

Tricky Words of the Day

Sunday, April 26, 2026

Note: Illustrations appear only on meanings where a picture genuinely helps ESL/ELL learners grasp the word. Abstract or context-dependent meanings are intentionally shown as text only.

Homophone · Lesson 1 of 9

Know / No

Good for yes/no questions and polite refusals.

Meaning 1

Know: to have information or to be sure about something.

These short words sound the same, but one talks about knowledge and the other is a negative answer.

"I know the answer to this question."

"Do you know his name?"

Meaning 2

No: a word used to refuse or to say something is not allowed or not true.

Same sound as 'know', but used when someone does not accept or agree with something.

"No, I cannot go today."

"There is no sugar in the jar."



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Row

Be careful with definition 3; most Americans would use the word 'fight' or 'argument' instead.

Meaning 1

A line of things or people next to each other.

Pronounced like 'low'. Common in classrooms or theaters.

"We sat in the front row of the cinema."

"Plant the seeds in a straight row."

Meaning 2

A noisy argument or fight.

Pronounced like 'now' or 'cow'. This is more common in British English.

"The neighbors are having a loud row about the fence."

"They had a row and aren't speaking to each other."

Meaning 3

To move a boat through water using oars.

Pronounced like 'low' (same as definition 1).

"It is hard work to row a boat upstream."

"They plan to row across the lake."

Related: line; paddle; argument; quarrel



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

The last straw

Often used when someone finally decides to quit a job or end a relationship.

Meaning 1

The final problem in a series of problems that makes a situation unbearable.

Refers to a proverb about a camel's back. It implies that the final problem might be small, but it's the one that causes a collapse.

"I was already unhappy at work, but when they canceled my vacation, that was the last straw."

"The noisy neighbors were bad, but throwing trash in my yard was the last straw."

Related: limit; breaking point; final blow



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Extra

Can be used as a lighthearted insult among friends.

Meaning 1

Being over-the-top, dramatic, or doing more than what is necessary.

Learners know this as 'additional.' As slang, it describes a person's personality or a specific behavior that is too much.

"She bought five different outfits for a one-hour party. She is so extra."

"Don't be so extra"

Related: dramatic; excessive; too much



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Bolt

One meaning is about staying still (locked), and the other is about moving very fast (running away).

Meaning 1

To secure or lock something in place.

Related to using a metal bolt or sliding a door bolt to stay safe.

"Remember to bolt the door before you go to sleep."

"The chairs were bolted to the floor."

Meaning 2

To run away suddenly and quickly.

Like a 'bolt of lightning', it implies speed and sudden departure.

"The horse bolted when it heard the loud noise."

"The suspect bolted down the alley as soon as he saw the police."

Related: fasten; dash; escape; lock



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Go down in flames

This phrase is often used to describe 'epic' failures. It is more dramatic than simply saying something 'failed.' It implies that the failure was visible to others and impossible to fix. It is commonly used in business, sports, and dating contexts.

Meaning 1

To end a romantic relationship or a career in a very angry or dramatic argument.

This usage focuses on the emotional 'heat' of a situation. Learners might be confused because 'flames' usually implies heat or light, but here it represents the intensity of anger or the speed of the social collapse.

"Their relationship went down in flames after they realized they had been lying to each other for months."

"The politician's career went down in flames following the public scandal."

Meaning 2

To fail spectacularly, suddenly, and completely.

ESL learners may take the phrase literally, imagining a physical fire or a crash (like an airplane). In a professional or social context, it actually describes a metaphorical disaster where a plan, project, or reputation is destroyed in a very public or dramatic way.

"The company's new product launch went down in flames after the software failed during the live demo."

"He tried to argue with the teacher, but his logic went down in flames when she showed him the facts."

Related: crash and burn; fiasco; train wreck; washout; bomb



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Jam**

Think of 'jam' as things being pushed tightly together, whether it's fruit in a jar, cars on a road, or notes in a song.

Meaning 1

To play music informally with other people.

This is a common slang term in music culture. It's often used as 'to jam out.'

"The band decided to jam in the garage all afternoon."

"Bring your guitar and we can jam tonight!"

Meaning 2

A sweet spread made from fruit and sugar, eaten with bread.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'jelly.' In British English, 'jam' is the standard term for fruit preserves.

"I love strawberry jam on my toast."

"She bought a jar of apricot jam at the market."

Meaning 3

A situation where too many people or vehicles are stuck and cannot move.

Used as a noun (traffic jam) or a verb (to jam). It implies being stuck or crowded.

"We were two hours late because of a traffic jam."

"The printer has a paper jam and won't work."

Related: preserve; congestion; improvise; stuck



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Expecting

This is a very safe and respectful way to talk about pregnancy in a professional environment.

Meaning 1

A polite way to say a woman is pregnant.

Learners might ask 'Expecting what?'. In English, it always implies a baby when used this way.

"Did you hear the news? Sarah and Tom are expecting!"

"She won't be drinking wine tonight because she is expecting."

Related: pregnant; with child; starting a family



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Break down

Very common. Can be separable in some contexts (break something down). Multiple meanings.

Meaning 1

To stop working or functioning (machine, vehicle, system).

ESL learners often confuse this with the literal meaning of physically breaking something. Here it's about failure or collapse.

"My car broke down on the highway."

"The washing machine broke down again."

Meaning 2

To become very emotional and start crying.

This meaning is about emotional breakdown.

"She broke down in tears when she heard the bad news."

Related: fall apart; give out; conk out



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