

Common Prefix Table with notes about common negative prefixes

Learning common prefixes is one simple way to increase your vocabulary. Just studying this list of about 50 common prefixes can help you recognize hundreds of words. When you combine them with common roots and suffixes you will multiply your English vocabulary exponentially!

A Few Hints to Get You Started

There are often several prefixes with the same meaning, one from Latin and one from Greek, maybe even one from Anglo-Saxon (as with sub-, hypo-, and under-.) Often-- but not always-- they are used with a root from the same language. So we have 'synthesis' originally from Greek and 'composite' from Latin, both combining 'with'+ the idea of setting down or placing something.

However, prefixes and roots do not have to match. New words can be made with parts of various origins. 'Hyper,' ('over' or 'excessive' in Greek) can be combined with 'active,' from Latin, to make the common English word 'hyperactive.'

Prefixes are commonly used to indicate size (macro, micro), quantity (mono, uni, bi, tri, quad, multi, poly), relationships (anti, contra, com, sym), position in time (ante, fore, pre, post) or space (circum, exo, inter, intra, peri, sub, trans, etc.), quality (eu, mal), or negation. (See the notes below this table.)

Several of the prefixes below have more than one form, usually because a different ending sounds better before certain letters. These include a-, an-, ad- (which often drops the 'd' and may double the consonant of the root word); co-, com-, con-; il-, im-, in-, ir; pre-, pro-; sym-, syn-; and sometimes others, like sub-.

This table is a little different than the list in Common Greek and Latin Prefixes, I've omitted some of the explanatory notes, and added several common prefixes with Old English origins. The most important information is all here. However, if you are interested in knowing more about the derivations (which prefixes come from Gree and which from Latin), see <http://www.englishhints.com/latin-prefixes.html>

Prefix	Meaning	Examples	See Also
a-, an-	not, without	anesthetic. atheist	
ab-	away, from	abject, abscess	
ad-, a-, ac-, as-	to, toward	access, admit, assist	
ante-	before	antecedent, anterior	fore-, pre-
anti-	against	antibiotics, antioxidant	contra-
auto-	self	autoimmune, autonomous	
ben-	good	benefit, benign	eu-
bi-	two, both	bifocals, bipolar	
circum-	around	circumference, circumscribe	peri-
co-, com-, con-	with	companion, concurrent, conform	sym-
contra-, counter-	against	contradict, counteract	anti-

de-	not, from, down, or completely	degenerate, depart, depress	negative prefixes below (also ob-)
di-, dis-	not, apart	disadvantage, displacement	negative prefixes
eu-	good, normal	eugenics, eulogy	ben-
ex-	out (of), former	expose, extract	
exo-, extra-	outside	exoskeleton, extraordinary	
fore-	before	foreshadow, foretell	ante-, pre-
hemi-	half	hemisphere,	semi-
hyper-	above, excessive	hyperactive, hypertension	over-, super-, ultra
hypo-	under, insufficient	hypodermic, hypothetical	sub-, under-
il-, im-, in-, ir-	not	illegitimate, inadequate	negative prefixes
inter-	between, among	interpose, intervene	
intra-	within	intramural, intravenous	
macro-	large	macrobiotic, macrocosm	
mal-	bad	malfuction, malignant	
micro-	small	microbe, microscope	
mis-	wrong, wrongly	misanthrope, misinform	
mono-	one	monolingual, monopoly	uni-
multi-	many	multiple, multitask	poly-
non-	not	nonexistent, nonsense	negative prefixes
ob-, oc-, -op	against, down, over, completely	object, occur, oppose	de-
omni-	all	omnipotent, omnivorous	pan-
over-	excessive, over	overactive, overflow	hyper-, super-, ultra
pan-	all	pandemic, pantheism	omni-
peri-	around	peripheral, periscope	circum-
poly-	many	polygamous, polygon	multi-
post-	after	postgraduate, postpone	
pre-, pro-	before, forward (pro- also 'in favor of')	predict, precede, provide	ante-, fore-
quad-	four	quadriplegic, quadrangle	
re-	again, back	reform, retain, regenerate	
semi-	half, partially	semiannual, semiconscious	hemi-
sub-	under, almost	submarine, subtropical	hypo-, under-
super-, supra-	above, excessive	superlative, suprarenal	hyper-, over-, ultra
sym-, syn-	with, together	sympathy, synthetic	co-
trans-	across, through	transform, transportation	
tri-	three	tricycle, triple	
ultra-	beyond, excessive	ultraliberal, ultrasonic	hyper-, over-, super-
un-	not	unknown, unlimited	negative prefixes
under-	too little, under	underestimate, underwrite	hypo-, sub-
uni-	one	uniform, unilateral	mono-

The Most Common Negative Prefixes

These prefixes make the following word negative. (They negate the base word, reversing its meaning and turning it into its antonym, or opposite.) De- is almost always before a verb, or a word formed from that verb. In-, non-, and un- are usually used for nouns, adjectives, or the adverbs formed from them, and they mean not _____.

Note that sometimes one prefix is used for an adjective, & different ones for related nouns or verbs.

Examples:

unstable, instability, (to) destabilize;
unable, inability, (to) disable;
unbalanced, imbalance, (to) unbalance.

Usually, however, the same prefix serves both adjective and noun: uncertain, uncertainty; unwilling, unwillingness; unfriendly, unfriendliness, inadequate, inadequacy, disloyal, disloyalty, etc.

Negative Prefixes With A Few More Examples:

1. de-

debug, decode, decompose, decontaminate, deform, defrost, dehydrate, demythologize, derail, detoxify. Note that the prefix de- in Latin (and in words that originate in Latin) has other, contrary meanings as well as sometimes making words negative. (See table and examples above.) It is often used as an intensifier, meaning completely (as in demand or deliberate), as well as meaning from, down, or away. When used with an English verb to make a new word, it works as a negative. (Debug, defrost, devalue.)

2. dis-

disaffected, disagree, disagreement, disagreeable, dishonorable, disloyal, distasteful. (Tasteful refers to something that shows good taste or judgment. Things which are pleasant to the taste buds are 'tasty.' Distasteful refers to tasks that are unpleasant. Foods that lack flavor are tasteless. A lack of good taste in aesthetics can also be called tasteless.)

3. in- (or, for better sound, -im before b, m, or p; -il before l; & -ir before r):

inability, inaccessible, instability, imbalance, immature, immaturity, impatient, impossible, illegal, illegible, illiterate, illogical, irrational, irregular, irrelevant, irreparable, irresistible, irresponsible, etc.

Exceptions in which 'in-' does not negate, but intensifies: Inflammable has the same meaning as flammable-- something that burns easily. Their opposite is nonflammable. The same is true for habitable and inhabitable (the negative is uninhabitable) and valuable and invaluable— except that invaluable is even stronger.

4. non-

nonconformist, nonentity, nonintervention, nonmetallic, nonpartisan, nonresident, nonrestrictive, nonstop, etc. Some words can be negated with non- or with another negative. In those cases non- is the most neutral in connotation. For example, nonstandard means not according to the usual standard, but substandard is below the standard: not good. Nonreligious means not religious, but irreligious means more actively opposed to religion.

5. un-

unable, unnatural, unrealistic, unfriendly (in this case the -ly isn't for an adverb; friendly & unfriendly are adjectives), unhelpful, unwilling, unpleasant, unafraid, unclear, unstable, unaffected (not affected at all; disaffected means affected badly), untouched, unknown, uncertain, unwise, etc.

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