

Tricky Words of the Day

Sunday, May 17, 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

Coarse / Course

If you are talking about education or food, always use 'course'.

Meaning 1

Rough or loose in texture or grain.

Often used for sand, fabric, or even rude language.

"The beach had very coarse sand."

"He was criticized for his coarse jokes."

Meaning 2

An area of land for games (golf); a series of lessons; or a part of a meal.

This is the 'default' spelling for most meanings. Remember 'u' as in 'university course'.

"I am taking an English course."

"The main course was grilled salmon."

Related: rough; class; path



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/coarse-course

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Duplicate

The primary confusion lies in the 'Heteronym' nature of the word: the pronunciation of the suffix '-ate' changes based on the part of speech. Verbs usually use a full vowel /et/, while nouns and adjectives use a reduced schwa or short /t/.

Meaning 1

To make an exact copy of something (Verb)

As a verb, the word ends with a long 'a' sound (like 'gate'). ESL learners often struggle with the shift in vowel sound when the word functions as an action.

"Please duplicate this document for the meeting."

"It is difficult to duplicate the results of this experiment."

Meaning 2

An exact copy of something else (Noun)

As a noun, the ending is pronounced with a short, reduced vowel sound (like 'kit' or 'cut'). Learners may use the verb pronunciation by mistake when referring to the object itself.

"I have a duplicate of the house key in my bag."

"The museum kept the original and displayed a duplicate."

Meaning 3

Exactly like something else already existing (Adjective)

Like the noun form, the adjective uses the reduced 'it' sound at the end. It is confusing because it describes a state of being redundant or repeated, rather than the action of copying.

"We need to delete the duplicate entries in the database."

"He accidentally sent duplicate emails to the client."

Related: replica; clone; replicate; carbon copy; redundant



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

In the same boat

This is often used to show empathy or solidarity.

Meaning 1

In the same difficult or unpleasant situation as someone else.

If a boat sinks, everyone in it faces the same problem. It creates a sense of shared struggle.

"We're all in the same boat with these high gas prices."

"Don't worry, I haven't finished my homework either-we're in the same boat."

Related: together; alike; shared; equally



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Mid

While 'average' is neutral, calling something 'mid' is usually a slight insult.

Meaning 1

Something that is average, mediocre, or not as good as people say it is.

Short for 'middle' or 'mediocre.' It is often used to express disappointment in something that was highly hyped.

"Everyone said that movie was amazing, but I thought it was pretty mid."

"The new burger place is mid"

Related: basic; average; meh



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Discursive

This word is a 'contronym' because it can mean both 'moving aimlessly' (rambling) and 'moving logically' (step-by-step reasoning). ESL learners should look at the context: in a literature class, it is usually a criticism of bad structure; in a philosophy class, it is often a description of the human thought process.

Meaning 1

Relating to discourse or the exchange of ideas within a social or political context.

This meaning is common in social sciences (e.g., 'discursive practices'). It refers to how language and dialogue shape our understanding of reality, which can be confusing because it doesn't imply 'rambling' or 'logic' specifically, but rather 'communication'.

"The researchers analyzed the discursive strategies used by politicians to influence public opinion."

"The book examines the discursive framework of Victorian medicine."

Meaning 2

Digressing from subject to subject; rambling or disorganized.

In everyday academic or literary criticism, this is often used negatively to describe writing or speech that lacks focus and wanders away from the main point.

"The professor's discursive lecture style made it difficult for students to take structured notes."

"The novel was criticized for its discursive plot that spent too much time on irrelevant subplots."

Meaning 3

Proceeding by argument or reasoning rather than by intuition; analytical and logical.

In philosophy and formal logic, this is a positive or neutral term. It describes a mind that moves step-by-step through a logical process to reach a conclusion, which is the opposite of 'rambling'.

"Human knowledge is largely discursive, relying on a sequence of rational steps to understand complex truths."

"The philosopher favored a discursive approach to ethics, building his argument piece by piece."

Related: digressive; analytical; rambling; rhetorical; logical



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eslwordwiz.com/words/discursive

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Win-win situation

This phrase is extremely common in business English and daily negotiations. It is often shortened to just 'a win-win.' It is the opposite of a 'zero-sum game,' where one person's gain is exactly equal to another person's loss.

Meaning 1

A cooperative agreement or outcome that provides benefits to all parties involved.

ESL learners may be confused by the repetition of the word 'win.' In many languages, a competition implies one winner and one loser. The idea that both sides can 'win' simultaneously is a metaphorical concept used in negotiations and problem-solving.

"If we trade tasks, I get to practice my coding and you get help with your writing"

"it's a win-win situation."

Meaning 2

A scenario where there is no possibility of a negative outcome, regardless of which choice is made.

Learners might struggle with the logic of this phrase when applied to a single person. It suggests that every available option leads to a positive result, which can feel counterintuitive if the learner is looking for a 'best' choice.

"Since I love both chocolate and vanilla, choosing a flavor is a win-win situation for me."

"Whether the stock price goes up or stays the same, I still collect the dividend, so it's a win-win situation."

Related: mutual benefit; compromise; zero-sum game; all-win; collaboration



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eslwordwiz.com/words/win-win-situation

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Bar**

Commonly confused with 'barrier'. A 'bar' can be the physical object that blocks the way.

Meaning 1

A place where alcoholic drinks are served.

The most common social meaning. In some cultures, a 'pub' or 'tavern' is the same thing.

"Let's meet at the bar for a drink after work."

"The bar was very crowded on Friday night."

Meaning 2

A long, thin, rectangular object (like chocolate or soap).

Used as a counter for specific noun types in English.

"I ate a whole bar of chocolate."

"Please buy a bar of soap at the store."

Meaning 3

To prevent or stop someone from doing something or entering a place.

This is a formal verb. It can also refer to the legal profession (passing the Bar).

"He was barred from the club for bad behavior."

"The new law might bar certain people from entering the country."

Related: block; pub; counter; exclude



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

To outgrow

Positive and natural-sounding for childhood development stages.

Meaning 1

To become too large to fit into a piece of clothing.

Commonly used by parents to explain why they are buying new clothes.

"He outgrew his winter coat in just three months."

Meaning 2

To become too big for something, or to stop being interested in something as you get older.

This is a polite way to say a child is too old or too big for a certain behavior or toy without sounding critical.

"Jason has outgrown his thumb-sucking habit."

"She outgrew her interest in dolls and now prefers video games."

Related: mature; develop; evolve



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

End up

Inseparable.

Meaning 1

To finally be in a particular place or situation.

Often unexpected result.

"We ended up staying at a cheap hotel."

"If you don't study, you'll end up failing."

Related: finish up; turn out



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