

Tricky Words of the Day

Saturday, May 23, 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

Chute / Shoot

Remember that 'chute' is almost always a noun (a physical object like a slide), while 'shoot' is primarily a verb (an action). The word 'parachute' contains 'chute' because it helps you 'slide' down through the air safely.

Meaning 1

Chute: A sloping channel or slide for conveying things to a lower level.

Learners often struggle with the spelling because 'ch' usually makes a 'tsh' sound (like 'chair'), but here it makes a 'sh' sound (like 'shoe').

"Please put your dirty clothes down the laundry chute."

"The grain was poured down a metal chute into the truck."

Meaning 2

Shoot: To fire a weapon, kick a ball toward a goal, or take a photograph.

This is a high-frequency verb with many different contexts (sports, photography, violence), which can overwhelm learners who only know one meaning.

"The photographer told the model to look at the camera before he started to shoot."

"You need to shoot the basketball with more arc to score."

Meaning 3

Shoot: A new growth on a plant; or an exclamation used to express mild frustration.

As a noun, it refers to nature; as an interjection, it is a 'polite' substitute for a swear word, which can be very confusing in social settings.

"In the spring, green shoots began to poke through the soil."

"Oh, shoot! I forgot my keys in the car."

Related: slide; channel; fire; sprout; shucks



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Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Incense

The key to distinguishing these is the word's function in the sentence. If it follows an article like 'the' or 'some', it is the noun (smell). If it follows a subject or 'to', it is likely the verb (to make angry). Pay close attention to syllable stress!

Meaning 1

A substance that is burned for the sweet smell it produces.

In this form, it is a noun with the stress on the first syllable (IN-cense). ESL learners often confuse it with other aromatic products or struggle with the 's' sound at the end.

"The priest lit the incense during the ceremony."

"I love the smell of sandalwood incense in my living room."

Meaning 2

To make someone very angry or furious.

In this form, it is a verb with the stress on the second syllable (in-CENSE). It is confusing because the spelling is identical to the aromatic substance, but the meaning and pronunciation change completely.

"The decision to cut the budget will incense the local community."

"He was incensed by the rude comments made by his coworker."

Related: enrage; infuriate; aroma; fragrance; furious



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Cut a rug

This is an old-fashioned American English expression that originated in the 1920s during the era of 'swing' and 'jazz.' While it is not used in daily slang by teenagers today, it is a very common 'classic' idiom that appears in books, movies, and when talking to older generations. It is always used positively.

Meaning 1

To attend a social dance or party.

In a broader sense, it can refer to the act of going out to dance. Learners might be confused by the vintage nature of the phrase, as it is less common in modern pop music but frequent in older movies and literature.

"We're heading to the jazz club tonight to cut a rug."

"They spent the whole evening cutting a rug at the wedding reception."

Meaning 2

To dance very well or with a lot of energy.

ESL learners may take this literally and think someone is using scissors to damage a carpet. The figurative meaning has nothing to do with cutting or floor coverings; it describes the movement of feet on a dance floor.

"The band was so good that everyone got up to cut a rug."

"Your grandfather can still cut a rug even at eighty years old!"

Related: bust a move; trip the light fantastic; shake a leg; hit the dance floor; boogie



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

That hits different

This phrase became highly popular on social media (TikTok/Twitter). It is almost always used positively. Note that 'different' is used as an adverb here, which is common in casual American English slang but would be marked incorrect in a formal English exam.

Meaning 1

Used to describe something that feels significantly better, more intense, or more satisfying than usual in a specific context.

ESL learners may be confused because the verb 'hit' usually implies physical impact or violence. In this slang context, it refers to an emotional or sensory impact. Additionally, it uses the adjective 'different' instead of the adverb 'differently,' which breaks standard grammatical rules.

"Drinking ice-cold water after a long run just hits different."

"I've heard this song before, but listening to it on vinyl hits different."

Meaning 2

To have a unique or special quality that sets an experience apart from the ordinary version of that experience.

Learners might try to translate this literally and assume something is physically striking them in a new way. They may not realize it is a superlative used to praise the 'vibe' or quality of a moment.

"Pizza at 2 AM just hits different."

"Watching a movie in a theater hits different than watching it on your phone."

Related: vibe; built different; slaps; game changer; next level



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Quiddity

This word comes from the Latin 'quid' (what). In a philosophical context, it asks 'What is it?'. It is considered a 'contronym' because it can describe the 'essence' (everything) or a 'quibble' (nothing). It is very rare in modern English and is mostly found in academic, legal, or classic literature.

Meaning 1

A trifling point or a petty distinction; a nitpicky detail used to avoid a real argument.

This creates a contronym-like confusion: the word can mean the 'essential core' (the most important part) or a 'trifling quibble' (the least important part). An ESL learner might not know if the speaker is being profound or critical.

"Stop wasting our time with legal quiddities and get to the main point of the contract."

"The professor was known for his love of quiddities, often stalling lectures to argue over minor definitions."

Meaning 2

The inherent nature or essence of someone or something; what makes a thing what it is.

This is a highly formal, philosophical term. ESL learners may find it confusing because it refers to the most important, fundamental part of an object, yet the word itself is rarely used in everyday conversation.

"The artist managed to capture the quiddity of the rugged landscape in just a few brushstrokes."

"To understand the quiddity of her character, one must look at her childhood influences."

Related: essence; quibble; haecceity; trifle; substance



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**In the blink of an eye**

This phrase is often used for dramatic effect. It is synonymous with 'in a flash' or 'instantaneously.' It is important to note that 'blink' refers to the involuntary closing and opening of the eyelid, which takes about one-third of a second, emphasizing the extreme speed.

Meaning 1

Happening extremely quickly or almost instantaneously.

ESL learners may take the phrase literally and look for a physical eye movement. They might not realize it is a metaphor for the speed of a reflex, used to describe events that happen faster than one can process.

"The car disappeared around the corner in the blink of an eye."

"In the blink of an eye, the thief grabbed the purse and ran into the crowd."

Meaning 2

A sudden, unexpected change in circumstances or life status.

This usage is confusing because it implies a permanent change occurring in a temporary moment. Learners might struggle with the emotional weight the phrase carries when describing life-altering events.

"Your whole life can change in the blink of an eye, so cherish every moment."

"The storm hit the village, and in the blink of an eye, the houses were gone."

Related: instant; split second; heartbeat; flash; momentarily



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Wax**

For ESL learners, the confusion usually arises because the common noun (candle wax) is very different from the formal verb (to grow/increase). Remember the phrase 'wax and wane' to describe things that go up and down.

Meaning 1

A solid substance used to make candles or polish furniture; also, the act of removing hair.

This is the most common noun and verb form. It refers to the physical material (like beeswax) or the action of applying it to a surface or using it for hair removal.

"The candle wax dripped onto the table."

"I need to wax my car to make it shine."

Meaning 2

To increase in size, strength, or intensity; specifically used for the moon.

In a literary or scientific context, 'wax' is the opposite of 'wane'. It describes the moon getting larger in appearance or a person becoming more expressive (e.g., 'to wax poetic').

"The moon will wax until it becomes full next week."

"He began to wax eloquent about his favorite childhood memories."

Related: wane; beeswax; polish; paraffin; increase



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Laid to rest

This phrase is highly formal and respectful. When used for people, it is almost always found in obituaries or news reports. When used for ideas or rumors, it implies a sense of finality-that the subject will never be brought up again.

Meaning 1

To bury a deceased person; a polite way to say someone has been buried or their funeral has concluded. ESL learners may take the phrase literally, thinking someone is simply lying down to take a nap or sleep. They might not realize it refers specifically to death and burial.

"The former president was laid to rest in a private ceremony yesterday."

"After the long service, her grandfather was finally laid to rest at the family plot."

Meaning 2

To finish or settle a matter permanently, such as a rumor, a fear, or an argument.

This metaphorical use can be confusing because it treats an abstract concept (like a rumor) as if it were a body being buried. Learners may not understand that the 'rest' here means 'ending' or 'stopping' the discussion.

"The company's official statement finally laid the rumors of a merger to rest."

"I hope this evidence will lay your fears to rest once and for all."

Related: buried; interred; put an end to; settled; passed away



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Hand in

Separable.

Meaning 1

To submit or give something to someone in authority.

Common for homework or reports.

"Don't forget to hand in your essay by Friday."

"I handed in my resignation."

Related: submit; turn in



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