

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, June 17, 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

Colonel / Kernel

The word 'colonel' comes from the French word 'coronel,' which explains the 'r' sound, but the spelling was later changed to reflect the Italian 'colonnello.' Remember: 'Colonel' is the person in the uniform; 'Kernel' is the corn in the jar.



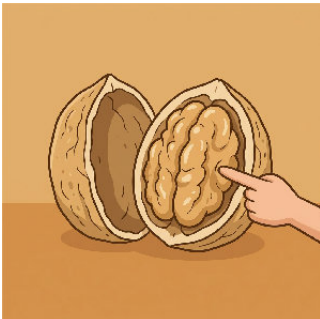
Meaning 1

Colonel: A high-ranking commissioned officer in the army, air force, or marine corps.

This is one of the most notoriously confusing words in English because the spelling (with 'l' and 'o') does not match the pronunciation (which sounds like it has an 'r'). ESL learners often try to pronounce it as 'co-lo-nel'.

"The colonel led his regiment during the training exercise."

"She was promoted to the rank of colonel after twenty years of service."



Meaning 2

Kernel: The inner part of a nut or seed, or the central/most important part of something.

While this word is spelled phonetically (how it sounds), it is confused with 'colonel' because they sound identical. Learners may struggle to choose the correct spelling based on the context of the sentence.

"Be careful not to choke on a popcorn kernel."

"There was a kernel of truth in his complicated explanation."

Related: rank; military; seed; core; homophone



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/colonel-kernel

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Transport

Remember: if it is a thing (noun), stress the beginning. If it is an action (verb), stress the end. This is a common pattern in English for noun-verb pairs like 'record', 'present', and 'object'.

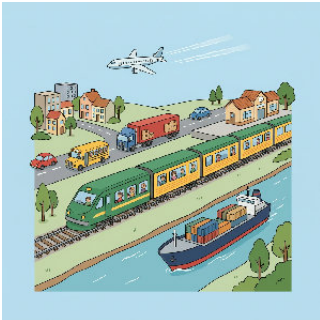
**Meaning 1**

To be overwhelmed by strong emotion, especially joy or delight.

This is a figurative use of the verb. It can be confusing because it implies a mental or emotional movement rather than a physical one, often used in the passive voice 'to be transported'.

"She was transported with joy when she heard the news."

"The beautiful music transported the audience to another world."

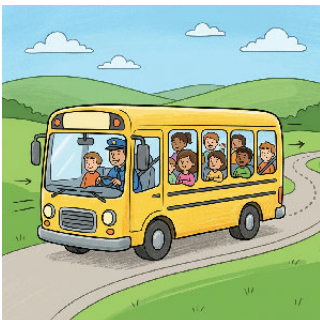
**Meaning 2**

A system or vehicle for carrying people or goods from one place to another.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (TRAN-sport). ESL learners often struggle with the shift in word stress when moving between the noun and verb forms.

"Public transport in this city is very efficient."

"The transport of heavy machinery requires a special permit."

**Meaning 3**

To carry, take, or move people or goods from one place to another.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (tran-SPORT). Learners may find it difficult to remember that the pronunciation changes based on the grammatical function of the word.

"The company will transport the goods by sea."

"Buses are used to transport students to the museum."

Related: transportation; transit; conveyance; logistics; enraptured



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/transport

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Batten down the hatches

This phrase is a 'nautical idiom.' Even though it started on ships, native speakers use it for any situation where you need to get ready for a 'storm' (which could be a literal storm, an argument, or a bad economy). Note that 'batten' is a verb here, but it is almost never used outside of this specific phrase.

**Meaning 1**

To physically secure a ship's openings (hatches) using wooden strips (battens) to prevent water from entering during a storm.

This is the literal, historical origin of the phrase. Learners might find it confusing because 'hatches' usually refers to doors on a ship or aircraft, not standard house doors.

"The captain ordered the crew to batten down the hatches as the waves grew taller."

"Before the hurricane hit, the sailors spent hours batten down the hatches to keep the cargo dry."

**Meaning 2**

To prepare for a difficult situation or a period of trouble.

ESL learners may be confused because the individual words (batten, hatches) are technical nautical terms that are rarely used in everyday conversation, making the figurative meaning hard to guess.

"The company is expecting a financial crisis, so they are batten down the hatches by cutting costs."

"With the storm approaching, the coastal town began to batten down the hatches."

Related: brace yourself; prepare for the worst; weather the storm; get ready



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/batten-down-the-hatches

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Legit

While 'legit' is widely used in conversation and on social media, it should be avoided in formal writing or professional emails. It is a very common 'filler' word used by native speakers to add emphasis to a statement.

Meaning 1

Used as an adverb to mean 'honestly,' 'truly,' or 'actually.'

It is often used for emphasis in a way that defies standard grammar rules, replacing words like 'really' or 'seriously.'

"I legit thought the movie started at eight o'clock."

"It was so cold outside, I legit couldn't feel my toes."

**Meaning 2**

Short for 'legitimate'; meaning something is legal, official, or follows the rules.

ESL learners may be confused because it is a clipped version of a formal word used in very informal settings. It sounds like a separate word rather than an abbreviation.

"Is that website legit, or is it a scam?"

"Don't worry, his business is totally legit."

**Meaning 3**

Used to describe something that is authentic, real, or of high quality.

In this context, 'legit' doesn't mean 'legal' in a court of law, but rather 'genuine' or 'impressive.' Learners might take it too literally as a legal term.

"That skateboarder just did a legit kickflip."

"The food at this restaurant is legit"



Related: legitimate; authentic; for real; genuine; bonafide



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/legit

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Nonplussed

This word is a classic 'contronym' or 'Janus word.' Because it has two opposite meanings, you must rely heavily on context to understand it. In British English and formal writing, it almost always means 'confused.' In casual American English, it often means 'unfazed.' To avoid confusion in your own writing, consider using clearer synonyms like 'perplexed' or 'unmoved.'

Meaning 1

Surprised and confused so much that one is unsure how to react.

This is the original, formal definition. ESL learners often find this confusing because the prefix 'non-' usually implies a negative or 'not,' leading them to think the person is 'not bothered,' when in fact they are deeply perplexed.

"The diplomat was completely nonplussed by the unexpected question from the reporter."

"She was nonplussed when she found her office completely empty."

**Meaning 2**

Not disconcerted; unperturbed or unimpressed.

This is the informal, North American usage. It is a contronym because it means the exact opposite of the original definition. It likely evolved because speakers assume 'nonplussed' means 'not plus-ed' (not bothered).

"He seemed nonplussed by the long lines and waited patiently for his turn."

"Despite the loud heckling from the crowd, the speaker remained nonplussed."

Related: perplexed; unfazed; bewildered; composed; confounded



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/nonplussed

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Free as a bird**

Often used about temporary freedom (after work, after exams) rather than permanent independence.

Meaning 1

Completely free of responsibilities, restrictions, or worries.

Birds can fly anywhere with no rules. The simile evokes the feeling of total freedom, often after a period of restriction.

"Now that the project is done, I'm free as a bird this weekend."

"After her divorce, she felt free as a bird."

Related: carefree; unrestricted; liberated; footloose; unburdened



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/free-as-a-bird

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Cap**

In digital communication, you might see the 'cap' emoji (a blue baseball hat) used to call someone out for lying. Additionally, 'CAPS' is short for capital letters, which is another common point of confusion.

Meaning 1

A type of soft hat with a brim, or a protective lid for a container.

ESL learners may confuse 'cap' with 'hat'. While all caps are hats, not all hats are caps. It also refers to the small plastic tops on bottles, which is a different category of object entirely.

"He wore a baseball cap to the game."

"Don't forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste."

Meaning 2

To lie or exaggerate; a statement that is false (slang).

This is a modern slang term that is highly confusing because it has no logical connection to headwear. 'No cap' means 'I am telling the truth,' while 'capping' means lying.

"Stop capping, I know you didn't actually meet a celebrity."

"That was the best meal I've ever had, no cap."

Meaning 3

An upper limit or ceiling placed on something, such as money or a quantity.

This is a metaphorical use often found in business or sports. It can be confusing because it describes an invisible boundary rather than a physical object.

"The government put a cap on energy prices this winter."

"The team is over their salary cap and cannot hire new players."

Related: lid; limit; deception; beanie; top



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/cap

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Powder room

For ESL learners, it is important to know that a 'powder room' almost never has a shower or a bathtub. If you are looking for a place to bathe, do not ask for the powder room. It is mostly used in North American English.

Meaning 1

A polite way for a woman to say she is going to the bathroom in a public or social setting.

In social situations, saying 'I need to go to the powder room' or 'I need to powder my nose' is considered more elegant and discreet than saying 'I need to use the toilet.'

"Excuse me for a moment, I need to visit the powder room."

"She headed to the powder room to check her makeup before dinner."

Meaning 2

A small bathroom for guests, usually containing only a toilet and a sink, located on the main floor of a house.

It is a euphemism because it avoids using the word 'toilet' or 'bathroom.' Historically, it referred to a room where people would literally go to apply powder to their faces or wigs. Today, it is a polite way to refer to a half-bathroom.

"The guests can use the powder room near the entrance."

"We are planning to renovate the small powder room under the stairs."

Related: half-bath; guest bathroom; restroom; lavatory; cloakroom



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/powder-room

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Turn down

Separable. Two very common meanings.

Meaning 1

To reject or refuse an offer or request.

Common confusion with literally turning something downward.

"She turned down the job offer because of the low salary."

"He turned down my invitation to the party."

Meaning 2

To reduce the volume or intensity.

Opposite of turn up.

"Please turn down the music-it's too loud."

Related: reject; lower; refuse



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/turn-down

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'nonplussed' correctly according to this definition: Surprised and confused so much that one is unsure how to react.?

- A. The diplomat was completely nonplussed by the unexpected question and stood in silence for a moment.
- B. He felt very nonplussed and satisfied after finishing the difficult marathon in first place.
- C. The athlete remained nonplussed and calm, even when the crowd began to cheer for her opponent.
- D. The teacher was unfazed by the noise, showing how nonplussed she was during the loud party.

2. Which sentence uses 'transport' correctly according to this definition: A system or vehicle for carrying people or goods from one place to another?

- A. She was in a complete transport of joy when she heard the good news.
- B. The city needs to invest more money in public transit to reduce traffic jams.
- C. The logistics of the event were handled by a local planning agency.
- D. The city needs to invest more money in public transport to reduce traffic jams.

3. Which sentence uses 'powder room' correctly according to this definition: A small bathroom for guests, usually containing only a toilet and a sink, located on the main floor of a house?

- A. The main bathroom is upstairs, but there is a convenient powder room just off the hallway for visitors.
- B. If the guests have questions about the event schedule, they can find a staff member at the powder room in the main lobby.
- C. Before we go into the kitchen, please place your shoes and damp raincoats in the powder room so the floor stays clean.
- D. You can leave your heavy winter coats and umbrellas in the powder room near the front door so you don't have to carry them.

4. Which sentence uses 'colonel' correctly according to this definition: A high-ranking commissioned officer in the army, air force, or marine corps.?

- A. There was a colonel of truth in his story, even if most of it was exaggerated.
- B. After twenty years of service, he was promoted to colonel and given command of the regiment.
- C. The computer's colonel is responsible for managing the hardware and software resources.
- D. I found a single unpopped colonel at the bottom of my bag of popcorn.

5. Which sentence uses 'free as a bird' correctly according to this definition: Completely free of responsibilities, restrictions, or worries.?

- A. The store is giving away samples for free as a bird to every customer who enters today.
- B. The prisoner was suddenly liberated from his cell after the guards found the true evidence.
- C. Following the rigorous physical training, his muscles felt free as a bird and completely relaxed.
- D. After handing in my last final exam, I felt free as a bird and ready for the summer holidays.

6. Which sentence uses 'legit' correctly according to this definition: Short for 'legitimate'; meaning something is legal, official, or follows the rules.?

- A. He is a very legit person who always tells the truth and never lies.
- B. You need to legit your passport at the office before you can travel abroad.
- C. I checked their business license online to make sure the company is legit.
- D. The movie was so legit that I cried at the end because it was very sad.

7. Which sentence uses 'cap' correctly according to this definition: A type of soft hat with a brim, or a protective lid for a container?

- A. Don't forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste after you use it.
- B. He tried to cap his brother by telling a more impressive story about the trip.
- C. She placed the lid on her head before going out into the morning sun.
- D. The government decided to cap the price of electricity to help families save money.

8. Which sentence uses 'batten down the hatches' correctly according to this definition: To prepare for a difficult situation or a period of trouble.?

- A. The team felt very confident, so they decided to batten down the hatches and celebrate their victory early.
- B. We need to weather the storm for the winter by buying extra food and warm clothes today.
- C. With a recession coming, the government is battening down the hatches by reducing all unnecessary spending.
- D. The company stayed calm and battened down the hatches only after the crisis had already passed.



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Quiz

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

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- A. The diplomat was completely nonplussed by the unexpected question and stood in silence for a moment.
- B. He felt very nonplussed and satisfied after finishing the difficult marathon in first place.
- C. The athlete remained nonplussed and calm, even when the crowd began to cheer for her opponent.
- D. The teacher was unfazed by the noise, showing how nonplussed she was during the loud party.

Target: Nonplussed · CEFR B1

2. Which sentence uses 'transport' correctly according to this definition: A system or vehicle for carrying people or goods from one place to another?

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- B. The city needs to invest more money in public transit to reduce traffic jams.
- C. The logistics of the event were handled by a local planning agency.
- D. The city needs to invest more money in public transport to reduce traffic jams.

Target: Transport · CEFR B1

3. Which sentence uses 'powder room' correctly according to this definition: A small bathroom for guests, usually containing only a toilet and a sink, located on the main floor of a house?

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- C. Before we go into the kitchen, please place your shoes and damp raincoats in the powder room so the floor stays clean.
- D. You can leave your heavy winter coats and umbrellas in the powder room near the front door so you don't have to carry them.

Target: powder room · CEFR B1

4. Which sentence uses 'colonel' correctly according to this definition: A high-ranking commissioned officer in the army, air force, or marine corps.?

- A. There was a colonel of truth in his story, even if most of it was exaggerated.
- B. After twenty years of service, he was promoted to colonel and given command of the regiment.
- C. The computer's colonel is responsible for managing the hardware and software resources.
- D. I found a single unpoped colonel at the bottom of my bag of popcorn.

Target: colonel / kernel · CEFR B1

5. Which sentence uses 'free as a bird' correctly according to this definition: Completely free of responsibilities, restrictions, or worries.?

- A. The store is giving away samples for free as a bird to every customer who enters today.
- B. The prisoner was suddenly liberated from his cell after the guards found the true evidence.
- C. Following the rigorous physical training, his muscles felt free as a bird and completely relaxed.
- D. After handing in my last final exam, I felt free as a bird and ready for the summer holidays.

Target: Free as a bird · CEFR B1

6. Which sentence uses 'legit' correctly according to this definition: Short for 'legitimate'; meaning something is legal, official, or follows the rules.?

- A. He is a very legit person who always tells the truth and never lies.
- B. You need to legit your passport at the office before you can travel abroad.
- C. I checked their business license online to make sure the company is legit.
- D. The movie was so legit that I cried at the end because it was very sad.

Target: Legit · CEFR B1

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- A. Don't forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste after you use it.
- B. He tried to cap his brother by telling a more impressive story about the trip.
- C. She placed the lid on her head before going out into the morning sun.
- D. The government decided to cap the price of electricity to help families save money.

Target: cap · CEFR B1

8. Which sentence uses 'batten down the hatches' correctly according to this definition: To prepare for a difficult situation or a period of trouble.?

- A. The team felt very confident, so they decided to batten down the hatches and celebrate their victory early.
- B. We need to weather the storm for the winter by buying extra food and warm clothes today.
- C. With a recession coming, the government is battening down the hatches by reducing all unnecessary spending.
- D. The company stayed calm and battened down the hatches only after the crisis had already passed.

Target: batten down the hatches · CEFR B1

Answer Key

- 1. A. The diplomat was completely nonplussed by the unexpected question and stood in silence for a moment.**

the correct answer (The diplomat was completely nonplussed by the unexpected) correctly illustrates being so surprised or confused that one is unsure how to act. Options A and D incorrectly use 'nonplussed' to mean 'unimpressed' or 'unfazed', which is a common misuse. a distractor (He felt very nonplussed and satisfied after finishing the) uses it as a positive feeling of achievement.

- 2. D. The city needs to invest more money in public transport to reduce traffic jams.**

the correct answer (The city needs to invest more money in public transport t) uses 'transport' as a noun referring to a system for moving people. Options A and B use a different related word or a different abstract sense of the noun, while D uses 'transport' as a verb rather than a system/vehicle noun.

- 3. A. The main bathroom is upstairs, but there is a convenient powder room just off the hallway for visitors.**

the correct answer (The main bathroom is upstairs, but there is a convenient) correctly describes a powder room as a secondary bathroom for guests. A is wrong because it's not a laundry; C refers to a 'restroom' (public context); D describes a utility room, whereas a powder room specifically lacks a shower or tub.

- 4. B. After twenty years of service, he was promoted to colonel and given command of the regiment.**

B is correct because it uses 'colonel' as a military rank. A, C, and D are incorrect because they use 'colonel' where the homophone 'kernel' (meaning a core part or a seed) is required.

- 5. D. After handing in my last final exam, I felt free as a bird and ready for the summer holidays.**

the correct answer (After handing in my last final exam, I felt free as a bir) correctly uses the idiom to describe a lack of worry/responsibility after exams. a distractor (The store is giving away samples for free as a bird to ev) confuses it with 'free of charge,' a distractor (The prisoner was suddenly liberated from his cell after t) uses a confusable word instead of the idiom, and a distractor (He tried to keep his pet free as a bird by leaving the wi) uses the idiom literally.

- 6. C. I checked their business license online to make sure the company is legit.**

the correct answer (I checked their business license online to make sure the) uses 'legit' to describe a business that is legal and official. A uses it to mean 'intense' or 'real', C confuses it with 'honest', and D uses it incorrectly as a verb instead of 'validate' or 'renew'.

- 7. A. Don't forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste after you use it.**

the correct answer (Don't forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste after) uses 'cap' to mean a protective lid. a distractor (The government decided to cap the price of electricity to) uses it to mean a limit, a distractor (He tried to cap his brother by telling a more impressive) uses it as a verb meaning to outdo someone, and a distractor (She placed the lid on her head before going out into the) incorrectly uses 'lid' for a hat.

- 8. C. With a recession coming, the government is battening down the hatches by reducing all unnecessary spending.**

the correct answer (With a recession coming, the government is battening down) correctly shows people preparing for an upcoming problem. a distractor (The company stayed calm and battened down the hatches onl) describes the period after a crisis; a distractor (The team felt very confident, so they decided to batten d) suggests celebration rather than preparation; a distractor (We need to weather the storm for the winter by buying ext) uses 'weather the storm' which refers to surviving the trouble, not the preparation itself.