

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, June 3, 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

Bean / Been

In fast, natural speech, 'been' is often reduced to sound like 'bin' (/bn/), whereas 'bean' almost always retains the long /i:/ sound. If you hear a quick, short vowel, it is likely the verb 'been'. If the vowel is stretched out, it is likely the food 'bean'.

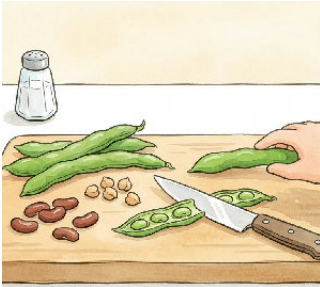
Meaning 1

Bean (noun): An edible seed or pod from various plants, often used in cooking.

ESL learners may confuse the spelling with its homophone 'been' because they sound identical in many dialects, especially when 'been' is stressed.

"I added a black bean to the salad."

"Coffee is actually made from a roasted bean."



Meaning 2

Been (verb): The past participle of the verb 'to be'.

This is a high-frequency functional word used in perfect tenses. Learners often misspell it as 'bean' because the double 'e' in English usually creates the long /i/ sound found in the vegetable.

"I have been to London twice."

"How have you been lately?"



Meaning 3

Bean (slang/informal): To hit someone on the head with an object.

This informal usage is confusing because it turns a common noun into a verb, which is unexpected for learners who only know the food definition.

"The pitcher accidentally beamed the batter with the ball."

"Watch out, or you might get beamed by that falling fruit!"



Related: legume; pulse; existed; visited; bin



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bean-been

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Relay

The confusion lies in the pronunciation and the hyphenation. While 're-lay' (to lay again) is sometimes hyphenated to avoid confusion, it is frequently written without the hyphen, making it look identical to the word for passing a message. Pay attention to the context: if it involves construction or flooring, it is likely the 'lay again' meaning.

Meaning 1

To pass along information, a message, or a physical object from one person to another.

In this context, the stress is usually on the first syllable. ESL learners may confuse this with simply 'telling' someone something, but it specifically implies a chain of communication where the speaker is a middleman.

"Please relay this message to the manager as soon as she arrives."

"The satellites relay radio signals across the Atlantic Ocean."

**Meaning 2**

A race between teams in which each member covers a specified portion of the distance.

Used as a noun, this refers to a specific type of sports competition. Learners often struggle with the transition from the verb (to pass) to the noun (the race itself).

"Our school won the 4x100 meter relay at the track meet."

"The swimmers are practicing their transitions for the medley relay."

**Meaning 3**

To lay something down again, such as a floor, carpet, or tiles.

This is the 'true' homograph trap. When it means 'to lay again,' it is pronounced /rile/ (re-lay). ESL learners often misread this in text, assuming it means 'passing information' because the spelling is identical.

"The workmen had to relay the tiles because the floor wasn't level."

"After the flood, we had to relay the entire carpet in the living room."



Related: broadcast; transmit; hand-off; re-install; baton



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/relay

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Play it by ear

This idiom is extremely common in professional settings when schedules are uncertain. A common mistake for learners is saying 'play by ear' (forgetting the 'it'). Always include 'it' unless you are specifically talking about a musical instrument (e.g., 'play the piano by ear').

Meaning 1

To perform a piece of music by memory or by listening to it, rather than reading from a musical score.

This is the literal origin of the phrase. Confusion arises because the modern figurative use (planning) is much more common than the musical use, leading learners to wonder why music terminology is used in business or social contexts.

"She never learned to read sheet music"

"She just hears a song once and can play it by ear."

**Meaning 2**

To handle a situation spontaneously without a pre-arranged plan or fixed schedule.

ESL learners often look for a literal connection to the body part (the ear). They may think it involves listening to something or physical contact with the ear, rather than the abstract concept of being flexible and making decisions as things happen.

"We don't have a dinner reservation, so let's just play it by ear and see which restaurant has a table."

"I'm not sure what time I'll finish work, so let's play it by ear regarding our meeting tonight."



Related: wing it; go with the flow; improvise; ad-lib; off the cuff



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/play-it-by-ear

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Fomo

FOMO was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013. It is very common in digital communication and casual conversation. A common antonym used today is 'JOMO' (Joy Of Missing Out), which refers to being happy staying in and relaxing.

**Meaning 1**

A social pressure to say 'yes' to every invitation or trend to avoid feeling excluded.

Learners might not realize that FOMO is often used to explain why people overcommit themselves or spend money they don't have, acting as a social motivator rather than just a simple 'fear'.

"I only bought these expensive sneakers because of FOMO"

"I didn't want to be the only one without them."

**Meaning 2**

An acronym for 'Fear Of Missing Out'; the feeling of anxiety or worry that an interesting or exciting event is happening elsewhere without you.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym pronounced as a single word rather than individual letters. It functions as a noun, but it describes a complex emotional state often triggered by social media.

"I have terrible FOMO watching everyone's vacation photos on Instagram while I'm at work."

"He went to the party despite being exhausted because he was suffering from FOMO."

Related: anxiety; exclusion; social media; JOMO; trending



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/fomo

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Toss out

The phrase is a contronym specifically in professional settings: if a boss says 'Toss out that idea,' they could mean 'delete it' or 'present it.' Context is vital. If the tone is dismissive, it means discard; if the tone is collaborative, it means suggest.

Meaning 1

To discard or throw something away because it is unwanted or useless.

ESL learners may find this confusing because 'toss' implies a light movement, but the result is permanent disposal. It is often used interchangeably with 'throw away'.

"I need to toss out these old magazines to clear some space."

"Don't toss out that milk"



Meaning 2

To suggest an idea or a suggestion for consideration.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. Instead of getting rid of something, you are 'putting it out there' for people to keep or use. This is a contronym because it can mean both to reject an idea and to offer an idea.

"Let me just toss out a few ideas for the marketing campaign."

"He tossed out a suggestion during the meeting, but no one responded."



Meaning 3

To forcibly remove someone from a place or a group.

This usage is more aggressive and refers to people rather than objects or ideas. It can be confusing because it implies a physical action that may or may not actually happen (like being 'thrown out' of a club).

"The unruly fan was tossed out of the stadium by security."

"If you keep breaking the rules, the committee will toss you out."



Related: Discard; Propose; Eject; Pitch; Scrap



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/toss-out

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Stick out like a sore thumb

This is a simile. Learners should note that 'stick out' is a phrasal verb meaning to protrude or be prominent. The phrase is almost always used to describe something that looks 'wrong' or 'mismatched' rather than something that is impressively unique.

**Meaning 1**

To appear out of place or inappropriate in a specific environment.

The confusion lies in the negative connotation. While 'standing out' can be positive (like being a star student), 'sticking out like a sore thumb' usually implies that the difference is awkward, unwanted, or aesthetically displeasing.

"I was the only person not wearing a uniform, so I stuck out like a sore thumb."

"That bright neon sign sticks out like a sore thumb in this quiet, dark neighborhood."

**Meaning 2**

To be very obvious or noticeable because of being different from the surrounding people or things.

ESL learners may be confused because the literal image of a 'sore thumb' (an injured finger) doesn't immediately suggest 'being different.' The phrase relies on the idea that an injured thumb is often swollen, red, and held awkwardly, making it impossible to ignore.

"If you wear a tuxedo to a beach party, you will stick out like a sore thumb."

"The modern glass building sticks out like a sore thumb among the historic stone cottages."

Related: conspicuous; out of place; eye-catching; mismatched; stand out



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/stick-out-like-a-sore-thumb

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Pepper

ESL learners should note the difference between 'pepper' (the spice) and 'a pepper' (the vegetable). Additionally, 'Dr Pepper' is a famous soda brand, and 'peppery' is the adjective used to describe food that has a lot of spice.

Meaning 1

A pungent spice made from dried berries (black pepper) or a vegetable that can be sweet or hot (bell pepper/chili pepper).

In its most common form, 'pepper' refers to the seasoning found on dining tables or the physical vegetable used in cooking. ESL learners often get confused because 'pepper' can be uncountable (the spice) or countable (the vegetable).

"Could you pass the salt and pepper?"

"I added some sliced green peppers to the salad."

**Meaning 2**

To hit or shower someone or something repeatedly with small objects; or to sprinkle/scatter.

As a verb, 'pepper' is used figuratively or literally to describe a rapid succession of things hitting a target, such as questions, bullets, or blows.

"The journalists began to pepper the politician with difficult questions."

"The boxer peppered his opponent with quick jabs."



Related: peppercorn; spicy; seasoning; capsicum; chili



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/pepper

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Right-sizing

This is a classic example of 'corporate speak.' It is used by management to make unpleasant news sound like a logical, strategic improvement. If you hear this at work, it usually signals job cuts rather than growth.

Meaning 1

The process of a company reducing its number of employees to save money or improve efficiency.

ESL learners may be confused because the word 'right' implies something positive or correct. However, in a business context, it is almost always a polite way to say 'laying people off' or 'firing staff.'

"The tech giant announced it would be right-sizing its workforce by 10% this quarter."

"After the merger, the company began a right-sizing initiative to eliminate redundant roles."

**Meaning 2**

Adjusting something to an appropriate or optimal size, such as moving to a smaller home or reducing inventory.

This meaning is more literal but still confusing because it masks the potential negative impact (like losing space or resources) by framing it as an 'optimization.'

"Now that the children have moved out, my parents are right-sizing by moving into a two-bedroom condo."

"The retailer is right-sizing its inventory to ensure they don't have too much unsold stock."



Related: downsizing; layoffs; restructuring; optimization; redundancy



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/right-sizing

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Come up with

Inseparable.



Related: think of; invent



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/come-up-with

Meaning 1

To think of or produce an idea or plan.

Learners may think it means coming physically upward.

"She came up with a brilliant solution."

"Can you come up with a good excuse?"



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.

ESLWordWiz.com