

Suffixes for English Language Learners

Adding suffixes to the base, or root, of existing words to form new words is common in English. Suffixes are added to the back of the base word to create a new word with a different meaning. For example, if you add the verb suffix *-en* to the adjective *awake*, you get *awaken*, a verb. Suffixes usually change the part of speech of the base word. Suffixes are not words in their own right and cannot stand on their own in sentence; if we print them on their own we place a hyphen before them (*-en*).

Suffixes that create verbs

Common suffixes used in academic English create verbs. If you add a verb suffix to a noun or adjective, it becomes a verb. For example, adding *-ate* to the noun *pollen* creates the verb *pollinate* (or *pollenate*, an alternate spelling). If you add the suffix *-en* to the adjective *short*, you get the verb *shorten*, to become short.

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-ate	become	differentiate, liquidate, pollinate, duplicate, fabricate
-en	become	awaken, fasten, shorten, moisten
-ify	make or become	classify, exemplify, simplify, justify
-ise /-ize	become	compromise, stabilize, characterize, symbolize, visualize

Suffixes that create nouns

The following suffixes create nouns. For instance, if you take the verb *demonstrate* and add the noun suffix *-tion*, you get the noun *demonstration*. Similarly, if you add the noun suffix *-ship* to the noun *citizen*, you get the noun *citizenship*, holding the position of being a citizen.

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-age	result of	breakage, wastage, package
-al	action or process of	denial, proposal, refusal
-ant /-ent	agent or performer of an action	assistant, consultant, student
-cy	state or quality	urgency, efficiency, frequency
-ence /-ance	state of quality of	preference, dependence, interference, attendance, acceptance, endurance
-er	person or object that does a specified action	advertiser, dancer, teacher, driver, computer, silencer
-ism	doctrine or belief	Marxism, Maoism, Thatcherism
-ity	quality of	ability, similarity, responsibility, curiosity
-ment	condition	development, punishment, unemployment
-ness	state of being	darkness, preparedness, consciousness
-ship	position held	friendship, citizenship, leadership
-tion /-sion	condition or state of	alteration, demonstration, expansion, inclusion, admission

Suffixes that create adjectives

These suffixes create adjectives. As an example, adding the adjective suffix *-ful* to the noun *peace* gives you an adjective, *peaceful*. Adding the adjective suffix *-ous* to the verb *danger* gives you the adjective *dangerous*, characterized by danger.

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-able	capable of being	drinkable, countable, avoidable
-al	having the form or character of	central, political, national, optional, professional
-ent	tending toward	different, dependent, excellent
-ful	notable for	beautiful, peaceful, careful
-ive	having the nature of	attractive, effective, imaginative, repetitive
-less	without	endless, homeless, careless, thoughtless
-ous	characterized by	continuous, dangerous, famous

Suffixes that create adverbs

A few suffixes create adverbs. For instance, adding the adverb suffix *-ly* to the adjective *happy* gives you *happily*, an adverb. Or adding *-ward* to the noun *west* gives you the adverb *westward*, in the direction of the west.

Suffix	Meaning	Example
-ly / -ily	related to or quality	softly, happily, sleepily, quickly
-ward/ -wards	direction	toward, afterwards, backwards, westward
-wise	in relation to	otherwise, likewise, clockwise

Prefixes and Suffixes used together

Prefixes and suffixes are often used together. The following words use both the prefix *mis-* (wrongly or badly) and the noun suffix *-tion* (condition of) with different base words:

inform	misinformation
communicate	miscommunication
interpret	misinterpretation

The following base words are changed by using both the prefix *un-* (not) and the adjective suffix *-able* (capable of being):

comfort	uncomfortable
imagine	unimaginable
available	unavailable

These use the prefix *dis-* (not) and the noun suffix *-ment* (condition):

agreement	disagreement
arm	disarmament

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