

Tricky Words of the Day

Wednesday, October 21, 2026

Note: Every meaning in this lesson has a picture to help ESL/ELL learners grasp the word. On the rare occasion a picture could not be drawn in time, its box reads "Illustration coming soon" (pending).

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 1 of 9

Lead / Led

The past tense of the verb 'lead' is 'led', which is pronounced the same as the metal 'lead'.

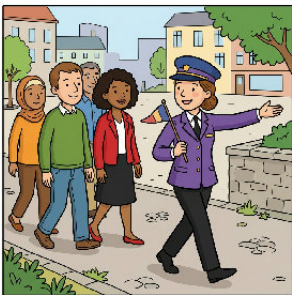
Meaning 1

/lid/ To show the way or be in charge of a group.

The verb form refers to leadership or movement.

"The captain will lead the team onto the field."

"This path leads to the beach."



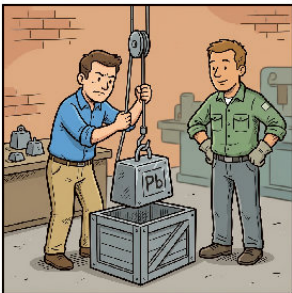
Meaning 2

/ld/ A heavy, grey metal.

This is a heteronym. It is spelled the same but pronounced differently when it refers to the metal.

"Pencils used to contain lead, but now they use graphite."

"Lead is a very heavy and toxic metal."



Meaning 3

/lid/ The winning position in a race or competition.

Used as a noun to describe who is winning.

"The runner took a huge lead in the final lap."

"Our team is in the lead."



Related: guide; conductor; metal



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/lead-led

Homograph · Lesson 2 of 9

Rampage

While 'rampage' is often associated with physical violence, it is frequently used in news headlines to describe metaphorical destruction, such as a 'spending rampage' or a 'hiring rampage.' Learners should note that the word always implies a lack of control.



Meaning 1

A period of violent and uncontrollable behavior, typically involving damage to property or injury to people.

As a noun, the stress is on the first syllable. ESL learners often struggle with the 'soft g' sound at the end and the specific nuance that a rampage implies a continuous, moving path of destruction rather than a single act of violence.

"The angry elephant went on a rampage through the village."

"The hackers went on a digital rampage, deleting files from every server they accessed."



Meaning 2

To move around in a violent, reckless, or destructive manner.

As a verb, the stress shifts to the second syllable in some dialects, though it is increasingly common to hear the first syllable stressed for both. This can confuse learners who are taught the noun-verb stress shift rule (like 'record' or 'present').

"The rioters began to rampage through the downtown shopping district."

"Giant monsters rampage across the city in the latest summer blockbuster movie."

Related: spree; turmoil; frenzy; uproar; havoc



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/rampage

Euphemism · Lesson 3 of 9

Gardening leave

Most common in British English. Mainly used for senior employees who have access to sensitive business information and are about to join a competitor. During gardening leave, the employee usually cannot start their new job.

**Meaning 1**

A period during which an employee is paid their full salary but is not required - or allowed - to come to work, typically after handing in their resignation.

ESL learners may think this involves literally gardening. The term humorously implies the person is at home tending their garden. It is a legal arrangement used to protect company secrets by keeping a departing employee away from colleagues while they still work out their contract.

"After resigning, he was placed on gardening leave for six months."

"The contract included a clause for gardening leave to protect trade secrets."

Related: paid leave; notice period; non-compete; garden leave; paid suspension

**Read the full lesson**

eslwordwiz.com/words/gardening-leave

Slang · Lesson 4 of 9

Smh

While 'smh' is very common in informal writing, it should never be used in formal or professional contexts. Occasionally, people use 'smdh' (shaking my damn head) for extra emphasis. It is important to note that you do not usually say the letters 'S-M-H' in a face-to-face conversation; instead, you would actually shake your head.

Meaning 1

A way to show frustration or annoyance at someone else's perceived lack of common sense.

The nuance can be tricky because it isn't just 'sadness'; it often implies a sense of superiority or judgment toward someone else's 'stupid' behavior, which can be difficult for non-native speakers to detect in text.

"He really thought he could win that argument without any facts. Smh."

"People are still falling for that internet scam? Smh."

**Meaning 2**

An abbreviation for 'shaking my head,' used to express disappointment, disapproval, or disbelief.

ESL learners may be confused because it is an acronym that describes a physical action rather than a direct word. It is rarely spoken aloud and is primarily used in digital communication (texting/social media) to convey a negative reaction without using full sentences.

"I can't believe he forgot his keys again. Smh."

"Smh, the bus is late for the third time this week."



Related: facepalm; disbelief; ffs; eye roll; smh



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/smh

Contronym · Lesson 5 of 9

Boxing

The word 'boxing' is a classic example of how context dictates meaning. If you are at a gym, it refers to the sport. If you are in a warehouse or moving house, it refers to packaging. Additionally, 'Boxing Day' (December 26th) is a holiday in many English-speaking countries that has nothing to do with the sport, but rather the tradition of giving 'boxes' (gifts) to the poor.

Meaning 1

A combat sport where two people fight using their fists.

This is the most common source of confusion. A learner might hear 'I am boxing today' and not know if the person is moving to a new house or participating in a violent sport. The context is entirely different but the word is identical.

"He has been training at the boxing gym for three years."

"Boxing is a sport that requires great agility and strength."



Meaning 2

The act of removing items from a box (often referred to as 'unboxing').

This is a contronym because in certain technical or industrial contexts, 'boxing' can refer to the process of opening or clearing out containers. However, it is most commonly confused with its direct opposite: the sport of hitting.

"The retail staff is boxing the new inventory to get it onto the shelves."

"He is famous for his unboxing videos, which is the opposite of boxing items for storage."



Meaning 3

The act of putting items into a box for storage or transport.

ESL learners may find this confusing because it describes the process of enclosing or containing something, which is the literal interpretation of the root word 'box'.

"We spent the whole afternoon boxing the old books for the move."

"The factory worker is responsible for boxing the electronics before shipping."



Related: packaging; sparring; unboxing; containerizing; pugilism



Read the full lesson

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Figure of Speech · Lesson 6 of 9

Sisyphean task

Literary and academic. Sometimes humorous about daily chores.

**Meaning 1**

An endless, hopeless, repetitive effort that never succeeds.

From Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder uphill forever. Today, used about futile, repetitive work.

"Cleaning a toddler's room is a Sisyphean task."

"Trying to please everyone is Sisyphean."

Related: endless effort; futile; pointless; never-ending; uphill battle



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/sisyphean-task

Multi-Meaning · Lesson 7 of 9

Bench

In professional services, 'bench time' or 'being on the bench' can be positive (resting between projects) or negative (not being deployed, which affects billing rates). Context determines the connotation.

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 1

A long seat without a back, made of wood, metal, or stone, used in parks, courtrooms, and workspaces.

The most common literal meaning - a physical seating surface. Also used in a workshop ('workbench') or courtroom ('bench ruling').

"She sat on the park bench and fed the ducks."

"The woodworker shaped the cabinet at his workbench."

Meaning 2

In sports, to remove a player from active play, placing them on the bench as a substitute.

When a coach 'benches' a player, they are removed from the game. This term is also used figuratively in business - to 'bench' someone means to remove them from a key assignment.

"The coach benched the star player due to poor performance."

"The director was benched after the project failure and reassigned to a less visible role."

Meaning 3

In consulting, staffing, and sports management, a pool of employees or professionals who are available and not currently assigned to a project or client.

Sports teams keep substitute players 'on the bench,' ready to play. In professional services firms, 'bench' describes employees between assignments who are available for deployment. ESL learners may only know the seating meaning.

"The consulting firm keeps a bench of specialists ready for short-notice deployments."

"We have several engineers on the bench who could start on your project immediately."

Illustration
coming soon

Related: available staff; substitute; reserve; unassigned; sideline



Read the full lesson

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Euphemism · Lesson 8 of 9

Realign

When you hear 'realign' in a corporate meeting, pay close attention. While it literally means 'to straighten,' it is frequently used to soften the blow of bad news regarding job security or organizational changes.

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 1

A corporate euphemism for restructuring a company, often involving layoffs or job cuts.

In a business context, 'realigning' sounds positive and organized, but it is often used to hide the unpleasant reality that people are losing their jobs or being demoted.

"The company decided to realign its workforce to improve efficiency, resulting in several redundancies."

"Due to the merger, we need to realign our management team."

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 2

To put something back into a straight line or its correct relative position.

This is the literal physical meaning. ESL learners may find it confusing when the word shifts from physical objects (like car tires) to abstract concepts (like business structures).

"The mechanic needs to realign the front wheels of the car."

"Please realign the margins in the document so the text is centered."

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 3

To change one's political or ideological stance to match a different group.

This refers to shifting loyalties or beliefs. It can be confusing because it implies a 'correction' of position rather than just a change of opinion.

"The country chose to realign itself with Western trade policies."

"After the scandal, the senator had to realign his platform to regain voter trust."

Related: restructure; downsize; reorganize; adjustment; calibration



Read the full lesson

eslwordwiz.com/words/realign

Phrasal Verb · Lesson 9 of 9

Reach out

Widely used in corporate emails and often considered overly casual or even hollow. Some critics call it jargon that has replaced clearer alternatives like 'contact' or 'call.' Very common in American business English.

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 1

To make contact with someone - to initiate communication, usually to ask for help, share information, or start a conversation.

ESL learners know the literal meaning of extending your arm toward something. In modern workplace English, 'reach out' has replaced 'contact' or 'get in touch' in many professional contexts, which can feel very informal for a formal setting.

"Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions."

"I'll reach out to the client to schedule a call."

Illustration
coming soon

Meaning 2

To physically extend your arm or hand toward something or someone.

The original, physical meaning - extending your hand to grab something or touch someone.

"She reached out to catch the falling vase."

"He reached out and shook the stranger's hand."

Related: contact; get in touch; connect; approach; communicate



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