

Tricky Words of the Day

Friday, May 29, 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.

Homograph · Lesson 1 of 7

Peaked

The most important distinction for learners is the pronunciation change for the 'sickly' meaning. While 'peaked' (at the top) and 'peaked' (pointed) rhyme with 'leaked', the version meaning 'sickly' rhymes with 'wicked'. Additionally, be careful not to write 'peaked my interest'-the correct spelling for that specific idiom is 'piqued'.

Meaning 1

Having a pointed shape or a brim (like a cap).

Pronounced as one syllable (peekt). This refers to the physical shape of an object resembling a mountain peak, often used to describe hats or roofs.

"The officer wore a peaked cap as part of his formal uniform."

"The house featured a high, peaked roof to help the snow slide off."

Meaning 2

Having reached the highest point of development, success, or intensity.

Pronounced as one syllable (peekt). ESL learners often confuse this with its homophones 'piqued' (stimulated interest) or 'peeked' (looked quickly). It implies someone has passed their best moment.

"The athlete peaked during the 2012 Olympics and never won another medal."

"The band's popularity peaked in the late nineties."

Meaning 3

Looking pale, thin, or sickly.

Pronounced as two syllables (PEE-kid). This is a rare case where the 'ed' ending creates an extra syllable in an adjective form, which contradicts standard past-tense pronunciation rules.

"You look a bit peaked today"

"are you feeling under the weather?"

Related: peak; piqued; peeked; pale; wan; climax; summit



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Idiom · Lesson 2 of 7

In the long run

This idiom is the opposite of 'in the short term.' It is commonly used in business, economics, and personal advice to encourage people to think about the future rather than just today. It is almost always preceded by the preposition 'in'.

Meaning 1

Over a long period of time; eventually; in the end.

ESL learners often take this literally, thinking it refers to physical exercise or a long-distance race. They may be confused when it is used in contexts like finance or decision-making where no physical running is involved.

"It seems expensive now, but buying a high-quality car will save you money in the long run."

"Learning a new language is difficult at first, but it is very rewarding in the long run."

Meaning 2

Relating to the final result of a situation rather than the immediate or short-term effects.

The word 'run' suggests continuous movement, which can lead learners to think the action is still happening, rather than focusing on the ultimate outcome or conclusion.

"In the long run, these small changes to the environment will make a big difference."

"We shouldn't worry about daily stock market fluctuations"

Related: eventually; ultimately; in the end; down the road; long-term



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Slang · Lesson 3 of 7

My bad

This phrase is very common in American English. It is strictly informal. Do not use it with your boss or in formal writing. It is best used among friends or peers when the mistake is small and easily fixed.

Meaning 1

An informal way to say 'I'm sorry' or 'it was my mistake.'

ESL learners are taught that 'bad' is an adjective, but here it is used as a noun. Grammatically, it should be 'my mistake' or 'my fault.' Using an adjective in a noun's place is confusing for those following strict grammar rules.

"I forgot to bring your book today. My bad!"

"Oh, I stepped on your toe! My bad, I didn't see you there."

Meaning 2

A casual acknowledgment of a minor error.

The phrase is only appropriate for small mistakes. If a learner uses it for a serious situation (like a car accident or a major work error), it can sound disrespectful or like they aren't taking the situation seriously.

"I sent the email to the wrong person. My bad, I'll resend it now."

"My bad, I thought we were meeting at five o'clock instead of four."

Related: my fault; my mistake; oops; apologies; whoops



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Contronym · Lesson 4 of 7**Out of**

As a contronym, 'out of' is tricky because it can mean 'originating from' (having) or 'depleted' (not having). Context is key: if followed by a container, it usually means movement; if followed by a noun like 'luck' or 'time', it means the supply is gone.

Meaning 1

From the inside to the outside; movement away from a center or origin.

This is the literal spatial meaning. It confuses learners because it can describe both physical movement (leaving a room) and the material something is made from (origin).

"He walked out of the house."

"The statue was carved out of solid marble."

Meaning 2

No longer having something; a state of depletion or absence.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. Instead of describing where something is coming from, it describes what is missing. Learners often struggle to understand how 'out of' can mean 'zero'.

"We are out of milk, so I need to go to the store."

"I am out of breath after running up the stairs."

Meaning 3

From a specific group or total number; used to express ratios or motives.

This usage is mathematical or psychological. It indicates a selection from a set or the reason behind an action, which feels disconnected from the physical 'inside/outside' logic.

"Nine out of ten students passed the exam."

"I asked the question out of curiosity."

Related: from; depleted; lacking; exterior; ratio



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Figure of Speech · Lesson 5 of 7

Out on a limb

The word 'limb' specifically refers to a large branch of a tree. The idiom creates a mental image of someone walking away from the sturdy trunk of a tree onto a thin branch that might break. It is often used with the verbs 'go' or 'put oneself'.

Meaning 1

To be in a vulnerable or risky position where you lack support from others.

ESL learners may be confused because the literal meaning involves climbing a tree branch (a limb). Figuratively, it means taking a risk where you might 'fall' or fail because no one else is helping you.

"I'm going out on a limb here, but I think our team will win the championship."

"She went out on a limb to defend her colleague's controversial idea."

Meaning 2

To express an opinion or make a guess that might be wrong or unpopular.

This usage is confusing because it implies social or intellectual risk rather than physical danger. It suggests the speaker is aware they are making a bold claim without proof.

"I'll go out on a limb and say that the price of gold will drop next month."

"He really put himself out on a limb by predicting the election results so early."

Related: vulnerable; risky; stick one's neck out; gamble; unsupported



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Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 7**Part**

The word 'part' is versatile. As a noun, it usually refers to a piece of a whole. As a verb, it almost always involves separation. Watch out for the phrase 'part and parcel,' which means an essential portion of something.

Meaning 1

To divide or separate things, such as hair with a comb or people saying goodbye.

This usage is confusing because it functions as a verb meaning 'to separate.' Learners may struggle with the phrase 'parting ways' or the specific noun for the line on a person's head.

"She used a comb to part her hair down the middle."

"It was difficult for the two friends to part at the airport."

Meaning 2

A role in a play or movie, or a specific portion of a larger task or amount.

Learners may not realize that 'part' can refer to an actor's character or the script they must memorize, as well as a fraction of time or work.

"He got the lead part in the school play."

"I did my part of the project, so now it is your turn."

Meaning 3

A piece or component that is combined with others to form a whole machine or object.

ESL learners often confuse 'part' with 'piece.' In technical contexts, a 'part' is a specific, functional component (like a car part), whereas a 'piece' is often more general or broken off.

"The mechanic ordered a new part for the engine."

"This toy has many small parts that are difficult to assemble."

Related: component; separate; divide; role; section; segment



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Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 7

Pay a visit to the little room

This is a British-influenced euphemism. In American English, people are more likely to say 'visit the restroom' or 'use the facilities.' The 'little room' specifically refers to the water closet (WC). It is considered very polite and slightly old-fashioned.

Meaning 1

To go to the bathroom or restroom to use the toilet.

ESL learners may take the phrase literally and look for a physically small room or think the speaker is visiting a child's bedroom. They might not realize it is a polite way to avoid saying the word 'toilet' or 'bathroom' in social settings.

"Excuse me for a moment, I need to pay a visit to the little room before we leave."

"If you need to pay a visit to the little room, it's just down the hallway on the left."

Meaning 2

A polite social signal used to excuse oneself from a conversation or table.

The confusion arises because the speaker is not actually interested in the 'room' itself, but is using the phrase as a social tool to leave a group temporarily without being graphic about their bodily needs.

"I'll be right back"

"I just need to pay a visit to the little room."

Related: powder my nose; use the facilities; restroom; washroom; nature calls



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