

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, May 19, 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

Watt

The most common confusion for ESL learners is the 'Who's on First?' style of wordplay. Because 'watt' sounds identical to 'what', people often make jokes like: 'The unit of power is the watt.' 'The what?' 'Exactly.'

Meaning 1

What (Question word)

The word 'watt' is a homophone of 'what'. They sound exactly the same in most English dialects, which often leads to puns or confusion in spoken conversation.

"What did you say?"

"I don't know what time it is."

Meaning 2

A unit of power used to measure how much energy an electrical device uses.

This is a technical term used in science and everyday life, specifically when buying lightbulbs or checking electricity bills.

"This LED lightbulb only uses 9 watts of power."

"The microwave has a power output of 1000 watts."

Related: kilowatt; electricity; power; voltage; ampere



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Estimate

The key to mastering this word is the vowel sound in the final syllable. Use the short 'it' sound for the thing (noun) and the long 'ate' sound for the action (verb). This is a common pattern in English for words like 'graduate', 'separate', and 'moderate'.

Meaning 1

A rough calculation or an approximate judgment of value, size, or cost (Noun).

As a noun, the word ends with a short 'it' sound. ESL learners often confuse the pronunciation with the verb form, leading to rhythm issues in speech.

"The mechanic gave me a written estimate for the car repairs."

"According to my estimate, we will need at least three more days to finish."

Meaning 2

To form an approximate opinion or calculation about something (Verb).

As a verb, the word ends with a long 'ate' sound (like the word 'gate'). The spelling remains identical to the noun, which makes it difficult to identify the part of speech in written text without context.

"Experts estimate that the population will double by next year."

"It is difficult to estimate how many people will attend the wedding."

Related: estimation; approximate; guess; appraisal; calculation



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Butterflies in your stomach

Can be used for both 'scary' nerves and 'exciting' nerves.

Meaning 1

A nervous or fluttery feeling in your stomach before doing something important.

It describes the physical sensation of anxiety. It doesn't mean you ate butterflies!

"I always get butterflies in my stomach before a big presentation."

"He had butterflies in his stomach before his first date."

Related: nervous; anxious; jittery; apprehensive



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Killer

Be careful with context. While 'killer' is a compliment in social settings (meaning 'great'), using it in formal or sensitive situations can be misunderstood. It can also mean 'very painful' or 'very hard,' such as a 'killer headache.'

Meaning 1

A person, animal, or thing that kills or causes death.

This is the literal and most common meaning. It refers to someone who commits murder or a predator in the wild (like a 'killer whale').

"The police are still searching for the killer."

"The flu can be a silent killer for the elderly."

Meaning 2

Something that is extremely impressive, cool, or excellent; or something very difficult.

In informal English, 'killer' is used as an adjective or noun to describe something high-quality or very intense. This is confusing for ESL learners because a word associated with death is being used as a high compliment.

"She wore a killer dress to the party."

"That was a killer workout"

Related: murderer; awesome; deadly; wicked; lethal



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Flog

As a contronym, 'flog' can mean to give something away/sell it (pushing it away) or to strike something (hitting it). In modern British English, 'flog' is very common for 'sell,' whereas in American English, it is almost exclusively used to mean 'whip.'

Meaning 1

To promote or sell something aggressively or persistently.

This is a common British slang usage. It is confusing because it shifts from a violent physical act to a commercial activity. It implies 'beating' a product into the market or trying very hard to get rid of it.

"He's been trying to flog that old car for months, but no one wants it."

"The comedian spent the whole interview flogging his new book."

Meaning 2

To 'flog a dead horse' (Idiomatic usage).

This common idiom means to waste energy on something that is already over or cannot be changed. Learners might take it literally, which sounds gruesome, rather than understanding it as a metaphor for wasted effort.

"The project has been cancelled"

"there is no point in flogging a dead horse."

Meaning 3

To beat or whip someone severely as a punishment.

This is the traditional, literal meaning. ESL learners may find it confusing because it is a harsh, archaic form of punishment that still appears in literature, history, and news reports about certain legal systems.

"In the 18th century, sailors were often flogged for disobedience."

"The prisoner was sentenced to be flogged in public."

Related: whip; scourge; peddle; hawk; promote



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**You reap what you sow**

This phrase is a metaphor based on farming. 'Sowing' is the act of planting, and 'reaping' is the act of gathering the crop. It is very similar to the concept of 'Karma' or the phrase 'What goes around comes around.' Note that 'sow' is pronounced like 'so' or 'sew,' not like 'cow.'

Meaning 1

A warning that bad behavior will result in future punishment or negative results.

While it can be positive, it is most frequently used as a 'karmic' warning. Learners may not realize that using this phrase can sound accusatory or judgmental depending on the tone.

"If you keep skipping class, you're going to fail the exam-remember, you reap what you sow."

"The company ignored safety regulations to save money, and now they are facing massive fines"

Meaning 2

The consequences of your actions (good or bad) will eventually come back to you.

ESL learners often struggle with the archaic agricultural vocabulary. 'Reap' (to harvest) and 'Sow' (to plant seeds) are rarely used in modern daily conversation, making the literal meaning difficult to visualize.

"He was always mean to his colleagues, and now that he needs help, no one will support him"

"I guess you reap what you sow."

Related: karma; consequences; what goes around comes around; poetic justice; get what's coming to you



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Project

Another heteronym. Noun = stress first; Verb = stress second.

Meaning 1

A planned piece of work that happens over a period of time (PRO-ject).

Noun. Stress the first syllable. Common in school and office work.

"I am working on a new marketing project."

"The science project is due next Monday."

Meaning 2

To throw or cast something forward, like an image on a wall (pro-JECT).

Verb. Stress the second syllable. Think of a 'projector'.

"The machine projects the movie onto a large screen."

"You need to project your voice so everyone can hear you."

Meaning 3

To estimate or forecast something for the future.

Business verb. Used for predicting growth or costs.

"The company projects a 10% increase in sales next year."

"They project that the bridge will be finished by 2026."

Related: task; forecast; display; plan



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Fashionably late

This phrase is almost exclusively used for social gatherings like parties or dinners. It is NEVER appropriate for professional settings like job interviews or business meetings, where being late is always seen as a negative.

Meaning 1

Arriving slightly after the agreed-upon time to a social event to appear busy, popular, or important.

ESL learners may find this confusing because 'late' is usually a negative trait. However, this phrase uses 'fashionably' to turn a rude behavior into a social strategy. It implies that arriving exactly on time might make one look desperate or over-eager.

"The party starts at 8:00, but most people will be fashionably late and arrive around 8:30."

"She didn't want to be the first person there, so she decided to be fashionably late."

Meaning 2

A polite way (euphemism) to describe being tardy without admitting to a mistake or poor time management.

It is used as a euphemism to soften the impact of being late. Instead of saying 'I am late because I am disorganized,' a person says they are 'fashionably late' to make it sound intentional and stylish.

"Sorry I missed the opening toast"

"I'm just being fashionably late!"

Related: tardy; punctual; social etiquette; make an entrance; behind schedule



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Get over

Separable in recovery sense: get something over with (finish).

Meaning 1

To recover from an illness, disappointment, or difficult situation.

ESL learners often think it means physically climbing over something. It is about emotional or physical recovery.

"It took her weeks to get over the flu."

"He still hasn't gotten over his breakup."

Meaning 2

To cross or move above something (literal).

Less common meaning that can confuse in context.

"We got over the fence to enter the yard."

Related: recover from; overcome



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