

Tricky Words of the Day

Thursday, June 25, 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

Doe / Dough

Remember the 'ough' in 'dough' sounds like the letter 'O'. A helpful mnemonic for 'doe' is the song from The Sound of Music: 'Doe, a deer, a female deer.'

Meaning 1

Dough (Slang): A common informal term for money.

Learners may be confused when they hear 'dough' used in a context that has nothing to do with baking. It is a very common American slang term.

"I'd love to go to the concert, but I don't have enough dough."

"He's making a lot of dough at his new job in tech."



Meaning 2

Dough: A thick mixture of flour and liquid used for baking bread or pastry.

The 'ough' spelling is notoriously difficult for learners because it can be pronounced in many ways (like 'tough', 'through', or 'thought'). In this case, it sounds exactly like 'doe'.

"Knead the pizza dough for ten minutes until it is smooth."

"The cookie dough needs to chill in the refrigerator."



Meaning 3

Doe: A female deer, rabbit, or goat.

ESL learners often confuse this with the musical note 'do' or the word 'dough' because they sound identical. The spelling 'oe' is also uncommon in English.

"A graceful doe stepped out of the woods with her fawn."

"The hunter spotted a doe near the stream."



Related: buck; fawn; batter; knead; cash; currency



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/doe-dough

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Animate

The most important thing to remember is the 'ate' sound. If you are describing an action (doing something), say 'ate' like the number 8. If you are describing a thing (a living object), say 'it'.

Meaning 1

To bring to life or to make something move (Verb).

As a verb, the word ends with a long 'a' sound like 'gate'. ESL learners often struggle with the shift in vowel sound and stress when moving between the verb and adjective forms.

"The artist used software to animate the character."

"A smile began to animate her face as she told the story."

**Meaning 2**

Living, having life, or showing physical movement (Adjective).

As an adjective, the ending is reduced to a short 'schwa' sound, sounding like 'it' or 'ut'. Learners often mispronounce this by using the verb pronunciation, which can confuse listeners.

"The scientist studied the difference between animate and inanimate objects."

"He was very animate during the discussion, using many hand gestures."



Related: animation; animated; inanimate; animator



Read the full lesson

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Idiom · Lesson 3 of 9

Burn the candle at both ends

This idiom is almost always used as a warning or a description of someone who is overworking. It carries a negative connotation of impending burnout or health issues. It is more common in professional or academic settings when discussing stress.

**Meaning 1**

To live a frantic or hectic life with little rest due to both work and social commitments.

Learners might be confused because the phrase can apply to 'fun' activities as well as work. It describes the total lack of downtime, regardless of whether the person is being productive or just partying.

"He was burning the candle at both ends, working all day and staying out with friends until 3 AM."

"During the music festival, everyone was burning the candle at both ends."

**Meaning 2**

To work or stay active from very early in the morning until very late at night, often leading to exhaustion.

ESL learners may take this literally and imagine someone physically lighting both ends of a wax candle. The confusion lies in the metaphor: a candle lit at both ends burns out twice as fast, just as a person who doesn't rest will lose their energy quickly.

"Since she started her new job and began night classes, she's been burning the candle at both ends."

"You'll get sick if you keep burning the candle at both ends"

Related: burnout; overextend; workaholic; exhaustion; pull an all-nighter



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/burn-the-candle-at-both-ends

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Chef's kiss

In digital communication, people often use the 'OK' hand emoji or the 'pinched fingers' emoji to represent this phrase. It is highly informal and very common on social media platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram.

**Meaning 1**

A gesture or expression used to describe something that is perfect, excellent, or of the highest quality.

ESL learners may be confused because it is not a literal kiss given by a chef. It refers to the physical gesture of touching one's fingertips to the lips and then blowing them away, but in modern digital slang, it is often used as a text-based description for anything flawless.

"The way the sunlight hits the mountains in this photo is just chef's kiss."

"I finished my essay and the conclusion is chef's kiss"

**Meaning 2**

A specific hand gesture originating from Italian culture (the 'al bacio') signifying that food is delicious.

Learners might see this used in cooking shows or restaurants and think it only applies to food. While it started in the culinary world, the slang has evolved to apply to movies, fashion, or even a clever comeback in an argument.

"The seasoning on this steak is chef's kiss."

"He performed the chef's kiss gesture after tasting the pasta sauce."

Related: perfection; flawless; spot on; gold standard; masterpiece



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/chef-s-kiss

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Comprise

The biggest confusion for ESL learners is the phrase 'comprised of.' Traditionally, 'comprise' already means 'is composed of,' so saying 'is comprised of' is considered redundant or incorrect by many style guides. However, because it is used so frequently by native speakers, it has become a 'contronym' where the direction of the relationship (whole-to-part vs. part-to-whole) is reversed.

Meaning 1

To constitute or make up (the parts forming the whole).

This is the 'opposite' meaning that makes it a contronym. Here, the 'parts' are the subject. While some grammarians dislike this usage, it is very common in modern English, leading to confusion about whether the word means 'to contain' or 'to be'.

"Nine players comprise a baseball team."

"Seminars and practical workshops comprise the bulk of the course."

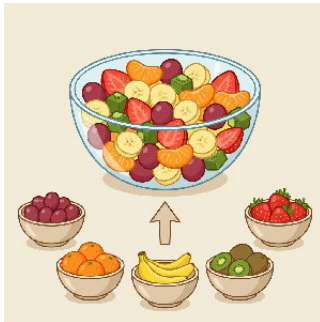
Meaning 2

To contain, include, or consist of (the whole containing the parts).

In its traditional sense, the 'whole' is the subject of the sentence. ESL learners often confuse this with 'compose'. You say 'The house comprises five rooms,' not 'The house is comprised of five rooms' in strict formal English.

"The collection comprises over 300 rare artifacts."

"The jury comprises twelve local citizens."



Related: compose; constitute; include; consist of; encompass



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/comprise

Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9**Hear it through the grapevine**

Casual. Reliable in tone but unverified in fact.

Meaning 1

Learn information informally, through gossip or rumors.

From Civil War telegraph wires that resembled grapevines and carried unverified news. Today: any informal rumor channel.

"I heard through the grapevine that they're getting married."

"She heard about the layoffs through the grapevine."

Related: rumor; gossip; word on the street; informal news; whisper



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/hear-it-through-the-grapevine

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9**Top**

The word 'top' is highly versatile. Beyond these three meanings, it can also mean 'to exceed' (verb) or 'the best' (adjective). For ESL learners, the most important thing is to look at the context: is it describing a location, an object you play with, or something you wear?

Meaning 1

The highest part, point, or surface of something.

ESL learners often confuse 'top' with 'above' or 'on.' While 'on' describes a position, 'top' refers to the specific highest section of an object itself. It can also be used as an adjective (the top shelf) or a noun (the mountain top).

"The cat is sitting on the top of the refrigerator."

"Please sign your name at the top of the page."

Meaning 2

A cone-shaped toy that is made to spin rapidly on its pointed tip.

This is confusing because the word shifts from a spatial descriptor to a specific physical object. Learners may not realize that 'top' can be a noun for a toy, leading to confusion in sentences like 'He is spinning his top.'

"The child watched the wooden top spin across the floor."

"If you pull the string quickly, the top will balance on its point."

Meaning 3

A garment worn on the upper part of the body, such as a shirt or sweater.

In a clothing context, 'top' is a generic category. ESL learners might be confused when someone asks 'Where did you get that top?' if they are expecting a more specific word like 'shirt' or 'blouse.'

"I need to find a blue top to match these trousers."

"She wore a heavy top because it was cold outside."

Related: peak; summit; upper; spinning top; blouse; shirt; pinnacle



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/top

Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Freshen up

This phrase is highly contextual. In a home or hotel, it usually refers to hygiene. In a bar or restaurant, it refers to drinks. It is considered a very polite and 'soft' way to handle bodily needs or hospitality.

Meaning 1

To wash one's face and hands, brush hair, or change clothes to look and feel cleaner.

ESL learners may take the word 'fresh' literally, thinking it refers to temperature or food quality, rather than personal hygiene and appearance.

"I've been traveling all day"

"I need a moment to freshen up before dinner."

Meaning 2

A polite way to say one needs to use the toilet or restroom.

This is a social euphemism. A learner might be confused when someone says they are going to 'freshen up' but they actually just need to use the bathroom.

"Excuse me, I'm just going to the ladies' room to freshen up."

"Where is the restroom? I'd like to freshen up before the meeting starts."

Meaning 3

To refill a drink or add more of a substance to make it better or stronger.

In a social or dining context, 'freshening up' a drink means adding more liquid (often alcohol or ice) to a glass that is nearly empty.

"Your coffee looks cold"

"let me freshen that up for you."

Related: spruce up; tidy up; powder one's nose; top off; wash up



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/freshen-up

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Take on

Separable in some contexts.

Meaning 1

To accept or undertake a responsibility or challenge.

Learners may think it means physically taking something on top.

"She took on too much work and got stressed."

"The company is taking on new employees."

Related: undertake; hire



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/take-on

Quick Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which sentence uses 'top' correctly according to this definition: The highest part, point, or surface of something?

- A. The child spent all afternoon playing with his wooden spinning top.
- B. She preferred the upper shelf because it was easier for her to reach.
- C. The climber finally reached the top of the mountain after six hours.
- D. I need to buy a new blue top to match these trousers for the party.

2. Which sentence uses 'burn the candle at both ends' correctly according to this definition: To work or stay active from very early in the morning until very late at night, often leading to exhaustion.?

- A. The power was out, so we had to burn the candle at both ends to see across the room.
- B. Sarah decided to burn the candle at both ends by spending all her savings on a new car.
- C. The company suffered a complete burnout because the manager was too strict with the rules.
- D. With a full-time job and a new baby, Mark is really burning the candle at both ends and needs a rest.

3. Which sentence uses 'freshen up' correctly according to this definition: To wash one's face and hands, brush hair, or change clothes to look and feel cleaner.?

- A. I've been traveling all day, so I'd like to go to the hotel room to freshen up before we go out to dinner.
- B. We should freshen up the apartment by painting the walls and buying new furniture for the bedroom.
- C. The waiter asked if I wanted him to freshen up my coffee cup since it was almost empty.
- D. The living room is a mess; we need to freshen up those old toys and magazines before the guests arrive.

4. Which sentence uses 'Chef's Kiss' correctly according to this definition: A gesture or expression used to describe something that is perfect, excellent, or of the highest quality.?

- A. The spicy seasoning on these fries is absolutely chef's kiss; I wouldn't change a thing.
- B. Make sure you chef's kiss the sauce frequently so it doesn't burn on the stove.
- C. That movie was a total gold standard, but I found the ending a bit boring.
- D. I gave the chef's kiss to my sister to congratulate her on her graduation.

5. Which sentence uses 'animate' correctly according to this definition: To bring to life or to make something move (Verb)?

- A. The studio needed a team of experts to animate the dragon for the new fantasy film.
- B. There are many inanimate objects in the museum that used to belong to famous explorers.
- C. After the long hike, we felt very animate and ready to sleep for the rest of the day.
- D. The technician worked for hours to animate the broken laptop screen so it would turn on.

6. Which sentence uses 'take on' correctly according to this definition: To accept or undertake a responsibility or challenge?

- A. The manager decided to take on additional duties while his assistant was on leave.
- B. We need to take on the bus at the next station to reach the museum.
- C. I need to hire a new hobby because I have too much free time lately.
- D. Before you leave the house, please remember to take on your coat.

7. Which sentence uses 'doe' correctly according to this definition: A female deer, rabbit, or goat?

- A. We watched quietly as a doe and her small fawn drank water from the forest stream.
- B. The hunter was surprised to find a large doe with impressive antlers standing in the clearing.
- C. The baker kneaded the doe for ten minutes before letting it rise in a warm bowl.
- D. If you don't have enough doe to buy the car, you might need to take out a bank loan.

8. Which sentence uses 'hear it through the grapevine' correctly according to this definition: Learn information informally, through gossip or rumors.?

- A. I didn't see the official announcement, but I heard it through the grapevine that the manager is quitting.
- B. If you want to know the truth, you should hear the word on the street from the CEO himself.
- C. The scientist spent years of research to hear it through the grapevine for his final report.
- D. The signal was very weak, so I could barely hear it through the grapevine during the phone call.

9. Which sentence uses 'comprise' correctly according to this definition: To contain, include, or consist of (the whole containing the parts)?

- A. The group hopes to comprise a list of all current members by tomorrow.
- B. Ten distinct chapters comprise the author's most recent historical novel.
- C. The travel package comprises flights, accommodation, and daily breakfast.
- D. She wants to comprise a new plan to finish the project on time.



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Quiz

Approved multiple-choice items for today. Answer key on the next page.

1. Which sentence uses 'top' correctly according to this definition: The highest part, point, or surface of something?

- A. The child spent all afternoon playing with his wooden spinning top.
- B. She preferred the upper shelf because it was easier for her to reach.
- C. The climber finally reached the top of the mountain after six hours.
- D. I need to buy a new blue top to match these trousers for the party.

Target: Top · CEFR B1

2. Which sentence uses 'burn the candle at both ends' correctly according to this definition: To work or stay active from very early in the morning until very late at night, often leading to exhaustion.?

- A. The power was out, so we had to burn the candle at both ends to see across the room.
- B. Sarah decided to burn the candle at both ends by spending all her savings on a new car.
- C. The company suffered a complete burnout because the manager was too strict with the rules.
- D. With a full-time job and a new baby, Mark is really burning the candle at both ends and needs a rest.

Target: burn the candle at both ends · CEFR B1

3. Which sentence uses 'freshen up' correctly according to this definition: To wash one's face and hands, brush hair, or change clothes to look and feel cleaner.?

- A. I've been traveling all day, so I'd like to go to the hotel room to freshen up before we go out to dinner.
- B. We should freshen up the apartment by painting the walls and buying new furniture for the bedroom.
- C. The waiter asked if I wanted him to freshen up my coffee cup since it was almost empty.
- D. The living room is a mess; we need to freshen up those old toys and magazines before the guests arrive.

Target: freshen up · CEFR B1

4. Which sentence uses 'Chef's Kiss' correctly according to this definition: A gesture or expression used to describe something that is perfect, excellent, or of the highest quality.?

- A. The spicy seasoning on these fries is absolutely chef's kiss; I wouldn't change a thing.
- B. Make sure you chef's kiss the sauce frequently so it doesn't burn on the stove.
- C. That movie was a total gold standard, but I found the ending a bit boring.
- D. I gave the chef's kiss to my sister to congratulate her on her graduation.

Target: Chef's Kiss · CEFR B1

5. Which sentence uses 'animate' correctly according to this definition: To bring to life or to make something move (Verb)?

- A. The studio needed a team of experts to animate the dragon for the new fantasy film.
- B. There are many inanimate objects in the museum that used to belong to famous explorers.
- C. After the long hike, we felt very animate and ready to sleep for the rest of the day.
- D. The technician worked for hours to animate the broken laptop screen so it would turn on.

Target: Animate · CEFR B1

6. Which sentence uses 'take on' correctly according to this definition: To accept or undertake a responsibility or challenge?

- A. The manager decided to take on additional duties while his assistant was on leave.
- B. We need to take on the bus at the next station to reach the museum.
- C. I need to hire a new hobby because I have too much free time lately.
- D. Before you leave the house, please remember to take on your coat.

Target: take on · CEFR B1

7. Which sentence uses 'doe' correctly according to this definition: A female deer, rabbit, or goat?

- A. We watched quietly as a doe and her small fawn drank water from the forest stream.
- B. The hunter was surprised to find a large doe with impressive antlers standing in the clearing.
- C. The baker kneaded the doe for ten minutes before letting it rise in a warm bowl.
- D. If you don't have enough doe to buy the car, you might need to take out a bank loan.

Target: doe / dough · CEFR B1

8. Which sentence uses 'hear it through the grapevine' correctly according to this definition: Learn information informally, through gossip or rumors.?

- A. I didn't see the official announcement, but I heard it through the grapevine that the manager is quitting.
- B. If you want to know the truth, you should hear the word on the street from the CEO himself.
- C. The scientist spent years of research to hear it through the grapevine for his final report.
- D. The signal was very weak, so I could barely hear it through the grapevine during the phone call.

Target: Hear it through the grapevine · CEFR B1

9. Which sentence uses 'comprise' correctly according to this definition: To contain, include, or consist of (the whole containing the parts)?

- A. The group hopes to comprise a list of all current members by tomorrow.
- B. Ten distinct chapters comprise the author's most recent historical novel.
- C. The travel package comprises flights, accommodation, and daily breakfast.
- D. She wants to comprise a new plan to finish the project on time.

Target: Comprise · CEFR B1

Answer Key

1. C. The climber finally reached the top of the mountain after six hours.

the correct answer (The climber finally reached the top of the mountain after) correctly uses 'top' to refer to the highest point of a physical structure (the mountain). a distractor (I need to buy a new blue top to match these trousers for) refers to a piece of clothing; a distractor (The child spent all afternoon playing with his wooden spi) refers to a toy; a distractor (She preferred the upper shelf because it was easier for h) uses an adjective instead of the target noun.

2. D. With a full-time job and a new baby, Mark is really burning the candle at both ends and needs a rest.

the correct answer (With a full-time job and a new baby, Mark is really burni) correctly describes working or being active for long hours (job and baby). A uses the literal meaning, C describes financial waste, and D uses a confusable noun instead of the target idiom.

3. A. I've been traveling all day, so I'd like to go to the hotel room to freshen up before we go out to dinner.

the correct answer (I've been traveling all day, so I'd like to go to the hot) correctly refers to personal grooming after travel. a distractor (The living room is a mess; we need to freshen up those ol) should use 'tidy up' for organizing items. a distractor (The waiter asked if I wanted him to freshen up my coffee) uses 'freshen up' to mean 'refill' a drink. a distractor (We should freshen up the apartment by painting the walls) describes 'sprucing up' or renovating a space.

4. A. The spicy seasoning on these fries is absolutely chef's kiss; I wouldn't change a thing.

the correct answer (The spicy seasoning on these fries is absolutely chef's k) uses 'chef's kiss' correctly as an adjective-like expression to describe something perfect. B incorrectly treats it as a literal greeting, C uses it as a verb for cooking, and D uses a confusable term incorrectly since the sentence later criticizes the movie.

5. A. The studio needed a team of experts to animate the dragon for the new fantasy film.

the correct answer (The studio needed a team of experts to animate the dragon) is correct because it uses 'animate' as a verb meaning to make a character move. A uses it incorrectly for repairing electronics; C uses it incorrectly as an adjective; D uses the confusable 'inanimate' which means not moving or living.

6. A. The manager decided to take on additional duties while his assistant was on leave.

the correct answer (The manager decided to take on additional duties while hi) correctly shows 'take on' used for accepting responsibility. B incorrectly uses it instead of 'put on' (clothing); C uses 'hire' which means to pay for services; D confuses it with 'get on' (transportation).

7. A. We watched quietly as a doe and her small fawn drank water from the forest stream.

the correct answer (We watched quietly as a doe and her small fawn drank wate) correctly uses 'doe' to refer to a female deer. a distractor (The baker kneaded the doe for ten minutes before letting) confuses the word with 'dough' (flour mixture), a distractor (The hunter was surprised to find a large doe with impress) is incorrect because female deer do not have antlers, and a distractor (If you don't have enough doe to buy the car, you might ne) uses 'doe' as slang for money, which is also a misspelling of 'dough'.

8. A. I didn't see the official announcement, but I heard it through the grapevine that the manager is quitting.

the correct answer (I didn't see the official announcement, but I heard it th) correctly uses the idiom to describe learning news via gossip. B uses the phrase literally (referring to sound quality), C uses it in a formal research context where rumors don't apply, and D incorrectly suggests that 'word on the street' comes from an official source like a CEO.

9. C. The travel package comprises flights, accommodation, and daily breakfast.

the correct answer (The travel package comprises flights, accommodation, and) correctly uses 'comprise' to

show a whole containing its parts. a distractor (The local library comprises of three separate floors and) is incorrect because 'comprise' is not followed by 'of'. a distractor (Twelve months comprise a full calendar year for most of t) shows 'parts making up a whole' (the sense of 'constitute'), and D confuses 'comprise' with 'compose' or 'devise'.