

Tricky Words of the Day

Friday, May 15, 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

Compliment / Complement

These are very commonly confused by native speakers as well.

Meaning 1

compliment (with an 'i'): a polite expression of praise or admiration

ESL learners often confuse the spelling because both words sound identical. This version is used when you say something nice to someone, like 'I like your shoes.'

"She gave him a nice compliment on his presentation."

"I take it as a compliment that you want to work with me."

Meaning 2

complement (with an 'e'): something that completes or brings to perfection

This is confusing because it sounds exactly like the word for praise, but it is a mathematical and design term meaning 'to go well with' or 'to complete a set.'

"The red wine was a perfect complement to the steak dinner."

"Her scarf complements her outfit perfectly."

Meaning 3

complimentary vs. complementary

The adjective forms add more confusion: 'complimentary' can mean 'free of charge' (like a hotel breakfast) OR 'praising,' while 'complementary' refers to things that work well together.

"The hotel offers a complimentary breakfast."

"They have complementary skills"

Related: praise; match; balance



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/compliment-complement

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Discharge

The word changes stress depending on its use. As a noun (the substance or the act of leaving), the stress is often on the first syllable (DIS-charge). As a verb (the action of releasing), the stress is usually on the second syllable (dis-CHARGE).

Meaning 1

To officially allow someone to leave a place, such as a hospital or the military.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it sounds like a negative action (like being fired), but in a hospital context, it is usually a positive sign of recovery.

"The patient was healthy enough for the doctor to discharge him from the hospital."

"He received an honorable discharge after serving four years in the army."

Meaning 2

To release or emit a substance, such as liquid, gas, or waste.

This is confusing because it shifts from a social/legal action to a physical/scientific process, often used in medical or environmental contexts.

"The factory was fined for discharging toxic chemicals into the river."

"The wound had a clear discharge, which the nurse said was a sign of healing."

Meaning 3

To perform a duty, pay a debt, or fire a weapon.

This meaning is highly formal and varies wildly; discharging a debt means paying it, while discharging a gun means shooting it.

"She worked hard to discharge all her financial obligations."

"The police officer accidentally discharged his firearm during the training exercise."

Related: release; emit; dismiss; excrete; fulfill



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Ring a bell

Often used in questions to see if someone remembers something.

Meaning 1

To sound familiar, even if you can't remember the details.

Learners often expect an actual bell sound. Usually used when you recognize a name or place but don't know why.

"The name rings a bell, but I can't remember where I met him."

"Does that address ring a bell for you?"

Related: familiar; recognize; recollect; remind



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Ghost / Ghosted

Being ghosted is considered very rude. It is different from 'leaving someone on read' because 'ghosting' implies a permanent stop.

Meaning 1

To suddenly end all communication with someone without any explanation.

ESL learners often confuse this with the noun 'ghost'. In modern slang, it is used as a verb primarily in dating or professional contexts.

"We went on three dates, but then he just ghosted me."

"I thought the interview went well, but the recruiter ghosted me."

Related: seems; ignored; cold shoulder



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Fulsome

This word is a 'contronym' because it can mean both 'generous' (positive) and 'excessive/insincere' (negative). Because many native speakers now use it incorrectly to mean 'very full,' you must look at the context to determine if the speaker is being nice or being critical. To avoid confusion in your own writing, use 'comprehensive' for the positive meaning and 'sycophantic' for the negative meaning.

Meaning 1

Complimentary, abundant, or generous in amount.

ESL learners often assume this is a positive word because it contains 'full' and sounds like 'awesome.' In modern usage, it is frequently used to mean 'comprehensive' or 'lavish.'

"The actor gave a fulsome tribute to his mentor during the awards ceremony."

"The report provided a fulsome account of the company's achievements over the last decade."

Meaning 2

Excessive, flattering in an insincere way, or offensive to good taste.

This is the traditional and more formal definition. It suggests that something is 'too much' to the point of being disgusting or fake, which is the opposite of the positive 'abundant' meaning.

"The salesman's fulsome praise made the customer feel uncomfortable and suspicious."

"The critics mocked the book for its fulsome and over-the-top descriptions."

Related: effusive; lavish; cloying; comprehensive; insincere



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Slippery slope

This phrase is almost always used in a negative context to warn of danger or loss of control. It is very common in political debates, legal discussions, and parenting. To 'stop the slide' is a related concept often used alongside it.

Meaning 1

A situation where a relatively small first step or decision is thought to lead to a chain of related (and usually negative) events.

ESL learners may take this literally, imagining a physical hill covered in ice or oil. In a metaphorical sense, it describes a process that is difficult to stop once it has begun, often used to warn against a specific action.

"If we allow students to use their phones for five minutes, it's a slippery slope to them using them all through the lesson."

"Some argue that legalizing this minor drug is a slippery slope toward increased crime rates."

Meaning 2

A type of logical fallacy where someone argues that a small action will inevitably lead to an extreme and undesirable result without providing evidence.

In academic or debating contexts, this phrase is used to criticize someone's logic. Learners might be confused when they hear it used as a 'label' for a bad argument rather than just a description of a situation.

"The politician's argument was a classic slippery slope"

"he claimed that a small tax increase would lead to total economic collapse."

Related: thin end of the wedge; snowball effect; domino effect; point of no return; logical fallacy



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eslwordwiz.com/words/slippery-slope

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Rose**

Always check if 'rose' is being used as a noun (flower) or a verb (action).

Meaning 1

A type of flower that usually has thorns and a sweet smell.

One of the most famous flowers; learners usually know this as a noun color or plant.

"He gave her a single red rose."

"The garden is full of beautiful roses."

Meaning 2

The past tense of the verb 'rise' (to go up).

Confusing because it sounds exactly like the flower but describes movement upward.

"The sun rose at 6 AM today."

"The prices rose significantly last year."

Related: flower; increase; ascend; bloom



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Sanitation engineer

It is common in government job listings.

Meaning 1

A person who collects trash or cleans buildings (garbage man / janitor).

This is a professional-sounding title given to manual labor jobs to give the workers more dignity.

"The sanitation engineer picks up our recycling every Tuesday morning."

"He applied for a job as a sanitation engineer with the city."

Related: garbage man; custodian; waste collector



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Keep up with

Inseparable. Often used with 'with'.

Meaning 1

To stay at the same level or pace as someone or something.

Learners often confuse with literally keeping something up. It means matching speed or progress.

"It's hard to keep up with all the new technology."

"She walks so fast I can't keep up with her."

Related: stay on top of; match



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