**6.1 Synonymy**

**key words**: synonyms, formal/informal language, dictionaries, meaning

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L3.4d Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/4/d>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.5a Distinguish the literal and nonliteral meanings of words and phrases in context (e.g., *take steps*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/5/a>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.5c Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of certainty (e.g., *knew, believed, suspected, heard, wondered*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3c Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5b Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/b>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5c](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/c/) Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5b Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/5/b>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5c Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homographs) to better understand each of the words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/5/c>

Words that have similar meanings are called **synonyms.** English has a lot more synonyms than most languages because it has borrowed words from numerous languages throughout its history. Typically, languages avoid exact synonyms; if you already have a word for something, why borrow another one? So the words, even if they had very similar meanings, often take on slightly different nuances. Learning these subtle differences in meaning can make your writing more interesting, accurate, and rich.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, we borrowed words and word roots from Latin and Greek, as well as a great many words from French (which ultimately came from Latin since French is a Latinate language). Both then and now, these words of Latin and Greek origin are usually considered more prestigious, more academic. So you might choose a Latinate synonym over its native English (Germanic) counterpart in more formal, academic writing. Consider, for example, the following pairs of synonyms or, at least, close synonyms.

**English/Germanic Latin/Greek origin**

try attempt

hard difficult

crazy insane

ghost spirit

clean sanitary

dirt soil

go advance

see visualize

holy sacred

space cosmos

heavenly celestial

Look up the following words of Anglo-Saxon/English origin in a dictionary. Find a synonym whose origin is Latin. What are the differences in meaning?

begin Teacher notes: (originate, initiate)

break (disintegrate; invalidate)

drink (imbibe)

eat (devour, consume)

frighten, scare (intimidate)

And now look up the following words of Latin origin in a dictionary. Find a synonym whose origin is Anglo-Saxon/English origin What are the differences in meaning?

shorten (abridge; abbreviate)

show (demonstrate)

sweat (perspire)

understand (comprehend)

In general, words of Old English origin are more informal than those of French, Latin, or Greek origin. But in addition to formality, the meaning differences are often really subtle. For example, consider *big* and *large, little* and *small. Big* is used more frequently to suggest importance: *big fish in a small sea, big man on campus, big deal*, while *large* suggests abundance: *living large, in large part*. *Little* includes emotion or endearment: *nice little dog*, *little sweetie*. *Small* can convey lack of importance: *small man, small matters*. So it’s in these kinds of subtle ways, and in idiomatic expressions and sayings, that we can discover some of the very subtle meaning differences even between words that seem to have synonymous meanings.

**6.2 Antonomy**

**key words**: antonyms, formal/informal language, dictionaries, meaning

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L3.4d Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/4/d>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.5c Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of certainty (e.g., *knew, believed, suspected, heard, wondered*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3c Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5c](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/c/) Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5c Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homographs) to better understand each of the words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/5/c>

We all know what opposites are: *big-little, happy-sad, beginning-end*. But there are some interesting different kinds of relationships among pairs of opposites. All languages share these same kinds of meaning relationships.

Some antonyms are **gradable**; that is, the opposites are two ends on a scale and there can be various gradations of each term. *Big* and *little* are like this, so something can be *very big*, *biggest, littler*, and so on. Compare than to antonyms that are **complementary** antonyms. These are not gradable – you are either *dead* or *alive*, but you can’t be *deader than someone* or *very alive*.

In informal speech, we do sometimes use degree words like *very* or *so* even with complementary antonyms: *She is very pregnant. Your homework is very complete.* *That raccoon is completely dead.* What is conveyed by the degree words in these examples, which serve to express degree on adjectives that are supposedly not able to express degree? Can they express degree? Why? In what contexts?

Various parts of speech can have antonyms. For the following pairs, label the part of speech and the type of antonym (gradable or complementary).

smart/dumb

dead/alive

often/rarely

before/after

fat/thin

permit/prohibit

day/night

precede/follow

up/down

send/receive

tall/short

beginning/end

rich/poor

**6.3 Homonymy**

**key words**: homonyms, spelling, dictionaries, meaning

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.2g Consult reference materials, including beginning dictionaries, as needed to check and correct spellings. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/2/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L3.4d Use glossaries or beginning dictionaries, both print and digital, to determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/4/d>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.5c Distinguish shades of meaning among related words that describe states of mind or degrees of certainty (e.g., *knew, believed, suspected, heard, wondered*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/5/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1g Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., *to, too, two; there, their*). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/1/g>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3c Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion). <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/3/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.5c Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homographs) to better understand each of the words. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/5/c>

Words that sound the same but have different (unrelated) meanings are called **homonyms** (from the Greek roots *homeos*, meaning ‘same’ and *onoma*, meaning ‘name’).

So there are words like *saw* which can mean either have to do with vision (the past tense form of ‘see’) or with using a blade of some kind to cut something. So *I saw the board* is ambiguous; did you see it or is it being cut?

**Homophones** do not necessarily share the same spelling; they are words like *sole* and *soul, they’re* , *there* and *their, to, too,* and *two* that sound the same, and **homographs** have different meanings, the same spelling, but different pronunciations (He has a *wound* on his leg/She *wound* up the string).

**homonyms**

same spelling and sound the same

*saw, bore*

*q p*

**homophones** **homographs**

different spelling and sound the same same spelling but sound different

*sole/soul, to/too, lead/led read, wind, wound*

Very seldom are homonyms ambiguous in context since the context usually makes it clear which word is intended. But they are easy to misspell, using one form when you intend the other. Even really competent spellers can slip up on these sound-alike words.

Determine whether the following sentences have spelling errors, and if so, underline the error, write the correct spelling, and write whether it is an example of a homophone or homograph.

I cannot except your generous gift.

You have a prominent role in the play.

He wrote a thank you note on nice stationary.

We drove passed the cyclist quickly.

The school principle made an announcement about the test.

The capitol of Washington is Olympia.

The dog ran around the tree and it’s leash got tangled.

Looking in the mirror a lot makes you seem vane.

**6.4 Meaning Change**

**key words**: language change, meaning, variation, style, dictionaries

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/) Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4c](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c/) Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/4/c>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3b](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/3/b/) Compare and contrast the varieties of English (e.g., *dialects, registers*) used in stories, dramas, or poems. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/3/b>

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.4c](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c/) Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/5/4/c>

We all know, when we stop to think about it, that language changes. All languages change, and all languages are in a constant state of gradual change. When we are in the middle of change, it just seems like variation; we may hear one person pronounce a word one way and someone else in a different way. We may be uncertain about which is the “right” way. The only thing that determines which pronunciation becomes the standard one is the number of people who adopt a certain pronunciation. Once the majority does it in one way, we begin to feel like that must be the right way. Even dictionaries use this method to determine their “preferred” pronunciation. They listen to the speakers of the language; their usage – *our* usage – is what eventually determines how words are spoken and used and what they mean.

This method is clear when we look at how the meanings of some words have changed over time. For example, the word *bully* used to be a term of endearment, meaning ‘dear one’ or ‘darling.’

Or consider the word *dog*, spelled *dogge* in Old English, about 1000 years ago. At the time, it referred to a certain breed of dog, and now has a much broader meaning of dogs in general. The adjective *nice* used to mean ‘foolish’ or ‘silly’.

At the time that the meanings were changing, there must have been some arguments and possibly some confusion, as some speakers used the new meanings and others the old meanings. Similar changes are going on now.

Look up the following words to see how their meanings have changed over time. You should use a dictionary that offers thorough etymologies, such as the *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

addict

broadcast

cute

matrix

nervous

Now consider the following words and discuss their meanings together. Are you aware of varying meanings or uses? After you have discussed the words and their meanings, turn to a dictionary to see what it has to say about these words and their meanings.

literally

anxious

aggravate

nauseous