

Tricky Words of the Day

Thursday, May 14, 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 8

Morning / Mourning

Be careful when writing; using 'morning' when you mean 'mourning' can seem insensitive.

Meaning 1

The early part of the day, from sunrise until noon.

A daily time period. Does not have a 'u'.

"I like to drink coffee in the morning."

"The sun rises every morning."

Meaning 2

Feeling or showing deep sadness after someone has died.

Contains the letter 'u', which some people remember as 'unhappy'.

"The nation was in mourning after the leader died."

"She was mourning the loss of her pet."

Related: AM; grief; sorrow



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/morning-mourning

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 8

Deliberate

The most important thing for ESL learners is the vowel shift in the final syllable. If it is a describing word (adjective), use the short 'it' sound. If it is an action (verb), use the long 'ate' sound. This is a common pattern in English homographs like 'separate' or 'alternate'.

Meaning 1

To think about or discuss something very carefully before making a decision.

As a verb, the pronunciation shifts to a long 'ate' sound (like 'celebrate'). Learners may not realize that the same spelling can function as an action, often used in legal or formal contexts like a jury.

"The jury will now retire to deliberate on the verdict."

"The committee needs time to deliberate before choosing a winner."

Meaning 2

Done on purpose; intentional and planned.

As an adjective, the word ends in a soft 'it' sound. ESL learners often confuse it with 'accidental' or struggle with the subtle difference between 'intentional' and 'deliberate' (which implies a slower, more careful choice).

"It was a deliberate lie to protect his friend."

"The architect made a deliberate choice to use recycled materials."

Meaning 3

Slow and careful in movement or action.

This is a secondary adjective usage. It describes the pace of an action rather than just the intent. Learners might mistake 'slow' for 'lazy,' but 'deliberate' implies a controlled, purposeful slowness.

"He walked with deliberate steps toward the podium."

"She spoke in a deliberate manner to ensure everyone understood."

Related: intentional; ponder; calculated; meditate; willful



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/deliberate

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 8

Cold shoulder

Used when someone is hurt or angry and expresses it through silence.

Meaning 1

To intentionally ignore someone or treat them in an unfriendly way.

Usually used as 'give someone the cold shoulder'. It implies a social rejection or snubbing.

"I tried to talk to her at the party, but she gave me the cold shoulder."

"He's been giving me the cold shoulder ever since our argument."

Related: ignore; snub; shun; dismiss



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 8

Cook / Cooking

Originates from internet gaming and sports culture.

Meaning 1

To let someone do what they are good at, or to be in the process of creating something impressive.

It rarely refers to food. If someone says 'Let him cook,' they mean 'Don't interrupt him, he's doing something great.'

"Hold on, don't stop him yet, let him cook."

"The director is cooking with this new movie trailer"

Related: In the zone; On a roll; Working



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eslwordwiz.com/words/cook-cooking

Figure of Speech · Lesson 5 of 8**Sink or swim**

This phrase is often used as an adjective (a sink-or-swim approach) or a verb phrase. It is closely related to the concept of 'throwing someone into the deep end.' It emphasizes self-reliance and the harsh reality of a challenge.

Meaning 1

A situation where you must either succeed through your own efforts or fail completely, with no help from others.

ESL learners may take this literally and think it refers to water safety or swimming lessons. In a professional or academic context, it describes a high-pressure environment where a person is given a task without training or support.

"The new manager didn't give me any training"

"it was a sink or swim situation."

Meaning 2

To be left to one's own devices to see if they are capable of surviving a challenge.

This is confusing because 'sink' and 'swim' are opposites. Learners might not realize that the phrase implies there is no middle ground or 'safety net'-you either reach the goal or you 'drown' (fail).

"We've given him all the tools he needs, now it's time to let him sink or swim."

"The university environment is sink or swim compared to high school."

Related: do or die; make or break; thrown into the deep end; survival of the fittest



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/sink-or-swim

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 8**Set**

As a verb, 'set' does not change in the past tense (set-set-set).

Meaning 1

To put or place something in a specific position.

Similar to 'put', but often implies careful placement or preparation.

"Please set the vase on the table."

"He set the alarm for 6:00 AM."

Meaning 2

A collection of related items that belong together.

A noun meaning a group. Learners often confuse this with the verb form.

"I bought a new set of tools."

"She has the complete set of Harry Potter books."

Meaning 3

To go down below the horizon (specifically for the sun).

The opposite of 'rise'. It is only used for the sun and moon in this context.

"We watched the sun set over the ocean."

"It gets cold quickly after the sun sets."

Related: place; group; collection; decline



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/set

Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 8

Visually impaired

Often used in medical, legal, or formal social contexts.

Meaning 1

Being blind or having very poor eyesight.

This is the most respectful and 'politically correct' way to describe someone's disability without using the blunt word 'blind'.

"The museum provides special audio tours for visually impaired visitors."

"He uses a cane because he is visually impaired."

Related: sight-challenged; blind



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eslwordwiz.com/words/visually-impaired

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 8 of 8

Figure out

Separable: figure something out. Extremely common in problem-solving contexts.

Meaning 1

To understand or solve something after thinking carefully.

Learners may confuse this with literally drawing a figure. It means to work out a solution or meaning.

"I can't figure out how to use this new app."

"She finally figured out the answer to the puzzle."

Related: work out; solve; understand



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