

Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, June 9, 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

Bread / Bred

Since these words are homophones, you must rely on the context of the sentence to know which one is being used. If the topic is food or sandwiches, it is 'bread.' If the topic is animals, family origins, or upbringing, it is 'bred.'

Meaning 1

Bread (noun): A common food made from flour, water, and yeast that is baked.

ESL learners often struggle because 'bread' is an uncountable noun in English. You cannot say 'a bread'; you must say 'a loaf of bread' or 'a piece of bread.'

"I bought a fresh loaf of whole wheat bread from the bakery."

"Would you like a slice of bread with your soup?"



Meaning 2

Bread (slang): A common informal term for money.

Learners may be confused when they hear 'bread' used in a context that has nothing to do with food, especially in older slang or urban music.

"I need to find a new job so I can start making some bread."

"That car must have cost him a lot of bread."



Meaning 3

Bred (verb): The past tense and past participle of the verb 'to breed,' meaning to produce offspring or to be raised in a specific way.

This is confusing because it sounds identical to the food item but has a completely different grammatical function and origin (biology/rearing).

"The labradoodle was originally bred to be a hypoallergenic guide dog."

"He was born and bred in a small village in the mountains."



Related: dough; loaf; reared; raised; offspring



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bread-bred

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Shower

The vast majority of the time, you will hear the pronunciation /ər/. The 'one who shows' meaning is very rare in spoken English but can appear in technical writing or specific descriptions. Always look at the context: if it's about water or weather, use the 'ow' sound.

Meaning 1

A brief period of rain or a device used for washing the body.

This is the most common meaning. It is pronounced with a 'ow' sound (like 'cow'). ESL learners often confuse the noun (the object) with the verb (the action).

"I need to take a quick shower before work."

"The weather forecast predicts light afternoon showers."

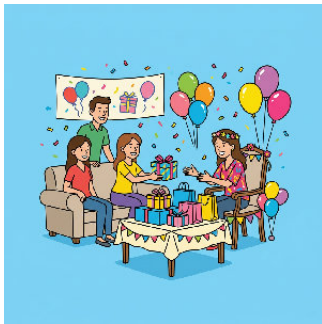
**Meaning 2**

A party or celebration where gifts are given to a specific person.

This is a figurative use of the first pronunciation. It confuses learners because it doesn't involve water; it implies 'showering' someone with gifts.

"We are attending a baby shower this weekend."

"She was surprised by the bridal shower her friends organized."

**Meaning 3**

A person who shows or demonstrates something.

This is a rare homograph pronounced with a long 'o' sound (like 'show'). It is formed by adding the suffix '-er' to the verb 'show'. It is confusing because it looks identical to the word for washing.

"He is a shower of great talent on the stage."

"The document shower pointed out the errors in the contract."



Related: drizzle; exhibitor; cleansing; precipitation; demonstrator



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/shower

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Bite off more than you can chew

This idiom is very common in workplace and academic settings. Remind students that 'chewing' in this context means 'managing' or 'processing' work. It is almost always used in a negative sense to describe a mistake in judgment regarding one's capacity.

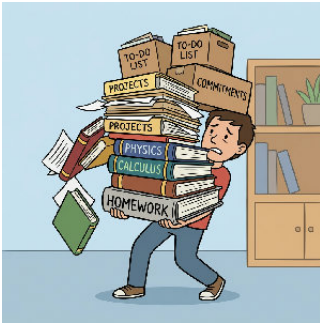
Meaning 1

To overcommit oneself or overestimate one's own abilities.

Learners may struggle with the grammatical structure, as the verb 'bite' must be conjugated (bit, bitten) while the rest of the idiom remains relatively fixed. It is often used as a warning or a realization of a mistake.

"He bit off more than he could chew when he promised to finish the report in one hour."

"She realized she had bitten off more than she could chew after seeing how complex the software was."

**Meaning 2**

To take on a task that is way too big or difficult for you to handle.

ESL learners often take this phrase literally, imagining someone eating too much food.

The confusion arises because the physical action of 'biting' and 'chewing' is used to represent 'starting a project' and 'completing it successfully.'

"I agreed to organize the entire wedding by myself, but I think I bit off more than I can chew."

"Don't bite off more than you can chew by taking five difficult classes this semester."



Related: overextend; overcommit; in over one's head; out of one's depth; overload



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/bite-off-more-than-you-can-chew

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Dm

In modern dating culture, the phrase 'sliding into the DMs' is a specific slang term meaning to send a flirtatious private message to someone you don't know well.

**Meaning 1**

Direct Message; a private message sent between two people on social media platforms.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym used as both a noun and a verb. It replaces standard words like 'email' or 'text' in digital contexts.

"I will send you a DM with the address."

"Did you see the DM I sent you on Instagram?"

Meaning 2

To send a private message to someone.

The acronym is often 'verbed,' meaning it is used as an action word. Learners might not realize they can conjugate it (e.g., DM'd, DMing).

"Don't forget to DM me the details later."

"She DM'd him to ask about the homework assignment."

**Meaning 3**

Dungeon Master; the person who organizes and narrates a game of Dungeons & Dragons.

In gaming communities, 'DM' has a completely different meaning. A learner might confuse a request to 'talk to the DM' as a request for a private message rather than a request to speak to the game leader.

"The DM described the dark cave to the players."

"Our DM is really good at doing different character voices."



Related: PM (Private Message); Inbox; Instant Message; Social Media; D&D



Read the full lesson

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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Awful

While 'awful' is almost always negative today, its root is the same as 'awesome.' Over time, 'awful' shifted to mean 'bad,' while 'awesome' shifted to mean 'great.' Be careful when reading older books, as 'awful' might actually be a compliment to something's power or scale.

Meaning 1

Very bad, unpleasant, or of low quality.

This is the most common modern usage. ESL learners may be confused because the suffix '-ful' usually implies a positive abundance (like 'wonderful' or 'beautiful'), but here it describes something negative.

"The weather was awful, so we stayed inside all day."

"I have an awful headache and need to lie down."



Meaning 2

Used as an intensifier to mean 'very' or 'extremely'.

In casual speech, 'awful' (often as 'awfully') is used to emphasize a quality, regardless of whether that quality is good or bad. This can confuse learners who expect the word to always mean 'bad'.

"That is an awful lot of money for a used car."

"She was awful kind to help us with our luggage."



Meaning 3

Inspiring awe, wonder, or deep respect; solemn and majestic.

This is the original, archaic meaning (literally 'full of awe'). It is confusing because it is the exact opposite of the modern meaning. It is now mostly found in older literature, religious texts, or formal poetry.

"The mountain stood in awful majesty against the sky."

"The subjects knelt before the awful power of the king."



Related: terrible; awesome; dreadful; formidable; exceedingly



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/awful

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Zero in on

Inseparable.

**Meaning 1**

To direct all of one's attention or effort toward a specific person, thing, or goal.

ESL learners may be confused because the word 'zero' usually represents nothingness or the number 0. In this context, it actually means the opposite: total focus and concentration on one specific point.

"The detective began to zero in on the main suspect after finding new evidence."

"We need to zero in on the most important part of this project today."

**Meaning 2**

To identify or discover something exactly.

It can be confused with 'finding' something generally. This phrase implies a narrowing-down process where many options are eliminated until only the correct one remains.

"Scientists are trying to zero in on the cause of the new disease."

"After hours of searching, we finally zeroed in on the error in the computer code."

**Meaning 3**

To aim a weapon or a camera lens precisely at a target.

This is the literal origin of the phrase (ballistics and optics). Learners might not realize that 'zeroing' refers to the calibration of equipment to ensure perfect accuracy at a specific distance.

"The photographer used the zoom lens to zero in on the rare bird in the tree."

"The pilot had to zero in on the landing strip during the heavy fog."

Related: focus on; target



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/zero-in-on

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Jog

While 'jog' is a simple physical action, ESL learners might be confused when they hear it used in a mental context (memory). It can also mean to push or nudge something slightly, like 'jogging' a table.

Meaning 1

To run at a steady, gentle pace, especially as a form of physical exercise.

This is the most common literal meaning. It describes a speed faster than walking but slower than running.

"I like to jog in the park every morning before work."

"She went for a quick jog to clear her head."

**Meaning 2**

To nudge or stimulate someone's memory.

This is a figurative use often found in the phrase 'jog someone's memory.' It means to provide a reminder that helps someone remember something they had forgotten.

"Maybe these old photos will jog your memory about our childhood trip."

"The sound of that song jogged my memory of our first dance."



Related: run; sprint; nudge; remind; stimulate



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/jog

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Spend a penny

This is a British English expression. It originated from the fact that public toilets in the UK used to require a one-penny coin to unlock the door. While most toilets are now free or cost more than a penny, the phrase remains a common, slightly old-fashioned way to be polite about a bodily function.

Meaning 1

A polite or indirect way of saying that one needs to use the toilet.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the speaker is talking about a financial transaction or shopping. Without the cultural context of historical coin-operated public toilets in the UK, the phrase seems nonsensical in a social setting.

"We've been driving for hours"

"I really need to find a service station to spend a penny."

**Meaning 2**

The literal act of paying one cent or one pence for a small item or service.

While rare today due to inflation, a learner might encounter this in a mathematical or literal retail context. The confusion arises because the literal meaning is rarely used, yet the words themselves are very common.

"In the 19th century, you could actually buy a piece of candy and only spend a penny."



Related: powder my nose; use the restroom; nature calls; loo; bathroom



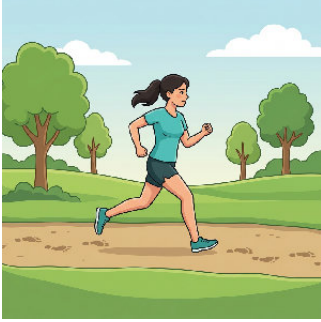
Read the full lesson

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Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Keep on

Inseparable. Often followed by -ing form (keep on doing something). Very common for encouragement.

**Meaning 1**

To continue doing something without stopping.

ESL learners often confuse this with literally keeping something on a surface. It means to persist or continue an action.

"She kept on talking even though everyone was bored."

"Keep on trying-you'll get it eventually."

Related: continue; carry on; go on



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/keep-on

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

-
1. I woke up early this morning to bake a fresh loaf of ____ for my family.
 - A. bread
 - B. braid
 - C. loaf
 - D. bred
 2. The weather report says there might be a light ____ this afternoon, so you should take an umbrella.
 - A. exhibitor
 - B. demonstrator
 - C. shower
 - D. precipitation
 3. James started three new jobs while still going to university; I think he's going to ____.
 - A. overcommit
 - B. overload
 - C. bite off more than he can chew
 - D. overextend
 4. If you want to know my secret recipe, please send me a ____ on Instagram.
 - A. Social Media
 - B. Inbox
 - C. D&D
 - D. DM
 5. I did not like the soup at the restaurant because it had an ____ taste.
 - A. awful
 - B. formidable
 - C. awesome
 - D. exceedingly
 6. After looking at many different houses, the couple finally decided to ____ the one near the park.
 - A. narrow down
 - B. target
 - C. zero in on
 - D. pinpoint

7. I don't like to go very fast, so I usually ____ slowly around the park for twenty minutes.

- A. sprint
- B. remind
- C. nudge
- D. jog

8. Could we stop at the next gas station? I really need to ____.

- A. spend a penny
- B. nature calls
- C. bathroom
- D. loo

9. I can't study because you ____ clicking your pen and it is making a loud noise.

- A. continue
- B. hold on
- C. carry on
- D. keep on



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Quiz

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

1. I woke up early this morning to bake a fresh loaf of ____ for my family.

- A. bread
- B. braid
- C. loaf
- D. bred

Target: bread / bred · CEFR A2

2. The weather report says there might be a light ____ this afternoon, so you should take an umbrella.

- A. exhibitor
- B. demonstrator
- C. shower
- D. precipitation

Target: Shower · CEFR A2

3. James started three new jobs while still going to university; I think he's going to ____.

- A. overcommit
- B. overload
- C. bite off more than he can chew
- D. overextend

Target: bite off more than you can chew · CEFR A2

4. If you want to know my secret recipe, please send me a ____ on Instagram.

- A. Social Media
- B. Inbox
- C. D&D
- D. DM

Target: DM · CEFR A2

5. I did not like the soup at the restaurant because it had an ____ taste.

- A. awful
- B. formidable
- C. awesome
- D. exceedingly

Target: Awful · CEFR A2

6. After looking at many different houses, the couple finally decided to ____ the one near the park.

- A. narrow down
- B. target
- C. zero in on
- D. pinpoint

Target: Zero in on · CEFR A2

7. I don't like to go very fast, so I usually ____ slowly around the park for twenty minutes.

- A. sprint
- B. remind
- C. nudge
- D. jog

Target: jog · CEFR A2

8. Could we stop at the next gas station? I really need to ____.

- A. spend a penny
- B. nature calls
- C. bathroom
- D. loo

Target: spend a penny · CEFR A2

9. I can't study because you ____ clicking your pen and it is making a loud noise.

- A. continue
- B. hold on
- C. carry on
- D. keep on

Target: keep on · CEFR A2

Answer Key

1. A. bread

'Bread' is the correct noun for a baked food made of flour. 'Bred' is a homophone but is the past participle of the verb 'breed'. 'Braid' is a common learner confusion due to similar spelling/vowels, and 'loaf' is a semantic distractor that describes the shape of the bread, not the substance itself.

2. C. shower

Here 'shower' means a brief period of rain. 'Precipitation' is a general meteorological term for any form of water falling from the sky (rain, snow, etc.) and is less commonly used in the casual phrase 'a light ____' in this context. 'Exhibitor' and 'demonstrator' refer to people and are not weather events.

3. C. bite off more than he can chew

The idiom 'bite off more than one can chew' fits naturally in this informal context to describe taking on a task that is too difficult. While the distractors have related meanings, they are single-word verbs (or nouns) that do not function as the target idiom in this specific syntactic structure.

4. D. DM

In social media slang, a 'DM' (Direct Message) is the specific action or item sent privately. 'Social Media' is the platform itself, 'D&D' refers to a game (Dungeons & Dragons), and 'Inbox' is the container where messages are stored, not the message itself.

5. A. awful

While 'awful' serves as the correct adjective to describe a bad taste in this context, 'awesome' is an antonym meaning excellent, 'formidable' describes something inspiring fear through size or power, and 'exceedingly' is an adverb used to modify other parts of speech rather than the noun 'taste' directly.

6. C. zero in on

To 'zero in' on something means to direct all your attention toward one specific goal or object. While 'narrow down' means to reduce options and 'pinpoint' means to find an exact location, 'zero in on' specifically describes the action of focusing energy on a chosen target.

7. D. jog

To jog means to run at a steady, gentle pace for exercise. 'Sprint' means to run at full speed, while 'nudge' and 'remind' do not describe a type of movement or exercise.

8. A. spend a penny

'Spend a penny' is a British idiom meaning to use the toilet and is a verb phrase that fits the sentence. The other options are confusables but do not fit grammatically in this sentence: 'loo' and 'bathroom' are nouns and 'nature calls' is a complete clause, so none of them correctly fill the blank as a verb phrase.

9. D. keep on

While 'continue', 'carry on', and 'go on' are synonyms of continuing an action, in this specific grammatical context followed by a gerund ('clicking'), 'keep on' is the most natural phrasal verb used for an annoying, repeated action in informal English. Crucially, in a multiple-choice format where synonyms are provided, the target word is tested for its specific phrasal structure.