

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Layers of Language:
The Greek Layer of Language –
Letter-sound Correspondences and Syllable Patterns

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Lecture Notes

Introduction

English words of Greek origin are found largely in the fields of math and science. Just as the Latin-based words found today in English, many Greek-based words entered the British Isles during the Renaissance. Words of Greek origin continue being formed to fit the needs of new technology. Words like *astronaut*, *megatechnics*, and *hydrosphere* all depend on Greek word parts.

Greek-based words often consist of two parts of equal importance, for example, *telescope* (*tele* + *scope*), *hemisphere* (*hemi* + *sphere*), *autograph* (*auto* + *graph*), and *polygon* (*poly* + *gon*). The two word parts are usually called *combining forms* because they combine (or compound) to make a word. They may also be called *roots*. Suffixes are often added to the words as in *hemispheric* and *autobiography* or *autobiographical*.

Letter-sound Correspondences

While Greek-based words use letter-sound correspondences similar to words of Anglo-Saxon and Latin origin, there are some unique patterns. Take the word *chlorophyll*. English words of Greek origin often contain the “hard” *ch* (pronounced /k/), the *ph* (pronounced /f/), and the *y* pronounced as a short *i*. The *y* often comes at the end of a syllable so gets the open long *i* sound as in *hydrogen* and *cyclone*.

Other patterns indicating the Greek origin include *pn* (*pneumonia*), *rh* (*rhinoplasty*), *mn* (*mnemonic*), *pt* (*pterodactyl*), and *ps* (*psychology*). Words beginning with *x* usually come from the Greek language such as *xylophone* and *Xerxes*. The pronunciation of *x* in this position is usually that of /z/.

Students read lists of Greek based words to pick out what is uniquely “Greek” in the words.

Syllable Patterns

Greek-based words are polysyllabic, containing at least two syllables. The most common syllable types in words of Greek origin are closed as in *graph*, *gram* and *hem/i*, and open as in *hy/dro*, *mi/cro*, and *me/ter*. Some Greek combining forms divide between two vowels. For example, *the/o*, *bib/li/o*, *he/li/o*, *ma/ni/a*, and *pho/bi/a* all have divisions between two vowels. Remember that dividing after a vowel forms an open syllable with a long vowel sound.

NOTE: The letter i before another vowel has the sound of long e. The same is true in suffixes such as ian (e.g., barbarian) and ium (e.g. auditorium).

Provide students with opportunities to discuss the unique letter-sound correspondences found in words of Greek origin. Have them count syllables and divide words into syllables as they begin reading Greek-based words.