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Spelling and Vocabulary Basics

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Spelling and Vocabulary Basics

Competitive exams test English in two simple ways. They check if you spell words correctly. They also check if you know what words mean.

Many exam questions ask you to spell a word or to pick the right meaning. A few easy rules and word lists make both much simpler.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Spelling**Receive: c first, then e before i.
02 **Meaning**Synonyms match meaning, not topic.
03 **Roots**Bene is Latin for well.
04 **Exam**CDS (I) 2021: reprimanded matches admonished.

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2. Commonly misspelt words
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How do exams test spelling and words?

1

Spelling matters

1.1 Which word is the classic trap?

Correct spelling matters in exams. A common trap word is “receive.” The rule “i before e, except after c” helps you remember it.

In receive, the letter c comes first. So the e goes before the i.

The rule is a memory aid, not a law. Some words break it, as card 5 shows.

True or false: "Recieve" is a correct spelling.

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: receive

2

Commonly misspelt words

2.1 Which words do students miss?

These words are often misspelt. Learn the shape of each word by sight. Then learn what it means.

Word	Meaning
Accommodation	a place to live, work or stay

Word	Meaning
Acquaintance	a person you know but who is not a close friend
Bureaucracy	the system of official rules in a government or organization
Committee	a group chosen to make decisions or handle a subject
Conscience	the part of your mind that tells you right from wrong
Definitely	a way of stressing that something is certainly true
Embarrass	to make someone feel shy, uncomfortable or ashamed
Exaggerate	to make something seem larger or more important than it is
Harass	to annoy or pressure someone with unpleasant words or actions
Liaison	a relationship that involves sharing information or ideas
Maintenance	keeping something in good condition by regular checks or repairs
Millennium	a period of 1,000 years
Mischievous	enjoying playing tricks and annoying people
Necessary	needed for a purpose or reason
Occurrence	something that happens or exists
Pronunciation	the way a word or sound is pronounced

Word	Meaning
Privilege	a special right or advantage held by a person or group
Rhythm	a strong, regular, repeated pattern of sounds or movements

Accommodation has a double c and a double m. Check that one first.

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: accommodation
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: bureaucracy
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: committee
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: conscience
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: millennium
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: rhythm

3

Synonyms and meaning

3.1 What is a synonym?

Vocabulary questions ask for a word's meaning, or a synonym. A synonym is a word that means almost the same thing.

An antonym is the opposite. It is a word that means the opposite of another word.

3.2 What does benevolent mean?

"Benevolent" is a common vocabulary word. It describes a person who is kind. Its closest synonym is simply "kind."

A dictionary adds two more ideas: helpful and generous. So kind is a good match, but the word has a wider sense.

True or false: Kind is a close synonym of benevolent.

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: synonym
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: antonym
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: benevolent

4

Reading and word lists

4.1 How do you build vocabulary?

Reading regularly is a steady way to build vocabulary. It shows you new words in real context.

A good habit is to write down new words as you meet them. Review that list often.

4.2 Which words should start your list?

One word can stand in for a whole phrase. Start your list with these seven.

One word	Phrase it replaces
Atheist	a person who believes that God or gods do not exist
Philanthropist	a rich person who helps the poor, especially by giving money
Misogynist	a person who hates or dislikes women, or believes they are not as good as men

One word	Phrase it replaces
Misanthrope	a person who hates and avoids other people
Omnipotent	having total power; able to do anything
Autobiography	the story of a person’s life, written by that person
Bibliography	a list of books or articles on a subject, or of those used in a work

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: atheist
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: philanthropist
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: misogynist
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: misanthrope
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: omnipotent
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: autobiography
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: bibliography

Which traps and word parts help?

5

Spelling exceptions

5.1 Do spelling rules always work?

Many English spelling rules have exceptions. “Receive” itself follows the “i before e” rule, but words like “weird” break it.

Weird comes from the Old English word wyrd, meaning destiny. Learn it as a word to memorise, not as a rule.

5.2 What are tricky wrong options?

Synonym questions often include tricky wrong options. These are words related in topic, but not in actual meaning.

Do not pick a word because it sounds right. Check that its meaning matches.

True or false: The word "weird" follows the rule "i before e, except after c."

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: weird

6

British and American spelling

6.1 Why do some words have two spellings?

Many English words have two correct spellings. One is British and one is American.

British	American
colour	color
centre	center
defence	defense
tyre	tire
cheque	check

Five pairs to learn first. The left word is British. The right word is American.

Here are more pairs, with the small notes you need.

British	American	Note
theatre	theater	
grey	gray	Grey is the usual British spelling. Gray is usually American.
programme	program	Programme is the British word for a TV or radio show.
plough	plow	Plow is the North American form.
aluminium	aluminum	North American English uses aluminum.
catalogue	catalog	Catalogue is the usual British spelling. Catalog is also used in the US.
analyse	analyze	Analyze is the North American form.
organise	organize	Organize is the main Oxford spelling. British English also allows organise.
judgement	judgment	Judgement is common in British English. Judgment is the usual North American form.
accommodation	accommodations	North American English often uses the plural.

In an exam, pick the form that matches the other words in the sentence. Do not mix the two styles.

True or false: "Tyre" is the American spelling of "tire."

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: color
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: centre
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: defence
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: tyre
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: cheque
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: grey
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: programme
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: organize
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: judgement

7

Look-alike word pairs

7.1 Which pairs do students mix up?

A homophone sounds like another word but has a different spelling or meaning. Plain and plane are an example.

Principal and principle sound the same. Oxford lists them as homophones.

Word	Meaning	Its partner	Meaning
principal	most important (adjective). In American English, the head of a school. In British English, the head of a college.	**principle**	a moral rule or strong belief that guides your actions

Word	Meaning	Its partner	Meaning
stationary	not moving	**stationery**	writing materials such as paper, pens and envelopes
compliment	a comment that expresses praise	**complement**	to add something in a way that improves it
council	a group elected to govern an area, or chosen to give advice	**counsel**	advice; also a lawyer who represents someone in court
discreet	careful in what you say or do, so as to keep something secret	**discrete**	separate and different from other things of the same type

An **effect** is a change that something causes. It is a result.

7.2 Which words change between noun and verb?

In British English, **licence** is the noun for an official permit. The verb is **license**, to give someone official permission.

Practise is the British verb, meaning to train regularly. **Practice** is the noun.

US English uses practice for both the noun and the verb. Practice is also the noun for a usual way of doing something.

True or false: "Stationery" means not moving.

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: homophone
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: principal

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: principle
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: stationery
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: compliment
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: counsel
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: discrete
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: licence
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: practise

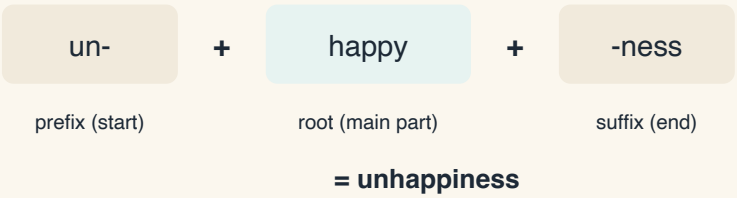
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Root words

8.1 What are prefixes, suffixes and roots?

A prefix is added at the start of a word to change its meaning. Examples are un- in unhappy and pre- in preheat.

A suffix is added at the end of a word to make another word. Examples are -ly in quickly and -ness in sadness.

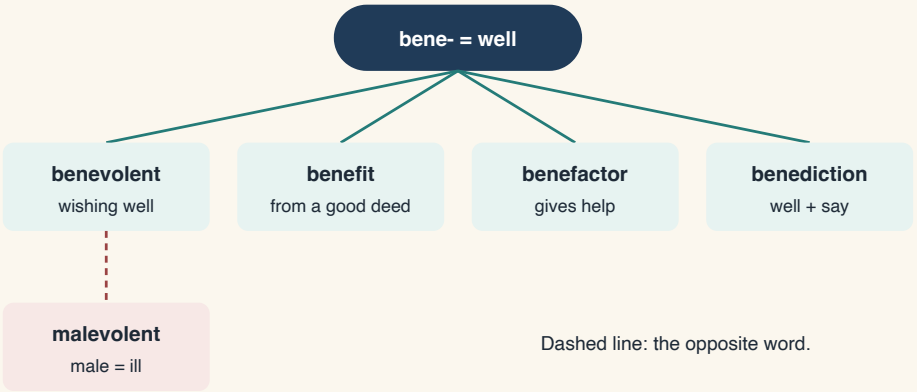


Prefix, root and suffix build one word.

8.2 What does bene- mean?

Root words help with vocabulary. The Latin word bene means “well”. Words built on it carry a good sense.

Knowing this helps you guess words like “benevolent” or “benefit.” Benevolent comes from “wishing well”. Benefit comes from benefactum, a “good deed”.



One root, four related words. Malevolent is the opposite of benevolent.

- **Benefactor:** a person who gives money or other help to a person or an organization, such as a school or charity.
- **Benediction:** a prayer asking for God’s protection. It joins bene with dicere, “say”.
- **Benign:** kind and gentle, or not dangerous. For a tumour, the opposite is malignant.
- **Malevolent:** showing a desire to harm others. It comes from Latin male, “ill”.

Note the small trap. Bene means well, not good. The good sense comes from words like benefactum.

True or false: Malevolent is the opposite of benevolent.

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: prefix
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: suffix

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: benefit
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: benefactor
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: benediction
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: benign
- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: malevolent

Why does this skill pay off?

9

Why skills pay off

9.1 Why build this skill early?

Spelling and vocabulary questions reward steady, long-term preparation over last-minute cramming.

One root can unlock many related words at once.

What have exams asked?

10

Exam point of view

10.1 How was a real synonym question solved?

CDS stands for Combined Defence Services. The label below links to that paper.

CDS (I) 2021 Q83

Synonyms: The officer was reprimanded by the court for delaying the case.

(a) admonished (b) appreciated (c) praised (d) disliked

Official answer: (a) admonished

Both words mean to formally scold or rebuke. Appreciated, praised and disliked are all the wrong sense entirely.

Reprimand means to tell someone officially that you disapprove of them or their actions. Admonish means to tell someone strongly that you disapprove of what they did.

View this question on the full CDS (I) 2021 English paper →

10.2 What pattern do synonym questions follow?

A synonym question can include an option with the opposite meaning. That tests whether you know the word, not just whether it feels “positive” or “negative.”

Sources

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: admonish

- Oxford Learner's Dictionaries: reprimand

Remember this

- **Trap word:** receive. Weird breaks the i-before-e rule.
- **UK and US:** colour and color, centre and center, tyre and tire.
- **Pairs:** stationary is still, stationery is paper. Practise is the British verb.
- **Roots:** bene is well. Male is ill. Un- plus happy plus -ness.
- **Synonyms:** admonished fits reprimanded. Wrong options share a topic, not a meaning.

Explain it back: Why does knowing one root help you with many words?

Your understanding checks Answered 0 of 6 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads. It is not saved to My Progress.

Practice MCQs

1. Choose the correctly spelled word.

A. Recieve

B. Receive

C. Receeve

D. Receve

See answer ↓

2. Synonyms: The officer was reprimanded by the court for delaying the case.

A. praised

B. disliked

C. admonished

D. appreciated

See answer ↓

3. In British English, which spelling is the verb meaning "to train regularly"?

A. Practyse

B. Practice

C. Practize

D. Practise

See answer ↓

4. The Latin word bene means "well".

Which word means "showing a desire to harm others"?

A. Benign

B. Malevolent

C. Benefactor

D. Benevolent

See answer ↓

5. Which one word means "a person who hates and avoids other people"?

A. Philanthropist

B. Misanthrope

C. Atheist

D. Misogynist

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The correct spelling is "Receive." Remember the rule: i before e, except after c. This helps you spell many similar words correctly. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The answer is **admonished**. To reprimand is to tell someone officially that you disapprove of their actions. To admonish is to tell someone strongly that you disapprove. Why the others fail: appreciated and praised show approval. Disliked is a feeling, not an official scolding. Memory hook: reprimand and admonish both scold. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The answer is **practise**. In British English, practise is the verb and practice is the noun. Why the others fail: practice is the British noun. Practize and practyse are not real spellings. US English uses practice for both noun and verb. Memory hook: the verb takes the s. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The answer is **malevolent**. It comes from Latin male, meaning ill, plus a word for wishing. It is the opposite of benevolent. Why the others fail: benevolent, benign and benefactor all carry a kind or helpful sense. Memory hook: male means ill, bene means well. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The answer is **misanthrope**. A misanthrope hates and avoids other people. Why the others fail: a misogynist hates or dislikes women. A philanthropist helps the poor, often by giving money. An atheist believes that God or gods do not exist. Memory hook: mis- is dislike, and anthrope points to people. ↑ Q5

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