

When to double consonants, and when not to ...

Martin Eayrs

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Learners of English are all familiar with the fact that sometimes consonants 'double'. This is common enough with verb tense formations ('stop'-'stopped'-'stopping' or 'big'-'bigger'-'biggest') but not always so clear in other situations (we write 'handful' and not * 'handfull', 'misspelled' and 'disappoint' and not * 'mispelled' and * 'dissappoint', 'occasion' and 'necessary' and not * 'ocassion' and * 'neccessary'). The problem for the learner (and for quite a few native-speakers too!) is to know when to double, and when not to.

Let us try to look at the problem systematically. I think there are three basic areas which we can look at independently, and I shall take these in reverse order from that mentioned above. Firstly, we have a situation where the word begins with a prefix ('dis-', 'mis-', 'un-', etc) and the stem of the word following begins with the same letter as the last letter of the prefix. So if we apply the prefixes 'dis-', 'mis-' and 'un-' to the word-stems 'solve', 'spell' and 'necessary', we get the words 'dissolve', 'misspell' and 'unnecessary'.

The 'double letters' here exist because one letter is from the prefix and one from the word-stem. We can see this by looking at the words 'disinterest', 'unfasten' and 'mistake' where the word-stem begins with a different letter to the last letter of the prefix.

So those people who spell (or misspell) words like * 'reccomend', * 'mistate' and * 'dissappear' are wrong because they fail to see that they are combinations of 're- + commend', 'mis- + state' and 'dis- + appear'.

A second group of words consists of all those 'odd' or 'difficult' words that have to be learned by memory. English-speaking children have to learn these by heart because (as you will probably have noticed) the spelling of English today is often very different to the way it is pronounced.

In some English-speaking countries many people have a bad opinion of you if you can not spell well. You may not agree with this, but it is obviously easier to get a job if your letter of application is not full of spelling mistakes.

Some words in English are often misspelled, and some of these involve knowing when to use single and double consonants. Obviously you can't sit down and learn all of these by heart - and it isn't a very efficient or enjoyable way to learn anyway - but you might like to make an effort to remember at least the following ten words, which are spelled correctly here:

occasion (not * ocassion)	immediately (not * imediately)
possession (not * posession)	professor (not * profesor)
tennis (not * tenis)	necessary (not * neccessary)
parallel (not * parralel)	embarrass (not * embarass)
accommodation (not * acomodation)	committee (not * comitee)

However, the most difficult thing for the learner is probably deciding when to double the **final** consonant before a suffix. Here at least we can state some simple 'rules' which might be helpful as a reference guide.

Let's start by making some simple divisions:

1. We can divide suffixes into two kinds: those which begin with a vowel ('ed', '-ing', etc) and those which begin with a consonant ('-ful', '-ly', etc).
2. We can also divide word-stems into those which are one syllable words ('hit', 'run', etc) and those which have more than one syllable ('credit', 'reckon', etc).
3. And the third division we need to make is between, on the one hand, words ending with a consonant ('hit', 'reckon', etc) and, on the other hand, words ending with:
 - a. a vowel ('go', 'accumulate', etc)

- b. words containing two vowels ('sleep', 'shoot', etc)
- c. words ending in two consonants ('help', 'farm', etc).

Now we can begin to make some generalisations on the basis of these divisions.

One syllable words ending in a single consonant like 'hit', 'stop', 'cup' and 'sad' will double their final consonant when the following suffix begins with a vowel. So we get 'hitting', 'stopped', and 'saddened' where the suffixes '-ing' and '-ed' begin with a vowel, but 'cupful' and 'sadly' where the suffixes '-ful' and '-ly' begin with a consonant.

This 'rule' is generally true for all consonants except when one syllable words end in the letter 'x', but then I have never yet found a learner who wanted to write * 'boxxed' or * 'boxxing' instead of the correct 'boxed' and 'boxing'.

One syllable words which end in two consonants ('help', 'farm', etc) or containing two vowels ('sleep', 'shoot', etc) do not double the final consonant before a prefix beginning with a vowel, so we say 'helped', 'farming', 'sleeping' and 'shooting'.

The letter 'k' at the end of the word invariably comes after the letter 'c' ('black', 'kick', etc) or a double vowel ('seek', 'break', etc), so a double 'kk' is almost unknown in English, (except for the exceptional word 'bookkeeper', which is the only word that I know in English with three consecutive double letters !).

One syllable words which end in the letter 'y' change the 'y' to an 'ie' when the letter before the 'y' is a consonant. So the plurals of 'fly' and 'spy' are 'flies' and 'spies', and the past tense of 'try' is 'tried'. However, if the first letter of the suffix is an 'i', as in the common suffix '-ing', the 'y' at the end of a one syllable word does not change, and we say 'trying', 'flying', etc. When the letter before the 'y' at the end of a one syllable word is a vowel, as in 'key' or 'pay' then the 'y' does not change to 'ie' and we say 'keyed', 'paying', etc.

Incidentally, be careful not to confuse doubling of a consonant with word-stems that end in a double consonant. The word 'cuff' for example ends in a double 'ff', and therefore if used as a verb in the past tense would have the form 'cuffed', but this is not a 'doubling' of the consonant - the word already ended in a double consonant before the suffix was added !

When we consider words of more than one syllable we have to look at the part of the word which is 'stressed'. Stress is very important in English. If you don't understand what stress is, think of the words

YES-ter-day um-BRELL-a ci-gar-ETTE

where the CAPITAL letters show which syllable is stressed or emphasized more than the others.

If the stress comes on the last syllable of the word-stem then a consonant at the end is doubled before the suffix is added according to the 'rules' we have stated above. The words 'propel' and 'occur' for example are stressed on the second syllable (e.g. pro-'pel and o-'ccur), so their past tenses will be '**propelled**' and '**occurred**'. However if a word is stressed on a syllable which is not the last syllable, such as 'offer' or 'gossip' (which are 'off-er and 'goss-ip) then we do not double the final consonant before a suffix beginning with a vowel, and we write 'offered' and 'gossipy'. In this respect American English is more consistent than British English; the Americans write 'traveled' and 'kidnaped', while the British break the 'rule' and write 'travelled' and 'kidnapped', even though the words 'travel' and 'kidnap' are stressed on the first syllable.

Another American/British difference is that some US speakers (not all) write the past tense and present participle of 'picnic', (stressed on the first syllable, 'pic-nic) as 'picnicing' and 'picniced' while most British would add a letter 'k' and write 'picnicked' and 'picnicking'.

Students (and also teachers !) should try to distinguish between what is accepted in different English-speaking countries and what is unacceptable anywhere, and teachers should be careful not to mark as 'wrong' what a student can find when reading British or American newspapers and magazines.