

Tricky Words of the Day

Monday, June 8, 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

Bough / Bow

Be careful: while 'bough', 'bow' (to bend), and 'bow' (front of a ship) are homophones, the word 'bow' (as in a bow and arrow or a hair bow) is pronounced /bo/ (rhymes with 'low'). Always check the context to determine if the word refers to a tree branch, a gesture of respect, or a piece of equipment.

Meaning 1

Bough: A main branch of a tree.

ESL learners often struggle with the 'ough' spelling, which can be pronounced in many ways (like 'tough' or 'though'). In this case, it sounds exactly like 'bow' (to bend).

"The heavy snow caused the bough of the apple tree to snap."

"The bird perched quietly on a thick bough."



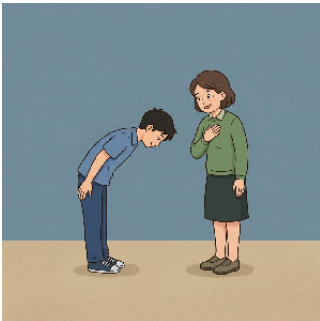
Meaning 2

Bow (verb): To bend the head or upper body forward as a sign of respect or greeting.

This is a homophone of 'bough' but also a homograph of 'bow' (the ribbon or weapon). Learners must distinguish between the action (rhymes with 'now') and the object (rhymes with 'go').

"The actors took a final bow after the performance."

"In many cultures, it is polite to bow when meeting an elder."



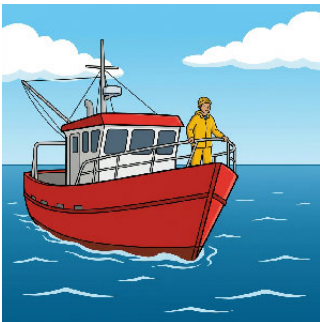
Meaning 3

Bow (noun): The front part of a ship or boat.

This nautical term is pronounced the same as 'bough' and the 'respectful bend,' adding a third layer of meaning to the same sound.

"The waves splashed over the bow of the ship."

"The captain stood at the bow, looking out at the horizon."



Related: branch; limb; curtsy; stern; knot



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bough-bow

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Sewer

The confusion lies entirely in the pronunciation. When you see 'sewer' in a text about fashion or crafts, pronounce it with a long 'O'. When you see it in a text about plumbing or cities, pronounce it with a 'OO' sound. Note that 'seamstress' or 'tailor' are often used instead of 'sewer' to avoid this exact confusion.

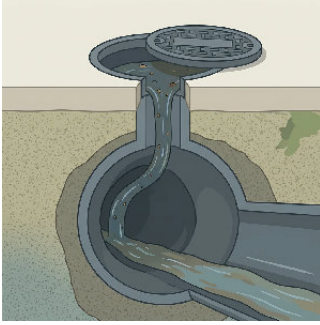
Meaning 1

An underground conduit or pipe for carrying off drainage water and waste matter.

ESL learners often struggle with the pronunciation of this version, which sounds like 'soo-er'. It is a common noun found in urban contexts.

"The city is replacing the old sewer pipes under Main Street."

"Heavy rain caused the sewer system to overflow."

**Meaning 2**

A person who sews; someone who uses a needle and thread to make or repair clothes.

This is a homograph that is pronounced 'so-er' (rhymes with 'mower'). Because it is spelled exactly like the waste pipe, learners often mispronounce it or fail to recognize it as a person's occupation.

"My grandmother was a talented sewer who made all her own dresses."

"The costume department is looking for an experienced sewer to join the team."



Related: sewage; sewing; drainage; tailor; seamstress



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/sewer

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Bark is worse than bite

This idiom is often used to reassure someone who is intimidated by a person in authority. It uses the 'possessive' form frequently (e.g., 'his bark,' 'their bark'). It is the opposite of 'a wolf in sheep's clothing,' where someone looks nice but is actually dangerous.

Meaning 1

Someone seems much more frightening, angry, or aggressive than they actually are.

ESL learners may take this literally and think it refers to an actual dog. The confusion lies in the figurative comparison: the 'bark' represents verbal threats or a loud voice, while the 'bite' represents actual harmful actions.

"Don't worry about the boss yelling"

"his bark is worse than his bite."

**Meaning 2**

A situation or threat that sounds very dangerous but results in little to no actual harm.

Learners might struggle to apply this to non-human subjects. It is used to describe warnings, penalties, or consequences that sound severe but are rarely enforced.

"The new law's bark is worse than its bite because the police rarely issue fines for it."

"The storm warnings were scary, but the bark was worse than the bite"



Related: all talk and no action; paper tiger; intimidating; harmless; bluster



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bark-is-worse-than-bite

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Lol

While 'lol' stands for 'laughing out loud,' it is now mostly used in lowercase (lol) in casual texting. Using it in formal writing or business emails is generally discouraged. Be careful with the 'lots of love' meaning, as it is very rare now and can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Meaning 1

A marker of tone used to soften a sentence or show that the speaker is not being aggressive.

This is confusing because the word is used even when nothing is funny. It acts as a 'punctuation mark' to make a text message sound more friendly or less serious.

"I'm going to be five minutes late lol."

"I forgot my keys again lol."

**Meaning 2**

Lots of love (archaic/niche usage).

In older contexts or among some older generations, 'lol' was occasionally used to mean 'lots of love.' This causes significant confusion and awkwardness when used in response to sad news.

"I am so sorry to hear about your dog, lol."

**Meaning 3**

Laughing out loud; used to indicate that something is funny.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym that is often treated as a word. It is rarely used to mean the person is actually laughing out loud physically; it is often just a polite acknowledgment of humor.

"That video of the cat was so funny, lol!"

"Lol, I can't believe you said that."



Related: lmao; rofl; haha; lmfao; omg



Read the full lesson

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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Egregious

Learners should only use this word in a negative context in modern conversation. If you see it in a book from the 16th or 17th century, check the context, as it might actually be a compliment. It is a 'dead' contronym in that the positive meaning has mostly disappeared from common speech.

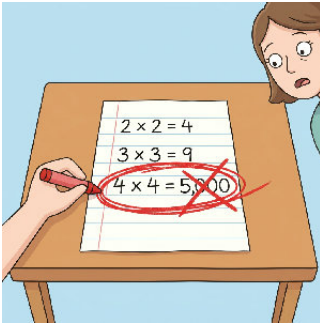
Meaning 1

Extremely bad, shocking, or flagrant.

In modern English, this word is almost exclusively used to describe something negative. ESL learners may find it confusing because it sounds formal and sophisticated, yet it describes something terrible like a mistake or a crime.

"The company was fined for an egregious breach of safety regulations."

"It was an egregious error that cost the team the championship."

**Meaning 2**

Remarkably good, distinguished, or eminent (archaic).

This is the original Latin meaning ('standing out from the flock'). While rarely used this way today, it appears in historical literature. It is a contronym because its root meaning is simply 'extraordinary,' which can be either good or bad.

"The knight was known for his egregious courage on the battlefield."

"He was an egregious example of virtue in a corrupt age."



Related: flagrant; atrocious; outstanding; conspicuous; notorious



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/egregious

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

X marks the spot

This phrase is heavily associated with pirate lore and adventure stories. In modern English, it is often used playfully. Learners should note that 'X' is used here as a symbol for 'here' or 'this exact place.'

Meaning 1

A phrase used to indicate the exact location of a hidden object, a destination, or a specific point of interest.

ESL learners may be confused because 'X' is a letter, not a physical object. The phrase originates from treasure maps where an 'X' was drawn to show where gold was buried, but it is now used figuratively for any precise location.

"I looked at the map and saw a red cross"

"X marks the spot where we should meet."

**Meaning 2**

Used to identify the most important part of a problem or the core of a situation.

This usage is metaphorical. A learner might look for a literal mark or drawing when the speaker is actually referring to a conceptual 'center' or the root cause of an issue.

"If we want to fix the company's budget, this line item is where X marks the spot."

"In terms of finding the error in the code, X marks the spot right here in the third paragraph."



Related: bullseye; dead center; treasure map; pinpoint; ground zero



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/x-marks-the-spot

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Shoot

The word is also used in photography (a 'photo shoot'). Learners should be careful with the context: 'Shoot me' could mean 'take my picture' or 'fire a gun at me' depending on the situation.

Meaning 1

To fire a weapon or to kick/throw a ball toward a goal.

This is the literal and most common meaning used in sports and combat. It is generally straightforward for learners.

"The soldier was ordered to shoot at the target."

"He needs to shoot the ball more often to score points."



Meaning 2

An exclamation used to show disappointment, or a command to tell someone to start speaking.

This is where it becomes confusing for ESL learners. 'Shoot!' is a polite euphemism for a swear word (sh*t). However, if someone says 'I have a question' and you respond with 'Shoot!', you are telling them to go ahead and ask.

"Oh shoot! I forgot my keys in the car."

"A: 'Can I ask you something?' B: 'Sure, shoot!'"



Related: chute; fire; blast; darn; go ahead



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/shoot

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Special needs

While 'special needs' is a very common euphemism, be aware that language in this area is evolving. Many disability advocates now prefer 'disabled person' or 'person with a disability' because they feel 'special needs' can sound patronizing or vague. In professional settings, 'special needs' is still widely used in the context of 'Special Education' (SPED).

**Meaning 1**

A term used to describe individuals who require additional support due to physical, mental, or psychological disabilities.

ESL learners may find this confusing because the word 'special' usually has a positive connotation (meaning 'better' or 'unique'). However, in this context, it is a polite way to avoid saying 'disabled' or 'handicapped,' which can be seen as too blunt or insensitive.

"The school provides extra resources for students with special needs."

"The playground was designed to be accessible for children with special needs."

Meaning 2

A specific category in education and law that grants access to specialized services or accommodations.

Learners might confuse this with 'specialized' or 'advanced' programs. While a 'specialized' class might be for gifted students, a 'special needs' class is specifically for those with learning challenges or disabilities.

"He is a special needs teacher who works with children on the autism spectrum."

"The airline offers assistance for passengers with special needs during boarding."



Related: disability; accommodation; accessibility; neurodivergent; inclusion



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/special-needs

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Drop in

Inseparable. Casual visiting phrase.

Meaning 1

To visit someone informally without planning ahead.

ESL learners may think it means dropping something inside.

"Feel free to drop in anytime."

"We dropped in on our neighbors yesterday."



Related: visit informally; stop by



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/drop-in

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses the word 'bough' correctly?

- A. The young sapling was just a tiny twig, not yet a bough.
- B. Large birds sat together on a thick bough of the oak tree.
- C. The performer gave a deep bough after the final song ended.
- D. She tied a colorful bough around the gift for her friend.

2. Which of the following sentences uses the word 'sewer' correctly?

- A. She used the dark sewage to stitch the buttons onto her new coat.
- B. Heavy rain caused the underground sewer to overflow into the street.
- C. The experienced tailor had a small workshop where she worked as a professional sewer.
- D. The skilled sewing worked all night to finish the wedding dress.

3. Which sentence uses the phrase 'his bark is worse than his bite' correctly?

- A. Grandpa shouts when the house is messy, but he is actually very kind.
- B. The paper tiger collapsed immediately because it was made of thin cardboard.
- C. He was intimidating when he stood over the smaller students in the hallway.
- D. The spider was completely harmless and lived quietly in the garden corner.

4. Which sentence uses the slang term 'lol' correctly to show something is funny?

- A. That is so strange and surprising, omg!
- B. That joke was actually pretty clever, lol!
- C. The weather is quite cloudy today, rofl!
- D. I'm feeling very tired after that long run, haha!

5. Which sentence uses the word 'egregious' correctly in its most common modern sense?

- A. The student made an egregious error by plagiarizing their entire essay.
- B. The sunset was so egregious that everyone stopped to take photos.
- C. She received an egregious award for her outstanding volunteer work.
- D. He felt egregious after winning the first place trophy in the competition.

6. Which sentence uses 'shoot' correctly in a sports context?

- A. You must shoot the ball before the whistle blows.
- B. The team will blast the ball into the hoop for three points.
- C. The players must fire the ball to the net to win points.
- D. You should go ahead the ball when you approach the goal.

7. Which of the following sentences uses the term 'special needs' correctly to describe a person's requirement for extra support?

- A. The building recently added a ramp to improve special needs.
- B. Our team ensures that every child receives proper special needs.
- C. The company provided a desktop special needs for the injured employee.
- D. The center offers specialized equipment for students with special needs.

8. Which sentence uses 'drop in' correctly to show an informal, unplanned visit?

- A. I will visit informally my grandmother for three hours this Sunday.
- B. If the temperature continues to drop in, we will need warmer coats.
- C. You should stop by your old clothes at the charity shop tomorrow.
- D. I was near your house, so I decided to drop in and say hello.



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Quiz

Approved multiple-choice items for today. Answer key on the next page.

1. Which sentence uses the word 'bough' correctly?

- A. The young sapling was just a tiny twig, not yet a bough.
- B. Large birds sat together on a thick bough of the oak tree.
- C. The performer gave a deep bough after the final song ended.
- D. She tied a colorful bough around the gift for her friend.

Target: bough / bow · CEFR B1

2. Which of the following sentences uses the word 'sewer' correctly?

- A. She used the dark sewage to stitch the buttons onto her new coat.
- B. Heavy rain caused the underground sewer to overflow into the street.
- C. The experienced tailor had a small workshop where she worked as a professional sewer.
- D. The skilled sewing worked all night to finish the wedding dress.

Target: Sewer · CEFR B1

3. Which sentence uses the phrase 'his bark is worse than his bite' correctly?

- A. Grandpa shouts when the house is messy, but he is actually very kind.
- B. The paper tiger collapsed immediately because it was made of thin cardboard.
- C. He was intimidating when he stood over the smaller students in the hallway.
- D. The spider was completely harmless and lived quietly in the garden corner.

Target: bark is worse than bite · CEFR B1

4. Which sentence uses the slang term 'lol' correctly to show something is funny?

- A. That is so strange and surprising, omg!
- B. That joke was actually pretty clever, lol!
- C. The weather is quite cloudy today, rofl!
- D. I'm feeling very tired after that long run, haha!

Target: Lol · CEFR B1

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- B. The sunset was so egregious that everyone stopped to take photos.
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- D. He felt egregious after winning the first place trophy in the competition.

Target: Egregious · CEFR B1

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- B. The team will blast the ball into the hoop for three points.
- C. The players must fire the ball to the net to win points.
- D. You should go ahead the ball when you approach the goal.

Target: shoot · CEFR B1

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- A. The building recently added a ramp to improve special needs.
- B. Our team ensures that every child receives proper special needs.
- C. The company provided a desktop special needs for the injured employee.
- D. The center offers specialized equipment for students with special needs.

Target: special needs · CEFR B1

8. Which sentence uses 'drop in' correctly to show an informal, unplanned visit?

- A. I will visit informally my grandmother for three hours this Sunday.
- B. If the temperature continues to drop in, we will need warmer coats.
- C. You should stop by your old clothes at the charity shop tomorrow.
- D. I was near your house, so I decided to drop in and say hello.

Target: drop in · CEFR B1

Answer Key

1. B. Large birds sat together on a thick bough of the oak tree.

In this context, 'bough' refers to a main branch of a tree. The distractors confuse it with its homophone 'bow' (a gesture of respect or a decorative knot) or the related but incorrect botanical term 'twig' (which refers to a minute terminal branch rather than a thick main one).

2. B. Heavy rain caused the underground sewer to overflow into the street.

The correct sentence uses 'sewer' as a noun referring to the conduit for waste water. The distractors incorrectly swap 'sewer' with its noun-form confusables: 'sewage' (the waste itself), 'sewing' (the act of stitching used as a person), and 'drainage' (misused as a person/tailor).

3. A. Grandpa shouts when the house is messy, but he is actually very kind.

The idiom 'his bark is worse than his bite' describes someone who sounds threatening but is actually gentle; the correct answer illustrates this contrast.

4. B. That joke was actually pretty clever, lol!

While 'omg' expresses surprise, and 'haha' and 'rofl' relate to laughter, the distractors use them in contexts that are not funny (surprise, fatigue, or neutral weather). The correct answer uses 'lol' to acknowledge a clever joke.

5. A. The student made an egregious error by plagiarizing their entire essay.

In modern English, 'egregious' is used negatively to mean remarkably bad or shocking. Historically, it meant 'standing out from the flock' (distinguished/outstanding), but using it to mean 'excellent' or 'praiseworthy' is now considered incorrect in common usage.

6. A. You must shoot the ball before the whistle blows.

The target word 'shoot' is used as a verb meaning to take a shot in sports. The distractors replace it with different verbs: 'fire' (often related to engines or discharge), 'blast' (meaning to explode or hit with extreme force), and 'go ahead' (meaning to proceed), which are semantically incorrect in this specific basketball or soccer context.

7. D. The center offers specialized equipment for students with special needs.

'Special needs' is a plural noun phrase referring to the requirements of individuals with disabilities. Use 'accessibility' for building improvements, 'inclusion' for team practices, and 'accommodation' for workplace adjustments.

8. D. I was near your house, so I decided to drop in and say hello.

'Drop in' is an intransitive phrasal verb meaning to visit informally without a prior appointment. 'Visit informally' is a dictionary definition and doesn't function as a natural phrasal unit; 'stop by' is used incorrectly here as it is confused with 'drop off'; 'drop in' in the weather context is a literal use of the words rather than the phrasal verb meaning.