

Prefixes · Free resource

Prefix: *mis-*

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

Origin: Old English *mis-*, meaning "wrongly" or "badly"

What it means

mis- means **wrongly** or **badly**.

misspell = spell **wrongly**

misbehave = behave **badly**

misunderstand = understand **wrongly**

mislead = lead in the **wrong** direction

Where it comes from

mis- is an Old English prefix (like *un-*), meaning it has been in English for over 1,000 years. It attaches mostly to verbs to indicate that the action was done incorrectly. Like *un-*, it sounds native and informal.

The double letter trap

When *mis-* is added to a word beginning with *s*, you get **double s**:

mis- + *spell* = **misspell** (two *ss* — one from *mis-*, one from *spell*)

mis- + *spend* = **misspend**

mis- + *step* = **misstep**

mis- + *state* = **misstate**

But most *mis-* words have only one *s*:

mis- + *take* = **mistake** (one *s*)

mis- + *lead* = **mislead** (one *s*)

mis- + *behave* = **misbehave** (one *s*)

The test: does the base word start with *s*? If yes → double *s*. If no → single *s*.

Statutory examples (Appendix 1, Y3/4)

Word	Meaning
misbehave	behave badly
mislead	lead in the wrong direction; give false information
misspell	spell wrongly
misunderstand	understand incorrectly
mistrust	trust wrongly; be suspicious of
misuse	use incorrectly or badly
mismatch	match incorrectly
misplace	put in the wrong place
miscalculate	calculate wrongly
miscount	count incorrectly

Morpheme matrix

	mis-	(nothing)
-behave	misbehave	behave
-lead	mislead	lead
-spell	misspell	spell
-understand	misunderstand	understand
-take	mistake	take
-trust	mistrust	trust
-use	misuse	use
-place	misplace	place
-count	miscount	count
-read	misread	read

Word family

misadventure · miscommunicate · misconduct · misfire · misfortune · misguide · mishap ·
misinform · misjudge · mismanage · mispronounce · misquote · misrepresent · mistreat · misprint
· miswire

mis- vs dis-

Both can negate, but they differ in meaning:

Prefix	Meaning	Example
<i>mis-</i>	done wrongly	<i>misunderstand</i> = understood wrongly
<i>dis-</i>	not / opposite	<i>disagree</i> = not agree

Mislead = lead in the wrong direction. *Disobey* = not obey (not doing it wrongly — just not doing it).

Dictation sentences

She did not **mislead** anyone — the directions were simply **misunderstood**.

It was a **mistake** to **misplace** the key and then **miscount** the spares.

He began to **mistrust** the advice after realising he had been **misled** twice.

The children had **misbehaved** and the teacher had to **misspell** a word on purpose to catch their attention.

A **miscalculation** in the **mismatch** of sizes caused a **misuse** of the space.

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology: Old English mis-, cognate with Dutch mis- and German miss-.