Tricky Words of the Day

Saturday, June 20, 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

Cymbal / Symbol

To remember the difference, think of the 'C' in Cymbal standing for 'Crash' (the sound it makes). Symbol starts with 'S' like 'Sign' or 'Signal'. Both words are pronounced exactly the same, so context is the only way to distinguish them when speaking.

Meaning 1

Symbol: A mark, sign, or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process.

This is a much more common word used in math, literature, and daily life. Because it sounds exactly like the musical instrument, learners might misspell it when writing about music or vice versa.

"The heart is a common symbol for love."
"The chemical symbol for gold is Au."

Meaning 2

Cymbal: A musical instrument consisting of a slightly concave round brass plate that is struck with a drumstick or crashed against another plate.

ESL learners may confuse this with 'symbol' because they sound identical. It is a specific noun used almost exclusively in the context of music and percussion.

"The drummer hit the crash cymbal at the end of the song."
"A pair of cymbals can produce a very loud, ringing sound."

Related: percussion; instrument; representation; icon; homophone

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cymbal-symbol

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Abstract

The main confusion lies in the stress shift: use 'AB-stract' for the noun and adjective, but 'ab-STRACT' for the verb. Additionally, learners often confuse the artistic meaning (non-representational) with the academic meaning (a summary).

Meaning 1

Existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence.

ESL learners often struggle with this adjective because it describes things that cannot be touched or seen, which is the opposite of 'concrete.' It is common in academic and artistic discussions.

"Love and freedom are abstract concepts."
"The gallery is full of abstract paintings that don't look like real objects."

Meaning 2

A brief summary of a research article, thesis, review, or any in-depth analysis of a particular subject.

In this context, the word is a noun. Students may be confused when asked to 'write an abstract,' thinking they need to write something vague or artistic rather than a concise summary.

"Please read the abstract of the report before the meeting."
"The scientist submitted a 200-word abstract for the conference."

Meaning 3

To extract or remove something; or to summarize the main points of a text.

When used as a verb, the pronunciation shifts the stress to the second syllable (ab-STRACT). This usage is much more formal and can be confused with 'extract' or 'summarize.'

"It is difficult to abstract the most important data from such a large study."
"The researchers needed to abstract the key findings for the presentation."

Related: summary; theoretical; conceptual; extract; concrete

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/abstract

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Birds of a feather flock together

The phrase 'of a feather' is an archaic way of saying 'of the same kind.' In modern English, we don't use 'feather' to mean 'type' in any other context, which is why this phrase is particularly tricky. You can also shorten it to just 'Birds of a feather...' and native speakers will understand the rest.

Meaning 1

A way to describe a group of people who share a common (often negative) trait.

While the idiom can be neutral, it is frequently used with a slightly negative or judgmental tone to imply that 'bad' people hang out with other 'bad' people. Learners might not realize they are implying a criticism when using it.

"He started hanging out with the gamblers at the club"
"birds of a feather flock together."

Meaning 2

People who have similar characters, interests, or backgrounds tend to spend time with each other.

ESL learners may be confused by the literal imagery of birds and feathers. They might try to translate it literally and miss the metaphorical meaning that 'feather' refers to 'type' or 'kind' of person, and 'flock' refers to socializing.

"All the computer programmers eat lunch together"
"I guess birds of a feather flock together."

Related: clique; like-minded; peas in a pod; kindred spirits; guilt by association

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/birds-of-a-feather-flock-together

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Totally

While 'totally' is common in everyday speech, it is very informal. In professional or academic writing, it is better to use 'completely,' 'entirely,' or 'definitely.' Be careful with the 'slang' usage, as overusing it can make a speaker sound immature.

Meaning 1

Used as an intensifier to emphasize an opinion or feeling, often associated with 'Valley Girl' or youth slang.

It is often used as a filler word to add emphasis to an adjective. It doesn't change the meaning of the sentence but changes the tone to be very informal and enthusiastic, which can be hard for learners to time correctly.

"That outfit is totally awesome!"
"I am totally over this cold weather."

Meaning 2

Completely or entirely; to the fullest extent.

In its literal sense, it is an adverb modifying an action or state to show it is 100% finished or true. ESL learners may confuse it with 'very' or 'really,' but it specifically implies completion.

"The building was totally destroyed by the fire."
"I totally forgot about our meeting this morning."

Meaning 3

An informal way to express strong agreement or to say 'yes'.

In casual conversation, 'totally' is used as a standalone exclamation. ESL learners might find this confusing because it functions as a sentence on its own without a verb, acting as a synonym for 'I agree completely.'

""That movie was so long!" "Totally!""
""Are you coming to the party tonight?" "Totally!""

Related: completely; absolutely; definitely; fully; for sure

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/totally

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Hew

The word 'hew' is a contranym because it can mean both to separate (chop away) and to stick to (conform). It is also a homophone with 'hue' (a shade of color). In modern English, you will most frequently encounter the phrase 'hew to' in formal writing or news reports regarding rules and standards.

Meaning 1

To conform, adhere, or stick closely to something (usually a rule, principle, or tradition).

This is the 'opposite' meaning that makes it a contranym. While the first meaning is about cutting things apart, this meaning is about staying attached or strictly following a line. It is almost always used with the preposition 'to'.

"The politician promised to hew to the party line during the debate."
"The company must hew to strict safety regulations to avoid fines."

Meaning 2

To shape or fashion something by carving it.

This is a nuanced middle ground between the first two meanings. It involves cutting (meaning 1) in order to create a finished form that adheres to a design (meaning 2). It is often used metaphorically regarding character or identity.

"The statue was hewn out of a single block of solid marble."
"He hewed a new life for himself out of the hardships he faced in the city."

Meaning 3

To strike, chop, or sever something with an axe or tool.

This meaning implies separation or destruction. ESL learners may find it confusing because it sounds exactly like 'hue' (color) but describes a forceful, physical action of cutting something apart.

"The lumberjack worked all morning to hew the logs into smaller pieces."
"They had to hew a path through the dense jungle using machetes."

Related: chop; adhere; conform; hue; sever; carve

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/hew

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Pretty as a picture

Slightly old-fashioned, often used by older speakers. Usually about people, scenery, or decorated rooms.

Meaning 1

Extremely beautiful or visually pleasing.

A picture is composed to be beautiful. The simile says a real person or scene is as lovely as a carefully made artwork.

"The bride looked pretty as a picture."
"The cottage garden in spring is pretty as a picture."

Related: beautiful; gorgeous; picturesque; lovely; stunning

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/pretty-as-a-picture

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Plate

ESL learners should be aware of the common idiom 'to have a lot on one's plate,' which means to be very busy or have many responsibilities. While the word itself is simple, its use in different fields (geology, automotive, culinary) and as an idiom makes it versatile.

Meaning 1

A flat dish, typically circular, from which food is eaten.

This is the most common literal meaning. It refers to the physical object used during meals.

"Please put the dinner plate on the table."
"She finished everything on her plate."

Meaning 2

A thin, flat sheet of metal or other hard material, or a specific part of a machine or vehicle.

In technical or administrative contexts, 'plate' refers to things like a 'license plate' on a car or 'tectonic plates' in geology.

"The police officer wrote down the car's license plate number."
"Earthquakes are caused by the movement of tectonic plates."

Related: dish; platter; license plate; tectonic; serving

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/plate

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Stretch the truth

This phrase is often used in professional or social settings where you want to point out an inaccuracy without starting a major conflict. It is synonymous with 'embellishing' or 'exaggerating.'

Meaning 1

To exaggerate the facts or make something sound better than it actually is; to lie slightly.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it uses the verb 'stretch' (usually associated with physical objects like rubber bands) to describe an abstract concept like 'truth.' It implies that the truth is being pulled or expanded rather than completely broken.

"He stretched the truth on his resume by saying he was a manager when he was only an assistant."
"I might have stretched the truth a little when I told my parents I finished all my homework."

Meaning 2

A polite way to describe lying without using the harsh word 'liar.'

In English, calling someone a 'liar' is very offensive. This phrase acts as a euphemism to soften the accusation, which can be confusing for learners who expect direct language when someone is not being honest.

"The salesman was definitely stretching the truth about the car's fuel efficiency."
"She didn't exactly lie, but she certainly stretched the truth to make her vacation sound more exciting."

Related: exaggerate; embellish; tall tale; white lie; fib

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/stretch-the-truth

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Run out of

Inseparable. Always followed by 'of'.

Meaning 1

To use up all of something so that none is left.

'Run out' sounds like physically running outside, confusing learners.

"We ran out of milk-can you buy some?"

"I'm running out of patience with this project."

Related: use up; exhaust; deplete

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/run-out-of

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'plate' correctly according to this definition: A flat dish, typically circular, from which food is eaten?

A. Scientists believe the earth's plate is moving slowly, which causes earthquakes.
B. He took the serving platter and began to wash it in the small sink.
C. The waiter brought a large plate of pasta and set it right in front of me.
D. The cars in this country usually have a yellow plate on the back showing the number.

2. Which sentence uses 'birds of a feather flock together' correctly according to this definition: People who have similar characters, interests, or backgrounds tend to spend time with each other.?

A. After the storm, the park was messy because many birds of a feather flock together on the grass.
B. It's no surprise that the tech enthusiasts spend all their weekends together; birds of a feather flock together.
C. The students formed a clique and refused to let anyone else join their study group.
D. Because they were seen at the same party as the criminals, they were birds of a feather flock together by the police.

3. Which sentence uses 'hew' correctly according to this definition: To strike, chop, or sever something with an axe or tool.?

A. The colorful flowers had a bright hew that attracted many bees to the garden.
B. The chef decided to hew the sauce with some extra salt and pepper for flavor.
C. I hope you will hew to the rules of the library while you are studying here.
D. The lumberjack needed to hew the thick logs into smaller pieces for the fire.

4. Which sentence uses 'stretch the truth' correctly according to this definition: To exaggerate the facts or make something sound better than it actually is; to lie slightly?

A. The athlete had to stretch the truth for ten minutes before the race to avoid muscle pain.
B. I can't believe her story; it's just a white lie that she won a marathon without any training.
C. The physical therapist told me that a stretch the truth is necessary after sitting at a desk all day.
D. He usually stretches the truth about his salary to make himself sound more successful than he is.

5. Which sentence uses 'pretty as a picture' correctly according to this definition: Extremely beautiful or visually pleasing.?

A. The gardener made the flowers grow pretty as a picture in the soil.
B. He felt pretty as a picture after winning the race because he was so happy.
C. The movie was very picturesque and lasted for nearly three hours.
D. With the snow falling on the old cottage, the whole scene was pretty as a picture.

6. Which sentence uses 'run out of' correctly according to this definition: To use up all of something so that none is left?

A. I had to stop at the petrol station because I was about to run out of fuel.
B. He decided to run out of his old toys because he didn't want them anymore.
C. We need to run out of the lights before we leave the house to save energy.
D. The athlete tried to run out of the stadium to break the world record.

7. Which sentence uses 'abstract' correctly according to this definition: Existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence.?

A. The architect asked us to provide an abstract of the old building before we demolish it.
B. Before the meeting started, I read a short abstract of the project report to save time.
C. Mathematical concepts like infinity can feel very abstract because you cannot touch them.
D. I need to abstract the coffee beans from the bag before I can start grinding them.

8. Which sentence uses 'cymbal' correctly according to this definition: A musical instrument consisting of a slightly concave round brass plate that is struck with a drumstick or crashed against another plate?

A. The heart is often used as a cymbal for love in many cultures.
B. He replaced the broken cymbal on his bicycle to make sure he was visible at night.
C. After the concert, the artist signed a rare cymbal of his appreciation on the back of the ticket.
D. The band's performance ended with a loud crash of the cymbal.

9. Which sentence uses 'totally' correctly according to this definition: Completely or entirely; to the fullest extent?

A. The old factory was totally demolished to make room for the new shopping mall.
B. I will totally be at your party tonight because I have no other plans.
C. She is a totally person who always helps everyone in her neighborhood.
D. The water in the pool was totally hot, so we decided to jump in immediately.

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