

Word formation

There are four main kinds of word formation: prefixes, suffixes, conversion and compounds.

Prefixes

We add prefixes before the base or stem of a word.

examples	prefixes
<i>monorail, monolingual</i>	<i>mono-</i> means 'one'
<i>multipurpose, multicultural</i>	<i>multi-</i> means 'many'
<i>post-war, postgraduate</i>	<i>post-</i> means 'after'
<i>unusual, undemocratic</i>	<i>un-</i> means 'not' or 'opposite to'

Suffixes

We add suffixes after the base or stem of a word. The main purpose of a suffix is to show what class of word it is (e.g. noun or adjective).

examples	suffixes
<i>terrorism, sexism</i>	<i>-ism</i> and <i>-dom</i> are used to form nouns
<i>employer, actor</i>	<i>-er</i> and <i>-or</i> are used to form nouns to describe people who do things
<i>widen, simplify</i>	<i>-en</i> and <i>-ify</i> are used to form verbs
<i>reasonable, unprofitable</i>	<i>-able</i> is used to form adjectives
<i>unhappily, naturally</i>	<i>-ly</i> is a common suffix used to form adverbs

Conversion

Conversion involves the change of a word from one word class to another. For example, the verbs *to email* and *to microwave* are formed from the nouns *email* and *microwave*:

*Can you **text** her?* (verb from noun *text*, meaning *to send a text-message*)

*They are always **jetting** somewhere.* (verb from noun *jet*)

*If you're not careful, some **downloads** can damage your computer.* (noun from verb *download*)

*OK, so the meeting's on Tuesday. That's a **definite**.* (noun from adjective)

*It's a very big **if** and I'm not at all sure we can afford it.* (noun from conjunction, meaning 'it's not at all certain')

*All companies have their **ups** and **downs**.* (nouns from prepositions)

We also use conversion when we change a proper noun into a common noun:

*Has anybody seen my **Dickens**?* (copy of a book by Dickens)

Compounding

When we use compounding, we link together two or more bases to create a new word. Normally, the first item identifies a key feature of the second word. For example, the two bases *back* and *ache* can combine to form the compound noun *backache*, and the two bases *post* and *card* combine to form the compound noun *postcard*.

Compounds are found in all word classes. The most common types of compounds are: Nouns: *car park*, *rock band*

Adjectives: *heartbreaking*, *sugar-free*, *airsick*

Verbs: *oven-bake*, *baby-sit*, *chain-smoke*

Adverbs: *good-naturedly*, *nevertheless*

It is sometimes difficult to know where to put hyphens in words that are compound ed. It is also difficult to know whether to separate words (e.g. *post box*) or to join the words (e.g. *postbox*). In such cases, it is best to check in a good learner's dictionary.

Other ways to form words

Abbreviation

Abbreviation involves shortening a word. We do this in three main ways: clipping, acronyms and blends.

We use clipping when we shorten or 'clip' one or more syllables from a word. We also commonly clip proper names for people:

ad: advertisement, advert

lab: laboratory

Matt: Matthew

Acronyms are a type of abbreviation formed when the initial letters of two or more words are combined in a way that produces consonant and vowel sequences found in words. Acronyms are normally pronounced as words:

RAM: random **a**ccess **m**emory (*RAM* is a term used to describe a computer's memory.)

Initials are similar to acronyms but are pronounced as sets of letters, not as words:

WHO: **W**orld **H**ealth **O**rganisation, pronounced *W-H-O*

CD: **c**ompact **d**isc, pronounced *C-D*

We form blends when we combine parts of existing words to form a new word:

blog: blend of *web* and *log*

motel: blend of *motor* and *hotel*

smog: blend of *smoke* and *fog*

Back-formation

We form words with back-formation when we remove part of a word, usually something which we think is a suffix (or occasionally a prefix). We do this commonly when we form verbs from nouns.

For example: *to liaise* (back-formed from the noun *liaison*); *to intuit* (back-formed from the noun *intuition*), *to enthuse* (back-formed from the noun *enthusiasm*):

*Can you **liaise** with Tim and agree a time for the meeting, please?*

*She's always **enthusing** about her new teacher.*

Loan words and new words

Loan words

Loan words are words that are borrowed from other languages. Some recent loan words for food taken from other languages include: *sushi*, *tapas*, *chapatti*, *pizza*. When we use loan words, we do not normally change them, though we do sometimes inflect them if they are singular countable nouns (*pizzas*, *chapattis*). We also sometimes pronounce them more like English words, instead of using their original pronunciation.

New words

Some prefixes are commonly used to create new words. In modern English the prefix *e-* is used to create new words that are connected with the Internet and the use of the Internet:

e-bank, *e-cards*, *e-commerce*, *e-learning*

Almost any noun may potentially combine with any other noun to form new noun compounds (e.g. *computer virus*, *carbon footprint*, *quality time*).