

Morphology in Action in the Classroom

Three Activities to Help Students Unlock Words and Their Meanings

Morphology instruction helps students recognize meaningful word parts and use them to unlock unfamiliar vocabulary in text. These three classroom-friendly activities can support students across grades as they move from noticing word parts to analyzing complex academic vocabulary. Use the activities for whole-class instruction, small groups, or individual students.

Grades K–3: Word Sorts

Purpose

Help students notice how endings and other word parts affect a word's meaning, grammar, pronunciation, or function.

Why it Matters

Word sorts help students develop awareness of meaningful word parts while strengthening connections among phonology (sounds), orthography (written representation), vocabulary, and meaning.

How it Works

Provide students with a collection of words that share a common pattern, suffix, or ending. Students sort the words into categories and discuss what they notice about the words' meanings, functions, or spelling patterns.

Possible Word Sorts

- Singular vs. plural nouns (*cat/cats*, *pen/pens*)
- Past-tense words ending in *-ed*
- Words with common suffixes such as *-ful*, *-less*, *-ness*, or *-y*

Teacher Prompts

- What do these words have in common?
- What does the ending tell us?
- How does the ending change the word's meaning?
- Can you think of another word that belongs in this category?

ed

landed	spelled	bumped
crashed	filled	planted
played	pinched	dusted
rested	stayed	cashed
jumped	sifted	hunted

/ɛd/

/d/

/t/

Grades 4+: Word Mapping

Purpose

Teach students a systematic approach for analyzing unfamiliar words and predicting their meanings.

Why it Matters

Word mapping helps students move beyond guessing to develop a reliable process for unlocking unfamiliar academic vocabulary.

How it Works

Provide students with a collection of words that share a common pattern, suffix, or ending. Students sort the words into categories and discuss what they notice about the words' meanings, functions, or spelling patterns.

Choose a word from a classroom text and guide students through a word map that identifies:

- Prefix
- Base word or root
- Suffix
- Meaning of each part
- Predicted word meaning

For example, students might analyze the word **unhelpful** by identifying:

- *un-* = not
- *help* = aid or support
- *-ful* = full of

Students then combine the meanings of the parts to predict the meaning of the entire word before confirming their thinking through reading the word in context, discussion, or using a dictionary.

Word



Prefix



Root



Suffix



Meaning



Meaning



Meaning



Prediction



Definition



Word



Prefix



Root



Suffix



Meaning



Meaning



Meaning



Prediction



Definition



Teacher Tip

Use vocabulary taken directly from science, social studies, or ELA lessons so students can immediately apply the strategy during authentic reading.

Grades 6+: Morpheme Triangles

Purpose

Deepen students' understanding of Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes while expanding academic vocabulary.

Why it Matters

Morpheme triangles help students recognize relationships among words, making academic vocabulary easier to understand across disciplines.

How it Works

Start with a complex academic word and identify three key morphemes:

- Prefix
- Base or root
- Suffix

Students write down the meaning of each morpheme and then generate additional words that contain the same prefix, root, or suffix.

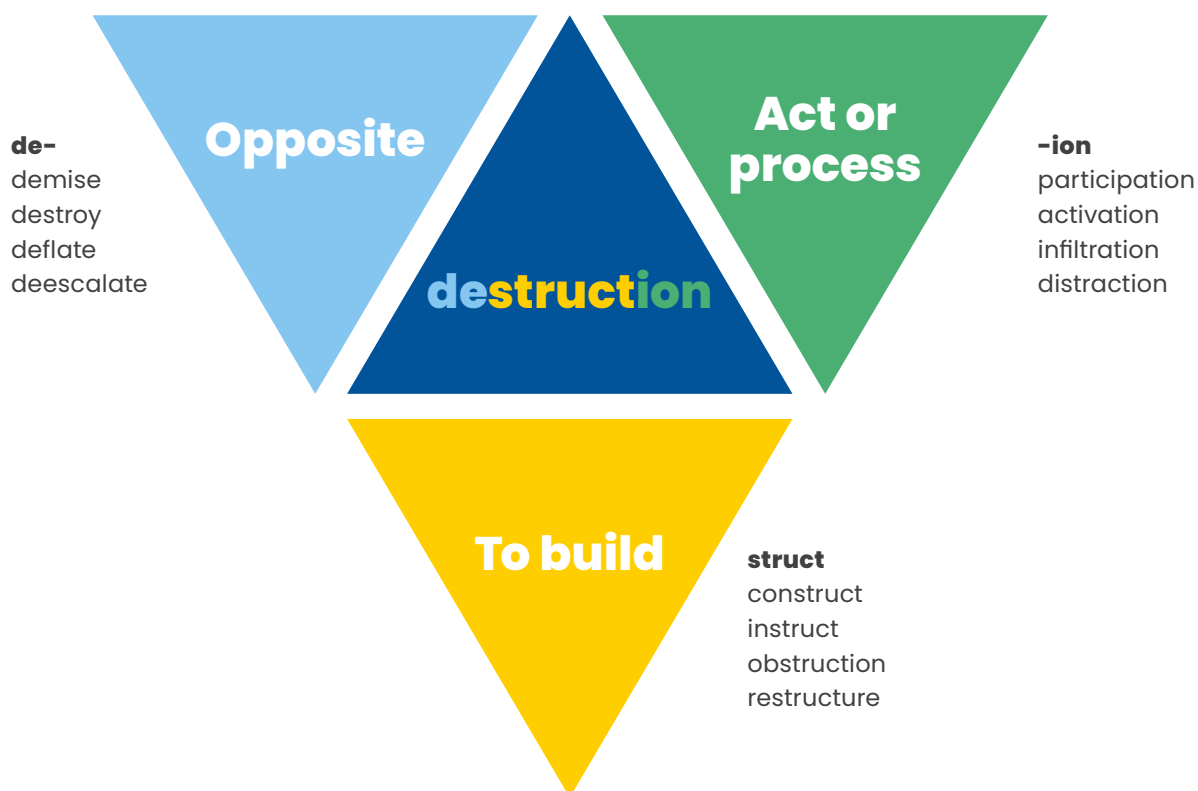
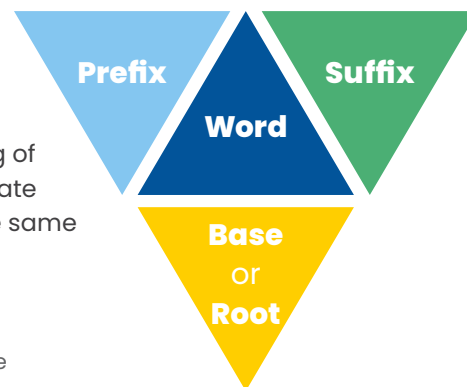
For example:

- *de-* = opposite, reverse, or remove
- *struct* = build
- *-ion* = act or process

Using the word destruction, students explore how each morpheme contributes to the word's meaning and identify related words.

For example:

- Words containing **de-**: **demise**, **destroy**, **deflate**, **deescalate**
- Words containing **struct**: **construct**, **instruct**, **obstruction**, and **restructure**
- Words containing **-ion**: **participation**, **activation**, **infiltration**, **distraction**





A Basic Progression for Morphology Instruction

Grades K-3

Notice meaningful word parts

Grades 4+

Analyze how word parts contribute to meaning

Grades 6+

Use morphemes to unlock increasingly complex academic vocabulary

When students learn to recognize prefixes, roots, and suffixes, they gain a tool for attacking unfamiliar words, expanding vocabulary, and comprehending increasingly complex text.

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