

Be Chalant

It had been a rough day, so when I walked into the party I was very chalant, despite my efforts to appear grunted and consolate. I was furling my wieldy umbrella for the coat check when I saw her standing alone in a corner. She was a descript person, a woman in a state of total array. Her hair was kempt, her clothing sheveled, and she moved in a gainly way.

—Jack Winter

Notice anything missing in that passage? How about a few crucial prefixes—those little syllables that appear at the beginnings of words and provide important ingredients of meaning. (For the record, substitute these words in the passage above and see if things make more sense: *nonchalant, disgruntled, disconsolate, unfurling, unwieldy, nondescript, disarray, unkempt, disheveled, and ungainly*.)

Words are not merely groups of letters aimlessly thrown together. They are composed of meaningful elements so arranged as to give each its own significance. For example, many words can be divided into beginnings, middles, and ends. The beginning is a prefix, the middle is the root, and the ending is the suffix.

One of the most economical ways of expanding your vocabulary is to become familiar with the most common affixes (prefixes and suffixes). In doing so, you will acquire clues to the meanings of thousands of words. Furthermore, you will find that spelling becomes easier, for you will see words in their meaningful parts rather than as mere jumbles of letters.

For example, the following English prefixes should already be quite familiar:

after- (later than) as in *afternoon, afterward, and afterthought*
fore- (before) as in *forehead, foreword, and forecast*
mis- (bad or wrong) as in *misbehavior, misfortune, and misfit*

Prefixes often give a negative spin to words. Notice how a prefix turns *stable* into *unstable*, *mature* into *immature*, *adequate* into *inadequate*, and *social* into *antisocial*. Some prefixes, on the other hand, suggest relationships: *con-* (meaning together) gives us *convoy, contain, and consent*; *circum-* (meaning around) yields *circumference, circumspect, and circumvent*; *inter-* (meaning between) provides *intercept, international, and interrupt*.

Suffixes (a word's ending syllable or syllables) also play an important part in determining a word's meaning. Notice what a difference the following suffixes make:

employer versus **employee**
thoughtful versus **thoughtless**
waiter versus **waitress**
changeable versus **changeless**

Sometimes you can even combine a prefix and a suffix to make a word. The ending *-cide* (act of killing), for example, can be combined with a variety of prefixes to give us *homicide, suicide, and genocide*.

Certainly you can't expect to master every prefix and suffix (though a little practice may pay big dividends). You can use your knowledge of the architecture of words, however—what constitutes their beginning, middle, and end—to make some informed guesses about words you don't know.

Suppose you come across the word *superfluous*. You may be stumped at first, but then you recognize *super-* as a prefix. You

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know the words *superman* and *superhuman*, so you make a guess that *super* means “over” or “above.” Now for the final part of the word: “Hmmm, *fluorous* sort of looks like *fluid*, so perhaps *superfluorous* means ‘extra fluid.’” That’s not far, by the way, from the dictionary definition—“overflow.”

So when you’re faced with a difficult word in the ACT exam, divide and conquer. Break the word into its various parts, and see if you can transform several small meanings into one large one.

