Tricky Words of the Day

Thursday, June 18, 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 8

Cruise / Crews

To remember the difference, think of the 'i' in 'cruise' as standing for an 'island' you might visit on a ship. 'Crews' ends in 's' because it is the plural of a group of people. Even though they sound exactly the same, their grammatical roles are usually different: 'cruise' is often a singular noun or a verb, while 'crews' is almost always a plural noun.

Meaning 1

Cruise: A vacation on a large ship that visits several places; or, to travel at a steady speed.

ESL learners often confuse the spelling because the 'ui' in cruise makes the same long 'u' sound as the 'ew' in crews. Additionally, 'cruise' can be both a noun (the trip) and a verb (the action of moving smoothly).

"We are going on a Caribbean cruise for our summer vacation."
"The car was set to cruise at 60 miles per hour on the highway."

Meaning 2

Crews: The plural form of 'crew,' referring to groups of people working together on a ship, aircraft, or project.

The confusion arises because 'crews' sounds identical to 'cruise.' Learners may struggle to distinguish whether a speaker is talking about a luxury boat trip or multiple groups of professional workers.

"The emergency crews arrived quickly to fix the downed power lines."
"Film crews from three different countries were present at the festival."

Related: vessel; team; staff; voyage; sail

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cruise-crews

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 8

Upset

Pay attention to word stress. As a verb or adjective, the stress is usually on the second syllable (up-SET). As a noun, especially in sports, the stress often moves to the first syllable (UP-set). Also, 'upset stomach' is a common collocation meaning nausea.

Meaning 1

To knock something over or flip it upside down.

This is the literal physical meaning. Learners may find it confusing because the word 'up' is used even though the object usually falls 'down' to the floor.

"The cat upset the bowl of milk on the rug."
"Be careful not to upset the boat while we are fishing."

Meaning 2

An unexpected result in a competition where the underdog wins.

In sports or politics, an 'upset' is actually a positive thing for the winner, which contradicts the usual negative emotional meaning of the word.

"The local high school team pulled off a major upset against the state champions."
"The election results were a huge upset that no one predicted."

Meaning 3

To feel unhappy, disappointed, or worried.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'angry.' While it can include anger, it is a broad emotional state that more often implies sadness or emotional distress.

"She was very upset when she lost her favorite necklace."
"Don't be upset with me"

Related: distressed; overturn; capsize; underdog; agitated

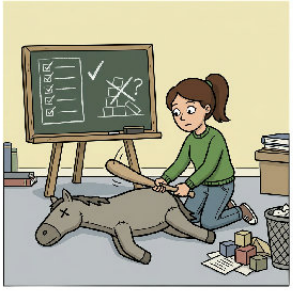
Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/upset

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 8

Beating a dead horse

This phrase is often used in business meetings or debates to signal that a conversation should move on to a new topic. In British English, you may also hear the variation 'flogging a dead horse,' where 'flogging' means whipping.



Meaning 1

To waste time or effort by continuing to talk about or work on something that has already been decided or finished.

ESL learners may be confused because the literal image-hitting an animal that is no longer alive-is violent and nonsensical. They might think it refers to animal cruelty rather than a metaphor for inefficiency and repetitive arguments.

"We have already decided to cancel the project, so bringing up the budget again is just beating a dead horse."

"I know you're upset about the mistake, but stop beating a dead horse"

Meaning 2

To keep trying to find a solution to a problem that is impossible to solve.

Learners might not realize that the 'horse' represents a goal or a vehicle for progress. If the horse is dead, it cannot move forward no matter how much you 'whip' or encourage it, symbolizing a hopeless endeavor.

"Trying to get a refund from that bankrupt company is like beating a dead horse."

"He keeps asking her out even though she said no ten times"

Related: redundant; pointless; overkill; harping on; letting it go

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/beating-a-dead-horse

Slang · Lesson 4 of 8

No cap

This phrase originated in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and became widely popular through hip-hop culture and social media (Gen Z). It is highly informal and should not be used in professional or academic writing. It is synonymous with the older slang phrase 'For real' or 'I'm serious'.

Meaning 1

To be completely honest; I am not lying; for real.

ESL learners may be confused because 'cap' literally refers to a hat or a lid. In this context, it has nothing to do with clothing. It functions as an adverbial phrase to emphasize the truth of a statement.

"That was the best burger I've ever had, no cap."
"I'm actually going to finish this project by tonight, no cap."

Meaning 2

To 'cap' (the verb form) means to lie or exaggerate.

Learners might find it difficult to distinguish between the noun 'cap' and the verb usage. If someone says 'You're capping,' they are accusing the speaker of lying, which is the opposite of 'no cap'.

"Stop capping, I know you didn't actually meet a celebrity."
"He's capping about his high score on the test."

Related: For real; Straight up; Deadass; Truthfully; Capping

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/no-cap

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 8

Chuffed

90% of the time, 'chuffed' means happy. However, because it is a contranym, you must pay close attention to the speaker's facial expressions. If someone says they are 'dischuffed,' they are definitely unhappy. 'Chuffed to bits' is a common idiom meaning 'extremely happy.'

Meaning 1

Very pleased, happy, or proud.

In British English, this is the most common usage. ESL learners may find it confusing because the word sounds similar to 'chafed' or 'huffed,' which have negative connotations, yet 'chuffed' expresses high satisfaction.

"I was dead chuffed when I heard I got the promotion."
"He looked really chuffed with his new car."

Meaning 2

Very annoyed, displeased, or disgruntled.

This is the 'contranym' aspect. In some regional British dialects or older contexts, 'chuffed' can mean the exact opposite of happy. This is extremely confusing because the speaker's tone and context are the only ways to distinguish the meaning.

"He was properly chuffed that they forgot his birthday."
"I'm a bit chuffed about having to work late on a Friday."

Meaning 3

The sound of a steam engine moving slowly.

This is the literal, onomatopoeic origin of the word. It describes the 'chuff-chuff' sound of an engine. While less common in conversation, it explains where the 'puffed up' or 'breathing hard' feeling of the adjective comes from.

"The old locomotive chuffed slowly out of the station."
"The exhaust chuffed as the tractor started up."

Related: pleased; delighted; annoyed; disgruntled; chuffed to bits; dischuffed

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/chuffed

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 8

Mad as a hornet

American expression. Also: 'mad as a wet hen.' Stronger than 'annoyed' or 'upset.'

Meaning 1

Extremely angry, especially in a loud, aggressive way.

Hornets sting fiercely when disturbed. The simile emphasizes furious, buzzing anger - not 'mad' in the sense of insane.

"When she found out about the surprise, she was mad as a hornet."
"Don't go in there - the boss is mad as a hornet."

Related: furious; livid; irate; enraged; seething

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/mad-as-a-hornet

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 8

Ghost

In professional contexts, 'ghostwriting' refers to writing something for another person who takes the credit. The common thread in all meanings is the idea of being 'invisible' or 'unseen.'

Meaning 1

The soul or spirit of a dead person that appears to the living.

This is the literal, traditional noun. ESL learners may find it confusing because it is often used in idioms like 'give up the ghost' (to die or stop working) which do not involve actual spirits.

"The old castle is said to be haunted by a ghost."
"Do you believe in ghosts?"

Meaning 2

To suddenly end all contact with someone (usually a romantic interest) without any explanation.

This is a modern slang verb. It is confusing because it transforms a noun (a spirit) into an action. Learners might not understand that 'he ghosted me' refers to digital communication silence rather than something supernatural.

"We went on three dates, but then he ghosted me."
"It is very rude to ghost someone instead of just saying you aren't interested."

Meaning 3

To leave a social event or party quietly without saying goodbye to anyone.

Also known as an 'Irish goodbye,' this usage is confusing because it describes a physical disappearance from a room rather than a digital one. It implies becoming invisible like a spirit.

"The party was too loud, so I decided to ghost around midnight."
"I didn't see you leave last night"

Related: haunt; spirit; phantom; breadcrumbing; shadowing

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/ghost

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 8 of 8

Fill out

Separable. Especially common in American English.

Meaning 1

To complete a form or document by writing information.

Common paperwork phrase that confuses learners.

"Please fill out this application form."
"I need to fill out my tax return."

Related: complete; fill in

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/fill-out

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'Chuffed' correctly according to this definition: Very pleased, happy, or proud.?

A. He was absolutely chuffed to bits after winning the first prize in the competition.
B. I was really chuffed when the bus left early and I missed my appointment.
C. She felt quite disgruntled because nobody remembered her birthday.
D. The manager was chuffed with the staff for losing the important client files.

2. Which sentence uses 'No Cap' correctly according to this definition: To be completely honest; I am not lying; for real.?

A. He is capping that he won the race, so we should celebrate his victory.
B. I just saw a celebrity at the supermarket, no cap!
C. I checked the kitchen and there is no cap for the water bottle I found.
D. You should no cap before you tell a lie to your parents.

3. Which sentence uses 'ghost' correctly according to this definition: The soul or spirit of a dead person that appears to the living.?

A. The old castle is famous for its history and the legend of a ghost that walks the halls at night.
B. I decided to ghost my old computer because it was too slow and buy a brand new laptop.
C. The wizard used his magic to summon a shadowing to follow the hero through the forest.
D. She felt a ghost of guilt after eating the last cookie without asking her brother.

4. Which sentence uses 'cruise' correctly according to this definition: A vacation on a large ship that visits several places; or, to travel at a steady speed.?

A. The airline's ground cruise helped the passengers with their heavy luggage at the terminal.
B. I need to cruise my bicycle tires because they are losing air very quickly.
C. The manager decided to cruise the new employee for a promotion after only three months.
D. After the storm passed, we were able to cruise comfortably at sixty miles per hour on the highway.

5. Which sentence uses 'fill out' correctly according to this definition: To complete a form or document by writing information.?

A. The small shop began to fill out with customers as soon as it opened.
B. He decided to fill out his glass with more water because he was very thirsty.
C. I need to fill out my homework before I can go out with my friends tonight.
D. Before you see the doctor, you need to fill out these medical insurance papers.

6. Which sentence uses 'upset' correctly according to this definition: To feel unhappy, disappointed, or worried?

A. The heavy rain caused an upset in the athlete's training schedule this morning.
B. The team felt very underdog after losing the championship game by only one point.
C. She was very upset when she realized she had lost her favorite necklace at the park.
D. The small boat began to upset when the massive waves hit the side of the hull.

7. Which sentence uses 'mad as a hornet' correctly according to this definition: Extremely angry, especially in a loud, aggressive way.?

A. After the long hike, it was mad as a hornet that we finally reached the summit.
B. The movie was so mad as a hornet that I couldn't stop laughing during the funny scenes.
C. He is very livid with excitement because he just won the lottery.
D. The manager was mad as a hornet when he saw the sales report, shouting at everyone in the office.

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