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
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.

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Examples Used in Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>one-letter graphemes</td>
<td>s, k, a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two-letter graphemes (called digraphs)</td>
<td>sh, ck, th, ng</td>
<td>wash, wick, this, ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three-letter graphemes (called trigraphs)</td>
<td>tch, igh, hei, ach, dne, que, oul</td>
<td>itch, sigh, heir, yacht, Wednesday, mosque, could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>four-letter graphemes (called quadraphones)</td>
<td>ough, eigh</td>
<td>through, eight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.