

Why Thirty Prefixes, Thirty Roots, and Thirty Suffixes

The small set of word parts that unlocks the widest world of words

The Big Word Detective songs are built on a deliberate choice. Instead of asking students to meet thousands of hard words one at a time, we teach the ninety word parts that those hard words are made from. Thirty prefixes, thirty roots, and thirty suffixes are not a random ninety. They are the highest leverage pieces in the English language, the parts that show up again and again across science, social studies, and literature. Learn them once, and a reader carries a key that fits thousands of locks.

Morphology is a multiplier, not a list

English is a morphological language, which means most of its longer words are built from smaller meaning parts. A student who knows that *tri* means three, *port* means carry, and *able* means can be, has a running start on *triangle*, *transport*, and *portable*, and on words never formally taught. This is why morphological knowledge behaves like a multiplier. Researchers have shown that a student's awareness of word parts makes its own contribution to reading comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling, above and beyond phonics, and that the contribution grows through the upper elementary and middle school years as texts fill with longer words (Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006). The academic words that carry the heaviest meaning in a textbook are almost all built from roots and affixes, so the student who can take them apart is the student who can read to learn.

Teaching a thousand words teaches a thousand words. Teaching ninety word parts teaches the strategy that opens tens of thousands.

What the research says instruction in word parts does

Morphology is not only useful, it is teachable, and teaching it works. A systematic review of the research found that instruction in word parts improves reading, spelling, and vocabulary, and that it brings the largest gains to the students who struggle most, exactly the readers who need the most help (**Bowers, Kirby, & Deacon, 2010**). A later meta analysis that pooled thirty studies reported a moderate overall benefit and, importantly, clear gains in the building block skills: decoding, spelling, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and morphological knowledge itself (**Goodwin & Ahn, 2013**). An integrative review reached the same conclusion and added a practical note, that morphology instruction pays off most when it is taught explicitly and connected to meaning rather than drilled as isolated pieces (**Carlisle, 2010**). That is the exact design of the Big Word Detective songs, where every word part arrives inside a meaning family and a real example.

Why these ninety, and why grouped this way

The lists are chosen for utility and organized for memory. Each song gathers word parts that share a meaning, so students meet them as a family rather than a pile. The families are built to cover the ideas that matter most in school reading: number and size, direction, negation, the senses, life and the earth, people and power, and the suffixes that turn any of these into a doer, a quality, or a describing word.

PREFIXES

Numbers & Size: uni, mono, bi, tri, poly, semi, micro, macro

Where & Which Way: sub, super, inter, trans, circum, mid, ex, pre, post

No & Not: un, non, in, im, dis, anti, contra, mis, de

ROOTS

Words & Senses: graph, scribe, dict, audi, phon, spect, sens, tele, log, phil

Life & Earth: bio, gene, geo, terr, photo, luc, chrono, omni, bene, pathy

People & Power: duc, port, manu, mand, jur, greg, cred, fid, flex, mit

SUFFIXES

People & Doers: er, or, ist, ian, eer, ee, ant, ent, ster, ling

States & Qualities: tion, sion, ment, ness, ity, ance, ence, ship, hood, dom

Describers: ful, less, able, ous, ive, al, ic, y, ish

The banks above show the meaning families that anchor each song. Grouping by meaning is what turns a memory task into a pattern, and patterns are what the brain keeps.

One set of parts serves reading and writing at once

The same knowledge that helps a student read a long word helps that student spell and build one. When a writer knows that *tion* spells the ending of *action* and *vacation*, the spelling stops being a guess and becomes a rule. The research bears this out.

Morphological instruction lifts spelling and decoding together, because both depend on seeing that words are made of stable, reusable parts (**Goodwin & Ahn, 2013; Nagy et al., 2006**). A student who owns these ninety parts reads unfamiliar words with more confidence and writes longer, more precise words with fewer errors, which is the whole point of teaching them together.

Why we put them in songs

Choosing the right word parts is half the work. Making them stick is the other half. Setting the morphemes to rhythm and rhyme loads them into the memory system the brain most reliably rewards and repeats, so hundreds of low stress repetitions happen almost without effort, and the parts are ready when a hard word appears on the page. The reasoning behind that choice is laid out in the companion document on music, rhythm, and rhyme. Together the two decisions, the right ninety parts and the song that carries them, are what make the Big Word Detective a strategy students keep for life.

References

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- Carlisle, J. F. (2010). Effects of instruction in morphological awareness on literacy achievement: An integrative review. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45(4), 464 to 487.
- Goodwin, A. P., & Ahn, S. (2013). A meta analysis of morphological interventions in English: Effects on literacy outcomes for school age children. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 17(4), 257 to 285.

Nagy, W., Berninger, V. W., & Abbott, R. D. (2006). Contributions of morphology beyond phonology to literacy outcomes of upper elementary and middle school students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(1), 134 to 147.

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