



Teaching Writing in Elementary School and Middle School
Teaching Beginning Writers and Struggling Writers

How to Improve Your Students' Vocabulary by Teaching Word Building and Morphology: Roots, Bases, Stems, Prefixes, Suffixes, and Morphemes



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How to Improve Your Students' Vocabulary by Teaching Word Building and Morphology

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How to Improve Your Students' Vocabulary by Teaching Word Building and Morphology

Would you like to teach your students about word building and morphology more effectively? Well, you need a better model. And you have found it!

Frankly, most teachers will need to read this twice because the concepts and vocabulary are advanced. But in the end, you will understand word building and morphology much better! You will have a model in your mind that lets you approach words systematically across the curriculum. Put simply, you will be a better vocabulary teacher!

Vocabulary instruction is an essential component of everything we teach our students across the curriculum. For one thing, **effective vocabulary instruction improves students' reading comprehension**. Additionally, vocabulary is commonly linked to academic achievement, socioeconomic disparity, and even intelligence. Finally, teachers all know that if students don't understand the vocabulary across the curriculum, they don't understand the subject content. In other words, all teachers are required to teach vocabulary.

By the time you are done reading this, you will not only understand word building and morphology, but you will also have a complete system and model in your mind for teaching it.

Morphology is One Aspect of Vocabulary Instruction; But It's an Important Aspect

Although morphology and word building is just one aspect of vocabulary instruction, it's one of the more important and exciting aspects. As pointed out above, **effective vocabulary instruction improves students' reading comprehension**. The research also shows that **morphological instruction alone improves students' reading comprehension**.

The following pack of statistics from Dictionary.com hints at why morphological instruction is so beneficial: "About 80 percent of the entries in any English dictionary are borrowed, mainly from Latin. Over 60 percent of all English words have Greek or Latin roots. In the vocabulary of the sciences and technology, the figure rises to over 90 percent."

Multi-syllable words contain an extremely high percentage of Latin and Greek roots. As I wrote this eBook, I looked up many multi-syllable words, and I didn't find a single one that didn't have a Latin or Greek origin. (*Please Note: I wasn't looking up multi-syllable words caused by inflectional suffixes.*) For most teachers, multi-syllable words are a significant issue. If they are for you—be sure to read on!

With all vocabulary instruction, our goal is to help students understand and create meaning from words. Word building and morphology are important because every single prefix, suffix, and root that students understand helps them unlock the meaning of many more words. It's kind of like compound interest, which Albert Einstein called "the eighth wonder of the world."

You Already Teach Word Building and Morphology

Word building and morphology concepts are frequently embedded inside of our language arts instruction. This instruction is usually presented as rules. However, we should be teaching more than just rules. Take a look at the following table of concepts that you already teach. These all involve word building and morphology.

➔ verb tense inflections	➔ various spelling rules
➔ plurals and possessives	➔ adjectives - degrees of comparison
➔ syllables	➔ adverbs - degrees of comparison
➔ some decoding instruction	

After reading this eBook, you will see these topics and others in a new light and with a fresh perspective. You will develop a better sense of *word consciousness* and *morphological awareness* and become a better vocabulary teacher.

Flawed and Varying Terminology

In *English Word-Formation* (1983), Laurie Bauer points out a big problem: "Root, stem and base are all terms used in the literature to designate that part of a word that remains when all affixes have been removed. Of more recent years, however, there has been some attempt to distinguish consistently between these three terms."

Unfortunately, decades later, the situation has not improved much. The **system of roots, stems, and bases** that Bauer outlines is the one that I think has caught on the most in linguistics. But even today, in the literature, in our textbooks, and on the internet, we find different models and flawed terminology.

Teachers need to teach a reliable system and methodology that helps their students *understand*. When students *understand*, they can deal with "varying terminology." What I present here adapts and expands on what I find is common in linguistics. More importantly, it's a model that doesn't fall apart when analyzing random words across the curriculum or when students ask questions. Let's take a look at it!

Section 1: Word Building and Morphology: My 2 x 2 Morpheme Model™

Morphemes

Do you want to teach your students about morphemes? You probably think that you don't want to. However, the word *morpheme* is the one word that ties everything we teach our students about word-building together.

Words are composed of parts called *morphemes*, and each morpheme contributes meaning to the word. Morphemes are the smallest unit of language that contains meaning. My students learn three types of morphemes: 1) prefixes, 2) suffixes, and 3) roots.

Here is an example of how words are composed of morphemes:

- ➔ 1 morpheme: sell
- ➔ 2 morphemes: re/sell
- ➔ 3 morphemes: re/sell/able

The ROOT in all three examples above is SELL. The root is the most important morpheme in a word because it contains or carries the main meaning of the word. We add AFFIXES (e.g., prefixes and suffixes) to the root to change the meaning of the word and change the part of speech.

My 2 x 2 Morpheme Model™

Prefixes, suffixes, roots, and morphemes—these four words are the foundation of basic word building and morphology. We will bring in a few other words, but these four are the foundation. Naturally, teachers can bring in additional words to meet the needs of their students.

This simple model will serve as a foundation for analyzing any word that you choose.

- ➔ **Type 1 Morphemes: Affixes:** 1) Prefixes, 2) Suffixes
- ➔ **Type 2 Morphemes: Roots:** 1) Independent Roots: Can Stand Alone, 2) Dependent Roots: Can't Stand Alone

Can you see why I call this *My 2x2 Morpheme Model™*? It's composed of two types of morphemes, each with two components.

Section 2: The Difference Between Roots, Stems, and Bases

Some people casually say that *root*, *stem*, and *base* mean the same thing. Others use a model that states that a *root* cannot stand alone as a word, and a *base word* can stand alone as a word. Both of those models are broken and will lead to confusion.

Please read [The Difference Between Roots, Stems, and Bases](#). It's a complete examination and explanation of the model I use below. Furthermore, it shows how quickly a flawed model can fall apart. The model I present here is the only model I have found that doesn't fall apart.

Root / Root Morpheme: The root is the main morpheme that carries the word's main meaning. We have two types of roots:

1. Dependent Roots: Roots that can't stand alone as words.
2. Independent Roots: Roots that can stand alone as words.

To find the root, we remove all of the prefixes and suffixes. If it has a prefix or suffix attached, it is not the root morpheme. To make this point clear, I often call the root the *root morpheme*. I don't use the term "root word" often. Admittedly, it sometimes slips out when the root is an "independent root"

Stem: To find the stem, remove the inflectional suffixes. It's that simple! (Note: We do leave on all prefixes and derivational suffixes.) All stems are bases. A stem may or may not be a root.

- ➔ **Stems That Are Not Roots:** 1) reviewing Stem: review; 2) justifyed Stem: justify
- ➔ **Stems That Are Roots:** 1) viewing Stem: view; 2) cats Stem: cat.

Base: A base is any root or word that we can add a prefix or suffix to. If we cannot add a prefix or suffix to the form, it is not a base. Eventually, a root or word becomes full of prefixes and suffixes and cannot handle any more of them. If the base is a stand-alone word, we *can* call it a base word (but I try not to).

- ➔ **Bases:** gress (root/base) ➔ progress (base) ➔ progressive (base)
- ➔ **Not a Base:** unprogressive (**Note:** If you consider *unprogressiveness* a word, then *unprogressive* is a base.)



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Section 3: Prefixes and Suffixes: Part 1

Affixes: Prefixes and Suffixes

Prefixes are added to the front of roots and bases. Suffixes are added to the end of the roots and bases. Both prefixes and suffixes are affixes, which is to say that they are added on to and affixed (attached) to the root or base.

We have one type of prefix:

1. **Derivational Prefixes:** These add meaning or change the meaning of the root. (e.g., re-, un-, pre-, dis-, anti-, mis-, sub-, trans-, tri-, uni-, etc.).

We have two types of suffixes:

1. **Derivational Suffixes:** These add meaning or change the root's meaning (e.g., -able, -dom, -ity, -less, -ment, -ness, -wards, -ous, -ic, -ical, etc.).
2. **Inflectional Suffixes:** These bend the root's meaning (e.g., -s, -ed, -ing, -er, -est, etc.).

Derivational Prefixes and Suffixes: Changing Parts of Speech by Adding and Removing Prefixes and Suffixes

All derivational prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of the word or root. Additionally, derivational suffixes often indicate the part of speech. Likewise, adding or removing derivational suffixes often changes the part of speech. Here are some examples of how this works.

1. Adjective: **gentle** → to → Adverb: **gently**
2. Adjective: **active** → to → Verb: **activate**
3. Adjective: **popular** → to → Verb: **popularize**
4. Verb: **move** → to → Adjective: **movable**
5. Verb: **observe** → to → Adjective: **observant**
6. Verb: **assess** → to → Noun: **assessment**
7. Verb: **accuse** → to → Noun: **accusation**
8. Noun: **person** → to → Adjective: **personal**
9. Noun: **joy** → to → Adjective: **joyful**
10. Noun: **capsule** → to → Verb: **encapsulate**

Prefixes don't usually change the part of speech, but here is an example of one that does:

1. Noun: **joy** → to → Verb: **enjoy**

Inflectional Suffixes: Bending the Meaning of the Stem

Remember, there are no inflectional prefixes, only inflectional suffixes. As you can see below, inflectional suffixes bend the root's meaning, but they don't change the part of speech.

Inflectional suffixes are added to a **stem**. When we remove the inflectional suffixes, we are left with a **stem**. As explained above, all **stems** are **bases**—and sometimes a stem is a root. Once again, be sure to please read [The Difference Between Roots, Stems, and Bases](#).

I like the term **stem** for one reason. It always means just one thing: the inflectional suffixes have been removed. Once the inflectional suffixes have been removed, we can analyze the word further and look for prefixes, suffixes, roots, and bases. In the examples below, the stem is also a base and the root. Let's examine inflectional suffixes on four different parts of speech: 1) verbs, 2) nouns, 3) adverbs, and 4) adjectives.

1. Verb: Stem/Base/Root: sleep

- ➔ **Verb:** I sleep at night.
- ➔ **Verb:** The dog sleeps all day. (Inflectional Suffix: -s)
- ➔ **Verb:** The dog is sleeping. (Inflectional Suffix: -ing)

2. Noun: Stem/Base/Root: dog

- ➔ **Noun:** The dog sleeps all day.
- ➔ **Noun:** The dogs sleep all day. (Inflectional Suffix: -s)

3. Adverb: Stem/Base/Root: fast

- ➔ **Adverb:** Your dog runs fast.
- ➔ **Adverb:** My dog runs faster. (Inflectional Suffix: -er)

4. Adjective: Stem/Base/Root: tall

- ➔ **Adjective:** The first building is tall.
- ➔ **Adjective:** The second building is taller. (Inflectional Suffix: -er)



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TMI: Food for Thought: Inflectional Suffixes and Verbals

Everyone says inflectional suffixes don't change the part of speech. Here are two examples that should get you thinking.

Functions as an Adjective (Verbal: Present Participle)

- ➔ The sleeping dog drooled. (Inflectional Suffix: -ing)

Functions as a Noun (Verbal: Gerund)

- ➔ Sleeping is great fun for dogs. (Inflectional Suffix: -ing)

Three Questions: If it functions as an adjective, is it an adjective? If it functions as a noun, is it a noun? Do these inflectional suffixes change a verb's part of speech when the verb is used as a verbal?

TMI: Food for Thought: Inflectional Suffixes and Possessives

In modern grammar theory, possessive nouns usually function as adjectives/determiners. Here is additional food for thought. Do the possessive inflectional suffixes change the stem's part of speech?

- ➔ Stem: Noun: dog
 - ➔ **Possessive Noun/Adjective Slot:** The dog's tail is short. (Inflectional Suffix: -'s)
 - ➔ **Possessive Noun/Adjective Slot:** The dogs' tails are short. (Inflectional Suffix: -s')



Your students will say, "I finally get it! I can't even read what I was writing before!"

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Section 4: Roots

Roots

All roots are bases because we can add prefixes and suffixes to all roots. Roots have two defining characteristics:

1. **Stripped Clean:** The root is what's left after all of the prefixes and suffixes have been removed.
2. **Main Meaning:** The root is the morpheme (the smallest unit of language that contains meaning) that carries the word's main meaning.

We have two types of roots:

1. Independent Roots: Roots that can stand alone as words.
2. Dependent Roots: Roots that can't stand alone as words.

1. Independent Roots: Roots That Can Stand Alone As Words

Here are two examples of roots that can stand alone as words:

- ➔ 2 morphemes: help/ful (root: help) (suffix: -ful)
- ➔ 2 morphemes: re/place (prefix: re-) (root: place)

I hope that makes sense.

The Case Against Calling These Independent Roots "Base Words"

- ➔ Prefix + Root: **re/view**
- ➔ Prefix + Root: **re/peat**

I've heard people say that the **re-** in **repeat** is not a prefix because "it's part of the word." These people then say that the base word of **reviewed** is **view** but that the base word of **repeated** is **repeat**. Can you see the problem with that? This problem is caused by the old and imperfect definition that says a "base word" is a word that can stand alone.

Be sure to read [The Difference Between Roots, Stems, and Bases](#).

2. Dependent Roots: Roots That Can't Stand Alone As Words

Many roots cannot stand alone as words. In fact, the English language uses hundreds of Greek and Latin roots, and most cannot stand alone as words. Of course, some Greek and Latin roots can stand alone as words. Can you spot some from this list? Take a look:

Greek and Latin Roots

act, agri, alt, aqua, arch, aud, biblio, bio, cardi, cede, cept, cert, cess, cide, claim, cline, commun, corp, cred, cycle, dem, dent, div, fac, firm, flect, flex, form, frag, funct, gen, geo, grad, gram, graph, grat, hab, homo, hosp, hydr, imag, integ, junct, jud, jur, lab, liber, loc, log, luna, man, mar, mech, mem, ment, meter, migr, miss, mit, mob, morph, mov, narr, nat, nav, neg, numer, opt, ord, path, ped, phob, phon, photo, phys, pop, port, pos, psych, ques, rad, rect, reg, rid, rupt, san, scend, sci, scope, scribe, script, sect, sed, sens, sent, serv, sign, sim, sol, solv, son, spec, spir, stell, strict, struct, sum, surg, surr, tact, tain, tang, term, terr, therm, tort, tract, trib, turb, urb, vac, var, ver, vict, vid, voc, void, vol, volv

Can you think of a word for each of these roots? Keep in mind that we can find roots at the beginning, middle, or end of a word. If the word is composed of multiple roots, you may find them in two or all three locations.

Let's look at a few examples:

➔ 2 morphemes: ment/al (root: ment = mind) (suffix: -al = relating to)

MENT cannot stand alone as a word. Many scientific and medical words contain one *or more* roots that cannot stand alone.

➔ 3 morphemes: osteo/por/osis (root: osteo = bone) (root: por = passage/porous) (suffix: -osis = condition)

DEFINITION: osteoporosis: a porous bone condition or disease.

➔ 2 morphemes: epi/dermis (root: epi = upon) (root: derm = skin)

DEFINITION: epidermis: the surface layer of skin—upon the dermis

As you can see, both *osteoporosis* and *epidermis* are composed of two Greek/Latin roots, and none of the roots can stand alone as words.

Section 5: Prefixes and Suffixes: Part 2

Prefixes: Derivational

Prefixes are affixes (a type of morpheme) that we add to the front of roots. Since prefixes are a morpheme, they add meaning or change the root’s meaning. We have just one type of prefix: derivational. Here is a brief list of some of the more common prefixes:

Prefixes
re-, un- pre-, dis-, anti-, mis-, sub-, under-, trans-, auto-, cent-, de-, uni-, bi-, tri-, poly-, bene-, co-, contra-, dys-, dia-, epi-, em-, homo-, extra-, ex-, hyper-, im-, ir-, mid-, mal-, intro-, intra-, inter-, meta-, micro-, mon-, mono-, mulit-, neo-, non-, milli-, mega-, nano-, on-, out-, over-, para-, pent-, per-, pro-, pseudo-, retro-, semi-, super-, syn-, tele-, trans-, ultra-, with-

We are going to look at just one prefix: *pre-*. In case you hadn’t noticed, the word *prefix* uses the prefix *pre-*. As you will see, even with a simple and common prefix like *pre-*, things can get messy fast. The prefix *pre-* means *before*; however, *before* has two meanings:

1. before: the time preceding something; in advance
2. before: in front of

Let’s look at a few groups of words while considering two aspects:

1. construction
2. meaning

Prefix Added Onto an Independent Root			
With this group of words, <i>pre-</i> clearly means <i>before</i> .			
preview	precaution	precooked	precondition
preapproved	predate	prefix	predisposition
predominant	pre-emergent	pregame	prefabricated
preexisting	prepaid	premature	preheat
prehistoric	prejudge	premeditated	preoccupied

Prefix Added Onto a Dependent Root

With this group of words, **pre-** clearly means **before**.

prepare	predict	prejudice	precede
precipitate	preclude	premonition	preempt
presumptuous	preliminary	premise	prenatal

Words evolve, change, and combine over thousands of years. People create the meaning of words every day as they use the words, and it's the rebels and rule-breakers who add the most to our language. For this reason, no prefix, suffix, or root always means what it would mean in a stagnant language. **Pre-** is a foundation for many words where the meaning has changed. Let's look at a few words where **pre-** doesn't *obviously* mean **before**. Keep in mind that all of these originated with **prae** (before).

Word	Definition	Etymology / Origin
president	One who is elected to preside	from preside → (Latin) praesidere ; prae (before) + sedere (to sit) → (Latin) praesident (sitting before)
preach	publicly proclaim or teach	(Latin) prae (before) + dicare (to make known)
precocious	Developed more than is natural or usual at a given age; exceeding what is to be expected of one's years	(Latin) prae (before) + coquere (to cook) → (French) praecoquere (to cook or ripen beforehand)
present	1. being at hand; within reach or call 2. existing or occurring now; current 3. the period of time now occurring	(Latin) prae (before) + esse (be)
precise	marked by exactness and accuracy	(Latin) prae (before) + caedere (to cut)
prevail	To overcome; to gain the victory or the advantage.	(Latin) prae (before) + valere (to be strong, able, or have power)

Here are a few more **pre-** words for you to think about and analyze. What does **pre-** mean in these words?

preface	pretend	preposition	prevent
precious	precarious	precinct	pretentious
predicate	precision	prefer	premium

And here is one word where **pre-** does not mean and never did mean **before**.

Word	Definition	Etymology / Origin
preen	1. For a bird to straighten and clean its feathers 2. To make oneself look attractive and then admire oneself	(Latin) ungere (anoint) → see <i>prune</i>

Suffixes: Derivational and Inflectional

Suffixes are affixes (a type of morpheme) that we add to the end of roots. Since suffixes are a morpheme, they add meaning or change the meaning of the root. We have two types of suffixes: 1) derivational and 2) inflectional.

Derivational Suffixes: Adding and removing derivational suffixes usually changes the part of speech and changes the word’s meaning or creates a new word.

Here are some of the more common derivational suffixes:

- Derivational Adjective Suffixes:** -able, -al, -ian, -ful, -ic, -ish, -ive, -less, -ous, -y
- Derivational Noun Suffixes:** -ness, -ity, -dom, -ment, -acy, -ance, -ship, -ist
- Derivational Adverb Suffixes:** -ly, -ways, -wise
- Derivational Verb Suffixes:** -ate, -fy, -ize, -ade, -ble (see *Inflectional Suffixes*)

** () = the number of morphemes

Verbs	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
clear (1)	clear/ness (2)	clear (1)	clear/ly (2)
	rar/ity (2)	rare (1)	rare/ly (2)

Inflectional Suffixes: ELLO (a course in English linguistics developed by four universities) said this: “Although the distinction between derivation and inflection is widely accepted within the field of morphology, it still remains one of the most controversial issues in morphological theory.” Clearly, there is a difference between derivational and inflectional suffixes, but the difference is debated.

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines inflection as “the act or result of curving or bending.” As relates to our topic, we don’t change the root’s meaning with inflectional suffixes, but we bend the root’s meaning.

Inflectional suffixes don’t change the part of speech (supposedly), but they do add valuable information. Some people speak as if these inflectional endings don’t change the meaning at all, but they do. They are morphemes, so they contain meaning and create meaning. However, they don’t change the root’s meaning in the same way that derivational suffixes do.

Although this is a small list of inflectional suffixes, they consume a significant amount of elementary school time.

Inflectional Suffixes List:

- ➔ **verb inflections/tenses:** -ed, -ing, -en, -s
- ➔ **plurals:** -s, -es
- ➔ **possessives:** -’s, -s’
- ➔ **degree:** comparatives (-er), degree: superlatives (-est)



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Section 6: Putting It All Together

Word Building and Word Agility: Adding, Removing, and Combining Prefixes, Suffixes, and Roots

Our goal here is to understand how to approach word formation and word building. When we know how to approach words, it makes us better readers, better writers, and probably more intelligent.

Keep in mind that discovering the truth of a word often requires that we consult an authoritative resource. I have come across many words with prefixes, suffixes, and roots where nothing is what it seems on the surface. You sometimes discover that the word is the result of a misspelling or other type of error that caught on. When you research a word, you find explanations like these: "Of uncertain origin; possibly from Old English."

Take a look at these words: *care*, *help*, *amaze*, *beauty*, and *place*. Our goal is to understand how all of these relate to each other and create meaning. If I researched these five words, I would find a history behind how these words came to be, and I may divide the roots differently.

** () = the number of morphemes

Verbs	Noun	Adjective	Adverb
care (1) car/es (2) car/ed (2) car/ing (2)	care (1) car/ing (2) care/less/ness (3)	care/ful (2) car/ing (2) care/less (2) un/car/ing (3)	care/ful/ly (3) car/ing /ly (3) care/less/ly (3)
help (1) help/s (2) help/ed (2) help/ing (2)	help (1) help/er (2) help/er/s (3) help/less/ness (3) help/ing/s (3)	help/ful (2) help/ing (2) help/less (2)	help/ful/ly (3) help/less/ly (3)
amaze (1) amaz/es (2) amaz/ed (2) amaz/ing (3)	amaze/ment (2)	amaz/ing (2) amaz/ed (2) un/amaz/ing (3)	amaz/ing/ly (3) un/amaz/ing/ly (3)
beauti/fy (2) beauti/fi/es(3) beauti/fi/ed (3) beauti/fi/ing (3)	beauty (1)	beauti/ful (2) beauty (1)	beauti/ful/ly (3)

place (1) plac/es (2) plac/ed (2) plac/ing (2) re/place (2) mis/place (2) dis/place (2)	place (1) place/ment (2) re/place/ment (3) re/place/ment/s (4)	dis/plac/ed (3) ir/re/place/able (4) mis/plac/ed (3)	
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Spelling/Phonics vs. Morphology

Spelling and phonics are both related to and a separate area of study from morphology. At times they all work together as a team, and at other times, they work against each other. I'll point out three areas of conflict:

1. **Spelling Rules:** Spelling rule changes often make the word-building analysis more challenging and confusing, especially for young students. For example, when teachers ask, "What's the base in *supplied*?" the students must know the spelling rule "change the *-y* to *i* and *-ed*." If they don't, they may answer "suppli."
2. **Syllables:** It's essential to teach students about syllables because it helps them decode text and spell correctly. However, the way we divide words into syllables is different from how we divide them into morphemes. For example, the suffix *-able* is one suffix BUT two syllables *a/ble*.
3. **Word Families:** Word families (*-ack*, *-ail*, *-ale*, *-all*, *-ain*, *-ake*, etc.) focus on how a word looks, not on the meaning of the parts of the word. Word families help with decoding and spelling, but that's it. In short, *quack*, *back*, *attack*, *pack*, *black*, *track*, *shack*, and *sack* are not related in meaning. In these words, *-ack* is not a morpheme.

In short, we can't combine *Spelling/Phonics* and *Morphology* to create a perfect system.

A Few Definitions

I'll conclude this with a few important definitions from Google/Oxford:

1. **etymology:** the study of the origin of words and how their meanings have changed throughout history.
2. **derivation:** the formation of a word from another word or a root in the same or another language.
3. **morphology:** the study of the forms of words.