

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, May 20, 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

Whine

While 'whine' starts with 'wh', the 'h' is silent for most modern speakers. To remember the difference: 'Wine' (the drink) is kept in a 'bin' (both have 'i'), while 'Whine' (the sound) is something 'He' does (both have 'h').

Meaning 1

To complain in an annoying, high-pitched voice; or a long, high-pitched unpleasant sound.

This is a common verb used to describe children complaining or the sound of a mechanical engine. It is confusing because it sounds exactly like 'wine' (the alcoholic drink).

"The child began to whine because he didn't want to go to bed."

"The jet engine made a high-pitched whine."

Meaning 2

wine (homophone)

In most English dialects, 'whine' and 'wine' are pronounced identically. This can lead to confusion in listening exercises or spelling.

"They served red wine with the dinner."

"He visited a vineyard to see how wine is made."

Related: complain; grumble; moan; whimper



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Excuse

The most important thing to remember is the 'S' sound. If you are using it as an action (verb), use a 'Z' sound. If you are talking about the 'reason' (noun), use an 'S' sound. Also, 'Excuse me' is a polite formula, while 'An excuse' often has a negative connotation of being dishonest.

Meaning 1

A reason or explanation given to justify a fault or offense.

As a noun, the 's' is pronounced like a sharp 's' (as in 'hiss'). The spelling is identical to the verb, but the change in sound and grammatical function is a common point of confusion.

"He had a weak excuse for not doing his homework."

"There is no excuse for such rude behavior."

Meaning 2

To forgive someone for a small mistake or to allow someone to leave.

As a verb, the 's' is pronounced like a 'z'. Learners often struggle with the voiced 'z' sound at the end and may confuse it with the noun form.

"Please excuse my late arrival"

"the traffic was terrible."

Meaning 3

To release someone from a duty or requirement.

This is a specific usage of the verb form. ESL learners might not realize that 'excuse' can mean being legally or formally exempt from something, not just 'saying sorry'.

"The doctor wrote a note to excuse her from gym class."

"He was excused from jury duty because of his travel plans."

Related: pardon; forgive; justification; alibi; exempt



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

A change of heart

Usually used for significant decisions, not small ones like choosing a flavor of ice cream.

Meaning 1

A change in your opinion or the way you feel about something.

The 'heart' represents your deep feelings or decisions. A 'change' means you now feel the opposite way.

"I wasn't going to sell the house, but I had a change of heart."

"He had a change of heart and decided to forgive her."

Related: reconsider; repent; switch; shift



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Low-key

The slang usage is extremely common among younger English speakers. It is often used as the opposite of 'high-key,' which means 'very much' or 'openly.' Note that 'low-key' can be used as an adjective (a low-key party) or a slang adverb (I low-key love this song).

Meaning 1

Quiet, relaxed, or not intended to attract much attention.

ESL learners may be confused because 'low' and 'key' are common words that don't literally describe a key. It functions as an adjective to describe an event or atmosphere that is modest rather than flashy.

"We're just having a low-key dinner at home tonight."

"The wedding was very low-key, with only ten guests."

Meaning 2

Secretly, subtly, or to a small extent (used as an adverb).

In modern slang, it is used to describe a feeling or action that someone wants to keep quiet or isn't ready to admit fully. It often modifies a verb or an adjective.

"I low-key want to go to the party, even though I said I was tired."

"That movie was low-key one of the best things I've seen all year."

Meaning 3

In art or photography, a style with dark tones and minimal lighting.

This is the technical origin of the term. It refers to a specific visual aesthetic that is dark and moody, which is very different from the casual conversational usage.

"The photographer used low-key lighting to create a mysterious mood."

"The film's low-key cinematography made it feel like a classic noir."

Related: understated; subtle; mellow; high-key; discreet



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Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9**Grade**

The word 'grade' is a contranym because it can mean both to 'arrange in steps/levels' and to 'make a surface level/flat.' Additionally, ESL learners should note the difference between British and American English: Americans use 'grade' for school years, while the British often use 'year' or 'form.'

Meaning 1

A mark indicating a student's performance or a year of school.

This is the most common usage. It can be confusing because 'grade' can refer to the score on a test (a noun), the act of marking the test (a verb), or the student's year in school (e.g., 5th grade).

"I was very happy with my grade on the final exam."

"The teacher spent the whole weekend grading essays."

Meaning 2

To level or smooth out a surface to make it uniform.

This is the 'contranym' aspect: while the first meaning is about separating things into levels, this meaning is about removing levels to make something flat. It is often used in construction and landscaping.

"The construction crew used a bulldozer to grade the road before paving it."

"We need to grade the backyard so the rainwater flows away from the house."

Meaning 3

To separate or categorize items into different levels of quality or value.

In this context, 'grade' means to distinguish between things (like eggs or lumber) to show that some are better than others. ESL learners may find this confusing because it implies creating a hierarchy or a division.

"The inspector will grade the beef based on its fat content."

"These diamonds are graded from D to Z depending on their clarity."

Related: gradient; gradual; rank; level; score; slope



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Bread and butter**

This phrase is most commonly used to discuss money and jobs. It comes from the idea that bread and butter are the most basic, essential foods one needs to survive. If you lose your 'bread and butter,' you lose your ability to support yourself.

Meaning 1

A person's main source of income or the most important part of their job.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the speaker is talking about food. In a business context, it refers to the work that pays the bills, not an actual meal.

"Selling insurance is my bread and butter, but I also paint on the weekends."

"Small businesses are the bread and butter of this town's economy."

Meaning 2

The basic, fundamental, or most essential elements of something.

This usage is metaphorical. It describes the 'basics' of a subject. A student might be confused why a teacher is mentioning food during a math or sports lesson.

"We need to focus on the bread and butter of the project before we add fancy features."

"Dribbling and passing are the bread and butter of basketball."

Meaning 3

A superstitious phrase said by two people who are walking together and are momentarily separated by an object (like a pole or a tree).

This is a very specific cultural idiom/superstition. If a learner hears two people suddenly say 'bread and butter' while walking, they will likely be completely lost without this context.

"When they walked on opposite sides of the lamppost, Sarah quickly whispered 'bread and butter' to avoid bad luck."

Related: livelihood; mainstay; basics; sustenance; meat and potatoes



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

File

As a verb in a legal sense, you can also 'file a complaint' or 'file taxes'.

Meaning 1

A metal tool with a rough surface used for smoothing or shaping things.

Commonly used in DIY or beauty (fingernail files).

"She used a nail file to smooth her manicure."

"The carpenter used a metal file to smooth the edges of the pipe."

Meaning 2

A folder or box used to keep papers in order, or a digital document.

In modern life, this almost always refers to a computer document (.pdf, .docx).

"I saved the file on my desktop."

"Can you send me the file via email?"

Meaning 3

To walk in a line, one person behind another.

This is a verb describing a specific way of moving in a group.

"The students were told to file into the classroom quietly."

"The fans filed out of the stadium after the game ended."

Related: document; folder; smooth; queue



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Intelligence gathering

The word 'intelligence' here acts as a mass noun meaning 'secret information.' Learners should note that 'gathering' implies a systematic collection. This phrase is frequently used in news reports and government documents to sanitize the act of surveillance.

Meaning 1

The collection of information of military or political value, often through spying or surveillance.

ESL learners often associate 'intelligence' only with being smart or having a high IQ. In this context, it is a euphemism for 'spying' or 'espionage,' which sounds more professional and less illegal or invasive.

"The agency is responsible for intelligence gathering in foreign territories."

"Satellite imagery is a key tool for modern intelligence gathering."

Meaning 2

The process of researching and analyzing data about competitors or market trends in business.

In a corporate setting, this phrase is used to avoid the negative connotations of 'snooping' on other companies. It sounds like a neutral academic or strategic activity rather than competitive monitoring.

"Our marketing team is focused on intelligence gathering regarding the rival's new product line."

"Competitive intelligence gathering helps us stay ahead in the tech industry."

Related: espionage; surveillance; reconnaissance; data collection; intel



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Fall apart

Inseparable.

Meaning 1

To break into pieces or stop working.

Literal or figurative failure.

"The old book fell apart in my hands."

"The plan fell apart at the last minute."

Meaning 2

To lose emotional control.

Similar to break down.

"She fell apart when she got the bad news."

Related: break down; collapse



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