

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, May 26, 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

So / Sew / Sow

To remember the difference: 'Sew' has an 'e' like 'nEEdle.' 'Sow' has an 'o' like 'Outdoors.' 'So' is the short word used for connecting ideas. Be careful with 'sow'-if you are talking about a pig, it rhymes with 'cow'!



Meaning 1

sew: A verb meaning to join or repair pieces of cloth or leather using a needle and thread.

The spelling is highly irregular; the 'ew' usually makes a /u/ sound (like in 'new' or 'few'), but here it sounds like 'oh.' This leads learners to mispronounce it or misspell it as 'sow'.

"My grandmother taught me how to sew a button onto my shirt."

"She is sewing a custom dress for the wedding."



Meaning 2

sow: A verb meaning to plant seeds in the ground by scattering them.

This word is a 'double threat' for learners. Not only is it a homophone for 'so' and 'sew,' but it is also a homograph. When pronounced /so/, it means to plant; when pronounced /sa/, it refers to a female pig.

"Farmers usually sow their wheat crops in the spring."

"You must sow the seeds evenly across the garden bed."



Meaning 3

so: An adverb used for emphasis (meaning 'very') or a conjunction used to show a result (meaning 'therefore').

ESL learners often confuse 'so' with 'very' or 'too.' Additionally, because it sounds identical to 'sew' and 'sow,' students may misspell it when writing from dictation.

"The weather is so beautiful today!"

"It was raining, so I decided to stay home."

Related: stitch; therefore; plant; thread; consequently



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/so-sew-sow

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Moderate

The key to mastering this word is the 'ate' ending. If it is an action (verb), say 'ate'. If it is a description (adjective), say 'it'. In politics, a 'moderate' (noun) also uses the 'it' pronunciation.

Meaning 1

Average in amount, intensity, quality, or degree; not extreme.

As an adjective, the word ends with a soft 'it' sound. ESL learners often struggle with the 'schwa' sound in the final syllable and may confuse it with the verb pronunciation.

"The doctor suggested doing moderate exercise three times a week."

"The hotel was available at a moderate price compared to the luxury resorts."

**Meaning 2**

To monitor or preside over a discussion, meeting, or online forum to ensure rules are followed.

As a verb, the final syllable is pronounced with a long 'A' sound (like 'ate'). Learners may not realize that changing the part of speech changes the vowel sound.

"She was asked to moderate the panel discussion at the conference."

"The comments on the website are moderated to prevent spam."

**Meaning 3**

To make something less extreme, intense, or violent.

This is another verb usage where the word means to 'tone down' something. It is confusing because it describes the action of moving toward the 'moderate' adjective state.

"The wind began to moderate as the storm moved out to sea."

"He had to moderate his political views to appeal to more voters."



Related: Moderator; Moderation; Medium; Temperate; Average



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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Call it quits

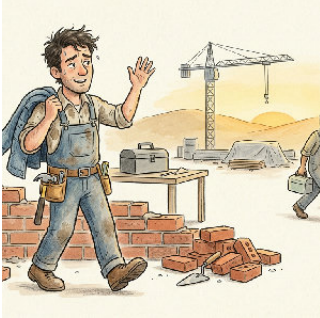
This idiom is very common in both professional and casual settings. It often implies a sense of finality or mutual agreement to stop. It is almost always used with the word 'it'-you cannot say 'call the job quits.'

Meaning 1

To stop doing something, especially after a long period of effort or because of a disagreement.

ESL learners may be confused because 'call' usually implies speaking or naming, and 'quits' is an unusual plural form of 'quit'. Literally, it sounds like you are giving a name to a situation, rather than stopping an action.

"We've been working on this project for ten hours"
"let's call it quits for the night."

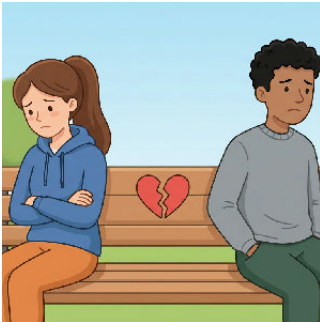


Meaning 2

To end a romantic relationship or marriage.

In this context, the phrase is used as a euphemism for breaking up. Learners might not realize that 'it' refers to the entire relationship, not just a specific task.

"After years of arguing, they finally decided to call it quits."
"I think it's time for us to call it quits and move on with our lives."



Meaning 3

To agree that a debt or a score is settled and that no one owes anything to the other.

This usage relates to the idea of being 'even.' A learner might think the speaker is giving up on the money, but it actually means the balance is now zero and the matter is closed.

"You paid for lunch and I paid for the taxi, so let's call it quits."
"If you help me move this sofa, we'll call it quits on the ten dollars you owe me."



Related: call it a day; break up; even the score; give up; throw in the towel



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/call-it-quits

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

I am chill

While 'chill' literally relates to low temperatures, in modern English slang, it almost always refers to a person's attitude. Be careful not to confuse 'I am chill' (I am relaxed) with 'I have a chill' (I am shivering/cold).

**Meaning 1**

To be relaxed, calm, or easy-going in personality or current mood.

ESL learners often learn 'chill' as a noun for coldness or a verb meaning to cool down. Using it as an adjective to describe a person's temperament can be confusing because it doesn't mean the person is physically cold.

"Don't worry about the mess"

"my roommate is very chill."

**Meaning 2**

To be unconcerned, okay with a situation, or not angry.

In this context, 'I am chill' is used to signal agreement or a lack of conflict. A learner might mistake this for meaning the speaker is bored or indifferent, rather than simply being 'at peace' with a decision.

"If you want to change our plans to Friday, I am chill with that."

"He apologized for being late, and I told him, 'It's fine, I'm chill.'"

**Meaning 3**

To be 'cool' or trendy in a low-key, effortless way.

This refers to a social vibe. Learners may struggle to distinguish between 'being chill' (relaxed) and 'being a chill person' (someone who is socially acceptable and pleasant to be around).

"You should meet my brother"

"he's really chill."

Related: laid-back; easy-going; mellow; cool; relaxed



Read the full lesson

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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Stakeholder

The confusion often stems from the homophone 'steak' (meat) and the multiple meanings of 'stake'. In a business context, 'stakeholder' is much broader than 'shareholder' (who owns stock); a stakeholder can be an employee, a customer, or even the government.

Meaning 1

A person or group with a direct interest or investment in a business, project, or organization.

In modern business, this is the most common usage. ESL learners may be confused because the 'stake' refers to an interest or share, not a physical wooden post or a piece of meat (steak). It implies someone who has something to gain or lose.

"The local community is a key stakeholder in the new factory project."

"We need to get approval from all stakeholders before changing the company policy."

**Meaning 2**

A neutral third party who holds money or property while a dispute or bet is being resolved.

This is the original legal definition and creates a contronym (opposite) effect. While the business 'stakeholder' is deeply involved and biased toward their own interest, this 'stakeholder' must be entirely disinterested and neutral, simply holding the 'stakes' for others.

"The lawyer acted as a stakeholder for the funds until the contract was signed."

"In a high-stakes bet, a trusted stakeholder holds the money to ensure the winner gets paid."



Related: shareholder; investor; interest; trustee; vested interest



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/stakeholder

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Long shot

The term originates from sports and combat where hitting a target from a great distance is extremely difficult. In modern English, it is most commonly used to describe business risks or unlikely sports victories.

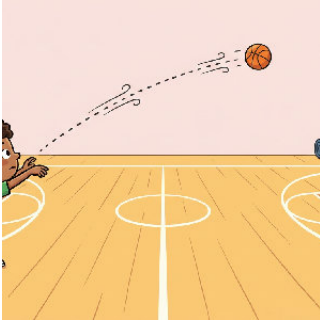
Meaning 1

An attempt or a guess that has a very low chance of succeeding.

ESL learners may take the phrase literally, imagining a physical shot (like a gun or a ball) from a great distance, rather than understanding it as a metaphor for low probability.

"It's a long shot, but I'm going to apply for the CEO position anyway."

"Winning the lottery is a long shot for anyone."



Meaning 2

Used in the negative phrase 'not by a long shot' to mean 'not at all' or 'nowhere near.'

The addition of 'not by a' changes the phrase into an adverbial intensifier, which can be difficult for learners to parse grammatically.

"The race isn't over yet, not by a long shot."

"He is not the best candidate for the job, not by a long shot."



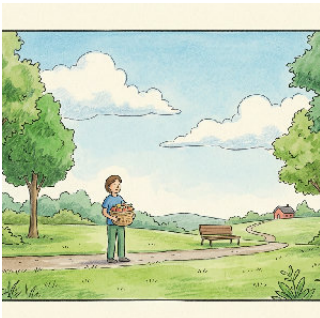
Meaning 3

In filmmaking and photography, a camera view that shows the entire subject and the surrounding environment.

This technical usage is confusing because it shifts from a metaphorical meaning (probability) to a literal description of distance and scale in visual media.

"The director used a long shot to show the lone traveler walking across the vast desert."

"We need a long shot here to capture the beauty of the entire mountain range."



Related: underdog; dark horse; slim chance; wide-angle; improbable



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Deal cards

ESL learners might be confused because 'deal' has many meanings (a business agreement, a large amount, or distributing items). In the context of cards, it specifically refers to the act of giving them out.

Meaning 1

To distribute playing cards to players in a game.

This is the literal meaning used in games like poker or blackjack. The person doing this is called the 'dealer'.

"It is your turn to deal cards to the group."

"The dealer will deal cards face down."

**Meaning 2**

To handle a difficult situation or accept the circumstances one is given.

This is a figurative use (often phrased as 'the hand you're dealt'). It means managing the specific challenges life gives you.

"Life isn't always fair, but you have to play the cards you're dealt."

"He was dealt a bad hand with his health problems, but he stays positive."



Related: shuffle; dealer; hand; deck; suit



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

No longer with us

This is a very common 'soft' expression used to avoid the harshness of the word 'died.' However, in business, always clarify the context. If someone says a colleague is 'no longer with us,' they usually mean the person left the job. If they say it with a sad tone at a funeral or family gathering, they mean the person has passed away.

Meaning 1

A way to indicate that someone has left an organization, group, or employment.

In a professional context, this phrase is often used to say someone was fired or resigned without being blunt. This is confusing because the same phrase is used for death, and the listener must rely entirely on context to know if the person is dead or just unemployed.

"Regarding your previous account manager, she is no longer with us, so I will be taking over your case."

"If a player doesn't follow the team rules, they will soon find they are no longer with us."

Meaning 2

A polite or indirect way of saying that someone has died.

ESL learners may interpret this literally, thinking the person has simply left the room, moved to a different city, or quit a job. Because it avoids the word 'dead,' it can cause significant misunderstanding in serious situations.

"I'm so sorry to tell you that your grandfather is no longer with us."

"The company founder is no longer with us, but his legacy lives on."



Related: passed away; departed; late; let go; moved on



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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Take over

Separable in some contexts.

**Meaning 1**

To take control or responsibility for something.

ESL learners often confuse with physically taking something over a distance.

"The new manager will take over next month."

"Who will take over the project when I leave?"

Related: assume control; take charge



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