Tricky Words of the Day

Friday, June 12, 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

Cast / Caste

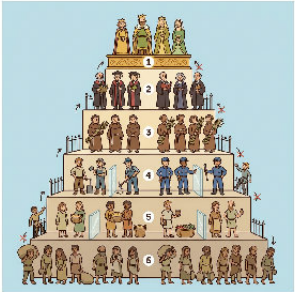
Remember that 'cast' (without the 'e') is used for almost everything: movies, fishing, broken bones, and shadows. 'Caste' (with the 'e') is a rare word used only when talking about social classes or hierarchy. They sound exactly the same.

Meaning 1

Cast: To throw something, to select actors for a play, or a hard bandage for a broken bone.

This spelling is confusing because it functions as a verb (to throw/assign roles) and a noun (the actors/the medical plaster). ESL learners often struggle with the many unrelated contexts for this single spelling.

"The doctor put a plaster cast on my broken arm."
"The director will cast the lead role tomorrow."



Meaning 2

Caste: A rigid system of social class or hereditary rank.

This spelling is specific to sociology and history. It sounds identical to 'cast' but refers exclusively to social hierarchy, which can lead to spelling errors in academic writing.

"The traditional caste system determined a person's occupation from birth."
"She wrote a book about the social castes of ancient civilizations."

Meaning 3

Cast: To form an object by pouring liquid metal or plaster into a mold.

This is a technical manufacturing meaning. It is confusing because it describes the process of making the 'cast' (the object) mentioned in the first definition.

"The bronze statue was cast in a single piece."
"They used a silicone mold to cast the wax figures."

Related: broadcast; forecast; social class; hierarchy; mold

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cast-caste

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Syndicate

The primary confusion lies in the pronunciation shift between the noun and the verb. Remember: the noun ends with a short 'uh' or 'it' sound (/-kt/), while the verb ends with a strong 'ate' sound (/-ket/). Additionally, be aware that 'syndicate' often carries a negative connotation in news reports about organized crime, despite being a neutral term in finance.

Meaning 1

A group of individuals or organizations combined to promote a common interest or carry out a specific business transaction.

As a noun, the word ends in a soft 'it' sound. It is confusing because it can refer to both legal business groups and illegal crime organizations (like a 'crime syndicate'), requiring context to understand the intent.

"The investment syndicate pooled their resources to buy the office building."
"Police are investigating a powerful crime syndicate operating in the city."

Meaning 2

To publish or broadcast material (such as a comic strip or television show) in many different newspapers or stations simultaneously.

As a verb, the word ends in a long 'ate' sound. ESL learners often struggle with this specific media industry term, which describes how a show like 'Friends' can be seen on many different channels at once.

"The production company plans to syndicate the hit sitcom globally next year."
"His political column is syndicated in over fifty newspapers across the country."

Related: consortium; alliance; broadcast; monopoly; cartel

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/syndicate

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

All that glitters is not gold

This phrase is a very old proverb, famously used by William Shakespeare in 'The Merchant of Venice' (though he used the word 'glisters' instead of 'glitters'). It is often used as a cautionary piece of advice. Note that 'glitter' means to shine with a bright, shimmering light.

Meaning 1

A warning against being deceived by superficial beauty or outward show.

The grammatical structure 'all... is not' can be confusing. In modern English, we would usually say 'Not everything that glitters is gold.' Learners might mistakenly think the phrase means 'Nothing that glitters is gold,' which is incorrect.

"The hotel looked amazing in the brochures, but the rooms were tiny and dirty-all that glitters is not gold."

"Don't be fooled by his charming smile"

Meaning 2

The appearance of something valuable or attractive does not always mean it is actually good or high quality.

ESL learners may take this literally and think it only refers to jewelry or precious metals. The confusion lies in the figurative application to people, opportunities, or products that look perfect on the outside but are disappointing once examined closely.

"The job offer had a high salary, but the long hours and toxic environment proved that all that glitters is not gold."

"He bought a flashy sports car for a low price, but it broke down a week later"

Related: don't judge a book by its cover; deceptive appearances; superficial; fool's gold; too good to be true

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/all-that-glitters-is-not-gold

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Squad

In modern social media culture, the term is often used in the phrase 'Squad Goals' to describe a group of people one admires. Learners should be careful not to use this in very formal business meetings unless referring to a specific task force.

Meaning 1

A small group of people working together, such as a military unit or a sports team.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it is often used in formal or professional contexts like the police (e.g., 'homicide squad') or military, which contrasts sharply with its informal social usage.

"The rescue squad arrived at the scene within minutes."
"He was selected for the national football squad."

Meaning 2

A close-knit group of friends who spend a lot of time together.

This slang usage is confusing because it treats a casual group of friends as a formal organization. It implies a high level of loyalty and 'coolness' that isn't present in the word 'friends'.

"I'm going to the movies with the squad tonight."
"That group of girls is total squad goals"

Related: crew; posse; clique; unit; team; homies

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/squad

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Certain

The word 'certain' is a contranym because it can mean both 'definite/known' and 'unnamed/unspecified.' To distinguish them, look at the sentence structure: if it follows 'I am...' it usually means 'sure.' If it comes before a noun (e.g., 'a certain smell'), it usually means 'a specific but unnamed' thing.

Meaning 1

Known for sure; established beyond doubt; confident.

In this context, 'certain' implies 100% accuracy and total confidence. ESL learners may find it confusing because it functions as a strong synonym for 'sure' or 'definite.'

"I am certain that I locked the front door before leaving."
"It is certain that the sun will rise tomorrow."

Meaning 2

Specific but not explicitly named or described; some but not all.

This is the 'contranym' aspect. While the first definition implies total clarity, this definition implies a level of vagueness or anonymity. It refers to something specific that the speaker isn't fully identifying.

"A certain person told me your secret, but I won't say who."
"The medicine is only effective against certain types of bacteria."

Meaning 3

Moderate or limited in amount or degree.

When used as an adjective before a noun like 'extent' or 'degree,' it suggests a limited amount rather than total certainty, which contradicts the 'absolute' nature of the first definition.

"I agree with you to a certain extent, but not entirely."
"There is a certain amount of risk involved in this investment."

Related: sure; definite; particular; specific; unnamed

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/certain

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Catch-22

The term originates from Joseph Heller's 1961 novel of the same name. In the book, a pilot wants to stop flying dangerous missions by proving he is insane, but the rule (Catch-22) states that anyone who wants to stop flying missions to stay safe is clearly sane. It is almost always used to describe frustration with bureaucracy or logic loops.

Meaning 1

A paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules or conditions.

ESL learners may be confused because the phrase uses the word 'catch' (usually a verb) and a specific number (22) that seems arbitrary. It describes a 'no-win' situation where the solution to a problem is blocked by a condition that can only be met if the problem is already solved.

"I can't get a job because I don't have experience, but I can't get experience because no one will hire me"
"it is a total Catch-22."

Meaning 2

A circular logic or a bureaucratic trap that makes a desired outcome impossible.

This is confusing because it often involves formal rules that seem logical on their own but become nonsensical when combined. Learners might look for a literal 'catch' (like a trap or a ball) or wonder why the number 22 was chosen.

"The government requires a permit to use the land, but they only issue permits to people who are already using the land."
"It's a Catch-22: I need to fix my glasses to see where I put my repair kit."

Related: vicious circle; deadlock; paradox; double bind; no-win situation

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/catch-22

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Bag

In British English, 'baggsy' is a slang way to claim something (like 'shotgun' in American English). Also, be aware of the idiom 'in the bag,' which means a success is certain.

Meaning 1

A flexible container made of paper, plastic, or cloth used for carrying items.

This is the most common noun form. ESL learners may be confused by the many specific types of bags (grocery bag, handbag, backpack) and the fact that 'bag' can be used as a general term for all of them.

"Please put the groceries in a paper bag."
"She carried her books in a large leather bag."

Meaning 2

To catch, kill, or trap an animal, usually during hunting.

This is a verb form. It is confusing because it transforms a common household object into an action related to hunting or capturing, which has no literal connection to a physical container.

"The hunter managed to bag a deer during the first week of the season."
"He hoped to bag a trophy elk on his trip to the mountains."

Meaning 3

To succeed in securing or winning something, or to claim something for oneself.

This is a figurative or informal use of the verb. Learners might not realize that 'bagging' something can mean winning a prize or claiming a seat before someone else does.

"I managed to bag a front-row seat for the concert."
"She bagged a promotion after only six months at the company."

Related: sack; pouch; capture; secure; handbag

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/bag

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Underprivileged

While 'underprivileged' is common in formal writing and news, it is rarely used in casual conversation between friends. It is important to note that the prefix 'under-' implies that these individuals are below the expected level of social 'privilege' or rights. In modern social justice contexts, some people prefer terms like 'underserved' or 'disadvantaged'.

Meaning 1

Lacking the standard of living and opportunities enjoyed by most people in a society; specifically, being poor or disadvantaged.

ESL learners may find this confusing because the word 'privilege' usually refers to a special luxury or advantage. However, in this context, it refers to basic human rights and social opportunities. It is a 'polite' way to avoid saying someone is 'poor' or 'low-income'.

"The charity provides free educational resources for underprivileged children in the city."
"The government is launching a new initiative to help underprivileged communities gain access to healthcare."

Meaning 2

A socially acceptable or 'softened' term used in professional, political, or academic settings to describe people living in poverty.

This is a euphemism. In English, calling someone 'poor' can sometimes be seen as blunt or insensitive. Learners might be confused by why native speakers use such a long, complex word instead of a simple one like 'poor'.

"The scholarship is specifically reserved for students from underprivileged backgrounds."
"The report highlights the gap between the wealthy and the underprivileged sectors of the population."

Related: disadvantaged; impoverished; low-income; underserved; deprived

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/underprivileged

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Show up

Inseparable. Common for unexpected arrivals.

Meaning 1

To arrive or appear (often unexpectedly).

Learners may think it means showing something upward. It means to be present.

"He showed up late to the meeting again."
"Guess who showed up at the party?"

Related: appear; turn up

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/show-up

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'cast / caste' correctly according to this definition: Cast: To throw something, to select actors for a play, or a hard bandage for a broken bone.?

A. The director will cast the lead roles for the new Broadway musical tomorrow.
B. The broken window was fixed with a new cast of glass by the repairman.
C. She had to cast her old clothes into the trash because they were too small.
D. In some historical societies, your cast determined your job and social status.

2. Which sentence uses 'Syndicate' correctly according to this definition: A group of individuals or organizations combined to promote a common interest or carry out a specific business transaction.?

A. After the argument, he felt a strong syndicate toward his friend's difficult situation.
B. You can syndicate the volume on the radio if you find the music is too quiet to hear.
C. A banking syndicate was formed to provide the massive loan needed for the new airport construction.
D. The local library decided to syndicate all the old books by giving them away for free to students.

3. Which sentence uses 'all that glitters is not gold' correctly according to this definition: The appearance of something valuable or attractive does not always mean it is actually good or high quality.?

A. The vintage car looked stunning on the outside, but the engine was completely broken, proving that all that glitters is not gold.
B. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover because sometimes the story is much better than the simple art on the front.
C. The jewelry store was very bright and expensive because all that glitters is not gold when the lights are on.
D. I checked my bank account after the bonus was paid, and I was so happy because all that glitters is not gold.

4. Which sentence uses 'squad' correctly according to this definition: A small group of people working together, such as a military unit or a sports team.?

A. The local fire squad was dispatched immediately to handle the emergency at the warehouse.
B. I need to buy a squad of tools from the hardware store to fix my broken kitchen cabinet.
C. She spent the afternoon organizing her squad of stamps into a colorful leather album.
D. The manager asked the entire clique to stay late to finish the project before the deadline.

5. Which sentence uses 'Certain' correctly according to this definition: Known for sure; established beyond doubt; confident.?

A. I am specific that the keys are on the kitchen table because I saw them there.
B. The manager mentioned that a certain employee had complained, but he didn't say who.
C. The scientists are now certain that the experiment was a complete success.
D. The teacher told the students to be very certain with their handwriting to avoid mistakes.

6. Which sentence uses 'Catch-22' correctly according to this definition: A paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules or conditions?

A. I need a work permit to get a job, but I can't apply for a work permit without a job offer; it's a real Catch-22.
B. The negotiator reached a Catch-22 where neither side wanted to talk, so they eventually just went home.
C. After the argument, they were in a vicious circle of blaming each other for the broken vase.
D. If you don't study for the exam, you will face a Catch-22 and fail the course next semester.

7. Which sentence uses 'bag' correctly according to this definition: A flexible container made of paper, plastic, or cloth used for carrying items.?

A. The hunters managed to bag several ducks during their trip to the lake.
B. You should bag your seat early if you want to see the performance clearly.
C. She kept her small coins in a leather pouch so they wouldn't fall out of her pocket.
D. The cashier asked if I wanted a plastic bag for my new shoes and clothes.

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