Tricky Words of the Day

Friday, June 19, 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

Council / Counsel

A helpful mnemonic: a 'Council' is a group (like a 'cil-ly' committee), while 'Counsel' ends in 'sel,' like 'selling' advice. Remember that 'counsel' can be a person (a lawyer), while 'council' is always a group.

Meaning 1

Council (noun): A group of people chosen to make decisions, provide advice, or manage an organization.

ESL learners often confuse this with its homophone because both involve 'advice' or 'guidance.' A council is specifically a formal body or committee, such as a city government.

"The city council voted to build a new park downtown."
"She was elected to the student council last year."

Meaning 2

Counsel (noun/verb): Advice given formally; or the act of giving advice. It can also refer to a legal lawyer.

This is confusing because it sounds identical to 'council' but functions as both a noun and a verb. It focuses on the act of advising rather than the group of people doing it.

"He sought wise counsel before making a career change."
"The therapist will counsel the couple on how to communicate better."

Related: committee; advice; attorney; consultation; board

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/council-counsel

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Use

The most important distinction for ESL learners is the 's' vs 'z' sound. Remember: 'Use' (z) is an action, 'Use' (s) is a thing. Also, be careful with 'used to'-it can mean a past habit or being familiar with something depending on the helping verb.

Meaning 1

To employ something for a purpose (Verb)

As a verb, the 's' is pronounced like a 'z'. ESL learners often struggle with this voicing change and may confuse it with the noun form.

"I need to use the computer to finish my homework."
"Please use the back door when you leave."

Meaning 2

The act of using something or the purpose for which something is used (Noun)

As a noun, the 's' is a soft 's' sound (like 'hiss'). Learners often mispronounce this as 'uze' when they should say 'uce'.

"The old tools were still in good use."
"I have no use for this broken umbrella."

Meaning 3

Used to (Modal phrase/Adjective)

This phrase indicates a past habit or being accustomed to something. It is confusing because the 'd' is often silent in speech, making it sound like the present tense 'use', and it requires different grammatical structures (infinitive vs. gerund).

"I used to live in London."
"I am getting used to the cold weather."

Related: utilize; usage; useful; accustomed

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/use

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Better late than never

While this idiom is common, learners should be careful using it with superiors (like a boss). In some cultures, being late is very disrespectful, and using this phrase might sound like you are making a lighthearted joke about a serious mistake. It is best used for social situations or long-term life goals.

Meaning 1

A phrase used to acknowledge that a delayed action is still appreciated or useful.

This is often used sarcastically or as a polite way to accept an apology. A learner might not understand if the speaker is being genuinely forgiving or slightly annoyed by the delay.

"You finally returned the book I lent you last year! Well, better late than never."
"The package arrived three weeks after my birthday, but better late than never, I suppose."

Meaning 2

It is better for someone to arrive or for something to happen late than for it not to happen at all.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it uses a comparative structure ('better than') to excuse a negative behavior (being late). Literally, it suggests that lateness is a positive outcome when compared to total absence, which can be culturally confusing in professional or strict environments.

"I'm sorry I missed the first half of the meeting, but better late than never!"
"She finally finished her university degree at age 50"

Related: tardy; delayed; finally; at long last; fashionably late

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/better-late-than-never

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

For real

While 'for real' is very common in casual conversation, it should be avoided in formal writing or professional emails. It is often shortened to 'FR' in text messaging. It can be used as a question, an answer, or an intensifier.

Meaning 1

Used as a question to ask if someone is being serious, honest, or telling the truth.

ESL learners may be confused because it functions as a complete question without a verb (like 'Are you serious?'). It is often used to express disbelief or surprise.

"I just won a thousand dollars! - For real?"
"Are you for real? I can't believe you're moving to Japan tomorrow!"

Meaning 2

Used as an adverb or exclamation to emphasize that something is genuine, authentic, or not a joke.

The phrase replaces standard adverbs like 'seriously' or 'genuinely.' Learners might struggle to understand if the speaker is talking about physical reality or just emphasizing a feeling.

"I'm for real this time"
"I'm going to start my diet today."

Meaning 3

Used to agree with someone else's statement or opinion.

In this context, it acts as a synonym for 'I agree' or 'That is true.' Learners may not realize it can be used as a standalone response to show solidarity.

"This weather is terrible. - For real, I'm freezing!"
"He needs to stop being so loud. - For real."

Related: seriously; legit; no cap; honestly; genuine

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/for-real

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Devolve

The word is a contranym because it can mean 'to pass something on' (orderly transfer) or 'to fall apart' (disorderly breakdown). To distinguish the two, look at the subject: if a government is the subject, it usually means transferring power. If a situation or conversation is the subject, it usually means it is getting worse.

Meaning 1

To degenerate or deteriorate into a lower or worse state.

This is the 'opposite' meaning where the word implies a negative collapse. It is often used to describe a situation getting out of control. It is confusing because it functions as the antonym of 'evolve' in a biological or social sense.

"The peaceful protest began to devolve into a violent riot."
"The sophisticated debate quickly devolved into petty name-calling."

Meaning 2

To transfer power, responsibility, or property down to a lower level or a substitute.

In a political or organizational context, this is a positive or neutral transfer of authority. ESL learners may find it confusing because it sounds like 'evolve' but describes a downward movement of power rather than an upward growth.

"The federal government decided to devolve more power to the local councils."
"When the manager went on vacation, her duties devolved upon her assistant."

Meaning 3

In biology, the hypothetical process of reverting to an earlier or less complex form.

While technically a subset of deterioration, this specific use in science (often called 'backward evolution') can confuse learners who are taught that evolution is a constant forward process.

"The sci-fi movie featured a virus that caused humans to devolve into primitive creatures."
"Some critics argue that our reliance on technology is causing our social skills to devolve."

Related: delegate; degenerate; deteriorate; decentralize; evolve

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/devolve

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Sharp as a tack

Almost always a compliment about mental sharpness, especially admired in older adults.

Meaning 1

Mentally very quick, alert, and intelligent.

A tack (small nail) has a very sharp point. The simile applies 'sharp' to the mind - describing keen intelligence, not physical sharpness.

"She's 90 years old and still sharp as a tack."
"You can't fool him - he's sharp as a tack."

Related: keen; bright; quick-witted; clever; astute

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/sharp-as-a-tack

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Tape

For ESL learners, 'tape' is confusing because it is used as both a noun (the object) and a verb (the action). Additionally, while physical cassette tapes are rare now, the verb 'to tape' is still commonly used as a synonym for 'to record' on a phone or computer.

Meaning 1

A long, thin strip of sticky material used to join things together.

This is the most common noun form. It refers to adhesive material like Scotch tape or masking tape. It can also be used as a verb meaning 'to stick something with tape'.

"I used some tape to fix the torn page in my book."
"Can you tape this poster to the wall?"

Meaning 2

To record sound or video; or the physical medium (cassette/film) used for recording.

Even though we use digital devices now, people still say 'tape' to mean 'record'. It also refers to a 'measuring tape' used to find the length of something.

"The police have the whole conversation on tape."
"The tailor used a measuring tape to check my waist size."

Related: adhesive; record; cassette; measuring tape; red tape

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/tape

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Fib

While 'fib' is a euphemism for 'lie,' it is only used for minor things. You would never use 'fib' to describe a serious crime, a legal perjury, or a major betrayal. It is most commonly used in family settings or lighthearted social situations.

Meaning 1

A small, trivial, or harmless lie.

ESL learners are often taught the word 'lie' early on, which carries a strong negative connotation of being dishonest or immoral. 'Fib' is confusing because it describes the same action but is socially treated as 'cute' or 'unimportant,' often used with children to avoid the harshness of the word 'lie.'

"He told a little fib about finishing his vegetables so he could have dessert."
"I told a white lie, or a fib, to avoid hurting her feelings about the dress."

Meaning 2

The act of telling a trivial lie (used as a verb).

Learners may be confused by the grammatical flexibility of the word. It can be a noun ('a fib') or a verb ('to fib'). In its verb form, it is often used in the continuous tense ('fibbing') to describe someone being slightly dishonest in the moment.

"Are you fibbing to me right now about where you went?"
"Stop fibbing"

Related: white lie; tall tale; untruth; storytelling; fabrication

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/fib

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Back up

Separable. Multiple meanings including computer backup.

Meaning 1

To support or help someone.

Learners may think it means moving backwards physically.

"Can you back me up in the meeting?"

"My data is fully backed up on the cloud."

Meaning 2

To move backwards (for a vehicle).

Literal movement.

"The truck backed up into the parking spot."

Related: support; reverse

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/back-up

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'sharp as a tack' correctly according to this definition: Mentally very quick, alert, and intelligent.?

A. Even though he is retiring next month, my boss is still sharp as a tack and notices every detail.
B. She is very keen on the new project because she thinks it will be successful.
C. The medicine made me feel sharp as a tack, and I slept for ten hours straight.
D. The kitchen knife is sharp as a tack, so please be careful when you slice the tomatoes.

2. Which sentence uses 'tape' correctly according to this definition: A long, thin strip of sticky material used to join things together?

A. The technician needs to tape the conversation so we can listen to it again later.
B. The tailor used a tape to check the length of the sleeves for my new jacket.
C. There was too much tape at the office, so it took months to get my permit approved.
D. Please use some transparent tape to attach this poster to the classroom wall.

3. Which sentence uses 'back up' correctly according to this definition: to support or help someone?

A. She decided to reverse her friend when the argument started.
B. I will back up to my computer every Friday to save my files.
C. I need to back up my car into the garage very carefully.
D. If you don't believe my story, Sarah can back me up because she was there.

4. Which sentence uses 'fib' correctly according to this definition: A small, trivial, or harmless lie.?

A. The witness committed a serious fib in court, leading to a decade in prison for the defendant.
B. The company was accused of a massive fib regarding their untaxed offshore profits.
C. During the news broadcast, the journalist reported a fib that the city's main bridge had collapsed in the earthquake.
D. She told a little fib about her age because she didn't want to admit she was thirty yet.

5. Which sentence uses 'better late than never' correctly according to this definition: It is better for someone to arrive or for something to happen late than for it not to happen at all.?

A. He finally finished his university degree at the age of forty; well, better late than never!
B. If you want to be successful, you must try to be better late than never every single morning.
C. I was better late than never for the wedding because I wanted to be fashionably late.
D. Most people prefer to be better late than never because they don't like waiting around.

6. Which sentence uses 'use' correctly according to this definition: To employ something for a purpose (Verb)?

A. You can use the microwave in the kitchen to heat up your lunch.
B. You must use to the new rules if you want to stay in the club.
C. The instructions were very use, so I finished the task quickly.
D. I am not use to waking up so early in the morning.

7. Which sentence uses 'council' correctly according to this definition: A group of people chosen to make decisions, provide advice, or manage an organization?

A. The local council will meet on Tuesday to discuss the new traffic regulations.
B. I often council my younger brother on how to save money for university.
C. He felt a lot of council after realizing he had made a major mistake at work.
D. The lawyer provided excellent council to her client during the trial.

8. Which sentence uses 'devolve' correctly according to this definition: To transfer power, responsibility, or property down to a lower level or a substitute?

A. It was such a devolve situation that everyone felt the need to complain immediately.
B. The committee decided to devolve its authority to the local community groups.
C. The company's profits started to devolve after the new competitor entered the market.
D. Scientists believe that these species will devolve into more complex organisms over time.

9. Which sentence uses 'For real' correctly according to this definition: Used as a question to ask if someone is being serious, honest, or telling the truth?

A. The movie was so for real that I cried throughout the ending.
B. I m moving to Japan next month! For real? I'm so happy for you!
C. I need to talk to you for real about your behavior at school.
D. That diamond ring is for real, not like the cheap plastic ones.

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