

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, May 12, 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

Allowed / Aloud

Despite the different spellings, the pronunciation is exactly the same.

Meaning 1

Having permission to do something.

Contains the word 'allow'. If you are allowed, you have the green light.

"Smoking is not allowed in this building."

"Are we allowed to use calculators during the test?"

Meaning 2

In a voice that other people can hear; not silently.

Contains the word 'loud'. If you read aloud, you use your loud voice.

"Please read the paragraph aloud to the class."

"He laughed aloud when he heard the joke."

Related: permitted; vocal; permission



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Defect

To remember the difference, keep in mind that the noun (a thing) usually starts with the emphasis (DEE-fect), while the verb (an action) pushes the emphasis to the end (de-FECT). This is a common pattern in English homographs like 'record' or 'present'.

Meaning 1

To abandon one's country or cause in favor of an opposing one.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (de-FECT). This meaning is entirely different from a physical flaw, often used in political or military contexts, which can be confusing because the spelling remains identical.

"The spy decided to defect to the West during the Cold War."

"Several players chose to defect from the team to join their rivals."

Meaning 2

A shortcoming, imperfection, or lack that causes something to be inadequate or faulty.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (DEE-fect). ESL learners often struggle with the shift in stress and may use the verb pronunciation when referring to a physical flaw in a product.

"The company recalled the cars due to a manufacturing defect in the brakes."

"The diamond was cheaper because of a tiny internal defect."

Related: flaw; imperfection; desert; betray; fault



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

A walk in the park

Similar in meaning to 'piece of cake', but more focused on the lack of effort required.

Meaning 1

Something that is very easy to do.

The idiom compares a task to a relaxing stroll. It is the opposite of a 'struggle' or 'challenge'.

"After all that training, the marathon was a walk in the park."

"The math exam was a walk in the park"

Related: easy; simple; effortless; breeze



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Understood the assignment

Often used as a high compliment for someone's effort and style.

Meaning 1

To do something perfectly or to exceed expectations in a specific situation.

This does not usually refer to schoolwork. It refers to someone's fashion choice, performance, or behavior in a certain context.

"The theme of the party was 80s disco, and Sarah definitely understood the assignment."

"The actor really understood the assignment with that villainous performance."

Related: Nailed it; On point; Perfect



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Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9**Shop**

As a contranym, 'shop' is tricky because it can mean to 'acquire' (goods) or to 'give up' (a person to the police). Additionally, the phrase 'talk shop' is a common idiom meaning to talk about work during one's leisure time, which can further confuse learners.

Meaning 1

To visit a store to look at or purchase goods.

This is the most common usage. ESL learners often struggle with whether 'shop' is a verb (to shop) or a noun (a shop), and how it differs from 'buy'.

"I need to shop for some new clothes this weekend."

"She likes to shop at the local farmers' market."

Meaning 2

To inform on someone or betray them to the authorities.

This is the 'contranym' aspect. While the first meaning involves supporting a business, this meaning involves getting someone in trouble (often used in British English). It is confusing because the context changes from a positive/neutral commercial activity to a negative/betrayal action.

"He decided to shop his accomplices to the police to get a lighter sentence."

"She was afraid her neighbors would shop her for breaking the noise ordinance."

Meaning 3

A place where things are manufactured or repaired (a workshop).

Learners may confuse a 'shop' (a retail store) with a 'shop' (a factory or repair garage). In many dialects, 'the shop' refers specifically to a mechanic's garage rather than a place to buy groceries.

"My car is currently in the shop getting the brakes fixed."

"He spends all his free time in his wood shop building furniture."

Related: store; betray; informant; workshop; retail; snitch



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/shop

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Move mountains**

This is a hyperbolic expression. It is almost always used in a positive sense to praise someone's dedication. It is similar to the idiom 'leave no stone unturned,' but 'move mountains' implies a much larger, more difficult scale of obstacles.

Meaning 1

To go to extreme lengths or make an enormous effort to achieve something that seems impossible.

ESL learners may take this literally and imagine physical labor involving earth and rock. The confusion lies in the hyperbole; it describes human determination and effort, not physical geography.

"A mother will move mountains to ensure her children are safe and happy."

"The legal team moved mountains to get the innocent man released from prison before the weekend."

Meaning 2

To have such strong faith or conviction that one can accomplish miraculous or incredible feats.

This usage often appears in literature or religious contexts. Learners might be confused by the shift from 'hard work' to 'spiritual power' or 'belief' as the source of the action.

"They say that faith can move mountains, even when the situation looks hopeless."

"With enough confidence in your vision, you can move mountains in the business world."

Related: go the extra mile; pull out all the stops; miracle worker; overcome; hyperbole



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eslwordwiz.com/words/move-mountains

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

In British English, the past tense can be 'spelt', while American English uses 'spelled'.

Meaning 1

To say or write the letters of a word in the correct order.

The most common academic usage for students.

"How do you spell your last name?"

"I always spell 'definitely' incorrectly."

Meaning 2

A spoken word or form of words believed to have magic power.

Common in fantasy stories like Harry Potter.

"The witch cast a spell on the prince."

"He used a magic spell to open the door."

Meaning 3

A short period of time.

Often used regarding weather ('a dry spell') or work.

"We are having a cold spell this week."

"She had a dizzy spell and had to sit down."

Related: alphabet; magic; period; incantation



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9**To have a few too many**

This is very common at social events and is considered less judgmental.

Meaning 1

To be drunk.

Instead of accusing someone of being 'intoxicated' or 'drunk', which can be harsh, this focuses on the number of drinks consumed.

"I think he's had a few too many"

"he shouldn't drive home."

Related: inebriated; wasted; tipsy



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Hold on

Inseparable in waiting sense.

Meaning 1

To wait (often on the phone).

Often used on phone.

"Hold on a second, I'll check."

Meaning 2

To grip tightly.

Literal physical meaning.

"Hold on tight during the rollercoaster."

Related: wait; grip



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