

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

Endings: -tion, -sion, -ssion, -cian

Year group: 3/4

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 3–4, Suffixes

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

These four endings all make the same /ʃən/ sound ("shun") but are spelled differently depending on the base word. Together they are the most common way to make nouns in English — and one of the trickiest spelling patterns for children and adults alike.

Which ending to use:

| Ending | When to use it | Example |
|---------------|--|--|
| -tion | Most common. Used after vowels, <i>r</i> , and many consonants. Default choice. | <i>station, invention, fraction</i> |
| -sion | After <i>l</i> or <i>n</i> , and when the base verb ends in <i>-d</i> , <i>-de</i> , or <i>-se</i> | <i>expansion, division, tension</i> |
| -ssion | After a short vowel — the double <i>s</i> keeps the vowel short | <i>discussion, permission, passion</i> |
| -cian | When referring to a person with a skill or profession | <i>musician, magician, politician</i> |

Etymology note

All four endings descend from Latin *-tio / -tionis*, meaning "the act of." The different spellings reflect the different sounds at the end of the Latin base words, preserved through French into English. The *-cian* ending — *-ician* — specifically means "expert in" (from Latin *-icia* meaning "quality" or "skill"). This is why **magician** means "expert in magic" and **musician** means "expert in music."

The -cian rule is extremely reliable: if the word means a person whose job or skill involves something, and that thing ends in *-ic* or *-ics*, the person ending is *-ician*: *music* → *musician*, *magic* → *magician*, *politics* → *politician*, *mathematics* → *mathematician*, *physics* → *physician*.

-tion examples

Most nouns ending in the /ʃən/ sound use *-tion*. When in doubt, try this first.

From Y3/4 statutory list and Appendix 1:

station (*state* → *stati-* + *-on*)

fraction (*fract-* + *-ion*)

mention † (*ment-* + *-ion* — the *t* is from the base)

position † (*posit-* + *-ion*)

question † (*quest-* + *-ion*)

invention, attention, direction, collection, action

After *r*: *portion, distortion, absorption* — always *-tion* after *r*

-sion examples

Use *-sion* when the base verb ends in *-d*, *-de*, *-se*, or *-l*:

| Base verb | Noun |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>expand</i> | expansion (<i>d → s</i>) |
| <i>divide</i> | division (<i>de → s</i>) |
| <i>tense</i> | tension (<i>se → s</i>) |
| <i>extend</i> | extension |
| <i>suspend</i> | suspension |
| <i>decide</i> | decision |
| <i>revise</i> | revision |

Also after *n*: *comprehension*, *dimension*, *mansion*, *pension*

-ssion examples

Use *-ssion* when the base verb ends in *-ss* or *-mit*, or when a short vowel precedes the /ʃən/ sound:

| Base | Noun |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| <i>discuss</i> | discussion |
| <i>permit</i> | permission |
| <i>admit</i> | admission |
| <i>omit</i> | omission |
| <i>transmit</i> | transmission |
| <i>confess</i> | confession |
| <i>possess</i> | possession † |

Also: *passion*, *mission*, *session* — short vowel before the *ss*

-cian examples (persons)

Use *-cian* when the word means a **person** skilled in something:

| Field | Person |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>music</i> | musician |
| <i>magic</i> | magician |
| <i>electric(ity)</i> | electrician |
| <i>politics</i> | politician |
| <i>mathematics</i> | mathematician |
| <i>physics</i> | physician |
| <i>optics</i> | optician |
| <i>beauty</i> | beautician |
| <i>diet(etics)</i> | dietician |

The -cian test: Does the word mean a person? If yes, and the related noun ends in *-ic* or *-ics*, use *-cian*.

Common mistakes and why they happen

| Wrong | Right | Reason |
|------------------|-------------------|--|
| <i>discution</i> | discussion | <i>discuss</i> → <i>-ssion</i> (double <i>s</i> + short vowel) |
| <i>permiton</i> | permission | <i>permit</i> → <i>-ssion</i> |
| <i>divistion</i> | division | <i>divide</i> → <i>-sion</i> (base ends in <i>-de</i>) |
| <i>musicean</i> | musician | person-word from <i>music</i> → <i>-cian</i> |
| <i>magition</i> | magician | person-word → <i>-cian</i> , not <i>-tion</i> |
| <i>posession</i> | possession | <i>possess</i> + <i>-ion</i> = <i>possession</i> (double <i>s</i> from <i>possess</i> , then <i>-ion</i>) |

Word sort activity

Sort these nouns by their ending.

Words: station · division · musician · discussion · question · revision · electrician · tension · passion · mention · permission · magician · position · extension · session · politician

| -tion | -sion | -ssion | -cian |
|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | | | |

Extension: Find the base word (verb or field) for each noun. What does the noun mean?

A reliable decision tree

Does the word mean a PERSON (expert/professional)?

YES → use -cian (musician, magician, politician)

NO → Does the base verb end in -d, -de, -se, or -l?

YES → use -sion (division, tension, revision)

NO → Does a short vowel come just before the ending?

YES → use -ssion (discussion, permission)

NO → use -tion (station, fraction, mention)

Dictation sentences (teacher-ready)

She asked the teacher for **permission** to leave the room.

The **musician** played her violin with great skill and expression.

The class had a **discussion** about the fairest way to divide the work.

His **position** in the team meant he had to make quick **decisions**.

The **magician** performed tricks that created a sense of mystery and **tension**.

Can you answer the **question** without any help?

Classroom questions

What is the difference between *-tion* and *-sion*? How do we choose?

Why does *musician* end in *-cian* and not *-tion*?

What is the base verb of *discussion*? (*discuss*) What does the double *s* tell us?

Can you think of another word that ends in *-cian* that means a person with a skill?

revision, division, decision — what do all these base verbs have in common?

Links to other rules

Y3/4 rule 02: -ation — the most common *-tion* pattern; teach alongside this rule

Y5/6: -cious/-tious — the *-ious* adjective form of *-tion/-ssion* nouns (e.g. *possession* → *possessive*; *ambition* → *ambitious*)

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). All statutory word examples verified against the published statutory word lists for Years 3–4.