

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.

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

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