

Tricky Words of the Day

Saturday, June 13, 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

Ceiling / Sealing

Remember: 'Ceiling' with a 'C' is the top of the room (think 'C' for Cover). 'Sealing' with an 'S' is about closing something tight (think 'S' for Shut).



Meaning 1

Ceiling: The overhead upper surface of a room.

ESL learners often confuse the spelling of 'ceiling' with 'sealing' because they sound identical. Additionally, the 'ei' spelling in 'ceiling' follows the 'i before e except after c' rule, which is a common point of struggle.

"The living room has a very high ceiling."

"I need to paint the ceiling white to make the room look brighter."



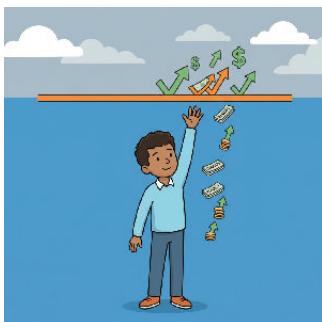
Meaning 2

Sealing: The act of closing or fastening something securely to prevent leakage or opening.

This is the present participle of the verb 'seal.' Learners may get confused because 'sealing' describes an action (closing a gap), while 'ceiling' describes a physical object (the top of a room).

"He is sealing the envelope before putting it in the mailbox."

"The worker is sealing the cracks in the window frame to keep the cold air out."



Meaning 3

Ceiling (Figurative): An upper limit set on something, such as prices, wages, or altitude.

This metaphorical use can be confusing because it doesn't refer to a physical roof, but rather a maximum allowable amount or level, such as a 'glass ceiling' in a career.

"The government has put a price ceiling on essential goods."

"She felt she had hit a professional ceiling and couldn't get promoted any further."

Related: roof; sealant; limit; fastening; overhead



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/ceiling-sealing

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Tarry

The primary confusion lies in the pronunciation shift. If you are talking about time or waiting, it rhymes with 'marry'. If you are talking about the sticky black substance used for roads or boats, it rhymes with 'starry'. The verb form is considered very formal or old-fashioned.

Meaning 1

Covered with, or smelling of, tar; dark and sticky.

This is an adjective derived from the noun 'tar'. It is confusing because it is spelled exactly like the verb meaning 'to linger' but is pronounced with a long 'ah' sound (like 'starry').

"The sailor's hands were black and tarry from working on the ship's ropes."

"The road crew left a tarry residue on the bottom of my car."



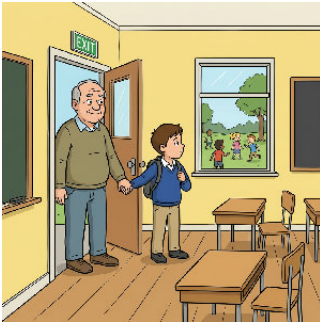
Meaning 2

To delay leaving a place; to linger or wait.

This is an archaic or literary verb. ESL learners may be confused because it is rarely used in modern conversation but appears frequently in classic literature and hymns. It is pronounced with a short 'a' sound (like 'carry').

"She decided to tarry a while in the garden before heading home."

"Do not tarry on your way to the market, for we have much work to do."



Related: linger; loiter; dawdle; pitchy; viscous



Read the full lesson

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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

As cool as a cucumber

This is a 'simile,' a type of idiom that uses 'as... as' to compare two things. The origin comes from the fact that the inside of a cucumber is often significantly cooler than the outside air temperature. In English, 'cool' is frequently used to mean 'calm' or 'fashionable,' but in this specific idiom, it only refers to being calm.

Meaning 1

Showing no signs of worry, fear, or panic when others might expect you to be upset.

The word 'cool' here acts as a synonym for 'composed.' Learners might struggle to understand why a cucumber is the standard for calmness, not realizing it refers to the vegetable's naturally low internal temperature.

"He walked into the job interview as cool as a cucumber, despite having no prior experience."

"While everyone else was screaming on the roller coaster, Sarah sat there as cool as a cucumber."

**Meaning 2**

To be very calm, relaxed, and in control of one's emotions, especially in a stressful situation.

ESL learners may be confused because the phrase uses 'cool' to describe a person's temperament rather than their temperature. Additionally, the comparison to a vegetable (a cucumber) seems random and lacks a literal connection to human behavior.

"Even though the stage lights failed during her speech, she remained as cool as a cucumber."

"The pilot was as cool as a cucumber while landing the plane during the storm."

Related: composed; unflappable; collected; calm; level-headed



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/as-cool-as-a-cucumber

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Bestie

While 'bestie' is very common among younger generations and on social media, it is considered too informal for professional or academic environments. It is gender-neutral and can be used for anyone.

**Meaning 1**

A casual, informal term for a person's best friend.

ESL learners may be confused by the suffix '-ie', which is often used to make words sound more affectionate or 'cute'. They might also mistake it for a formal title rather than a highly informal slang term used primarily in social media and casual conversation.

"I'm going to the mall with my bestie this afternoon."

"Happy birthday to my absolute bestie!"

Meaning 2

A term of endearment used ironically or casually for someone who is not necessarily a close friend, often used in digital spaces.

In modern internet culture, 'bestie' is often used to address strangers or acquaintances (e.g., 'Listen bestie...'). This can be very confusing for learners who expect the word to only apply to lifelong friends.

"Bestie, you need to delete that post, it's so embarrassing."

"Not this again, bestie!"

Related: BFF; best friend; best mate; besty; ride or die



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Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Dispose

The word 'dispose' is a contronym because it can mean to 'put away' (discard) or 'put in place' (arrange). ESL learners should note that when meaning 'to throw away,' it almost always requires the preposition 'of' (dispose of), whereas when meaning 'to arrange,' it does not.

Meaning 1

To throw something away or get rid of it.

This is the most common usage (usually followed by 'of'). ESL learners may find it confusing because it sounds formal, yet it describes the simple act of discarding trash or unwanted items.

"Please dispose of your litter in the bins provided."

"The company must find a safe way to dispose of chemical waste."

**Meaning 2**

To make someone inclined or willing to do something.

This refers to a mental state or tendency. It is confusing because it shifts from a physical action (throwing away or placing) to an abstract psychological influence.

"Her cheerful nature disposes people to trust her quickly."

"Faulty wiring may dispose a building to fire hazards."

Meaning 3

To arrange or place things in a particular order or position.

This is the 'opposite' sense of the contronym. While the first meaning is about removing something, this meaning is about carefully placing or organizing something. It is often used in technical, military, or artistic contexts.

"The commander began to dispose his troops along the river bank."

"The interior designer disposed the furniture to maximize the natural light."



Related: disposable; disposition; disposal; inclined; discard



Read the full lesson

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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Clean slate

This phrase originates from the use of slate tablets in schools and taverns. When the slate was full of writing or debts, it would be wiped clean with a cloth. Today, it is used almost exclusively as a metaphor for forgiveness or new beginnings.

Meaning 1

A legal or official record that has been cleared of previous offenses or marks.

In a professional or legal context, this can be confusing because it implies that history has been deleted or 'wiped,' which might sound impossible or literal to a non-native speaker.

"After five years of good behavior, his criminal record was cleared, giving him a clean slate."

"The new manager wanted a clean slate, so she didn't look at the previous performance reviews of her team."

Meaning 2

A fresh start where past mistakes, debts, or failures are forgotten or ignored.

ESL learners may be confused because they might look for a physical object (a slate is an old-fashioned writing board). They may not realize it refers to the metaphorical act of wiping a chalkboard clean to start over.

"Moving to a new city gave him a clean slate to start his career."

"The teacher decided to give the student a clean slate after he apologized for his behavior."

Related: Fresh start; Tabula rasa; Wipe the slate clean; New chapter; Square one



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/clean-slate

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Frame

Beyond these two meanings, 'frame' is also used in 'frame of mind' (mood) or 'to frame a question' (to formulate words carefully). The shift from a physical object to a criminal setup is what usually confuses learners.

Meaning 1

A rigid structure that surrounds or supports something, like a picture, window, or building.

This is the most common literal meaning. It refers to the physical border of an object or the skeleton of a structure.

"I bought a wooden frame for the photograph."

"The builders finished the steel frame of the house today."

**Meaning 2**

To falsely accuse someone of a crime by creating fake evidence.

This is a common idiomatic or figurative use in crime contexts. It is confusing for ESL learners because it changes from a physical object to a deceptive action.

"He didn't steal the money"

"someone tried to frame him."

Related: framework; set up; border; structure; casing



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/frame

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Unhoused

In modern American English, 'unhoused' is preferred by social workers and activists because it suggests that the situation is temporary or a result of a lack of housing availability, whereas 'homeless' can sometimes carry a negative social stigma. However, 'homeless' is still the most common term used in casual conversation.



Meaning 1

A person who does not have a permanent place to live; a more sensitive or politically correct term for 'homeless'.

ESL learners may be confused because 'homeless' is the standard term taught in textbooks, but 'unhoused' is increasingly used in professional, social, and political contexts to sound more humanizing and less stigmatizing.

"The city is opening a new shelter to provide services for the unhoused population."

"Many unhoused individuals struggle to find consistent medical care."

Meaning 2

The state of being displaced from a home due to specific circumstances like natural disasters or eviction.

Learners might confuse this with 'homelessness' as a permanent identity, whereas 'unhoused' often implies a systemic failure to provide housing rather than a personal characteristic of the individual.

"The earthquake left thousands of families unhoused and in need of emergency aid."

"Advocates argue that the term 'unhoused' emphasizes that housing is a human right that has been removed."

Related: homeless; displaced; unsheltered; transient; housing insecure



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/unhoused

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Point out

Separable: point something out.

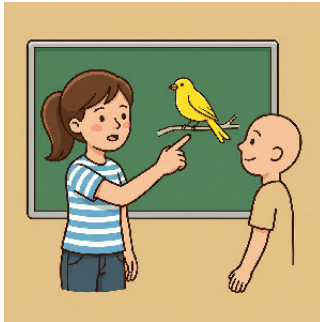
Meaning 1

To indicate or draw attention to something.

Learners may think it means physically pointing a finger. It means to highlight or mention.

"She pointed out the error in the report."

"The guide pointed out the famous landmarks."



Related: highlight; indicate; mention



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/point-out

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'ceiling' correctly according to this definition: The overhead upper surface of a room.?

- A. He painted the ceiling of his bedroom white to make it look brighter.
- B. The artist used a ceiling to protect his charcoal drawing from smudging.
- C. Wait for the floor to dry before you ceiling it with varnish.
- D. Please ceiling the envelope before you mail it so nothing falls out.

2. Which sentence uses 'tarry' correctly according to this definition: To delay leaving a place; to linger or wait.?

- A. The old road was covered in a dark, tarry substance that stuck to our shoes.
- B. We must not tarry here any longer, or we will miss the last train home.
- C. The syrup was viscous and poured slowly from the bottle.
- D. You should tarry the heavy boxes to the basement while I clean the garage.

3. Which sentence uses the expression 'as cool as a cucumber' correctly according to this definition: To be very calm, relaxed, and in control of one's emotions, especially in a stressful situation?

- A. The manager was as cool as a cucumber and started shouting when the project failed.
- B. Even though he had to give a speech to five hundred people, Mark was as cool as a cucumber.
- C. The air conditioning in the office is so strong that I feel as cool as a cucumber.
- D. She is very level-headed because she eats a healthy diet and exercises every morning.

4. Which sentence uses 'Bestie' correctly according to this definition: A casual, informal term for a person's best friend.?

- A. I can't wait to see my bestie today; we have been close friends since kindergarten.
- B. The teacher told the students to find a 'ride-or-die' partner for the science project.
- C. The company hired a new bestie to manage the marketing department.
- D. She is the bestie student in the whole class because she always gets 100%.

5. Which sentence uses 'dispose' correctly according to this definition: To throw something away or get rid of it?

- A. The manager has a very friendly disposition toward all the new customers.
- B. She disposed the books on the shelf neatly.
- C. Please dispose of your old newspapers in the recycling bin.
- D. If you are disposed to help us, please sign your name on this list.

6. Which sentence uses 'clean slate' correctly according to this definition: A fresh start where past mistakes, debts, or failures are forgotten or ignored?

- A. Moving to a new school gave Mark a clean slate to make new friends who didn't know about his past.
- B. The kitchen floor was a clean slate after I spent all morning scrubbing it.
- C. I am back to square one because I lost all my notes and have to start the project again.
- D. She has a clean slate of health and doesn't need to see the doctor anymore.

7. In this sentence, what does "frame" mean? The photo is in a wooden frame on my desk.

- A. A plan for a project
- B. To blame someone unfairly
- C. One picture in a movie
- D. A rigid border or support around something

8. What does "unhoused" mean?

- A. Moving into a new apartment
- B. Living in a very large house
- C. Without a permanent place to live
- D. Staying home from school

9. What does "point out" mean?

- A. To show or mention something so people notice it
- B. To make something sharper
- C. To agree without speaking
- D. To leave a room quickly



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Quiz

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

1. Which sentence uses 'ceiling' correctly according to this definition: The overhead upper surface of a room.?

- A. He painted the ceiling of his bedroom white to make it look brighter.
- B. The artist used a ceiling to protect his charcoal drawing from smudging.
- C. Wait for the floor to dry before you ceiling it with varnish.
- D. Please ceiling the envelope before you mail it so nothing falls out.

Target: ceiling / sealing · CEFR A2

2. Which sentence uses 'tarry' correctly according to this definition: To delay leaving a place; to linger or wait.?

- A. The old road was covered in a dark, tarry substance that stuck to our shoes.
- B. We must not tarry here any longer, or we will miss the last train home.
- C. The syrup was viscous and poured slowly from the bottle.
- D. You should tarry the heavy boxes to the basement while I clean the garage.

Target: Tarry · CEFR A2

3. Which sentence uses the expression 'as cool as a cucumber' correctly according to this definition: To be very calm, relaxed, and in control of one's emotions, especially in a stressful situation?

- A. The manager was as cool as a cucumber and started shouting when the project failed.
- B. Even though he had to give a speech to five hundred people, Mark was as cool as a cucumber.
- C. The air conditioning in the office is so strong that I feel as cool as a cucumber.
- D. She is very level-headed because she eats a healthy diet and exercises every morning.

Target: as cool as a cucumber · CEFR A2

4. Which sentence uses 'Bestie' correctly according to this definition: A casual, informal term for a person's best friend.?

- A. I can't wait to see my bestie today; we have been close friends since kindergarten.
- B. The teacher told the students to find a 'ride-or-die' partner for the science project.
- C. The company hired a new bestie to manage the marketing department.
- D. She is the bestie student in the whole class because she always gets 100%.

Target: Bestie · CEFR A2

5. Which sentence uses 'dispose' correctly according to this definition: To throw something away or get rid of it?

- A. The manager has a very friendly disposition toward all the new customers.
- B. She disposed the books on the shelf neatly.
- C. Please dispose of your old newspapers in the recycling bin.
- D. If you are disposed to help us, please sign your name on this list.

Target: Dispose · CEFR A2

6. Which sentence uses 'clean slate' correctly according to this definition: A fresh start where past mistakes, debts, or failures are forgotten or ignored?

- A. Moving to a new school gave Mark a clean slate to make new friends who didn't know about his past.
- B. The kitchen floor was a clean slate after I spent all morning scrubbing it.
- C. I am back to square one because I lost all my notes and have to start the project again.
- D. She has a clean slate of health and doesn't need to see the doctor anymore.

Target: Clean Slate · CEFR A2

7. In this sentence, what does "frame" mean? The photo is in a wooden frame on my desk.

- A. A plan for a project
- B. To blame someone unfairly
- C. One picture in a movie
- D. A rigid border or support around something

Target: Frame · CEFR A2

8. What does "unhoused" mean?

- A. Moving into a new apartment
- B. Living in a very large house
- C. Without a permanent place to live
- D. Staying home from school

Target: Unhoused · CEFR A2

9. What does "point out" mean?

- A. To show or mention something so people notice it
- B. To make something sharper
- C. To agree without speaking
- D. To leave a room quickly

Target: Point Out · CEFR A2

Answer Key

1. A. He painted the ceiling of his bedroom white to make it look brighter.

The correct answer uses 'ceiling' to mean the overhead surface of a room. Distractor 1 uses 'ceiling' where the verb 'seal' or 'sealing' (to close) is intended (homophone confusion). Distractor 2 uses a different meaning of 'ceiling' (an upper limit), not the physical overhead surface. Distractor 3 uses 'ceiling' as a verb for treating a floor, which is a misuse of the word and the wrong part of speech.

2. B. We must not tarry here any longer, or we will miss the last train home.

The correct answer uses 'tarry' as an intransitive verb meaning to delay leaving or linger. Distractor 1 uses 'tarry' as an adjective meaning covered with tar (different meaning/part of speech). Distractor 2 shows a misuse of 'tarry' (attempting to use it transitively to mean 'prepare' this is incorrect). Distractor 3 uses the confusable word 'viscous' correctly in its own meaning (thick, slow-flowing) but does not use 'tarry' at all.

3. B. Even though he had to give a speech to five hundred people, Mark was as cool as a cucumber.

The correct sentence (Mark giving a speech) uses the idiom to describe someone remaining calm during a stressful event. Distractor 1 uses the phrase to describe physical temperature (literal meaning), which is incorrect for the idiom. Distractor 2 uses a synonym ('level-headed') and describes calmness, but it does not use the target expression. Distractor 3 uses the idiom and then describes someone shouting behavior that contradicts the idiom (the opposite of being calm), so it is incorrect.

4. A. I can't wait to see my bestie today; we have been close friends since kindergarten.

'Bestie' is an informal noun meaning a person's best friend. The correct sentence ("I can't wait to see my bestie today; we have been close friends since kindergarten.") uses it appropriately as a casual noun referring to a close friend. Distractor 1 incorrectly treats 'bestie' as a job title or professional role. Distractor 2 uses a different slang expression ('ride-or-die') rather than 'bestie' (and is odd in a classroom instruction), so it does not show correct use of 'bestie.' Distractor 3 uses 'bestie' as an adjective modifying 'student' (wrong part of speech), which is not correct usage.

5. C. Please dispose of your old newspapers in the recycling bin.

Correct: 'Dispose of' means to get rid of something (throw away or discard). Distractor 1 uses the noun 'disposition' (a person's usual mood or attitude), not 'dispose'. Distractor 2 uses 'disposed' meaning 'inclined' or 'willing' (e.g., 'disposed to help'), which is a different meaning. Distractor 3 misuses 'dispose' to mean 'arrange' or 'place' the correct verb for that meaning is 'arrange' or 'put'; to talk about getting rid of the books you would say 'disposed of the books'.

6. A. Moving to a new school gave Mark a clean slate to make new friends who didn't know about his past.

the correct answer (Moving to a new school gave Mark a clean slate to make ne) correctly describes a psychological fresh start where past issues are ignored. a distractor (The kitchen floor was a clean slate after I spent all mor) uses the term literally for physical cleanliness, a distractor (I am back to square one because I lost all my notes and h) refers to starting over because of failure (back to square one), and a distractor (She has a clean slate of health and doesn't need to see t) incorrectly uses the idiom instead of 'clean bill of health'.

7. D. A rigid border or support around something

Here, "frame" means the physical border or support around the photo. The other choices are different meanings of the word.

8. C. Without a permanent place to live

"Unhoused" is a sensitive term for a person who does not have a permanent place to live.

9. A. To show or mention something so people notice it

"Point out" means to indicate, show, or draw attention to something.