Tricky Words of the Day

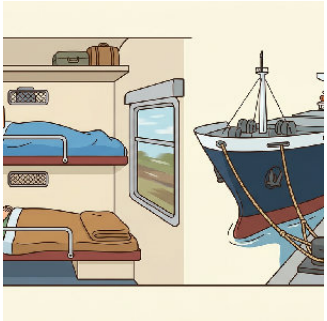
Friday, June 5, 2026

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

Birth / Berth

Remember: 'Birth' has an 'i' like 'infant'. 'Berth' has an 'e' like 'equipment' or 'engine' (related to ships and trains). They are pronounced exactly the same, so you must rely on the context of babies versus boats/beds.



Meaning 1

Berth: A fixed bunk or bed on a ship or train; also, a designated space for a ship to dock.

This is confusing because it sounds exactly like 'birth' but refers to transportation and sleeping quarters. Learners may see 'berth' in travel contexts and assume it is a misspelling of 'birth'.

"I reserved a lower berth on the overnight train to London."
"The cargo ship was guided into its berth at the harbor."

Meaning 2

Give a wide berth (Idiom): To stay a safe distance away from someone or something.

This figurative use of 'berth' is particularly tricky. ESL learners might interpret 'wide birth' (incorrect spelling) as something related to childbirth rather than keeping physical or social distance.

"The dog looks aggressive, so I would give it a wide berth."
"After their argument, she gave him a wide berth in the office."

Meaning 3

Birth: The emergence of a young from the body of its mother; the start of life.

ESL learners often confuse the spelling because the 'i' and 'e' sounds are identical in this context. It is a very common noun and verb, but its homophone 'berth' is much rarer, leading to spelling errors in writing.

"She gave birth to a healthy baby boy yesterday."
"The date of your birth must be entered on the application form."

Related: delivery; dock; bunk; origin; mooring

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/birth-berth

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Repeat

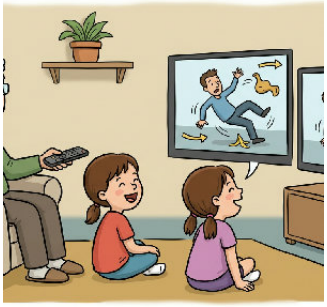
Pay close attention to word stress: use ri-PEET for the action and REE-peet for the object. Avoid the common mistake of saying 'repeat back' or 'repeat again' as the word 'repeat' already implies doing something a second time.

Meaning 1

To say, do, or provide something again.

As a verb, the stress is on the second syllable. ESL learners often struggle with the 're-' prefix, sometimes incorrectly adding 'again' (e.g., 'repeat it again'), which is redundant.

"Could you please repeat that sentence?"
"The history teacher had to repeat the instructions for the class."



Meaning 2

An event, action, or television program that happens or is shown again.

As a noun, the stress shifts to the first syllable. Learners may find it confusing that the same spelling changes its sound depending on whether it is an action or a thing.

"I've already seen this episode"
"it's a repeat."

Meaning 3

A pattern or musical passage that is played more than once.

In technical contexts like music or textile design, 'repeat' functions as a specific noun referring to a cycle, which can be confusing when learners only know it as a simple action.

"The wallpaper has a floral repeat every twelve inches."
"Look for the repeat sign at the end of the second bar in the music."

Related: reiterate; re-run; duplicate; echo; reoccurrence

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/repeat

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Sleep on it

This is a very common professional and casual phrase. It is almost always used when a decision is important. It implies that a person shouldn't be rushed. Note that 'it' always refers to the decision or problem being discussed.

Meaning 1

To delay making a decision until the next day so that you have more time to think about it.

ESL learners may take this literally and imagine someone physically lying on top of an object or a piece of paper. They might not realize it refers to the passage of time and the mental clarity that comes after a night's rest.

"That is a very expensive car"
"I need to sleep on it before I sign the contract."

Meaning 2

To take time to consider an idea or proposal carefully before committing.

The confusion arises because the phrase implies that 'sleeping' is the action required, when the actual requirement is 'thinking' or 'waiting.' Learners might wonder if they actually have to go to sleep for the idiom to be valid.

"The job offer is great, but I'm going to sleep on it to make sure it's the right move for my family."
"We should sleep on the marketing proposal before we reject it entirely."

Related: think it over; mull it over; take your time; overnight; deliberate

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/sleep-on-it

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Imo

This is almost exclusively used in texting, social media, and informal emails. It is rarely spoken aloud as 'Imo'; instead, people will say the full phrase 'In my opinion'. In some cultures, 'Imo' is also a common proper name, which can cause further confusion in international contexts.

Meaning 1

An abbreviation for the phrase 'In my opinion'.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym used primarily in text-based communication. It does not follow standard English grammar rules and can look like a name or a typo if the learner is unfamiliar with internet shorthand.

"Imo, the first movie was much better than the sequel."
"That dress is a bit too expensive, imo."

Meaning 2

A variation often written as 'IMHO', meaning 'In my humble opinion'.

The addition of the 'H' can confuse learners who already learned 'Imo'. It is used to sound slightly more polite or less aggressive when sharing a disagreement, though it is often used sarcastically.

"IMHO, we should probably check the map before we get lost."
"That is not the best way to solve the problem, imho."

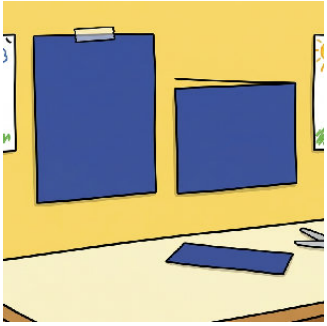
Related: TBH (To be honest); POV (Point of view); AFAIK (As far as I know); Opinion; Acronym

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/imo

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Clipped

Clipped is a classic contranym (or 'Janus word') because it can mean both 'to attach' and 'to separate.' To understand which meaning is being used, you must look at the preposition: 'clipped to' usually means attached, while 'clipped from' or 'clipped off' means removed.

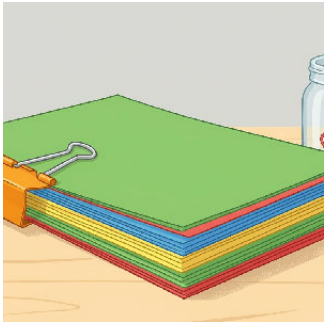


Meaning 1

To have been cut off, shortened, or detached.

In this context, 'clipped' means something has been removed or separated from the main body, such as cutting a coupon from a newspaper or trimming a hedge.

"He clipped the article out of the magazine to save it for later."
"The gardener clipped the dead branches off the bush."



Meaning 2

To be fastened, attached, or held together with a clip.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. Instead of removing something, you are joining two things together using a device like a paperclip or carabiner.

"She clipped the microphone to her shirt before the presentation."
"The papers were clipped together so they wouldn't get lost."

Meaning 3

A style of speech that is rapid and uses short, abbreviated sounds.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it describes a 'shortened' way of speaking (related to meaning 1) but refers to phonetics and tone rather than physical cutting.

"The military officer spoke in a very clipped, professional tone."
"His clipped accent made it difficult for the students to hear the ends of his words."

Related: trim; fasten; abbreviate; snip; bind

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/clipped

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

To each his own

While the traditional phrase uses 'his,' it is increasingly common and more inclusive to say 'To each their own' in modern conversation. This phrase is very similar to the Latin proverb 'Suum cuique.' It is best used when discussing subjective things like food, art, or lifestyle rather than objective facts.

Meaning 1

Everyone has their own personal preferences, tastes, or opinions, and they are entitled to them even if others disagree.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it is grammatically incomplete; it is a shortened version of 'to each his own taste.' The use of 'his' is also a traditional gender-neutral pronoun in this specific idiom, though modern speakers often say 'to each their own.'

"I don't understand why he likes cold pizza for breakfast, but to each his own."
"She prefers living in a tiny apartment rather than a big house"

Meaning 2

A way to end a disagreement about personal choice without being rude.

It can be confusing because it functions as a conversation-ender. A learner might think the speaker is starting a new sentence about possession, but it is actually a polite way to say 'I don't agree with your choice, but I won't argue about it.'

"You want to spend your whole vacation studying? Well, to each his own!"
"He thinks that movie is a masterpiece, but I found it boring. To each his own."

Related: different strokes for different folks; no accounting for taste; whatever floats your boat; personal preference

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/to-each-his-own

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Belt

ESL learners should also be aware of the idiom 'under your belt,' which means to have learned or achieved something. Additionally, it can refer to a geographic area, like the 'Corn Belt' or 'Sun Belt' in the US.

Meaning 1

A strip of leather or fabric worn around the waist to support clothes or for decoration.

This is the most common literal meaning. It is a basic noun used in daily life and fashion.

"I need to tighten my belt because these pants are too loose."
"He wore a brown leather belt with his suit."

Meaning 2

To hit something very hard, or to sing/shout something loudly.

In informal English, 'belt' can be used as a verb. It often describes hitting someone or singing a song with great energy (to 'belt out' a song).

"The singer really belted out that last note."
"The player belted the ball across the field."

Related: strap; waistband; buckle; hit; region

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/belt

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Senior discount

In the US, 'senior' is the standard polite term for an older adult. Using 'old person discount' can be seen as rude or blunt. Note that the age requirement for a 'senior discount' varies by business; some start at 50 (like AARP), while others start at 65.

Meaning 1

A reduced price offered to people who are older, typically over the age of 60 or 65.

ESL learners may be confused because 'senior' usually refers to someone in a high position at work or a final-year student. In this context, it is a polite way to avoid saying 'old person' or 'elderly person' discount.

"The movie theater offers a senior discount for anyone over sixty-five."
"Don't forget to ask for the senior discount when you book your hotel room."

Meaning 2

A polite social label used to describe benefits for the elderly without using age-sensitive language.

The term acts as a euphemism to make aging sound more respectful or prestigious. Learners might expect words like 'aged' or 'old-age,' but 'senior' is the socially preferred professional term in business.

"Many restaurants have a special menu specifically for those eligible for the senior discount."
"Is there a senior discount available for the public transportation pass?"

Related: senior citizen; golden years; pensioner; retiree; concession

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/senior-discount

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Go through

Inseparable. Multiple meanings make it tricky for learners.

Meaning 1

To use up or consume something.

Common for money or supplies.

"We went through all the food at the party."

Meaning 2

To experience something difficult or unpleasant.

Confusion arises because 'go through' can literally mean passing physically through something.

"She went through a lot of hardship after losing her job."
"We went through a tough divorce."

Meaning 3

To examine or search something carefully.

This meaning is about review or inspection.

"I need to go through these documents before the meeting."

Related: experience; examine; use up

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/go-through

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. In the sentence 'She is celebrating the birth of her daughter,' what does the word 'birth' mean?

A. a designated sleeping space
B. a small bed on a ship or train
C. a place for a ship to dock
D. the start of a life

2. In the sentence 'Could you please repeat that sentence?', what does the word 'repeat' mean?

A. To say something again.
B. To duplicate something.
C. To re-run something.
D. To echo something.

3. In a social conversation, what does it mean when someone says they want to "sleep on it"?

A. mull it over
B. take your time
C. think it over
D. wait until the next day to make a final decision

4. In social media and texting, what does the abbreviation 'Imo' mean?

A. In my opinion
B. To be honest
C. As far as I know
D. Acronym

5. The student clipped a small photo out of the newspaper for her social studies project. What does 'clipped' mean in this context?

A. bound
B. abbreviated
C. cut or detached
D. fastened

6. What does the expression "to each his own" mean in a conversation?

A. Everyone is entitled to their own personal preferences or tastes.
B. no accounting for taste
C. different strokes for different folks
D. whatever floats your boat

7. In the sentence 'She wore a leather belt with her jeans,' what does the word 'belt' mean?

A. buckle
B. region
C. a strip of material worn around the waist to hold up clothes
D. strap

8. What does 'senior discount' mean when used in a retail or service context?

A. a price reduction offered to people of a certain older age
B. golden years
C. pensioner
D. senior citizen

9. What does the phrasal verb 'go through' mean in the following sentence? 'After the divorce, she had to go through a very lonely time.'

A. to examine something carefully
B. to use up all of a supply
C. to experience a physical sensation
D. to experience an unpleasant situation

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