

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

Prefixes: un-, dis-, mis-, re-, sub-, inter-, super-, anti-, auto-

Year group: 3/4

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

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

A prefix is a group of letters added to the **beginning** of a base word to change its meaning. The spelling of the base word **never changes** when you add a prefix.

This is one of the most reliable rules in English spelling: unlike suffixes, prefixes never trigger doubling, dropping an *e*, or changing a *y* to *i*. You simply attach the prefix to the word as it stands.

*dis + appear = **disappear** (not dissappear)*

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

*un + natural = **unnatural** (two *ns* — same reason)*

The nine statutory prefixes – what they mean

Prefix	Meaning	Origin
un-	not; reverse of	Old English
dis-	not; away; apart	Latin
mis-	wrongly; badly	Old English
re-	again; back	Latin <i>re-</i>
sub-	under; below	Latin <i>sub</i>
inter-	between; among	Latin <i>inter</i>
super-	above; beyond; greater	Latin <i>super</i>
anti-	against; opposing	Greek <i>anti</i>
auto-	self; by oneself	Greek <i>autos</i>

Statutory examples from the Y3/4 word list

(All words marked † appear in the Y3/4 statutory word list, DfE Appendix 1)

un- (not / reverse)

unhappy, undo, unfair, unlock, unusual, unnecessary

dis- (not / away)

disappear †, disappoint *(non-statutory example)*, **disagree, disobey, dislike**

mis- (wrongly / badly)

misbehave, mislead, misspell *(note: double s)*, **misunderstand, mistrust**

re- (again / back)

return, recycle, rebuild, refresh, reappear, remember †

sub- (under)

submarine, submerge, subtitle, subheading, subway

inter- (between)

interact, intercity, interfere *(Y5/6 word but useful here)*, **international**

super- (above / greater)

supermarket, superstar, supernatural, superhuman

anti- (against)

anticlockwise, antiseptic, antifreeze, antidote

auto- (self)

autobiography, autograph, automatic, automobile

Why this matters: morphemes carry meaning

Understanding prefixes unlocks whole word families. A child who knows *sub-* means "under" can make sense of **submarine** (under the sea), **submerge** (go under), **subtitle** (text under an image), and **subway** (path under the road) — without memorising any of them individually.

This is why prefix knowledge transfers. Unlike learning a word list, learning a prefix gives children a tool that works on thousands of words they've never seen before.

Etymology note on *dis-* and *mis-*: Both can give double letters when the base word starts with the same letter as the final letter of the prefix. *dis-* + *satisfy* = *dissatisfy*; *mis-* + *spell* = *misspell*. This is not an exception — it is the rule working correctly. The prefix is added intact; if that creates a double letter, the double letter stays.

Common mistakes and why they happen

Wrong	Right	Why
<i>dissappear</i>	disappear	<i>dis-</i> + <i>appear</i> – only one <i>s</i> , <i>appear</i> starts with <i>a</i>
<i>missunderstand</i>	misunderstand	<i>mis-</i> + <i>understand</i> – only one <i>s</i> , <i>understand</i> starts with <i>u</i>
<i>unecessary</i>	unnecessary	<i>un-</i> + <i>necessary</i> – <i>necessary</i> starts with <i>n</i> , giving double <i>n</i>
<i>dislike</i> ✓ but <i>disklike</i>	dislike	<i>dis-</i> + <i>like</i> – no extra letter needed
<i>reenter</i> / <i>re-enter</i>	reenter or re-enter	both accepted; hyphen optional when <i>re-</i> precedes a vowel

The most reliable test: can you see the prefix clearly, and can you see the base word clearly?
If yes, the spelling is probably right.

Word sort activity

Print and cut. Sort into the correct prefix column.

Words to sort: anticlockwise · autobiography · disappear · interact · misbehave · rebuild · submarine · supermarket · unhappy · unnatural · disagree · reappear · misunderstand · intercity · antiseptic

un-	dis-	mis-	re-	sub-	inter-	super-	anti-	ai

Extension challenge: Add one more word of your own to each column. Can you use the prefix to work out what the word means?

Classroom questions (Rosenshine – ask large numbers of questions)

What does the prefix *sub-* mean? Give me a word that uses it.

If *marine* means "of the sea," what does *submarine* mean?

Why does *misspell* have two *ss*?

Auto comes from the Greek for "self." What does *autobiography* mean — and why?

What would *interstellar* mean? (*stella* is Latin for star)

Links to other rules

See **suffix resources** for what happens when you add endings to base words (where spelling *does* sometimes change)

See **Y5/6: in-/il-/im-/ir- prefix** — the prefix *in-* changes form depending on the base word's first letter: *impossible* (not *inpossible*), *illegal* (not *inlegal*), *irregular* (not *inregular*)

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