

# Tricky Words of the Day

Monday, May 11, 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

### Buy / By / Bye

Learners often accidentally use 'by' when they mean 'purchase' (buy).

#### Meaning 1

To get something by paying money for it.

Think of the 'u' in 'buy' as standing for 'using' money.

"I want to buy a new laptop."

"Where did you buy those shoes?"

#### Meaning 2

Used to show who did something, or a position near something.

This is a preposition. It is a very short word used for location or authorship.

"The book was written by a famous author."

"She sat by the window to see the garden."

#### Meaning 3

A shortened version of 'goodbye' used when leaving.

This is for social interactions. It has an 'e' at the end like the word 'leave'.

"Bye! See you tomorrow."

"He waved bye to his friends as the bus left."

Related: purchase; near; farewell



**Read the full lesson**

[eslwordwiz.com/words/buy-by-bye](https://eslwordwiz.com/words/buy-by-bye)

## Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

**Convict**

This is a classic 'noun-verb' stress pair. For the noun (the person), emphasize the start of the word. For the verb (the action), emphasize the end. Also, note that 'convict' as a noun is often considered a harsh or stigmatizing term; 'inmate' or 'prisoner' are more common in modern professional contexts.

**Meaning 1**

To officially declare someone guilty of a crime in a court of law.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (con-VICT). This shift in word stress is a common feature of English homographs that can lead to pronunciation errors and listening comprehension issues.

"The jury had enough evidence to convict the defendant of fraud."

"It is difficult to convict someone without physical evidence or witnesses."

**Meaning 2**

A person who has been found guilty of a crime and is serving a sentence in prison.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (CON-vict). ESL learners often struggle with this because the word changes its sound depending on whether it is a person or an action.

"The escaped convict was caught by the police two days later."

"He spent most of his life as a convict in a high-security facility."

Related: conviction; prisoner; sentence; verdict; inmate



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## Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

**Break the bank**

Commonly used in the negative (e.g., 'It won't break the bank') to mean something is affordable.

**Meaning 1**

To cost too much money; to be very expensive.

Learners might take this literally and think of a robbery. It simply means a purchase is more than one can afford.

"We can go out to dinner, as long as it doesn't break the bank."

"Buying a new car right now would definitely break the bank."

Related: expensive; pricey; costly; fortune



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**Slang · Lesson 4 of 9****Sleep on**

Usually used for movies, music, or hidden gems in a city.

**Meaning 1**

To ignore, fail to notice, or fail to appreciate the value of someone or something.

This is a phrasal verb. Learners might think it means literally sleeping on a bed. It means missing out on something good.

"Don't sleep on that new restaurant"

"their tacos are incredible."

Related: Underestimate; Overlook; Ignore



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**Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9****Variety**

The confusion lies in the scale of the word. If you say 'I want variety,' you want many different things. If you say 'I want this variety,' you are pointing to one specific thing. Context clues like 'a' vs 'this' or 'wide' vs 'specific' are essential for understanding which meaning is intended.

**Meaning 1**

A collection of many different things; diversity.

In this context, 'variety' implies a wide range of options or a lack of uniformity. ESL learners often learn this as the primary definition, meaning 'many types'.

"The buffet offers a wide variety of international dishes."

"I like this shop because they have a great variety of shoes."

**Meaning 2**

A specific, single type or sub-category of something.

This is the 'contronym' aspect. While the first definition means 'many different things,' this definition refers to one specific, distinct kind. This is confusing because the word can represent both the 'whole group' and a 'single specific type'.

"This specific variety of tomato is very resistant to cold weather."

"The store only carries one variety of organic honey."

**Meaning 3**

A type of entertainment consisting of several different short acts (like music, magic, and comedy).

ESL learners may be confused when 'variety' is used as an adjective to describe a show or performance, as it refers to the format of the program rather than the quality of the acts.

"We watched an old-fashioned variety show on television last night."

"The talent show was a variety performance featuring singers and jugglers."

Related: diversity; type; kind; assortment; strain; breed



**Read the full lesson**

[eslwordwiz.com/words/variety](https://eslwordwiz.com/words/variety)

## Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

**Like two ships passing in the night**

This phrase originates from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It is almost always used to express a sense of missed connection or a lack of quality time. It is a 'simile' because it uses the word 'like' to compare people to ships.

**Meaning 1**

A brief, chance encounter between two people who are unlikely to meet again.

This version focuses on the 'fleeting' nature of a meeting. Learners might be confused because the phrase can describe people who know each other well (like a married couple) or complete strangers.

"I met a fascinating traveler at the airport, but we were just two ships passing in the night."

"We had a great conversation on the train, but like two ships passing in the night, I never even got her name."

**Meaning 2**

Two people who meet briefly or live in the same house but rarely see each other because they are busy at different times.

ESL learners may take this literally and look for actual boats. The confusion lies in the metaphor: the 'night' represents a busy or chaotic life, and the 'ships' are people who are close in proximity but never actually interact.

"My roommate works the night shift and I work mornings, so we are like two ships passing in the night."

"With our busy travel schedules, my husband and I have been like two ships passing in the night lately."

Related: fleeting; transient; missed connection; brief encounter; ships in the night



**Read the full lesson**

[eslwordwiz.com/words/like-two-ships-passing-in-the-night](https://eslwordwiz.com/words/like-two-ships-passing-in-the-night)

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

When ordering food, 'rare' refers to temperature/doneness, not how common the meat is.

**Meaning 1**

Not occurring very often; very unusual or special.

Relates to frequency. Common for hobbies like collecting stamps or coins.

"It is very rare to see snow in this part of the country."

"He found a rare coin in his grandfather's collection."

**Meaning 2**

(Of meat) cooked for only a short time so that the inside is still red.

Used specifically in cooking sounds. The opposite is 'well-done'.

"I would like my steak rare, please."

"The meat was too rare for me to eat."

Related: unusual; scarce; undercooked; raw



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## Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

**To see a man about a dog**

Mostly used by older generations or in a lighthearted, secretive way.

**Meaning 1**

A way of saying you are leaving but do not want to say where you are going (often used for going to the bathroom or buying a drink).

This is an idiom-based euphemism. There is no actual dog involved; it is a humorous way to maintain privacy.

"Excuse me for a moment, I have to go see a man about a dog."

"Where is John? Oh, he just said he had to see a man about a dog."

Related: stepping out; taking a break



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## Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

**Make up**

Separable in some meanings.

**Meaning 1**

To invent a story or excuse.

Common literal meaning is apply makeup.

"She made up an excuse for being late."

**Meaning 2**

To reconcile after an argument.

Used about repairing relationships.

"They made up after the fight."

Related: invent; reconcile



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