

# Noun Feminine and Noun Diminutive Forms

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Noun Feminine Forms English has a small clutch of nouns with feminine derivational suffixes. All but one of these feminizing suffixes (-ster) are of foreign origin. They have been added to a masculine form or to a base morpheme. Here is a list of most of them, with examples of the feminine nouns to which they have been attached and the corresponding masculine forms.

<i>Suffix</i>	<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>
1. -e	fiancé	fiancée
2. -enne	comedian	comedienne
3. -ess	patron	patroness
4. -etta	Henry	Henrietta
5. -ette	farmer	farmerette <sup>4</sup>
6. -euse	masseur	masseuse
7. -ina	George	Georgina
8. -ine	hero	heroine
9. -ster	spinner	spinster
10. -stress	seamster	seamstress (= -ster + -ess)
11. -ix	aviator	aviatrix <sup>5</sup>

These suffixes vary in vitality from -ess, the most productive, to -stress, which is completely dead. Two of them, -enne and -euse, occur only in Words borrowed from French. The -e, also from French, is merely orthographic and is not heard in the spoken word. The -ster is no longer a feminizing suffix but now indicates any person, usually male: gangster, oldster, prankster.

English also has about fifty pairs of words with separate forms for the masculine and the feminine, e.g., bull, cow; uncle, aunt; gander, goose. But these are a matter of lexicography rather than morphology, and we shall pass them by. The suffix -ette can also be a diminutive, as in kitchenette. Some feminine forms have gone out of fashion. Today, for example, we say pilot and poet instead of *aviatrix* and *poetess*. The current tendency in English is to avoid feminine forms.

## Noun Diminutive Forms

In English six diminutive suffixes can be found. These are morphemes which convey a meaning of smallness or endearment or both. They are the following:

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. -ie, -i, -y        | as in <i>auntie, Betty, sweetie, Willy</i>     |
| 2. -ette              | as in <i>dinette, towelette</i>                |
| 3. -kin, -ikin, -kins | as in <i>lambkin, manikin</i>                  |
| 4. -ling              | as in <i>duckling, darling</i> (= little dear) |
| 5. -et                | as in <i>circlet</i>                           |
| 6. -let               | as in <i>booklet, starlet</i>                  |

The vowels of these diminutive suffixes are three front vowels: /i/, /ɪ/, and /ɛ/.

The first suffix, pronounced /i/ and spelled -ie, -i, and -y, is highly productive. It is frequently attached to one-syllable first names to suggest endearment and intimacy, or smallness, as in *Johnny, Janey, Jackie*, and *Geri*. Similarly, it is attached to common nouns, as in *doggie, sweetie, birdie*.

The second suffix is also in active use, generally to indicate smallness. Thus, a *dinette* is a small dining area, and a *roomette* is a small room.

The other four diminutive suffixes exist in the language as diminutives but are rarely if ever added to new nouns. In short, they are unproductive, inactive. Furthermore, in some words, like *cabinet* and *toilet*, the meaning of the diminutive suffix has faded away to little or no significance. Some of these diminutive suffixes have homophones that can be a source of confusion. Here, for instance, are four of them:

1. -y, an adjective-forming suffix added to a noun, as in *cloudy*.
2. -ie, a noun-forming suffix added to an adjective, as in *smartie, toughie*.
3. -ette, a feminine suffix, as in *majorette*.
4. -ling, a noun suffix denoting animals, as in *yearling, shearling, fledgling, nestling, weanling*.

In addition to these six diminutives, many others have come into English as a part of borrowed words. These were diminutives in their own or parent language but are non-morphemic in English. For illustration, here is a handful of them.

<i>mosquito</i>	<i>panel</i>	<i>Venezuela</i>
<i>bambino</i>	<i>morsel</i>	<i>quartet</i>
<i>armadillo</i>	<i>damsel</i>	<i>bulletin</i> (two successive diminutives here)
<i>peccadillo</i>	<i>scalpel</i>	<i>falsetto</i>
<i>flotilla</i>	<i>satchel</i>	<i>stiletto</i>
<i>Priscilla</i>	<i>muscle</i>	<i>Maureen</i>
<i>cookie</i>	<i>particle</i>	<i>loch</i>
<i>colonel</i>	<i>pupil</i>	<i>formula</i>
<i>citadel</i>	<i>violin</i>	<i>capsule</i>
	<i>violoncello</i>	
<i>novel</i> (noun)	<i>puppet</i>	<i>calculus</i>

Most of these borrowed diminutive endings, you will observe, contain the vowels /i/, and /e/, though these vowels have often been reduced to /a/ in English because of lack of stress. Only the last four do not have a front vowel or in the diminutive suffix. Furthermore, nearly all these suffixes have lost the diminutive sense that was once alive in them.