

Tricky Words of the Day

Sunday, May 24, 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

Holey / Holy / Wholly

To remember the difference, look at the root words: 'hole' (a gap), 'holy' (sacred), and 'whole' (complete). In spoken English, you must rely entirely on the context of the sentence to know which one is being used.

Meaning 1

holey: full of holes or gaps

ESL learners often confuse this with 'holy' because they sound identical. It is an adjective derived from the noun 'hole'. It is most commonly used to describe old clothes or porous surfaces.

"I need to throw away these holey socks."

"The old wooden fence was holey and falling apart."

Meaning 2

holy: sacred, religious, or dedicated to God

This is a high-frequency word in religious contexts. Learners may struggle to distinguish it from 'holey' in spoken English, leading to unintentional humor (e.g., calling a sacred book 'holey' implies it has physical holes in the pages).

"The Ganges is considered a holy river in India."

"They visited several holy sites during their pilgrimage."

Meaning 3

wholly: completely, fully, or entirely

This is an adverb derived from the word 'whole'. Because the 'w' is silent, it sounds exactly like the other two words. Learners often misspell it as 'holy' when they mean 'completely'.

"The report was wholly inaccurate."

"I am wholly committed to finishing this project on time."

Related: sacred; entirely; porous; whole; hole



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/holey-holy-wholly

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Intern

Pay close attention to word stress. If you stress the first syllable, people will think of a job; if you stress the second syllable, people will think of jail or detention. Also, do not confuse 'intern' with 'internal,' which relates to the inside of something.

Meaning 1

A student or trainee who works, sometimes without pay, in order to gain work experience.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (IN-tern). It is confusing because it can refer to both a paid professional and an unpaid student, and the role varies significantly across different industries.

"The marketing intern is helping us with the social media campaign."

"After finishing medical school, she started her year as a surgical intern."

Meaning 2

To confine someone as a prisoner, especially for political or military reasons during a war.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (in-TERN). This is highly confusing for ESL learners because the meaning changes from a positive career step to a negative, forced imprisonment.

"The government decided to intern enemy aliens during the conflict."

"They were interned in a camp for the duration of the war."

Related: internship; internment; trainee; detain; apprentice



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Stand pat

This phrase is often used in business, politics, and sports. It implies a deliberate choice to remain stable or resistant to change rather than being lazy or stuck.

Meaning 1

To refuse to change one's mind, opinion, or a current situation.

This is confusing because the word 'pat' usually refers to a light touch with the hand. In this context, it has nothing to do with touching. It originates from poker, where a player who 'stands pat' keeps their original hand without drawing new cards.

"Despite the pressure from the media, the governor decided to stand pat on his decision."

"The company is going to stand pat with its current marketing strategy for another year."

Related: hold firm; stick to your guns; stay the course; unwavering



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Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Haters

The phrase 'Haters gonna hate' is a very common idiom used to mean that some people will always find something to complain about, no matter what you do. It is best to ignore them.

Meaning 1

People who are cynical or pessimistic about a specific trend, hobby, or popular thing.

Learners might be confused because the word is often used as a label for a group (e.g., 'the haters') rather than describing a specific action. It implies the person is 'hating' just for the sake of being negative.

"The movie was a huge hit despite what the haters said."

"I'm not a hater, I just think that brand is overpriced."

Meaning 2

People who express dislike or criticism toward someone, often out of jealousy or without a valid reason.

ESL learners may think this refers to people who feel intense, literal 'hatred' (a very strong emotion). In slang, however, it is used more lightly to describe anyone who is being negative, cynical, or unsupportive of someone else's success.

"Don't listen to the haters"

"your new song is actually great."

Related: trolls; naysayers; critics; shade; salty



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Sanguine

Sanguine is a 'contronym' because it can imply both something positive (cheerfulness) and something negative (bloodiness/violence). In modern professional English, it almost always means 'optimistic.' If you see it in older literature or art descriptions, it likely refers to the color red or blood.

Meaning 1

Optimistic, hopeful, or confident, especially in a difficult situation.

This is the most common modern usage. ESL learners may find it confusing because the word's Latin root 'sanguis' means blood, yet it describes a positive mental state.

"Despite the economic downturn, the CEO remained sanguine about the company's future."

"He is surprisingly sanguine about his chances of winning the election."

Meaning 2

Blood-red in color or relating to blood; bloody or bloodthirsty.

This meaning is the literal root of the word. It creates a contronym effect because it can describe something violent or macabre, which is the opposite of the 'cheerful' definition.

"The sunset bathed the valley in a deep sanguine glow."

"The battle was a sanguine affair, leaving many casualties on the field."

Meaning 3

In the archaic 'four humors' theory, having a temperament dominated by blood, characterized by a ruddy complexion and a courageous, passionate nature.

This historical medical context explains how the word transitioned from 'bloody' to 'cheerful.' A person with a 'sanguine' temperament was thought to be healthy and ruddy-faced, thus happy.

"According to medieval medicine, a sanguine person was naturally sociable and full of life."

"Her sanguine complexion suggested she spent much of her time outdoors."

Related: optimistic; buoyant; ruddy; crimson; bloodthirsty



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Jack of all trades

In modern English, the phrase is often used positively to describe someone adaptable. However, the full historical version 'Jack of all trades, master of none' is used to warn against being too broad and not specializing enough. Always check the tone of the speaker.

Meaning 1

A person who has many different skills or can do many different types of work.

ESL learners may be confused because 'Jack' is a common name, but here it is used as a generic term for a person. Additionally, 'trades' refers to professional skills or crafts rather than the act of swapping items.

"Our handyman is a real jack of all trades"

"he fixed the sink, the roof, and the electrical wiring."

Meaning 2

The first half of the full proverb 'Jack of all trades, master of none,' implying someone who is competent but not an expert in any one field.

The phrase can be confusing because it can be used as a compliment (versatility) or a subtle insult (lack of expertise). Learners must look for context to see if the speaker is praising or criticizing the person.

"He's a jack of all trades, but I'm worried he doesn't have the deep knowledge we need for this specific project."

"She's a jack of all trades, which makes her the perfect person to manage our diverse team."

Related: handyman; polymath; generalist; versatile; factotum



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Stick

ESL learners often find 'stick' confusing because it functions as both a noun and a verb with very different meanings. Additionally, it is part of many phrasal verbs like 'stick to' (continue doing something) or 'stick out' (be noticeable). Its past tense 'stuck' is also used as an adjective.

Meaning 1

A thin piece of wood that has fallen or been cut from a tree.

This is the most common noun form. It refers to a physical object found in nature or used as a tool (like a walking stick).

"The dog ran to fetch the stick."

"We gathered dry sticks to start a campfire."

Meaning 2

To attach something to a surface using glue or tape; or to become fixed in one place.

This is a common verb form. It can describe physical adhesion or the state of being unable to move (being 'stuck').

"Please stick the label on the box."

"The car wheels began to stick in the thick mud."

Related: stuck; sticky; sticker; stick to; stick with



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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Less fortunate

This phrase is considered 'politically correct' and is very common in formal writing, speeches, and charity advertisements. While 'poor' is a direct adjective, 'less fortunate' is a noun phrase (the less fortunate) or an adjective phrase used to show empathy and respect.

Meaning 1

A polite way to describe people who are poor, living in poverty, or experiencing difficult life circumstances. ESL learners may take the words literally, thinking it only refers to people with 'bad luck.' In reality, it is a socially sensitive way to avoid using the blunt and potentially offensive word 'poor.'

"The charity collects toys during the holidays to give to less fortunate children."

"We should be grateful for what we have and try to help those who are less fortunate."

Meaning 2

A comparative term used to describe someone who has fewer opportunities or advantages than the speaker.

The word 'less' implies a comparison, but the person being compared to is often unstated. Learners might be confused about who the person is 'less' fortunate than (usually the general middle class or the speaker themselves).

"Growing up in a wealthy neighborhood, he rarely interacted with people from less fortunate backgrounds."

"The scholarship program is designed to support students from less fortunate families."

Related: underprivileged; disadvantaged; impoverished; low-income; in need



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Cut down on

Inseparable. Often followed by 'on'.

Meaning 1

To reduce the amount or use of something.

Common for habits like smoking or spending.

"I need to cut down on sugar."

"The doctor told him to cut down on alcohol."

Related: reduce; decrease



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