Tricky Words of the Day

Tuesday, June 23, 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

Die / Dye

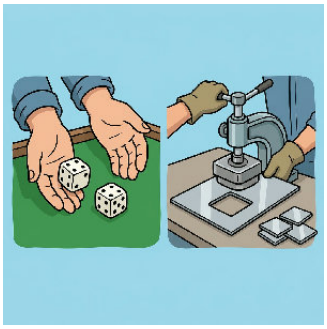
The most common mistake is the spelling of the '-ing' form: 'dying' refers to death, while 'dyeing' refers to color. Remember that 'dye' keeps the 'e' before adding 'ing' to help distinguish it from the word for death.

Meaning 1

Dye (verb/noun): To change the color of something (like hair or fabric) using a special liquid; the substance used to color something.

The spelling 'dye' is specific to coloring. Confusion occurs most frequently in the present participle form 'dyeing' (coloring) versus 'dying' (passing away).

"She decided to dye her hair bright blue for the summer."
"We used a natural red dye to color the cotton shirts."



Meaning 2

Die (noun): A small cube with dots (1-6) used in games; also a metal tool used for cutting or shaping material.

This is a secondary meaning of 'die' that is a homonym to the verb 'to die'. Learners are often confused because the plural is 'dice', which is now commonly used as a singular noun in casual English.

"Roll the die to see how many spaces you can move on the board."
"The factory uses a steel die to stamp out the shape of the car parts."

Meaning 3

Die (verb): To stop living or to cease to exist.

ESL learners often confuse the spelling with 'dye' because they sound identical. Additionally, the irregular forms (die, dying, died) can be confused with 'dyeing' or 'dead'.

"The ancient tree began to die after the long drought."
"Many characters die at the end of the tragic play."

Related: death; dead; dying; dyeing; pigment; dice; stain

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/die-dye

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Affect

Remember the 'RAVEN' acronym: Remember Affect Verb Effect Noun. However, be aware that in medical or psychological fields, 'affect' can be a noun meaning 'outward emotion.' Pay attention to the syllable stress: uh-FECT (verb) vs. AFF-ect (noun).

Meaning 1

To influence or produce a change in something.

This is the most common usage and is frequently confused with the noun 'effect'. ESL learners often struggle to remember that 'affect' is usually the action (verb) while 'effect' is the result (noun).

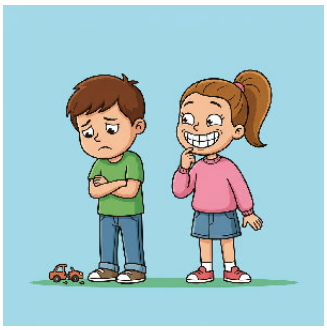
"The cold weather will affect the growth of the plants."
"How does the new law affect your business?"

Meaning 2

An expressed or observed emotional response or demeanor.

In psychology and formal contexts, 'affect' is a noun with a different pronunciation (stress on the first syllable). This is confusing because it breaks the general rule that 'affect' is only a verb.

"The patient exhibited a flat affect, showing no emotion during the interview."
"Her facial affect did not match the sadness of the news she received."



Meaning 3

To pretend to feel or possess something; to put on a false appearance.

This verb usage is confusing because it implies insincerity or 'acting,' which is very different from the neutral meaning of 'influencing' something.

"He tried to affect a British accent to impress his friends."
"She affected an air of indifference, though she was actually very nervous."

Related: effect; influence; impact; demeanor; pretend

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/affect

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Blow off steam

This idiom comes from the era of steam engines. If the pressure inside the engine became too high, a valve would open to let steam out so the engine wouldn't explode. We use it today to describe preventing an 'emotional explosion.' You can also use the word 'vent' as a synonym.

Meaning 1

To release strong emotions or energy, such as anger or stress, by doing something active or noisy.

ESL learners may take this literally and look for actual steam (water vapor) or a physical valve. It is confusing because it uses a mechanical metaphor (like a steam engine) to describe human emotions.

"After a long day at the office, I like to go to the gym to blow off steam."
"He wasn't really angry at you"

Meaning 2

To talk loudly or complain about something in order to feel better, without intending to take serious action.

In this context, the phrase is confusing because it implies the person is 'venting' verbally. A learner might think the person is starting a fight, when they are actually just trying to calm down.

"Don't take her comments personally"
"she's just blowing off steam about the new rules."

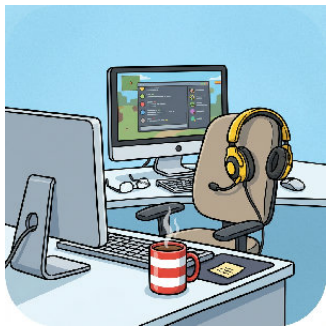
Related: vent; let off steam; decompress; unwind; blow off; chill out

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/blow-off-steam

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Afk

While originally used in PC gaming, AFK is now common in text messaging and professional chat apps like Slack or Discord. It is almost always written in capital letters, though lowercase 'afk' is common in casual settings. It is rarely spoken aloud in face-to-face conversations unless discussing gaming.



Meaning 1

Away From Keyboard; used to indicate that a person is temporarily unavailable or not actively participating in an online activity.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym rather than a standard word. It is often used as an adjective or a verb in digital communication, and learners might not realize it refers specifically to the physical act of stepping away from a computer or device.

"I'll be AFK for five minutes to grab a snack."
"He went AFK during the middle of the game, so we lost."

Meaning 2

Inactive or idle; used more broadly in gaming to describe a player who is connected to a server but not moving or playing.

This usage can be confusing because the person might actually be at their keyboard but simply not responding or participating. It describes a state of 'idleness' rather than literal physical distance.

"Don't just stand there AFK while we are trying to complete the quest!"
"The system kicked me for being AFK for too long."

Related: BRB (Be Right Back); Idle; Away; Offline; Lurking

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/afk

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Charter

The word is confusing because it functions as a contranym regarding 'giving' vs 'taking' rights/services. Additionally, in travel, a 'charter flight' is the opposite of a 'scheduled flight,' which can be a difficult distinction for learners to grasp initially.

Meaning 1

A written statement of the principles, functions, and rights of an organization (a noun).

ESL learners often struggle with 'charter' because it shifts between a verb (the act of hiring or granting) and a noun (the physical document). In a 'charter school,' it refers to the specific contract that allows the school to operate.

"The United Nations Charter outlines the rights of all member nations."
"The school's charter requires it to meet specific academic standards every year."

Meaning 2

To hire or rent a vehicle (like a bus, plane, or boat) for private use.

In this context, the person 'chartering' is the customer who is paying to use the vehicle. ESL learners may find it confusing because it implies an act of outgoing payment and temporary ownership of a service.

"The company decided to charter a private jet for the executive team."
"We are looking to charter a fishing boat for the weekend trip."

Meaning 3

To grant rights or provide a formal document that establishes a new organization or city.

This is the 'opposite' sense where the word refers to the official granting of power or the creation of a legal entity. It functions as a contranym because it can mean both 'to hire/take' and 'to grant/give' legal status.

"The king decided to charter the new colony in 1680."
"The bank was chartered by the state government to provide loans to farmers."

Related: Lease; Constitution; Contract; Grant; Privatize

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/charter

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Go bananas

Casual and playful. Can mean happy excitement or anger - context decides.

Meaning 1

Become wildly excited, angry, or out of control.

Possibly from monkeys' reaction to bananas. Today, used about humans reacting emotionally to anything.

"The kids went bananas when they saw the pool."
"My boss went bananas when he saw the report."

Related: go crazy; freak out; lose it; go wild; flip out

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/go-bananas

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

China

The material is called 'china' because it originally came from the country China. In modern English, 'fine china' or 'bone china' refers to very expensive, delicate dishes. Note that the country is always capitalized (China), while the dishes are usually lowercase (china).

Meaning 1

High-quality ceramic or porcelain used for plates, cups, and vases.

When used as a common noun (usually lowercase), it refers to delicate dishware. This is confusing for ESL learners because the same word refers to both a country and a kitchen item.

"We only use the fine china on special occasions like Thanksgiving."
"Be careful not to chip the china tea set."

Meaning 2

A large country in East Asia.

When used as a proper noun (capitalized), it refers to the People's Republic of China. It is one of the world's most populous countries.

"Beijing is the capital of China."
"I am planning a trip to China next summer."

Related: porcelain; ceramics; dishware; pottery; Chinese

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/china

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Washroom

This is a 'polite' word. Even though you are going there to use the toilet, saying 'I need to use the toilet' can sound too graphic or blunt in North American social settings. 'Washroom' or 'restroom' softens the request.

Meaning 1

A polite term for a room containing a toilet and a sink; a bathroom.

ESL learners are often confused because the word literally implies a place to 'wash' (like laundry or hands), but it is actually a polite way to ask for the toilet. In many cultures, naming the toilet directly is considered impolite.

"Excuse me, could you tell me where the washroom is?"
"The restaurant's washroom was very clean and well-maintained."

Meaning 2

A regional synonym for 'restroom' or 'bathroom' primarily used in Canada and parts of the United States.

Learners may be confused by regional variations. While Americans say 'restroom' and British people say 'loo' or 'toilet', Canadians almost exclusively use 'washroom'. Using the 'wrong' regional term can sometimes lead to minor social confusion.

"In Toronto, you will see signs for the 'Washroom' rather than the 'Restroom'."
"I need to use the washroom before we board the bus."

Related: restroom; bathroom; lavatory; loo; powder room; latrine

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/washroom

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Run across

Inseparable. Good synonym for 'come across'.

Meaning 1

To meet or find someone/something by chance.

Similar to 'run into' but slightly more formal.

"I ran across an old friend at the airport."
"While reading, I ran across this interesting fact."

Related: meet by chance; discover

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/run-across

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'charter' correctly according to this definition: To hire or rent a vehicle (like a bus, plane, or boat) for private use.?

A. Before you can drive the car, you must sign a charter to pay for any accidental damage.
B. The startup company needs to charter its employees before they can begin working on the new project.
C. The travel agency recommended that the large group charter a private bus for their tour of the coast.
D. The city council decided to charter the old library into a modern community center next month.

2. Which sentence uses 'blow off steam' correctly according to this definition: To release strong emotions or energy, such as anger or stress, by doing something active or noisy?

A. He decided to blow off steam his homework because he wanted to play video games instead.
B. It was a very blow off steam atmosphere at the party because everyone was dancing.
C. The kettle is starting to blow off steam, so the water must be boiling now.
D. I was so angry after the meeting that I went for a long run to blow off steam.

3. Which sentence uses 'go bananas' correctly according to this definition: Become wildly excited, angry, or out of control.?

A. The sports fans started to go bananas when their team scored the winning goal in the final minute.
B. I need to go crazy to the grocery store because we have run out of milk and bread.
C. If you are tired after work, you should just go bananas and take a long nap on the sofa.
D. It is important to go bananas and eat healthy snacks like fruit every single day.

4. Which sentence uses 'die' correctly according to this definition: To stop living or to cease to exist?

A. The flowers in the vase will die if you don't give them fresh water.
B. The technician had to die the old engine to make it run faster.
C. She used a special die to color the white cotton fabric pink.
D. I want to die my hair bright blue before the summer holiday starts.

5. Which sentence uses 'affect' correctly according to this definition: To influence or produce a change in something?

A. The heavy rain will likely affect the number of people who attend the outdoor concert.
B. You should not affect to be someone you are not just to please your friends.
C. Even though he was very angry, he maintained a calm affect during the meeting.
D. The new government policy had a positive affect on the local economy.

6. Which sentence uses 'AFK' correctly according to this definition: Away From Keyboard; used to indicate that a person is temporarily unavailable or not actively participating in an online activity?

A. I was AFK all night because I forgot to pay my internet bill and my router was deactivated.
B. The game is very AFK because the levels are too easy and I finished them quickly.
C. I have been lurking in the chat for an hour, but now I need to go offline.
D. I'll be AFK for about ten minutes while I go to the kitchen to make a sandwich.

7. Which sentence uses 'run across' correctly according to this definition: To meet or find someone/something by chance.?

A. The manager decided to run across the meeting until next Tuesday.
B. While tidying the attic, I managed to run across some old family photographs.
C. I had to run across the street because I was late for the bus.
D. I need to run across my notes before the exam starts to memorize the dates.

8. Which sentence uses 'China' correctly according to this definition: A large country in East Asia.?

A. I really enjoy eating China food because I love spicy rice dishes.
B. The museum has a beautiful collection of China from the 18th century.
C. Many students travel to China to study its history and language.
D. Please be careful with those China plates as they break very easily.

9. Which sentence uses 'washroom' correctly according to this definition: A polite term for a room containing a toilet and a sink; a bathroom.?

A. Soldiers in the forest had to dig a deep washroom for their camp to use over the weekend.
B. I left my dirty car in the washroom for an hour to get the mud off the tires.
C. Before we sit down to eat at the restaurant, I need to go to the washroom to clean my hands.
D. The hotel has a large washroom where staff clean all the bedsheets and towels.

Scan to visit
eslwordwiz.com
© 2026 ESL Word Wiz. This PDF may be shared freely as long as ESL Word Wiz branding and all links remain intact.