

Tricky Words of the Day

Saturday, May 16, 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

Maize / Maze

In the US, 'corn maze' is a popular autumn activity, using both words conceptually.

Meaning 1

A network of paths and hedges designed as a puzzle to find one's way through.

Think of being 'a-maze-d' (amazed) when you get lost in one.

"The children got lost in the corn maze."

"The office building was a maze of hallways."

Meaning 2

A central American cereal plant; another word for corn.

This is a technical or British term for corn. It is rarely used in casual US conversation.

"Maize is a staple crop in many African countries."

"The fields were filled with tall maize."

Related: corn; puzzle; labyrinth



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/maize-maze

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Discourse

The primary confusion for ESL learners is the 'noun-verb stress shift' common in English homographs. Remember: DIS-course (noun) vs. dis-COURSE (verb). In modern internet slang, 'discourse' is also used informally to mean 'online arguments or drama,' which can be confusing when compared to its formal academic roots.

Meaning 1

Written or spoken communication or debate; a formal discussion on a topic.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable. It is confusing because it sounds more formal than 'conversation' and is often used in academic or political contexts to describe a general trend of ideas.

"The political discourse in the country has become very polarized."

"She is an expert in the discourse of linguistics."

Meaning 2

To speak or write authoritatively and at length about a subject.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable. ESL learners may find it difficult to distinguish this from the noun form in spoken English, and it is a much more formal way of saying 'to talk about something'.

"He would discourse for hours on the history of the Roman Empire."

"The professor began to discourse upon the importance of ethics."

Meaning 3

A formal and long piece of writing or a speech on a particular subject.

This meaning is often confused with 'essay' or 'speech'. It refers to the physical or structural output of the communication rather than the act of communicating itself.

"The philosopher published a famous discourse on human nature."

"His discourse on the economy was well-received by the committee."

Related: dialogue; rhetoric; treatise; colloquy; oration



Read the full lesson

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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Fishy

Used when you don't have proof of a lie but you have a strong feeling about it.

Meaning 1

Suspicious, dishonest, or strange.

Literal 'fishy' smell is bad; figuratively, a 'fishy' situation smells like trouble or a lie.

"His excuse for being late sounds a bit fishy to me."

"There is something fishy going on in that office."

Related: suspicious; shady; dubious; odd



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Touch grass

Often used as a mild insult or a reality check for people behaving 'too online.'

Meaning 1

A way to tell someone they are spending too much time online and need to reconnect with reality.

Learners might take this literally. It is actually a metaphorical way to say someone is acting irrationally or is too obsessed with internet drama.

"You've been arguing on Twitter for eight hours"

"go touch grass."

Related: get a life; reconnect; unplug



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Dollop

The confusion lies in the speaker's intent. If someone says 'just a dollop,' they usually mean a small amount. However, if they say 'a dollop of help' or 'a dollop of fortune,' they are often emphasizing a significant or impactful amount. It is almost exclusively used for semi-solid substances (cream, jam, mud) or abstract concepts (luck, wisdom).

Meaning 1

A small, shapeless mass or blob of something, usually soft food.

ESL learners often struggle with 'dollop' because it is an imprecise measurement. While it technically implies a small amount (like a spoonful), it is often used casually to mean 'a little bit.'

"Add a small dollop of whipped cream to the top of the pie."

"She put a dollop of mustard on the side of her plate."

Meaning 2

A large, generous, or excessive amount of something.

This word is a contronym because it can describe both a tiny speck and a huge heap. In casual conversation, someone might ask for a 'dollop' but actually expect a very large serving, leading to confusion about the intended quantity.

"The reporter served up a dollop of sarcasm in his opening remarks."

"He scooped a massive dollop of mashed potatoes onto his tray."

Related: glob; blob; mound; dash; smidgen



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Two wrongs don't make a right

This phrase is often used by parents or teachers to stop children from fighting. It is important to note that 'wrong' is used as a noun here (an immoral act), which can be confusing since 'wrong' is more commonly used as an adjective.

Meaning 1

A proverb meaning that if someone does something bad to you, you should not do something bad to them in return as a way of getting even.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it uses the word 'make' in a mathematical or logical sense (like $1+1=2$). Literally, it sounds like an equation, but it is actually a moral instruction about revenge and behavior.

"I know he stole your pen, but you shouldn't hide his notebook"

"two wrongs don't make a right."

Meaning 2

A philosophical argument used to discourage retaliatory actions or the justification of a bad deed by pointing to another bad deed.

The word 'right' here does not mean 'correct' in a factual sense or 'right' as in a direction; it means 'morally good' or 'justice.' Learners might struggle to identify which definition of 'right' is being used in this context.

"The politician tried to justify his lies by pointing out his opponent's lies, but the public reminded him that two wrongs don't make a right."

"Retaliation only continues the cycle of violence because two wrongs don't make a right."

Related: revenge; retaliation; eye for an eye; karma; forgiveness; moral



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/two-wrongs-don-t-make-a-right

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Ring**

Ring-Rang-Rung are the verb forms.

Meaning 1

To make a sound with a bell or to call someone on the phone.

Commonly used for telephones or doorbells.

"I'll ring you later tonight."

"The church bells ring every hour."

Meaning 2

A small circular piece of jewelry worn on a finger.

The noun for jewelry.

"She wears a beautiful diamond ring."

"He lost his wedding ring in the sand."

Meaning 3

An enclosed space for sports like boxing or a circus performance.

A specific location for competition.

"The boxers stepped into the ring."

"The circus performers were in the center ring."

Related: jewelry; call; circle; arena



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

To push up daisies

This can be seen as slightly dark humor, so it shouldn't be used at a funeral; it's better for lighthearted conversation about oneself or old history.

Meaning 1

To be dead and buried.

This is a colorful, humorous, and indirect way to talk about death. The image is of someone buried under the ground helping flowers grow.

"I'll be pushing up daisies by the time this building is finally finished!"

"He has been pushing up daisies for over twenty years now."

Related: six feet under; bought the farm; deceased



Read the full lesson

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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Put on

Separable. Multiple common meanings.

Meaning 1

To wear clothing or makeup.

Common literal meaning.

"Put on your coat-it's cold outside."

"She put on some lipstick before the party."

Meaning 2

To pretend or act in a certain way.

This meaning confuses learners.

"He always puts on a brave face."

Meaning 3

To organize or present (a show, event).

Theater context.

"The school is putting on a play next month."

Related: wear; pretend; stage



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