

Using prefixes to make an opposite meaning

1. Negative prefixes

There are many prefixes (part-words that go before the main word) that change the meaning of the word to an opposite meaning.

un-, il-, ir-, im-, in-, de-, dis-, a- (or an-), anti-, non-, mis-

Which one should be used? Unfortunately, like a lot of English!, there aren't rigid rules. But here are some points to help you, along with some examples of each type.

Un-	
Common!! Use before words ending '-able' and '-ed', and quite a lot of other situations!	
Unreal	The party began to take on an unreal, almost nightmarish quality.
Unable	I tried to contact him but was unable to.
Unusual	It's unusual for the trees to flower so early.
Unhappy	I didn't realize but he was deeply unhappy at that time.
Unfaithful	She remained loyal to her unfaithful husband.
Unfair	It would be unfair not to let you have a choice.
Unprepared	She was totally unprepared for his response.
Unhelpful	The taxi driver was being very unhelpful.
Unlikely	The project seemed unlikely to succeed.
Unshaven	He looked pale and unshaven.
In-	
Use before words that don't start with an 'i' nor a 'u'	
Incorrect	The time on my clock is incorrect.
Incredible	It seemed incredible that she had been there a week already.
Invalid	People with invalid papers are deported to another country.
Insane	The prisoners were slowly going insane.
Infrequent	Muggings are relatively infrequent in this area.
Incapable	The children seem to be totally incapable of working by themselves.
Inexpensive	Inexpensive socks fade faster than pricey ones.
Inorganic	Rocks and minerals are inorganic.
Indecent	It would be indecent to wear such a short skirt
Invisible	The gas in a balloon is invisible
Informal	We can wear jeans to an informal party
Independent	She is proud to be independent in her job.
Inactive	It's hard to exercise after being inactive for a week.
Inappropriate	Casual clothes are inappropriate at a wedding.
Indefinite	Rain delayed the game for an indefinite period.
Infamous	Jack the Ripper was an infamous criminal of the 19 th century
Il-	
Use before words that start with 'l'	
Illegal	It's illegal to drive through a red light.
Illegible	His signature is totally illegible.
Illogical	His answer is illogical; it makes no sense.

Im-	
Use before words that start with 'm' or 'p' (and sometimes 'b')	
Impolite	It's impolite to interrupt a person who is speaking.
Imperfect	The items being sold at a reduced price are slightly imperfect.
Immoral	It's immoral to steal.
Impossible	It's impossible to prove.
Impatient	He was too impatient to wait in line for the bus
Immobile	The ship was immobile after grounding on a reef.
Imbalance	Postnatal depression is usually due to hormonal imbalance.
Immature	She is too immature to take a babysitting job.
Impersonal	Online teaching is so impersonal.
Ir-	
Use before words that start with 'r'	
Irrational	There was nothing inherently irrational in such a decision.
Irregular	The shirt was on sale because of irregular stitches
Irresistible	My father's homemade apple pie is irresistible
Irrelevant	Music skills are irrelevant in playing baseball.
Irresponsible	It is irresponsible to run into traffic.
Irreparable	My shoe is irreparable since my dog chewed it.
De-	
Use with verbs when the action is reversed	
Deactivate	It took him 3 hours to deactivate the bomb.
Decode	If you can decode his writing then you are a genius.
Decommission	The government will decommission the nuclear power station.
Decompose	The vegetables were so old that they were decomposing.
Decontaminate	It will take years to decontaminate the chemical spill.
Deform	Road surfaces sometime deform in hot weather.
Derail	The train derailed due to some cracked track.
Dis-	
Use when a reversal is implied'	
Disapprove	He disapproved of her behaviour.
Disrespect	Be sure not to disrespect the king. You may get sent to prison.
Disbelief	He stared at me in disbelief.
Dishonour	He dishonoured our Club by speaking Cantonese all morning.
Disillusion	I had to disillusion her. Santa Claus is not a real person.
Disinterest	His total disinterest in money puzzled his family.
Displeasure	She made no attempt to hide her displeasure at the prospect.
Disregard	Please disregard what Andrew says. It's all hot air!
Dissatisfaction	Many people have expressed their dissatisfaction with the arrangement.
Distrust	He doesn't have a mobile phone because he distrusts modern technology.
Discomfort	You will experience some minor discomfort during the treatment.
Discontent	There is widespread discontent about the pay and conditions.
A- or Ab- (An before vowels)	
Means 'without' (this prefix is commonly used in medical terms)	
Apolitical	Apolitical people usually don't bother to vote in elections.
Atheist	He doesn't believe in a God of any kind – he's an atheist.
Abnormal	It's highly abnormal to be born with 6 toes.
Amoral	He doesn't care who he hurts – he's amoral.
Asexual	Most plants can reproduce asexually.
Asymmetric	Nowadays it's very fashionable to wear asymmetric designs.

Anti-	
Means 'against'	
Antiseptic	An antiseptic cream will keep your wound free of infection.
Antisocial	The judge said their behaviour had been very antisocial.
Antifreeze	In winter we make sure to have antifreeze in our car radiator.
Antibody	Have a Covid injection to increase your antibody count.
Antibiotic	To stop your cough, take one of these antibiotic pills every morning.
Antidote	Although the snake was poisonous, we had an antidote, so he survived.
Antihero	Dracula is the antihero. We love to boo him every time he enters the stage.
Anticlockwise	To undo the screw, turn it anticlockwise.
Antiaging	If this cream really had antiaging properties, I would look as though I was 21!
Non-	
Use before almost any word ... if you're not sure use this!	
Nonessential	I have no money for nonessentials.
Nonfiction	I prefer reading nonfiction.
Nonsense	You're talking nonsense!
Nonstop	She talks nonstop.
Nonexistent	Mobile phones cheaper than £50 are nonexistent
Nonresident	Although he's English, he's classed as a non-resident. He lives in Malta.
Nonstandard	The door won't fit – the frame is a nonstandard size.
Nonmetallic	Is this made of steel, or is it non-metallic?
Mis-	
NOT a negative prefix ... it means 'wrongly'	
Misunderstand	I misunderstood the invitation and arrived a day late.
Misheard	She whispered his name but I misheard her.
Misquote	"Money is the root of all evil" is a misquotation.
Misjudge	I misjudged your intention – I thought you wanted to hurt him, not to help him.
Misspell	You've misspelled my name – it's Andrew, not Androo.
Misplace	You'll have to pay. I've misplaced my wallet

2. Hyphens

Only use with *Anti-*, *Non-* and *Mis-*

Add a hyphen if the word is difficult to read:

- Mis-spell (because we don't mean Miss Pell !)
- Anti-aging

There isn't always a "correct" time to use and not to use!!

3. Use of prefixes 'under-' and 'over-'

'under-' means

- 'beneath' "I'll use the **under**ground train"
- 'insufficient' "The council **under**funds road maintenance"

'over-' means

- 'above' "Those are rain clouds **over**head"
- 'excessive' "Her kids never play outdoors – she's **over**protective"