

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, May 13, 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

Weather / Whether

If you are talking about rain, use 'weather'. If you are talking about an 'if' choice, use 'whether'.

Meaning 1

The conditions outside, such as sun, rain, or snow.

Think of the 'ea' in 'weather' being like the 'ea' in 'earth'.

"The weather is beautiful today."

"I hope the weather stays dry for the picnic."

Meaning 2

Used to express a choice or doubt between two possibilities.

This is a conjunction. It often goes with 'or'.

"I don't know whether I should go or stay."

"Tell me whether you liked the movie."

Related: climate; if; options



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/weather-whether

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Delegate

The key to distinguishing these is the vowel sound in the final syllable. Use the short 'it' sound for the person (noun) and the long 'ate' sound for the action (verb). This is a common pattern in English for words ending in '-ate' like 'estimate' or 'associate'.

Meaning 1

To entrust a task or responsibility to another person, typically one who is less senior.

In this verb form, the ending is pronounced with a long 'a' sound (/et/). The shift in vowel sound based on the part of speech is a common source of confusion.

"A good manager knows how to delegate tasks to their team."

"You should delegate the data entry to the assistant so you can focus on the report."

Meaning 2

A person chosen or elected to represent a group at a meeting or conference.

In this noun form, the ending is pronounced with a short 'it' sound (/t/). ESL learners often struggle because the spelling suggests a long 'a' sound.

"Each state sent a delegate to the national convention."

"The delegates voted unanimously on the new policy."

Related: representative; assign; deputize; delegation; envoy



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

On the ball

Very common in professional and academic settings to describe a person's competence.

Meaning 1

Being alert, quick to understand things, and doing a good job.

This comes from sports culture. If you are 'on the ball,' you are focused and ready for action.

"The new assistant is really on the ball"

"she caught the mistake immediately."

Related: alert; focused; efficient; sharp



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Era

Popularized by Taylor Swift's 'Eras Tour'.

Meaning 1

A current phase of someone's life characterized by a specific interest or behavior.

Traditionally, an 'era' is a long period in history (like the Victorian era). Now, it refers to a short personal phase (like a 'cooking' era).

"I'm in my 'health and fitness' era right now, so I'm going to the gym daily."

"He's in his 'villain era', which means he's finally setting boundaries with people."

Related: Phase; Chapter; Mood



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9**Go**

The word 'go' is a contronym because it can mean both to function (The car is on the go) and to fail (The car's transmission is about to go). ESL learners should look for context clues: if 'go' is used with a body part or a mechanical part, it often means that part is failing.

Meaning 1

To move forward, start, or function.

This is the standard meaning taught to beginners. It implies movement away from a point or the initiation of an action (like a green light).

"The green light means you can go."

"I need to go to the store now."

Meaning 2

To stop working, fail, or disappear.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. In this context, 'go' means something has reached its end or broken down, which is highly confusing because the same word usually means 'start'.

"My hearing is starting to go."

"The old bridge finally let go during the storm."

Meaning 3

To be released or sounded (specifically for alarms).

When an alarm 'goes off', it actually starts making noise, but the word 'off' usually implies stopping. This creates a double layer of confusion for learners regarding whether the device is starting or stopping.

"The fire alarm started to go off at midnight."

"I heard the whistle go to signal the end of the game."

Related: proceed; depart; fail; expire; break down



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eslwordwiz.com/words/go

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Separate the wheat from the chaff**

This expression originates from the Bible and ancient farming practices. 'Wheat' represents the valuable part of the plant, while 'chaff' is the dry, protective casing that is useless as food. In modern English, 'chaff' is almost never used outside of this specific idiom, which makes it particularly difficult for non-native speakers to guess the meaning from context.

Meaning 1

To sort through a large amount of information to find the important facts.

In a digital context, this refers to data filtering. Learners might be confused because the phrase sounds formal or biblical, yet it is frequently used in modern business and technology environments to describe data processing.

"In the age of fake news, it is difficult for readers to separate the wheat from the chaff."

"Our new software helps investors separate the wheat from the chaff by highlighting only the most profitable stocks."

Meaning 2

To distinguish between what is useful or valuable and what is worthless or of low quality.

ESL learners may struggle because the phrase uses agricultural terminology (wheat and chaff) that is rarely used in modern daily conversation. Without knowing that 'chaff' is the husk of the grain that must be discarded, the metaphor for 'good vs. bad' is lost.

"With over 500 applications for the job, the HR manager had to separate the wheat from the chaff to find the top candidates."

"The first round of the competition is designed to separate the wheat from the chaff."

Related: filter; sift; winnow; sort out; separate the sheep from the goats



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/separate-the-wheat-from-the-chaff

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Run**

One of the most complex words in English with over 600 meanings. Focus on these three first.

Meaning 1

To move quickly on foot, faster than walking.

The most basic physical action. Most learners learn this first.

"I run in the park every morning."

"She had to run to catch the bus."

Meaning 2

To manage or be in charge of a business or organization.

Confusing because there is no physical movement involved. It means 'to operate'.

"My aunt runs a successful restaurant."

"Who is running the meeting today?"

Meaning 3

To function or operate (for machines, programs, or water).

Used for technology or liquids. If a computer 'runs' a program, it is working.

"Leave the water running to warm it up."

"Does this app run on older phones?"

Related: sprint; manage; operate; function



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9**In the family way**

Though slightly dated, it is still understood and used in literature or formal settings.

Meaning 1

Being pregnant.

This is an old-fashioned, polite way to refer to pregnancy without being clinical. It emphasizes the 'family' aspect.

"I heard that Mrs. Higgins is in the family way again."

"She decided to quit her job now that she's in the family way."

Related: pregnant; with child; expecting



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Hold back

Separable.

Meaning 1

To stop oneself from doing or showing something.

Emotional control.

"She couldn't hold back her tears."

"He held back his anger."

Meaning 2

To keep something secret or prevent progress.

Restrain.

"The company is holding back information."

Related: restrain; withhold



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