

Prefixes · Free resource

Prefix: *in-* (and its variants *il-*, *im-*, *ir-*)

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling* (2013) — Years 3–4 statutory prefix

Origin: Latin *in-*, meaning "not" or "into/within"

What it means

The prefix **in-** means **not** when used as a negation prefix:

incorrect = not correct

inactive = not active

invisible = not visible

It can also mean **into** or **within** in some words, but the negation meaning is what Appendix 1 teaches at Y3/4.

The assimilation rule – why *in-* changes form

When *in-* is added to a word beginning with certain letters, the *n* changes to match the first letter of the base word. This makes the word easier to pronounce. The process is called **assimilation** (the prefix assimilates to the base word).

Base starts with	Prefix becomes	Example
<i>l</i>	il-	<i>in- + legal</i> → illegal
<i>m</i> or <i>p</i>	im-	<i>in- + possible</i> → impossible
<i>r</i>	ir-	<i>in- + regular</i> → irregular
Everything else	in-	<i>in- + correct</i> → incorrect

Why does assimilation happen?

Try saying *illegal* — the *n* and *l* clash awkwardly. Your mouth naturally shifts the *n* to *l* to make *illegal*, which flows more smoothly. *Impossible* is easier to say than *inpossible*. *Irregular* is easier than *inregular*.

This is not an exception or an irregularity — it is the regular rule working to make the language more natural to speak. The prefix is always *in-* in meaning; only its spelling changes.

***in-* words (base starts with most consonants or a vowel)**

Word	Meaning
incorrect	not correct
inactive	not active
incomplete	not complete
independent	not dependent
invisible	not visible
insecure	not secure
informal	not formal
indirect	not direct
injustice	lack of justice
inhuman	not human; cruel
inadequate	not adequate
inaccurate	not accurate
infinite	not finite; endless
innocent	not guilty (<i>in-</i> + <i>nocent</i> – not causing harm)

***il-* words (base starts with *l*)**

Word	Meaning
illegal	not legal
illegible	not legible (can't be read)
illiterate	not literate (can't read or write)
illogical	not logical
illegitimate	not legitimate; unlawful

***im-* words (base starts with *m* or *p*)**

Word	Meaning
impossible	not possible
immature	not mature
immortal	not mortal; living forever
immovable	not movable
imperfect	not perfect
impatient	not patient
impractical	not practical
immense	not small; enormous
immediate	not with a gap; instant
immobile	not able to move

***ir-* words (base starts with *r*)**

Word	Meaning
irregular	not regular
irrelevant	not relevant
irresponsible	not responsible
irreversible	not reversible
irrational	not rational
irresistible	not resistible (impossible to resist)
irreplaceable	not replaceable

Double letters explained

The double letters in *illegal*, *immature*, *irregular* are NOT from the doubling rule — they come from assimilation:

il- + *legal* → **il**legal (the *l* from *il-* + the *l* from *legal*)

im- + *mature* → im**m**ature (the *m* from *im-* + the *m* from *mature*)

ir- + *regular* → ir**r**egular (the *r* from *ir-* + the *r* from *regular*)

The double letters are a visual signal of assimilation: you can see the prefix and the base word clearly, each contributing one letter to the pair.

Common mistakes

Wrong	Right	Reason
<i>inlegal</i>	illegal	<i>in- + l</i> → <i>il-</i>
<i>inpossible</i>	impossible	<i>in- + p</i> → <i>im-</i>
<i>inregular</i>	irregular	<i>in- + r</i> → <i>ir-</i>
<i>illogical</i> written as <i>inlogical</i>	illogical	assimilation to <i>il-</i>
<i>iregular</i>	irregular	double <i>r</i> – both from prefix and base

Word sort

Identify which form of the prefix each word uses.

Words: incorrect · illegal · impossible · irregular · inactive · illegible · immature · irresponsible · incomplete · illiterate · imperfect · irreversible · invisible · illogical · impatient

<i>in-</i>	<i>il-</i>	<i>im-</i>	<i>ir-</i>

Classroom activity: Find the base

For each word, find the base word and check which *in-* variant is used. Ask: why that variant?

illegal → legal → starts with *l* → *il-*

impractical → practical → starts with *p* → *im-*

irregular → regular → starts with *r* → *ir-*

incomplete → complete → starts with *c* → *in-*

Dictation sentences

It was **illegal** and **irresponsible** to leave the building **incomplete**.

The **irregular** pattern made the design look **imperfect** and **illogical**.

She remained **invisible** and **inactive** while the **immature** argument continued.

The **impossible** task became **irreversible** once the **incorrect** code was entered.

An **illegible** note left by an **irresponsible** patient made the whole record **inaccurate**.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology: Latin in-, from Proto-Indo-European ne- (not). Assimilation is a standard phonological process documented in all Latin grammars.