

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, May 6, 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

Sun / Son

Good pair for family and weather vocabulary.

Meaning 1

Sun: the star that gives light and heat to the Earth.

These words sound the same, but one is about nature and the other is a family member.

"The sun is bright today."

"Plants need sun to grow."



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/sun-son

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Invalid

In tech/IT, you will almost always use the first definition.

Meaning 1

Not legally or officially acceptable.

Adjective. Stress on the second syllable (in-VAL-id). Used for tickets or arguments.

"Your password is incorrect, so the login is invalid."

"The contract was declared invalid by the judge."

Meaning 2

A person made weak or disabled by illness or injury.

Noun. Stress on the first syllable (IN-val-id). Note that this term is becoming dated and sometimes seen as insensitive.

"He spent many years as an invalid after the accident."

"She cared for her elderly mother who was an invalid."

Related: void; null; patient; expired



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Take it with a grain of salt

In British English, people often say 'a pinch of salt' instead of 'a grain'.

Meaning 1

To not completely believe something that you are told, because it might be exaggerated.

This is difficult because 'salt' doesn't seem related to 'truth'. Think of it as adding flavor to a story that might not be 100% accurate.

"I read that rumor online, but I take everything on that site with a grain of salt."

"He tends to exaggerate, so take his stories with a grain of salt."

Related: skeptical; doubtful; distrust; exaggeration



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/take-it-with-a-grain-of-salt

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Bop

Commonly used in the context of pop, hip-hop, or dance music.

Meaning 1

A really good song with a catchy beat that makes you want to dance.

ESL learners might know 'bop' as a verb meaning to hit lightly. As slang, it is a noun used to describe high-quality music.

"Turn up the radio! This new song is a total bop."

"I haven't heard the full album yet, but the lead single is a bop."

Related: Jam; Banger; Tune



Read the full lesson

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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9**Scan**

Because 'scan' is a contronym (a word that is its own opposite), you must look at the context to understand the speed and depth of the action. If someone says 'scan this for errors,' they mean look closely. If they say 'scan this for the gist,' they mean look quickly.

Meaning 1

To look through or read something very quickly to find a specific piece of information.

ESL learners often use this to mean 'skimming.' It is confusing because it implies a lack of attention to detail, focusing only on keywords or highlights.

"I scanned the newspaper headlines while eating breakfast."

"Can you scan the document for the date of the meeting?"

Meaning 2

To examine something very closely and carefully, often in great detail.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. In technical, medical, or scientific contexts, 'scanning' means a deep, thorough analysis where no detail is missed.

"The doctor will scan the X-ray to look for any tiny fractures."

"The radar scanned the horizon for any signs of the missing ship."

Meaning 3

To convert a physical document into a digital image using an electronic device.

This is a modern technical meaning. It can be confusing because it describes the action of a machine 'reading' a page, which relates to both the quick and thorough definitions.

"Please scan these receipts and email them to the accounting department."

"I need to scan my ID card to enter the building."

Related: skim; scrutinize; browse; examine; digitize



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/scan

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

Be careful using this phrase, as there is a common opposing proverb: 'Out of sight, out of mind.' While 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' suggests distance increases love, 'out of sight, out of mind' suggests distance causes people to forget each other. ESL learners should use this phrase specifically when discussing romantic or deep familial bonds.

Meaning 1

The idea that being away from someone you love makes you love them even more.

ESL learners may find this confusing because the word 'grow' usually refers to physical size, but here it refers to the intensity of an emotion. Additionally, the word 'fonder' is the comparative form of 'fond,' a word not commonly used in everyday casual conversation compared to 'like' or 'love.'

"I haven't seen my girlfriend in three months, but absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Being away at college made me realize how much I miss my family"

Meaning 2

A proverb used to comfort someone who is separated from a loved one.

This is often used as a 'cliché' or a set phrase to provide emotional support. Learners might take the phrase too literally and wonder if the heart physically changes, or they might struggle with the grammatical structure where 'absence' is the subject performing an action on the 'heart'.

"Don't be sad about your business trip"

"remember that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Related: long-distance; homesick; fondness; separation; proverb



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/absence-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Novel**

You may hear 'Novel Coronavirus'; this uses definition 2 because it was a 'new' type of virus.

Meaning 1

New, original, or unusual.

Used as an adjective to describe an idea or method that hasn't been tried before.

"The scientist proposed a novel way to solve the energy crisis."

"They came up with a novel solution to the traffic problem."

Meaning 2

A long fiction book telling a story.

In many languages, 'roman' is used. Learners often say 'a history' or 'a book' when they mean a novel.

"To Kill a Mockingbird is my favorite novel."

"She is writing a historical novel set in Japan."

Related: fiction; unique; innovative; story



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

On the streets

This is often used in news reports or social discussions.

Meaning 1

A way to describe a person who does not have a home (homeless).

Learners might think the person is just standing outside. It implies a permanent state of lacking housing.

"After the factory closed, many people ended up on the streets."

"The charity provides hot meals for those living on the streets."

Related: unhoused; displaced



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Pick up

This is a 'separable' phrasal verb. You can say 'pick up the clothes' or 'pick the clothes up.' However, if you use a pronoun, it must go in the middle: 'pick them up' (NOT 'pick up them').

Meaning 1

To collect or fetch someone or something from a specific place.

This is a very common figurative use where you go to a location to get someone (like a child from school) or something (like dry cleaning).

"I need to pick up my kids from school at 3:00 PM."

"Can you pick up some milk on your way home?"

Meaning 2

To lift something or someone from a surface (like the floor or a table).

This is the literal meaning used in the user's sentence. It is a phrasal verb, which can be confusing for ESL learners because the meaning changes when 'up' is added to 'pick'.

"Please pick up your toys from the floor."

"She picked up the book and started reading."

Meaning 3

To learn something quickly without formal teaching.

This is confusing because it sounds like physically picking something up.

"She picked up Spanish really fast after moving to Spain."

Related: lift; collect; retrieve; tidy up; drop off



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