WORD FORMATION

Word families

Look at this group of words and decide what they have in common:

ability	*disability*
disabled	*enable*
inability	*unable*

All of the above words are formed from – and are related to – the adjective **able**. So we can call **able** the 'base word' from which all these other words are developed. Can you guess which word is the base word for this next group?

destroyer	*destructive*
destruction	*indestructible*

All these words are formed from the base word **destroy**. We call these groups of related words 'word families'. Like members of real families, the words that make up a word family share some of the same features: they all share some of the letters of the base word, and their meanings are related too.

ACTIVITY

Look at the following groups of words and try to decide in each case what the base word is. The answers are on page LS19. Then try to guess the meaning of each word. Check in the dictionary to see if you are right.

discomfort	*uncomfortable*
comfortable	*comforting*

decision	*decisive*
undecided	*indecisive*
indecision	

impure	*purify*
purist	*impurity*

How are words formed?

Many English words are formed from combinations of other words, or from combinations of words and prefixes or suffixes. So if you know what each of the parts means, you will often be able to guess the meaning of a new word.

What are prefixes and suffixes?

A *prefix* is added to the *beginning* of a word to make another word. A prefix can be either a short word, or a group of letters that is not a word. An example of the first type is **self**-. **Self**- means 'yourself' or 'itself', so if you are **self-employed**, you work for yourself, and if something **self-destructs**, it destroys itself. An example of the second type is **non**-, which means 'not'. So a **non-violent** protest is a protest that does not involve violence.

A *suffix* is added to the *end* of a word to make another word. A suffix can be either a short word, or a group of letters that is not a word. An example of the first type is **-rich**, which is added to nouns to make adjectives for describing something that 'contains a lot' of something. So **oil-rich** rocks are full of oil, and **vitamin-rich** foods contain a lot of vitamins. An example of the second type is **-ish**, which means 'slightly' or 'rather'. So **greenish** water looks slightly green.

ACTIVITY

Look at the words in **bold** in the following sentences and see if you can guess what they mean. After you have guessed, you can check the meanings in the dictionary. All the prefixes and suffixes used in these sentences (and shown here in red) have their own entries in the dictionary.

*The software is **over**priced and doesn't offer anything more than its rivals.*

*Local residents are calling for the police to crack down on **anti**social behaviour by troublemakers, some of whom are as young as ten.*

***E**-commerce now accounts for 84 per cent of the company's sales.*

*The machines are very **user-friendly** and they tell you how hard you are working and how many calories you have used up.*

*The new district health boards will
be required to act in an efficient and
businesslike way.*

- **ACTIVITY** See if you can make
some more words using these
prefixes and suffixes. Check in the
dictionary to see if your words are
there.

Compounds

Using prefixes and suffixes is not the
only way to form new words. Many
English words are *compounds*.
Compounds are formed by combining
two or three words. Sometimes these
combinations remain as two or three
separate words and sometimes they
combine to form one new word. For
example, the word **troublemakers** in
the second example above has been
formed by combining the two nouns
trouble and **maker**. This has created
a new word meaning 'someone who
makes (=causes) trouble'.

Most compounds are treated as
separate entries in this dictionary, so
that you can see immediately that they
have a meaning of their own that is
different from the meanings of the
words from which they are formed.
Sometimes these meanings are easy
to guess. For example, a **bus stop** is
a place where buses stop to pick up
passengers, and a **bookshop** is a place
where you buy books. However, a
soap opera does not contain any
singing and has nothing to do with
soap: it is a television or radio show
that is broadcast several times a week,
and tells the story of the lives of a
group of ordinary people.

Other ways of forming words

Some new words are formed by
combining part of one word with part
of another. For example, **brunch** is a
meal you eat in the late morning that
combines **break**fast and **lunch**, and
edutainment is something such as a
video, television programme, or
software program that combines
education and enter**tainment**.

- **ACTIVITY** Can you guess which
words have combined to form the
following computer terms:
**emoticon, netiquette, netizen,
technophobe**?

And can you guess their meanings
from the words that have combined
to form them? The answers are at the
bottom of this page.

Other new words are formed from the
first letters of the words in a
compound or phrase. Examples of this
are **CD-ROM** (**c**ompact **d**isc **r**ead-**o**nly
memory), **FAQs** (**f**requently-**a**sked
questions), and **IT** (**i**nformation
technology). These new words are
called *acronyms*.

- **ACTIVITY** Think about how new
words are formed in your own
language. Are they formed mainly
by using *prefixes* and *suffixes*, by
combining words to form
compounds, by means of *acronyms*,
or in other ways?

Spelling note: Words that are formed
from combinations of other words,
whether these are compounds or
words formed from prefixes or
suffixes, are often written in several
different ways. You may see them
written as separate words, or with
hyphens, or as single words. For
example: **hard hat**, **hard-hat**, or
hardhat. Although one form is often
more frequent than others, you
shouldn't worry too much about
which is correct. If you want to be
sure, write the word using the form
that you find in this dictionary.

ANSWERS

emoticon: emotion + icon (=a symbol such
as :-) or :-(that you type in an email or text
message to show how you are feeling)
netiquette: Internet + etiquette (=the polite
way of expressing yourself when
communicating with people on the Internet)
netizen: Internet + citizen (=someone who
spends a lot of time using the Internet)
technophobe: technology + -phobe
(=someone who does not like to use new
technology, especially computers)

The base words are *comfort, decide, pure*