

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, May 5, 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

One / Won

Useful in sports and game contexts.

Meaning 1

One: the number 1.

These words share the same sound, but one is a number and the other is a past tense verb.

"There is only one ticket left."

"She has one brother."

Meaning 2

Won: past tense of 'win'.

Same sound as 'one', but used to talk about success in competitions or games.

"Their team won the game."

"He won a prize at the event."



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Entrance

The noun 'entrance' is very common, while the verb 'entrance' is more literary or poetic.

Meaning 1

A door, gate, or passage used to enter a place.

Noun. Pronounced with stress on the first syllable (EN-trance).

"Please meet me at the main entrance of the mall."

"The hidden entrance was behind a large bush."

Meaning 2

To fill someone with wonder or delight; to hold someone's entire attention.

Verb. Pronounced with stress on the second syllable (en-TRANCE).

"The beautiful music seemed to entrance the entire audience."

"She was entranced by the bright lights of the city."

Related: doorway; gate; fascinate; charm



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Up in the air

Often used when waiting for a third party to make a choice.

Meaning 1

Uncertain or not yet decided; a plan that is not finalized.

ESL learners might think of literal objects floating. In business, it means no firm decision has been made.

"Our vacation plans are still up in the air because we haven't booked flights."

"The contract hasn't been signed yet, so the deal is still up in the air."

Related: undecided; unsure; pending; uncertain



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Curated

Often carries a slight criticism that something is not 'real' or organic.

Meaning 1

Carefully chosen and organized, often used to describe a social media feed that looks perfect.

In a museum, a curator picks art. On the internet, people 'curate' their lives to look better than they are.

"Her Instagram grid is so perfectly curated."

"They offer a curated selection of vintage clothes."

Related: selected; organized; polished



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Ravel

Ravel is a rare 'auto-antonym' or contronym. In modern English, 'unravel' is much more common when you mean 'to untangle' or 'to solve.' If you see 'ravel' used in a book, look at the context to see if the situation is getting simpler (untangling) or more complicated (tangling).

Meaning 1

To untangle, separate, or unwind something that is knotted or woven.

This is confusing because 'ravel' and 'unravel' are often used as synonyms. Usually, adding a prefix like 'un-' changes a word to its opposite, but here, they can mean the same thing.

"The knitter had to ravel the scarf to fix a mistake in the pattern."

"She carefully raveled the threads of the old fabric to see how it was made."

Meaning 2

To become tangled, knotted, or confused.

This is the exact opposite of the first definition. It describes a situation where things are becoming messy or complicated rather than being straightened out.

"The fishing line began to ravel in the wind, creating a huge knot."

"As the witness lied, the simple case began to ravel into a complex mystery."

Related: unravel; tangle; entwine; complicate; disentangle



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Don't judge a book by its cover

This is often shortened to just 'Don't judge a book...' in casual conversation. It is synonymous with the idiom 'Appearances can be deceiving.' It is important for learners to recognize that 'cover' refers to any external trait, such as clothing, facial expressions, or building facades.

Meaning 1

A reminder that the internal value of something often differs from its external presentation.

Learners might struggle with the grammatical structure 'by its cover,' which implies that the 'cover' is the only evidence being used to make a judgment. It is confusing because it suggests that the 'truth' is hidden inside.

"That cheap-looking phone actually has better features than the expensive brands"

"you can't judge a book by its cover."

Meaning 2

A metaphorical warning that you should not form an opinion about someone or something based solely on outward appearance.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the speaker is talking about literature or publishing. The confusion arises because the phrase uses a specific object (a book) to represent a universal concept (character or quality).

"He looks very intimidating with all those tattoos, but he's actually the kindest person I know"

"don't judge a book by its cover."

Related: appearances can be deceiving; all that glitters is not gold; first impressions; misleading; superficial



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eslwordwiz.com/words/don-t-judge-a-book-by-its-cover

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Gross

Can also be used in law to mean 'extreme' or 'obvious', as in 'gross negligence'.

Meaning 1

Disgusting or very unpleasant.

Informal adjective. Very common in 'kid' and 'teen' slang.

"There is some gross green mold on this bread."

"Oh, gross! I stepped in a puddle."

Meaning 2

The total amount of money before taxes or expenses are taken away.

Business term. Opposite of 'net'.

"His gross annual income is \$60,000."

"The movie's gross earnings exceeded \$100 million."

Meaning 3

A group of 144 items (twelve dozen).

A specific measurement noun. Less common now but still used in manufacturing and wholesale.

"We ordered a gross of pencils for the school."

"The factory produces a gross of these units every hour."

Related: disgusting; total; twelve-dozen; unpleasant



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Well-to-do

Often used to describe people with 'old money' or established wealth.

Meaning 1

Having plenty of money; wealthy or rich.

The literal meaning ('doing well') is clear, but as an adjective, it is a polite way to describe a family's status without focusing on 'cash.'

"She grew up in a well-to-do neighborhood in North London."

"They are a well-to-do family known for their charity work."

Related: well-off; affluent



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Come across

As a phrasal verb, 'come across' is inseparable when it means 'to find by chance' (you cannot say 'come it across'). It is very common in both casual conversation and professional settings. Note that 'come across' (find) does not use 'with'-you 'come across something', you don't 'come across with something'.

Meaning 1

To find something or meet someone by chance.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'find' or 'meet'. Unlike 'meet', which is often planned, 'come across' implies an accidental discovery. It is a phrasal verb, which can be difficult because the individual words 'come' and 'across' do not literally describe the act of finding.

"I came across an old photo of my grandmother while cleaning the attic."

"If you come across any errors in the text, please let me know."

Meaning 2

To give a particular impression or appear to be a certain way.

This is confusing because it describes how other people perceive a person's personality or tone. It is often followed by the preposition 'as'. Learners may struggle to understand how 'moving across' relates to someone's personality.

"He comes across as a very shy person, but he is actually quite talkative."

"I hope I didn't come across as rude during the interview."

Meaning 3

To be communicated clearly or understood.

This meaning refers to an idea or emotion being successfully transmitted from a speaker to an audience. It is confusing because the 'subject' is the message itself, not the person speaking.

"The speaker's enthusiasm really came across in her presentation."

"The message of the movie didn't really come across to the viewers."

Related: run into; stumble upon; appear; seem; encounter



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