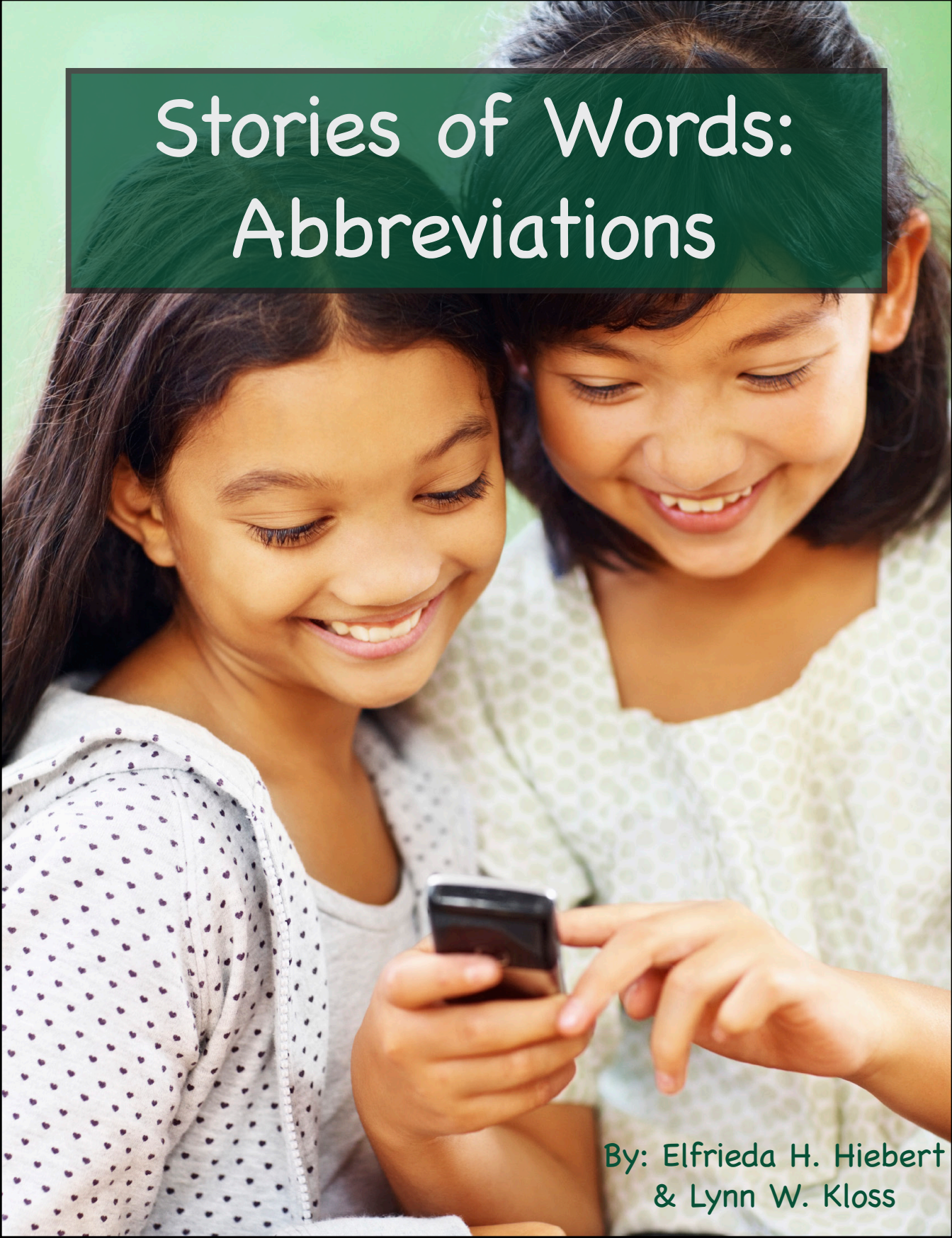
Stories of Words: Abbreviations



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Learning About Words

"Who's the D.J. for the dance tonight?"

"I don't know, but my brother's the M.C."

How many abbreviations do you see in that conversation? If you said five, you're right!

Here's the same conversation without abbreviations:

"Who is the disc jockey for the dance tonight?"

"I do not know, but my brother is the master of ceremonies."

What's the difference between those two conversations? They have the same information, but the first one sounds more like the way people speak. The second one is more formal, like the way people speak when they don't know how informal they should be.

We talk and write in abbreviations all the time. They're a kind of shortcut, allowing us to give others information quickly. In fact, the word *abbreviation* is from a Latin word that means "to make something short, or brief."

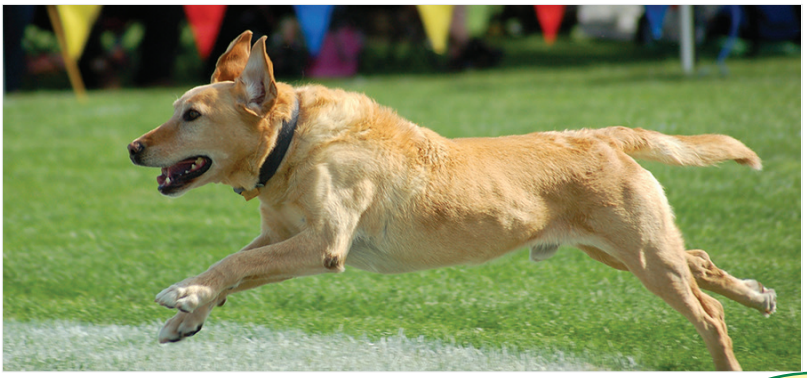
Abbreviations save time and space, but they can be confusing. If you didn't know what a D.J. or an M.C. was, you'd have no idea what was being said in the first conversation. That means that when you're using abbreviations, you should make sure that the person you're speaking or writing to knows the abbreviations you're using.

Some abbreviations you can assume most people know, such as *they're* and *didn't,* but others may require explanation. Of course, you should think about what your audience knows whenever you speak or write, because sometimes you'll need to explain what you mean more fully.

1 ISN'T THAT RIGHT?

There's one type of abbreviation you use every day. However, you might not think of it as an abbreviation. It's the contraction. In fact, there are two contractions in this paragraph: *there's* and *it's.*

These two contractions are similar in that they both end with an apostrophe and an *s.* The apostrophe shows that one or more letters have been left out. In both of these words, the letter *i* in the word *is* has been left out. Then the two words have been joined. The first word, *there's,* is a contraction of "there is." The second word, *it's,* is a contraction of "it is."



That dog's running away!

Contractions that use the word *is* are very common. Here are a few examples:

He's ready to go.

Contraction With *Is*	Word Parts
dog's	dog is
he's	he is
it's	it is
that's	that is
what's	what is

It's time for lunch!

That's so funny!

Like the word *abbreviation,* the word *contraction* is from a Latin word. It means "to draw things together." Contractions draw words together to make shorter words. They help speech sound more natural, like real conversation.

What's your name?

We aren't leaving yet.

Didn't you play ball today?

She can't hear you.

Another type of contraction you use every day contains the word *not.*

I shouldn't go out in the rain

Contraction With *Not*	Word Parts
aren't	are not
can't	can not or cannot
didn't	did not
don't	do not
shouldn't	should not

Please don't let the cat out.

Contractions can be made with words other than *is* and *not,* too. They're often made with verbs, like the one that begins this sentence. (The word *they're* is made from the pronoun "they" and the verb "are.")

Contractions With Different Verbs	Word Parts
I'm	I am
she'll	she will
they're	they are
we'd	we had
you've	you have

Two other verbs that are often used in contractions are *will* and *would*. For example, *I'll* go to the library after school. (*I will* go to the library after school.) Also, *He'd* play ball if we asked him. (*He would* play ball if we asked him.)

I'm on my way home.

She'll take the bus.

They're waiting for us.

You've played well today.

We'd better hurry.

2 TTYL

If you sent the message in this title to someone as recently as ten years ago, the person might have no idea what you were saying. Today, though, the person would know that you were finishing a conversation by saying I'll "talk to you later." Abbreviations like this are common in text messages.

As cell phones get smaller, so do the keypads people use for texting. As a result, people have created many abbreviations to help them spend less time typing. These abbreviations, which are used in texting, instant messaging, and email are called *chat-speak, text-speak,* or *SMS language.* By the way, *SMS* is itself an abbreviation for "short message service."

TTYL, like *LOL,* is a type of abbreviation called an initialism. As the name says, initialisms use the first letter, or initial, of each word in a phrase to send a quick message.

Here are some common text-speak initialisms:

Initialism	**Meaning**
BFF	best friend forever
IMO	in my opinion
LOL	laugh out loud
TTYL	talk to you later
Y	why

CUL8R

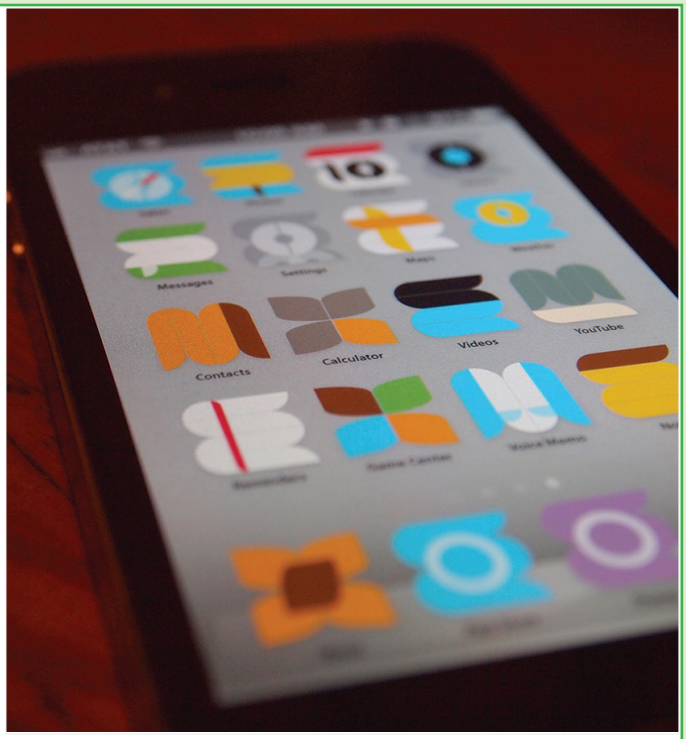
Another kind of text-speak, such as *CUL8R,* or "see you later," may contain initialisms, substitutions, and even numbers.

U2 is a common text abbreviation for "you too." In this case, the *U* is an abbreviation of the word *you,* and the number *2* is an abbreviation of the word *too.*

Like *U2, UR* uses the letter *U* to stand for the word *you.* The whole abbreviation, though, can have either of two meanings. *UR* can mean "you are," as in "you are sitting down" or "your," as in "your hat is in the closet." The words around *UR* will tell you which meaning is correct.

Another abbreviation that uses letters and numbers is *L8,* which means "late." Here, the letter *L* is combined with the number *8,* which sounds like "ate." That abbreviation is in this title.

Abbreviations on the Web



Some examples of text-speak are simply shortened words. For example, *app* is an abbreviation of "application," or a piece of software that's designed to do a particular job. Thousands of apps are available for cell phones, but they're used on desktop computers, too. They're usually downloaded from the Web.

Also, *bot* is an abbreviation for "web robot." Bots do a variety of jobs more quickly than any person could. For example, a shop bot can compare products, such as bikes, on several different Web sites and give you a list of choices. Bots are also used in games and auction sites to do jobs quickly.

Many initialisms are used on the Web. For example, *WWW* means "World Wide Web." *URL* means "Universal Resource Locator." (A site's URL is its web address.) If you play video games, you probably also know that *VR* means "Virtual Reality."

3 ABBREVIATIONS IN TIME AND SPACE

What year is it? You don't need to say that it's 2016 *A.D.,* but the initialisms *B.C.* (or *B.C.E.*) and *A.D.* (or *C.E.*) help you express time.

People have created many ways to categorize periods of time, including years, seasons, months, and days. Knowing the month helps farmers plant their crops at the right time. Knowing the year helps you see events in relation to one another. For example, you can tell how long ago something was, or how old you are.

In North America, most people speak of years in relation to the Christian calendar. They say that dates that are more than about 2,000 years old are *B.C.* This initialism stands for *Before Christ.* In contrast, *A.D.* is an initialism for the Latin phrase *Anno Domini,* which means "in the year of our Lord."

In the mid-19th century, historians and scientists began to use the initialisms *B.C.E.* and *C.E.* instead of *B.C.* and *A.D.* They did this to distance themselves from the religious nature of the earlier terms. *B.C.E* means "Before the Common Era," and *C.E.* means "Common Era."

What time is it? It might be 8:00, but is it 8:00 AM or 8:00 PM? If you look outside, you can probably tell by the amount of daylight you see. But what do AM and PM mean?

You know that 8 AM is in the morning, and 8 PM is at night. You may not know, though, that AM is an initialism that stands for "Ante Meridiem," which is a Latin phrase that means "before noon." PM is an initialism that stands for "Post Meridiem," a Latin phrase that means "after noon." As you can guess, meridiem means "noon."

Some abbreviations, as you've seen, are just shorter versions of common words. You see may abbreviations like these when you read about time.

Abbreviations save us so much time that it seems right that there should be so many devoted to time.

Abbreviation	Meaning
hr.	hour
min.	minute
mon.	month
sec.	second
yr.	year

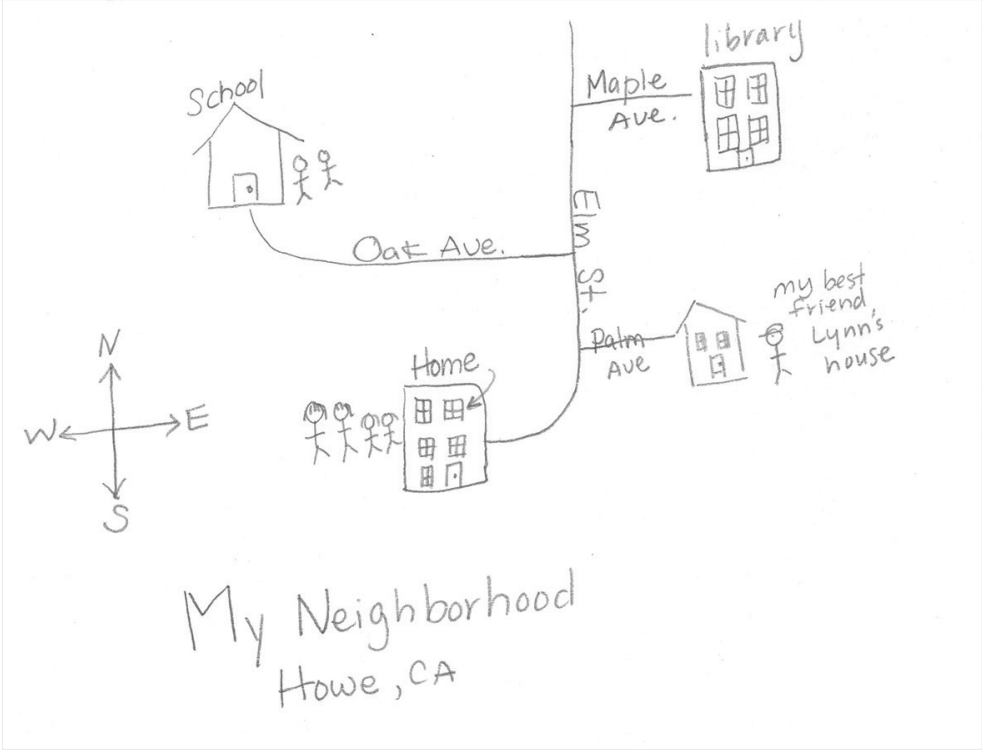
What's your address? Maybe you live on Fifth Ave. or Main St. Maybe you live in CA or NY. These abbreviations help save time and space when you're writing a letter. They also help you find a location on a map.

Maps have several tools to help you orient yourself, or find a direction. One design, which is often found in the corner of a map, is called a compass rose. The compass rose helps you see, for example, that one country is east or west of another.

Often, the arrow that points to the top of the map will tell you where north is, but you should make sure. The abbreviation for north is usually N, but it could be Nor.

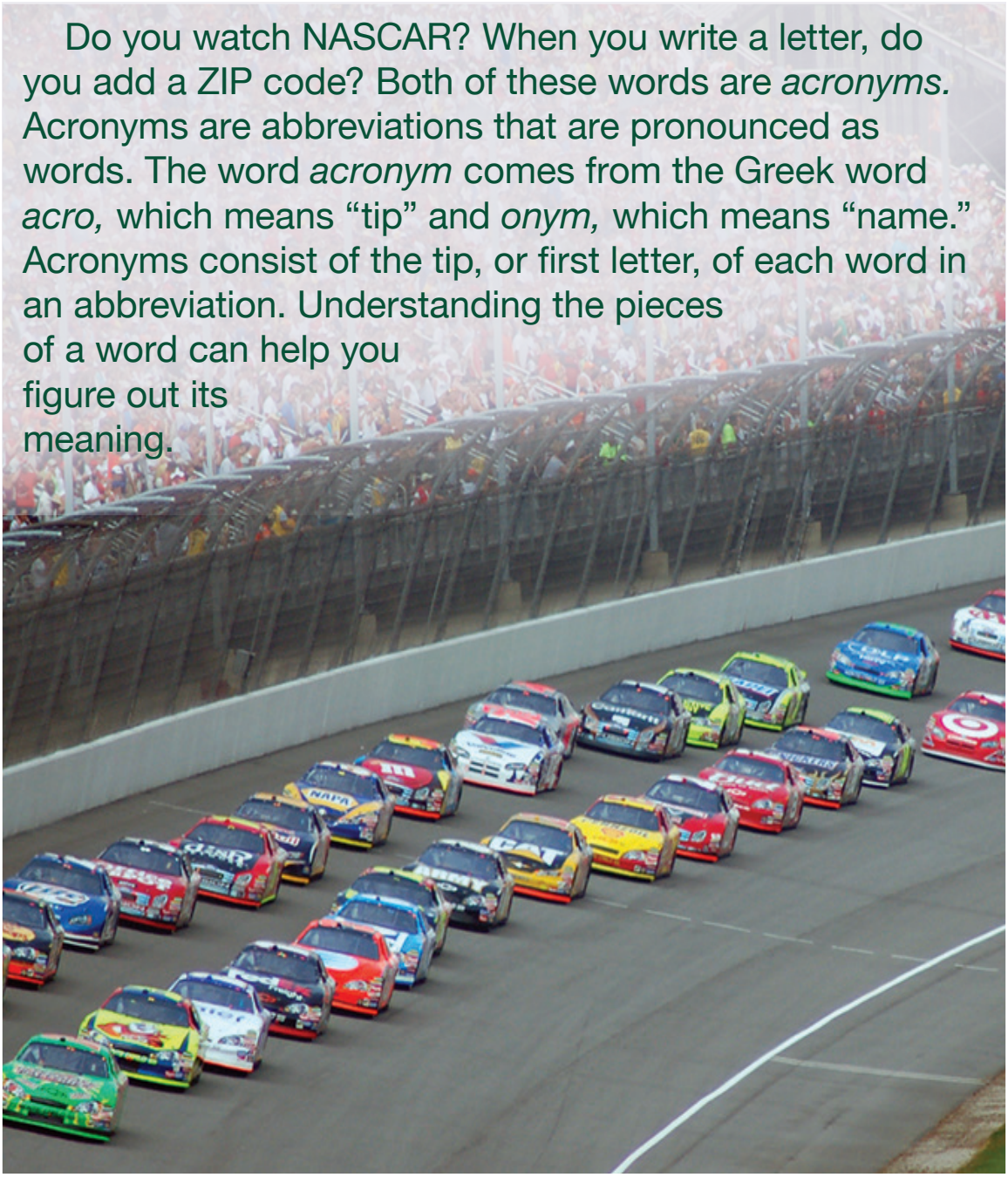
Here are some common abbreviations you might find on maps.

Abbreviation	Meaning
Ave.	Avenue
St.	Street
CA	California
NY	New York
E	east
N	north
S	south
W	west



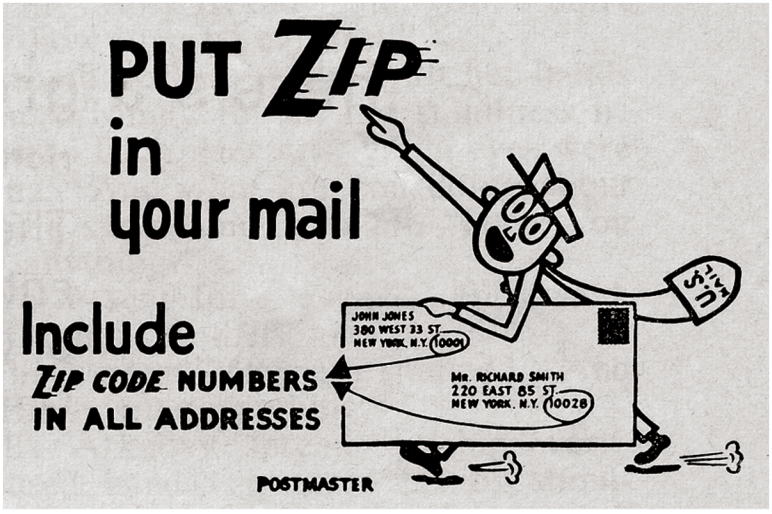
4 ACRONYMS

Do you watch NASCAR? When you write a letter, do you add a ZIP code? Both of these words are *acronyms.* Acronyms are abbreviations that are pronounced as words. The word *acronym* comes from the Greek word *acro,* which means "tip" and *onym,* which means "name." Acronyms consist of the tip, or first letter, of each word in an abbreviation. Understanding the pieces of a word can help you figure out its meaning.



If you watch NASCAR, you might know that its acronym stands for the *National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing.* NASCAR was formed in 1947, and the term came to describe these popular races. Today, people watch almost as many NASCAR races on TV as football games.

How does the U.S. Postal Service know where to deliver your mail? It reads the ZIP code on the envelope. The *ZIP* in *ZIP code* stands for "Zoning Improvement Plan." An envelope's ZIP code tells a sorting machine which post office is closest to your home. The first three digits of a ZIP code identify your section of the United States and the last two identify the post office that is closest to your home.



Groups Who Help Others

One of the most important things people do is help others. People around the country and around the world help to feed needy people and animals. They also help to provide them with doctors, medicines, and homes.

One of these groups is CARE. You may have heard of CARE packages, which were first sent in 1945 from the United States to people in Europe who were struggling to recover from World War II. *CARE,* which now stands for "Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere," sends help to people in disaster zones, areas affected by war, and other situations in which people need emergency help.

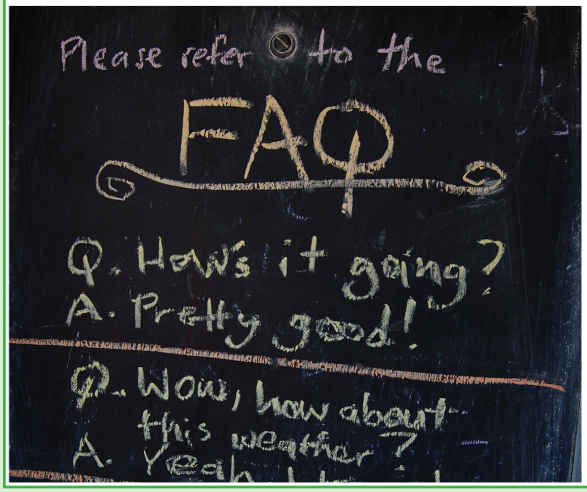
Another group that helps people around the world is *UNICEF,* or the "United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund." UNICEF works for children's rights, focusing on ending poverty, violence, and disease.

People work to help animals, too. One such group is called *PETA,* which stands for "People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals." PETA works around the world to end cruelty to animals.

Acronyms Around Us

Many acronyms have become so common that people have forgotten they're abbreviations. For example, when you use a credit card or ATM card, you enter a *PIN* number. *PIN* is an acronym that stands for "Personal Identification Number." These digits act as a password to make sure no one else can use your money but you.

An acronym you might see when you have questions about something on the Internet is *FAQ,* or "Frequently Asked Questions." This is usually a section of a Web site that answers questions many users have asked and helps them solve common problems.



Here are some acronyms for science equipment that helps people explore and measure the world.

LASER

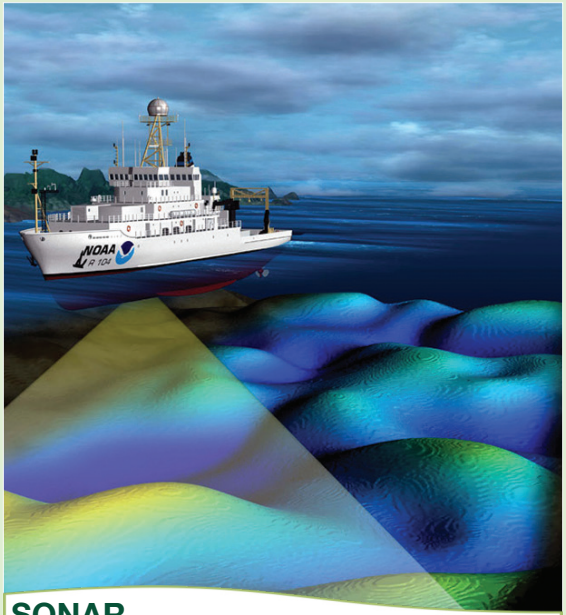
Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation

RADAR

Radio Detecting and Ranging

SCUBA

Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus



SONAR

Sound Navigation and Ranging

5 ET CETERA

"The park is so much fun! I can play ball, run around the track, swing on the swings, etc." You know what that means: the speaker can play ball, run, swing, and do lots of other things. That's what *etc.* means: "and the others." It's an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *et cetera.*

Abbreviations are all around us. In which country do you live? Many of the readers of this book will say they live in the *USA.* That's an initialism for the "United States of America."

Are you *OK?* The story of the initialism *OK* is a bit unclear, but many people believe that *OK* (also written *O.K.* and *okay*) dates to 1839 and stands for "Oll Korrect," a humorous respelling for "all correct." This initialism was associated with President Van Buren, whose nickname was Old Kinderhook. Today, *OK* is used by speakers of many languages to mean "all right" or "correct."

Like *OK,* the story of the initialism *FYI* is unclear. It stands for "For Your Information," and it sometimes appears on information that you don't need right away but might use at a later time. It could be instructions for fixing your bicycle or finding something on the Internet.

Speedy Abbreviations

Have you ever been told to clean your room *ASAP?* If you have, you know what this abbreviation means: "as soon as possible." Sometimes people even pronounce this initialism as a word, making it an acronym. *ASAP* was first used in 1955 in the U.S. Army.

Another abbreviation that shows that something needs to happen quickly is *stat.* You may have heard this abbreviation if you watch medical shows on TV. In medicine, *stat* means "at once" or "immediately." It is an abbreviation of the Latin word *statim.*

Most abbreviations were invented to save time. You wouldn't want to say "I'm going to use an *automated teller machine*" every time you wanted to get money from the bank. It's much easier to say, "I'm going to use an *ATM*."

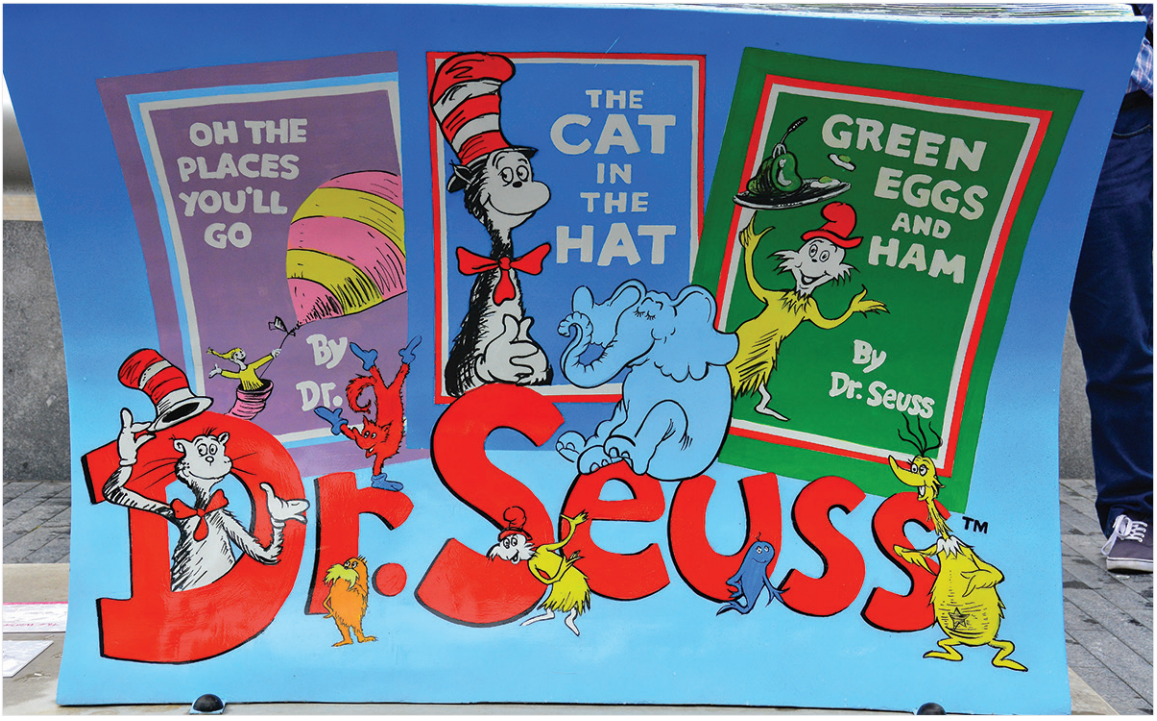
What's Your Title?

What is your teacher's name? Perhaps it's *Mr.* Daniels, or *Mrs.* James, or *Ms.* Williams. All of these words in italics are abbreviations.

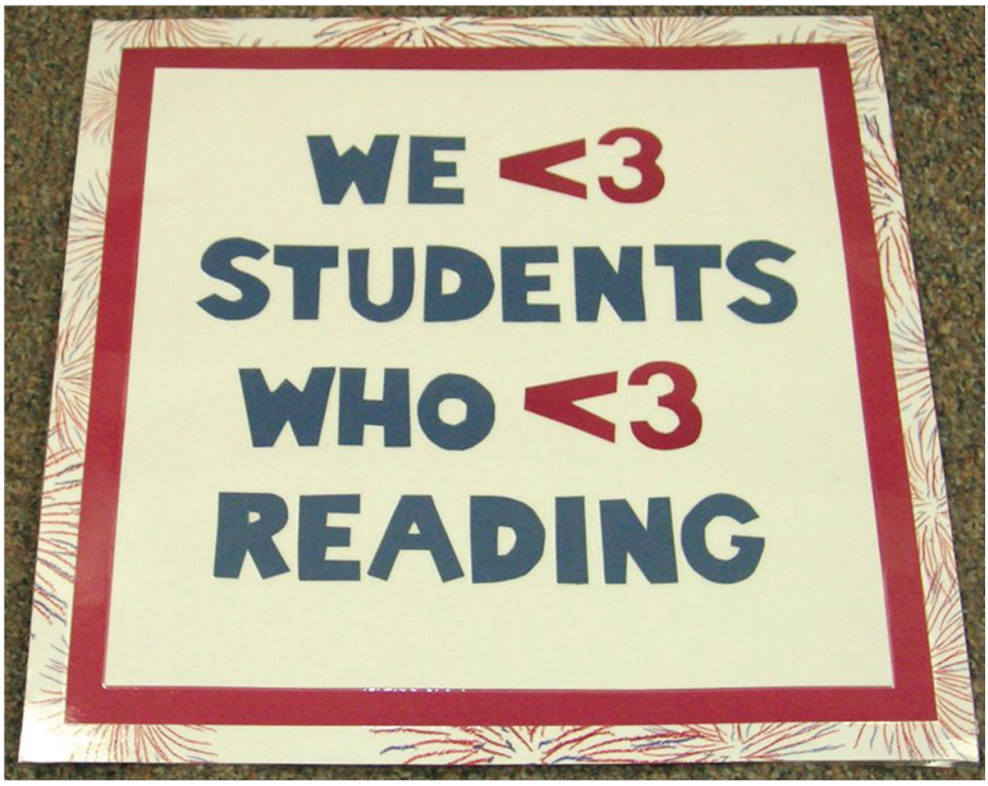
Mr. is an abbreviation for "mister." In the 1400s, the word was *master.* At that time, *master* meant "someone who has authority." Today, some people use the title *Master* when referring to a boy.

Mrs. is an abbreviation for "mistress." Like *master, mistress* meant "a woman who has authority." It later came to mean "a married woman." *Miss,* which is sometimes used to refer to girls, is another abbreviation for "mistress."

The abbreviation *Ms.* seems to have been invented in 1901, but it didn't become popular until the late 1960s. Like *Mrs., Ms.* is an abbreviation for "mistress," but it has become a way for women to avoid saying whether they are married.



When you get sick, who helps you get better? Perhaps it's *Dr.* Brown. *Dr.* is an abbreviation that stands for *Doctor.* In the 1200s, this word meant "a religious teacher or scholar" in Latin. It came to mean "someone who treats people medically" in the early 1700s. Today, it's also used to talk of someone who has completed an advanced degree in college.



Our Changing Language

Languages change all the time. New words are created to describe new things. You can see this happening whenever a new piece of technology is invented. When texting was invented, for example, it was first called *text messaging.* That phrase was later abbreviated to *texting.* Then a whole group of abbreviations, which came to be called *text-speak,* were invented to make sending texts faster. These abbreviations, in particular, change very quickly.

Abbreviations work well to give others information quickly, but you have to be careful when using them, too, because people might not understand you. Text-speak and acronyms are good examples of abbreviations that are clear to some people, but not to others. It's always good to think about who will be getting your message before you abbreviate words. You might need to explain the abbreviation or use the whole word.

Abbreviations also are usually considered to be informal. They're fine for conversations or messages between friends, but your teacher, for example might not want you to use them in your assignments. It's wise to make sure. You can make a game of inventing new abbreviations, too, and letting others guess what you mean.

Glossary

abbreviation a word or phrase that has been shortened

acronym an abbreviation that is pronounced as a word (example: *NASA* for the "National Aeronautics and Space Association")

contraction two words that have been shortened to make one word (example: *we'll* for "we will")

initialism a type of abbreviations that uses the first letter of each word in a phrase to send a quick message (example: *NY* for "New York")

text-speak abbreviations that are used when sending a text message (example: *LOL* for "Laugh Out Loud")

Think About It

• Most people or their relatives came to the United States from another country. Ask a relative or neighbor about the country or countries where they or their relatives were born. What language did they speak? How did they learn English?

• Think of a word you use often. What does that word mean? If you can, have an adult help you look up the word in a dictionary and find out something about the word's history.

• Make up a new name for an object in your classroom or at home. Teach the new word to a classmate and tell the person what the name means and how you invented it.

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