Shell Education

Grades 2–4

Starting with Prefixes and Suffixes

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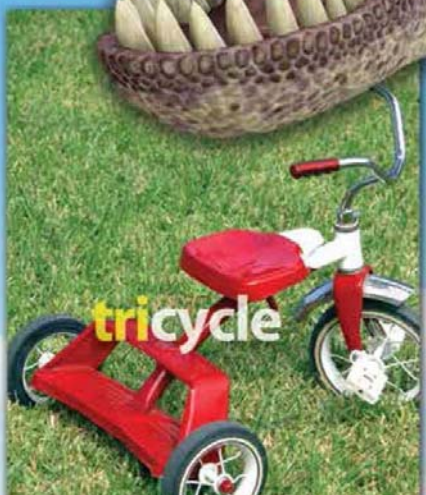

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Why Roots? Vocabulary Research and Practice

What Is a Root?

A root is a word part that contains meaning (and not merely sound). There are three categories of roots, depending on their placement in a word:

- prefix: a root at the beginning of a word. For example, in the word *retraction*, the initial *re-* is a prefix, meaning "back, again."
- base: the core root, which provides a word with its basic meaning. In the word *retraction*, the base is *tract*, which means "pull, draw, drag."
- suffix: a root that ends a word. In the word *retraction*, the final *-ion* is a suffix, meaning "act of, state of."

What Do Prefixes and Suffixes Do?

A prefix serves one of three functions:

- A prefix can *negate* a word by meaning "not." The most common negating prefixes are *un-* (e.g., unhappy, unwashed) and negative *in-, im-, il-* (e.g., invisible, impossible, illegal). Some directional prefixes can also be negating. For example, the prefix variations *di-, dis-, dif-,* which mean "apart, in different directions," can also mean "not." Examples: things that are "not similar" are *dissimilar*; a *difficult* task is "not" easy.
- A prefix can be *directional*. This is the most common function of a prefix: it sends the base of the word in a specific direction. The prefix *ex-* means "out," *re-* means "back, again," *sub-* means "under, below," and *ad-* means "to, toward, add to." For example, an *exit* sign indicates the way "out" of a building; we *descend* a staircase when we go "down"; when class *convenes*, it comes "together"; when class is *dismissed*, students scatter "in different directions"; when they *proceed* to their buses, they move "forward, ahead" to their bus stops.

  Thus, using the base *tract-* (pull, draw, drag), *extract* means to "pull out" (e.g., we extract a tooth); *retract* means to "take or pull back" (e.g., a journalist retracts a statement; a cat retracts its claws); *subtract* means to "take a lower number from a higher one"; to *attract* means to "pull, draw someone to or toward an object" (the prefix *at-* in this word is assimilated *ad-*; e.g., a magnet attracts metal objects, which are "pulled toward" it).
- A prefix can have *intensifying force*, meaning "very, thoroughly." A *perfectly* baked cake, for example, is "thoroughly" done.

A suffix either changes the part of speech (e.g., *act, action*) or modifies the base (e.g., *fast, faster*).

Note: Although students may not be aware that prefixes can suggest direction, they can benefit from examining the prefix and thinking about the direction of these words (both literal and metaphorical).

Why Roots? Vocabulary Research and Practice *(cont.)*

What Is Assimilation?

Some prefixes have multiple forms, as shown in the chart on page 8. These slight changes reflect an easily recognizable and predictable phenomenon called *assimilation*. Assimilation simply means that some consonants at the beginning of a word change and become like the consonants that follow them (*assimilate* = "similar to").

It is obvious that the prefix *con-*, for example, occurs in the words *convention* and *conference*. Through assimilation, a variation of *con-* also appears in *collect, commotion,* and *correct*. The reason is simple: assimilation makes a word easier to pronounce (consider *conlect* vs. *collect*).

The concept of assimilation can be easily understood and presented in a three-step approach. The three steps are: (1) unassimilated prefixes (i.e., the prefix is not changed since it is easily pronounced with the next letter of the word), as in *convention, invent, advent, subterranean;* (2) partial assimilation (i.e., the prefix changes its final *n-* into an *m-* to facilitate pronunciation with the next letter of the word), as in *compose, imbibe, import;* and (3) full assimilation (i.e., the prefix changes its final consonant into the same consonant as the next letter of the word to facilitate pronunciation), which results in a doubled consonant, as in *collect, illegal, attract, suffer, support*.

Unassimilated prefixes thus retain their original form as *con-, in-, ad-, sub-,* and so on. Partial assimilation occurs when prefixes that end in *n-* (e.g., *con-, in-*) change to *m-* before bases that begin with *b-* or *p-*: *con* + *bine* becomes *combine*, for example. Full assimilation occurs when the final consonant of the prefix is dropped and the following consonant doubled: *con* + *lect* becomes *collect*, and *ad* + *tract* becomes *attract*.

Although assimilation causes spelling changes, the meaning of the prefix does not change. The Teaching Tips section will let you know if the prefix for a particular lesson can undergo assimilation. Suffixes, however, do not undergo assimilation.

To teach assimilation, explain the concept to students by showing them a few examples, such as the ones provided in the chart (page 8). As you discuss these examples, be sure that students recognize the prefix of the word. Tell them that whenever a doubled consonant appears near the beginning of a word, they should divide the word between the doubled consonant and identify the assimilated prefix. Also, remind them that *con-* and *in-* may partially assimilate and become *com-* or *im-* when they attach to bases that begin with *b-* or *p-*.

See the following page for an outline of the three-step approach to presenting assimilation. This approach uses examples of commonly known words, which can be helpful when introducing the concept. In each step, ask students to pronounce the prefix and base separately. Then, ask them to pronounce the prefix and the base together as a single word. In Step 1, pronunciation is easy without altering the prefix. In Step 2, partial assimilation makes the prefix easier to pronounce with the base. In Step 3, full assimilation is required to make the prefix easier to pronounce, resulting in a double consonant near the beginning of the word.

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Why Roots?
Vocabulary Research and Practice *(cont.)*

Step 1: Unassimilated Prefixes

con + vention = convention

in + visible = invisible

sub + terranean = subterranean

ob + struction = obstruction

ex + pose = expose

dis + tract = distract

Note: We can easily pronounce the unaltered prefix with the base. Hence, there is no need to assimilate.

Step 2: Partial Assimilation

in + possible = impossible

con + pose = compose

con + bine = combine

con + fort = comfort

Note: We cannot easily pronounce *n* when it is followed by such consonants as *b*, *p*, and (occasionally) *f*. In such cases, the final *n* of the prefix partially assimilates into *m*.

Step 3: Full Assimilation

con + rect = correct

in + legal = illegal

sub + fer = suffer

ob + pose = oppose

ex + fect = effect

dis + fer = differ

ad + similation = assimilation

Note: We cannot easily pronounce these unaltered prefixes when followed by certain consonants. In such cases, the final consonant of the prefix changes into the initial consonant of the base that follows it. The result is a doubled consonant near the beginning.

Why Roots?
Vocabulary Research and Practice *(cont.)*

Latin Prefixes that Assimilate

Prefix	Meaning	Examples
ad-	to, toward, add to	*admit, accelerate, affect, aggravate, allusion, appendix, arrogant, assimilate, attract*
con-, co-	with, together, very	*congregate, coworker, collect, combine, commit, compose, correct*
ex-, e-, ef-	out, from, completely	*expose, edict, effect*
dis-, di-, dif-	apart, in different directions, not	*disintegrate, divert, different, difficult*
in-, im-, il- (directional)	in, on, into, against	*induct, insert, imbibe, immigrant, import, impose, illustrate*
in-, im-, il- (negative)	not	*infinite, insatiable, ignoble, illegal, illegible, impossible, irresponsible*
ob-	toward, up against	*obstruct, occurrence, offensive, oppose*
sub-	under, up from under	*submarine, succeed, suffer, support, suspend*

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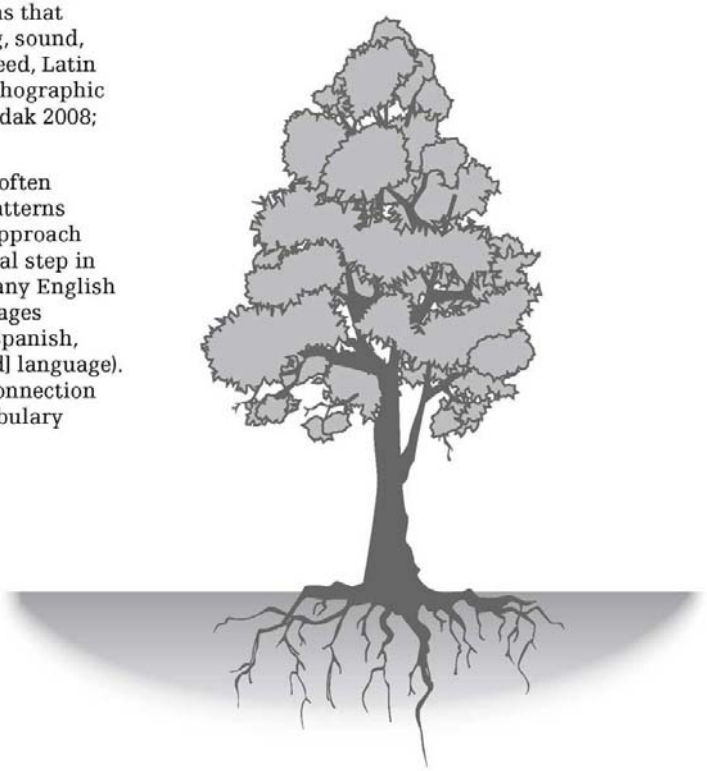
Why Teach with a Roots Approach?

Teaching with a roots approach is efficient. Over 60 percent of the words students encounter in their reading have recognizable word parts (Nagy et al. 1989). Moreover, content-area vocabulary is largely of Greek and Latin origin (Harmon, Hedrick, and Wood 2005). Many words from Greek and Latin roots meet the criteria for "tier two" words and are appropriate for instruction (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002).

Root study also promotes independent word learning (Carlisle 2010). In addition, students learn to make connections among words that are semantically related (Nagy and Scott 2000). Research suggests that the brain is a pattern detector (Cunningham 2004). Latin and Greek word roots follow linguistic patterns that can help students with the meaning, sound, and spelling of English words. Indeed, Latin and Greek roots have consistent orthographic (spelling) patterns (Rasinski and Padak 2008; Bear et al. 2011).

Young readers' word instruction is often characterized by a study of word patterns called rimes. A Latin-Greek roots approach is the next logical and developmental step in word learning (Bear et al. 2011). Many English language learners speak first languages semantically related to Latin (e.g., Spanish, which is a "Romance" [Latin-derived] language). Enhancing this natural linguistic connection can accelerate these students' vocabulary growth (Blachowicz et al. 2006).

Many states are beginning to include a study of derivations in their elementary and middle school literacy standards. Indeed, the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2011) focus extensively on root-specific standards in the "Reading: Foundational Skills" and "Language" sections. According to these standards, attention to roots should begin in kindergarten. (For more information, see http://www.corestandards.org/.)



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