

# WORD STUDY



## INTRODUCTION

The more students study words, the stronger their vocabulary will become. At the upper elementary level, students are increasingly aware of the many ways in which words can be used and are interested in trying out some new and different uses themselves. The teacher can encourage the students' interest by:

- breaking words into meaningful parts
  - pointing out how people change words in everyday use
  - encouraging students to research word histories
  - showing how dictionaries can help with word study
- With these goals in mind, this section looks at these aspects of word study:
- word families, graphemes, and homophones
  - acronyms, abbreviations, and contractions
  - basic etymology

- hyphenation
- 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, 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.

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

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 homonyms:

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

### 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 heir ach dne que oul	itch sigh heir yacht Wednesday mosque could
four-letter graphemes (called quadgraph)	ough eigh	through eight

- **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](http://www.cooper.com/alan/homonym_list.html)>

## 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.