Tricky Words of the Day

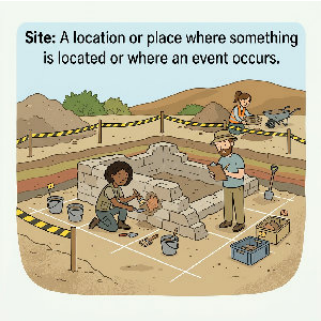
Monday, June 15, 2026

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 7

Cite / Sight

To remember the difference: 'Cite' starts with 'C' like 'Citation' or 'Copyright.' 'Sight' contains 'igh' like 'Light' or 'Night' (things related to vision). 'Site' refers to a 'Situation' or 'Space.'

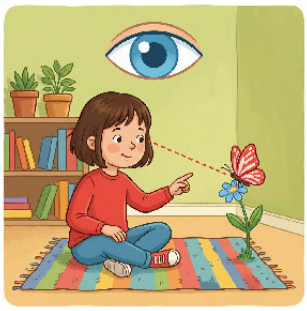


Meaning 1

Site: A location or place where something is located or where an event occurs.

Though not explicitly requested, 'site' is the third member of this homophone group. ESL learners frequently swap 'site' (location) with 'cite' (reference) or 'sight' (vision) because all three are pronounced /sat/.

"This is the future site of the new city library."
"We visited the historic site where the battle took place."



Meaning 2

Sight: The faculty or power of seeing; something that is seen.

This is a noun related to vision. Learners may struggle because it is part of common idioms like 'sightseeing' or 'out of sight,' which are pronounced exactly like the academic verb 'cite.'

"The sunset over the mountains was a beautiful sight."
"He lost his sight in a tragic accident many years ago."

Meaning 3

Cite: To refer to a source, book, or author as evidence for an argument or statement.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'sight' because they sound identical. 'Cite' is a verb used primarily in academic writing or legal contexts (e.g., citing a law or a source).

"You must cite your sources at the end of your research paper."
"The lawyer decided to cite a previous case to prove her point."

Related: citation; vision; location; insight; website

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cite-sight

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 7

Torment

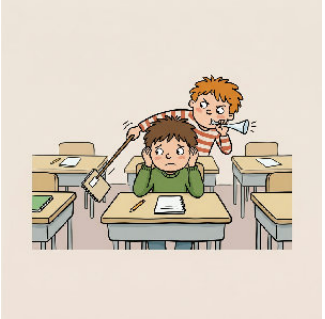
This is a 'noun-verb' stress pair. Similar to words like 'record' or 'present,' the noun form usually has the stress on the first syllable, while the verb form has the stress on the second. In casual conversation, 'torment' can also be used hyperbolically to mean minor annoyance.

Meaning 1

Severe physical or mental suffering; a source of pain or annoyance.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (TOR-ment). ESL learners often struggle with the shift in stress between the noun and verb forms, which changes the rhythm of the sentence.

"The long wait for the news was pure torment for the family."
"Mosquitoes can be a real torment during the summer months."



Meaning 2

To cause someone or something great physical or mental suffering; to annoy or tease persistently.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (tor-MENT). Learners may find it confusing that the same spelling requires a different emphasis depending on whether it is an action or a thing.

"The older boys used to torment him on the playground."
"He was tormented by the memory of his mistake."

Related: torture; agony; harass; affliction; pester

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/torment

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 7

Back to square one

This phrase likely originates from board games like 'Snakes and Ladders' or early radio football commentaries where the pitch was divided into numbered squares. For ESL learners, it is important to note that this is almost always used in a frustrated or disappointed tone.

Meaning 1

To start over from the very beginning because a previous attempt failed.

ESL learners may take this literally and look for a physical square or a board game. It is confusing because it implies that all previous progress has been lost, even if the person isn't playing a game.

"The software crashed before I could save my work, so now I'm back to square one."
"Our negotiations failed, and we are back to square one with the contract."

Meaning 2

To return to the initial stage of a process to rethink a strategy.

It can be confusing because it doesn't always mean a 'failure'; sometimes it describes a choice to restart to ensure better quality or a different approach.

"The cake didn't taste right, so the baker went back to square one to check the recipe."
"If this marketing plan doesn't work, we'll have to go back to square one."

Related: start from scratch; clean slate; back to the drawing board; reset; restart

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/back-to-square-one

Contranym · Lesson 4 of 7

Garnishment

In everyday English, people usually use 'garnish' for food and 'garnishment' for legal debt collection. The confusion arises because the root word 'garnish' originally meant 'to equip' or 'to arm,' which evolved into both 'to decorate' (adding) and 'to warn/legally seize' (taking).

Meaning 1

A legal process where a person's money or property (usually wages) is taken away to pay off a debt.

This is a contranym because while the first meaning implies 'adding' something, this meaning implies 'taking away' or 'subtracting' funds from a paycheck. This reversal of direction is highly confusing.

"The court ordered a wage garnishment to ensure his child support payments were made."
"She was shocked to see a garnishment on her bank statement for unpaid taxes."

The act of adding something decorative or functional to something else, such as food

Meaning 2

The act of adding something decorative or functional to something else, such as food or a document.

ESL learners often associate 'garnish' only with cooking (like adding parsley to a plate). In a legal or formal context, it can mean adding necessary information or 'decorating' a legal notice.

"The chef focused on the garnishment of the platter to make it look more appetizing."
"The garnishment of the contract included several additional clauses to protect the buyer."

Related: garnish; levy; attachment; decoration; deduction

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/garnishment

Figure of Speech · Lesson 5 of 7

Face value

This phrase is most commonly used in the idiom 'to take something at face value.' It implies a choice to believe what is seen or heard rather than being cynical or investigating further.

Meaning 1

The literal meaning of something as it appears, without looking for hidden meanings or ulterior motives.

ESL learners may be confused because 'face' usually refers to a body part. In this context, it means the 'surface' or 'outward appearance' of a statement or situation.

"I took his apology at face value and assumed he was truly sorry."
"You shouldn't always take what you read on social media at face value."

Meaning 2

The value printed or stamped on a piece of money, a stamp, or a financial document like a bond.

This is confusing because the 'value' of an item (like a vintage stamp or a concert ticket) might be much higher or lower than the number actually printed on its 'face'.

"The face value of the postage stamp is 50 cents, but collectors will pay fifty dollars for it."
"The bond has a face value of one thousand dollars."

Meaning 3

The price printed on a ticket for an event, before any additional fees or resale markups.

Learners often struggle with this in the context of the 'secondary market' where tickets are sold for much more than the original price shown on the ticket itself.

"I was lucky to get these concert tickets at face value before they sold out."
"Scalpers are selling the tickets for three times their face value."

Related: literal; surface level; nominal value; apparent; par value

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/face-value

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 6 of 7

Block

In British English, 'a block of flats' refers to an apartment building, which is another distinct meaning. Also, 'block' is used in social media to describe preventing someone from contacting you.

Meaning 1

The distance between two intersecting streets, or a specific rectangular area in a city.

This is a common source of confusion when giving directions. In many countries, 'a block' is not a standard unit of measurement, so learners may not know how far they need to walk.

"Walk two blocks north and turn left at the pharmacy."
"I live on the same block as the grocery store."

Meaning 2

A solid piece of hard material (like wood or stone) with flat sides, or a toy for children.

ESL learners may confuse this physical object with the abstract or geographical meanings. In a toy context, it is a noun, but it can also be used as a verb meaning to obstruct.

"The toddler built a tall tower using wooden blocks."
"The pyramid was constructed from massive stone blocks."

Meaning 3

To stop something from moving or to prevent progress (physical or mental).

This usage can be physical (blocking a door) or psychological (writer's block). Learners often struggle with the transition from the noun (an object) to the verb (the action of stopping something).

"A fallen tree is blocking the main road."
"I have writer's block and cannot finish my essay."

Related: obstruct; cube; neighborhood; barrier; stop

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/block

Euphemism · Lesson 7 of 7

Waste management specialist

This is a classic example of workplace euphemism. When you see long, complex titles for simple jobs, it is often an attempt to increase the 'dignity' of the role. Learners should look for the word 'waste' to understand the job involves trash, regardless of how fancy the other words sound.

Meaning 1

A professional job title for someone who collects, transports, or processes garbage and recycling.

ESL learners may be confused because the individual words 'management' and 'specialist' usually imply a high-level office or scientific role, but here they are used to describe manual labor involving trash.

"The waste management specialist emptied the bins early this morning."
"He applied for a job as a waste management specialist with the city council."

Meaning 2

A pop-culture reference to organized crime figures who use 'waste management' as a front for illegal activities.

In American media (like 'The Sopranos'), this term is famously used as a code for the Mafia. An ESL learner might hear this in a movie and not realize it is a sarcastic cover for criminal behavior.

"In the TV show, the mob boss tells the police he is just a 'waste management specialist'."
"He claimed to be in waste management, but everyone knew he was involved in the underground syndicate."

Meaning 3

A polite or 'politically correct' way to refer to a garbage collector or janitor to make the job sound more prestigious.

This is confusing because it is a 'doublespeak' term. It disguises a job that is often seen as dirty or low-status with academic-sounding language to show respect or avoid social discomfort.

"In modern job listings, you will rarely see the word 'garbage man'"
"they prefer 'waste management specialist'."

Related: sanitation worker; refuse collector; garbage man; environmental services; custodian

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/waste-management-specialist

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'waste management specialist' correctly according to this definition: A professional job title for someone who collects, transports, or processes garbage and recycling?

A. The waste management specialist is responsible for hiring new accountants for the city council.
B. The waste management specialist arrived at 6 a.m. to empty all the municipal recycling bins.
C. I need a waste management specialist to fix the leaking pipes in my bathroom.
D. As a waste management specialist, he spends his day sweeping the office floors and dusting desks.

2. Which sentence uses 'back to square one' correctly according to this definition: To start over from the very beginning because a previous attempt failed.?

A. The teacher asked the students to back to square one their desks to make the room tidy.
B. We need to clean slate the project because we have a new manager joining us.
C. The negotiator realized the treaty was rejected, so the team is back to square one.
D. I finally reached the finish line and I am so back to square one with my victory.

3. Which sentence uses 'face value' correctly according to this definition: The literal meaning of something as it appears, without looking for hidden meanings or ulterior motives?

A. The tickets have a face value of fifty dollars, but they are selling for much more online.
B. The par value of the company's message was clear: they wanted to increase their profits.
C. He is a very face value person who always tells the truth no matter what happens.
D. When Sarah said she was too busy to help, I just took it at face value and didn't think she was angry.

4. Which sentence uses 'garnishment' correctly according to this definition: The act of adding something decorative or functional to something else, such as food or a document.?

A. The chef spent several minutes on the final garnishment of the dessert, adding fresh mint and gold leaf.
B. The company faced a court order for the garnishment of the employee's wages to pay off his debts.
C. After the storm, the garden was a mess of garnishment and broken branches that needed to be cleared.
D. The government decided to levy a new garnishment on all imported luxury electronics this year.

5. Which sentence uses 'block' correctly according to this definition: A solid piece of hard material (like wood or stone) with flat sides, or a toy for children.?

A. The runner struggled to block his opponent from overtaking him during the final lap.
B. The construction crew used a heavy crane to lift each stone block into place for the wall.
C. The technician had to obstruct the signal to prevent the device from overheating.
D. I live just one block away from the local library and the grocery store.

6. Which sentence uses 'cite' correctly according to this definition: To refer to a source, book, or author as evidence for an argument or statement?

A. In her essay, the student had to cite several academic journals to support her claims.
B. The mountain view was a beautiful cite to behold during our vacation.
C. The workers are currently preparing the cite for the new library construction.
D. In her essay, the student had to recite several academic journals to support her claims.

7. Which sentence uses 'torment' correctly according to this definition: Severe physical or mental suffering; a source of pain or annoyance.?

A. The teacher gave us a torment of homework that we had to finish by Friday.
B. The athlete won the race with a great torment of speed and strength.
C. Waiting for the medical results was a week of absolute torment for Sarah.
D. If you continue to pester the dog while he is eating, he might get angry.

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