

Tricky Words of the Day

Friday, May 8, 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 7

Peak / Peek

Visual support works well for this pair.

Meaning 1

Peak: the pointed top of a mountain or the highest level of something.

Same sound, but one word describes a high point and the other describes a quick look.

"Snow covered the peak of the mountain."

"His energy reached its peak at noon."

Meaning 2

Peek: to look quickly or secretly at something.

Learners may confuse this with 'peak', so showing both with pictures helps.

"The child took a peek inside the box."

"Do not peek at the test answers."



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/peak-peek

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 7

Polish

The most important thing to remember is that the capital 'P' usually signals the long 'o' sound (/o/) referring to the country. If it starts a sentence, you must look at the context to know which pronunciation to use. It is one of the few words in English where capitalization changes the pronunciation.

Meaning 1

Relating to the country of Poland, its people, or its language.

This version is a proper adjective and must always be capitalized. It uses a long 'o' sound (like 'pole'), which is counterintuitive to many learners because of the double consonant rule often seen in English.

"My neighbor is Polish and grew up in Warsaw."

"I love eating traditional Polish pierogi."

Meaning 2

To rub the surface of something to make it smooth and shiny.

This version is a verb or a noun and is not capitalized. It uses a short 'o' sound (like 'pot'). ESL learners often struggle because the spelling is identical to the nationality, but the vowel sound changes completely.

"You need to polish your shoes before the wedding."

"She used a soft cloth to give the silver a bright polish."

Meaning 3

To improve or refine a skill or a piece of work.

This is a figurative use of the verb. It means to 'clean up' or 'perfect' something like a speech or a presentation. It uses the same short 'o' pronunciation as the physical cleaning definition.

"I need to polish my presentation before the meeting tomorrow."

"The author spent months polishing the final chapters of the book."

Related: Poland; Shine; Buff; Refine; Gloss



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 7

Cut to the chase

Can be slightly rude if said to a superior; use 'get down to business' for a more formal tone.

Meaning 1

To stop talking about unimportant details and get to the main point.

Originates from old movies where the 'chase scene' was the most exciting part. Use this when you want someone to be direct.

"Stop telling me about the traffic and cut to the chase: why are you late?"

"I'll cut to the chase-we need to reduce our budget by 20%."

Related: summarize; be direct; get to the point



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/cut-to-the-chase

Contronym · Lesson 4 of 7**Presently**

This is a classic 'contronym' (a word that is its own opposite). In British English, 'presently' almost always means 'soon.' In American English, it is more commonly used to mean 'currently.' To avoid confusion, ESL learners should use 'currently' for the present and 'soon' for the future.

Meaning 1

In a short time; soon; shortly.

ESL learners often assume that because the word contains 'present,' it must mean 'right now.' However, in this context, it actually refers to the near future, which can cause confusion regarding timing.

"The doctor will be with you presently."

"I will finish this report presently."

Meaning 2

At the present time; now; currently.

This meaning is the opposite of the first. Instead of meaning 'soon,' it means 'right this second.' This creates a 'contronym' where the word can mean both 'now' and 'not yet.'

"She is presently working as a consultant."

"Presently, there are no vacancies at the hotel."

Related: currently; soon; shortly; now; anon



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/presently

Figure of Speech · Lesson 5 of 7

Every rose has its thorn

This phrase is very similar to the idiom 'take the bitter with the sweet.' It is also famous in pop culture as the title of a popular 1980s rock ballad by the band Poison, which helped cement the phrase in modern English conversation.

Meaning 1

An acknowledgment that no person or situation is perfect, often used to provide comfort during a disappointment.

Learners might struggle with the tone of this phrase. It is often used as a philosophical way to accept a bad situation rather than complaining about it, which can be culturally specific.

"She is a wonderful partner, but she is very messy at home. Well, every rose has its thorn."

"The city is exciting and full of culture, but the cost of living is very high"

Meaning 2

A proverb meaning that every good or beautiful thing also has a negative side, a flaw, or a hidden difficulty.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the speaker is discussing gardening. The confusion lies in the metaphorical use of 'rose' to represent something positive (like a job or relationship) and 'thorn' to represent a drawback or pain.

"I love my new high-paying job, but the long commute is exhausting"

"I guess every rose has its thorn."

Related: double-edged sword; pros and cons; no pain, no gain; cloud with a silver lining; bittersweet



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/every-rose-has-its-thorn

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 7**Duck**

Common phrase: 'Duck out' means to leave a place quickly or secretly.

Meaning 1

A common water bird with short legs and webbed feet.

Basic animal vocabulary. Used for both the animal and the meat.

"We fed the ducks at the park."

"I ordered roasted duck for dinner."

Meaning 2

To lower your head or body quickly to avoid being hit or seen.

A verb of movement. Very common in sports or when entering a room with a low ceiling.

"Duck! The ball is coming right at your head!"

"I had to duck to get through the small doorway."

Meaning 3

To avoid a responsibility or a question.

Metaphorical use. Usually used when someone is being dishonest or lazy.

"The politician tried to duck the reporter's difficult questions."

"You can't duck your duties forever."

Related: bird; dodge; crouch; evade



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 7

Passed over

This is specifically related to career or status rejection.

Meaning 1

To be ignored or bypassed for a promotion or an award that you expected to get.

The word 'passed' usually means 'succeeded' in exams, but here it means the opportunity skipped over you and went to someone else.

"She was disappointed when she was passed over for the manager position."

"He felt he was passed over for promotion because of his age."

Related: overlooked; skipped



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