

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, April 28, 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

Waste / Waist

Useful for teaching everyday habits and health.

Meaning 1

Waste: to use something in a careless way so that it is not helpful or is lost.

These words sound the same, but one is about not using resources well and the other is part of the body.

"Do not waste water when you wash the dishes."

"They try not to waste time at work."



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/waste-waist

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Dove

In British English, people usually say 'dived' instead of 'dove'.

Meaning 1

A white bird that is often a symbol of peace.

Pronounced (duv) - rhymes with 'love'.

"A white dove flew over the garden."

"The dove is a beautiful bird."

Meaning 2

The past tense of 'dive'.

Pronounced (doh-v) - rhymes with 'drove'. Mostly used in American English (dived is also correct).

"He dove into the swimming pool."

"The bird dove into the water to catch a fish."

Related: bird; peace; jump; plunge



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Wrap your head around

Often used in the negative: 'I can't wrap my head around it.'

Meaning 1

To find a way to understand something difficult, strange, or complex.

It suggests that an idea is so big or complicated that your mind has to physically reach around it to grasp it.

"I'm trying to wrap my head around this new math formula."

"It's hard to wrap my head around the fact that she's moving away."

Related: comprehend; grasp; understand



Read the full lesson

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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9**Rent-free**

Usually used for negative or annoying thoughts that won't go away.

Meaning 1

To be obsessed with something or someone to the point where you can't stop thinking about it.

Comes from the phrase 'living in your head rent-free.' It implies that something is occupying your thoughts without your permission.

"That catchy song has been living in my head rent-free all week."

"The way he embarrassed himself in the meeting is still living in his head rent-free."

Related: obsessed; fixated



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9**Dust**

Think of the direction of the particles: are they coming off (cleaning) or going on (sprinkling)?

Meaning 1

To remove small particles of dirt from a surface.

This is the most common use in household chores.

"I need to dust the bookshelf before the guests arrive."

"She used a soft cloth to dust the TV screen."

Meaning 2

To sprinkle or cover something with a thin layer of powder.

Commonly used in cooking or farming.

"Dust the cake with powdered sugar."

"The farmer had to dust the crops with pesticide."

Related: clean; sprinkle; powder



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 9**Firm**

As an adjective, it's the opposite of 'soft' or 'weak'. As a noun, it's a synonym for 'company'.

Meaning 1

Hard or solid; not soft or flexible when pressed.

Often used to describe physical objects or food texture.

"I prefer a firm mattress for my back."

"The peaches aren't ripe yet"

Meaning 2

A business or a company.

A formal noun common in professional contexts, especially law or architecture.

"She works for a famous law firm in the city."

"The accounting firm is hiring new interns."

Meaning 3

Strong, steady, and unlikely to change (about a person or decision).

Used to describe personality or convictions.

"You need to be firm with the children so they follow the rules."

"We have a firm agreement to finish the project by Friday."

Related: solid; company; strict; stable



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eslwordwiz.com/words/firm

Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 9

Big-boned

Sometimes used by doctors to describe body structure, but often used as a defensive or kind euphemism.

Meaning 1

A polite, indirect way to describe someone who is large or overweight.

Literally referring to the size of bones, but used to avoid saying the word 'fat'.

"I'm not overweight"

"I'm just naturally big-boned."

Related: heavy-set; plus-sized; stout



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eslwordwiz.com/words/big-boned

Figure of Speech · Lesson 8 of 9**Like a fish out of water**

This is a very common simile used to describe social anxiety or lack of experience. It almost always carries a negative or uncomfortable connotation. It is important to note that the 'water' represents the person's 'comfort zone' or 'natural environment.'

Meaning 1

To feel very uncomfortable, awkward, or out of place because you are in an unfamiliar situation or environment.

ESL learners may take this literally and think someone is talking about a dying animal. It is a simile that compares a person's social discomfort to a fish's physical inability to breathe or move properly when removed from its natural habitat.

"As a shy person at a loud party, I felt like a fish out of water."

"When the engineer tried to teach a dance class, he was like a fish out of water."

Meaning 2

Lacking the necessary skills or experience for a specific task or social circle.

This usage focuses on the lack of 'belonging' to a specific group. Learners might be confused because the person isn't physically 'out' of anything, but rather lacks the internal knowledge to fit in with the people around them.

"He had never used a computer before, so in the IT department, he was like a fish out of water."

"Moving from a small village to a massive city like Tokyo made her feel like a fish out of water."

Related: out of one's element; misfit; awkward; unfamiliar; square peg in a round hole



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eslwordwiz.com/words/like-a-fish-out-of-water

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Look after

Inseparable phrasal verb. More common in British English.

Meaning 1

To take care of someone or something.

Many learners interpret 'look' literally as see and 'after' as following. It means care for.

"Can you look after my cat while I'm away?"

"She looks after her sick mother."

Related: care for; take care of



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