

Tricky Words of the Day

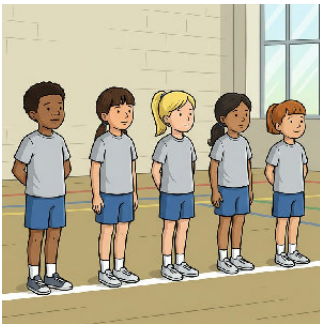
Wednesday, May 27, 2026

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

Toe / Tow

Remember: 'Toe' is part of your foot (ends in 'e' like 'foot' has an 'o'). 'Tow' is for pulling a car (ends in 'w' like 'wheel'). They are pronounced exactly the same, so you must use context to determine the meaning.



Meaning 1

Toe the line (idiom): To follow the rules or behave according to standard expectations.

This is a major source of confusion for advanced learners. Because 'tow' involves pulling, many people (including native speakers) incorrectly think the phrase is 'tow the line'. However, it refers to placing one's 'toe' on a starting line.

"New employees are expected to toe the line regarding company policy."

"If he doesn't start to toe the line, he might lose his job."



Meaning 2

Toe (noun): One of the five separate parts at the end of the human foot.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'tow' because they sound identical. It is a physical body part, but it also appears in many idioms like 'toe the line' which learners often mistakenly spell as 'tow the line'.

"I stubbed my big toe on the edge of the bed."

"She stood on her toes to reach the top shelf."



Meaning 3

Tow (verb/noun): To pull a vehicle or boat behind another vehicle using a rope or chain.

This is confusing because it sounds exactly like the body part. Learners may struggle to distinguish between the physical action of pulling a car and the anatomical term when listening to spoken English.

"Our car broke down and we had to call a truck to tow it to the garage."

"The boat was taken in tow by the coast guard."

Related: mistletoe; tow truck; tiptoe; towing capacity



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/toe-tow

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Mouth

Pay close attention to the 'th' sound. When it is a noun (the body part), it is unvoiced (/θ/). When it is a verb (the action of moving lips), it is voiced (/ð/). This is a common pattern in English noun/verb pairs like 'bath' and 'bathe'.

Meaning 1

The opening in the face used for eating and speaking.

This is the most common noun form. ESL learners may find it confusing when used metaphorically for non-human objects, such as the 'mouth of a cave' or the 'mouth of a river.'

"Keep your mouth closed while you are chewing your food."

"The explorers stood at the mouth of the dark cave."

**Meaning 2**

To speak in a way that is not sincere or to say something without really meaning it.

This is a figurative verb usage. It implies that the person is just going through the motions of speaking without any heart or belief behind the words.

"He just mouthed the usual platitudes about hard work."

"Stop mouthing slogans and tell me what you actually think."

**Meaning 3**

To move the lips as if speaking, but without making any sound.

As a homograph, the pronunciation changes slightly. The final 'th' sound is voiced like 'the' (/ð/) instead of unvoiced like 'think' (/θ/). Learners often miss this subtle phonetic shift.

"The prompter would mouth the words to the actor from offstage."

"I saw her mouth the words 'help me' across the crowded room."



Related: oral; lip-sync; utter; opening; estuary



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/mouth

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Bent out of shape

This idiom is very common in American English. It is often used with the verbs 'get' or 'be'. To help remember it, imagine a piece of metal that is no longer straight and smooth; similarly, a person's 'smooth' or calm mood has been twisted by anger.

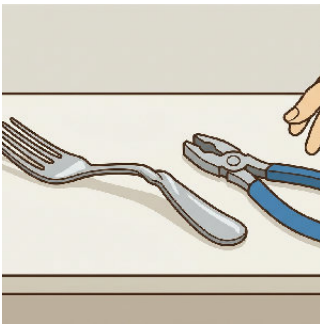
**Meaning 1**

To become very angry, upset, or annoyed, often about something that is not very important.

ESL learners may take this literally and think a physical object or a person's body has been physically twisted or deformed. In reality, it describes an emotional state of agitation.

"Don't get so bent out of shape just because I'm five minutes late."

"He got all bent out of shape when he found out they changed the seating chart."

**Meaning 2**

To be physically deformed or crooked through force or pressure.

This is the literal meaning. Confusion arises because the same phrase can describe a damaged car bumper or a person's angry reaction, requiring the learner to rely entirely on context.

"The bicycle wheel got bent out of shape after he hit the curb."

"The metal frame was bent out of shape by the extreme heat of the fire."

**Meaning 3**

Under the influence of alcohol or drugs (slang).

In some informal contexts, 'bent' or 'bent out of shape' can refer to intoxication. This is confusing because it shifts from an emotional description to a physical/chemical state of impairment.

"They went to the party and got completely bent out of shape."

Related: worked up; agitated; indignant; distorted; pissed off



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bent-out-of-shape

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Nope

The 'p' sound at the end is often 'unreleased,' meaning you close your lips to make the sound but don't let a puff of air out. It is much more informal than 'no' and should not be used in business meetings or formal essays.

Meaning 1

An informal way of saying 'no'.

It is a casual variation of 'no' used to express disagreement or refusal. It is considered slang because it is informal and primarily used in spoken English or casual texting rather than professional writing.

"Are you finished with your homework? Nope."

"Do you want to go for a run in the rain? Nope, I'm staying inside."



Related: no; nah; negative; nix



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/nope

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Puzzle

The word 'puzzle' is a contronym because it can mean both the act of being confused and the act of solving that confusion (especially when used as 'puzzle out'). ESL learners should pay close attention to whether the word is being used as a noun (a thing), a verb (an action of confusing), or a phrasal verb (the action of solving).

Meaning 1

To cause someone to feel confused or baffled (to create a problem).

In this sense, the word acts as a verb meaning to complicate or make something difficult to understand. ESL learners may find it confusing because the word itself describes the state of not knowing the answer.

"The strange noise from the engine began to puzzle the mechanic."

"Her sudden decision to quit her job puzzles everyone in the office."

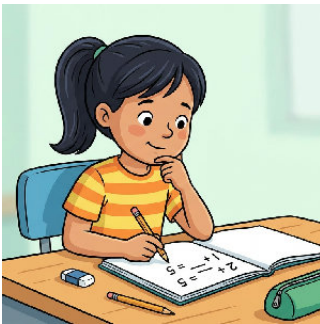
**Meaning 2**

To solve or figure something out through careful thought (to resolve a problem).

This is the 'contronym' aspect. When used with the preposition 'out' (to puzzle out), the word means the exact opposite of being confused—it means to reach a state of clarity and understanding.

"She finally managed to puzzle out the meaning of the cryptic message."

"We spent hours trying to puzzle out the best way to fix the broken sink."

**Meaning 3**

A game, toy, or problem designed to test ingenuity or knowledge.

As a noun, it refers to the physical object (like a jigsaw puzzle) or the abstract problem itself. Learners often confuse the noun 'puzzle' with the verb 'to puzzle' or the adjective 'puzzled'.

"I am missing one piece from this 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle."

"The detective treated the entire crime scene like a giant puzzle."



Related: perplex; baffle; riddle; enigma; conundrum; decipher



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/puzzle

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Not all it's cracked up to be

This phrase is almost always used in the negative. You would rarely hear someone say something 'is all it's cracked up to be' unless they are specifically contradicting someone else's disappointment. It is a very common way to express that something was overhyped.

Meaning 1

A feeling of disappointment when reality does not meet high expectations.

The phrase is difficult because it is a passive construction ('cracked up to be') that doesn't specify who is doing the 'cracking' (praising). Learners might try to translate it literally and think something is broken.

"The new software update was supposed to be revolutionary, but it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"Living in a big city is not all it's cracked up to be when you consider the high cost of rent."

**Meaning 2**

Not as good, impressive, or exciting as people claim it is or as it is advertised to be.

ESL learners may be confused by the word 'cracked,' which usually refers to physical damage or breaking. In this context, it is an archaic usage meaning 'to boast' or 'to praise highly,' which is no longer used in modern English outside of this specific phrase.

"I finally visited the famous restaurant, but the food was not all it's cracked up to be."

"Being a celebrity might seem glamorous, but many stars say it's not all it's cracked up to be."



Related: overrated; disappointing; letdown; underwhelming; hype



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/not-all-it-s-cracked-up-to-be

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Crazy

ESL learners should be careful with this word. While it is very common in casual speech to mean 'cool' or 'surprising,' using it to describe a person can sometimes be offensive or rude depending on the context. It can also be used as an adverb (slang) to mean 'very,' as in 'It's crazy hot outside.'

Meaning 1

Extremely enthusiastic, excited, or impressed; very much in love.

In casual conversation, 'crazy' is frequently used as a positive intensifier. It describes a high level of interest or affection rather than mental instability.

"I'm crazy about this new song!"

"The fans went crazy when the team scored a goal."



Meaning 2

Mentally ill or insane; behaving in a wild or uncontrolled way.

This is the literal, clinical, or traditional meaning. In modern English, it is often considered insensitive to use this to describe people with actual mental health conditions, but it is still used to describe wild behavior.

"The driver was going at a crazy speed."

"It sounds crazy, but I think I saw a ghost."



Related: insane; mad; wild; nuts; absurd; passionate



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/crazy

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Non-traditional student

In the US and UK, 'traditional' students are typically 18-22 years old and live on campus. Anyone outside this norm—due to age, family, or work—is 'non-traditional.' Note that this term is almost exclusively used in higher education (college/university) and not in primary or secondary school.

Meaning 1

A university or college student who does not follow the standard path of attending school immediately after high school.

ESL learners may find this confusing because 'traditional' usually refers to culture or customs. In an academic context, it refers specifically to age and timing. A student might be 40 years old, but they are still called a 'student,' which is usually associated with youth.

"As a non-traditional student, Maria balanced her accounting classes with a full-time job and parenting."

"The university offers a lounge specifically for non-traditional students to network with other adult learners."

**Meaning 2**

A polite way (euphemism) to describe an 'older' or 'mature' student without focusing on their age.

This is used as a euphemism to avoid the potential stigma of being 'old' in a classroom. Learners might be confused why the word 'old' or 'adult' isn't used directly; 'non-traditional' sounds more professional and inclusive in administrative settings.

"The scholarship is reserved for non-traditional students returning to the workforce after a long break."

"He felt out of place at the freshman orientation until he met a few other non-traditional students in their thirties."

**Meaning 3**

A student who meets specific criteria such as being financially independent, having dependents, or attending school part-time.

The term can be confusing because it isn't just about age; it's a technical category for students with 'adult' responsibilities. An ESL learner might be 'non-traditional' even if they are young, provided they are married or working full-time.

"Even though she is only 22, her status as a veteran makes her a non-traditional student."

"Non-traditional students often require night classes because of their professional commitments."



Related: mature student; adult learner; continuing education; re-entry student; lifelong learning



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/non-traditional-student

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Make out

Separable in some senses. Context is important for the slang meaning.

Meaning 1

To be able to see, hear, or understand something with difficulty.

ESL learners may think it means creating something. It means barely perceiving.

"I can just make out the sign in the fog."

"Can you make out what he's saying?"

**Meaning 2**

To kiss and touch passionately (slang).

Adult/slang meaning that surprises many learners.

"They were making out in the car."



Related: discern; kiss passionately



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/make-out



Scan to visit

eslwordwiz.com

© 2026 ESL Word Wiz. This PDF may be shared freely as long as ESL Word Wiz branding and all links remain intact.

SLWordWiz.com