Tricky Words of the Day

Monday, June 22, 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

Dew / Due

In American English, both words are pronounced exactly like 'do.' In British English, they often have a 'y' sound (dyew). Remember: 'Dew' is for water/nature; 'Due' is for time/money/reasons.

Meaning 1

Due: Expected to happen, arrive, or be paid at a specific time.

This version is confusing because it functions as an adjective, a noun, and part of a prepositional phrase ('due to'), making its grammatical role hard to identify.

"The library books are due back next Tuesday."
"The baby is due in early September."

Meaning 2

Due to: A prepositional phrase meaning 'because of' or 'caused by.'

Learners often struggle with whether to use 'due to' or 'because of.' In formal grammar, 'due to' should follow a form of the verb 'to be' (e.g., The delay was due to rain).

"The flight cancellation was due to heavy fog."
"Due to the holiday, the office will be closed tomorrow."

Meaning 3

Dew: Tiny drops of water that form on cool surfaces at night, such as grass or leaves.

ESL learners often confuse this with 'due' because they sound identical in many dialects. It is a specific weather phenomenon that is rarely used in plural form.

"The morning dew made the grass feel wet and cold."
"Flowers are often covered in dew just before sunrise."

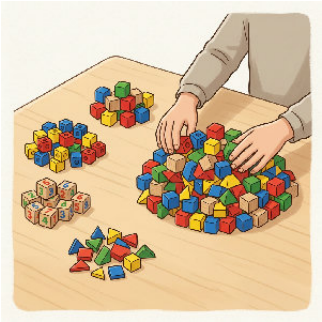
Related: moisture; condensation; deadline; owing; scheduled

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/dew-due

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Aggregate

The key to mastering this word is the 'Noun-Verb Heteronym' rule. If you are using it as a thing (noun) or a description (adjective), use the short 'it' sound. If you are describing the action of bringing things together (verb), use the long 'ate' sound.

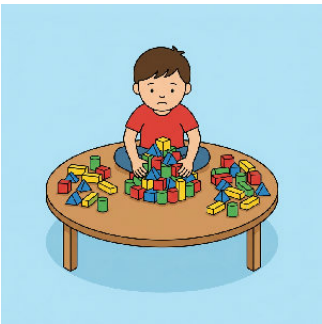


Meaning 1

A whole formed by combining several separate elements; a total or sum.

In this form, the word is a noun or adjective. The confusion arises because the final syllable is pronounced with a short 'it' sound (like 'it' or 'et'), which is counterintuitive to how the word is spelled.

"The aggregate score of the two games was 4-2."
"The council is an aggregate of various local community leaders."



Meaning 2

To collect or gather into a mass or whole.

In this form, the word is a verb. The pronunciation changes so that the final syllable sounds like 'ate' (as in 'I ate dinner'). ESL learners often struggle to switch the vowel sound based on the part of speech.

"The website will aggregate news stories from many different sources."
"The software helps to aggregate data for the final report."

Meaning 3

Crushed stone, gravel, or sand used in making concrete.

This is a specialized technical meaning used in construction. It is confusing because it uses the noun pronunciation but refers to a physical material rather than an abstract mathematical total.

"The builder ordered a truckload of coarse aggregate for the foundation."
"Concrete is made by mixing cement, water, and aggregate."

Related: accumulate; total; composite; amass; cumulative

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/aggregate

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Break the news

This idiom is almost always used for serious or life-changing information. You wouldn't usually 'break the news' about something trivial, like what you ate for lunch. It often carries a connotation of 'softening the blow' when the news is bad.

Meaning 1

To be the first person to tell someone significant, often upsetting or surprising, information.

ESL learners may be confused because the verb 'break' usually implies damaging a physical object. In this context, it means to 'open up' or reveal information that was previously unknown. It does not mean the news is broken or incorrect.

"I had to break the news to him that the flight was canceled."

"The doctor gently broke the news to the family about the test results."

Meaning 2

To announce a major story to the public for the first time (often used in journalism).

Learners might confuse this with 'breaking news.' While 'breaking news' is the noun for the event, 'to break the news' is the action of reporting it first. It implies a sense of urgency and priority.

"Our local station was the first to break the news of the election results."

"The journalist won an award for breaking the news about the corporate scandal."

Related: breaking news; let the cat out of the bag; disclose; inform; soften the blow

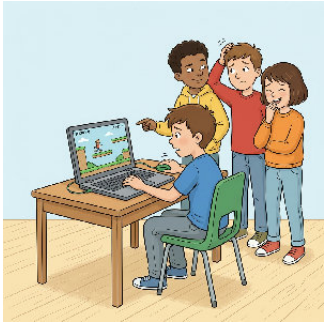
Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/break-the-news

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Noob

The word is derived from 'newbie.' You may also see it spelled as 'n00b' (using zeros) in older internet culture. While it can be used playfully between friends, calling a stranger a 'noob' is generally considered rude or 'toxic' in online environments.



Meaning 1

A person who is new to an activity, especially online gaming or a specific internet community.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it is a shortened, phonetic spelling of 'newbie.' It is often used as a mild insult or a way to point out someone's lack of experience.

"Don't be mad at him for losing the game"
"he's just a noob."

Meaning 2

A person who lacks skill or refuses to learn, even if they have been doing the activity for a while.

In gaming culture, there is a subtle distinction between a 'newbie' (someone who is just new) and a 'noob' (someone who plays poorly or acts foolishly regardless of time spent).

"Stop acting like such a noob and follow the team's strategy."
"He has been playing for months, but he still makes noob mistakes."

Related: newbie; rookie; novice; beginner; n00b; scrub

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/noob

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Blunt

The word is a contranym because it can imply both a lack of 'edge' (physical dullness) and an excess of 'edge' (social harshness). In social contexts, being 'blunt' is often seen as a negative trait in some cultures but a sign of honesty in others. Additionally, in informal slang, 'a blunt' refers to a cigar filled with cannabis, which learners should be aware of to avoid confusion in casual settings.

Meaning 1

Dull or not sharp; having a thick edge or point.

ESL learners often learn this in the context of tools like knives or pencils. It describes a physical state where an object lacks the ability to cut or pierce easily.

"I need to sharpen this pencil because the lead is blunt."

"It is actually more dangerous to cut vegetables with a blunt knife than a sharp one."

Meaning 2

Being very direct, honest, and outspoken, often to the point of being rude.

This is a figurative use describing a person's communication style. It is confusing because while a 'blunt' knife is weak and ineffective, a 'blunt' person is very forceful and sharp with their words.

"To be blunt, your performance this month has been very poor."

"She has a blunt way of speaking that sometimes hurts people's feelings."

Meaning 3

To weaken or reduce the force or spirit of something.

This is the verb form. It is a contranym because while 'blunt' (adj) describes something that is already dull, 'to blunt' (verb) is the active process of making something less sharp or less effective, such as blunting an edge or blunting someone's enthusiasm.

"The bad news served to blunt his excitement about the promotion."

"Age had blunted his senses, making it harder for him to hear clearly."

Related: dull; frank; candid; abrupt; unsharpened

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/blunt

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Right as rain

British in origin, common worldwide. Often used reassuringly after illness or worry.

Meaning 1

Perfectly fine, healthy, or back to normal - especially after illness or trouble.

Rain in some climates is steady and reliable. ESL learners may wonder what is 'right' about rain. The simile means 'completely all right' and has no negative weather meaning.

"After a good night's sleep, I felt right as rain."

"Don't worry - once the medication kicks in, she'll be right as rain."

Related: fine; well; healthy; recovered; in good shape

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/right-as-rain

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Customs

The biggest point of confusion is the 's'. If you are at the airport, 'Customs' is a place/authority. If you are talking about culture, 'a custom' is one tradition and 'customs' are many. Also, do not confuse 'customs' with 'costumes' (clothes worn for acting or Halloween), which has a different pronunciation (/ks.tjumz/).

Meaning 1

Made-to-order or specially designed for a specific customer (used as an adjective).

In this context, 'custom' (usually without the 's') acts as an adjective. Learners may get confused between 'custom' (bespoke) and 'customs' (the border police).

"He ordered a custom suit for the wedding."
"The shop specializes in custom furniture design."

Meaning 2

Traditional behaviors, habits, or social practices that are unique to a specific group of people or culture.

ESL learners may confuse this with 'habits.' While a habit is personal, a 'custom' is a shared social tradition. The plural 's' is part of the base word when referring to multiple traditions.

"It is one of our local customs to remove your shoes before entering a home."
"The guide explained the various wedding customs of the region."

Meaning 3

The government department or the place at a border/airport where officials check bags and collect taxes on imported goods.

This is confusing because it is a 'plural-only' noun in this context. Even if you are talking about one office or one process, you must say 'Customs' with an 's'. Learners often mistake this for the plural of a tradition.

"We had to wait in line for an hour to go through customs at the airport."
"The customs officer asked if I had anything to declare."

Related: tradition; duty; import; bespoke; habit; border control

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/customs

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Nature calls

This is a very common 'safe' phrase to use in social situations where saying 'I need to pee' would be too blunt or impolite. It is often used with the verb 'to answer,' as in 'I must go answer the call of nature.'

Meaning 1

A polite or humorous way to say that one needs to use the bathroom.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the person is talking about the environment, wildlife, or a literal phone call from the outdoors. They might not realize it refers to the biological urge to urinate or defecate.

"I'll be right back, nature calls!"

"We should stop at the next gas station because nature is calling."

Meaning 2

The literal personification of the natural world (less common in modern conversation).

In literature or poetry, it might describe the beauty or power of the wilderness 'calling' to a person to explore it, which creates confusion with the common bathroom idiom.

"He left the city for the mountains because nature was calling to his soul."

Related: restroom; powder my nose; loo; bathroom break; call of nature

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/nature-calls

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Come up

Inseparable. Common in meetings.

Meaning 1

To arise or be mentioned (topic, problem, event).

Sounds like physically coming upward.

"A new issue came up during the discussion."
"His name came up in the conversation."

Related: arise; occur

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/come-up

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'restroom' correctly according to this definition: A room in a public building containing a toilet and a sink for washing hands?

A. I was very tired after my shift, so I went to the restroom to sleep for an hour.
B. The movie theater has a large restroom near the main entrance for all customers.
C. The office staff usually eat their lunch in the restroom because it has a microwave.
D. My grandmother's new house has a beautiful restroom with a walk-in shower and a bathtub.

2. Which sentence uses 'hold up' correctly according to this definition: To delay or cause a delay.?

A. Please hold up your hand if you have a question during the presentation.
B. Don't forget to delay your umbrella because it is starting to rain quite hard.
C. The construction work on the main road will likely hold up the morning commute.
D. I need to hold up my bedroom before the guests arrive this evening.

3. Which sentence uses 'plate' correctly according to this definition: To cover a metal object with a thin layer of another metal, such as gold or silver?

A. The workshop will plate the steel keys with nickel to prevent them from rusting.
B. The ring is quite heavy because it is made of solid gold rather than a thin layer.
C. He decided to plate all the food onto the expensive silver dishes.
D. The artist will plate the wooden frame with a special dark paint.

4. Which sentence uses 'get up on the wrong side of the bed' correctly according to this definition: Wake up in a bad mood for no clear reason?

A. The hotel room was so small that I literally had to get up on the wrong side of the bed to avoid hitting the wall.
B. She is very grumpy because she stayed up until 3:00 AM finishing her homework.
C. Don't ask him for any favors today; he clearly got up on the wrong side of the bed and is being very rude.
D. I had to get up on the wrong side of the bed because my alarm clock was broken and I woke up late.

5. Which sentence uses 'dew' correctly according to this definition: Tiny drops of water that form on cool surfaces at night, such as grass or leaves.?

A. The heavy dew from the storm flooded the entire downstairs.
B. The morning dew made the garden grass feel wet and cold.
C. The project is dew to be finished by the end of the week.
D. I need to pay my monthly dew to stay a member of the club.

6. Which sentence uses 'decent' correctly according to this definition: Of a satisfactory or acceptable quality; also, following moral standards of behavior.?

A. The airplane began its slow decent toward the runway as we approached London.
B. After the long hike, the group made a decent down the steep side of the mountain.
C. It is hard to find a decent apartment in this city that doesn't cost a fortune.
D. She practiced the piano every day to become a very decent and professional height.

7. Which sentence uses 'affiliate' correctly according to this definition: To officially attach or connect a person or organization to a larger body?

A. The company decided to branch its workers into small groups for the team-building exercise.
B. I need to affiliate my broken computer to the printer before I can start working.
C. The local sports club decided to affiliate with the national league to gain better funding.
D. She was an affiliate person who always tried to help her neighbors with their groceries.

8. Which sentence uses 'Gg' correctly according to this definition: Good Game; a polite expression used at the end of a competition to show sportsmanship.?

A. The scoreboard showed 3-0, so we all said gg and shook hands.
B. I was so gg when I finally finished my homework.
C. Gg! I hope we have a fair and fun match today.
D. I said glhf after the referee blew the final whistle.

9. Which sentence uses 'against' correctly according to this definition: In opposition to or in conflict with someone or something?

A. I was very touching to see how many people came to the funeral to pay their respects.
B. The results of the experiment were quite against from what the scientists expected.
C. The local community was firmly against the plan to build a highway through the park.
D. If you are tired, you can rest your back against the wall for a few minutes.

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