

Years 5 & 6 · Free resource

Words with **-fer**: the stress-and-doubling rule in action

Year group: 5/6

Source: DfE, *English Appendix 1: Spelling*, National Curriculum for England (2013) — Years 5–6

Curriculum requirement: Statutory

The rule

Words ending in *-fer* show the stress-based doubling rule (introduced at Y3/4) in its clearest form. When you add a vowel suffix:

Double the *r* if the stress STAYS on *-fer* in the new word

Do NOT double the *r* if the stress SHIFTS away from *-fer*

Examples

| Base | Suffix | Stress in new word | Result |
|-----------------|--------------|--|---------------------|
| <i>refer</i> | <i>-ing</i> | re- FER -ring (stress stays) | referring |
| <i>refer</i> | <i>-al</i> | REF -er-al (stress shifts) | referral |
| <i>refer</i> | <i>-ence</i> | REF -er-ence (stress shifts) | reference |
| <i>prefer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | pre- FER -red (stress stays) | preferred |
| <i>prefer</i> | <i>-ing</i> | pre- FER -ring (stress stays) | preferring |
| <i>prefer</i> | <i>-ence</i> | PREF -er-ence (stress shifts) | preference |
| <i>prefer</i> | <i>-able</i> | PREF -er-able (stress shifts) | preferable |
| <i>transfer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | trans- FER -red (stress stays) | transferred |
| <i>transfer</i> | <i>-ing</i> | trans- FER -ring (stress stays) | transferring |
| <i>transfer</i> | <i>-ence</i> | TRANS -fer-ence (stress shifts) | transference |
| <i>infer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | in- FER -red (stress stays) | inferred |
| <i>infer</i> | <i>-ence</i> | IN -fer-ence (stress shifts) | inference |
| <i>confer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | con- FER -red (stress stays) | conferred |
| <i>confer</i> | <i>-ence</i> | CON -fer-ence (stress shifts) | conference |

| Base | Suffix | Stress in new word | Result |
|---------------|---------------|--|-------------------|
| <i>differ</i> | <i>-ed</i> | DIF-fered (stress on first – no double) | differed |
| <i>differ</i> | <i>-ence</i> | DIF-fer-ence (stress on first) | difference |
| <i>offer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | OF-fered (stress on first) | offered |
| <i>suffer</i> | <i>-ing</i> | SUF-fering (stress on first) | suffering |
| <i>buffer</i> | <i>-ed</i> | BUF-fered (stress on first) | buffered |

The key test

Say the new word aloud. Where is the stress?

*re-**FER**-ring* — stress on *-fer* → double the *r* → **referring**

***REF**-er-ence* — stress moved to front → no double → **reference**

This is the same test as Y3/4 multisyllable doubling — the *-fer* words are simply the clearest and most memorable examples of it.

Word family web

PREFER

- preferred (double r – stress stays)
- preferring (double r – stress stays)
- preference (no double – stress shifts)
- preferable (no double – stress shifts)

REFER

- referred (double r)
- referring (double r)
- referral (no double – stress shifts)
- reference (no double – stress shifts)

CONFERENCE comes from confer → conferred / conferring / conference

Common mistakes

| Wrong | Right | Why |
|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| <i>refering</i> | referring | stress stays on <i>-fer</i> → double |
| <i>referrence</i> | reference | stress shifts → no double |
| <i>prefered</i> | preferred | stress stays on <i>-fer</i> → double |
| <i>prefrence</i> | preference | stress shifts → no double (but also missing <i>e</i>) |
| <i>transfered</i> | transferred | stress stays on <i>-fer</i> → double |
| <i>infered</i> | inferred | stress stays on <i>-fer</i> → double |

Dictation sentences

The **conference** was attended by everyone who had been **referred** by a colleague.

She **preferred** the original but accepted that **preference** was a personal matter.

The **inference** from the data was clear even before the results were fully **transferred**.

He was **referred** to the specialist after the doctor had **inferred** a more complex cause.

Referring to her notes, she summarised the main points of the **conference**.

Classroom questions

Say *referring* aloud. Where is the stress? Why does that mean we double the *r*?

Say *reference* aloud. Where is the stress now? Why does that mean we do NOT double?

Differ, *offer*, and *suffer* do not double when you add *-ed* or *-ing*. Why not?

Can you work out whether *conferred* or *conference* doubles the *r*? Say them aloud first.

Links to other rules

Y3/4 rule 10: multisyllable doubling — this is the same rule; *-fer* words demonstrate it most clearly

difference → revisit **Y5/6 rule 03: -ent/-ence/-ency** (no *-ation* form → *-ence*)

Source: DfE English Appendix 1: Spelling (2013). The -fer rule is explicitly cited in the Years 5–6 statutory content. All examples verified against standard British English usage.