

- acronyms, abbreviations, and contractions
- basic etymology
- hyphenation
- crossword puzzles and other word games
- dictionaries

WORD FAMILIES, GRAPHEMES, AND HOMONYMS

Background Information

Diction, the choosing of the word or words that best suit a particular situation, affects both the clarity and the impact of what people say and write. In earlier years, the students were introduced to the concepts of word families, graphemes, and homophones. These concepts involve considering what patterns can be seen in words, what sounds words make, and what meanings words have. Expanding the ability for diction, the ability to recognize and choose words that are appropriate in a situation, involves the students becoming even more aware of the role of these three concepts in language.

Understanding that there are many **word families**, groups of words with a common feature or pattern, helps students choose appropriate words in writing and speech as well as make important connections when they come across new words. For example,

pear, pair
 stalk, stock
 stationary, stationery
 peak, peek
 bite, byte
 so, sew, sow
 knew, new, gnu
 red, read
 led, lead
 air, heir

students who know the word family “ame,” which includes common words such as same, game, and name, will find it easier to read and pronounce less common words from the same word family, such as frame, lame, and blame.

Being aware of word families also helps students recognize words that sound the same but are spelled differently. For example, the sound at the beginning of the word “fat” is the same as the sound at the end of the word “graph,” but both sounds are spelled differently and are in different word families.

With practice in reading, students come to understand that words that sound the same will not always be spelled in the same way. Thinking about the sounds of words involves knowing that a **grapheme** is a

letter or combination of letters that represent one sound, which is called a **phoneme**. As the chart in this section shows, up to four letters can combine to make one sound, and graphemes can occur anywhere in a word. The difference between a grapheme and a phoneme is that the grapheme represents the written letters, and a phoneme represents the sound that is made and heard.

In the Montessori classroom, students can raise their awareness of sounds and graphemes by interchanging cards with graphemes written on them. For example, one card might show the grapheme “ead.” Three other cards might show the graphemes “h,” “dr,” and “thr.” With these four cards, a student could make three words: head, dread, and thread. Many upper elementary students enjoy making

grapheme cards, then experimenting with the number of words they can make. (Keeping a dictionary at hand helps determine whether the words are actual ones or interesting creations.)

While considering pattern and sound helps students choose and recognize many words, **homonyms**, words that have the same spelling and/or sound, but different meanings, create challenges for many students. There are two kinds of homonym:

- **Homophones**, the more common kind of homonym, are words that sound the same, but have different meanings and may have different spellings. Examples: pear, pair; stalk, stock; stationary, stationery; peak, peek, pique; bite, byte; so, sew, sow (present tense of the verb); knew, new, gnu; red, read (past tense of

Some graphemes and examples of words that contain them

Kind	Examples	Examples Used in Words
one-letter graphemes	s k a	
two-letter graphemes (called digraphs)	sh ck th ng	wash wick this ring
three-letter graphemes (called trigraphs)	tch igh hei ach dne que oul	itch sigh heir yacht Wednesday mosque could
four-letter graphemes (called quadgraphs)	ough eigh	through eight

the verb); led (past tense of the verb “lead”), lead (chemical element); air, heir; their, there; pour, pore.

- **Homographs** are words that are spelled the same but have different meanings and may have different sounds. Examples: slight (adjective meaning “rather thin”) and slight (verb or noun referring to a rude or disrespectful act); tear (verb meaning to rip apart) and tear (noun meaning a drop of salty fluid from the eye); lead (chemical element) and lead (present tense of the verb).

Did you know?

- Latin has a good fit between graphemes and phonemes, with individual letters (graphemes) often matching phonemes. English, however, often has a poor fit between graphemes and phonemes because English is based on many different languages, including German, Latin, and French. That is a major reason why many people find English spelling challenging.
- According to some sources, the English language reached its one millionth word in 2006.
- A **pun** refers to using in a humorous way a word or words that have more than one meaning. Many puns involve homonyms. Example: The contest for most skilled logger ended in a split decision.

Note to the teacher

The activities in this section involve using a dictionary to check spelling, pronunciation, and meanings of words. More information about using dictionaries appears in the Writing Essays and Research Reports section later in this manual.

Resources

Here is a link to an extensive list of homonyms:

- Alan Cooper’s Homonym List. <http://www.cooper.com/alan/homonym_list.html>

ACTIVITY 1

Identifying and Using Word Families and Graphemes

Purpose

To practice identifying and using word families and graphemes.

Material

Whiteboard and marker.

Chart, Some graphemes and examples of words that contain them.

Dictionary.

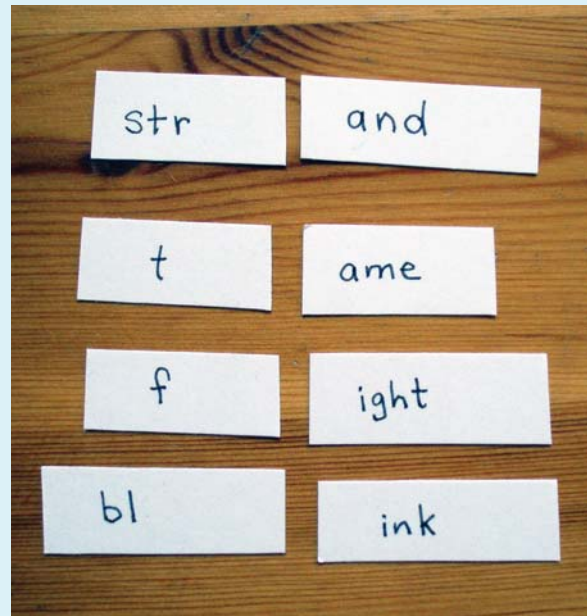
Labeled container (Word Families) holding slips of paper with word families written on them. Examples: and, ame, ight, ink.

Labeled container (Graphemes) holding slips of paper with graphemes written on them. Examples: bl, f, s, t, str.

Language Arts journals and pencils.

Presentation

- Most Montessori teachers present this concept in Year 4.
 - Announce that the students will have the opportunity to create new words from parts of words.
 - Review what is meant by word families, graphemes, and phonemes. Explain that these terms are associated with diction, the choosing of the word or words that best suit a particular situation.
 - Demonstrate the chart, Some graphemes and examples of words that contain
- them. Review the chart with the students. Invite the students to suggest other examples that could appear on the chart. Encourage the students to refer to the chart later as they carry out projects.
 - Demonstrate the two containers. Point out that one holds slips showing word families and the other holds slips showing graphemes.
 - Invite a student to close her/his eyes, reach into each container, and take out a slip of paper. Ask the student to put the grapheme slip in front of the word family slip.
 - Ask this question: Do the slips combined form a word?
 - If the student feels confident that the slips form a word, invite the student to



make a sentence using that word. Write the sentence on the whiteboard.

- If the student is not sure whether the slips form a word, demonstrate the dictionary and ask one of the students to look up the word.
- If the slips do not form a word, invite the student to choose another slip of paper (from either container) and try to make a word. Continue until the student can make an actual word and use it in a sentence.
- Repeat until all students have had a chance to make a word and use it in a sentence.
- Ask the students to use their journals to list all the words they can make with the slips used in the activity and to use each word in a sentence.

Extensions

- Form a small group and create a word-family tree. Draw or paint a tree on a large piece of sturdy paper such as Bristol board. Make plenty of main branches. On each main branch write a word family. Example: og. Cut out leaf shapes and attach them to each main branch. On each leaf, write a grapheme that can combine with the word family on the main branch to make a word. Example: j (jog); bl (blog). Try to find unusual combinations as well as common ones. Make several leaves for

each main branch. Over a period of a month, add new graphemes and leaves. At the end of the month, compare word-family trees with other groups of students, then together compile a list of words that were not repeated (that is, appeared only on one group's tree).

- Create and play a word-family game with 2–4 players. First, write word families and graphemes on slips of paper, then sort them into two separate containers (choose containers that are difficult to see inside, such as high-sided boxes or cans). Next, on a large piece of construction paper draw a winding path of up to 50 squares (or other shape), each one touching another. Mark the first square Start. Mark the final square End. Finally, make and distribute a large number of counters (e.g., squares of paper in four different colors), each player choosing one color. The game starts with one student taking a slip out of each container, then trying to make a word. If the student can make a word (a dictionary may be consulted if needed), the student moves his/her counter one square. If the student cannot, she/he returns the slips to their containers and shakes the containers well. Then the next student takes a slip out of each container, and so on. When one student has moved to the end of the path, all counters are removed, and the game can start over.

ACTIVITY 2

Identifying and Using Homonyms

Purpose

To practice recognizing and using homonyms.

Material

Whiteboard and marker.

Dictionary.

Language Arts journals and pencils.

Presentation

- Most Montessori teachers review this concept in Year 4.
 - Announce that the students will have the opportunity to explore fascinating words that have the same spelling and/or sound in English, but different meanings.
 - Review what is meant by homonyms and two kinds of homonyms: homophones and homographs. Point out that homophones are much more common in English than homographs.
 - Invite the students to name examples of homophones and homographs. Write the examples on the whiteboard.
 - With the students, discuss some of the challenges that homonyms present to people (may look or sound the same, but have different meanings and spellings).
 - Demonstrate the dictionary. Invite the students to look up homophones that commonly confuse people: stationary
- and stationery. With the students, discuss ways students can help themselves remember the spellings and meanings of these two words.
 - Repeat with some homographs: slight and slight.
 - Encourage the students to use the dictionary to look up the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of any words about which they are not sure.
 - Define and discuss puns, and write some examples on the whiteboard. Say that homonyms provide much of the material for puns.



- Ask the students to use their journals to make a two-column chart of ten rows. In each row, the first column will contain a pair of homonyms. The second column will contain two sentences, each containing one of the homonyms in the pair shown in the first column. The goal is to show ten pairs of homonyms on the chart.

Extensions

- Play homonym charades, in which players take turns acting out (without talking) homonym pairs for others to guess. Example: pear, pair; stationary, stationery.
- Play the word game Coffeepot, which was introduced at the lower elementary level. Each player writes down a sentence that contains homophones. Then the first player reads her/his sentence aloud to the other players (without showing them the sentence). For each homophone, the player substitutes the word “coffeepot.” Example: We made a big red circle on the calendar coffeepot we would know when to coffeepot for the new growing season. (The missing homophones are so/sow: We made a big red circle on the calendar so we would know when to sow for the new growing season.)
- Research puns, then make a list of five or more — three favorites from books or websites and a few of your own.