

XXX's Question about the Plural Suffixes <-s> and <-es>

Xxx asked a great question. She used the <pack> matrix to make the word sum for <packages>

pack + age/ + es → packages

Being a good spelling detective, she noticed that we were dropping the single, silent <e> from the word <package> and then putting back a letter <e> from the suffix <-es>. “Why not just add the suffix <-s> and not bother having to cross out an <e> and then put one right back?” she asked.

What an excellent observation! It would end up with the same spelling, and on the surface it appears easier. To understand the answer, it might help to step back and ask, “Why do we even have these two suffixes to make plurals? Let’s look at some singular words and their plurals:

<u>Word in the singular</u>		<u>Word in the plural</u>
pack		pack + s → packs
package		package/ + es → packages
tiger		tiger + s → tigers
fox		fox + es → foxes
dish		dish + es → dishes
paper		paper + s → papers

Say the singular and plural form of these word to see if you can see the pattern for when you have to add <-es> instead of <-s>.

The pattern can be stated like this:

When you make a plural, you usually add the <-s> suffix. However, if making a plural of a word adds a syllable to the word, you need to add the suffix <-es>.

It is important to know why this makes sense. If you added the suffix <-s> to box, you would get the impossible spelling *<boxs>. The singular word <box> has one syllable. When we say the plural <boxes> there are two syllables. It is impossible in English to have more syllables than vowels in a word. A basic spelling law in English is this:

Every syllable in word must have at least one vowel letter. To follow that law, we add the suffix <-es> when making a plural that adds syllables to a word.

The word <package> has two syllables. When we say <packages> we use three syllables, so we need to use the <-es> suffix, even if it drops the single, silent <e> of <package>.

Notice that the <e> in <package> is a single and silent. Its job in this word is to show that the <g> is ‘soft’ as in <gem> rather than ‘hard’ as in <go>. So the <e> in the suffix <-es> does two jobs. It provides a vowel letter for the third syllable in <packages>, and it tells the reader about how the <g> in <packages> is pronounced. We will find many other jobs the single, silent <e> does for us.

It is important to note that in words that end in the letter <o>, we usually add <-es> even when it does not add a syllable. For example the plural of <tomato> is <tomatoes> even though the plural suffix doesn’t add a syllable. See if you can find other words like this. Thanks to Xxx for being such a sharp spelling detective in just our second class!