

Tricky Words of the Day

Monday, May 18, 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

Medal / Meddle

'Meddlesome' is an adjective used to describe someone who interferes too much.

Meaning 1

A metal disk awarded as a prize for bravery or skill.

The word contains 'metal' (almost)-medals are made of metal.

"She won a gold medal at the Olympics."

"He wore his military medals on his jacket."

Meaning 2

To interfere in something that is not one's concern.

Think of 'middle'. If you meddle, you put yourself in the middle of someone else's business.

"Please don't meddle in my private life."

"He is always meddling with things he doesn't understand."

Related: award; interfere; trophy



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eslwordwiz.com/words/medal-meddle

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Elaborate

The key to distinguishing these is the grammatical position. If it follows a subject (e.g., 'He will elaborate'), it is a verb with a long 'a'. If it describes a noun (e.g., 'An elaborate cake'), it is an adjective with a short 'a'.

Meaning 1

To provide more details or information about something.

Used as a verb, the final syllable is pronounced with a long 'a' sound (like 'gate'). ESL learners often confuse the pronunciation when switching from the action of speaking to the description of an object.

"Could you please elaborate on your plan for the new project?"

"The witness was asked to elaborate on her statement to the police."

Meaning 2

Involving many carefully arranged parts or details; complicated and detailed.

Used as an adjective, the final syllable is pronounced with a short 'uh' sound (like 'it' or 'ut'). The spelling remains identical to the verb form, which causes confusion in reading comprehension.

"The palace was decorated with elaborate wood carvings."

"They came up with an elaborate excuse for why they were late to the meeting."

Related: detailed; complex; expand; intricate; clarify



Read the full lesson

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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Skeleton in the closet

British English often uses 'skeleton in the cupboard'.

Meaning 1

A shocking or embarrassing secret from the past that someone wants to keep hidden.

Learners might find this scary. It refers to 'hidden' laundry or history that would be shameful if revealed.

"The politician lost the election when a skeleton in his closet was revealed."

"Almost every family has a skeleton in the closet."

Related: secret; scandal; shame; hidden



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Soft launch

The opposite is a 'hard launch,' which is a direct announcement of a relationship.

Meaning 1

To hint at a new romantic relationship on social media without showing the person's face.

Borrowed from business (testing a product), this usually involves a photo of two coffee cups or a hand, rather than a full couple photo.

"She soft launched her new boyfriend by posting a photo of his watch at dinner."

"Was that a soft launch, or is he just hanging out with a friend?"

Related: teaser; hint; clue



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

First-degree

This term is a contronym because its intensity flips depending on the field: in law, it is the 'worst' (most severe), while in medicine (burns), it is the 'best' (least severe). Learners must identify if the speaker is talking about a crime or an injury to understand the severity.

Meaning 1

The most serious or severe level of a crime (such as murder).

In legal contexts, 'first-degree' represents the highest level of intent and severity. ESL learners may find this confusing because 'first' usually implies the beginning or the least amount, but here it signifies the maximum penalty.

"He was charged with first-degree murder because the act was premeditated."

"A first-degree felony carries the harshest prison sentence in this state."

Meaning 2

The least severe level of a physical injury (specifically burns).

In medical contexts, 'first-degree' refers to the mildest form of injury, affecting only the surface layer of skin. This is the exact opposite of the legal usage, where 'first-degree' is the most severe.

"It was just a first-degree burn from the stove, so the skin was only slightly red."

"Sunburns are typically classified as first-degree burns."

Meaning 3

A direct relationship between family members.

In genealogy or social science, it refers to immediate relatives (parents, siblings, children). This adds a third layer of meaning regarding proximity rather than intensity or severity.

"A first-degree relative shares approximately 50 percent of your genes."

"The study focused on the health history of first-degree family members."

Related: premeditated; superficial; severity; classification; felony



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eslwordwiz.com/words/first-degree

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink

This is one of the oldest proverbs in the English language. In casual conversation, native speakers often shorten it to just the first half: 'You can lead a horse to water...' and leave the rest implied. It is important to note that this phrase is usually used when the speaker is feeling a bit annoyed or resigned.

Meaning 1

A proverb used to express frustration when someone refuses to do something that is clearly beneficial for them.

The phrase is often used as a standalone reaction to a situation. Learners might find it confusing when someone says this in response to a human problem without mentioning any animals or water.

"I told her that quitting smoking would save her money and health, but she just ignored me. Well, you can lead a horse to water..."

"We set up the perfect meeting for the two businesses to collaborate, but the CEO refused to attend. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Meaning 2

You can provide someone with an opportunity, but you cannot force them to take advantage of it.

ESL learners may take this literally and think it is advice about animal husbandry. The confusion lies in the metaphorical shift from a physical action (leading an animal) to a psychological one (persuading a person).

"I bought my son all the best SAT prep books, but he won't open them"

"I guess you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Related: proverb; metaphor; opportunity; stubbornness; free will



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/you-can-lead-a-horse-to-water-but-you-can-t-make-it-drink

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Light

In food, 'light' (or lite) means low in calories or fat.

Meaning 1

The brightness that comes from the sun or a lamp which allows us to see.

Noun form. Opposite of darkness.

"Please turn on the light so I can read."

"The morning light came through the window."

Meaning 2

Not heavy; something that weighs very little.

Adjective. Opposite of heavy.

"This suitcase is very light"

"I can carry it easily."

Meaning 3

A pale color (not dark), or to start a fire.

Can be an adjective for colors (light blue) or a verb (light a candle).

"She wore a light green dress to the party."

"Could you light the candles on the cake?"

Related: bright; weightless; pale; ignite



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9**To freshen up**

Very common in guest/host situations to avoid saying 'toilet'.

Meaning 1

To wash your hands and face, or go to the bathroom.

This is a polite way to excuse yourself from a social situation to use the restroom or fix your appearance.

"I'd like to freshen up a bit after the long flight."

"Where can I go to freshen up before dinner?"

Related: wash up; check my hair; tidy up



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Bring about

Inseparable.

Meaning 1

To cause something to happen.

ESL learners may confuse with bringing something physically.

"The new law brought about many changes."

"His speech brought about a big reaction."

Related: cause; lead to



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