

Tricky Words of the Day

Thursday, May 21, 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

Bored a hole

This phrase is confusing for ESL learners because 'bored' is a homophone. It sounds exactly like the common adjective 'bored' (feeling weary because one is unoccupied). Learners often mistake 'bored a hole' for something related to being tired or uninterested, rather than the act of drilling or piercing.

Meaning 1

To make a deep, round hole in a solid material using a tool like a drill.

This is the literal, physical meaning of the phrase. It comes from the verb 'to bore', which means to pierce or drill into something.

"The carpenter bored a hole in the wood to install the screw."

"The machine bored a hole through the mountain to create a tunnel."

Meaning 2

To stare intensely at someone, or to feel like someone is staring through you.

This is a figurative use (figure of speech). If someone 'bores a hole' into you with their eyes, they are looking at you very intensely, often making you feel uncomfortable.

"I could feel his eyes boring a hole into the back of my head."

"The teacher bored a hole into the student with a stern look."

Related: drill; pierce; puncture; stare; gaze



Read the full lesson

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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Exploit

The most confusing aspect is the 'Stress Shift.' If you say 'EX-ploit' (noun), you are talking about a hero's adventure. If you say 'ex-PLOIT' (verb), you are usually talking about using something or someone. In computer science, an 'exploit' (noun) refers to a piece of software that takes advantage of a flaw.

Meaning 1

To use something or someone unfairly for your own advantage.

As a verb, the stress is on the second syllable. It often has a negative connotation, implying that someone is being treated poorly or taken advantage of for profit.

"The company was accused of trying to exploit its workers by paying them very low wages."

"Some people exploit legal loopholes to avoid paying their taxes."

Meaning 2

A bold or daring feat; a remarkable achievement.

As a noun, the stress shifts to the first syllable. This meaning is positive and heroic, which contrasts sharply with the negative connotation of the verb form.

"The book details the brave exploits of the pilots during the war."

"The young gymnast's latest exploits have made her a national celebrity."

Meaning 3

To make full use of and derive benefit from a resource.

This is a neutral version of the verb form. ESL learners may struggle to distinguish when 'exploit' means 'to use efficiently' (neutral/positive) versus 'to use selfishly' (negative).

"The new technology allows us to exploit solar energy more efficiently."

"We need to exploit every opportunity to expand our business in Asia."

Related: utilize; abuse; adventure; feat; manipulate



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

A storm in a teacup

In American English, the equivalent is 'a tempest in a teapot'.

Meaning 1

A lot of unnecessary anger or worry about a small, unimportant problem.

The imagery of a massive storm inside a tiny cup helps learners visualize something small being treated as something big.

"They had a huge argument about who forgot to buy milk, but it was just a storm in a teacup."

"Don't worry about the office gossip"

Related: overreacting; fuss; exaggeration



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

High-key

To understand 'high-key', you must first understand 'low-key' (meaning quiet or subtle). While 'low-key' is very common in standard English, 'high-key' is more common among younger generations and on social media to express strong, unabashed feelings.

Meaning 1

Openly, clearly, or intensely; used to emphasize that something is done without secrecy.

ESL learners may find this confusing because 'key' usually refers to a tool for a lock or a musical scale. In this slang context, it acts as an adverb of intensity, functioning as the direct opposite of 'low-key'.

"I high-key want to quit my job and travel the world."

"She was high-key obsessed with that new TV show."

Meaning 2

In photography or cinematography, a style of lighting that is bright and contains few shadows.

This is the technical origin of the term. Learners might confuse the artistic technical term with the modern slang usage, as both imply 'brightness' or 'visibility' but in very different fields.

"The portrait was shot in a high-key style to make it look airy and optimistic."

"High-key lighting is often used in sitcoms and commercials."

Related: low-key; totally; definitely; obvious; overexposed



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Lease

To avoid confusion, use 'lease to' when you are the owner and 'lease from' when you are the tenant. While 'rent' is often used for short-term or informal agreements, 'lease' usually implies a formal, long-term legal contract.

Meaning 1

A legal contract specifying the terms of property rental.

ESL learners may confuse the noun form (the document) with the verb form (the action). Additionally, the phrase 'a new lease on life' is a common idiom that adds another layer of complexity.

"Please read the lease carefully before you sign it."

"The lease expires at the end of the month."

Meaning 2

To grant the use of property to someone else in exchange for payment (to let out).

In this context, the subject is the owner (landlord). ESL learners often find it confusing that the same verb describes the action of the person giving the property and the person receiving it.

"The landlord decided to lease the apartment to a young couple."

"The company leases its extra office space to small startups."

Meaning 3

To take or hold property under a contract (to rent from someone).

In this context, the subject is the tenant. Without prepositions like 'to' or 'from', it is impossible to know if the person is the owner or the renter just by looking at the verb 'lease'.

"I want to lease a car for three years instead of buying one."

"They are looking to lease a small shop in the city center."

Related: rent; tenant; landlord; sublet; contract



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Bring to the table**

This phrase is most commonly used in business and professional networking. When someone asks 'What do you bring to the table?', they are asking for your 'Value Proposition'-your strengths and assets.

Meaning 1

To provide or offer something beneficial, such as a skill, resource, or quality, to a group or negotiation.

ESL learners often take this literally, imagining someone physically carrying an object to a piece of furniture. In a professional context, it refers to abstract contributions like experience or ideas.

"She brings over ten years of marketing experience to the table."

"What unique skills can you bring to the table for this project?"

Meaning 2

To introduce a topic or proposal for discussion or consideration.

This is confusing because it implies a physical 'placement' of a problem or idea. Learners may confuse it with 'putting it on the table,' which can sometimes mean postponing a discussion in certain dialects (like US English).

"We need to bring the budget issues to the table at the next meeting."

"He brought a new perspective to the table during the debate."

Meaning 3

The literal act of delivering food or items to a dining surface.

In a restaurant or home setting, the phrase is literal. The confusion arises when a learner cannot distinguish if the speaker is talking about dinner or a business deal.

"The waiter will bring the appetizers to the table in a few minutes."

"Please bring the extra napkins to the table."

Related: contribution; assets; value-add; offer; input



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Jingle

For ESL learners, the confusion usually arises when moving from holiday contexts (like 'Jingle Bells') to business contexts (marketing jingles). While the two meanings are related by the idea of 'catchy sound,' they are used in very different environments.

Meaning 1

A light, ringing sound made by metal objects hitting each other.

This is the literal, physical meaning. It is often used as both a noun (the sound) and a verb (the action). It is most commonly associated with bells or keys.

"I could hear the jingle of the keys in his pocket."

"The silver bells jingle every time the door opens."

Meaning 2

A short, catchy song or tune used in advertising.

In a business or media context, a jingle is a mnemonic device. It is a specific type of 'earworm' designed to make a brand name easy to remember through music.

"That insurance company has a very annoying jingle that gets stuck in my head."

"The songwriter made a lot of money writing famous radio jingles."

Related: chime; clink; slogan; catchphrase; earworm



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Joined the ancestors

This is a 'soft' way to talk about death. English has many such euphemisms (like 'passed away' or 'departed'). This specific phrase is more common in literature or in cultures with strong ancestral traditions. It is much more formal and respectful than slang terms like 'kicked the bucket'.

Meaning 1

A cultural expression often used in African, Indigenous, or Asian contexts to describe passing into the spirit world.

The phrase carries a spiritual connotation that implies the deceased is now watching over the living. Learners might not understand the cultural weight or the shift from a biological fact to a spiritual belief.

"In many traditions, when a leader passes, we say they have joined the ancestors to guide us from beyond."

"He spoke of his father not as being gone, but as having joined the ancestors."

Meaning 2

A polite or respectful way to say that someone has died.

ESL learners may take the phrase literally, imagining a physical gathering or a family reunion. Because it uses the word 'joined' (an active, social verb), it can be confusing to realize it refers to the end of a person's life.

"After a long and fruitful life, the village elder has finally joined the ancestors."

"The family gathered to honor their grandfather who joined the ancestors last week."

Related: passed away; departed; deceased; gone to a better place; late



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Work out

Multiple meanings. Common in fitness and daily conversation.

Meaning 1

To exercise or do physical training.

Learners may think it means solving a problem literally.

"I work out at the gym three times a week."

Meaning 2

To develop or end in a particular way.

About how things turn out.

"I hope everything works out for you in your new job."

Meaning 3

To solve or calculate something.

Problem-solving meaning.

"Can you work out the total cost?"

Related: exercise; resolve; calculate



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