Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, June 24, 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

Discreet / Discrete

A helpful mnemonic for ESL learners: in 'discrete,' the two 'e's are separated by a 't,' representing that the word means 'separate.' In 'discreet,' the two 'e's are together, hiding quietly in the middle of the word.

Meaning 1

discreet: careful and prudent in one's speech or actions, especially in order to keep something confidential or to avoid embarrassment.

ESL learners often confuse this with its homophone because they sound identical. This version (ending in -eet) refers to being 'quiet' or 'secretive' about information.

"The lawyer was very discreet about his client's private affairs."
"We made a discreet exit through the back door so no one would notice us leaving."

Meaning 2

discrete: individually separate and distinct.

This version (ending in -ete) is a technical term used in mathematics, science, and data. It describes things that are detached or separate units rather than a continuous flow.

"The digital clock displays time in discrete units of seconds and minutes."
"The organism is composed of several discrete layers of cells."

Related: confidential; separate; distinct; prudent; detached

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/discreet-discrete

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Ally

Be careful not to confuse 'ally' (/æl.a/) with 'alley' (/æl.i/). An 'ally' is a friend or supporter, while an 'alley' is a narrow street between buildings. Additionally, remember to shift the stress to the end of the word when using it as an action (verb).

Meaning 1

A person, group, or nation that supports and helps another, especially in a common cause or war.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable (AL-ly). ESL learners often confuse this with 'alley' (a narrow path), which is spelled differently but sounds similar.

"The two countries became strong allies during the conflict."
"She is a powerful ally for the marginalized community."

Meaning 2

To join or unite together for a specific purpose or to form an alliance.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable (al-LY). This change in word stress depending on the part of speech is a common challenge for non-native speakers.

"The small tech company decided to ally itself with a larger corporation."
"They chose to ally with the political party that shared their environmental goals."

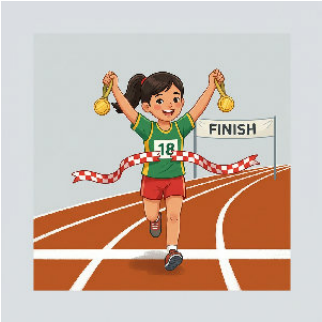
Related: alliance; allied; partner; supporter; alley

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/ally

Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Bring home the bacon

This phrase originated from a 12th-century English tradition where a side of bacon was awarded to any man who could swear before God and the church that he had not argued with his wife for a year and a day. Today, it is most commonly used to describe the primary breadwinner of a household.



Meaning 1

To achieve success or to win a prize/victory.

In some contexts, particularly sports or competitions, this phrase refers to winning the 'prize' or coming home victorious, which can be confusing if the learner only knows the financial definition.

"The team played hard and really brought home the bacon by winning the championship."
"Go out there and bring home the bacon for our school!"

Meaning 2

To earn the money that is needed to live and support a family.

ESL learners may take this literally and think the person is physically carrying pork products home from a grocery store. It is confusing because 'bacon' is used as a metaphor for a paycheck or income.

"Now that he has a new job at the bank, he's the one who brings home the bacon."
"My husband and I both work because it takes two salaries to bring home the bacon these days."

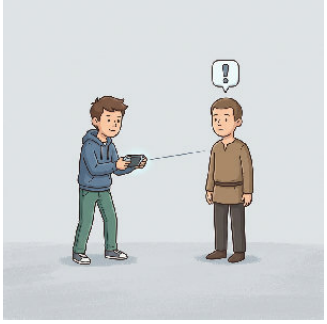
Related: breadwinner; earn a living; make ends meet; provider

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/bring-home-the-bacon

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Npc

While it started in gaming, 'NPC' is now a common internet insult. It is often used in political or social debates to dismiss an opponent's argument as unoriginal. Be careful using it, as it is considered derogatory.



Meaning 1

Non-Player Character: A character in a video game that is controlled by the computer rather than a human.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym. In gaming, these characters often have limited dialogue and repetitive actions, which serves as the basis for the slang usage.

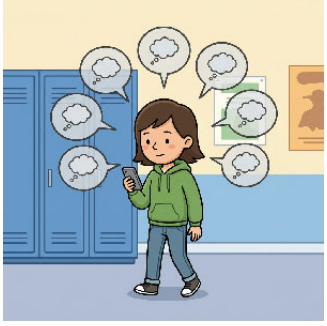
"I need to talk to that NPC to get the next quest."
"The town is full of NPCs that just walk in circles."

Meaning 2

A person who is boring, predictable, or irrelevant to the main 'story' of a situation.

In social media contexts, calling someone an NPC suggests they are a background character in someone else's life, which can be confusing as it shifts from a critique of intelligence to a critique of personality.

"I felt like an NPC at that party because nobody talked to me."
"The background actors in that movie had total NPC energy."



Meaning 3

A person who lacks original thoughts or follows trends blindly without thinking for themselves.

This is a metaphorical insult. It is confusing because it applies a technical gaming term to real-life human behavior, implying the person is 'programmed' or lacks a soul.

"He's such an NPC"
"he just repeats everything he hears on the news."

Related: bot; main character energy; sheep; avatar; default

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/npc

Contranym · Lesson 5 of 9

Cite

The word 'cite' is a triple homophone with 'site' and 'sight'. As a contranym, it is particularly tricky because being 'cited' can mean you did something very good (an award) or something very bad (a ticket/summons). Always look at the context-if it involves a 'citation for bravery,' it is good; if it is a 'citation for a violation,' it is bad.

Meaning 1

To quote or refer to a source of information as evidence for an argument.

This is the most common academic usage. It is confusing because it sounds identical to 'site' (a place) and 'sight' (vision), leading to frequent spelling errors in writing.

"You must cite your sources at the end of your essay to avoid plagiarism."
"The lawyer cited several previous cases to support her argument."

Meaning 2

To praise or honor someone officially for a positive act or achievement.

In a professional or military context, being 'cited' is a positive thing. It means you are being formally recognized for excellence or bravery, which can confuse learners who associate the word only with legal trouble.

"The soldier was cited for bravery during the rescue mission."
"The department was cited for its outstanding contribution to the research project."

Meaning 3

To officially summon someone to appear in court or to issue a formal notice of a violation.

This is the opposite of the first meaning. Here, being 'cited' is negative, implying a legal infraction or a requirement to face a judge (e.g., a traffic citation).

"The shop owner was cited for violating the city's health code."
"The driver was cited for speeding in a school zone."

Related: citation; site; sight; quote; summons; commendation

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/cite

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Have your cake and eat it too

Common in advice and negotiations.

Meaning 1

Want two desirable but incompatible things at the same time.

Once cake is eaten, it's gone. The proverb warns against expecting both options when only one is possible.

"You can't keep your salary and quit working - you can't have your cake and eat it too."

"She wants the freedom of singlehood and the security of marriage"

Related: want it both ways; impossible; double dipping; greedy; contradictory

Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Head

The word 'head' is one of the most versatile words in English. Beyond these three meanings, it can also be a verb meaning 'to move toward' (e.g., 'Let's head home'). The nautical use of 'head' for a toilet comes from the fact that in the past, the latrines were located at the 'head' (front) of the ship.

Meaning 1

The upper part of the human body that contains the brain, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

This is the primary literal meaning. ESL learners usually learn this first, but they may get confused when the word is used in non-anatomical contexts.

"He wore a hat on his head to stay warm."
"She nodded her head to show she agreed."

Meaning 2

The person in charge or the leader of an organization or group.

This is a metaphorical use where the 'head' of a body represents the 'brain' or leader of a group. Learners might confuse this with the physical body part.

"She is the head of the marketing department."
"We need to speak to the head of the school."

Meaning 3

A toilet or bathroom, specifically on a boat or ship.

This is nautical jargon. ESL learners may be very confused when a sailor says they are 'going to the head,' as it sounds like they are going toward a physical body part.

"The captain showed the passengers where the head was located on the deck."
"Make sure to pump the handle after using the head on the sailboat."

Related: chief; latrine; skull; leader; bathroom; bow

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/head

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Answer the call of nature

This is a 'double' figure of speech: it is both an idiom and a euphemism. It is considered more polite than saying 'I need to pee,' but it is often used slightly jokingly in social settings. In formal writing, it is better to use 'restroom' or 'facilities.'

Meaning 1

A polite or humorous way to say that one needs to go to the bathroom (urinate or defecate).

ESL learners may take the phrase literally, imagining someone responding to a phone call or a spiritual summons from the outdoors/environment. They might not realize it refers specifically to biological waste functions.

"We had to pull the car over so that Tim could answer the call of nature."
"Excuse me for a moment"

Meaning 2

A literal urge to return to a primitive or outdoor lifestyle, away from civilization.

In some literary contexts, it can mean a desire to be in the wilderness. This creates confusion because the same words can mean 'going to the toilet' or 'going on a hiking trip.'

"After years in the city, he finally answered the call of nature and moved to a cabin in the woods."

Related: use the restroom; powder my nose; see a man about a dog; nature calls; bio-break

Read the full lesson
eslwordwiz.com/words/answer-the-call-of-nature

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Wake up

Separable: wake someone up.

Meaning 1

To stop sleeping or cause someone to stop sleeping.

Literal meaning that is straightforward but often practiced as phrasal.

"I wake up at 7 AM every day."
"Can you wake me up at 6?"

Related: awaken

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

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'bring home the bacon' correctly according to this definition: To earn the money that is needed to live and support a family.?

A. Since her husband lost his job, Sarah has had to work two shifts to bring home the bacon.
B. He is the main breadwinner of the house, so he always brings home the bacon for everyone to eat at night.
C. I need to make ends meet the bacon because my rent is increasing next month.
D. The family decided to bring home the bacon from the local butcher for their Sunday breakfast.

2. Which sentence uses 'discreet' correctly according to this definition: careful and prudent in one's speech or actions, especially in order to keep something confidential or to avoid embarrassment.?

A. She was wearing a very discreet dress that was so bright and colorful everyone noticed her.
B. He is a very discreet person who always shouts his opinions in the middle of the office.
C. The project is divided into several discreet stages that don't overlap with each other.
D. The manager was very discreet when he told Sarah she had made a mistake so that no one else would hear.

3. Which sentence uses 'Answer the Call of Nature' correctly according to this definition: A polite or humorous way to say that one needs to go to the bathroom (urinate or defecate)?

A. During the long bus ride, we had to stop at a gas station so several passengers could answer the call of nature.
B. When the boss asked for volunteers for the outdoor project, Sarah felt she had to answer the call of nature.
C. The hiker decided to answer the call of nature by climbing the highest mountain in the region.
D. After living in the city for years, Mark moved to a cabin to answer the call of nature and live simply.

4. Which sentence uses 'NPC' correctly according to this definition: Non-Player Character: A character in a video game that is controlled by the computer rather than a human.?

A. I can't believe my brother is such an NPC; he always follows the popular trends.
B. If the internet goes down, you will have to NPC against the computer instead of real people.
C. After reaching level 10, players can upgrade their NPC and choose better weapons for their own character.
D. The shopkeeper in the game is an NPC who always stays in the same spot to sell items.

5. Which sentence uses 'cite' correctly according to this definition: To praise or honor someone officially for a positive act or achievement?

A. You should check your vision because your cite seems to be getting worse every year.
B. The architect visited the construction cite to check if the foundation was level.
C. The local mayor decided to cite the firefighter for her incredible courage during the forest fire.
D. I can cite several reasons why we should move the meeting to next Thursday.

6. Which sentence uses 'head' correctly according to this definition: The upper part of the human body that contains the brain, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.?

A. The project head managed the team to ensure every task was finished on time.
B. At the head of the ship, the lookout scanned the horizon for land.
C. The sailor asked the captain for permission to use the head before his shift.
D. She gently rested her head on the pillow and fell into a deep sleep.

7. Which of the following best describes the meaning of the idiom 'have your cake and eat it too'?

A. To achieve a difficult goal by working twice as hard as everyone else.
B. To get a double portion of something because you arrived earlier than others.
C. To be extremely greedy and eat much more than you actually need.
D. To want the benefits of two different situations when you can only have one.

8. Which sentence uses 'Ally' correctly according to this definition: A person, group, or nation that supports and helps another, especially in a common cause or war.?

A. During the trade negotiations, France proved to be a reliable ally for neighboring countries.
B. I need to ally the groceries on the shelf so that the labels are facing forward.
C. The small street behind the bakery is a narrow ally where people park their bikes.
D. The company decided to ally its old office because it was no longer big enough.

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