

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Layers of Language: Chameleon (Assimilated) Prefixes

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The final consonant of a Latin prefix may change because of the beginning letter of the roots. The change is due to “euphony” meaning *to sound better*. Because the prefixes change to match or to sound better with the first letter of the root word, these prefixes are sometimes called “chameleon” prefixes. Another term used by linguists is “assimilated prefixes.” The prefix *in-*, meaning *in* or *not*, changes to *il-* before roots beginning with *l* as in *illustrate* and *illegal*. The *in-* changes to *ir-* before roots beginning with *r* as in *irregular* and *irreligious*, and to *im-* before roots beginning with *m*, *b*, or *p* as in *immune*, *imbalance*, and *importing*. Students will hear how difficult it is to say “inlegal” or “inregular” or “immune.” (See handout for summary of changes.)

The prefix *con-*, meaning *together* or *with*, changes to *col-*, *cor-*, or *com-* in similar circumstances as in *collide*, *corrected*, and *commit*, *combine*, and *compute*. The prefix *ad-*, meaning *to* or *toward*, has many variants such as *ac-* in *accept*, *ag-* in *aggressive*, *al-* in *alleviate*, *an-* in *announcement*, *ap-* in *apparent*, *as-* in *assertion*, and *at-* in *attentive*. The prefix *sub-*, meaning *under* or *below*, changes to *suc-* in *succession*, *suf-* in *sufferance*, *sug-* in *suggestion*, *sup-* in *supportive*, and *sus* (before *p* or *t*) in *suspend* and *sustain*. In addition, variants occur for *ob-* (*down*, *against*) such as *oc-*, *of-*, and *op-* in *occur*, *offer*, and *opposition*.

Once students know the roots and affixes, words containing the chameleon prefixes are not difficult to read. Spelling the words, however, is more difficult as the final consonant of the prefix and similar beginning consonant of the root aren't always both heard. Students need numerous opportunities to read and spell words containing these prefixes. Provide students with handout summarizing the chameleon prefixes. Have lists of words prepared for them to read, and then dictate words containing these prefixes.