

Prefixes · Free resource

## Prefix: *un-*

**Source:** DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling* (2013) — Year 1 and Year 2 statutory prefix

**Origin:** Old English *un-*, meaning "not" or "reverse of"

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### What it means

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**un-** has two meanings:

**Not:** *unhappy* = not happy, *unkind* = not kind

**Reverse of:** *unlock* = reverse of locking, *undo* = reverse of doing

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## Where it comes from

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*un-* is one of the oldest prefixes in English, descended directly from Old English (before 1066). Unlike most prefixes which came with the Normans from Latin and French, *un-* is pure Old English — which is why it sounds natural and informal. It's been part of English for over 1,500 years.

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## Statutory examples by year group

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**Year 1 (statutory):** unhappy · undo · unfair · unlock · unwell · untie · unlike

**Year 2 (statutory extension):** unusual · unsafe · unable · unpack · unclear · unfit · unusual

**Year 3/4 (consolidated):** unnatural · unnecessary · unusual · uncertain · unfamiliar

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## Morpheme matrix

	<b>un-</b>	<b>(nothing)</b>
<b>-happy</b>	unhappy	happy
<b>-kind</b>	unkind	kind
<b>-do</b>	undo	do
<b>-lock</b>	unlock	lock
<b>-fair</b>	unfair	fair
<b>-safe</b>	unsafe	safe
<b>-well</b>	unwell	well
<b>-usual</b>	unusual	usual
<b>-able</b>	unable	able
<b>-natural</b>	unnatural	natural

## The double *n* cases

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When *un-* is added to a word starting with *n*, you get two *ns*. This is correct and follows the rule (prefix added intact, base word unchanged):

*un-* + *natural* = **unnatural**

*un-* + *necessary* = **unnecessary**

*un-* + *noticed* = **unnoticed**

*un-* + *named* = **unnamed**

Children often write *unatural* — remind them: the prefix *un-* is always spelled *un-*, and *natural* is always spelled *natural*. Put them together: *un* + *natural* = ***unnatural***.

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## ***un- vs dis- vs in-***

All three can mean "not," but they attach to different words:

<b>Prefix</b>	<b>Typical use</b>	<b>Example</b>
<i>un-</i>	Old English base words	unhappy, unkind, unwell
<i>dis-</i>	Latin/French base words	disagree, disappear, dishonest
<i>in-</i>	Latin adjectives	impossible, incorrect, inactive

*un-* sounds native and informal. *dis-* and *in-* sound more formal. Same meaning, different register.

## Dictation sentences

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She was **unhappy** when she found the door **unlocked** and the room in an **untidy** state.

It was **unsafe** and **unwise** to cross the **unlit** road at night.

The **unusual** creature was **unlike** anything anyone had ever seen before.

The **unnecessary** delay meant the **unfinished** work could not be **undone**.

**Unable** to continue, she sat down and waited until the storm passed.

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*Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). Etymology: Old English un-, cognate with Latin in- and Greek a-/an-.*