

Years 3 & 4 · Free resource

Suffix: -ous

Year group: 3/4

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

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

The suffix **-ous** is added to nouns to make adjectives meaning "full of" or "having the quality of."

*danger (noun) → **dangerous** (adjective — full of danger)*

*poison (noun) → **poisonous** (adjective — full of poison)*

*mountain (noun) → **mountainous** (adjective — having many mountains)*

When the base word ends in a silent e: usually drop the *e* before adding *-ous*

*fame → **famous** (not fameous)*

*nerve → **nervous***

*adventure → **adventurous***

When the base word ends in *-our*: drop the *u* before adding *-ous*

*humour → **humorous** (not humourous)*

*glamour → **glamorous***

*vigour → **vigorous***

When the base word ends in *-ge*: keep the *e* to preserve the soft *g* sound

*courage → **courageous** (not couragous — the *e* keeps *g* soft)*

*outrage → **outrageous***

advantage → ***advantageous***

Special case — *-ious*: when the base noun ends in *-ion* or when following *c*, *t*, or *x*, the form becomes *-ious*

ambition → ***ambitious***

caution → ***cautious***

space → ***spacious***

(Note: the full treatment of -ious is at Y5/6. Introduce it here as a related ending.)

Etymology note

-ous came into English from Old French *-ous / -eux*, which in turn came from Latin *-osus* meaning "full of" or "abounding in." This is why *-ous* words tend to feel fairly formal. Many came into English after 1066 with the Norman French: *dangerous*, *famous*, *marvellous*, *precious* all have French or Latin roots.

The *-our* → *-orous* pattern reflects a difference between British and American English: British *humour* → *humorous*; American *humor* → *humorous* (same result, different route). The *-our* spelling is British; the *-orous* adjective drops the *u* regardless.

Examples from Y3/4 and statutory lists

(† = statutory Y3/4 word)

Straightforward (drop the -e):

famous † (*fame* → *fam-* + *-ous*)

nervous (*nerve* → *nerv-* + *-ous*)

adventurous (*adventure* → *adventur-* + *-ous*)

Base word has no -e (add directly):

dangerous † (*danger* + *-ous*)

poisonous (*poison* + *-ous*)

mountainous (*mountain* + *-ous*)

marvellous † (*marvell* → note: British spelling keeps double *l*; US: *marvelous*)

Drop the -u from -our:

humorous (*humour* → *humor-* + *-ous*)

glamorous (*glamour* → *glamor-* + *-ous*)

vigorous (*vigour* → *vigor-* + *-ous*)

Keep the -e to protect soft g:

courageous (*courage* → *courage*+ *-ous* — keep *e*)

outrageous (*outrage* → *outrage*-*ous*)

-ious form (introduce at Y3/4, deepen at Y5/6):

ambitious (*ambition* → drop *-ion*, add *-ious*)

cautious (*caution* → drop *-ion*, add *-ious*)

precious (*price*/*preci-* + *-ous*)

Common mistakes and why they happen

Wrong	Right	Reason
<i>fameous</i>	famous	Drop the <i>e</i> from <i>fame</i>
<i>dangrous</i>	dangerous	<i>danger</i> + <i>-ous</i> – include the <i>e</i> in <i>-ous</i>
<i>humourous</i>	humorous	Drop the <i>u</i> from <i>humour</i> before <i>-ous</i>
<i>couragous</i>	courageous	Keep the <i>e</i> – it protects the soft <i>g</i>
<i>marvellous / marvelous</i>	marvellous (British English)	Both are correct in their varieties; British English keeps the double <i>l</i>

Word sort activity

Sort these *-ous* adjectives by the rule used to form them.

Adjectives: famous · dangerous · courageous · humorous · poisonous · adventurous · glamorous · outrageous · nervous · mountainous · vigorous · marvellous

Add -ous directly	Drop the -e	Drop -u from -our	Keep -e to protect soft g

Extension: Find the base noun for each adjective. What does *-ous* add to the meaning?

Morpheme family

The *-ous* ending combines powerfully with other suffixes to generate longer words:

danger → *dangerous* → *dangerously* → *dangerousness*

ambition → *ambitious* → *ambitiously* → *ambitiousness*

fame → *famous* → *famously* → *infamous* → *infamously*

Show children this chain on the board. Each step adds one morpheme and changes the word class.

Dictation sentences (teacher-ready)

It was **dangerous** to walk near the edge of the cliff in the wind.

She was the most **famous** scientist in the country.

The adventurers crossed the **mountainous** terrain for three days.

He was **nervous** before the performance but felt better once he started.

The crowd was **outrageous** in their celebrations after the final whistle.

With **courageous** determination, she kept going even when it was hard.

Classroom questions

What noun is hiding inside the word *dangerous*? What does *-ous* add to its meaning?

Why does *humour* lose its *u* when we add *-ous*?

Why do *courageous* and *outrageous* keep the *e* but *famous* and *nervous* drop it?

Can you think of an *-ous* word from another subject you're studying? (Science: *porous*, *fibrous*;
Geography: *mountainous*, *cavernous*)

Links to other rules

Y5/6: -ious and -eous endings — deepening the *-ious* pattern introduced here

Y2: drop the -e rule — same underlying rule applies when adding *-ous*

Y3/4 rule 03: -ly suffix — many *-ous* adjectives form adverbs with *-ly* (dangerous → dangerously)

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