Worksheet 1: Why Verbs Are Irregular — History and Patterns

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Reference: Irregular Verbs Are the Old Ones

English irregular verbs are not random. They are **strong verbs** — an ancient Germanic system that formed the past tense by changing the vowel inside the word (**ablaut**), not by adding a suffix. The -ed past is a later, generalised system (**weak verbs**) that now dominates. The irregular set survives precisely because these verbs are used very frequently: high-frequency items resist analogy.

Ablaut class	Pattern	Members
Class I	ī → ā → i (write/wrote/written)	ride/rode/ridden; drive/drove/driven; rise/rose/risen; bite/bit/bitten; hide/hid/hidden; shine/shone/shone
Class II	ēo → ēa → o (choose/chose/chosen)	fly/flew/flown; freeze/froze/frozen
Class III	i + consonant cluster → a → u (sing/sang/sung)	begin/began/begun; drink/drank/drunk; swim/swam/swum; ring/rang/rung; shrink/shrank/shrunk; spring/sprang/sprung; stink/stank/stunk
Class IV/V	e → a → e (speak/spoke/spoken)	break/broke/broken; steal/stole/stolen; bear/bore/borne; weave/wove/woven; give/gave/given
Class VI	a → ō → a (shake/shook/shaken)	take/took/taken; forsake/forsook/forsaken; stand/stood/stood
Dental suffix class *(originally weak but irregular)*	vowel shortening + -t or -d	feel/felt/felt; keep/kept/kept; sleep/slept/slept; leave/left/left; mean/meant/meant; deal/dealt/dealt; build/built/built

Part A – Classify by Ablaut

> **Assign each verb to the correct class and explain why.**

#	Verb (3 forms)	Class	Evidence
1	stride / strode / stridden		
2	spring / sprang / sprung		
3	weep / wept / wept		

4	slay / slew / slain		
5	swear / swore / sworn		
6	spin / spun / spun		

Part B – Regularisation in Progress

> **These verbs are undergoing regularisation — the irregular and regular forms compete. State which form you would use in (i) formal written English and (ii) informal speech, and comment on any meaning difference.**

#	Verb	Forms	Your analysis
1	dive	dived / dove (AmE)	
2	fit	fit (AmE past) / fitted (BrE)	
3	sneak	sneaked / snuck (now widespread)	
4	plead	pleaded / pled (legal AmE)	
5	strive	strove/striven vs strived/strived	

Score: _____ / 20

Worksheet 2: Register-Sensitive Forms

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Reference: Form Choice Signals Register

When two forms are available, the choice between them is often a **register signal**. At C1, choosing the wrong form creates a register mismatch rather than a grammatical error.

Context	Typical choices and what they signal
Formal / literary	Prefer strong/irregular: *strove, wept, forsook, bade, spake, writ, clad, wrought, smote, stridden*
Academic written	Prefer -t forms where BrE standard: *learnt, burnt, spelt, dreamt, leapt*; avoid overtly literary forms
Neutral / journalistic	Regular forms preferred for verbs in transition: *thrived, dived, sneaked, fitted*
Informal spoken	Forms in transition accepted: *snuck, dove, fit, gotten* (AmE influence)

Part A – Register Sorting

> **Assign each sentence a register label (formal/literary, academic, neutral, informal) based on the verb form used. Justify your choice.**

#	Sentence	Register & justification
1	"The knight smote his enemy with a single blow."	
2	"He snuck out of the meeting before it ended."	
3	"The company has thrived despite difficult conditions."	
4	"She leapt at the opportunity without hesitation."	
5	"The defendant pleaded not guilty."	
6	"He dove into the pool before anyone could stop him."	

Part B – Rewrite for Register

> **Rewrite each sentence in the register specified, changing only the verb form(s).**

1. "She wept at the news." → Informal, neutral register.

   _____

2. "He sneaked into the room." → Formal / literary register.

   _____

3. "The army strove to maintain order." → Neutral / journalistic.

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4. "She was clad in black." → Neutral.

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5. "The results were spelt out clearly." → AmE-neutral (no BrE -t form).

Part C – American English Intrusion

> **Each sentence uses an AmE form that would be marked in formal BrE. Identify it and give the BrE preference.**

#	Sentence	AmE form	BrE preference
1	"I have gotten used to the noise."		
2	"She dove into the research with enthusiasm."		
3	"The suit fit him perfectly."		
4	"He pled guilty at the hearing."		

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Collocation and Fixed Phrases

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Reference: Irregular Participles in Fixed Phrases

Many irregular past participles are frozen inside idioms, compounds, or collocations. The irregular form is obligatory — using the regular equivalent produces unidiomatic English.

Fixed phrase / collocation	Irregular PP	Literal / base verb
ill-gotten gains	gotten	get
a God-forsaken place	forsaken	forsake
hand-woven fabric	woven	weave
a swollen river / ankle	swollen	swell
a broken home / English	broken	break
forbidden fruit	forbidden	forbid
a foregone conclusion	gone	go
hardworn / hard-won reputation	won	win
unbeknown(st) to him	known	know
wrought iron; overwrought	wrought	work
a stricken community / grief-stricken	stricken	strike
bespoke tailoring	spoke	speak
proven reserves; unproven claims	proven	prove
sunken cheeks / a sunken ship	sunken	sink
a swollen sense of importance	swollen	swell

Part A – Complete the Phrase

> **Fill each gap with the correct irregular past participle.**

1. The company has a hard-_____ reputation for quality. *(win)*
2. The river was _____ after days of heavy rain. *(swell)*
3. It was, to use an overused phrase, a _____ conclusion. *(forego → foregone)*
4. The charity works with families from _____ homes. *(break)*
5. The _____-stricken community received little outside support. *(grieve)*
6. _____ to her colleagues, she had already resigned. *(know)*

7. Critics accused the minister of acquiring _____-gotten gains. *(ill)*

8. These are _____ reserves of natural gas, not speculative estimates. *(prove)*

Part B – Register and Idiom

> **Explain what each phrase means in context and why the irregular participle is obligatory.**

1. *bespoke tailoring*

2. *overwrought*

3. *sunken cheeks* vs *sunk costs*

Part C – Error Detection

> **Each sentence contains an error with a fixed-phrase participle. Correct it and explain the mistake.**

1. He had a swelled ankle after the match.

2. The community remained strike-stricken years after the disaster.

3. Their proved innocence was announced in court.

4. The policy produced what many called a foregoed conclusion.

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 4: Critical Analysis and Writing

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C1 (CEFR)

Part A – Critical Reading

The irregular verb is, in a very literal sense, a living fossil — a relic of a grammatical system that English has otherwise abandoned. The strong-verb classes that once organised Germanic morphology have been eroded by centuries of analogy: every generation of children acquires the default -ed rule and applies it, often correctly but sometimes to verbs that resist it. *Strived*, *thrived*, *dived*, *sneaked*: all of these have now achieved sufficient currency that prescriptivists who condemn them are arguably fighting a lost battle.

Yet frequency is a conservative force. The verbs that have survived as irregular are overwhelmingly the most commonly used in the language — *be, have, do, go, come, say, get, make* — and their irregularity is self-reinforcing: the more often a form is encountered, the more deeply it is entrenched in memory. The irregular verbs that are disappearing are the low-frequency ones: how many speakers today use *strode*, *smote*, or *clove* outside of a literary register?

Questions

1. The writer uses the metaphor "living fossil". Unpack this metaphor and evaluate how apt it is for describing irregular verbs.

2. Find four irregular verb forms in the passage that the writer has chosen deliberately for register. Explain each choice.

3. The writer says frequency is "self-reinforcing". Explain this argument in your own words and evaluate whether it holds for verbs like *strive* and *thrive*.

4. The passage uses *arguably* and *overwhelmingly*. Classify each and explain what it contributes to the argument.

Part B – Extended Analytical Writing

Write a formal analytical paragraph of **160–200 words** responding to the proposition: "*The survival of irregular verbs in English is a feature, not a bug.*"

You must include and underline: (1) one ablaut-class irregular verb used precisely; (2) one fixed-phrase participial collocation; (3) one instance of a verb form chosen for register effect; (4) two epistemic hedges (adverbs or modal verbs); (5) one example of a verb that is currently regularising, discussed with appropriate precision.

Word count: _____ Features: _____ / 5

Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C1 Level, Irregular Verbs

Worksheet 1 – Part A

#	Verb	Class	Evidence
1	stride/strode/stridden	**Class I**	**ī → ā → i vowel pattern, like write/wrote/written**
2	spring/sprang/sprung	**Class III**	**i + consonant cluster → a → u (cf. sing/sang/sung)**
3	weep/wept/wept	**Dental suffix**	**Vowel shortening + -t; same forms for PS and PP**
4	slay/slew/slain	**Class VI (modified)**	**Distinctive vowel change; now rare/literary**
5	swear/swore/sworn	**Class IV/V**	**e/a → o → o pattern; cf. speak/spoke/spoken**
6	spin/spun/spun	**Class III**	**i + consonant → u; PS = PP (same u grade)**

> *The ablaut classes are a useful teaching tool but should be introduced as a mnemonic, not as a full historical grammar. The key insight is that irregularity is patterned, not random.*

Worksheet 1 – Part B

#	Analysis
1	***dove*: informal/AmE spoken; *dived*: formal written/BrE. No meaning difference.**
2	***fit*: neutral/AmE past; *fitted*: BrE standard. BrE distinguishes *fit* (intransitive state) from *fitted* (transitive action).**
3	***snuck*: now widespread in informal use; *sneaked*: formal and safe for all registers. No meaning difference.**
4	***pled*: legal AmE; *pleaded*: BrE standard and formally preferred everywhere.**
5	***strove/striven*: formal written; *strived/strived*: increasingly standard in neutral register. No meaning difference but register signal differs.**

Worksheet 2 – Part A

#	Register	Justification
1	**formal/literary**	***smote* is archaic strong past; restricted to literary/epic contexts**
2	**informal**	***snuck* is colloquial; widely used in speech but avoided in formal writing**
3	**neutral/journalistic**	***thrived* is the regularised form now dominant in neutral prose**

4	**academic/elevated**	***leapt* is the BrE -t form; sounds more formal than *leaped***
5	**formal/legal**	***pleaded* is the standard form in formal and legal English**
6	**informal/AmE**	***dove* is an AmE spoken form; not standard in BrE formal writing**

Worksheet 2 – Parts B and C

Part B: **1** She cried at the news. **2** He crept/stole into the room. **3** The army struggled/tried to maintain order. **4** She was dressed in black / wore black. **5** The results were spelled out clearly.

Part C: **1** gotten → got **2** dove → dived **3** fit → fitted **4** pled → pleaded

Worksheet 3 – Part A

1 won · 2 swollen · 3 foregone · 4 broken · 5 grief · 6 Unbeknown(st) · 7 ill · 8 proven

Worksheet 3 – Part B

bespoke tailoring: custom-made to a client's specification ('bespoke' is archaic PP of 'bespeak' = to order); the irregular form is now a lexicalised adjective and cannot be replaced by 'bespoken'.

overwrought: means excessively worked up / too elaborate; from 'over-' + 'wrought' (past participle of 'work' in its old sense). 'Overworked' is a different word. The irregular form is obligatory.

sunken cheeks vs sunk costs: *sunken* (attributive, adjectival, physical hollowness). *sunk* (predicative, or in 'sunk costs' — a fixed economics term). The distinction is partially lexicalised.

Worksheet 3 – Part C

1 *swelled* → **swollen** (swelled ankle is not standard; swollen is the attributive adjective form).
2 *strike-stricken* → **grief-stricken** or **disaster-stricken**; 'strike-stricken' is not a set phrase.
3 *proved* → **proven** (the adjective form in formal English is 'proven'; 'proved' is the past tense or participle as a verb).
4 *foregoed* → **foregone**; 'foregoed' does not exist.

Worksheet 4 – Part A

Q	Answer
1	**A 'living fossil' is an organism that has survived unchanged while its relatives became extinct. Applied to irregular verbs: the strong-verb system is 'extinct' as a productive class, yet individual members survive embedded in high-frequency usage. The metaphor is apt in highlighting survival against odds through functional advantage (frequency). It is less apt in implying stasis — irregular verbs are actively changing (strived/strove).**
2	**Accept any four from: *eroded* (standard — but 'worn away' would be neutral); *strived / thrived / dived / sneaked* (chosen as examples of regularising forms — the writer deliberately uses the neutral/regular forms, not literary ones, to enact the register point); *smote, strode, clove* (literary — marked explicitly as such by the parenthesis).**

3	**The argument: frequent exposure to a form makes it easier to retrieve, so it is used more, which increases exposure further, a positive feedback loop. For *strive* and *thrive*: both are moderately frequent but their irregular forms are literary; the regular forms are now dominant in neutral prose, suggesting the feedback loop is pushing them toward regularisation.**
4	***arguably*: epistemic disjunct — hedges the claim that prescriptivists are fighting a lost battle; the writer is not asserting it as fact. *overwhelmingly*: degree adverb modifying 'most commonly used'; it intensifies the claim and adds rhetorical force.**

Worksheet 4 – Part B: Marking Rubric

Criterion	Descriptor	Marks
Ablaut verb	Used correctly and demonstrably from an ablaut class	0–5
Fixed-phrase collocation	Natural, not forced; irregular participle form obligatory	0–5
Register choice	Form choice is consciously motivated by register, not random	0–5
Epistemic hedging	Two hedges calibrated to the strength of the claim	0–5
Regularising verb	Accurate description of the variation; no prescriptive oversimplification	0–5
Task & argument	160–200 words; position stated and supported	0–5

> *At C1, the point is not whether the student uses a rare irregular verb but whether they use it with awareness — knowing why that form, in that context, for that register. A student who writes strove and can explain the choice scores higher than one who writes it by accident.*