

# PREFIXES



## Guidelines:

- \* **A prefix is a group of letters that appears at the front of a word.** A prefix affects the meaning of the root or base word to which it is attached. To determine whether a group of letters is a prefix, remove them from the word. If a known word remains, you have a prefix. For example, remove the letters *un* from the following words: *unhappy*, *untie*, *uncle*, *uninterested*. In which word are the letters *un* not a prefix? (*uncle*)
- \* **Make students aware of the following warnings about prefixes.**
  1. **Most prefixes have more than one meaning.** For example, the prefix *un* can mean “not” as in *unhappy*, or “do the opposite of” as in *untie*. Teach the multiple meanings of the most common prefixes and use careful language during lessons, such as “the prefix *un* sometimes means *not*.”
  2. **Be careful of letter clusters that look like prefixes but aren’t.** For example, when the letters *un* are removed from *uncle*, no recognizable root or base word is left. And when the letters *in* are removed from *invented*, the word that remains is not related to the whole word. The prefixes that are most troublesome are *re*, *in*, and *dis*.
  3. **Don’t rely solely on word-part clues.** Students should use context clues as well as examine prefixes to verify a word’s meaning. For example, a student might think the word *unassuming* means “not assuming/not supposing” instead of its actual meaning “modest.” It is estimated that about 15-20% of the prefixed words students encounter share this complexity (White et al., 1989).
- \* **Teach only the most common prefixes.** The chart below shows the most common based on a count of prefixed words appearing in the *Word Frequency Book* (Carroll, Davies, and Richman, 1971). The prefix *un* alone accounts for almost one-third of the total. The top three account for more than half. In first through third grades, only the prefixes *un* and *re* need to be formally taught since these have the highest utility and are the most likely to appear in primary-level materials.

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**The Most Common Prefixes**

| <b>Rank</b> | <b>Prefix</b>          | <b>Meaning</b>   | <b>%</b> |
|-------------|------------------------|------------------|----------|
| 1           | <b>un</b>              | not, opposite of | 26       |
| 2           | <b>re</b>              | again            | 14       |
| 3           | <b>in, im, ir, ill</b> | not              | 11       |
| 4           | <b>dis</b>             | not, opposite of | 7        |
| 5           | <b>en, em</b>          | cause to         | 4        |
| 6           | <b>non</b>             | not)             | 4        |
| 7           | <b>in, im</b>          | in or into       | 4        |
| 8           | <b>over</b>            | too much         | 3        |
| 9           | <b>mis</b>             | wrongly          | 3        |
| 10          | <b>sub</b>             | under            | 3        |
| 11          | <b>pre</b>             | before           | 3        |
| 12          | <b>inter</b>           | between, among   | 3        |
| 13          | <b>fore</b>            | before           | 3        |
| 14          | <b>de</b>              | opposite of      | 2        |
| 15          | <b>trans</b>           | across           | 2        |
| 16          | <b>super</b>           | above            | 1        |
| 17          | <b>semi</b>            | half             | 1        |
| 18          | <b>anti</b>            | against          | 1        |
| 19          | <b>mid</b>             | middle           | 1        |
| 20          | <b>under</b>           | too little       | 1        |

All other prefixes (@ 100) accounted for only 3% of the words.  
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