

Tricky Words of the Day

Thursday, April 30, 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

Sale / Sail

Useful if your app includes travel or shopping topics.

Meaning 1

Sale: a time when prices are lower in a store.

These words sound identical, so learners can confuse shopping with travel by boat if they only listen.

"The store has a big sale this weekend."

"We bought the shoes on sale."

Meaning 2

Sail: to travel on water using a boat, often with a sail.

Same sound as 'sale', but connected to movement and the sea.

"They will sail across the lake tomorrow."

"He learned how to sail when he was a child."



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/sale-sail

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Bat

The superhero 'Batman' is named after the animal, not the sports equipment!

Meaning 1

A long piece of wood or metal used to hit a ball in sports.

Used in baseball or cricket.

"He swung the baseball bat as hard as he could."

"I need to buy a new cricket bat."

Meaning 2

A small animal that flies at night and looks like a mouse with wings.

The only mammal that can fly.

"Bats live in dark caves during the day."

"We saw a bat flying at sunset."

Related: baseball; mammal; nocturnal; hit



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bat

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Get out of hand

Often used for behavior, crowds, or escalating costs.

Meaning 1

To become difficult to control or become chaotic.

Think of losing your grip on a physical object. If a situation 'leaves your hands', you can no longer manage it.

"The party got out of hand when 100 people showed up."

"We need to stop this argument before it gets out of hand."

Related: uncontrollable; wild; unmanageable



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/get-out-of-hand

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Ghosting

Usually used in dating, but can also apply to friendships and job applications.

Meaning 1

Suddenly stopping all communication with someone without any explanation.

ESL learners might think it involves actual ghosts. It refers to 'disappearing' like a ghost in a social context.

"We went on three dates, but then he started ghosting me."

"I hate it when recruiters resort to ghosting after an interview."

Related: ignore; disappear; cold shoulder



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/ghosting

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Finished

Note the tone of voice; 'I'm finished!' with a smile is good, but with a sigh it might mean you are exhausted or failing.

Meaning 1

Completed; brought to an end or a state of being whole.

This is the positive, standard meaning of having reached a goal.

"I am finally finished with my homework."

"The painting is finished and ready to hang."

Meaning 2

Ruined, defeated, or having no future.

This is a negative, idiomatic meaning. It implies that something has failed completely.

"If we don't win this game, our season is finished."

"After the scandal, his career as a politician was finished."

Related: done; complete; ruined; terminated



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/finished

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 9

Wave

Also used in science (sound waves, light waves).

Meaning 1

A moving ridge of water on the surface of the ocean or a lake.

The most common natural definition.

"The waves were so high that we couldn't go surfing."

"I love listening to the sound of the waves on the beach."

Meaning 2

To move your hand back and forth as a greeting or signal.

A common gesture. Learners should note it is used with 'at' or 'to'.

"Don't forget to wave goodbye to your grandmother."

"She waved at me from across the street."

Meaning 3

A sudden increase or spread of something (like heat or sickness).

Used for patterns of weather or social phenomena.

"A sudden heat wave hit the city in July."

"There was a new wave of flu cases last winter."

Related: gesture; surf; signal; surge



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/wave

Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 9

Economical with the truth

Often used in politics or formal debates to avoid calling someone a 'liar' directly.

Meaning 1

A humorous or polite way to say that someone is lying or leaving out facts.

Learners might think this is about money. It actually means the person is 'saving' the truth and not using it.

"The witness was being rather economical with the truth during his testimony."

"Are you telling me everything, or are you just being economical with the truth?"

Related: dishonest; deceptive; misleading



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/economical-with-the-truth

Figure of Speech · Lesson 8 of 9**Nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs**

This is an exaggerated 'long-form' simile common in American English, particularly in the South. It is often shortened to just 'nervous as a cat.' The humor comes from the vivid, slightly violent imagery of a cat trying to protect its tail.

Meaning 1

Extremely anxious, jittery, or worried about a potential danger or mistake.

This is a colorful simile that relies on a mental image. ESL learners may be confused because they might try to translate the literal components (cats and furniture) rather than understanding the underlying logic: a cat's tail is at risk of being crushed by the moving rockers, creating a state of constant hyper-vigilance.

"Before his big presentation, Mark was as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

"She's been pacing the hallway all morning, nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

Meaning 2

Being in a state of high alert or jumpiness due to a chaotic or unpredictable environment.

Learners might find this confusing because it is a 'Southernism' or regional American idiom. It implies not just internal anxiety, but a reaction to a specific, crowded, or 'dangerous' environment where one must constantly watch their step.

"With the auditors coming to the office today, the manager is nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

Related: on pins and needles; jittery; on edge; anxious; like a cat on a hot tin roof



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/nervous-as-a-cat-in-a-room-full-of-rocking-chairs

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Wear out

Separable for objects.

Meaning 1

To become exhausted or to damage something through use.

Tiredness or physical wear meaning.

"The kids wore me out today."

"These shoes are completely worn out."

Related: exhaust; damage by use



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/wear-out



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