

The Difference between Digraphs and Diphthongs

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The terms **digraph** and **diphthong** are common terms in the reading world. At workshops on spelling or phonics, I often find that many people are confused about the difference between the two terms.

The clear difference is that **digraphs are letters** and **diphthongs are sounds**. The morphemes (meaningful word parts) in each word help us remember their meanings. Both words are derived from Greek. The first morpheme *di* in both words means “two.” The morpheme *graph* means written, making the word digraph refer to something written that has two parts. The morpheme *phthong* means “sound”, making the word diphthong refer to a sound that has two parts. If you understand the meaning of the morphemes in each word, you will never confuse them again.

A digraph is two letters that spell one sound. Digraphs that spell consonant sounds include the letter pairs *sh, ch, th, wh, ck, ph, ng*. Digraphs that spell vowel sounds include the letter pairs *ai, ay, ee, ea, ie, ei, oo, ou, ow, oe, oo, ue, ey, ay, oy, oi, au, aw*. The important thing to remember is that a digraph is made of two letters, and although the letters spell a sound, the digraph is the two letters, not the sound.

A diphthong is a special kind of vowel sound. Most vowel sounds in English are made with the mouth in one position and with one pure sound. These vowel sounds are called monophthongs (*mono* meaning “one” and *phthong* meaning “sound”). **A diphthong is one vowel sound formed by the combination of two vowel sounds.** A diphthong begins as one vowel sound and moves toward another, such as the vowel sounds in *coin* or *loud*. Diphthongs can be contrasted with two monophthong vowel sounds together that form two syllables, such as in *chaos, triage, or violin*.¹

When teaching reading, the two vowel sounds most commonly identified as diphthongs are /oy/ and /ow/. The most common spellings for the vowel sound /oy/ are *oy* (*toy*) and *oi* (*void*), and the two most common spellings for /ow/ are *ow* (*cow*) and *ou* (*cloud*). The fact that these two diphthongs are usually spelled with digraphs may explain the confusion between the terms.

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¹ To feel the difference between a monophthong and a diphthong, you can put an index finger on either side of your mouth. Say the vowel sound /ă/ and your fingers will stay in the same position because your mouth doesn’t move. The same thing happens with most vowel sounds. However, if you say the vowel sounds /oy/ or /ow/, your fingers will move because your mouth moves from one vowel sound to another. Two other diphthongs in American English are long i (/ī/) and long a (/ā/), which are always identified as diphthongs by linguists but not often by reading teachers. Both these vowel sounds pass the diphthong test, which is movement of a part of the mouth, generally the tongue or lips, while saying a vowel sound. Other diphthongs exist in various dialects and other languages.