Tricky Words of the Day

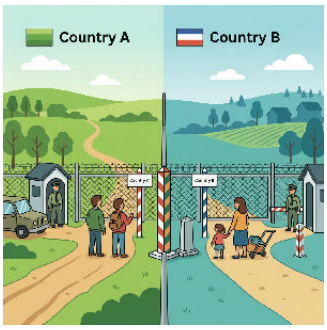
Sunday, June 7, 2026

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 8

Boarder / Border

To remember the difference, think of the 'a' in 'boarder' as standing for 'Accommodation' (living somewhere). Think of the 'er' in 'border' as the 'Edge' of a country. Both words are pronounced exactly the same, so you must rely on the context of the sentence to understand which one is being used.



Meaning 1

Border: The official line or boundary that separates two countries, states, or areas.

This is a very common noun in news and travel contexts. Confusion arises because the spelling 'border' looks like it should relate to 'board,' but it actually refers to an edge or margin.

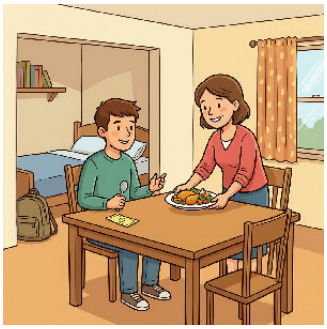
"You must show your passport when you cross the border between France and Spain."
"The garden was surrounded by a beautiful flower border."

Meaning 2

Boarder (Sports): A person who takes part in a sport using a board, such as a snowboarder or skateboarder.

In modern informal English, 'boarder' is often used as shorthand for someone practicing board sports. This adds a third layer of potential confusion for learners who only know the 'boundary' or 'renter' definitions.

"The ski resort has a separate park specifically for boarders and freestyle skiers."
"He is a talented boarder who spends every weekend at the skate park."



Meaning 3

Boarder: A person who pays a homeowner or a school to live there and receive meals.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'border' because they sound identical. It comes from the word 'board,' which historically referred to a table where meals were served.

"The university student became a boarder in a local family's home to save money."
"The boarding school has over two hundred boarders living on campus during the semester."

Related: boundary; lodger; tenant; frontier; boarding house; skateboarding

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/boarder-border

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 8

Separate

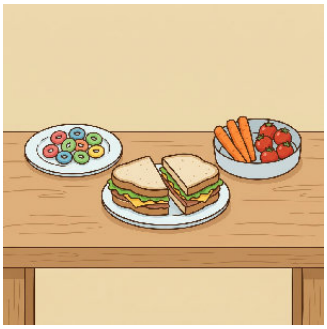
A common spelling mistake even for native speakers is writing 'seperate' with an 'e' in the middle. Remember: there is 'a rat' in sep-a-rat-e. Also, pay close attention to the vowel sound at the end: 'ate' for action, 'it' for description.

Meaning 1

To divide or keep apart; to move things away from each other (Verb).

As a verb, the word ends with a long 'A' sound (like 'gate'). ESL learners often struggle to remember that the pronunciation changes based on whether the word is an action or a description.

"Please separate the white clothes from the colored ones before washing."
"The teacher had to separate the two students who were talking."



Meaning 2

Existing as an independent or distinct entity; not joined or connected (Adjective).

As an adjective, the ending is reduced to a short 'it' or 'et' sound (schwa). Learners often mispronounce this as 'separate-ate' even when using it as a descriptor, which sounds unnatural to native speakers.

"The children sleep in separate bedrooms."
"They decided to go their separate ways after the meeting."

Meaning 3

To stop living together as a couple without getting a formal divorce (Verb).

This is a specific social context of the verb. It can be confusing because 'separating' is a specific legal and social step that is different from 'divorcing' or simply 'breaking up'.

"My parents decided to separate last year, but they are still legally married."
"They are currently separated and living in different cities."

Related: detach; disconnect; individual; segregate; split

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/separate

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 8

Add fuel to the fire

This idiom is very similar to 'add insult to injury,' but 'add fuel to the fire' specifically implies making a volatile situation more intense or explosive. It is common in both casual conversation and professional news reporting.

Meaning 1

To intensify a person's strong emotions, such as anger, jealousy, or excitement.

Learners may be confused because 'fuel' is usually a noun (gasoline/wood), but here it acts as a metaphor for words or actions that 'feed' an emotion.

"Showing him photos of his ex-girlfriend with her new partner really added fuel to the fire of his jealousy."

"The media's constant coverage of the scandal only added fuel to the fire of public outrage."

Meaning 2

To make a bad situation, argument, or problem even worse by saying or doing something provocative.

ESL learners often take this literally and think it refers to a physical campfire or stove. They may not realize it describes social conflict or emotional tension where no actual fire exists.

"I was already angry, and his sarcastic comment just added fuel to the fire."

"The manager's decision to cut bonuses added fuel to the fire of the employees' strike."

Related: exacerbate; aggravate; fan the flames; make matters worse; add insult to injury

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/add-fuel-to-the-fire

Slang · Lesson 4 of 8

Brb

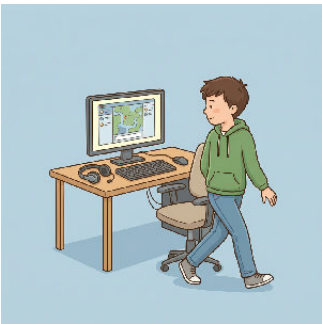
This is highly informal and should never be used in professional emails or formal writing. It is primarily used in texting, social media comments, and online gaming. While it is an abbreviation, people rarely say the letters 'B-R-B' out loud in face-to-face conversation; they would simply say the full phrase 'I'll be right back.'

Meaning 1

An abbreviation for the phrase 'be right back.'

ESL learners may find this confusing because it is an initialism where each letter is pronounced individually, rather than being read as a word. It is used almost exclusively in digital communication to signal a temporary departure.

"Someone is at the door, brb!"
"I need to grab a glass of water, brb."



Meaning 2

A social signal used in gaming or instant messaging to pause a conversation.

It can be confusing because the 'right back' part is subjective; it could mean thirty seconds or ten minutes. Learners might expect the person to return instantly, but in internet culture, it is often a polite way to end a session temporarily without a formal goodbye.

"Brb, dinner is ready."
"Gotta take this call, brb."

Related: AFK (Away From Keyboard); TTYL (Talk To You Later); G2G (Got To Go); BBL (Be Back Later)

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/brb

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 8

Apparent

The confusion lies in whether the speaker believes the situation is 'obvious and true' or 'only appearing to be true.' To distinguish between them, look for the word 'but.' If the sentence says 'apparent... but,' it usually means the second definition (seeming, but false). If it says 'it became apparent,' it usually means the first definition (obvious).

Meaning 1

Clearly visible or obvious; easy to see or understand.

In this context, 'apparent' means something is a proven fact or a visible reality. ESL learners may find this confusing because it implies certainty and truth.

"It became apparent that he was lying when his story kept changing."
"The cause of the accident was apparent to everyone at the scene."

Meaning 2

Seeming to be real or true, but not necessarily so; superficial.

This is the 'contranym' usage. Here, 'apparent' suggests that something looks true on the surface, but it might actually be false. This creates a direct contradiction with the first definition.

"Their apparent success was actually built on a mountain of debt."
"Despite his apparent calm, he was actually very nervous about the interview."

Meaning 3

Used in formal or legal titles to describe a position that is certain, provided no one else is born with a stronger claim.

This is a specific technical usage (often seen in the phrase 'heir apparent'). It combines the idea of 'obvious' with 'future status,' which can be confusing because it refers to a role that hasn't fully started yet.

"The Prince is the heir apparent to the throne."
"She is the apparent successor to the CEO position."

Related: obvious; seeming; evident; ostensible; supposed

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/apparent

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 8

Watch your step

In its literal sense, it is a polite safety warning. In its figurative sense, it can sometimes sound like a threat or a stern piece of advice depending on the speaker's tone.

Meaning 1

A literal warning to look down at the ground to avoid tripping or falling.

ESL learners may take this literally and only look at their feet, not realizing it is often a standard safety warning found on signs near stairs, curbs, or wet floors.

"Please watch your step as you exit the train."
"The floor is wet near the entrance, so watch your step."

Meaning 2

A figurative warning to behave cautiously or follow rules to avoid getting into trouble.

This is a figure of speech where 'stepping' represents social or professional behavior. Learners might be confused because no physical walking is actually occurring.

"The boss is in a bad mood today, so you'd better watch your step."
"You are on probation at school, so watch your step or you might be expelled."

Related: be careful; tread lightly; mind your P's and Q's; look out; walk on eggshells

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/watch-your-step

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 8

Cup

Beyond these meanings, 'cup' is also used in sports (The World Cup) and as a protective piece of equipment in athletics. Remember that 'a cup of' usually refers to the contents, while 'a cup' refers to the physical object.

Meaning 1

A small, bowl-shaped container used for drinking, typically having a handle.

ESL learners often confuse 'cup' with 'glass' or 'mug'. In English, a cup is usually for hot liquids and often comes with a saucer, whereas a glass is for cold drinks and a mug is larger and thicker.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"
"She placed the ceramic cup back on the saucer."

Meaning 2

A unit of measurement used in cooking, equal to 8 fluid ounces or approximately 240 milliliters.

Confusion arises because a 'cup' in a recipe is a precise measurement, but a 'cup' in a cupboard can be any size. Learners might use a random drinking cup for a recipe instead of a standard measuring cup.

"The recipe calls for one cup of sugar and two cups of flour."
"Use a measuring cup to ensure the proportions are correct."

Meaning 3

To curve your hands into a rounded shape to hold or support something.

This is a functional shift from a noun to a verb. Learners may not realize that the object (a cup) can become an action (to cup), describing the specific physical shape the hands make.

"He held the tiny bird gently in the cup of his hands."
"She cupped her hands to catch the falling rainwater."

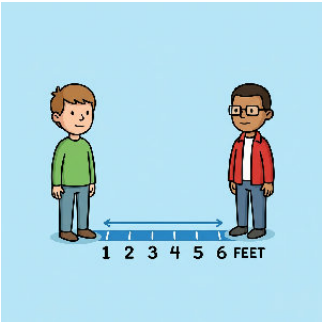
Related: mug; glass; chalice; scoop; handful

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cup

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 8

Socially distanced

While 'physical distancing' is more scientifically accurate, 'socially distanced' became the standard phrase. Learners should note that it describes physical space, not necessarily a lack of communication.

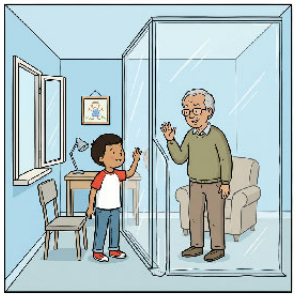


Meaning 1

Maintaining a physical space of at least six feet (two meters) between oneself and others to prevent the spread of disease.

The term is confusing because 'socially' usually refers to interacting with people, but here it actually means the opposite: staying physically apart. ESL learners might think it means being unfriendly or lonely.

"We had a socially distanced picnic in the park."
"Please stay socially distanced while waiting in line for the bus."



Meaning 2

A polite way to describe the strict isolation, lockdowns, or the lack of physical contact during a pandemic.

As a euphemism, it replaces harsher words like 'quarantine,' 'isolation,' or 'separation.' It makes the act of staying away from loved ones sound like a responsible civic duty rather than a forced restriction.

"They had a socially distanced wedding over Zoom."
"Even though we were socially distanced, we felt close through our daily video calls."

Meaning 3

Feeling emotionally or mentally detached from a group or society.

In a non-medical context, this can describe someone who is introverted or feels like an outsider. This literal interpretation can be confused with the specific public health meaning.

"He has always felt socially distanced from his coworkers because of the language barrier."
"The artist remained socially distanced from the mainstream art world."

Related: social distancing; self-isolation; quarantine; six-foot rule; remote; contactless

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/socially-distanced

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. In the context of housing, what is the meaning of the word 'boarder'?

A. The line that divides two different countries
B. A piece of wood used to build a floor
C. A decorative edge around a picture or cloth
D. A person who pays to live and eat in someone's home

2. What does the word 'separate' mean in this sentence? 'Please separate the white clothes from the colored ones.'

A. To move things away from each other
B. To split a bill in a restaurant
C. To disconnect a phone line
D. To detach a part from a machine

3. What does it mean to "add fuel to the fire" in a conversation?

A. To make a bad situation even worse by doing something provocative
B. To fan the flames of a minor disagreement
C. To add insult to injury during a heated debate
D. To exacerbate a conflict between two friends

4. In text messages, what does the slang term "brb" mean?

A. Be right back
B. TTYL (Talk To You Later)
C. AFK (Away From Keyboard)
D. G2G (Got To Go)

5. In the sentence, 'The mistake was apparent to everyone,' what does 'apparent' mean?

A. Supposed
B. Easy to see or understand
C. Seeming
D. Ostensible

6. What does the phrase 'watch your step' mean when used at a train station?

A. Look at the ground to avoid falling.
B. Count the number of stairs as you go up or down.
C. Walk slowly and quietly so that nobody hears you.
D. Move your feet in time with the music while dancing.

7. What is the meaning of the word 'cup' in a kitchen?

A. A small container with a handle used for drinking
B. A hollow, spoon-shaped tool used for measuring or serving portions
C. A hard, transparent container made from silica used for cold drinks
D. A decorative or religious vessel often made of precious metal

8. What does it mean if a meeting is 'socially distanced'?

A. The meeting is remote.
B. Participants are under quarantine.
C. People are in self-isolation.
D. People stay two meters apart to stay healthy.

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