

# VOA Learning English

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Beginning Level  
Reading Corpus

For Beginning English Learners

159 Articles | 75,600 Words | ~302 Pages

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Generated: February 04, 2026

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Total: 159 articles | 75,600 words

# Ask a Teacher

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159 articles

## Article 1: Using Punctuation Marks

Date: 2021-11-26T22:02:42+00:00 | 798 words | Source

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Hello! Today on Ask a Teacher we answer a question about punctuation marks from Luay in Syria.

I hope you can tell me about the difference between punctuation marks such as the semicolon (;), the colon (:) and the comma (,) and between round brackets and square brackets.

Thank you for writing with this very interesting question. Even native speakers have trouble with these punctuation marks when writing English. Let us begin with the simplest one, the comma.

First, you need to understand the sentence: it is a group of words with a subject and a verb that expresses a complete thought.

When part of a sentence expresses a complete thought, and could be a sentence, we call it an “independent clause.” It has a subject and a predicate or verb.

The most common use of a comma is to separate an independent clause and a phrase or a dependent clause. When we read the examples in this lesson, we will say the punctuation marks out loud so listeners can understand where they belong.

Every Thursday, VOA has a new Everyday Grammar lesson.

The independent clause is “VOA has a new Everyday Grammar lesson.” “Every Thursday” is separated by a comma. There are many other uses for commas which you can read about in our Everyday Grammar lesson.

The colon is two dots, one over the other. It has three main uses. One is to introduce a list of things. The part of the sentence before the colon should be an independent clause. Here is an example:

Ashton likes only three kinds of fruit: apples, bananas and cherries.

You should not use a colon when the list is part of the independent clause, as in:

Ashton likes apples, bananas and cherries.

Note that these things are separated by commas but there is no comma before “and.” That is a debated subject we will not get into today.

You can also use a colon between two independent clauses when the second one explains the first.

We ate all of the ice cream: it was too hot this afternoon.

Third, you can use a colon to emphasize a phrase or word at the end of a sentence:

After hours of work, we saw what we wanted: a clean house.

Moving on to the semicolon, you may say it looks like a period or a dot above a comma. We use a semicolon to connect two independent clauses that have related subjects. For example,



I think we should study in the bookstore; my friend works there.

You should never use a comma to connect two independent clauses. Note that the semicolon takes the place of any conjunction that might connect two independent clauses. A good test of whether you have used the semicolon correctly is to replace it with a conjunction, that is, “or,” “for,” “and” or “but.” Here is a sentence with a semicolon between the two independent clauses:

The cat came in the door; it was carrying a mouse.

When we use a conjunction, we no longer need the semicolon.

The cat came in the door, and it was carrying a mouse.

### Brackets and parentheses

Your last question was about the marks you call round and square brackets. The round ones are called parentheses. We use them to add some information to help explain what we have written. When reading them aloud, we say “open parentheses” for the one on the left side and “close parentheses” for the opposite one, on the right. For example,

I opened a can of food for Makeda (the dog) and put it in a dish.

The square brackets [] have several uses. They are used to put comments or information into direct quotations, to identify errors in text, and to add more information within something that is already in parentheses. Here are examples of the brackets in action:

His mother said, “Look, this letter [it was from the university] came for you.”

Alex picked up the bag (he thought it held more water [it only had empty bottles]) and shook it.

You may also see brackets around a Latin word, [sic] showing there was a mistaken word in what someone else wrote.

I hope this answers your question, Luay.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story had an error in reference to one of the sentences. It has been corrected. We thank our listeners and readers for their thoughtful comments which make our stories better.

punctuation—the marks (such as periods and commas) in a piece of writing that make its meaning clear and that separate it into sentences and clauses

## Article 2: Pretend and Imitation

Date: 2021-12-03T22:01:17+00:00 | 472 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Shinji in Japan.

I am unsure about how to use “imitate” and “pretend.”

For example, I see such sentences as, “Does your child likepretendplay?” referring to acting like a superhero, for instance. But is it wrong to say, “Does your child like imitation play?”

We have all watched children as they use their imagination during play. For example, a child may pick up a stick and use it as a sword, pretending to be a hero.

The simple answer to your question is no, it is not wrong to use “imitation” as an adjective with the noun “play.” But there is a difference in meaning. Let us look at the two words.

When someone pretends, they are acting as if something were true. An example is the child who takes an empty shoe box and puts a doll into it. The child is pretending as they push it around the floor, saying,

This is her car.

When children imitate, they are acting as if they were another person, such as an adult in their life. The child who holds a doll and sings a gentle song to it is imitating a loving parent. The child puts the doll down and covers it, saying,

My baby is going to sleep now. Please be quiet.

The child is both imitating a parent and pretending that the doll is a living thing.

Do you have a child who plays in this way? You may be interested to know that experts say it is very important for children to learn by imitating what they see around them and pretending with toys and other objects. Both help them use their imagination.

Another word for this kind of play is “make-believe.” One way to help a child develop their imagination is to provide dress-up clothes and toys that look like tools and household objects. Experts also suggest it is good to play along with whatever story the child imagines and talk about what is happening to help develop their language skills.

Shinji, I hope you have fun taking part in pretend play with the children in your life. You can even see adults playing at being someone else or being in another time at historical fairs and museums.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

pretend—v. to act as if something is true when it is not true

sword—n. a weapon with a long metal blade that has a sharp point and edge

museum—n. a building in which interesting and valuable things (such as paintings and sculptures or scientific or historical objects) are collected and shown to the public

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## Article 3: Register, Sign in and Log in

Date: 2021-12-10T22:02:31+00:00 | 363 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from Mali.

What are the differences between "register", "sign in" and "log in?"

Thank you for writing to us with your question. These words and phrases are all common when we use the internet. Sometimes you can use them when discussing activities that do not require a computer.

Let's look at some of the similarities and differences.

Let us begin with the phrasal verb "log in." This expression means to gain permission to use a computer system. Logging in usually requires a username and password. When a user logs in, the computer system keeps a record, or "log," of that user's session on the system. We can also use the single word "login" as a noun to describe such a session on a computer.

We can use the phrasal verb "sign in" in the same way as "log in." But unlike "log in," "sign in" is common outside of the computer world. As part of security measures in an office building or school, you may have to provide information about yourself before you enter. That could mean writing your name (or "signing" your name) on a paper or showing an identity card. This creates a record of visitors to a place.

Finally, the verb "register" means to provide information about yourself the first time you use a computer program or attend an event. You often need to register before you can sign in or log in to a service. Another phrase we use for "register" is "sign up."

Here is an example:

I recently signed up for a birdwatching class!

Registering for something sometimes involves paying money, while signing in or logging in to something usually does not require a payment.

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phrasal verb—grammar.a group of words that functions as a verb and is made up of a verb and a preposition, an adverb, or both

session—n. a period of time that is used to do a particular activity

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## Article 4: Goal and Aim

Date: 2021-12-17T22:01:06+00:00 | 413 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Paul in the Czech Republic.

Could you tell me the difference between the words aim, target, objective and goal? When should I use each one?

Paul, Czech Republic.

Thank you for writing to us. These words are similar. As nouns they all mean something you are trying to do or make happen. But we often use two of them to describe an object we can touch.

Goal and target

Both “target” and “goal” can be used in sports. In soccer, players try to get a ball into the other side’s goal, an area at the end of the playing field marked by a net. We say a player “scored a goal,” as in this example:

Abby Wambach broke the women’s soccer record by scoring 184 goals.

In the sport of archery, you try to make an arrow hit a “target.” We use the word this way to describe archery:

To get a high score, your arrow has to hit close to the center of the target.

When we use “target” to talk about what we want to do in the near term, it is often an exact number, as in this example:

Our sales target for the coming month is \$1000 a day.

Compare that with the use of “goal” to talk about a more general thing you want to make happen further in the future, as in:

It is her goal to become the president of the company.

Objective and aim

We use those two words as well as “objective” and “aim” to talk about our purposes. Often people decide on their “objectives” as a group or organization. For example:

The Senator said, “Our objective today is to pass this bill.”

Finally, we can use “aim” as a verb meaning to direct effort toward a goal in this way:

I aim to plant ten trees today.

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net—n. a device that is used for catching or holding things or for keeping things out of a space and that is made of pieces of string, rope, wire, etc., woven together with spaces in between

score—v. to get points, goals, runs, etc., in a game or contest

archery—n. the sport or skill of shooting with a bow and arrow

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## Article 5: What Does Season's Greetings Mean?

Date: 2021-12-24T22:01:08+00:00 | 344 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week we answer a question about a common greeting we hear in December: Season's Greetings.

I hear Americans saying, "Season's Greetings." What does it mean? And how do you write it: "Season's [Season-apostrophe-s] Greetings" or "Seasons' [seasons-apostrophe] Greetings?"

Hussein, India.

This expression is very common in the period between Thanksgiving, at the end of November, and New Year's Day, January 1. There are many holidays being celebrated during this time, or season.

Thanksgiving is held on the fourth Thursday in November. Then there is Hannukah, which is part of the Jewish religion. This year, Hannukah began shortly after Thanksgiving, on November 28.

Christmas is on December 25. Kwanzaa, a yearly celebration of African American culture, is held from December 26 to January 1. Lastly, there is New Year's Eve on December 31 and New Year's Day on January 1.

The plural word "greetings" means a message that expresses good wishes to someone.

When we write cards or letters at this time of year, we try to include as many of our friends' religious, or nonreligious, traditions as possible. So, people may choose to say, "Season's Greetings." You will find the expression on cards, gifts and in outdoor lighting displays.

A similar expression is "Happy Holidays." That is another way to include people with a variety of traditions in our greetings.

How to write it

Finally, how do you write “Season’s Greetings?” It is one season, so the apostrophe goes after the word “season” and before the “s.”

The VOA Learning English team hopes you are able to gather safely with your family and loved ones during this season, as we send you all “Season’s Greetings.”

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

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plural-grammar. relating to a form of a word that refers to more than one person or thin

display—n. an arrangement of objects intended to decorate, advertise, entertain, or inform people about something

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## Article 6: What Do Americans Say at the New Year?

*Date: 2021-12-31T22:02:16+00:00 | 305 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! This week we answer a question from Maria in Brazil.

I am sending some cards to my American friends. I’d like to know what to write on the cards for the new year.

Thank you for writing to us. In many countries, people send messages at the end of the year or the beginning of the year with greetings and good wishes.

Health and wealth

A popular wish that you will see on a New Year’s greeting card is for good health.

Wishing you a healthy and happy new year.

Another popular wish is for happiness and wealth, or prosperity.

We wish you a prosperous and joyful new year.

Another wish you can write on your cards is for peace and joy for your friends.

Hoping that your new year is filled with joy and peace.

As the new year starts, we may wish them success in new beginnings.

Hoping the new year and your new beginnings bring you much success.

And finally, we can tell our friends how much they mean to us as we look forward to another year. Here is one way to do just that.

Looking forward to another year of being friends with you. Thank you for your friendship!

The VOA Learning English team would like to thank readers like you, Maria, for making 2021 a great year for us. We wish you all a wonderful year of learning together in 2022.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

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greeting— n. something that is said or done to show people that you are happy to meet or see them

prosperity— n. the state of being successful usually by making a lot of money

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## Article 7: Rather, Quite and So

Date: 2022-01-07T22:02:26+00:00 | 346 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from a reader.

I often confuse the meaning of the words “rather,” “quite” and “so.” Thank you, dear teacher.

The words you asked about are a special kind of adverb called “intensifiers.” These words make a statement about something a little stronger. Let us look at some examples.

It was rather hot yesterday – that’s why I went for a swim.

You will look quite attractive in this shirt.

We are so excited about going to see the movie!

Note that the words come before an adjective. They give more force to the adjective. It is difficult to say how much force these words add to an adjective because their use can change from one person to another and from one area to another. Speakers of British English use “quite” and “rather” differently than speakers of American English.

I would like to say a few more words about the adverb “so.” As an English teacher, it bothered me when I began to hear people using “so” more often to add force to their statements, as in these examples.

She was so happy.

This math homework is so hard.

My traditional grammar guides told me that this kind of statement should include “that” and another expression, as in these examples:

She was so happy that she jumped up and down.

This math homework is so hard that I needed to ask for help.

But last year, my coworker John Russell wrote about “so” in *Everyday Grammar*. He explained that in the past 20 years, its use as an intensifier has increased. Grammar experts at *Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary* still say it is an “informal” use of the word.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

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confuse—v. to mistakenly think that one person or thing is another person or thing : to mistake (one person or thing) for another

bother— v. to cause (someone) to feel troubled, worried, or concerned

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## Article 8: Even Though and Even If

*Date: 2022-01-14T22:01:40+00:00 | 420 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from a reader in China.

There is a question I’ve been thinking about for a long time. What is the difference between “even though” and “even if?” Could you tell me the answer? Thank you.

Thanks for writing to us. You asked a question that many learners of English have. Let us begin with “even though.”

“Even though” comes before a statement of fact. It has a similar use to the word “but.” Here are examples about travel to your country, Roy:

I want to travel to China, but I cannot because of COVID travel restrictions.

Now, see how you can say the same thing with the expression “even though.”

Even though I want to visit China, I cannot because of the pandemic.

Compare these statements with even though and the expression “despite the fact that.”

Despite the fact that snow fell on Monday, our schools opened.

Our schools opened Monday even though there was snow.

In both statements, it is true that snow fell Monday and although our schools often close due to snow, they did not on this day.

Grammar expert Betty Azar says that statements with “even if” are similar to ones with “whether or not.” “Even if” tells us that there is a certain condition that does not matter. Compare these examples.



I will take the dog for a walk even if it is raining.

Whether or not it is raining, I will take the dog for a walk.

For both statements, the rain is possible, but may not happen.

You will sometimes find that “even if” describes an unreal situation.

Even if I could travel to Mars, I would not go there.

I cannot attend the party, even if you could change the time.

In these examples, it is impossible to travel to Mars and the time of the party cannot be changed. However, the speakers say that in any case, they are not interested in traveling to Mars and are not able to attend the party.

I hope this helps you understand the difference between “even if” and “even though,” Roy.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

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despite—prep. without being prevented by (something) — used to say that something happens or is true even though there is something that might prevent it from happening or being true

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## Article 9: Restore and Recover

*Date: 2022-01-21T22:02:17+00:00 | 528 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from a reader in China.

I read an article on your website, *Visitors Slowly Return to a Famous Thai Coastal Area*. I am a little confused about the words "restore" and "recover" in the story. Is there any difference between them? Thank you!

Your loyal reader,

Thank you for this question. The story tells of a famous place, Maya Bay, in Thailand. A movie was filmed there. Too many people visited this island and it became polluted. Fish and wildlife disappeared from its waters. In 2018 the government closed it. Now, it is open again and a smaller number of people can visit it.

The story ends with this quote from an Italian visitor: “I think it is fine that it has been closed all this time to protect the nature and allow it to restore and recover.”

Let us look first at the word “restore.” It means to give back something that was lost or taken. In the case of Maya Bay, the beautiful sea animals called corals died from all the traffic in the water. So workers had to plant new coral on the sea floor. In other words:

Officials restored them by planting new corals from other places.

Maya Bay’s beach experienced another loss – the native plants that grew there. The movie makers took away some of the plants. They planted trees that are not native to the island. Thai officials tried to correct that environmental damage by bringing back the usual plants that grew in the sand. You can say,

Marine biologists restored the native plants on the beach.

Now, let us look at the word “recover.” It means to get back or regain something that was lost. The ecological system, or environment, of Maya Bay was lost to pollution. We read that government scientists brought corals and plants back, but they need time to grow.

It will take a few years for the beach to recover as the new plants grow.

Think of how we use “recover” to mean, “become healthy again after an illness.” You can say,

She recovered quickly from a mild infection.

The doctor’s care restored her to good health.

To review, when we return something that was lost, we “restore” it. When something goes back to its original state, or the way it was, it “recovers.”

If all goes well, the island at Maya Bay will recover its beauty as the plants, wildlife and waters return to good health.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. unable to understand or think clearly

restore—v. to give back (someone or something that was lost or taken) to return (someone or something)  
— often + to

coral—n. a creature that lives on the bottom of the sea; its body forms a hard rock-like material

reef—n. a long line of coral that lies in warm, shallow water

beach—n. an area covered with sand or small rocks that is next to an ocean or lake

ecological system—n. everything that exists in a particular environment (ecosystem)

## Article 10: Stand and Stay

Date: 2022-01-28T22:02:42+00:00 | 457 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from La Mancha, Spain.

Hello VOA. I was wondering about the difference between stand and stay... Are they synonyms?

Felix, in Spain.

Thank you for asking us this question. The two words do seem to be similar, but there is an important difference between them.

Let us begin with the verb, “stand.” For a human, it means to be in an upright position with your weight on your feet. When you stand, you do not move much. Here is an example.

The employee’s feet hurt because she was standing most of the day.

We can use “stand” for non-living as well as living things.

The streetlight stands beside the path to my house.

Another meaning of “stand” is to move from a sitting position to a standing position.

Please stand to sing the national anthem.

There are many other uses of “stand” with prepositions or as a noun, but we will not worry about them here.

Compare “stand” now with the verb “stay.”

To “stay” means to continue to be in the same place for a period of time. You could use “remain” in the same way as “stay” in many cases. “Stay” and “remain” both describe a living thing that has a choice of moving to another location. For example,

We have to stay at home to work to avoid infection.

The soccer player stayed off the field for the whole game.

We also can use “stay” to talk about continuing in a state or condition, or position.

Reyna and Alex stayed friends for years after they left school.

I could not stay awake during the math lecture today.

You can also use “stay” to talk about living in a place as a guest for a short period.

Mahmoud stayed at the Ramses Hotel for a month while he worked in Cairo.

When to use ‘stay’ or ‘stand’

When you are trying to decide whether to use “stay” or “stand,” please ask yourself: Can the subject change its location? Will the verb “remain” work?

Here is a statement you can use to test our method:

We know that a tree cannot move by itself, and it does not choose to remain by the wall. So, we should use “stands” in that statement.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Write your answers in the comments or on paper.

Complete these sentences using a form of “stay” or “stand.”

upright—adj. positioned to be straight up or vertical

national anthem—n. a song that praises a particular country and that is officially accepted as the country's song

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## Article 11: Best and Most

*Date: 2022-02-04T22:02:46+00:00 | 441 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Rebecca, an English teacher in China.

I am Rebecca from China. I am also an English teacher for kids. I am confused by the two phrases as follows:

1. I like summer and winter best.
2. I like summer and winter most.

Which one is correct? What's the difference grammatically?

Rebecca, China.

Thank you for writing to us. At first, I thought the statements sounded incorrect. Then, I saw that they may simply be incomplete.

Let us begin with “best.” It is an adverb, a word that describes time, manner, place, or degree. Your grammar book will say it is the superlative form of “well.” A superlative adverb shows something is to the greatest degree of a quality. Here is an example of “best” as an adverb:

Yao Ming is best known for his work in the NBA.

The problem I saw was that you said two seasons were better than all the others. Maybe you enjoy swimming and skiing, sports that are not as easy to do outdoors in spring and fall. You can add a phrase

to explain this.

Of the four seasons, I like summer and winter best. That's because I can swim in summer and ski in winter.

You could also say,

For my sports, swimming and skiing, I like summer and winter best.

Now let us look at “most.” It is also a superlative adverb. It means “in or to the greatest degree.” You can add some information to your statement about traveling in China to make it clearer.

I like spring and fall most for visiting Hangzhou.

The short answer to your question, Rebecca, is that there is no grammatical difference between your phrases. But make sure your students understand that “best” and “most” can also be used as superlative adjectives, as in these examples:

The best seasons for visiting Shanghai are spring and fall.

I think the Silk Museum is the most interesting one in Hangzhou.

Note that both of these statements have “the” before the adjective. That is one easy way to tell the difference between superlative adverbs and adjectives.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

kid—n.informal.a young child

confused—adj. unable to understand or think clearly

phrase—n.a group of two or more words that express a single idea but do not usually form a complete sentence

superlative—adj. grammar. of or relating to the form of an adjective or adverb that is used to indicate the greatest degree of a particular quality

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## Article 12: Should We Think ‘Outside’ or ‘Outside of’ the Box?

*Date: 2022-02-11T22:03:40+00:00 | 372 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the adverb “outside” from Philip in China.

Could you please tell me the difference between outside of and outside? ... Please tell me which is better,

We should think outside the box.

We should think outside of the box.

Thank you for writing to us. “Outside” can have one of four uses in English, as a noun, adjective, adverb, or preposition. It is not surprising that you found it hard to understand. Your question brings up an interesting dispute between grammar experts in the United States and Britain. The Oxford English Dictionary says that “outside” in phrases like “outside of the box” is an adverb. It changes the meaning of the verb, in this case, “think.” Together with the preposition “of” it becomes a two-word preposition. Here are other examples of such two-word prepositions:

A baby bird flew out of the nest.

He was never close to his sister.

Your example uses “outside of” or “outside” to talk about the space the subject occupies. You can use either “outside” alone or with “of” in that sense. There is another use where “outside of” means “apart from” or “besides.” Here are examples of that use:

Outside of their later songs, I do not enjoy the Beatles’ music.

I cannot think of a time outside of high school when I wore a tie.

The Merriam-Webster Learners Dictionary says “outside of” is a North American use. Another British dictionary, the online Oxford Dictionary also sees the use of “outside of” to talk about location as “chiefly North American.” But its use in the “apart from” sense is seen as normal for British and American English.

So in British English, you would usually hear,

Think outside the box.

And in American English, you might hear it that way or

Think outside of the box.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

puzzle—v. to be difficult for (someone) to understand

location—n. a place or position

think outside the box– (expression) If you think outside the box, your thoughts are not limited or controlled by rules or tradition, and you have ideas that are creative and unusual.

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## Article 13: Turn or Make a Turn?

Date: 2022-02-18T22:03:05+00:00 | 411 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Orlando in Brazil. He writes,

Could you please tell me the difference between these phrases when talking about directions?

We can turn left to go there.

We can make left to go there.

Which one is considered correct? Thanks. Orlando, Brazil.

Thank you for writing to us. Please note that the word “left” serves as two different parts of speech in these two sentences. In the first one, “left” is an adverb. It shows the direction of a turn. Here is a similar example:

At the next intersection, I turned left and then right onto Main Street.

In that statement, both “left” and “right” show a movement in a certain direction. They are both adverbs, which means they affect the meaning of a verb. A person or a vehicle can turn, as we have in this example,

The car ran the stop right there, and it turned left.

But we would not talk about a vehicle “making a turn.” Generally speaking, only people can “make a turn.”

Your second statement is missing an important word, the determiner “a.” It should be:

We can make a left to go there.

It also leaves out a word that a listener understands but is not said, “turn.”

We can make a left [turn] to go there.

When we give directions with the word “make” we have to use “a” because here, “left” serves as an adjective. It modifies the noun “turn.” Here are other examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA:

He made a left turn on a red light. Horns protested.

Officials said the driver in front was waiting to make a left turn.

In looking at the results in COCA, I found that “to make a turn” is much less common than simply using the verb “turn.” Some writers think it is a North American way of speaking.

There is one more way to give directions. You can ask someone to “take a turn.”

Take the second right turn after the bank.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

sentence—n. a group of words that expresses a statement, question, command, or wish

intersection—n. the place or point where two or more things come together

modify—v. (grammar) to limit or describe the meaning of (a word or group of words)

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## Article 14: In or Under Quarantine?

Date: 2022-02-25T22:02:21+00:00 | 430 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from Samuel in China. He writes,

When I read the news, sometimes I see 'under quarantine', and at other times I see 'in quarantine.' Are they different in meaning? In the following sentence, which one should I use?

Jerry left Hohhot for school in Hefei when the virus outbreak started in Hohhot. So, when he arrived in Hefei, he was put (under or in) quarantine in a quarantine hotel.

Prepositions are tricky for Chinese English learners. I hope you can help clear my mind a little bit.

Thank you in advance,

Thank you for writing to us. I am sure that almost everyone who is reading or hearing this knows that “quarantine” is the isolation of a person or a group of people to prevent the spread of infection to others. But it may not yet be clear how we use different prepositions with the word “quarantine.”

Let us begin with “under.”

Since May 2020, language researchers have collected what people are saying related to the pandemic in 20 different English-speaking countries. They call the result the Coronavirus Corpus. I searched in that collection and learned that “under quarantine” is much less common than “in quarantine.” Here are some examples:

All close contacts of the coronavirus cases have been placed under a quarantine order.

Following his classmate's positive test, the 11-year-old was placed under quarantine on Thursday.

Many countries put their entire populations under strict quarantine in order to prevent the virus from spreading.



Compare these examples of how “in quarantine” appears.

Some schools are offering meals to students in quarantine.

New Zealand requires a 10-day stay in hotel quarantine for all travelers.

Note that the words “put” and “place” appear before “under quarantine” in our examples. Often there is an official organization taking this kind of action. You can also find examples of putting or placing someone “in quarantine,” but they are less common.

The short answer to your question, Samuel, is that you would not be wrong to use either “under” or “in” before the word quarantine in your example, but English speakers would be more likely to use “under quarantine” after the verb “put” in the statement:

When he arrived in Hefei, he was put under quarantine in a quarantine hotel.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

sentence—n. a group of words, usually containing a verb, that expresses a thought in the form of a statement, question, instruction, or exclamation and starts with a capital letter when written

tricky—adj. difficult to deal with and needs careful attention or skill

positive—adj. on a medical test, showing the presence of a virus or other infection

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## Article 15: All Right and Alright

Date: 2022-03-04T22:02:15+00:00 | 455 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Humera in Pakistan. Humera writes,

Amazing way of teaching. I would like to know the difference between alright (one word) and all right (two words).

Humera, Pakistan

Thank you for writing to us. This set of words is interesting because it shows a possible change in the English language. The two separate words “all right” and the single word “alright” both describe something that is fairly good or acceptable. We use them in the same way we use the expression “okay.”

Let us begin with the two-word adjective, “all right.” In this example, you can see that “all right” means something is not outstanding or special:

That writer's first book was great but her second one was just all right.

We also use “all right” to talk about someone’s health. It means a person is healthy or not sick.

I asked Mom if she was feeling better and she said she was all right.

You may hear “all right” used as an adverb along with verbs like “seem.”

The milk is a week old, but it seems all right, because it doesn't smell bad.

You will often hear “all right” at the beginning or end of a statement:

Let him know I stopped by, all right?

So, you're free tonight? All right, let's go to the movies.

Now, let us consider the single word, “alright.”

Here is where you can see language change happening in real time. You can use it in the same ways we talked about here with “all right” as two words. In writing, it gives a more informal feeling. Language experts say that this written form is appearing more frequently these days and may be based on the idea that the expression is similar to the adverbs “already” and “altogether.” When you want to make someone feel better, you might say,

Everything is going to be alright.

You may also have heard this expression as two words repeated many times in popular songs and in movies. Here is the song Hey Yaby Outkast:

I say what's, what's cooler than being cool? (Ice Cold!)All right, all right, all right, all right, all right, all right, all right, all rightAll right, all right, all right, all right, all right, all rightOkay now, ladies (Yeah?)

However, you should know that some English speakers consider alright (one word) to be a mistake.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Jill Robbins. And I'm Faith Pirlo.

Dr. Jill Robbins and Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

amazing –adj. wonderful; very surprising or making you feel pleasure, approval, or wonder

informal—adj. casual

## Article 16: A Lot and Lot

Date: 2022-03-11T22:02:52+00:00 | 307 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Mohamed about “a lot” and “lot.”

Thank you for making a comment on our website!

Firstly, let us look at the noun “lot”. By itself, “lot” can refer to a set or group of things that can be counted. Here is an example:

The company shipped 1000 lots of the vaccine yesterday.

We can also use “a lot” as an adverb. Like other adverbs, it affects the verb in a statement. This use of “a lot” can mean “often” or “to a greater degree.” Compare these examples:

I go to Indonesian restaurants a lot.

In the above example, “a lot” talks about the number of times I go to Indonesian restaurants.

Their noodles are a lot spicier than other restaurants.

In this example, the noodles have a greater degree of taste compared to noodles elsewhere.

A lot of and lots of

And finally, we have “a lot of” and “lots of.” Both include the preposition “of”, and we use them as quantifiers. We use them to refer to a quantity of something without being exact. These expressions can be used in the same way and there is no difference in meaning, though “lots of” might be considered by some to be more informal.

Note that in these examples “a lot of” and “lots of” come before noncount nouns. They are referring to the same thing.

In the summer you should drink a lot of water.

Doctors advise us to drink lots of water.

I hope this helps you in using these expressions, Mohamed!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. unable to understand clearly

noodle—n. a ribbon-shaped pasta

spicy—adj. having strong flavors

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## Article 17: Everyday and Every Day

Date: 2022-03-25T22:02:06+00:00 | 358 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Yuna from Japan.

I would like to know the difference between “everyday” and “every day.” Thank you.

Thank you for emailing us. People often confuse “everyday” (one word) and “every day” (two words) because they can be used in similar ways.

Let us start with the one word “everyday.”

We use “everyday” (one word) as an adjective to describe nouns. Its meaning is something that happens regularly, from day to day.

My everyday schedule includes waking up early, going to the gym and making breakfast.

In this example, “everyday” (one word) describes the schedule or the plan of activities that happen every morning.

Another way we can use “everyday” as an adjective is to mean in an ordinary or usual way.

He wears sneakers as his everyday shoes.

In this statement, the sneakers are his usual shoes.

Now let us look at the two-word form of “every day.” This form is a grouping of two separate words, “every” (adjective) and “day” (noun). It means the same as the expression “each day.”

We use “every day” (two words) as an adverb phrase to describe verbs, other adverbs and adjectives. Compare these examples.

The children go to school every day.

Eating vegetables every day is important for our health.

In the first example, “every day” (two words) can be replaced by “every single day”, “each day” or even another expression like “every week” or “every month.”

In the second example, “every day” (two words) describes how often we should eat our vegetables.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Yuna.

Next week, we will answer a question from Melvin about “daily” and “everyday”. If you are interested in how these expressions are similar or different, please come back next week to find out!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

schedule—n. a plan of tasks and when to do them

sneakers—n. clothshoes that are worn for informal times and for sports

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## Article 18: Daily

Date: 2022-04-01T22:02:25+00:00 | 382 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about "daily" and compare it to last week's Ask a Teacher question.

We will answer a question from Malvin, a visitor to our website.

Malvin writes: I would like to know about the difference between "everyday" and "daily".

Thank you for writing to us! Last week, we answered Yuna's question about "everyday" and "every day." This week we look at the difference between those words and the word "daily."

Daily as an adjective

"Daily" can be used as an adjective or an adverb. As an adjective, it means happening regularly or day to day. "Daily" can be a synonym for "everyday" (one word). Last week, we learned that the word "everyday" (one word) describes regular events.

My everyday schedule includes waking up early, going to the gym and making breakfast.

So, we can exchange "everyday" (one word) for "daily" in this statement.

My daily schedule includes waking up early, going to the gym and making breakfast.

But we cannot use "daily" in place of "everyday" (one word) when it means common or usual.

Daily as an adverb

"Daily" can also be an adverb. When used this way, "daily" can take the place of "every day" (two words). Here are some different examples comparing "daily" to "every day" (two words).

Getting enough sleep every day can help our memory.

Getting enough sleep daily can help our memory.

In both sets of examples, "daily" can be exchanged for "every day" (two words) because it is used as an adverb. It also describes how often events, activities or usual things happen.

You can use "daily" like "everyday" (one word) as an adjective to describe something that happens day to day. You can also use "daily" as an adverb to describe how often something happens.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Malvin!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). Be sure to tell us where you are from in your email.

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonym—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

schedule—n. a plan of tasks and when to do them

memory—n. the ability to remember something in your mind

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## Article 19: Crazy and Insane

Date: 2022-04-08T22:01:12+00:00 | 531 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Leah from Vietnam.

Thank you so much!

I really appreciate the question. These two words may appear as synonyms in some situations. But in recent years, their usage and meanings have changed with increased knowledge of mental health issues.

Let us start with “crazy.”

“Crazy” is mostly used as an adjective and can have several different meanings that are informal.

Its first meaning is foolish, strange, wild or intense.

The crazy kittens knocked over their water bowl because they were so excited.

In this example, the kittens were a little wild and foolishly spilled the water.

A second meaning of “crazy” is really enthusiastic, interested in, or in love with something. We usually use the preposition “about” with the word.

The couple is crazy about each other; they are always holding hands.

And crazy can also mean mentally sick or unbalanced. This meaning is falling out of use because now there is more awareness and sensitivity towards mental health issues.

An example from recent years can be seen in the TV show Crazy Ex-Girlfriend.

The song for the show is about the main character, Rebecca Bunch, an ex-girlfriend who is “crazy” and not doing well with her mental health.

At the time, people criticized the use of “crazy” in the show’s title. But the creator and star, Rachel Bloom, also helped to increase awareness of mental health issues through the TV show.

Let’s move on to “insane.”

“Insane” has a stronger, more negative association than crazy. As an adjective, it was once used to describe people with severe mental illness. But it is no longer used in the field of medicine.

Today, some people, especially younger ones, use it to mean extremely foolish, irrational, or not able to make good decisions. Those kinds of meanings are falling out of use.

Another, more recent use as an adjective can mean shocking, outrageous, or intense. This meaning is similar to “crazy.”

Compare these examples:

I had an insane day at work.

In this example, “insane” means intense and busy.

The pasta sauce smells insane.

Here the sauce has an intense and wonderful smell.

“Crazy” and “insane,” as adjectives, are used informally to mean foolish, intense, or not believable. If they are used this way, they can be synonyms.

Insane is stronger and often sounds more negative than crazy. Crazy is more normal in informal speech when showing enthusiasm or even expressing love. But, both terms have in the past been used to describe people with mental illnesses.

While both terms are still used informally, saying them in the wrong situation can be a mistake.

I hope these explanations and examples have helped you, Leah!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonym—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

mental health—n. well-being of your mind, emotions, and social needs

stereotypes—n. common, over-simplified and negative ideas of people or their roles in life

enthusiastic—adj. feeling or showing strong excitement about something; filled with or marked by enthusiasm

negative—adj. harmful or bad; not wanted

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## Article 20: Reflexive Pronoun 'Oneself' and 'By Oneself'

Date: 2022-04-15T22:02:14+00:00 | 357 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Vietnam.

I am writing because I want to know the difference between "oneself" and "by oneself."

Can you explain it to me?

Bích Tiên, Vietnam.

Thank you for your question!

"Oneself" is a reflexive pronoun. A reflexive pronoun describes the subject of a sentence. We can use it when the subject and the object of the sentence describe the same person. Other reflexive pronouns include myself, yourself, herself, himself, and themselves.

"Oneself" is also a third-person singular pronoun, like herself or himself, but it does not show gender. It can describe a male or female.

Here is an example with "oneself."

A selfie is a picture one takes of oneself.

In this example, the subject of the clause, "one," is taking a picture of "oneself" and no one else. We can see "oneself" is describing the subject.

In American English, "oneself" is formal and rarely appears in everyday speech. It is mostly used in academic writing.

Instead of "oneself," most speakers use "yourself" when talking about another person directly in informal speech.

When working from home, one often talks to oneself.

When working from home, you often talk to yourself.

And now for "by oneself."

"By" is a preposition. Although it has other meanings, when used with a reflexive pronoun, it means alone or without help.

One could carry this television by oneself.

In this sentence, "One" does not need any help to carry the TV. One can do it alone.

We can rewrite this sentence in everyday speech.

You could carry this television by yourself.

Sometimes we use a reflexive pronoun without "by". This usage may have the same meaning as "by" + reflexive pronoun.

You could carry the TV yourself.

I hope these examples have helped you to understand the difference with reflexive pronouns and using "oneself!"



What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)  
And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

gender—n. the state of being either male or female

academic—adj. relating to school and education

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## Article 21: With and Within

Date: 2022-04-22T22:02:06+00:00 | 385 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Mod, a reader of our website.

Could you please explain to me the difference between “with” and “within?”

Thanks for asking this question!

“With” and “within” are both prepositions. Prepositions describe a relationship to an area, place or time between two nouns.

Let us start with “with!”

“With” has several different uses. And depending on what the situation is, the meaning can change a bit.

The first use of “with” means together.

I went to the café with my friends.

In this sentence, I did not go to the café alone. My friends and I went together.

A second use of “with” describes a close relationship between two nouns, and it means “along,” “nearby” or “among.”

Does that hat go with this shirt?

In this question, the person is asking if the hat and shirt go along together or match.

And a final use of “with,” means being in opposition or against something.

She had a fight with her sister.

We can see in this sentence that sisters are having a fight or argument. They are against each other.

And now for “within.”

“Within” is also a preposition and is a combination of “with” and “in.”

There are two uses of “within.”

The first use means a period of time. For example, we can say:

The winner of the contest should answer within 2 days.

This sentence means that the winner has 2 days to answer back and no more than 2 days.

The last meaning of “within” describes a relationship between two nouns in an area, space, or limit. It can mean “inside of.”

There are many organs within the body.

This sentence means that inside the body, there are a lot of organs.

The store is within walking distance of my apartment.

This sentence means that the store is close or nearby to my apartment, so I can walk to it.

Please let us know if these examples have helped you.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

café—n. a coffee shop or small restaurant

match—v. to complement or look nice together

contest—n. a game or competition that people try to win

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## Article 22: Learning New Words: Parts of Speech, Suffixes

Date: 2022-04-29T22:02:48+00:00 | 599 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Erol from Turkey.

My name is Erol. What is the best way of learning words? I am very confused about this subject. Can you give me some advice about learning words, please?

Thank you for emailing us this very important question, Erol!

There are many ways to learn words in English. Over the next two weeks, we will talk about learning different parts of speech, or word families, and using suffixes.

What are parts of speech or word families?

Many language teachers say there are eight different parts of speech in English. We will look at the four major parts of speech that include most content words: nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

Nouns are people, places, things, or ideas. Adjectives are words that describe nouns. Verbs describe actions or states of being. And adverbs describe adjectives, verbs or even other adverbs.

In this simple sentence we can see all four major parts of speech.

Warm days have quickly come.

“Warm” is the adjective that describes the noun, “days.” “Quickly” is the adverb that describes “have come,” the verb in the sentence.

We use suffixes after the base form or root of a word. The root is the simplest form of the word. We can use suffixes to change the meaning of words by adding them to the base form.

So, if we know one word, like a verb, we could use a suffix to change that part of speech to another part of speech. This idea is very helpful for learning new words. We can create several new words from a base form when we add suffixes.

For example, if we have the verb “to argue,” we can add the suffix -ment to make the noun “argument.”

Or if we have a verb like “create,” we can add -ive to the end to make the adjective “creative.”

In this case, we drop the final e at the end of the verb and add the suffix.

To turn some nouns and adjectives into verbs, we can use the suffixes -ize or -ify.

“Beauty” (noun) + suffix -ify = “beautify”

Remove the -y and add the suffix.

“Organization” (noun) + suffix -ize = “organize”

We can drop the ending -ation, a noun suffix, to get the base form. Then add -ize, the verbal ending.

To turn some verbs into nouns, we can use the suffix -er, -ment or -ation.

“Argue” (verb) + suffix -ment = “argument”

Drop the -e and add the suffix.

“Dance” (verb) + suffix -er = “dancer”

“Create” (verb) + suffix -ation = “creation”

Drop the -e and add the suffix

Some adjectives can also become nouns with suffixes -ity or -ty.

“Responsible” (adjective) + suffix -ity = “responsibility”

Drop the -e and add the suffix

We can also use the suffixes -ist or -ism to make other nouns.

“Active” (adjective) + suffix -ist = “activist”

Drop the -e and add the suffix

“Magnet” (noun) + -ism = “magnetism.”

Some English teachers use a chart to show the possible words you can make using suffixes.

Next week on Ask a Teacher, we will continue learning how to make new words by adding suffixes. And we will fill in the chart of words we have been talking about by making adjectives and adverbs with suffixes.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

suffix—n. a letter or group of letters added to the end of a word to change its meaning

confused—adj. to be uncertain or unable to understand something

content words—n. words that add meaning to a sentence

chart—n. a form of presenting information using a table or columns to group things

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## Article 23: Learning New Words: Parts of Speech and Suffixes, Part 2

Date: 2022-05-06T22:01:23+00:00 | 578 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will continue to answer Erol's question about learning new words by using suffixes to create adjectives and adverbs.

My name is Erol. What is the best way of learning words? I am very confused about this subject. Can you give me some advice about learning words, please?

Last week we looked at creating nouns and verbs by adding suffixes to words. Now, we will create adjectives and adverbs with suffixes.

Reviewing parts of speech and suffixes

Words that add meaning to a sentence are known as content words. Content words often appear as one of the four major parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

Let us look at an example with all four major parts of speech:

The orange cat cried loudly.

The adjective, “orange” describes the color of the cat which is the noun. Loudly is the adverb that describes the verb “cry” in the past tense.

We add suffixes to the end of the base form of a word to change the part of speech. This way we can create several words from the base form in English.

Making adjectives from nouns

To change some nouns into adjectives we can use several endings: -ful, -less, -y, -al, -ic, and -ical.

“Beauty” (noun) + suffix -ful= “beautiful”

Change the “y” to “i” and add the suffix -ful.

The suffix -ful means having the quality of the noun.

“Emotion” (noun) + suffix -less= “emotionless”

The suffix -less means “without.”

“Rain” (noun) + suffix -y= “rainy”

The suffix -y means to be characterized by.

“Organization” (noun) + suffix -al = “organizational”

Keep the noun suffix -ation. And add -al, the adjective ending.

This suffix means “relating to.”

“History” (noun) + suffix -ic= historic

Remove the -y and add the suffix -ic.

This word means important or famous in history.

“History (noun) + suffix -ical= historical

Remove the -y and add the suffix.

This word means relating to history or past events.

Let us move on to making adjectives from verbs!

Making adjectives from verbs

To turn some verbs into adjectives, we can use the suffixes -ive, -ious, -ing, -ed/-en and -able.

“Create” (verb) + suffix -ive= “creative”

Drop the -e and add the suffix.

“Study” (verb) + suffix -ious= “studious”

Drop the -y and add the suffix.

Sometimes participles are used as adjectives. These adjectives can have a sense of either continuation (-ing) or completion (-en or -ed).

“Cry” (verb) + suffix -ing = “crying”

Keep the -y and add the suffix.

An example sentence is:

The crying baby did not sleep all night.

“Shake” (verb) + suffix -en = “shaken”

An example of this suffix is:

I often drink teas shaken with milk.

Lastly, for making adjectives from verbs, we have the suffix -able. It means able or possible to do.

“Break” (verb) + suffix -able = breakable.

This word means able to be broken.

Finally, many adjectives become adverbs by adding the suffix -ly.

Creative (adjective) + suffix -ly = creatively

Now let us complete the chart from last week that lists possible words you can make by adding suffixes:

Argumentatively

Understanding suffixes can be a path to quickly learning a lot of new content words.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

suffix—n. a letter or group of letters added to the end of a word to change its meaning

confused—adj. to be uncertain or unable to understand something

chart—n. a form of presenting information using a table or columns to group things

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## Article 24: Never Mind and It Doesn't Matter

Date: 2022-05-13T22:02:20+00:00 | 467 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Jesús, from Spain, about the difference between “never mind” and “it doesn’t matter.”

My name is Jesús, and I find the use of "never mind" and "it doesn't matter" sometimes confusing, could you clear it up for me, please?

Thank you from Spain.

Thank you for your question. We will start with the expression “never mind.”

Often, we use “never mind” as an imperative or command form to tell someone to leave a subject or topic alone. This is especially true if a request is not fulfilled or a question is left unanswered.

For example, if you have a question like:

Can you help me put away the groceries?

And it goes unanswered. You can reply:

Never mind, I will do it without you.

In this exchange, “never mind” is used as a command to mean “ignore what was just asked or said.”

Another way we can use “never mind” is as a conjunction, a part of speech that joins together two ideas, clauses or sentences. When used as a conjunction, “never mind” connects two options, the second option being the least likely or wanted.

I do not like traveling to work. There are too many people on the bus, never mind that it takes 45 minutes to get there.

In this sentence, “never mind” acts the same as another conjunction, “in addition.” In the above example, the second option is expressed as the worst part of traveling to work.

“It doesn’t matter” means that the subject or issue is not important.

We can reword the sentence to understand it better:

It does not matter (to me).

The verb “matter” means to be of importance. So when we say, “it doesn’t matter” we are saying “this issue or subject is not important.”

For example, if we are given a choice between two things, and we say “it doesn’t matter,” we are saying that either choice is acceptable.

Do you want coffee or tea?

It doesn’t matter.

Here we are saying that the choices are unimportant and we could enjoy either coffee or tea.

Sometimes, both of these expressions can be combined, as follows:

Never mind, it doesn't matter.

This sentence demonstrates our lack of interest in the subject and expresses that we do not care to talk about the situation any further.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Jesús!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

And I'm Jill Robbins.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confusing— adj. something uncertain or unable to understand

groceries— n. goods bought to be used in the home such as food and cleaning product

option— n. a choice

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## Article 25: Beg to Differ and Other Expressions of Disagreement

*Date: 2022-05-20T22:01:18+00:00 | 441 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Yevgen, from Ukraine, about the use of "I beg to differ" and disagreement expressions in American English.

Hello everybody. I would like to know the best disagreeing phrases. How common [is the] phrase 'I beg to differ' in American English? Best regards,

Yevgen, from Ukraine.

Thank you for your question. The expression "I beg to differ" is not commonly used in American English. This British English expression of disagreement is quite formal and extremely polite.

We have several expressions in American English for disagreement. Some are more formal and polite than others. We will take a closer look at a few of those expressions today.

You can use these basic statements for disagreeing: either "I disagree" or "I do not agree." However, sometimes these statements are too strong for certain conversations.

If we disagree with someone in a formal setting or over a sensitive issue, such as politics or beliefs, we sometimes add the following phrases before our basic messages.

I am afraid I disagree.



I see your point, but I do not agree.

I understand what you are saying, but I disagree.

These expressions are used to hedge, or soften, what we say. They are used like a barrier - think of a green bush that surrounds a garden or house - to help protect the receiver of the message. Hedging expressions let the writer or speaker say what they want to say less directly or politely.

When we speak to a close friend or family member, we often use less formal hedge expressions. For example:

Speaker A (Husband): What time should we wake up? Our flight leaves at 9:30 in the morning.

Speaker B (Wife): We should wake up at 4:00 a.m. to arrive at the airport by 6:00 a.m.

Speaker A (Husband): Well, I don't think so. We will be waiting for a long time!

In this example, speaker B uses the word "well" to hedge or soften the sentence and "I don't think so" to disagree. This informal expression of disagreement is acceptable since the speakers are close and familiar with each other.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Yevgen!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

beg—v. to ask for help; to appeal

polite—adj. having or showing good manners or respect for other people

formal—adj. serious or official rather than relaxed and informal

hedge—v. to use words and phrase to soften what we say, making it more indirect to protect the receiver of the message

bush—n. a usually low shrub with many branches

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## Article 26: Using Hyphens

Date: 2022-05-27T22:01:31+00:00 | 533 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Yousra, from Egypt, about how to use hyphens when making a compound adjective.

Hello, my name is Yousra from Egypt.

I would like to know when I should use a hyphen (-) between two words like, “top-selling” or “well-being.”

Thank you for your question! In this week’s program, we will explain how to use hyphens to make compound adjectives.

What is a hyphen?

A hyphen (-) is used to combine two or more words together to create a compound word.

Do not confuse a hyphen with a longer dash (–). In writing, we use a longer dash like a comma (,) or a period (.) to separate sentences.

What is a compound adjective?

Compound adjectives are modifiers formed by combining adjectives with other adjectives, nouns, and even adverbs. We use them as a single expression to describe the noun that comes after.

The compound adjective “top-selling” from your question is a great example.

The top-selling employee had the most sales for the month.

Here, the two adjectives, “top” and “selling” are combined into one to describe the employee. “Top-selling” means “having the most sales.”

We use hyphens to create compound adjectives, but there are some important rules for creating them with hyphens.

How to use hyphens to make compound adjectives

1. Only use a hyphen when the two words could be misunderstood, and the compound adjective acts together as a single expression. Here is an example:

The well behaved cat slept all day. (no hyphen, incorrect)

The well-behaved cat slept all day. (hyphen, correct)

In this example, “well-behaved” acts like one expression.

If we separate the two words “well” and “behaved”, the sentence does not make sense. And it could be misunderstood.

2. Use only a hyphen in a compound adjective when it comes before a noun. Example:

I love old-fashioned clothes. (Hyphen, correct)

I love clothes that are old-fashioned. (Hyphen, incorrect)

I love clothes that are old fashioned. (No hyphen, correct)

3. You do not need a hyphen between an adverb and an adjective, especially when using a present participle adjective or a past participle adjective.

The urgently-needed doctor arrived on time.

(Hyphen, incorrect)

The urgently neededdoctor arrived on time.

(No hyphen, correct)

These are just a few basic rules to help you create compound adjectives when writing or speaking. Please let us know if these rules, explanations, and examples have helped you, Yousra.

Next week on Ask a Teacher, we will explore using hyphens to create compound nouns!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

compound adjectives—n. (grammar) two adjectives that, together, have one meaning

confuse—v. to mix up someone's mind or ideas, or to make something difficult to understand

modifier—n. (grammar) a word (such as an adjective or adverb) or phrase that describes another word or group of words

behave—v. to act in an acceptable or correct way

old-fashioned—adj. of or relating to the past: generally no longer used or replaced by something more recent

participle—n. (grammar) a form of a verb that is used to indicate a past or present action and that can also be used like an adjective

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## Article 27: Using Hyphens with Compound Nouns

Date: 2022-06-03T22:01:27+00:00 | 444 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will continue to answer a question from Yousra, from Egypt, about using hyphens when making compound nouns.

Hello, my name is Yousra from Egypt.

I would like to know when I should use a hyphen (-) between two words like, “top-selling” or “well-being.”

Thank you for your question! In this week's program, we will learn some general rules for creating compound nouns with hyphens.

## Review of hyphens

In last week's program, we talked about using hyphens to create a compound adjective. For example, top-selling, meaning, "having the most sales."

A hyphen (-) is used to combine two or more words together.

What is a compound noun?

A compound noun is two or more nouns combined to create a single noun expression. While we write most compound nouns as one word ("raindrop") or two separate words ("high school"), some compound nouns use a hyphen. For example, "well-being," or the state of being happy, healthy, or successful.

We use hyphens with compound nouns so that the sentence is clear and understandable. Just like compound adjectives, you can create compound nouns from adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and other nouns.

How to use hyphens to make compound nouns

1. When combining a verb and an adverb to create a compound noun, use a hyphen. The hyphen connects the adverb to the verb and not another word in the sentence. For example, let's look at the compound noun, "take-out." It means food you order from a restaurant to pick up and take with you.

Every Friday night I love getting take-out from my favorite Middle Eastern restaurant.

2. A hyphen is required for compound nouns made from two nouns. These types of nouns act as a unit, like in these examples, "English-speakers" or "hunter-gatherer."

There are over 1.5 billion English-speakers in the world!

There are many hunter-gatherer societies today that still depend on the natural environment for food.

3. Always check your dictionary if you are unsure if a compound noun requires a hyphen. There are many exceptions to these rules. And, sometimes, a word that once required a hyphen changes over time to become a one-word compound or a two-word compound.

Please let us know if these rules, explanations, and examples have helped you, Yousra.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

compound noun—n. (grammar) two or more nouns combined to create a single noun expression.

unit—n. a single thing or a separate part of something larger

societies— n.people in general thought of as living together in organized communities with shared laws, traditions, and values

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## Article 28: Mission vs. Assignment

Date: 2022-06-10T22:02:23+00:00 | 498 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Aiping about the difference between mission and assignment in one of our stories.

I read an article by VOA Learning English titled "After Helping Fight COVID-19 US military plans for Next Pandemic." There are two words: "mission" and "assignment." Can you tell me the difference between these two words?

Thank you for your question! Let us look at these two words within the story. We will start with the word "mission" and then move onto "assignment."

Firstly, we have the word "mission." Let us look at how the word "mission" is used in the story:

"The United States military deployed about 24,000 troops to help state and local governments across the country fight COVID-19. That mission has ended, at least for now."

"And, officials are seeking to learn from the experiences of service members who took part in the COVID-19 mission."

"(The patient) is going to get the treatment he needs. That was the mission."

The word mission in these three sentences from the story refers to the US military's deployment of troops to help local governments fight COVID-19. In this way, we can think of "mission" as an important operation, effort, or task.

The US military defines "mission" as "a task together with a purpose." This may be an overall mission or larger goal, like to defend the United States, or it might be a specific task, like helping local governments to fight COVID-19.

So we can think of "mission" as a larger goal or objective. Many organizations and even individual people use the word "mission."

The charity's mission is to provide shelter and food to young people without homes.

My mission for the summer is to take an hour-long walk every day.

Next, we have the word "assignment." Let us look at how we use it in the story:

"The last military medical team deployed for the pandemic finished its assignment last week at the University of Utah hospital."

In this sentence, “assignment” refers to a specific place where the task or mission is carried out, like the University of Utah hospital.

Military units and other employees might have different assignments or jobs in different places. This is how we can think of the word “assignment,” like a specific job in a specific place.

To summarize, we use the word “mission” to talk about the overall goal or purpose for an organization or an individual. We use the word assignment when talking about individual jobs in a specific place.

The two words can overlap when a person’s assignment (individual job) is helping carry out the mission or larger, overall goal.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Aiping!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

mission—n. an operation or effort of great value

charity—n. an official organization that gives money, food or other assistance to people in need

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## Article 29: What vs. Which

Date: 2022-06-17T22:02:51+00:00 | 468 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Zehra, a reader of our website, about the difference between using the question words “what” and “which.”

Could you please tell me which one is correct? “What color is missing?” or “Which color is missing?”

Thank you for your question! Either of these questions could be correct.

“What” and “which” can both be used to form a question. So, either of these questions could be correct. It depends on the situation and the information we are seeking. Let us consider each question word more closely.

When we ask a question using “what,” we are asking for information because we do not know the answer. The information can be about things or actions.

What is your favorite kind of pizza?

In this example, the person who asks the question does not know what kind of pizza the other person likes.

There can be an unlimited number of possible answers. This is important when trying to decide between the two question words.

A person answering the pizza question could say a favorite combination of toppings, like meat and cheese, or even a favorite style of pizza.

We use “which” to ask questions about specific information or when we are presenting a set of choices.

We may have some background information that we want to explore more by using a “which” question.

For example, if I am in a parking lot with my friend and I know she has a car but am unsure which is hers, I could ask a question using “which.”

Which is yours, the blue truck or the red car?

Here, the question deals with a limited choice. So we use the question word “which.”

We can use an example using geography to easily show the difference between “what” and “which.”

What is the capital of the United States?

The answer is unknown, and the choices are unlimited.

Which is the capital of the United States: Philadelphia or Washington, D.C.?

There are only two choices.

Using “what” suggest that the questioner does not know the answer and that there is no limit to the number of possible answers.

If you choose “which” as your question word, you may have prior knowledge and you are asking for information that is more specific. You may also be limiting the decision to a few choices.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Zehra!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

toppings–n. ingredients that are placed on top of a main dish, like on pizza or ice cream

style–n. a particular way of doing, preparing or designing something

prior– adj. existing earlier in time

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## Article 30: Other vs. Another

Date: 2022-06-24T22:01:45+00:00 | 525 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Mahad, a reader of our website, about the difference between “other” and “another.”

I would like to know the difference between “another” and “other.”

Thank you for writing to us. Although we have written about the subject for Everyday Grammar, we will take a closer look at the differences between “other” and “another” in this week’s Ask a Teacher.

Let us discuss “other” as a determiner and as an adjective. An adjective describes a noun. Determiners also give information about nouns, but they describe things like how many or whose.

The word “other” can have many meanings such as “not included” or “remaining,” “different” or “distinct,” “additional,” and “different kinds of.”

And we use “other” with plural nouns and nouns that cannot be counted (noncount nouns). “Other” is also used to describe nouns in a general way.

There are other sports to watch on TV if football isn’t on.

In this example, “other” means “different kinds of.” So, instead of watching football, we can watch a different sport.

Is there other wood for the fire? This wood is damp.

The word “wood,” in this example, is a noncount noun. Here “other” means “different” wood, such as dry wood.

Other as an adjective

If we use “other” before some kinds of nouns, we must use another determiner before it, like “the.”

The word “the” makes the sentence more specific.

“The other” can be used with plural countable nouns, too.

My dog played with the other dog at the park.

(The remaining dog)

My dog played with the other dogs at the park

(The other remaining dogs)

In these sentences, “other” is used as an adjective because “the” is used as the determiner.

“Another” is a combination of “an” + “other.”

“Another” is a determiner. It is only used with singular nouns. It does not refer to anything or anyone specific.

It can mean “one more,” “an additional one of the same kind,” or “different from the first.”



Let's look at some examples:

My dog played with another dog of her breed at the park.

In this example, “another” means “an additional one of the same kind.”

The sport of soccer has another name in many other countries. They call it football.

In this sentence, “another” means “one more.”

(An additional or one more name for soccer)

Is there another kind of music that you play besides classical?

And here, “another” means “different from the first.”

(A different kind of music than classical music)

The biggest difference between these two words is that “another” is always singular and does not describe anything specific. “Other” is used for plural and noncount nouns that are general. We only use “the other” to refer to specific nouns.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Mahad.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

distinct—adj. different and separate

damp—adj. somewhat or slightly wet

breed—n. a particular kind of dog, cat, horse or similar animal

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## Article 31: To Me vs. For Me

Date: 2022-07-01T22:02:01+00:00 | 471 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Maria, a teacher from Brazil, about the difference between “to me” and “for me.”

If I am asking a student to read in class, should I say “to me” or “for me?” I would to know which one is correct.

Could you read it to me? or

Could you read it for me?

Thank you for writing to us. Both of these questions can be correct. The choice of “to me” or “for me” depends on the meaning you would like to express.

In the examples you sent us, “to” and “for” are both used as prepositions. Prepositions are a word or group of words that is used with a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase to show physical direction, location, time, or to introduce an object.

“To” and “for” in the examples you sent are used to introduce an object, but the meanings are different.

We will take a closer look at these differences.

“To” is used to show the physical direction of an action. But in your example, the use slightly changes.

Could you read it to me?

In your example, “to” is used to show who the action of reading is directed towards.

The object of the preposition is “me”, receiving the action of reading.

It is like asking:

Could you direct your reading towards me?

You could have also said:

Could you read it to us?

In this example “us” would be the whole class.

The preposition of “for” can have many meanings.

Could you read it for me?

The preposition of “for” in this example means “in place of,” “to help,” or “on behalf of.”

“Me” is again the object of the preposition.

So, instead of you reading a story, you are asking the student to read a story in place of you or to help you by reading it.

If something is directed towards you and you are receiving the action, use “to me.”

Another example is:

Could you bring my science book to me?

Here you are asking someone to bring your book to you. You will receive it and take it with you.

But if you ask,

Could you bring my science book for me?

you are requesting that someone brings your book in place of you bringing it. They will take it with them to class, instead of you taking it.

“For me” is used if you are asking someone to do something on behalf of you, in place of you doing it, or to help you.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Maria!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 32: Linking Verbs vs. Helping Verbs

*Date: 2022-07-08T22:02:51+00:00 | 692 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Tahir about the difference between linking verbs and helping verbs.

What is the difference between the verb “is” in these two sentences?

He is a doctor.

Is he a doctor?

I know the first one is a linking verb. Is the second verb a linking verb or helping verb?

Thank you Tahir for writing to us. Before I answer your question, let's talk about the difference between linking verbs and helping verbs.

A linking verb connects the subject of a sentence with more information about the subject. It is not an action verb. The verb “to be” and all of its forms are the most common linking verb. Other linking verbs include, “become,” “seem”, and sense verbs like “feel” and “smell” in some sentences.

Here is an example of a linking verb.

My cat is 3 years old.

The verb in this sentence, “is,” connects the subject “my cat” to more information about him - that he is 3 years old.

Helping or auxiliary verbs are also used along with a main verb. Auxiliary verbs “help” the main verb and the rest of the sentence by giving additional information about the verb, like tense.

We have three main helping verbs in English “be,” “do,” and “have.”

Here is an example of a helping verb.

My cat is watching birds from the window.

In the sentence the helping verb is “to be” in the third person singular (is). It is helping the verb “watch” along with the present participle ending –ing to become the present progressive tense.

In this sentence, the verb “is” cannot stand on its own. It needs a main verb, like “watch.”

Linking verb or helping verb?

Back to your question, Tahir.

In your first example the verb “is” is a linking verb.

He is a doctor.

The verb “is” connects the subject of “he” with the rest of the sentence that describes the subject. Here the verb “is” can stand on its own without another main verb. So it is not a helping or auxiliary verb.

The second example is actually a yes or no question.

We switch the verb to the first position and the subject to the second position to get a question.

Is he a doctor?

In this question, “is” has a special status called an operator. It does not need another helping or auxiliary verb to make a question because it had the role as a linking verb in the original sentence.

Here is another example of a linking verb changing to an operator within a question:

Is Washington, D.C. the capital of the United States?

The answer would be of course “Yes, Washington, D.C is the capital of the United States.”

In the sentence, the linking verb “is” connects Washington D.C. with the rest of the information about the city.

In the question form, “is” begins the question as an operator. It switches places with the subject Washington, D.C. to create the question.

To tell if the verb “to be” is a linking verb or a helping verb, see if there another verb in the sentence.

If there is, then “to be” acts as a helping or auxiliary verb.

If “to be” is alone and connects the subject to more information about it, then it is a linking verb.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Tahir!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Do you have a question for the teacher?

We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Write your comment in the box.

Under the box, you can see four images for social media accounts. They are for Disqus, Facebook, Twitter and Google.

Click on one image and a box appears. Enter the login for your social media account. Or you may create one on the Disqus system. It is the blue circle with “D” on it. It is free.

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## Article 33: Is It a.m. or p.m.?

*Date: 2022-07-15T22:02:20+00:00 | 598 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Max in China about the difference between a.m. and p.m.

Dear VOA teachers,

This is Max from China. During a listening exam I heard a saying like this, “The incident happened on the 400 block of Rutland Road just after 12:30 PM,” and it was described as midnight. I’m confused. I think that 12:30 PM should be at noon during the day, and if I want to say the time of midnight I think AM is correct. Which one is right? Thank you for helping me solve this problem.

Thank you for writing to us.

You are correct! In the United States, we do not use a 24-hour clock in day-to-day speech. But some special fields that demand very clear communication use a 24-hour clock. So, you might hear a person describe such time as “military time.” A 24-hour clock is more commonly used internationally than it is in America.

We use a 12-hour clock and abbreviations from Latin to tell time, a.m. (ante meridiem, meaning before midday) and p.m. (post meridiem, meaning after midday).

Our morning clock starts at 12:00 a.m. That is 0:00 (zero hundred hours), or midnight, internationally.

Morning, or a.m. hours, go until 12:00 p.m., which would also be 12:00 on an international, 24-hour clock.

But most of the time, we do not show a difference between the two forms of timekeeping in everyday speech. For example, we know that, if a friend wants to meet at 2:00 local time, hopefully they do not want to meet at 2:00 in the morning.

Let us look at a few examples to compare times.

My supervisor planned the meeting for 3 p.m.

This means that the meeting will take place at 3:00 in the afternoon.

That new superhero movie is so long; it lasted until 1 a.m.

This means that the movie did not finish until 1:00 in the morning (after midnight).

I have an evening class from 4:30 p.m. until 7:00 p.m.

This example means that the class continued from the afternoon into the evening.

Now, consider a clock for comparison.

If you are reading online, we have a clock to help us understand the differences between the 24-hour clock and the 12-hour clock.

The clock is at 10:10. If it is the morning we would say it as 10:10 a.m. This would be the same internationally.

But, if it were before midnight, we would read it as 10:10 p.m. or 22:10 on a 24-hour clock.

“Somebody hit the lights, so we can rock it day and night People gettin' down, that's right, from AM to PM”

In the song, the party is starting in the early hours of the morning (after midnight) in the a.m.

And the party is so long that it goes into the afternoon, or the p.m. hours.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Max!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. to be uncertain or unable to understand something

abbreviation—n. a shortened form of a word or name that is used in place of the full word or name

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

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## Article 34: Famous v. Popular

Date: 2022-07-22T22:01:45+00:00 | 509 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Mohammadreza from Iran about the difference between “famous” and “popular.”

Dear VOA teachers,

Would you please let us know difference between the words “popular” and “famous,” and how to use them in our day-to-day speech?

Dear Mohammadreza,

Thanks for writing to us and asking this question.

Famous and popular are both adjectives. The words may seem similar, but their meanings are very different.

Let’s start with famous.

“Famous” means known or recognized by many people. We often use the word when describing people.

For example, movie actors, singers and professional athletes can be described as famous.

For example: Taylor Swift is a famous singer-songwriter.

Some famous people are known to people around the world. Others may be famous in their home country.

Places can be famous, too. For example, the Eiffel Tower in France and the pyramids in Egypt are very famous.

Now let’s talk about popular. “Popular” means liked or enjoyed by many people.

One way we use “popular” is to talk about trends like “popular fashion” or “popular styles.”

The bucket hat was a popular trend in the 1990s, and now younger generations are wearing it again today.

We also use popular to talk about people. For example, there are “popular students” at school. These people are generally well-liked by people in their class. They are not famous, though. People outside of the school probably do not know who they are.

Places can also be described as popular. If we describe a place as popular, we mean a lot of people like to go there.

“Famous” and “popular” mean different things. Just because someone is popular does not mean the person is famous. And some famous people might not be especially popular.

Let us compare these two examples:

This restaurant is famous.

In this example, we are saying that many people know about this restaurant. Maybe it has become known for a special kind of food it serves. Maybe it appeared on a television show.

This restaurant is popular.

In this example, we are saying that many people go to the restaurant. But it may just be the local population that knows about it.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Mohammedreza!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

athlete—n. a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina

fashion—n. a popular way of dressing during a particular time or among a particular group of people

style—n. a method, manner, or quality that is felt to be very respectable, fashionable, or proper

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

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## Article 35: Heritage v. Inheritance

Date: 2022-07-29T22:02:54+00:00 | 469 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Noura about the difference between “heritage” and “inheritance.”

Hi VOA learning team,

Would you please help me to understand the difference between “inheritance” and “heritage?” And in which situations we use each of them?

Thanks for this question!

“Heritage” and “inheritance” are similar words. They are both nouns, and share some meaning. Both represent something passed down through generations.

The big difference in these two words is how we use them and their associations.

Let's start with “heritage.”



Heritage can be property, traditions, customs, or culture passed down through generations. “Heritage” is something you get just by being born.

Heritage is tied to the history of a person, group or nation.

For example, many Americans who are born in the U.S. have heritage from other countries.

I have Italian heritage, for example. My great-grandfather was born in Italy. But, I was born to Americans in the United States, so I have American heritage also.

Another example is when we talk about language:

Heritage speakers of a language learn the language from talking to their parents at home instead of just at school.

“Inheritance” can be an action or a thing. It is something passed down by one person to another, usually through death. Often this is property or money from a family member, like in this example.

My inheritance from my grandmother includes a little house on the coast.

But, inheritances are not always welcomed! Listen:

My inheritance from my new job is an old, dirty office.

And a brief note on the word “inherit.” Inherit is a verb. It can mean either receiving something from someone at birth or when someone dies.

When you are born, you receive or inherit physical and mental traits from your parents or ancestors. Like in these examples:

She inherited her blue eyes from her father.

I inherited my father’s poor eyesight.

We can also use inherit in the same way we talk about inheritance, but as a verb.

The brothers will inherit their mother’s house when she dies.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Noura!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

association— n. a connection or relationship between things or people

inherit—v. to receive from someone when that person dies

trait—n. a quality that makes one person or thing different from another

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

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## Article 36: Mine v. Quarry

*Date: 2022-08-05T22:01:31+00:00 | 612 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Yusuf about the difference between “mine” and “quarry.”

Hi VOA learning team,

Would you please help me to understand the difference between “quarry” and “mine?”

This is a great question! Thank you for asking it!

Both “mine” and “quarry” can be used as nouns and verbs. Their meanings are related but are different in important ways. Let us start with the word “mine.”

As a noun, a “mine” is a hole dug underground to recover minerals and other valuable substances from the earth. For example,

Recently, a large pink diamond was found in a mine in the African country of Angola.

“Mine” as a noun has another meaning.

A mine is a bomb that is hidden underground as a defensive weapon. These land mines cause many deaths, even long after a war is over.

Large pouch rats in Africa are trained to find land mines by using their sense of smell.

A floating mine can also be put in the sea as a weapon against ships.

A “mine” can also be any large supply of a resource. For example:

There is a mine of information on the internet.

“Mine” can also be a verb. “To mine” means to dig useful or valuable substances out of the earth.

Americans went west to California in the mid-1800s to mine for gold. This is called the California Gold Rush.

A “quarry,” like a mine, is a place where valuable minerals or rocks are recovered, but it is open on the earth’s surface rather than underground. Rocks, sand and minerals are removed from quarries. Big pieces of stone like limestone and granite and some minerals are removed from quarries as building materials.

The Ancient Egyptians cut huge blocks of limestone and granite from quarries to build the Great Pyramids.

The noun “quarry” has another meaning. It can be an animal or even a person that is hunted.

The dogs chased their quarry through the field.

“Quarry” as a verb can mean to take or dig from.

There are many sites in the United States where you can quarry for fossils.

The use of “quarry” and “mine” is sometimes linked to the kind of mineral being recovered. So, limestone is almost always quarried while diamonds are usually mined.

So, a “mine” is a hole underground that is used to remove minerals and valuable substances from the earth. A “quarry” is like a mine but is on the surface of the earth and usually is used to remove large pieces of stone, sand or minerals. It can also be something that is hunted or sought after.

Both “quarry” and “mine,” as verbs, mean to dig something out of the earth.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Yusuf!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pouch— n.a pocket of folded skin especially for carrying the young (as on the abdomen of a kangaroo) or for carrying food (as in the cheek of a hamster)

idiom— n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but that has a separate meaning of its own

fossil—n. the remains of ancient life forms that have mineralized and turned to stone

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

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## Article 37: Refuse v. Reject

Date: 2022-08-12T22:01:27+00:00 | 559 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Jago about the difference between “refuse” and “reject.”

Dear Learning English,

What is the difference between, “refuse” and “reject?”

Thanks, Jego from Ethiopia.

Thank you for your question.

Both “refuse” and “reject” are verbs. They can also be used as nouns. As verbs, they can have a similar meaning, but there are slight differences in how we use them.

We commonly use “refuse” with another infinitive verb to say we are not willing to do something. For example:

I refuse to go outside today because it is too hot.

She refused to take the crowded subway.

We can also use the verb “refuse” with a direct object to say we do not accept or want it.

I refused another piece of cake.

He refused her invitation to dinner.

Lastly, “refuse” can also mean not permitting or letting someone do or have something. For example:

The supervisor refused his request for more money.

As a noun, “refuse” means garbage that is thrown out regularly. The stress is on the first syllable of the word. So instead of “re-FUSE” (a verb), we say it as “RE-fuse.” It is not very common to use this word in everyday speech, but here is an example.

Our neighborhood collects refuse every Monday, including garbage and recycling.

Now onto “reject.”

As a verb, “to reject something” means that you completely do not accept something or that you do not agree to it. We use “reject” with a direct object. For example,

Some people reject modern living, like driving cars or using computers.

There are specific ways we can use “reject.” Proposals, applications, offers or requests can be “rejected,” especially, if minimum requirements were not met.

My visa application was rejected because I forgot to sign it.

Another use of “reject” is when we talk about the human body. Sometimes the body rejects a new organ or even the food we eat.

After her kidney transplant, Selena Gomez, took medication so that her body did not reject the new organ.

I had a stomach virus last week, and my body rejected anything I tried to eat.

As a noun, a reject is something that cannot be used or sold because something might be wrong with it. It can also mean something that is not wanted. Like the noun of “refuse,” the first syllable is stressed.

My sister gives merejectsof old clothes when she no longer wears them.

Both “refuse” and “reject” can mean not to accept something, but their uses can be very different.

Refuse can take a direct object or it can be used with an infinitive verb. Reject cannot be used with other verbs. It only takes a direct object.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Jegu.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

syllable—n. apart a word is naturally divided into when pronounced

recycling –adj.having to do with the processing of paper, glass, cans, etc. in order to regain or reuse materials

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 38: Proper Adjectives, Part 1

*Date: 2022-08-19T22:02:55+00:00 | 481 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Gustavo in Brazil about using proper adjectives to describe someone.

Hello, my name is Gustavo, from Brazil.

I have been learning English with you for many years. Thank you for all of the stories!

I have a question. I want to say, "my Spanish teacher" meaning "my teacher from Spain". Then I realized that it could also mean "my teacher that teaches Spanish language classes."

So, which is it? Does it mean both

Thank you very much for reading my message!

Thanks for your question and for reading our website so often.

In English, we have a limited number of adjectives to describe what language someone speaks or teaches, or where they are from. However, we can use proper adjectives and prepositions as well as other structures to help our understanding.

### Using proper adjectives

Let us start with proper adjectives. Proper adjectives come from proper nouns, which are words or groups of words that name a specific person, place or thing. Proper nouns and adjectives begin with a capital letter, so they are easy to spot.

Proper adjectives that describe a country of origin or language come from their proper nouns. These adjectives mean “of or relating to the country, its people, language or culture.”

“Spanish” means relating to Spain. So we can talk about “Spanish people” and “Spanish culture.” “Spanish” is also the proper adjective to describe the language of Spain.

Generally, when we talk about teaching or learning a language, we use the proper adjective of the language to describe the teacher or student. For example,

I am an English teacher.

I teach English, but I am not from England; I am from the U.S.

In your question, the proper adjective of “Spanish” is modifying the noun “teacher.” Therefore, a “Spanish teacher” means someone who teaches the Spanish language.

We can use the preposition “from” to describe where our language teachers are originally from.

My Russian teacher is from the country of Georgia.

Her French teacher is from Canada.

Using the preposition “from” makes the sentence clearer by providing more information.

Next week, we will continue talking about proper adjectives and other ways to describe your teacher!

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Gustavo!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

realize—v. to understand or become aware of something

origin—n. the cause of something or where something comes from

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is [here](#).

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## Article 39: Proper Adjectives, Part 2

Date: 2022-08-26T22:01:50+00:00 | 555 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will continue to answer a question from Gustavo in Brazil about describing his teacher using the linking verb “be” and other adjectives.

Hello, my name is Gustavo, from Brazil.

I have been learning English with you for many years. Thank you for all of the stories!

I have a question. I want to say, “my Spanish teacher” meaning “my teacher from Spain”. Then I realized that it could also mean “my teacher that teaches Spanish language classes.”

So, which is it? Does it mean both?

Thank you very much for reading my message!

Thanks once again, Gustavo, for the question.

Last week we looked at two ways to describe your teacher. The first way was with proper adjectives. We use the proper adjective of a language, like “Spanish,” to describe teachers or students of a language. The second way we can describe your teacher is to talk about where they are from, using the preposition “from.” This can be useful if you want to be exact about where they were born or are “from.”

So, if your teacher does not teach Spanish, then using “from” is a better choice. You can say,

My teacher is from Spain.

We also have two other ways we can describe your teacher in a bit more detail.

The linking verb “be”

We can also use the linking verb “be.” For example,

My teacher is Spanish.

Here we use the linking verb “be” and the proper adjective of “Spanish” after the verb. This means that the teacher is of Spanish heritage or culture. But, be careful. This does not always mean that the teacher is “from” Spain. They could have been born somewhere else but have Spanish parents. Heritage and culture are not always the same as a person’s nationality or where they were born.

In the US, we commonly use this kind of expression when we talk about where our families or ancestors come from since many Americans consider their heritage to be from other parts of the world. For example,

My friend Pedro is Puerto Rican.

Lena's family is Polish, but she is American.

Using other adjectives

We can use an additional adjective to describe what kind of teacher you have if they do not teach a language. We can then combine this with the linking verb "be" and say where they are from. For example,

My economics teacher is from India.

Their French teacher is from Canada.

Remember, it is sometimes small details that ensure your meaning is understood and mistakes are avoided.

Please let us know if these new explanations and examples this week have helped you, Gustavo!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

realize—v. to understand or become aware of something

heritage—n. the traditions, beliefs, and important things that were done that are part of the history of a group or nation

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 40: Deplete v. Evacuate

Date: 2022-09-02T22:01:45+00:00 | 472 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the words "deplete" and "evacuate."

Dear Learning English,

I have a question:



What the difference is between “deplete” and “evacuate?”

Thank you for asking about these two terms.

“Deplete” and “evacuate” both suggest “to lessen or remove” something. However, there are big differences in the dictionary definitions of these words and their uses.

Let us start with “deplete.”

“Deplete” is a verb that takes a direct object. It means to lessen, reduce, or use up something over time.

We commonly use “deplete” with nouns like “strength,” “energy,” “resources,” “money,” or “funds.”

Jack depleted his college fund a year before graduation.

This sentence means that Jack used up most or all of the money in his college fund before he graduated.

Natural resources like oil and coal will become depleted, so we must find other energy sources.

This means that natural resources will run out after an amount of time.

The nurse’s 16-hour shift depleted all of her energy. She was so tired by the time she returned home.

This means that she had no more energy left.

Let us move on to “evacuate”

“Evacuate” is also a verb that takes a direct object. It usually means to remove people from an area because it is dangerous.

The word is often linked with the idea of an emergency. When we use the term “evacuate,” there is a sense of quickness or urgency.

In everyday speech, this is the most common way that we use “evacuate.”

When the fire alarm goes off, people must evacuate the building.

This means people must leave the building if they hear the alarm, whether there is a fire or not.

“Evacuate” can also mean to make or leave empty or sometimes in the case of a body, it can mean to discharge.

We had to evacuate all the furniture in the house to clean the floors.

The doctor evacuated rocks and dirt from the open cut on her knee.

These two words might seem similar in meaning, but they are very different. You can think of “deplete” as “using up or lessening over time.” For “evacuate,” you can think of “removing very quickly” because of an emergency.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, Mehran!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm John Russell.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

fund—n. a sum of money for a special purpose

shift— n.the scheduled period of time during which a person works

urgency— n. something that needs immediate attention

alarm—n.a signal (such as a loud noise or flashing light) that warns or alerts

furniture— n.chairs, tables, beds, and other objects that are used to make a room ready for use

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## Article 41: Big Trouble with Three Little Words – In, On and At

*Date: 2022-09-09T22:03:30+00:00 | 537 words | Source*

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Hello! This week we answer a question from Sajador.

I have a question about when we use “in,” “on” and “at.” I don't know when to use them.

Thank you for writing to us. These little words cause a lot of trouble for English learners. They are called prepositions. One purpose of prepositions in English is to show the relationship between two or more things in time or place. These three words do follow some basic rules. It may be easier to think of them separately. Let's begin with location, or place.

Prepositions of place

The first rule is to think of whether the place is general or exact. Here is an example of a general place, a city:

I live in Washington, DC.

We use “in” with cities, countries, neighborhoods, and places with a clear boundary or dividing line. Now, let us add some detail with our next example:

I live on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC.

This shows that you can use “on” for streets. We are moving from the general - a city - to a more specific location - a street. If we add the intersection, or cross street, we are adding more detail, that is, we are talking about an exact location and we must use “at.”

I live at the corner of 16th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC.

Now you know the exact place the speaker lives and can guess that it might be the U.S. President, who lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue!

Prepositions of time

When you want to talk about a time something happens, you can also use “in,” “on,” and “at.” I have a friend who is getting married soon. I can begin talking about the event this way.

Caroline’s wedding is in September.

I use “in” because this is general information. Use “in” for months, years, and parts of days, such as morning or afternoon. Getting more specific, I can use “on” and the day of the week.

Caroline’s wedding is on Saturday, September 24.

Finally, we can add the time, and use “at.”

Caroline’s wedding is on Saturday, September 24 at 1:00 pm.

I hope this helps you to use these little words with more confidence, Sajador. Just remember them in order (in-on-at) and that they help you go from general to exact information.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

And I’m Andrew Smith.

You can see more examples in the video below and the pictures showing the prepositions and their uses.

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Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

boundary—n. any line or thing marking a limit, bound or border

specific—adj. precise; definite; explicit

intersection—n. a place where roads or other lines meet or cross.

corner—n. a point or an area where two or more streets, sides, or surfaces of something join

confidence—n. a feeling of belief that you can do something correctly

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 42: Energy v. Power

Date: 2022-09-16T22:03:28+00:00 | 542 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Max in Ukraine about the difference between “energy” and “power.”

Dear Learning English,

I have a question about the difference in the meaning of two similar words - energy and power.

Thank you for this interesting question. These words are commonly used interchangeably, meaning they are used in place of each other.

But there are important differences in use under some conditions.

Let's start with how these two words differ in the study of science.

“Energy” and “power” in science

Energy is the ability to do work or create some kind of physical change.

Energy is used to lift a box.

The amount of energy to lift the box is the same. But what if you can lift the box faster than someone else? This is where the word “power” comes in.

Power is how fast the work or change is done. In the field of physics, power is often measured in watts.

An energy-saving light bulb will use about 10 to 15 watts of power.

“Energy” in everyday conversation

Energy as a noun can describe the ability to do physical activities; it can be the feeling of life and enthusiasm that you use to complete tasks.

If you have low or no energy, you may feel tired or run down.

Energy can be temporary. You may have a lot of energy in the morning, but by the afternoon you may not have any energy.

Coffee gives me energy, but it quickly wears off.

“Power” in everyday conversation

Power as a noun can mean the ability or capacity to do something. It can also mean that it is within your means or you have the resources to do something. This meaning has an association that power is naturally available.

I don't have the brain power to finish my homework tonight.

To have power means that you have control over something. If you have power, you have the ability and legal right to do something.

To “come into power” or “take power” in a country means that a person or group controls it in some way.

King Charles III took on the powers of the British monarchy after his mother, Queen Elizabeth II died.

We can also use “power” to talk about energy resources like nuclear and electricity.

Nuclear power is environmentally friendly.

Power can also be a verb meaning to provide energy to make something operate.

Batteries power our smart devices like cell phones.

Please let us know if these examples have helped you, Max!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

watt – n. a unit for measuring power

light bulb – n. a glass bulb or tube that produces light when it is supplied with electricity

enthusiasm – n. strong excitement about something

capacity – n. the largest amount or number that can be held or contained

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 43: Memory Problems? Remember v. Recall

*Date: 2022-09-23T22:02:32+00:00 | 510 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Jago in Ethiopia about the difference between “remember” and “recall.”

Dear Learning English,

What is the difference between “remember” and “recall?”

Jago from Ethiopia

Thank for writing to us again and asking this question.

Both “recall” and “remember” are verbs that involve memory --- thinking about something that happened in the past. In many cases, the two words are interchangeable.

“Remember” is a verb that means to think about the past. You can create from memory a mental picture of the past.

I remember playing outside a lot as a child.

The opposite of “remember” is to “forget” something. We often use “remember” as a command so others “do not forget” something important.

Remember to take the cat to the animal hospital.

Don’t forget to take the cat to the animal hospital.

Recall has a few different meanings and uses. It can be similar in meaning to “remember.” This meaning is “to call back into memory” or “access something from memory again.”

I don’t recall meeting her last year.

In this sentence, we can replace “recall” with “remember” as the meanings are similar.

As a noun “recall” is the ability to remember something or the act of remembering. The first syllable of the word is stressed. So we say RE-call, not re-CALL.

Although he had not spoken French for a while, his recall of vocabulary was amazing.

Recall also has two more uses as verbs. The first means to order someone back to a place or country officially.

She was recalled back to her home country because her visa expired.

We often use the passive voice with this meaning of recall.

Lastly as a verb, to recall something means, “to order back.” We often use this expression when talking about businesses or companies asking for products to be returned because there is something wrong with them.

Car companies often recall cars to change the safety system.

“Remember” means to keep something in your memory, while “recall” means to access your memory.

You cannot exchange “do not forget” with “recall,” only with “remember.”

Acceptable: Don’t forget the flowers for the wedding.

Acceptable: Remember the flowers for the wedding

Not acceptable: Recall the flowers for the wedding.

Please let us know if these examples have helped you, Jago!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

access—v. a way of being able to use or get something

syllable—n. apart a word is naturally divided into when pronounced.

expire—v. to end : to no longer be valid after a period of time

passive voice—n. a way of writing or speaking that uses passive verbs

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 44: What is a Wild Card?

*Date: 2022-09-30T22:03:23+00:00 | 568 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Katerina in Spain. She writes,

I have a question about something my American friend usually says. It is the... expression “a wild card.” What does it mean? Thank you very much for your answer!

Thank you for writing to us. This expression is like many that come to American English from card games, especially the game of poker.

Each set of playing cards has two extra cards. These can take the place of lost or damaged cards. These cards are called “Jokers.” They often have a picture of a clown-like person sometimes called a jester.

In some card games, the “Joker” card is dealt to the players along with the usual kinds of cards. It serves as a “wild card” in the game. That means, if you have it in your hand, you can use it as any other card. Here is an example of how a player might talk about their use of a wild card in a game.

I have three kings and one joker. I'll use the wild card as a king, so now I have four kings.

But card games are not the only places you will hear the term “wild card.” In sports, we use the expression for a team that is invited to compete for a championship. For example, in American football, the best teams play each other at the end of the season – in a series of games called “playoffs.” A few teams that might not have the best records are invited to play against the top teams. It is possible, if the wildcard team is good enough, that it can win the championship.

Here is an example showing how a wild card team won the championship of American football, the Super Bowl.

In 2007, the New York Giants entered the playoffs as a wild card team, but they went on to beat the New England Patriots and win the Super Bowl.

And, as you can probably guess, we use “wild card” to describe people as well. If a person is unpredictable, you cannot be sure of how they will act. Then you might say:

My brother is a wild card when it comes to holidays – we never know if he is coming to our family dinners.

Finally, in the world of computers, the term “wild card” describes a symbol that programmers use. It looks like a little star and is called an asterisk. It means anything can appear in that place. For example, if you want a computer to find all the words in a document that start with the prefix dis- so you can write a command: “Find dis\*.” The result will be a set of words like these: discover, discuss, dismiss, and the like.

I hope this will help you to understand and even use the expression “wild card” yourself, Katerina. What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for Learning English.

asterisk– n.a small star-shaped symbol

What do you think of this story? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 45: Talking Stormy Weather

*Date: 2022-10-07T22:02:21+00:00 | 591 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from VSRC Murthy in India about some stormy weather.

Hello VOA Learning English,

I have a question about the differences and similarities among these words: “hurricanes,” “typhoons,” “tornadoes,” “cyclones,” and “thunderstorms.”

VSRC Murthy from Hyderabad, India.

Thank you, VSRC Murthy! Your question is timed well. Powerful storms have been in the news recently, from a hurricane that hit the southern United States to a typhoon that blew into the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.



Which word you might use to describe a storm often depends on where you are in the world. Let's start with hurricane.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary says that word means a tropical cyclone with winds of 119 kilometers an hour or greater, and usually including rain, thunder, and lightning. The term is used for such storms in the North Atlantic Ocean down to the Caribbean Sea.

Typhoons are the same kind of powerful ocean storm, or cyclone, but that term is used for storms in the Northwest Pacific Ocean.

In the South Pacific and Indian Ocean, these storms are more commonly called tropical cyclones.

All of these storms are considered cyclones because they rotate or move in a circular motion across tropical or subtropical warm waters.

You may have heard names like "tropical depression" or "tropical storm" in news coverage of hurricanes and the like. These kinds of storms can lead to a hurricane or typhoon depending on the speed of the winds.

A storm with winds below 62.7 kilometers per hour is a "tropical depression." If the winds are from 62.7 to 118 kilometers per hour, the storm is called a "tropical storm." And lastly, anything over 119 kilometers per hour is considered a hurricane, typhoon, or cyclone.

Hurricanes and typhoons include thunderstorms and storm surges from ocean water that can lead to coastal flooding.

Thunderstorms are heavy rainstorms in which you can hear thunder. During thunderstorms, winds are strong and there is always lightning. You can find thunderstorms in different parts of the world, not just in the tropics.

When thunderstorms become severe with intense winds, tornadoes can form. Tornadoes are narrow storms that start in a thunderstorm and touch the ground. They are very violent and destructive.

Here are a few examples of how we can use these words in sentences:

Hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean is from June through the end of November.

Typhoon Noru quickly strengthened into a super typhoon last week with winds up to 175 kilometers per hour.

Often in the summer, thunderstorms form in the afternoons bringing heavy rain and lightning.

Tornado Alley is an area in the central United States where tornadoes happen often.

Please let us know if these examples and explanations have helped you, VSRC Murthy!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

rotate—v. to turn or cause something to turn in a circle

tropical—adj. of or occurring in the tropics

surge—n. an abnormal rise in the level of the sea along a coast caused by the onshore winds of a severe cyclone

thunder—n. the loud sound that comes from lightening in the sky

alley—n. a narrow street or passage

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 46: Inflicting Confusion: Afflict v. Inflict

*Date: 2022-10-14T22:01:36+00:00 | 447 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question from Ray in Hong Kong about the difference between two very similar sounding words “afflict” and “inflict.”

Hello VOA Learning English, What is the difference between “afflict” and “inflict?” Thank you,

Ray from Hong Kong

Thank you, Ray, for writing to us!

These two words are often confused. Not only do they sound the same — especially in fast speech — but they also have very similar meanings.

Both of these verbs can mean, “to cause harm or to bring pain to.” However, their correct use depends on who or what is doing the action and who or what is affected by the action.

The verb “inflict” takes a direct object. But that direct object is usually the harm that someone is suffering. For example:

Paper cuts always inflict much more pain than you expect.

Here the object of “inflict” is the pain from the paper cut.

We often use a prepositional phrase starting with “on” to tell who is suffering the harm. For example,

The war inflicted suffering on the people.

“Inflict” can also mean, “to impose” or “force.”

His job inflicts a lot of pressure on him, as he works very long days.

Let us move on to “afflict!”

The verb, “afflict,” also means, “to cause harm to.” But the direct object of “afflict” is often the sufferer.

COVID still afflicts many at-risk populations.

Water-borne diseases sometimes afflict flood survivors.

If “afflict” is used in the passive voice, we often use the preposition “with” followed by the cause of the harm.

She was afflicted with depression for many months before asking for help.

My cat was afflicted with extreme sickness after he ate an insect.

Let’s review these two verbs.

Someone or something inflicts harm, pain or damage on something else.

Something, like an illness, afflicts someone. In the case of the passive voice, someone is afflicted with something that causes harm — like an illness.

Please let us know if these explanations have helped you, Ray!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. to be uncertain or unable to understand something

impose—v. to establish; to bring about as if by force

mood—n. the way someone feels at a particular time

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 47: Is It Pointless or Futile?

Date: 2022-10-21T22:01:52+00:00 | 394 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “pointless” and “futile.”

I am Aiping from California.

I read the article "Who Brings Sand to the Beach?" I wondered what is the difference between the words "pointless" and "futile?"

Thank you! I wish you all the best!

Aiping, your loyal reader.

These two words are often used as synonyms or words that can be used to mean the same thing.

But there are slight differences in usage.

Let's start with “pointless.”

“Pointless” is an adjective that means having no point, sense or purpose. To be “pointless” is to be without meaning or aim.

For example, we can say:

It is pointless trying to talk to her... She will not listen.

Driving home right now is pointless because traffic is so heavy.

In a game or competition, “pointless” can also mean without a point scored.

The game remained pointless at the end of the first half.

“Futile” is also an adjective. It means not able to produce a desired result. It can mean ineffective or useless.

We worked on the project for hours, but failed to fix the problem. All of our attempts were futile.

Voting for that candidate would be futile as he did not win the nominating election.

The main difference between these two words, is that with “futile” there is a goal or aim that can not be reached by the methods attempted. With “pointless” there is no goal or aim.

Please let us know if these explanations have helped you, Aiping!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

beach— n. an area covered with sand or small rocks that is next to an ocean

synonyms— n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

primary- n. an election in which members of the same political party run against each other for the chance to be in a larger and more important election

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 48: According to v. As Per

*Date: 2022-10-28T22:01:26+00:00 | 688 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the phrases “as per” and “according to.”

This is Mengwen. I just wanted to know what is the difference between “as per” and “according to” when writing an email. Many thanks in advance. Mengwen

This is a great question.

In some cases, we can use both of these expressions in the same way. But they do have slight differences in tone and formality.

Let's start with “according to.”

“According to” is described as a preposition in many dictionaries.

“According to” means “as stated by someone or shown by something.” It is usually used at the beginning of a sentence.

Here are some examples:

According to our teacher, the final paper is due before the end of the day.

According to my last email, if we do not schedule the event soon, we will not be able to do so until next year.

It can also mean, “in a way that agrees with.” For this meaning, “according to” can appear in the middle of a sentence. For example:

The teacher divided the class according to age. Any student born before July was put in group A, and anyone born July 1st or after was placed in group B.

The term “according to” is used very generally. The tone or feeling that we get from it is neutral, meaning neither good nor bad. It can be used in both formal and informal situations.

“According to” is used best when we expect something to have happened, or for setting up meetings or completing requests.

This use is most closely related to “as per,” so let's move on to that discussion now.

“As per” means “in accordance with.” The expression combines the adverb “as” with the preposition “per.” Here is an example:

As per your request, I have listed all of the items that we need to send out by next week.

In this case, it has the same meaning as “according to.” And we can use it in similar situations when we want to point out something previously referenced. But it is best to use “as per” with more formal requests that have specific times and dates. The term is often used in commercial or business settings.

We can also use just the preposition “per” in the same way, as in this example:

Dear Professor Karen,

I handed in the test before the due date, per your instructions.

Both “according to” and “as per” relate to what was previously said or done. “According to” is more general and can be used in different situations. “As per” is more formal and is often used for business, especially with specific due dates and requests.

If you are still unsure about which to use, try thinking of the connotation of each. Connotation is the idea, feeling or association linked to a word or phrase.

Since “according to” is more general and can be used in a lot of different situations, it usually has a neutral connotation.

In recent years, especially with many jobs going online, “as per” is sometimes seen in a more negative way. This has led to many internet memes showing how “as per” is used in emails.

So you might want to choose “according to,” just in case.

Please let us know if these explanations have helped you, Mingwen.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

tone—n.a quality, feeling, or attitude expressed by the words that someone uses in speaking or writing

formal—adj.following or according with established form, custom, or rule

in accordance with—phr.following or obeying a rule, law, wish, etc.

commercial—adj. related to or used in the buying and selling of goods and services

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## Article 49: Still and Yet

Date: 2022-11-04T22:01:33+00:00 | 653 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “still” and “yet.”

I am delighted to write you this email. I am hoping that I will get some good explanations about using similar words such as “still” and “yet.”

Looking forward to reading the answer!

Arios from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Thank you for writing to us. We still have not covered this subject.

“Still” and “yet” have very different meanings and uses, yet in some situations, they can be used in the same way.

Let us begin by looking at “still.”

Although “still” can be an adjective, noun or verb, we often use it as an adverb. As an adverb, “still” describes an action that began in the past and continues into the present. We often use it before the base verb.

She still talks with her college friends years later.

I have been eating all day, but I’m still hungry!

Using “still” in negative statements means that the action should change, but it has not.

I still haven’t finished cleaning. There is just too much to do.

Let’s move on to “yet.”

“Yet” can be either an adverb or a conjunction, which links two clauses together.

As an adverb “yet” refers to an action that has not happened but is expected. Someone might be waiting for it to happen. We often use it with negative statements.

As a conjunction “yet” means “but at the same time.”

Let us look at a few examples:

You want to get the project done, yet you also want to be fair with everyone involved.

They aimed to honor the establishment of the policy, yet it had many shortcomings that left members unsure.

Both of these sentences contain two clauses involving action that is taking place at the same time.

Other uses as a conjunction can show difference:

The sun is out, yet it is very cold.

“Yet” is used to create a contrast and combine the clauses into one sentence.

“Yet” can also be used as an adverb:

I have yet to receive my package.

In this case, the person is waiting for their package to arrive.

Have you made dinner yet, Faith?

No, I haven’t. I’ve been too busy working.

“Yet” is often used at the end of the statement or question.

Both “yet” and “still” can be used in the same way when talking about situations in the past using negative statements that continue into the present.

He still has not returned my phone call.

He has not returned my phone call yet.

Note that “still” goes before the verb and “yet” is at the end of the sentence.

Some native speakers notice a slightly different tone when saying these words aloud. If “still” is used, this could be a sign of being upset or impatient with the situation, especially if “still” is emphasized while speaking. As in:

He still has not returned my phone call.

Please let us know if these explanations have helped you, Arios!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

negative—n. a word or statement that means “no” or that expresses a denial or refusal

clause—n. grammar: a part of a sentence that has its own subject and verb

contrast—n. a difference between things or the act of comparing two things to show their differences

tone—n. a quality, feeling, or attitude expressed by the words that someone uses in speaking or writing

impatient—adj. not willing to wait for something or someone; not patient

emphasize—v. to place special attention to something or add urgency to something said



Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 50: Haven v. Sanctuary

Date: 2022-11-11T22:02:10+00:00 | 587 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “haven” and “sanctuary.”

I am Ghulam Mohammad from Afghanistan. I am confused by the words “haven” and “sanctuary.”

Dear Ghulam Mohammad,

Thanks for writing to us. These words can mean the same thing, but they also have their own meanings and uses.

Let’s explore each of them with some examples.

“Haven” is a noun and it has several different meanings.

In the past, a “haven” was a harbor for ships that was protected from the sea.

Over the centuries, this meaning has fallen out of use. But you might see it used as a part of a name of a place near a harbor.

It is helpful to know the past meaning of haven to understand the current usage of the word. The modern meaning of “haven” is a place that provides safety or refuge.

Mother birds use a nest as a haven for their baby birds.

We often use “haven” with the adjective “safe,” as in “safe haven.”

The local youth center provides a safe haven for children after school.

It can also be used to describe a place that offers a lot of opportunities for certain kinds of people. For example:

The restaurant is a haven for local artists to share their work.

Now, let’s turn to “sanctuary.”

“Sanctuary” is a noun with several different meanings.

In religion, a “sanctuary” is a holy place or room for religious services. For example,

The leader of the church addresses the attendees from the sanctuary.

Members of the choir sit near the church sanctuary.

Over time, the meaning and use has changed. Churches have at times permitted people to seek shelter and refuge inside the building. This created the idea of the sanctuaries as being safe places. So now, “sanctuary” means a place where someone or something is protected or given shelter.

It can also mean a place where one can find peace.

The garden was her sanctuary after work, a place where she was able to relax.

A “sanctuary” is also a protected space for animals to live freely and away from danger. There are many wildlife sanctuaries around the world.

Lions and tigers have been placed in big cat sanctuaries where they are free and are not hunted.

Lastly, as an adjective, “sanctuary” is used to describe areas in the United States where local law enforcement has a limited ability to oversee federal laws related to immigration.

States like California, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont are all sanctuary states.

This means that undocumented people will not be asked about their immigration status.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

harbor— n.a part of the ocean or a lake that is next to land and that is protected and deep enough to provide safety for ships

refuge—n.a place where people or animals are protected from danger

youth—n.someone who is young

opportunity—n. a situation in which it is possible for you to do something that you want to do

choir—n.a group of singers especially in a church

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## Article 51: Verbing Nouns

Date: 2022-11-18T22:01:31+00:00 | 594 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about if nouns can become verbs.

Can any nouns be a verb?

When it's hot, I fan my mom.

When it's raining, I umbrella her.

Thanks for writing us, Johnny. This is a great question.

The answer may surprise you.

Yes, any noun can be made into a verb in English. It is one of the most interesting things about English. The process is called “verbing” or making a verb from a noun.

Let’s review your two examples:

“To fan” something or someone is an accepted verb, which means that many people use it, and you can find it in the dictionary. This verb means to cool by using a device, a like fan, to create air.

So, you can totally fan your mom.

You can also “fan” the flames of a fire to make it stronger.

But just because a noun can be made into a verb, does not mean that it always works or is accepted into the language.

We do not yet have “to umbrella” as a verb in our language. But who knows, if you keep using it enough, you might just “verb” it!

Verbing is very common

We often see “verbing” on the internet, especially on social media. For example, the noun “friend” is now commonly used as a verb.

She friended me on Facebook yesterday.

We also “google” to find information. And since more people study and work from home during the pandemic, we now “zoom” or “skype” each other.

But this process of creating verbs from nouns is not new. We have been verbing for centuries!

Some common nouns turning into verbs include “pencil, table, butter, and voice. For example,

I will pencil you in for next Friday!

“To pencil” means to set up a meeting or add someone to a list by writing their name down.

Since we are running out of time, let’s table this discussion for next week’s meeting.

“To table” something is to delay the discussion until a future time.

I butter my bread every morning.

“To butter” means to apply butter to bread.

And lastly, “to voice” has two meanings. The first is to tell someone your thoughts, feelings, or opinions about something.

She voiced her opposition to the new community plan.

The second meaning of voice is to make sounds with your voice, like speaking. For example,

At Learning English, we always voice our stories after we write them.

If you are interested in learning how words are created and accepted into the language, there is an interesting TED Talk by Erin McKean, who writes dictionaries.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

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I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

fan—*norv.* a machine or device that is used to move the air and make people or things cooler; to cool using a machine or device to move air around

umbrella—*n.* a device that is used for protection from the rain and sun

butter—*n.* a solid yellow substance made from milk or cream that is spread on food or used in cooking

flame—*n.* the visible part of a fire

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## Article 52: Restrain, Refrain, or Restrict?

*Date: 2022-11-25T22:01:32+00:00 | 598 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about three verbs, “restrain,” “refrain,” and “restrict.”

Thanks for writing to us! This is an interesting question. These words appear similar, but they are different in their meanings, use, and especially whether they take a direct object or not.

Let's look at each word and compare!

Restrain is a verb that takes a direct object. In grammar, this means that it is transitive.

The first meaning is that you limit or prevent a person or even an animal from doing something.

I must restrain my cat with a leash when going outside.

Another meaning is that you prevent someone from doing something or deny them freedom by using physical force or official power. For example,

You should never restrain someone having a seizure by holding them down.

You can restrain yourself or others from some kind of action through methods of control. Like restraining your emotions or limiting yourself in some way.

I restrained myself from having another piece of pie on Thanksgiving.

You can also restrain things from getting too large.

The government raised interest rates in hopes of restraining inflation.

Refrain is a verb that does not take a direct object; it is intransitive.

To refrain means that you stop yourself from doing something by choice.

I'm refraining from buying anything on Black Friday. There are better sales right before the holidays.

Refrain is also a noun. In music, it means a repeated part of a song, such as a melody or chorus.

We often remember refrains of songs because they are repeated.

It can also mean a word, phrase or saying that is repeated such as in a poem or song.

Lana Del Rey uses the refrain "red dress" in many of her songs.

Let's move on to "restrict."

Restrict is a verb that takes a direct object. It means to put a limit on something or to reduce or prevent it.

In the US, the government restricts anyone under 18 years of age from voting in elections.

If you restrict a person or animal "to" something else, you have limited them to one thing.

They restrict their dog to a special diet for his health.

You can restrict something to a particular group or place.

During the height of the pandemic, many countries restricted entry to hospitals to authorized people or patients.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. to be uncertain or unable to understand something

leash—n. a long, thin piece of rope, chain, etc., that is used for holding a dog or other animal

seizure— n. (medical) a state in which you become unconscious and your body moves in an uncontrolled and violent way

pie —n. a food consisting of a pastry crust and a filling, as of fruit or meat

Black Friday— n. the day after Thanksgiving when the start of holiday seasonal shopping begins; many businesses profit during this time and go into “the black”

phrase— n. a group of two or more words that express a single idea but do not usually form a complete sentence

authorized—adj. officially permitted or allowed to do something

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## Article 53: Decrease or Reduce?

*Date: 2022-12-02T22:01:07+00:00 | 627 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the words “reduce” and “decrease.”

Would you please explain to me when to use “decrease” and “reduce?”

Thanks for giving us such valuable points.

Mahmoud in Saudi Arabia

Hello Mahmoud! Thank you for writing to us! The words “decrease” and “reduce” are often thought of as having the same meaning. However, there are some differences, especially in the uses of “reduce.”

Let's look at each word more closely!

“Decrease” is a verb that can take a direct object, meaning it is transitive. It can also be intransitive which means that it does not take a direct object.

“Decrease” means to grow less in amount, size or strength over time, or to cause to be less.

Online shopping and big stores like Target have helped to decrease shopping malls in the US from 2,500 in the 1980s to around 700 malls now.

Voter turnout numbers decreased during the midterm election in some states like West Virginia and Virginia.

Decrease can also be a noun. It is the process of growing less over time. It is a countable noun. For example:

There has been a decrease in newspaper reading over many years, possibly because of the internet.

Now let's move on to "reduce."

"Reduce" is a verb and has many more meanings. It is most often used as a transitive verb that takes a direct object, but sometimes, we can use it without a direct object.

The general meaning is to make something smaller. This meaning is most closely related to "decrease."

Electric cars could reduce our need for gasoline-powered cars.

Reduce can also mean to bring together into one and to narrow down.

Every year, I reduce my clothes by going through my closet and giving away some pieces.

We can also reduce a liquid by boiling it. This makes the taste stronger and there is less liquid.

If you bring sugar to a boil and then reduce it, you are left with a thick caramel sauce.

Reduce can also mean to bring to a certain state or condition, usually a negative one. We can use "reduce" with the preposition "to" to create a phrasal verb.

The concert reduced her to tears.

This sentence is in the active voice. This means that the concert moved the woman emotionally to such an extent that she cried.

We can also use the passive voice to mean that someone is reduced to a state or condition.

She was reduced to uncontrollable laughter after seeing the funny movie.

The forest was reduced to ashes by the wildfire.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

shopping mall—n. a large building or series of buildings containing stores and restaurants

closet—n. a usually small room that is used for storing things (such as clothing, towels, or dishes)

caramel—n. a light brown candy made from butter, sugar, and milk or cream

sauce—n. a thick liquid that is eaten with or on food to add flavor to it

negative— adj. emphasizing the bad side of a person, situation, or thing

active voice—n. a way of writing or speaking that uses active verbs where the subject performs the action of the verb.

passive voice—n. a way of writing or speaking that uses passive verbs where the subject receives the action of a verb.

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## Article 54: All about Clothes

Date: 2022-12-09T22:01:27+00:00 | 610 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about clothes, outfits, suits, and costumes.

Could you explain for me when to use "costume", "outfit", "suit" and "clothes" please?

Chau from Vietnam

Thanks for this question! “Costumes” and “suits” are kinds of “clothes.” An “outfit” is a combination of clothes that you wear for the day. Let’s look at each of these a little closer.

“Clothes” is a plural noun meaning coverings we wear over our body to give protection and keep us warm or cool. Sometimes, “clothes” we wear can be stylish or have a special meaning.

By the end of the week my dirty clothes pile up and I need to wash them.

Kinds of “clothes” include pants, shorts, shirts or “tops,” dresses, and skirts. They also include underwear and socks.

I have summer clothes like skirts and shorts and winter clothes like sweatpants and hoodies.

Some “clothes” are worn only at special times, for example:

My gym clothes include stretchy pants and a tee-shirt.

An “outfit” is a set of clothes. The word “outfit” is a countable noun.

When I travel, I like to pack an extra outfit just in case.



On the internet, people like to share their outfits of the day or OOTDs.

A “suit” is a formal outfit consisting of a jacket, pants, or a skirt, and sometimes a vest, all made from the same cloth.

Suits were a popular choice for work before 2020.

My husband wore a blue suit to our wedding.

A “suit” can also be a piece of clothing that you wear for a certain activity.

Swimsuits are for swimming and other water activities.

“Costume” has several meanings.

As a noun, the first meaning is a set of clothes for a performer when they are on stage or worn by a person for a specific reason or an event like a holiday.

During the play, the actors had to change their costumes many times.

I have a full closet of dance costumes that I need to sell.

What is your Halloween costume this year? My costume is a cat!

The second meaning as a noncount noun refers to clothes worn by people during a time in history or in a specific country or area.

She dressed in her country’s traditional costume for an international event.

Victorian-era costumes consisted of fitted clothes like high-collared shirts and long skirts for women that did not reveal much skin.

And, we use “costume” as an adjective describing something like a play or film set in the past and where actors use clothing from that time period.

The television show *Outlander* is a costume drama set in the 1700s in countries like Scotland, France, and The United States.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

stylish—adj. following a popular way of dressing or presenting oneself

hoodie—n. a sweatshirt with a hood covering the head

vest—n. a sleeveless piece of clothing with buttons down the front that is worn over a shirt and under a suit jacket

high-collared— adj.describing part of as shirt or coat that fits around the top part of the neck

reveal— v.to show something that was hidden or unknown earlier

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 55: Already or Yet?

*Date: 2022-12-16T22:01:01+00:00 | 609 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the differences between “yet” and “already.”

Dear Learning English,

I can learn a lot from you. I have a question about the difference between “already” and “yet.”

Have you already finished your homework?

Have you finished your homework yet?

Which sentence is natural?

Is there any difference in meaning between these two sentences?

Hiroyuki from Japan

This is a great question, Hiroyuki! We answered a question a few weeks back about the differences between “yet” and “still.” Thank you for bringing “already” into the discussion.

Your example sentences are in question form, which highlights some slight differences between the two words.

Both questions are “natural,” as in native English speakers would use both these questions. The difference between them comes from how and why we use them.

Let’s look at “yet” and “already” by themselves, then we will look at the differences in your questions.

“Yet” is an adverb and is often used at the end of a statement or question. We use “yet” in connection with expected actions. We often use “yet” in questions and negative statements.

Here’s an example:

Class starts in five minutes and I haven’t gotten out of bed yet.

The use of “yet” expresses the idea that the student might be late for class. It connects the class time to their current state.

When we use “yet” in questions, we are unsure if the action has been completed or not and we are checking either way by asking a yes or no question. Here is an example:

Question: You are moving next month! Have you found an apartment yet?

Answer: Not yet. I am still looking at places.

By using “yet” in the question, we guess that the person answering the question has not completed the action up to this point in time.

“Already” is an adverb and we use it before the verb in a sentence.

We use “already” for actions that we expect to occur or have occurred depending on if we use “already” in a statement or question.

When we use “already” in statements the action has occurred.

The paper is due tomorrow and I’ve already written it.

When we use “already” in a question, we are suggesting that the action may be complete. We want confirmation or denial in an answer.

Question: You are moving next month! Did you already find an apartment?

Answer: Yep, we found a place last week!

Your two questions

Now let’s look at your two questions.

In the first question, the questioner may believe that the listener has finished their homework by using already. Once again, it is just a guess.

In the second question, by using “yet,” the questioner is not sure if the homework has been completed or not.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Hiroyuki!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

occur—v. to happen

apartment—n. a room or set of rooms rented as a home

essay—n. a piece of writing that tells a person's thoughts or opinions about a subject

guess— v. to form an opinion or give an answer about something when you do not know much or anything about it

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 56: Able or Ible

*Date: 2022-12-23T22:01:10+00:00 | 740 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about how to use “-able” and “-ible” suffixes.

Please help me and share your valuable suggestions.

Sincerely yours,

Md. Abdur Rahman.

Thank you, Abdur Rahman for writing to us. English spelling is difficult even for native speakers. The English writing system is old, and it does not match up with how we pronounce things now.

But there are “rules” and methods we can use that might help improve our spelling ability.

We add the suffixes “-able” and “-ible” to the ends of words to create an adjective meaning “able to,” for example, “fixable.”

I broke the coffee pot. Do you think it’s fixable?

We pronounce both endings with a “schwa.” It is used in expressing unstressed central vowels, like in the word visible.

If you drive out to the countryside, the stars are even more visible!

The ending “-able” is more common because it is considered a “living” suffix. This means that we can create new words with it.

We do not use the suffix “-ible” to make new words because it is used for Latin-based words. And there are no new Latin words, as it is now a dead language with no native speakers.

While there are always exceptions to spelling rules in English, we do have a few rules that can help us figure out which spelling to use.

Let’s start with “-able.”

We add “-able” to full words, often dropping an “e” in the process.

Adorable is a good example. You start with the word “adore,” which means to love or like very much. Now, we drop the “e” from “adore” and put “able” in its place

I saw the most adorable dog on my walk.

In this sentence, adorable could be substituted with “cute.”

There are exceptions though, so watch out for words like “available” and “capable.” If you take the suffix off, the roots of these words cannot stand alone.

If a word ends in a /k/ or /g/ sound, use “-able,” like the word “despicable.”

Their favorite movie is “Despicable Me.”

Let’s move onto “-ible.”

Remember that the number of words with “-ible” will not change because there is a limited number of words from Latin that we use with the suffix. Since it is not a living suffix, we cannot add it to form new words.

Most -ible words cannot stand on their own. They need the suffix to be a word. For example, “possible.”

“Poss” is not a word. It needs the suffix “-ible” to be “possible.”

But like the suffix “-able,” there are exceptions to this rule.

Like the word flexible. “Flex” can be a word on its own.

Remember the spelling rules

For both suffixes you should remember general spelling rules.

One rule is especially notable.

You should drop the “e” on the end of a word when adding a suffix beginning with a vowel.

For example, “likable.”

She was very likable in high school.

There is an exception to this rule.

Do not drop the “e” when words end in “ce” or “ge.” This has to do with the sounds /g/ or /s/. The letter “e” is needed to keep the consonant sound the same.

For example: Danceable and Changeable

Latin music is so danceable!

The date is changeable for the tickets.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)  
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Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pronounce—v. to make the sound of (a word or letter) with your voice

unstressed—adj. not having an accent

vowel—n. speech sounds made with your mouth open and your tongue in the middle of your mouth not touching your teeth, lips, etc.

visible—adj. capable of being seen

odds—n. the possibility that something will happen

cute—adj. having a pleasing, youthful appearance

despicable—adj. very bad or unpleasant: deserving to be despised

flexible—adj. willing to change or to try different things

consonants—n. a speech sound (such as /p/, /d/, or /s/) that is made by partly or completely stopping the flow of air breathed out from the mouth

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## Article 57: Nation or Country?

*Date: 2022-12-30T22:03:11+00:00 | 625 words | [Source](#)*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “nation” and “country.”

Hi VOA Learning English,

Could you please help and explain what the difference is in usage between “nation” and “country?”

Thanks and regards,

This is a great question. Often these words are used as synonyms, but there are differences. Let's look at how we use these words and find some examples to help us understand.

Let's start with “country.”

A “country” is an organized political unit. We often describe “countries” as “states,” especially when talking about politics. Joshua Keating, a former editor for the website Foreign Policy says there are several things that are needed to become a country.

A country needs territory or land. Next, people living there must live there permanently. Then the international community must recognize the boundaries or borders of the country.

Next, the country must have full sovereignty or the freedom of rule and be recognized by other countries. Finally, a country is ruled by a government or political body.

Here are some examples of how to use “country” in a sentence.

There are no countries in Antarctica, but some countries like Chile and New Zealand have claimed areas of it.

I have been to several countries in Europe including Romania, Czechia, Estonia and Finland.

Even though The United States is made up of smaller units called “states,” they are not sovereign countries and are not internationally recognized as such.

California is a state and has the world’s 4th largest economy, but it is not a country.

We often use “country” and “state” as synonyms, especially to differentiate the other meaning of “country” as a place outside of a city that has fields, farmland, trees, or villages.

Regina enjoys going to the country on the weekends to visit her family’s farm in West Virginia.

And now let’s move onto “nation.”

“Nation” has two different meanings. Firstly, a “nation” can describe the same thing as the word “country” or “state.” Our VOA Word Book describes a “nation” as a “country” together with its political and social systems. Let’s look at an example.

There are 193 nations that make up the international organization called The United Nations.

The nation of Argentina recently won the FIFA World Cup.

“Nation” also has another meaning. It is the people of an area who are connected by a common culture or identity.

Sometimes a “country” or “state” is represented by one “nation,” called a “nation-state.”

Japan, Finland, and even the United States are considered nation-states.

Not all “nations” of people have their own “country” or border of their land that is recognized internationally.

Examples of “nations” of people without their own “country” include: The Kurdish people and native indigenous people like Native Americans.

The Kurdish nation lives throughout a region called Kurdistan, which is spread throughout five countries. Kurds have a common language and culture.

First Nations people are an indigenous nation group in Canada.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonyms—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

sovereignty—n. a country's independent power and the right to govern itself

evolution—n. a gradual process of change and development

indigenous—adj. produced, living or existing in a certain place or environment; native to a place

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## Article 58: Veggie, Vegetarian, or Vegan?

*Date: 2023-01-06T22:01:53+00:00 | 669 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between three words: “veggie,” “vegetarian,” and “vegan.”

Hi VOA team and happy holidays!

I am wondering if you could help me clarify the difference between “vegan,” “vegetarian,” and “veggie.” When can we use them? Or are they interchangeable?

As we start the new year, many of us are thinking about ways to be healthier. This is a great question to begin our 2023 series of Ask a Teacher. Some of the answers might surprise you!

Let's start with “veggie.”

In American English, the noun “veggie” is a shortened and informal way to say “vegetable.” It is used as a countable noun. To make the noun plural we add an “s.”

My guinea pig loves to eat a many kinds of veggies, including lettuce, carrots and broccoli.

Veggie can also be used as an adjective meaning “vegetarian.” American English speakers often use “veggie” as an adjective to describe vegetarian recipes and dishes rather than describing people as being “veggies.”



I love making veggie tortilla chipsoup with peppers, corn and tomatoes!

We are grilling up some veggie burgers made with black beans.

Now let's move onto "vegetarian."

As a noun, a "vegetarian" is a person who does not eat meat or fish. They usually eat foods made from plants. There are different kinds of vegetarians. Some eat eggs, others eat and drink dairy products like cheese and milk. Other people are flexible in their diet. For example, they might eat vegetarian food on some days of the week and eat animal products on other days. They are called "flexitarians."

Adaline became a vegetarian in college.

Mark is an ovo-vegetarian. He does not eat any animal products except for eggs.

"Vegetarian" can also be an adjective describing something that only has fruit or vegetables and no meat or fish.

I love Indian food not just for the bold and spicy flavors, but there are many vegetarian choices!

Let's move onto "vegan."

If a vegetarian does not eat fish or meat, what is a vegan?

A vegan, as a noun, is someone who does not eat or use any animal products or products made from animals. This can include things like honey from bees, whey protein from milk, and a color made from crushed insects called carmine often used in cosmetics.

She prefers agave nectar to honey because she is a vegan.

Veganism is more of a lifestyle and not just what people eat. Vegans are against killing animals. They do not use any animal products for health and environmental reasons. They are also against cruelty to animals.

Davey Havok, the singer of the band AFI, has been a vegan for 24 years.

Just like "vegetarian," "vegan" can be an adjective, too. It describes something that was not made from animal products and that did not involve harming an animal in any way.

Many bags are now made with vegan leather.

Cosmetic brands are becoming vegan and cruelty-free.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Noura!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

guinea pig—n. a small furry animal, or rodent, that is often kept as a pet

tortilla chip— n.a thin, hard piece of food (called a chip) that is made from corn and usually salted

grill— v.to cook food on a metal frame over a fire

flexible—adj.willing to change or to try different things

cosmetic— n.a substance that is put on the face or body to improve appearance

nectar—n.a sweet liquid produced by plants

cruelty— n.actions that cause suffering

leather— n.animal skin used to make shoes, clothing and other things

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 59: To Do or Create?

*Date: 2023-01-13T22:01:50+00:00 | 592 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “create” and “do.”

Hello Learning English,

I would like to ask you about the word “essay.” Do we say, “create an essay” or “do an essay?”

Thank you for your help,

This is a great question, and one that we actually have not talked about. Your question is less about the word “essay,” and more about the choice of which verb to use, “do” or “create.”

Let’s look at each of these more closely. Let’s start with “do.”

The verb “do” is an irregular verb that has many uses.

We use “do” for actions that we are required or must do and for general activities that we often repeat.

I will do the dishes tonight after dinner.

We also use “do” to show the completion or achievement of things.

Is that report done?

Sometimes we use “do” for talking about a job or for studying.

What did you do at your last job?

We can use “do” to mean “produce” something, like an essay or something artistic. We use it in place of more specific verbs that focus on the operative action. Using “do” focuses more on the general action or completion of the action.

I’m doing my essay this weekend, so I do not have to worry about it over spring break.

I’m writing my essay this weekend, so I do not have to worry about it over spring break.

She did the painting in watercolors.

She painted in watercolors.

This brings us to “create.”

To “create” something means to bring something new into existence. When we think of “create,” we think of something new that has not been produced before.

To “create” something requires imagination, a special skill or talent, a new method, or a unique process.

Heather likes to create new dances for her students.

She created the recipe from just 5 simple ingredients.

We can “create” an essay. For example, your teacher might ask you to “create” an essay about a problem or a solution.

But think about the actions that you perform to “create” the essay. You might research the subject, form ideas about how to express yourself and more. Yet finally, to create an essay you must write. This is the required action and the more specific verb.

So just like “do” is a less specific verb, here “create” is the less specific verb for the entire process of writing an essay.

Tony is writing an essay about climate change.

I wrote many essays in college.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Mekhpara.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

essay- n. a piece of writing that tells a person's thoughts or opinions about a subject

irregular—adj. not following the usual rules about what should be done

achievement— n. a thing that is completed successfully

watercolors—n. colored paints combined with water or a wet brush to create an effect

unique— adj.used to say that something or someone is unlike anything or anyone else

ingredient—n. one of the things that are used to make a food, product, etc

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 60: Release and Relief

*Date: 2023-01-20T22:01:27+00:00 | 585 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “release” and “relief.”

Hello VOA Learning English,

I am Renna. I am glad you saw my email. I want to ask the difference between “release” and “relief.”

Thank you so much,

These words are often mistaken because they sound similar.

Both words come from Latin and old French before making their way into the English language. They have completely different meanings and parts of speech. Let’s begin by looking at “release.”

The word “release” can be either a verb or a noun. As a verb it can take a direct object. “Release” has several meanings.

The first meaning is to free or let go, especially if limited in some way.

The teacher released the class 15 minutes early.

The kidnappers released their hostages when the negotiations ended.

“Release” as verb can also mean to express, especially feelings or ability.

Sarah released many emotions during therapy.

The acting class will help release my inner artist.

Lastly, “release” can mean to make available or to publicize.

VOA Learning English has released its new video series, Let’s Learn English with Anna online.

The White House press office released the president’s plan to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

As a noun, a “release” is the action or process of being released.

The activists postponed the fish release when the river level dropped.

Now let's move onto "relief."

"Relief" as a noun is the easing of pain, difficulty or lack.

The only relief for her headache was to lie still in a dark room.

It is such a relief to know you're back home safely.

The government opened roads so relief, including medicine, could get through to the disaster site.

And lastly, "relief" means a person who takes on the responsibility of others to provide support.

As a relief employee, Pat works at all the local hospitals filling in when a nurse takes leave.

Relief or relieve?

One important note about the word "relief." "Relief" as a verb is "relieve," which can sometimes be confused as "release." The meanings of "relieve" are connected to those of "relief," but just in the verb or action form.

For example, to "relieve" means to cause something to be less such as pain or stress.

A visit to the steam room relieved her back pain.

"Relieve" can also mean to free someone of a job, duties, a burden, or responsibility, like the relief nurse.

A relief nurse takes over or relieves another nurse of their work.

This meaning of "relieve" is most closely related to "release" as "to make available."

He carried my bags for me, which relieved me.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Renna.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

net-zero—n. a situation in which nothing is gained and nothing is lost

emissions—n. (often pl.) something that is released, such as a gas or gasses, from a process

steam—n. water vapor kept under pressure so as to supply energy for heating, cooking, or mechanical work : —v. to apply steam to

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 61: How to Use Avoid, Prevent

Date: 2023-01-27T22:01:42+00:00 | 408 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Sergio in Brazil. He asks,

I would like to know whether there is any difference between "avoid" and "prevent."

Sergio, Brazil.

Thank you for writing to us with this question. These words are similar – they both express the idea of staying away from something. Let us look at the meaning of each word and then we will compare how they are used.

Avoid means to keep away from a person or thing. Here are some examples:

After we had that fight, my sister has been avoiding me.

Pizza makes my stomach hurt, so I avoid eating it.

Note that in these examples, the word that comes after "avoid" can be a noun or a gerund (the -ing form of a verb).

Now, consider the word "prevent." It means to take some action to stop something from happening. It can be used in a simple way with a noun. So, going back to our previous example:

To prevent stomach problems, I do not eat pizza.

In this sentence, several nouns follow the word "prevent." The meaning is clearly to stop something.

You can also use "prevent" in a more complex sentence with an object followed by a verb. This gives us a more detailed idea of stopping someone from doing something. In fact, you will often find the word "from" in sentences with "prevent."

The city wants to prevent drivers from speeding on that road, so they added some speedbumps.

In this example, drivers cannot go too fast because the city placed some raised areas, speed bumps, on the road, forcing cars to slow down.

So, Sergio, if you are trying to decide between avoid and prevent, think about this difference. "Avoid" is just staying away from something you do not like or want. "Prevent" is to take an action that keeps someone from doing something or keeps something from happening.

Do you have a question for the teacher? Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher!

I'm Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

bump— n.raised area

What do you think of this story? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 62: Prediction and Projection

*Date: 2023-02-03T22:01:54+00:00 | 597 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “projection” and “prediction.”

This is Mohammed from Libya. I would like to know the difference between “projection” and “prediction.” How can I use them the right way?

Thanks for writing to us. These two words are similar and are often used to describe guesses about the future, but they have some interesting differences.

Let's start with “prediction.”

The word “prediction” is a noun meaning a statement about what will happen in the future. Because people make predictions, they may or may not happen. “Predictions” are often made for the near future.

We often use this word's verb form, “predict,” with events like the weather.

For example, in the Science and Technology Report “Study: Exxon Scientists Predicted Global Warming since 1970s,” the word “prediction” is used in the plural form to talk about the possibility of world temperature changes in the 1970s.

“A new study says scientists at the oil company Exxon Mobile made accurate predictions about global warming starting in the 1970s.”

A study by Harvard University researchers said that the “predictions” made by scientists in the 1970s became true. That means they believed something would happen in the future, and it happened that way.

Not only scientists make predictions about the weather. Groundhogs also make predictions. Groundhogs are large animals that live under ground.

On February 2nd in the United States, several groundhogs including Punxsutawney Phil in the state of Pennsylvania and French Creek Freddie in West Virginia, wake up and “predict” the weather for

spring. The activities around these “predictions” are cultural traditions rather than realweather forecasts.

The tradition goes like this: If the groundhogs see their shadows, meaning that it is a sunny day with no clouds, the prediction is there will be six more weeks of winter.

If they do not see their shadows, meaning that it is cloudy and there is no sun, the groundhogs’ prediction is there will be an early spring.

This year, Punxsutawney Phil’s prediction is that there will not be an early spring because he did see his shadow.

Let’s move onto “projection.”

“Projection” is a noun. It has a similar meaning to “prediction,” something that might happen in the future. But “projections” can change depending on the situation or conditions.

“Projections” are created based on numbers and facts. But if that information changes, it is understood that the projection changes too. Projections are often made for longer periods.

For example, in 2019, projections for children finishing secondary education programs by 2030 were only at 60 percent worldwide. That was only if conditions stayed the same.

Since COVID-19 affected children’s education, that projection has probably changed.

Here is another example:

Recently the United Nations reported a projection for the world’s population increasing to 9.7 billion people by the year 2050.

And here is one additional note: The word projection is often used to describe information in a form that can be seen, like a graph or chart. A prediction is a statement about the future, but, unlike a projection, it is not easily changed if the underlying conditions change.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Mohammed!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

accurate—adj. free from mistakes or errors

weather forecast—n. a statement saying what the weather will be like the next day or for the next few days

shadow— n. an area of darkness created when a source of light is blocked



## Article 63: Reserve, Preserve, and Conserve

Date: 2023-02-10T22:01:13+00:00 | 438 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between reserve, preserve, and conserve.

Dear VOA Learning English,

I have been learning English for more than twenty years, but my English is still just okay. I have many difficult words to understand. For example: reserve and preserve.

Please let me know the difference between these words.

Mei from China.

Thanks for your note. These words share similar meanings and sounds. That makes it hard to remember which is which. I will add a third word, “conserve” so that we understand all the differences between these terms. Let’s start with “reserve.”

Reserve can be a verb or a noun. As a verb it means to store for future use.

Please call the restaurant and reserve a table for Saturday.

Emily reserved two books from the library.

As a noun, “reserve” means a supply of goods or materials. It is often used in plural form.

The government says it has only \$25 million in usable foreign reserves.

“Reserve” as a noun also means a place where wildlife is protected.

Many national parks and forests in the US are nature reserves.

And lastly, as an uncountable noun, “reserve” means the act of keeping one’s feelings hidden.

The dancer’s reserve disappeared when the music started.

“Preserve” as a verb means to protect something from change.

The glass case helps preserve the pictures of her ancestors.

Ed used a canning process to preserve tomatoes from the harvest.

And, like reserve, a preserve can also mean a place of protection for wildlife.

To “conserve” means to protect something from harm, destruction, loss, or change.

We conserved on energy use by putting in new windows.

Conserve also means to use little of a natural resource.

To conserve water, you should turn off the faucet when brushing your teeth.

And conserve can also be a noun. It means a sweet food made by preserving fruit with sugar.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples are helpful. We have more in reserve, if needed!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

faucet—n.a device that is used to control the flow of water from a pipe

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 64: Made and Prepositions

*Date: 2023-02-17T22:01:53+00:00 | 465 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the verb “made” when used with prepositions.

Hello, VOA Learning English,

I hope that you are doing well.

I am very happy to be sending this email as I have been listening to this Learning English program for some time.

I would like to know more about the differences between these words:

“Made in,” “made from,” and “made for.”

Abdulkadir from Somalia

Dear Abdulkadir,

Thanks for being a loyal listener of VOA Learning English. And thank you for writing to us. The verb “made” is often used with prepositions to describe how things are created or produced. Depending on the preposition, like “in,” “from,” or “for,” the meaning of the verb changes slightly.

Let's start with the verb “made.”

“Made” is the past tense form of “make.” It means to produce, build, or prepare something.

He made me dinner on Valentine's Day.

Sometimes we use this verb for things we cannot physically see or touch.

We made plans to study at the library.

Made with prepositions

Let's look at the examples Abdulkadir asked about: "made in," "made from" and "made for."

"Made...in," or in the past tense, "made in," means that something was produced or built in a certain place, country or city.

The company made products in the USA.

Sometimes when we use "made in" we are using the term as an adjective to describe where the products are produced.

Products made in the USA support American workers.

"Made from" describes the materials used to create or produce something. Usually these are the unprocessed or raw materials. Processing or manufacturing changes them into something new so that we cannot tell what the materials are.

Tofu is made from soybeans.

Cheese is made from cow's milk.

"Made for" is used when something is created for a specific purpose or person.

She made a cake for her friend's birthday.

Mountain bikes are not really made for the road.

Sometimes "made for" suggests that people get along very well together.

Those two were made for each other.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

loyal—adj. having or showing complete and constant support for someone or something

raw—adj. in the natural state

tofu—n. a soft white or brown food made from soybeans.

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 65: Reading Skills: Definitions and Transitions

Date: 2023-03-03T22:03:12+00:00 | 803 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about reading skills like finding definitions and transitions.

Greetings from Ecuador,

Could you please provide me any information and guidance to improve my reading skills and share them with my English students?

Thank you in advance for your help and support,

Thanks for writing to us, Angel. When we read, we are reading someone's piece of writing. So, we can bring writing skills to the activity of reading. Finding transitions and definitions can help us with our reading.

Transitions are words and phrases that connect ideas. Transitions help with organizing thoughts in writing. They help develop ideas smoothly. Identifying transitions while reading can help us better understand what we are reading.

Transitions can be found within paragraphs, between paragraphs, and between longer divisions of text.

There are several kinds of transitions. Time-order transitions are words like "first," "next," "second," "finally," and "lastly." They establish the order of events or ideas.

There are also transitions that show a relationship between ideas.

For example, we can show contrast between ideas by using "however" or "nonetheless." We can show results by using the phrases "as a result" or "consequently."

Here is an example paragraph from a recent story called, "Five Ways That the Ukraine War Has Changed the World."

What transitions are used?

"Before the war, much of the grain and vegetable oil sent to the Middle East and Africa came from Ukraine and Russia.... Now, countries are thinking about ways to provide their own food and energy."

Two time-order transitions, "before" and "now," are used to show the time relationship between events that happened.

Spotting the transitions and knowing what they mean can be helpful when reading.

We can also find definitions within the text to help us better understand unfamiliar words. There are a few ways to do this.

We can find verb phrases like “is/are,” “is defined as,” “is called,” “means, or “is a type of.” Noticing these phrases within the story can help us learn new vocabulary.

Here is an example from the article, “Study: Better Instruments Needed to Discover Life on Mars.”

“Such testing is carried out in areas where bodies of water once existed.

This is because those areas, called deltas, contain higher levels of ancient microbes to study. The Red Stone area was a river delta about 100 million years ago.”

We can see from this example, that “called” is used. The term “delta” is in an earlier paragraph, too. A delta is a kind of body of water, a place where a river meets the sea. We even have an example with The Red Stone area as a river delta.

Another way to show definitions is through punctuation like dashes or commas.

Here is an example from our American Presidents stories: “George Washington: Reluctant.” This example uses two ways of showing a new word.

“He established a group of advisors — called the cabinet — as well as the nation’s official money.

Here, we see that the writer uses dashes and “called” to give an informal definition of the group of advisors.”

And, we can find definitions by reading further into the text.

Here is an example from another recent story called, “‘Imperfect’ Models in Italy Redefine Beauty.”

“Sonia Sparta is one of the models. The 28-year-old from Sicily has a condition called hyperpigmentation or unusual skin coloring. It results in dark spots on her face and body.”

The word that is defined is “hyperpigmentation.” The definition is found right after the conjunction “or,” which shows the definition. But if you read further into the next sentence, you can find out more about Sonia’s condition. The writer uses the verb “results” to show the relationship between the condition of hyperpigmentation and its results.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Angel!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

paragraph— n. a part of a piece of writing that usually begins on a new line and often is made up of a few sentences

contrast—n. a difference between things or the act of comparing two things to show their differences

punctuation—n. the marks (such as periods and commas) in a piece of writing that make its meaning clear

dash—n. a horizontal line that represents a break in meaning; often used before a definition

conjunction— n. grammar: a word that joins together sentences, clauses, phrases, or words

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 66: Syllable Dropping in Speaking

*Date: 2023-03-10T22:01:21+00:00 | 511 words | [Source](#)*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about syllable dropping in American English pronunciation.

Hi, VOA Learning English,

I'm Herbert from Germany.

Throughout my whole life speaking English, I did not realize that some vowels in words are “swallowed,” like in the words “vegetable,” “family” and “difference.”

Could you give a lecture on this topic?

This is an interesting question! Or is it interesting? Now you have us thinking! We do not “swallow” the vowels. That would be a little strange, but it creates a great image!

So, why does it happen in English?

Syllables and vowels

First, let's talk about syllables and vowels.

A syllable is part of a word that contains one vowel sound. For example, “cat” is a one-syllable word that contains one vowel sound. And “swallow”, with two vowel sounds, has two syllables -swa(l)and-lo.

Stress and unstressed vowels

Every word in English has one stressed syllable. This is called word stress. The stressed syllable is longer, louder and clearer than the other syllables. The unstressed syllables then become shorter, softer, and less clear.

Now, let's look at the word "family" with its three vowels ofa, iandy. The stress is on the first syllable-fam. Over time the vowelirelaxes so much that we dropped the whole syllable and turned it into-fam-ly.

We say some of these words so often that we skip over the less important, unstressed vowels. As you said, "vegetable" becomesvej-t-bland "difference" becomesdi-f(-)r-n(t)s.

Let's look at a few more examples of words that lose unstressed vowels.

"Business" is pronounced with two syllables,biz-n-s, instead of three. Theivowel sound is dropped. You do not want to pronounce itbi-ze-n-s.That is another three-syllable word "busyness."

"Evening" is pronounced with two syllables instead of three -ev-ningnote-ven-ing. And lastly, we have "Wednesday," the third day of the work week aswenz-daynotwed-nes-day.

Speaking like a native

You can speak fast like a native speaker of American English by dropping syllables.But remember to center more on the stressed vowel, rather than the dropping of the unstressed one.

In this exercise, I will pronounce all the syllables first, then drop the unstressed vowel.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Herbert!

What question do youhave about American English? Send us an email atlearningenglish@voanews.com.

And that'sAsk a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

vowel—n. a speech sound made with your mouth open and your tongue in the middle of your mouth not touching your teeth, lips, etc.

lecture— n.a talk or presentation by a professor or teacher

pronunciation—n. the sound of the way a word is said

stress—adj. something that is stressed is louder or in a higher pitch when speaking

relaxed—adj.not tense or stressed

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. Wehave a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 67: Irregular vs. Abnormal

Date: 2023-03-17T22:01:56+00:00 | 594 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about two common synonyms, or words that have similar meanings, “abnormal” and “irregular.”

Hi VOA Learning English,

I am Riya from China. I wish to know the difference between the words “abnormal” and “irregular.” Is there any other word that has a similar meaning of irregular?

Thank you, Riya, for this great question. While “abnormal” and “irregular” are often used in similar situations, there are some notable differences. Let’s consider “abnormal” first.

“Abnormal” is an adjective meaning not normal, usual, or average. It suggests that something is troublesome or a problem. For example:

His blood tests showed an abnormal level of T cells.

The veterinarian said a viral infection caused the marmot’s abnormal behavior.

“Normal” is often used in describing growth or behavior. These are processes that are not the same all of the time, but experience and knowledge form our understanding of what they are. “Abnormal” is often used to describe what is outside our experience of what “normal” is.

Let’s move on to “irregular.”

As an adjective, “irregular” has several different meanings.

The first describes something that does not happen at regular, predictable times. It can describe an activity that happens for different lengths of time or that happens once in a while.

Amanda’s work schedule was very irregular. Sometimes she worked nights; other times she worked during the day.

The second meaning describes appearance that is not even, straight, or smooth. It can also describe something that does not form a regular pattern.

The coast of the state is quite irregular with its rocky hills.

A third meaning has to do with observing regular rules, laws or behavior.

The bank failed because of irregular investment practices.

In English grammar, there are “irregular” action words, or verbs. In many languages, verbs have different endings to agree with number or tense.

For example, the verb “eat” is an irregular verb. The past tense is not “eated,” it is “ate.” The past participle is “eaten.”



Other words can also have “irregular” differences from the usual patterns of grammar.

“Irregular” can be a noun, too. It can describe a person belonging to a military force that is outside of the national armed forces of a country. Such forces usually do not have the same command structure and are often called paramilitary forces.

“Irregular” also can mean a piece of clothing that is a little damaged, or not exactly perfect, and is sold in some stores at a lower price than normal.

So, while these two words are often used as synonyms, “irregular” has more meanings and is often used as both an adjective and a noun. And it might be a better word choice in some situations depending on what you want to say.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Riya.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pattern— n. a regular and repeated way in which something happens

participle—n. (grammar) a form of a verb that is used to indicate a past or present action and that can also be used like an adjective

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 68: Begin, Start, Commence

*Date: 2023-03-24T22:02:09+00:00 | 489 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about “start,” “begin,” and “commence.”

Please let me know the difference between “begin,” “start” and “commence,” and their usage.

Saeed from Iran

Thanks for this great question, Saeed!

These words have similar meanings, but the difference lies in how formal they are and their usage. Let's take a closer look at each one. Let's start with “start!”

“Start” can either be a verb or a noun. As a verb, “start” means to happen or come into being from a particular point in time.

I always start my day with a cup of tea.

Julie started teaching last year.

As a noun, “start” has two meanings. It can be the point in time when something happens or begins.

The start of the race is downtown.

When is the start of the budget year?

Another meaning is a movement that is sudden or surprising.

Guinea pigs have sudden starts called “popcorning,” like jumping in the air.

We also use “start” to talk about things like machines and business.

My computer will not start!

She started her own business by creating videos on YouTube.

In comparison to the other words, “begin” and “commence,” “start” is the most informal of the three.

“Begin” means the same thing as “start.” But remember that “begin” has different spelling in the past tenses - “began” and “begun.” Here are some examples:

Regina began as an actor before changing her career to become a director.

I have begun to work on the class project, but I have yet to finish it.

In language, sometimes we say a word “begins” with a certain letter of the alphabet. We also use it to describe when someone starts to speak.

“I cannot wait for Friday,” she began, “this work week felt so long!”

“Commence” means to start or begin. The difference is that “commence” is the most formal of the three. We usually use commence when talking about a ceremony or a project.

The graduation ceremony commences at one in the afternoon.

The groundbreaking for the new building will commence in the morning.

Spring commenced two days ago.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Saeed!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

formal—adj. following or according with established form, custom, or rule

particular—adj. used to indicate that one specific person or thing is being referred to and no others

graduation—n. the act of receiving a diploma from a school, college or university

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 69: As Well As

*Date: 2023-03-31T22:01:22+00:00 | 482 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about “as well as.”

Hi VOA Learning English,

My name is Neethu, and I am from India. I have been learning English using your programs for several years. My question is: What is the correct meaning of “as well as” and please explain the usage in sentences.

This is an interesting question, Neethu!

That little group of words operates in an unusual way sometimes.

As an adverb, “as well” means “also,” “in addition” or “too.” We often place “as well” at the end of our sentences.

Thank you for meeting me today and for helping me with my errands as well.

We can also add “as” to form the phrase “as well as.” This means “in addition to” and normally serves as a conjunction.

She studied business in college as well as art history.

“And” combines two nouns, expressions, or sentences, usually of the same importance. However, a speaker using the phrase might be bringing additional attention to the noun that comes before “as well as.”

On their trip to Europe, they went to Prague as well as smaller cities in Czechia.

Be careful when using “as well as” with the subject of a sentence. In this case, the phrase does not act like a normal conjunction. When we use “as well as” to form the subject of a sentence, English usage calls for us to pay attention to subject-verb agreement.

Normally, if a subject is singular, we use a singular verb. If the subject is plural, then we use the plural form of the verb. But, in many cases, having “as well as” after the subject does not make the subject plural.

My cat, as well as my dogs, plays outside in the yard every day.

If you want to include the noun “my dogs” in the subject, use “and.” Then the subject will be plural.

My cat and my dogs play outside in the yard every day.

The reason English speakers do this is complex and requires more explanation than we can provide here. Just remember that the “as well as...” phrase is not included in the subject. Use the normal subject-verb agreement rules for the subject of the sentence.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Neethu!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

errands—n. a short journey that you take to do or get something

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 70: Gauge and Yardstick

*Date: 2023-04-07T22:01:11+00:00 | 449 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about “gauge” and “yardstick.”

I am Anora, your loyal reader from China. I am glad to write an email to you again.

I am confused by the words, "gauge" and "yardstick". I sincerely hope to know their differences.

Looking forward to your marvelous answers.

Thanks for writing to us, Anora.

A “yardstick” is a measuring device. The length of a “yardstick” is three feet or .9144 meters long. We measure large things using yardsticks, like fabric or furniture.

I used a yardstick to measure fabric for a dress that I will make.

Calling something a “yardstick” is to say it is a standard by which to judge something:

The teachers used the test results as a yardstick for how much their students learned this year.

Dancers use their technique as a yardstick for improvement.

Now let’s move onto “gauge.”

Like “yardstick,” a “gauge” involves measurement. Instead of measuring length, a “gauge” can measure distance, size, width, or the thickness of material or objects.

For example, needles are sized by gauges to show their thickness.

My ears were pierced using an 18-gauge needle.

A gauge can also be a device or instrument for measuring.

Sam uses a digital thermometer as a temperature gauge when he cooks.

As a verb, “gauge” has several meanings. The first meaning is to measure the exact size or number of something.

Weather scientists gauged snow fall at 12 inches.

We can also use “gauge” to mean estimate.

I gauge that we will have about 70 people at the wedding.

And lastly, “gauge” can also be used to describe judging other people’s emotions or opinions.

Social media companies often gauge their users’ interests with questions and opinion studies.

He couldn’t gauge his sister’s feelings about the new move.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Anora.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher. I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

standard—n. a level of quality, size or some other condition that is considered acceptable or desirable

pierce— v. to cut a hole in the body to wear earrings or other jewelry

dial—n. a round part on a piece of equipment that you turn to operate something

thermometer— n. a device used for taking a person's temperature

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 71: Subjects and Objects

Date: 2023-04-14T22:02:33+00:00 | 654 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about subjects and objects.

Hello VOA Learning English, I am Noormohammed from Saudi Arabia. I have a question about subjects and objects in sentences. Are they the same thing?

Thanks for writing to us, Noormohammed.

Subjects and objects are not the same thing in English language sentences. But they both involve nouns within the structure of a sentence. Let's take a closer look at each to see how they work.

The subject of a sentence causes the action described by the verb. Nouns, pronouns and noun phrases are mainly used as subjects. Here is a simple example:

The cat sleeps.

"The cat" is a noun phrase and the subject of this sentence. The verb is "sleeps." Subjects almost always come before their verbs in sentences.

Other kinds of phrases can also become subjects of sentences.

For example, a verb phrase can become a subject. One kind of verbal phrase is called a gerund, the "ing" form of a verb. It acts as a noun. This means that it can be the subject of a sentence.

Walking is a great form of exercise.

In this sentence, "walking" is a gerund and is the subject. It is not a verb.

Other grammatical forms can be subjects too, like noun clauses and prepositional phrases.

Now let's move onto objects.

An object is another part of the sentence. Objects come after verbs. We say that the object of a sentence receives the action of the verb or that the verb affects the object in some way.

Objects are always nouns or noun phrases. This is something that is shared between the subject of the sentence and the object, but the two are not the same.

Here is a simple example of an object:

The cat eats food.

In this sentence, "food" is the object. The "food" receives the action from the cat — it gets eaten. This makes "food" the direct object. It comes after the verb, and it is directly affected by the action of the

verb.

Here are some more examples of direct objects:

I love drinking tea in the morning.

Remember how gerunds act like nouns? Here the verb phrase “drinking tea” is the object.

We ate Thai food last night.

Here the noun phrase “Thai food” is the direct object.

I baked Masha a cake.

Here the direct object of the sentence is “a cake.” But what about the other noun that comes right after the verb in the sentence?

“Masha” is the indirect object. Indirect objects are affected by the direct object and not the verb. Indirect objects need a direct object.

So, in this sentence, we did not bake Masha; we baked the cake for Masha.

Here are a few sentences to practice. Find the subject and the object (direct and/or indirect).

Write your answers below in the comments or send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

Walking up too many hills hurts Oliver’s back.

We made our parents breakfast.

Abdul bought his wife a new car.

She writes long letters every month.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Noormohammed.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

phrase—n. two or more words that do not form a complete sentence but that express an idea

clause—n. (grammar) a part of a sentence that has its own subject and verb

cake—n. a soft, sweet food made from a heated mixture of flour, sugar, eggs and butter.

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 72: Football or Soccer?

Date: 2023-04-21T22:01:01+00:00 | 537 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between football and soccer.

Hello, my name is Ben.

I am a middle school student from China. I like learning English. “Soccer” and “football” sometimes mean the same thing, and sometimes they mean different things. Could you please explain how to tell the difference in daily life?

This is an awesome question, Ben.

You are correct, “football” and “soccer” are the same sports. But “football” in the United States is a completely different game from the “football” played in other parts of the world.

Let’s take a closer look at the two terms and two different games played.

The most popular game in the world - “football” - is the one played only with the feet. Every four years, players from many nations gather for the World Cup. In game play, a ball is passed and kicked around a large field with goals at each end. A goalkeeper protects each goal while 10 other players try to score. Football is played almost year-round with two short breaks in the winter and summer.

The Argentina national football team won the 2022 World Cup.

We also play this game in the United States, but we call it “soccer.” It is the same sport.

Eleven US cities will host soccer games for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

One of the most popular sports in the United States, however, is called “football,” but it is a completely different sport. Most people from outside of the U.S. know this sport as “American football” and the big game each year is called the Super Bowl.

In this sport, the ball is oval-shaped and brown. The players mostly use their hands as they run and throw the ball down the field to the other team’s end zone to score points, known as touchdowns. Players can also kick the ball over a high bar to score extra points.

As with soccer, there are 11 players on each team, but no goalkeepers. Instead, defensive players try to stop the other team from scoring by knocking the ball away or knocking down the player with the ball. American football is played September through January.

Unlike soccer, there are no professional football teams with women.



The West Virginia Mountaineers have won a lot of football games, but they have never won a national college championship.

Tailgating parties before football games include music, food, and drinks.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples helped you, Ben!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo and Dan Friedell wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

knocking—v.to cause someone or something to fall to the ground

tailgate—v.to have a social gathering in which food and drinks are served at or near the back of a parked vehicle

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 73: Swine, Pigs and Hogs

Date: 2023-04-28T22:02:12+00:00 | 648 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between swine, pigs and hogs.

I am Ken from China.

I am one loyal reader for VOA, so glad to write an email to you again. I am just confused by three words: “pig,” “hog” and “swine.”

I sincerely hope to know their differences.

Thanks for writing to us again, Ken. This is a great question.

I am not a farm animal expert, as I grew up in a small city. But a family member, my niece, Amanda, grew up on a farm with many pigs and hogs! So, I asked her for some help.

Let's start with “swine.”

“Swine” is an older term that is mainly used in agriculture today. The term describes all animals that are pig-like: short-bodied, short-legged, thick-skinned and that have a large snout or nose.

You may see the word “swine” in old sayings, stories and readings.

The idiom “do not cast pearls before swine” means do not offer valuable things to people who will not appreciate them.

In English, calling a person is swine is a big insult. In agriculture, the term is still widely used, for example, in the term “swine flu.”

In the United States, pigs and hogs are different to farmers.

A “pig” is the term that is most often used for all members of the family of animals with the scientific name Suidae.

Charlotte’s Web is a book about the friendship between a spider and a pig named Wilbur.

In farming, a “pig” refers to either a young swine or one that weighs less than 113 kilograms. Pigs are not often used for their meat or for breeding until they are much older or bigger.

Some people in the U.S. have miniature or “teacup” pigs as pets because of their small size.

“Hogs,” on the other hand, are large and weigh over 113 kilograms. Hogs are raised for their meat or for breeding.

Brianne’s family raises hogs on their farm.

There is another kind of animal called a pig — that is not really a pig. Guinea pigs are small mammals that are members of the rodent family. They are called guinea pigs because they could be bought for a guinea, a gold coin that was used in Britain more than 200 years ago. They also look a little like small pigs with short legs and small bodies.

I have two guinea pigs, Nina and Nibbles.

Pigs are a touchy subject in a lot of cultures around the world. Jewish and Muslim people consider them religiously unclean. Comparing people to pigs or swine is a big insult in many places while, in East Asia, pigs are considered to have good qualities and are well liked.

So, like many things, there are big differences in how people see things depending on where they are and who they are with.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples helped you, Ken!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pearl—n. a hard, white, round object made inside the shell of an oyster, used to make jewelry

appreciate—v. to understand the value of a person, to be thankful for something or someone

breeding—adj. the process by which young animals are produced by their parents

guinea pig—n. a small furry animal, or rodent, that is often kept as a pet

mammal—n. a type of animal that feeds milk to its young and that usually has hair or fur covering most of its skin

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 74: Spin or Rotate?

*Date: 2023-05-05T22:01:00+00:00 | 513 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “spin” and “rotate.”

What is the exact difference between "spin" and "rotate"?

Thank you for your time,

This is an interesting question, Alex. “Spin” and “rotate” as verbs both involve circular movement. They are synonyms, but there may be situations when one sounds better than the other.

Let’s start with “rotate.”

“Rotate” is a verb that means to turn in a circular motion around a center point.

The verb can take a direct object or not.

The earth rotates around the sun. (no direct object)

I rotated the globe on the desk to find Helsinki, Finland. (direct object)

When we think of “rotate,” we might consider the action of “rotating” to be slower than “spinning.”

Rotate also has another meaning. “Rotate” can mean to take turns or to pass or change something in a series.

We should rotate our car’s tires every 5,000 to 7,000 miles.

Now let’s look at “spin.”

The verb “spin” also means to turn in a circular motion on a center point, much like “rotate.” But we typically think of “spin” as being faster than “rotate.”

The dancer spins fast on one foot.

“Spin” also has two other specific meanings as verbs. The first one means to make fiber into thread or yarn.

She spins wool from sheep into yarn using a spinning wheel.

The second meaning is when insects like spiders make thread from their bodies to create webs.

In the book *Charlotte’s Web*, Charlotte, the spider spins a web with the words “Some Pig” in it for her friend, Wilbur.

“Spin” can also be a noun with several meanings. Those meanings connect to the verbal meanings above.

A “spin” is a fast turn.

It can also mean a quick or fun ride in a vehicle.

Let’s take the car out for a quick spin!

“Spin” can also mean mental confusion or physical dizziness. There was a popular song in the 1980s about this kind of spinning.

A “spin” can also be presenting something in an unusual way.

The restaurant puts a Mediterranean spin on popular American food dishes.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Alex!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonyms—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

globe—n. model of the earth

tire— n. a rubber ring that usually contains air and that fits around the wheel of a car or bicycle

yarn—n. thread used for knitting, weaving, or sewing

wool— n. the soft, thick hair of sheep and some other animals

web—n. a net made from silk threads woven together by a spider

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 75: Religious Places

Date: 2023-05-12T22:01:31+00:00 | 433 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about different kinds of religious centers.

I am Saeed from Iran. I am so glad to send you an email. I have a question about differences between a “cathedral” and a “church?”

Are they the same?

This is a great question, Saeed!

Let’s expand this question further to include different religious centers.

A “church” is a building used by Christians for their religious services. Because there are many different denominations of Christians, there are many different kinds of churches.

A “cathedral” is one kind of Christian church. However, a “cathedral” is the main church for an area under the direction of a bishop, a high-level church leader, in the Roman Catholic faith.

Other Christian groups might also call large churches cathedrals. For example, sometimes the term is used in the Eastern Orthodox Church, another form of Christianity based in places like Eastern Europe, Greece, and the Middle East.

There are many famous cathedrals around the world like Notre Dame in Paris, St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow, and the Cathedral of Brasilia in Brazil’s capital.

Now let’s talk about a few different worship and prayer centers for other big religions.

A “temple” is another form of religious building. “Temple” is the English language word for religious centers in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Temples are places of prayer or worship.

Sometimes, people who observe Reform Judaism call their religious centers “temples.”

A “mosque” is a place for Muslims to pray. Women and men usually have separate places to pray within the same building. Muslim holidays and marriages are observed in mosques.

“Synagogues” are Jewish places of worship. They are for prayer and religious services, ceremonies and study.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples helped you, Saeed!

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

denomination—n. a separate religious group

faith—n. strong religious belief or strong belief in someone or something

worship—v. to show respect and love for God or for a god especially by praying, having religious services, etc.

prayer—n. words spoken to a god or higher being especially in order to give thanks or to ask for something

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 76: Woods, Forests and Jungles

*Date: 2023-05-19T22:01:37+00:00 | 709 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the difference between “woods,” “forests,” and “jungles.”

This is Sumaira from Pakistan.

I have been listening to the podcast since August 2022. I am so glad that it helps me to improve my listening skills.

I want to ask you about the difference between the words “woods,” “forest” and “jungle.”

Thanks for writing to us, Sumaira. I love this question because I grew up playing in the woods a lot as a child.

Let's start with the word “woods”

Woods are areas covered with tall growing trees. They are smaller than a forest. The word appears in the singular form, “a wood,” especially in British English.

The main difference between “woods” and a “forest” is the size of the land area and the amount of ground fully covered by trees called the canopy. There are several definitions for a forest. The U.S. National Vegetation Classification system classifies a forest as having 60 to 100 percent of the land covered by the tree canopy. The same system says “woods” are classified as having only 25 to 60 percent of the land covered by the tree canopy. A wood can be small so long as it is bigger than a

grouping of trees.

A “forest” is a larger area where tall trees grow close together largely covering the ground below. There are three main kinds of forests found around the world.

The first aretemperatedeciduous forests. Deciduous means that the trees’ leaves turn different colors and fall off each year. These forests exist where the climate has four seasons and the temperature changes throughout the year.

Many forests in Europe, the United States and parts of Canada are temperate deciduous forests. Animals that you would find in these forests include bears, deer, squirrels, owls and snakes.

Borealforests are found in colder climates that often have freezing temperatures. They are found in places around the Baltic Sea, Siberia, Northern Canada and Alaska. Animals you would find in a boreal forest include reindeer, moose, Artic hares, wolves and wolverines.

Tropicalforests are found near theequatorin warmer, more humid climates. These forests experience two seasons, a rainy season and a dry season. In some tropical forests, the trees’ leaves will fall off in the dry season just like deciduous forests. Tropical forests are found in places like India, Northern Australia, parts of Mexico and Bolivia and and in northwestern South America, on the Pacific Coast.

This brings us to our next word, which is “jungle.”

The word “jungle” is a common term, not a scientific one, for forests found in the tropics. They are very dense and have a lot of undergrowth which means many of the plants andvegetationgrow close to the ground. This undergrowth becomestangledtogether and is extremely difficult to walk through.

Animals you would find in a tropical jungle include primates like gorillas and monkeys; birds like parrots; and reptiles like tropical snakes and lizards.

Sometimes the word “jungle” is used to describe a rainforest. But a rainforest is another kind of forest. It has high rainfall throughout much of the year. The largest tropical rainforest is the Amazon Rainforest in South America. There are also temperate rainforests in the Pacific Northwest in the United States.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Sumaira.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at[learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’sAsk a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

classify– v.to organize things into groups by their type, size, or qualities

temperate– adj.moderate climate that lacks extremes

boreal—adj. of or relating to northern areas and regions

tropical—adj. of or occurring in the tropics

equator—n. an imaginary line drawn around the earth equally distant from both poles, the parallel of latitude

vegetation—n. plants in general: plants that cover a particular area

tangle—v. to become or cause (something) to become twisted together

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 77: Noncount and Mass Nouns

*Date: 2023-05-26T22:01:39+00:00 | 616 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about noncount and mass nouns.

Dear Learning English,

Thank you so much for your excellent programs.

How do we know how to use the singular and plural of some nouns like “effort” vs. “efforts?” Both show in people's writing.

For some nouns, it is very hard to know if they should be used in the singular or plural, like “experience” or “faculty.”

Thank you for your question. These words are in a group called “mass” or “noncount” nouns. These nouns are not counted as individual things.

They present problems even for native speakers of English sometimes. While there are many noncount and mass nouns, we will provide some general rules to help you use them.

Noncount and mass nouns do not have a plural form. For example, sand or milk would be difficult to count. Particles of sand are too small and numerous, and milk is a liquid.

Mass nouns or noncount nouns can describe abstract concepts like “advice.”

In some cases, “faculty” is a collective noun, not a mass noun. Collective nouns describe many individuals who form a group. For example, the “faculty” is made up of individual teachers.

However, if you hear the word “faculties,” it often is describing a person's powers of the body or mind.

The teacher aimed to develop the students' faculties of critical thought.



Noncount nouns are always singular. There are no plural forms of noncount nouns.

Sometimes nouns can be both mass and count nouns. Many people use “effort” and “experience” as mass nouns, while describing a concept, but they can become plural when talking about repeating or multiple attempts (efforts) or individual experiences.

Her boss noticed her efforts on the project over the past few weeks. (repeating or multiple attempts)

The vacation package offers many different experiences like snorkeling, swimming in the ocean or hiking in the rainforest.

Another example of a noun that can be a mass or count noun is “paper.”

The teacher collected the students’ final papers. (count noun referring to the students’ individual pieces of writing)

I need to buy some paper for the printer. (mass noun)

Since noncount nouns cannot be counted, numbers are not used with them. We need to add other words if we want to talk about an amount of a noncount noun. We use words like “types,” “slices” or “pieces.”

Kelly always has four types of cheese in her refrigerator.

The teacher handed the student three pieces of paper to take his test on.

I eat two slices of bread in the morning.

Lastly, we do not use the indefinite articles “a” or “an” with noncount or mass nouns. We do use the definite article “the.”

The rising water flooded the town.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples helped you, Lily.

What questions do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

faculty—n. the group of teachers in a school or college

abstract—adj. relating to or involving general ideas or qualities rather than specific people, objects, or actions

concept—n. an idea about how something works or what it is

snorkeling—n. the act of swimming underwater with a tube to get air for breathing

type—n. a particular kind or group of things

refrigerator—n. an electric device that keeps food cold

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 78: Help or Aid?

*Date: 2023-06-02T22:01:21+00:00 | 473 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “help” and “aid.”

I am Mayer from Colombia. I have been listening to the podcasts since May 2020, and I have learned so much.

I would like to ask you about the difference between “aid” and “help.”

Thank you, Mayer for writing to us and listening to our podcast!

The words “aid” and “help” can sometimes mean the same thing, but there are a few differences. Let us look at these two words more closely.

As a verb, “help” means to assist or to give support. When you help someone, you make things easier for them in some way.

He helped me make dinner last night.

As a noun, “help” means the act of doing something in support of someone, to complete a task for, or to make it easier for the person. It can also be an action taken if a person is in danger and needs to be rescued or supported.

She could use your help tomorrow night at the party.

Their neighbors gave them help after their house caught fire.

I yelled, “Help,” when I fell and broke my leg.

Like “help,” the word “aid” can be either a verb or a noun.

As a verb, “aid” means providing what is useful or necessary.

I aided the teacher by handing out graded papers.

“Aid” as a noun can also be the supplies, materials or support that are provided.

When we think of “aid” we think of organizations, governments and people providing necessary things like food, clothing, money and equipment to those who need it.

The organization provided aid to those affected by the earthquake.

Also, as a noun, “aid” can be something used to help perform a task.

Visual aids can be useful for learning.

An “aide,” with the letter “e” on the end, is a person who assists someone. Sometimes they can be a caregiver to an elderly person or a person with a disability. An “aide” also can be a person who assists someone with their tasks, like a teacher or government official.

Lori gets experience in the classroom by being a teacher’s aide.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Mayer.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

visual—adj. of, relating to, done by, or used in seeing

elderly—adj. old or rather old; past middle age

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 79: Wood, Timber or Lumber?

Date: 2023-06-09T22:02:08+00:00 | 557 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “wood,” “timber,” and “lumber.”

Hi VOA Learning English team. My name is Yen, and I am from Vietnam. I have followed VOA (for) more than 7 years. Can you explain the different meanings between “wood,” “lumber,” and “timber?” I hope you (can) help (with) how to use individual word(s) in sentences also. Many thanks, Nguyen

Thank you, Yen for writing to us and being a loyal follower all these years!

The words “timber” and “lumber” have different meanings in American and British English.

Let us look at what these words mean in American English.

Wood is the hard substance that makes up trees. It helps with the movement of water and nutrients through the tree to the branches and leaves. The structure of wood is fibrous.

There are many kinds of wood, such as hardwood from maple trees and softwood from pine trees.

Wood is also the material used to make things like pencils or toothpicks.

She makes bowls out of wood.

Many children learn to write with a wooden pencil.

In an earlier Ask a Teacher, we answered a question about the word “woods,” which means a forested area.

In the United States and Canada, “timber” can mean either wood from standing trees or wood that has just been cut but is unprocessed.

The loggers loaded the timber onto the truck after cutting down the trees.

Just like “a wood,” the word “timber” can describe a grouping of trees or a wooded area.

Timber often appears combined with other words like “line” and “land.”

The timberline is a high area of elevation that marks the limit for tree growth.

Timberlands are areas of forest used especially for timber.

When loggers are cutting down trees, they traditionally yell, “Timber!” The goal is to warn people of the falling tree.

“Timber” as a verb means to cover or support with timber.

We timbered the cabin with fresh logs.

Now let us look at lumber.

The word “lumber” in American English means wood that has been processed or cut into boards.

You can find lumber products at the local hardware or home-and-garden store.

Lumber, much like timber, can also be used as a verb. It can mean cutting or preparing wood to make it into lumber.

He lumbered his own wood for his house.

But it can also mean to move in a slow or unskilled way.

She lumbered through the room beneath the heavy weight of her load.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Nguyen.

What questions do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

nutrients— n.individual substances in food that humans and animals need to live and grow

fibrous— adj.containing, made of, or resembling fibers

elevation— n.the height of a place

log—n. a long, heavy section of a tree that has fallen or been cut down

hardware— n.equipment used for a particular purpose

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 80: Award vs. Reward

*Date: 2023-06-16T22:02:41+00:00 | 460 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “award” and “reward.”

I am Li from China. I have been listening [to] the VOA Learning English podcast [for] more than one year.

I have benefitted a lot from your program. Can you clarify the meaning of "award" and "reward?" I am always confused (about) the two words.

Thanks for writing to us, Li.

“Award” and “reward” have similar meanings. They both can be different parts of speech - nouns and verbs. They are something you get for your behavior, but there are major differences. Let's look more deeply at each word.

“An award” is a noun. It is something valuable that is given, like a prize, to someone for their accomplishments. “Awards” are usually given by someone to someone else.

The student received an award from the teacher for not missing any school days.

As a verb, “award” means to give someone something, like a prize or money, for an accomplishment.

The judges awarded first place to the dance group.

In the area of law, “award” has slightly different meanings.

As a verb, “award” means to give an official judgment of an amount or sum of money. As a noun, “award” is the amount of money the court or judge decides.

The judge awarded money to the victims.

The award totaled 2.5 million dollars.

Let’s move on to “reward.”

“A reward” is a benefit given to someone in exchange for a certain behavior or action.

The reward for all the students passing the test was an ice cream party.

There is a \$500 reward for returning the lost dog.

“Reward” as a verb means to give someone a reward for their actions or behavior.

I rewarded my cat with some fish after he did a trick.

Sometimes you do not need anyone to reward you. You can reward yourself.

Victoria rewarded herself with a weekend trip to the countryside after a hard work week.

Remember, “award” is based on accomplishments. And “reward” is based on behaviors or actions.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Li.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

accomplishment—n. the successful completion of something

benefit—n. something extra given to workers by an employer in addition to their regular pay

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 81: Finish or Complete?

Date: 2023-06-23T22:01:16+00:00 | 616 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “finish” and “complete.”

Hello VOA Learning English,

My name is Bear Wang, and I am from China. I have a question. What is the difference between “finish” and “complete?”

Looking forward to your reply.

Thank you for this great question, Bear.

Both words share a similar meaning of “coming to an end,” but there are small differences in their meanings as verbs. They can be used as different parts of speech. We often use them in different situations. Let’s look at the differences more closely.

“Finish” as a verb means “to come to an end or close.” We can use it with or without a direct object.

The school day finishes at three in the afternoon.(No direct object)

We finished dinner then watched a movie before going to bed. (With a direct object)

“Finish” can also mean the final ranking of teams or players in a competition.

The basketball team finished 2nd in the state championship.

Another meaning of “finish” as a verb is to defeat, ruin, or even kill:

The criminal charges finished his hopes of a political career.

In the video game, Mortal Kombat, players can perform a kill action to finish off their opponent.

The word “finish” can also be a noun that means “something that perfects or completes” such as the appearance of the surface of a material. “Finish” can even be used to describe the taste of a drink or food in the mouth.

His house has many well-made finishes on its marble countertops and hardwood floors.

The finish of the wine is fruity and fresh.

Let’s move onto “complete.”

“Complete” as a verb has a similar meaning to “finish,” but instead of just “to end,” it means “finish making or doing something in its entirety.”

We can use it with a direct object.

She completed her bachelor’s degree last May.

Kaitlyn completed reading the series of over twelve books!

“Complete” also means to make something perfect or whole.

The shoes complete Daria’s outfit for her brother’s wedding.

The band completed their final set with one of their most popular songs.

As a verb, “complete” means to fill in all the questions on a form.

The doctor reminded the patient to complete both sides of the health history form.

And lastly, “complete” can be used as an adjective. It has several meanings as this part of speech. It can mean “having all steps or parts.” It can mean “total,” “thorough,” or “whole.” And “complete” can also signify that something has “ended” or “finished.”

The writing assignment is not complete until you return the second draft to your teacher with corrections.

Her day always feels complete after she reads a book in bed.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Bear.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

ranking—n.a position in a list that shows things or people of importance

marble—n.a kind of stone that is often polished and used in buildings and statues

entirety— n.the whole or total amount of a material or result of an action

set—n. a sequence of songs performed together for a live concert or recording

draft— n.a version of a document that is made in preparation for the final version

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 82: Victim vs. Casualty

*Date: 2023-06-30T22:01:30+00:00 | 436 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the words, “victim” and “casualty.”

I am Mayer from Colombia. I hope you are well.

I would like to ask you about the difference between the words, “casualty” and “victim.”



Thank you, Mayer, for this question. Both “casualty” and “victim” are nouns. They have similar meanings and usually describe people who have suffered in some way. Let’s look closer at each word.

A “victim” is someone who has been hurt or even killed because of a crime or natural disaster.

Rescuers gave shelter to the flood victims.

We often use the preposition “of” after the word, followed by what happened.

She was a victim of a robbery.

“Victim” can also mean someone who has suffered because of someone else’s actions.

The TV show was an interview with victims of religious abuse.

Also, a victim does not always have to be a person.

The school’s theater and music programs were the main victims of budget cuts.

Let’s move on to “casualty.”

Like “victim,” “casualty” means someone who has been hurt or killed, but the difference is in the cause. If that person has been harmed in a war or accident, then they are a “casualty.”

The implosion of the Titan submarine resulted in five casualties.

We also use “casualty” with the preposition “of” to say that someone suffered because of a situation or an event.

The four children were the only surviving casualties of the plane crash in the Amazon rainforest.

And, like the word victim, a casualty can be something other than a person.

My succulent plant became a casualty of overwatering.

The easiest way to remember which word to use is to understand the situation that harmed the person. If the incident you are talking about was a natural disaster or a crime, the word “victim” is most often used. If you are describing the damage of a war or accident, use “casualty.”

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Mayer.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

implosion—n. a collapse inward or a crushing effect

succulents—n. plants with thick, heavy leaves or stems that store water

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 83: Worth, Worthy and Worthwhile

Date: 2023-07-07T22:01:29+00:00 | 548 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “worth,” “worthy,” and “worthwhile.”

Hello VOA Learning English,

I am Li from China. Could you kindly explain and further explore the differences and usage between these three words: “worth,” “worthy” and “worthwhile?”

Thank you, Li, for writing to us. This is a good question to explore parts of speech using the word “worth.” Let’s examine the differences in parts of speech and how we can use the term.

“Worth” can be a noun. As a noun, it is an expression of value. It can mean an amount of money or something equal to a specific amount.

The Hope Diamond’s worth is estimated to be between 200 and 300 million dollars.

I was short on cash, so I put \$20’s worth of gas in the car.

“Worth” can mean “value” measured by qualities, morals, excellence or wealth.

Knowing your worth can help you get a better salary.

The house’s worth has increased over the past few years.

“Worth” can also operate like a preposition or an adjective meaning “equal in value to” or “deserving of.”

The necklace is worth \$200.

I hope the food at this restaurant is worth standing in this long line!

Some websites say that “worth” is a preposition and others say it is an adjective. In any case, the word is telling us about quality or the amount of some form of value.

Let’s move on to an adjective form of “worth.”

“Worthy” is an adjective that means having worth, value or importance because of qualities or abilities. It describes something or someone who deserves praise or a reward because of those qualities.

There are many worthy charities to give help or money to.

The student was worthy of many scholarships.

We can add the suffix “-worthy” to the ends of words to make another adjective meaning deserving of being valued.

At Voice of America, reporters write many newsworthy stories.

While “worthy” means that something or someone has value or deserves something because of certain qualities or abilities, “worthwhile” describes something that is worth spending time on or making an effort to do.

It is worthwhile to do the dishes now instead of later.

Many high school students now think that getting a college degree is not worthwhile.

The expression “worth your while” means the same thing.

It is worth your while to study English with VOA Learning English.

Try making some sentences with the words you learned today; it may just be worth your while. And please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Li.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com)

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

salary—n. the money paid to a worker for their labor

necklace—n. a piece of jewelry worn around the neck

scholarship—n. money given for the purpose of attending school

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 84: Teen vs. Tween

*Date: 2023-07-14T22:01:16+00:00 | 508 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hi there. This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “teen” and “tween.”

Hello VOA Learning English,

I am Abdirohim from Somalia. Could you kindly explain and further explore the differences and usage between these two words: “tweens” and “teens?”

Thanks for you for this interesting question, Abdirohim! Both words refer to very young people.

There are major differences in the ages of these two groups. Let’s look not only at the meanings of these two words but also how they were made. Let’s start with “teen.”

The word “teen” is a noun that means a young person from ages thirteen to nineteen. We get this word from the ending of the numbers, like thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and so on.

Many teens enjoy hanging out with their friends.

When he was a teen, he loved the Beatles music.

We combine “teen” with “age” to make “teenage,” an adjective that describes someone who is in their teens.

The movie “Mean Girls” is about a group of teenage girls in high school.

We can also add an “-er” ending to “teenage” to make another noun with the same meaning as “teen.”

Some teenagers like to go against their parents.

Now, let’s move on to “tween.”

The word “tween” is a blend of the two words “teen” and “between.”

It is a special blend word since it combines not only the spellings of the two words but the meanings as well. The word is used to describe the age group between a child and a teenager. The earliest age for “tweens” is eight or nine years old, and the oldest age goes up to twelve.

Many tweens go to a middle school after completing elementary and before going to high school.

Maria looks after tweens who are not old enough to be by themselves.

We also call this group of young people “preteens,” with the prefix “pre” to mean “before.”

A fun fact about the history of “tween” is that it may have come from JRR Tolkien who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Some say he came up with “tween” to describe an in-between age for his characters called “hobbits.”

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Abdirohim.

Do you know any other blend words in English or have a question about them? You can send these and other questions you have about American English to our email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

blend—n. a word made by combining parts of two words

elementary—adj. relating to or teaching the basic subjects of education

character—n. a person who appears in a story, for example in a book or television show

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## Article 85: Snug, Cozy and Comfortable

*Date: 2023-07-21T22:03:02+00:00 | 693 words | Source*

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Hi there. This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “snug,” “cozy,” and “comfortable.”

I am Zalat from Egypt. I hope you are well.

I would like to know the difference between these words, “snug,” “cozy” and “comfortable.”

Thanks for writing to us, Zalat. All three words can mean the same thing, to describe feeling relaxed. But there are many small differences, and we can use them in different situations.

Let’s start with “comfortable.”

“Comfortable” is an adjective. If we are talking about clothes or household goods like blankets or bedding, we can call them “comfortable” if they give relaxation or physical ease.

My new bed is so comfortable that I fall asleep right away.

I love coming home and putting on a pair of comfortable pants.

We can extend the meaning of physical ease and relaxation to other areas of our lives.

“Comfortable” can mean freedom from stress or worry.

She lives a comfortable life out in the country away from the stress of the city.

The word can also mean being free of pain.

The nurse asked the patient if she was comfortable after the surgery.

It can mean having financial security.

Zeke has a comfortable income now that he started his new job.

We also have a short form of “comfortable” and that is adjective “comfy.”

She loves to get comfy on the couch and watch her favorite TV shows.

Let's move onto "cozy."

"Cozy" is an adjective and overlaps in meaning with "comfortable."

Something that is "cozy" gives a feeling of comfort, relaxation or closeness.

We are going to a cozycottagein Maine for our vacation.

We had a cozy chat at the coffee shop.

"Cozy up to" can mean to get closer to something in order to get more comfortable, especially in cold weather.

I love to cozy up to the fireplace with a good book.

And lastly, "cozy" has a special meaning as a noun in American English. It means a coveringto keep drinks warm or cold, especially if they are in cans or bottles.

She keeps a variety of cozies in her kitchen for her guests' drinks.

Let's move onto "snug."

There is a saying that we use often with the word, "as snug as a bug in a rug."

This saying describes the meaning of "snug" very nicely. "Snug" as an adjective has a meaning that combines "comfortable" and "cozy" into one. It can describe a feeling ofcontentment, warmth and protection.

If you feel as snug as a bug in a rug, you feel warm, safe and comfortable.

"Snug" also means fitting closely together.

Thetentat our campsite was snug up against the tree in the rain.

Clothing can be snug, meaning it fits close to the body.

Shoes should not fit too snug on the feet.

And finally, as a verb, "snug" means to cause to fit closely or to make snug. We get another verb "snuggle" from "snug." We use "snuggle" more often. It means to draw physically near for comfort

My cat loves snuggling up to me in the winter, so he stays warm.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you,Zalat.

Do you have a question about American English?Send us an emailatlearningenglish@voanews.com.

And that'sAsk a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

relax—v. to become less tense; to become at ease

stress—n. a state of mental tension or worry; experiencing pressure

surgery—n. medical treatment in which a doctor cuts into someone's body in order to repair or remove damaged or diseased parts

income—n. money that is earned from work, investments, business, etc.

cottage— n. a small house

contentment—n. a feeling of being happy and satisfied

tent—n. a portable shelter that is used outdoors, is made of cloth (such as canvas or nylon), and is held up with poles and

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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## Article 86: Climate vs. Environment

Date: 2023-07-28T22:03:36+00:00 | 407 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hi there. This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “environment” and “climate.”

Hello, VOA learning English,

My name is Sukhwant, and I am from India. I have a question about the difference between “environment” and “climate.”

Thank you so much,

Thank you, Sukhwant, for this important question!

“Climate” is part of the “environment.” Let’s look at the meanings of each.

Let’s start with “environment.”

“Environment” has many meanings.

Your “environment” can be everything that surrounds you. Different conditions and objects make up your environment.

My home environment is a peaceful place that includes my husband and my pets.

“Environment” can also be social and cultural elements that contribute to your life or a community.

The phrase “nature or nurture” describes the debate about whether your biology or your environment shapes you.

When we are talking about science, the “environment” is all the physical, biological and chemical conditions around you. The “environment” includes things like climate, geography, diversity of plants and animals and many other things. The environment affects the condition and survival of the things within it. And those things, likewise, affect the environment.

Deserts are environments with land features like sand or dry ground and extreme temperatures of hot and cold.

We must protect our environment.

Note that the word “environment” can be used in specific professions like computer science and linguistics, or the study of language.

Let’s move onto “climate.”

“Climate” has several different meanings. In science, “climate” is the overall weather pattern for an area over time. Climate includes amounts of rain and snow, temperatures and other weather conditions. Climate is part of the environment.

“Climate” also can describe an area that has a certain kind of climate.

She moved to the southern US last year for the warmer climate.

And lastly, “climate” can mean a general atmosphere or situation in a place or period.

The political climate of 1950s in the United States was marked by fears about the spread of communism.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Sukhwant.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

nurture— v. to take care of, feed and protect someone or something, especially young children or plants

diversity— adj. characteristics or qualities that are different

pattern— n. the regular and repeated way in which something happens or is done

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## Article 87: Hear vs. Listen

Date: 2023-08-04T22:01:42+00:00 | 486 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “listen” and “hear.”



My name is Waleed. And I am from Egypt. I would like to ask about the difference between "hear" and "listen."

Thanks in advance,

Thanks for writing to us, Waleed.

This is an excellent question. Both words have to do with sounds and our ears, but they do not mean the same thing. Let's look at each.

"Hear" is a verb that can either take a direct object or not. It has several meanings. First, in its simplest form, the word means to receive sound through the ear.

Every few hours I hear the whistle of the train.

"Hear" can mean to get information or knowledge by hearing something.

I hear that we need to clean out our offices soon!

"Hear" also means to receive communication from someone.

Nathan has not heard from his mother in a while. He needs to call her.

"Hear" can share a meaning with the word "listen." To say you "hear" someone means that you listened to them with attention.

I hear your side of the story, but I do not agree.

Let's move on to "listen."

Just like the last meaning we gave for "hear," "listen" means to hear with attention and understanding. We often use the preposition "to" with it.

"Listen" can mean paying attention to sounds or being alert enough to catch and understand sounds.

Maria listens to a lot of different kinds of music.

My cat listens for the sound of the can-opener to know when it is dinner time.

And when speaking informally, "listen" can be a noun meaning the act of listening itself.

Give this a listen! It's Carly Rae Jepsen's new song.

The biggest difference between "hearing" something and "listening" to something is the amount of attention given to the process. "Hearing" is what we usually call a passive activity, sounds are coming into your ear, you receive them, but you are not necessarily paying attention to them. "Listening" suggests an active effort that requires attention.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Waleed.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

whistle— v.to make a high sound by forcing air through a small hole in the mouth

passive—adj. the quality of not being active or not taking action and letting things happen

active—adj. the quality of taking action or being the agent of some effort or activity

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

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## Article 88: What Does the Song, 'This Is Me' Mean?

*Date: 2023-08-11T22:01:42+00:00 | 480 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello. This week on Ask a Teacher, we will explain parts of a song for a listener.

I have a song I want you to explain. It is This Is Me from the Greatest Showman.

Masafumi, Japan

Thanks for writing to us. The song you asked about is from a 2017 movie about P.T. Barnum. He started his circus, a traveling show featuring unusual animals and people, in 1870. He gathered performers of all kinds for the show. One was a very small man. Another was a very tall woman. A woman named Josephine Clofullia had a beard; her face was covered with long hair. In her act people called her a "bearded lady."

In the movie, Hugh Jackman plays the part of P.T. Barnum. One of his lines in the movie expresses his view of the unusual people he employs: "Every one of us is special, and nobody is like anyone else. That's the point of my show."

The actor who sings the song This Is Me in the movie is Keala Settle. She plays the character Lettie Lutz, a bearded lady, in The Greatest Showman.

Now that you know about where the song appears and who sings it, let us look at its meaning. The song is about strength in the face of criticism. The singer confirms her individuality and self-acceptance.

Here are the words of the song showing its basic meaning. First, the criticism:

Hide away, they say 'Cause we don't want your broken parts  
I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars  
Run away, they say No one will love you as you are

Next, her resistance to it and self-acceptance:

To be “bruised” can mean to have marks on one’s skin from a blow. But it can also mean a person received an emotional injury. Another image we can draw from the song’s words is the person who hears a “different drummer” and marches, or moves forward, to that beat.

The song uses a common expression about a person who does not follow the expected path. That person is “marching to the beat of a different drummer.”

In one part of the song, the singer uses “we” to include all of the unusual performers in the show.

We are bursting through thebarricadesAnd reaching for the sun (we are warriors)Yeah, that's what we've become

Connection to social issues

I hope this answers your question, Masafumi. You may also find it interesting to know that Barnum was against the practice of slavery before it became illegal in this country. And the ideas presented in the movieTheGreatest Showmanare being debated today.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

bruised– adj.injured in a way that causes discoloration to the skin

barricade–n.a line of vehicles or other objects placed across a road or open space to stop people from getting past, for example, during street fighting or as a protest

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## Article 89: Descent vs. Ancestry

*Date: 2023-08-18T22:02:08+00:00 | 410 words | Source*

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Hi there! This week onAsk a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “descent” and “ancestry.”

My name is Karim. I am 53 years old, and I am from Uzbekistan. I have been learning English on my own for 3 years. Although I cannot speak yet, I like learning English, reading books and listening to yourpodcasts.

I would like to ask about the difference between "descent" and "ancestry".

Thanks a lot for your help and support!

Thank you for writing to us, Karim! Keep up the good work learning English with us.

This is a great question!

A few months ago, I wrote about “heritage” and “inheritance.”

These words are related to Karim’s question.

Let's start with "descent."

"Descent" is a noun that means a person's family, social status, ethnicity or origin. We usually use it with an adjective that describes a person's background.

She is of Irish descent.

Beau's family, of Cajun descent, is from the state of Louisiana.

Another noun, "descendant" is connected to "descent." It means a person in a family line that stretches from earlier generations to the present one.

The United States' fourth president, James Madison, had no direct descendants.

Both words come from the verb "descend." To "descend" means to come from a family line or group.

There is a theory that birds descended from dinosaurs.

"Descend" also means to go or come down from a higher place.

Let's move onto "ancestry."

"Ancestry" is a noun that also means a person's ethnic origin or their family members from past to present.

For example, I am American because I was born in the United States, but my great-grandfather was from Italy.

I have Italian ancestry.

We can use the word "ancestry" as a synonym, or a word that has the same meaning, for "descent."

A recent study has shown that many people of Puerto Rico still have Taíno ancestry.

Another noun we use is "ancestor." Your "ancestors" are the people from whom you descended.

In many religions and cultures, ancestors hold a special place and are honored in ceremonies.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Karim.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

podcast—n. digital audio programs

origin—n. the place where a person comes from; the beginning or starting point

## Article 90: Persons vs. People

Date: 2023-08-25T22:01:58+00:00 | 379 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “persons” and “people.”

My name is Richard. I am from Uruguay. I would like to ask you about the differences between “persons” and “people.”

I learned that I have to use "people" as a plural of "person," however I saw that in English sometimes they write "persons" as a plural instead of "people."

Thanks in advance,

Thank you for writing to us, Richard.

This is a great question. Both words are the plural form of “person,” but we use them in different situations. Let’s explore each word further.

A “person” is a noun meaning an individual human. “Person” is in the singular form.

In English, we do have a plural form of that word, which is “persons.” Although we do not use it much in everyday speech, the word “persons” is often used in law, especially when talking about “missing persons” or “persons of interest.”

Police said they are seeking three persons of interest possibly in connection with the robbery.

People and Peoples

Most often, we use the word “people” to mean multiple or a group of humans. It is the most common plural form of “person.” The word is a countable noun. And, although “people” is defined as many humans, it is not a collective noun. Collective nouns describe many individuals who form a group.

There were 50 people picking apples at the orchard.

Susan enjoys being around a lot of people.

We often use the word “people” when talking about one ethnic group or nationality.

The Ukrainian people celebrate their independence day on August 24th.

Sometimes you may see “peoples,” with an “s.” We use “peoples” when we are talking about different ethnic groups in the same area.

The peoples of the Caucasus are spread over six countries and include more than 50 ethnic groups.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Richard.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

orchard—n.an area of land on which fruit trees are grown

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you.

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## Article 91: Cheer vs. Applause

Date: 2023-09-01T22:01:38+00:00 | 568 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “cheers” and “applause.”

Hello VOA Learning English,

I am Sina from Iran. I have been learning English with your app for two years. I have a question:

What is the difference between "cheers" and “applause?"

Thanks for writing to us, Sina.

These two words can mean to express approval or excitement, but the way that these feelings are expressed is a little different.

Cheering uses your voice, and applauding uses your hands to clap and make a sound. But let's look a little closer at each.

“I live for the applause-plause, live for the applause-plause, live for the-

Way that you cheer and scream for me

The applause, applause, applause...”

“Applause” is a noun that has two meanings. The first meaning is the approval or excitement marked by clapping hands together. The second meaning is the show of approval through praise or vocalizing.

Lady Gaga sang that she lives for the applause of her fans.

“Applaud” is the verb form and also has two meanings. When you applaud something, you are showing your approval or excitement by clapping your hands together. The verb can either take a direct object or not.

The crowd applauded the dancers during the show.

The audience applauded after the musical performance.

The second meaning of “applaud” is to praise or say that you like or agree with something that a person has done.

My professor applauded my work this year.

Let’s move onto “cheer.”

Much like “applaud,” “cheer” as a verb means to show approval or excitement by vocalizing or shouting.

Parents cheered on their children at the soccer game.

To “cheer” also means to perform the act of cheerleading. Cheerleaders are people who lead the crowds at sporting events through cheering and applauding the teams. They encourage their team to win.

Kirstin cheered in school for the basketball team.

As a verb, “cheer” also means to be cheerful or to make glad or happy. We often use this verb with the preposition “up” in the command, “Cheer up!”

You look so unhappy, cheer up!

He cheered his girlfriend up with flowers.

Cheer is also a noun, and its meanings are closely related to the verb form.

“Cheer” is a shout of approval or excitement.

The cheers of the crowd grew louder as the football team started winning.

“Cheer” is the sport or activity of cheerleading.

There are different kinds of shoes needed in cheer depending on what position you are in.

“Cheer” also has other meanings as a noun, such as a mood or feeling, gladness or joy, or encouragement.

Holidays are a time for good cheer and making memories with family.

And we often say “cheers” before eating or drinking at a party or social gathering.

Cheers to the happy couple on their wedding day.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Sina.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

scream— v.to shout or cry out

praise— n.spoken or written words about the good qualities of someone or something: an expression of approval for someone or something

audience—n. people who gather to watch a performance

Do you have a question for the teacher? We want to hear from you.

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## Article 92: Mandatory, Compulsory and Obligatory

Date: 2023-09-08T22:02:42+00:00 | 448 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “mandatory,” “compulsory,” and “obligatory.”

Hello. My name is Nelson, and I’m from Nicaragua. Can you help me to understand the difference between “compulsory,” “mandatory” and “obligatory?” Thank you in advance,

This is a great question, Nelson. These three adjectives have the same meaning, so they are synonyms. They share a basic definition of “required.” But there are some slight differences in how often we use each. Let’s start with the most common, “mandatory.”

Mandatory comes from the word “mandate,” which means to give authority to act or as a noun means an official order. Something that is “mandatory” is the result of that action or order. It usually comes from a law or rule.

This is the most common of the three words in question because it is often used in everyday conversations. We use it to describe something that is required by a mandate, law, or rule.

In most public high schools, there is mandatory testing every year.

Seatbelts are mandatory in the U.S. If you do not wear a seatbelt, you are breaking the law.

“Compulsory” is the second most common adjective out of the three, so it is used less often than “mandatory. It also means required by law. We often use it to describe education and military service.

Many countries in the world have compulsory military service like Ukraine, South Korea, and Egypt.

Massachusetts became the first place in the United States to have compulsory schooling for children in the year 1642.

The least common adjective is “obligatory,” but it is the most formal of the three. It means the same as “mandatory” and “compulsory,” but also has other meanings.

We use “obligatory” not just for laws or rules, but we use it to describe obligations that are based on moral or social instances.

Social media is now the obligatory way to message friends because young people do not like to talk on the phone.



Another way we use obligatory is when we are talking about something that people have stereotypically used but is not really needed.

Many movies for young people feature obligatory dances at the end of the film.

The obligatory two-week notice before you quit your job is common in the U.S. but not required by law.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Nelson.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

authority—n. a leadership figure or government

obligation— n. something that you must do because it is morally right

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## Article 93: Awareness vs. Consciousness

*Date: 2023-09-15T22:05:07+00:00 | 383 words | Source*

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between “awareness” and “consciousness.”

I am Mayer from Colombia. I hope you are well.

I would like to know the difference between the words, “awareness” and “consciousness.”

Thanks for this wonderful question, Mayer.

“Awareness” and “consciousness” share somewhat similar definitions.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “awareness” as having knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists. And it defines “consciousness” as being aware of things around you or something within oneself.

But these two words can have many different meanings.

Let's look at each one more closely.

“Awareness” is a noun that comes from the adjective “aware.” When you are aware of something, you know or you have a sense that something exists. For example:

Many drivers have no awareness of other cars in their blind spots, areas around the car that they cannot easily see.

Yoga, your mind and your body connect to bring awareness to places of pain so that you can ease it.

We often talk about “awareness” of social or political causes or beliefs. This is one of the meanings that is shared with “consciousness.”

World Pangolin Day is celebrated on February 18th to raise more awareness for these animals.

Let’s move on to “consciousness.”

“Consciousness” is a noun that has several meanings. It comes from the adjective “conscious.” When you are “conscious,” you are awake and can think and make decisions for yourself.

When you are asleep, you are not conscious.

Your “consciousness” is your physical and mental state of being conscious or awake.

She lost consciousness after she fell and hit her head.

Your “consciousness” also includes your mind and thoughts.

Don’t let his bad feelings cloud your consciousness.

And lastly, “consciousness” is the belief that people can have, or it can be an interest or knowledge of certain ideas.

Greta Thunberg helped younger people to have more interest in climate consciousness and activism.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Mayer.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

yoga– n.a system of exercises for gaining bodily or mental control and well-being

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## Article 94: On Time or In Time?

*Date: 2023-09-22T22:05:11+00:00 | 378 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between "in time" and "on time?"

Have a great day,

Thanks for this great question, Nguyen! Both “on time” and “in time” have to do with being punctual and deadlines. Sometimes people use these expressions interchangeably, but they are different. And “in time” has a few more uses.

Let's look at each one.

“On time” is an expression that includes a preposition (on) and a noun (time). If something is “on time” it arrives at or by an exact time or deadline. It is not late. You can think of “on time” as when something happens. And if it happens at that exact time, then it is “on time.”

Jordan did not submit her homework on time, so she received 5 points off.

The train is always on time so I am never late to work.

Let's move onto “in time.”

“In time” is also an expression that includes a preposition (in) and the noun “time.” Like “on time,” it is used to talk about deadlines and times.

It means early enough or not too late for something to happen. Often, we use it to talk about something in relation to another event or thing using another preposition “for” after the expression.

Even though my train was late, I got to work in time for the meeting.

We made it home in time to watch our favorite show.

“In time” is also used two other ways.

In music, “in time” means to keep arhythmor speed.

The tap dancer was able to keep time with the musicians.

And “in time” also means “eventually.” We use it to describe the passage of time and something happening in the future.

In time, the leaves will turn bright colors as autumn settles in.

The medicine will start to work, and you will feel better in time.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Nguyen.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that'sAsk a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

punctual– adj.doing something at the expected time

rhythm– n.a regular, repeated pattern of sounds or movements

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## Article 95: Teacher, Lecturer or Tutor?

Date: 2023-09-29T22:04:00+00:00 | 492 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between a “teacher,” a “tutor,” and a “lecturer.”

My name is Saddam, and I am from Uganda in Africa.

I request your help to differentiate between three words and their deep meanings: “teacher,” “lecturer” and “tutor.”

Thanks for this great question, Saddam. All three words are nouns used to describe educators. All three teach students in different ways and have different experiences and qualifications. Let’s look at each word so we understand the differences.

A teacher is a professional educator who teaches students.

When we think of a teacher, we see a smaller classroom with 15 to 25 students. A teacher might teach in front of the class or go around to work with individual students.

In the United States, we call those who teach students up to 12th-grade teachers. They teach all subjects in elementary school or specific subjects like math, English or history in middle or high school.

Teachers are usually required to have an advanced degree, such as a master’s in education. They also must pass a certification or test in general teaching knowledge and specific subjects.

Ms. Leslie is a first-year elementary school teacher. She recently completed her certifications and spent many hours in a classroom helping another teacher.

A lecturer, or professor, is an educator who teaches in colleges or universities.

Lecturers often teach larger classes and stand in front of a big room. For one-on-one time with students, they meet outside the classroom during office hours.

Lecturers or professors usually have an advanced degree, like a Master’s or Ph. D, in their subject or special field of study.

Angela is an economics lecturer at a university. She has a Ph.D., but this is her first year of full-time teaching.

A tutor is an educator who specializes in a certain subject or content area. Tutors usually help students one-on-one or in small groups.

They do not need a degree. However, some professional tutors have at least a bachelor’s degree.

High school students can be tutors to other students if they have advanced knowledge in a subject.

Tutors usually give study help to students at different times, like in the evening or on the weekends. They make lessons more personal and help students with specific problems.

I have a big English test coming up, so I am meeting with my tutor after school every day this week so I can be prepared.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Saddam.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

qualification— n. a special skill or type of experience or knowledge that makes someone suitable to do a particular job or activity

grade— n. a level of study that is completed by a student during one year

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## Article 96: Why Do Songs Break Grammar Rules?

Date: 2023-10-06T22:05:06+00:00 | 479 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! Our question for today on Ask a Teacher comes from a reader in Brazil.

I have an easy question. Why does Sir Elton John use “don’t” and not “doesn’t” in the song *This Train Don't Stop There Anymore*?

That’s a great question. As an English teacher, I often hear things in songs that do not follow grammar rules. Sometimes, I believe it is because the songwriter wants to speak in a way that is used by another community. Also, informal, or everyday, language is often not completely grammatical.

Songwriting partners

Let’s look at some of the words of *This Train Don't Stop There Anymore*. It appears in a collection of songs called *Songs from the West Coast*, published in 2001. The songwriter Bernie Taupin co-wrote this and many other songs with Elton John. Taupin wrote the words and John wrote the music. Taupin said he was always interested in “Americana,” the culture and history of America, and in country and western music. That helps explain the images and language he put into this song.

In the first part, the singer says he does not believe in miracles anymore and has lost strong feelings about romantic love. The second part brings in images of an old kind of train:

I used to be the main express  
All steam and whistles heading west  
Picking up my pain from door to door  
Riding on the storyline, furnace burning overtime  
But this train don't stop  
This train don't stop  
This train don't stop there anymore

The singer tells us of the strong emotions he once had by comparing them to a fast, or express, train. The high, sharp sound of a train warning people of its approach is called a whistle. Old trains used to be powered by steam engines that let out whistles as they passed through towns.

If we connect these words to the earlier part of the song, we can get a picture in our mind of a lonely, isolated place. A town where the train no longer stops is usually a quiet place with little activity. We can suppose that town is like the singer’s heart.

My understanding of the song is that the singer is saying he no longer wants to be in love because the feeling is too strong. Continuing the image of the train, he sings,

It really means my engine's breaking down

What do you think, Luiz? Would the song be just as good if Elton John sang, “That train doesn’t stop there anymore?” Maybe it would not have the quality of informal language Taupin was hoping for.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for Learning English.

This Train Don't Stop There Anymore lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

informal— adj.words, phrases, and idioms in speech or writing that are casual, ordinary, or colloquial

miracle—n.an unusual or powerful event believed to be caused by God

isolated— adj.separated from other persons or things; alone; solitary

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## Article 97: Historic and Historical

*Date: 2023-10-13T22:05:24+00:00 | 389 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! Our question for today on Ask a Teacher comes from a reader in China.

This is an interesting question. The differences between these two words have grown over the years not based on their grammatical form, but on how people have used them. So, let’s start by taking a look at what the Merriam-Webster online dictionary says about the ways people use the words.

The word “historic” is used for important and famous events in history. Here are two examples of that use.

The weather reporter warned of a big storm coming that will be of historic proportions.

Will you come to Washington, D.C. and be part of this historic event?

In these two examples, we see “historic” used for a storm and for a gathering. The word “historic” might also appear when people talk about sports.

You can also see the word used to describe places. In the United States, we have an organization that has information on important places, for example, the home of a former president. Here is a statement using that phrase, “historic places.”

That home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

And many local organizations fix up old buildings that are part of their town’s history. This process is called “historic preservation.”

In this neighborhood, homeowners care a lot about historic preservation.

Moving on to the word “historical,” we find it used to describe history, as in “the historical record.” It appears more often than the word “historic” and also appears with words like perspective, literature, and analysis. Here are some examples.

Historical evidence suggests wolves are both man’s best friend and his worst enemy.

Isabel Allende wrote many works of historical fiction.

To sum up, if the thing itself is important or famous, you would probably use “historic” with it. If the thing you are talking about relates to history, something real in the past, use the word “historical.”

I’m Jill Robbins.

Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for Learning English.

surf –v. to look through information in search of something interesting or useful

proportion –n. the relationship between the qualities of at least two things, for example, in size

perspective –n. a way of thinking about something, especially one that is influenced by your beliefs or experiences

analysis –n. the process of considering something carefully or using statistical methods in order to understand it or explain it

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## Article 98: 'When' with Past Tense

*Date: 2023-10-20T22:05:12+00:00 | 357 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about using “when” with past simple or past continuous tenses.

Is the sentence The good news came when we weren't expecting it grammatically correct?

If it is correct, how can we understand the following rule:

“As a general rule, you should use “while” in a clause with a continuous action, using a verb in a continuous tense. Use “when” in a clause with a single action, using a simple past or present tense.”

Thank you for writing, Jinye. Keep up the good work learning English with us!

The sentence “The good news came when we weren't expecting it” is grammatically acceptable.

As for “when” and “while” we answered a question about How to Use ‘When’ and ‘While’ in an earlier Ask a Teacher program.

We explained that some experts call both words “subordinating conjunctions” in some cases. This means they signal how pieces of information are related to one another. And we shared that general rule to give an idea of how they are used in English.

Let's look at these two examples:

When the phone rang, I was making dinner.

While I was making dinner, the phone rang.

“While” and “when” both relate to time although “while” usually signals that two events are happening at the same time.

Using English in real life

Another issue to consider is how people use language in real life. Sometimes, the real-life use of language does not seem to equal textbook rules.

For example, many native users of English use “when” with continuous action. In fact, “when” is used with past progressive more often than “while” in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Here are some example sentences from the corpus.

When I was growing up, I wanted to be a cowboy.

I was thinking about her when we were talking.

When he was running for President, Obama gave electrifying speeches.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Jinye.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 99: This and That

*Date: 2023-10-27T22:05:49+00:00 | 400 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the use of “this, that, these, those.”

Please, how should I use the pronouns “this, that, these, those” beyond the notion of near or far?

Thank you for writing, Odilon. This is an excellent question!

We know that the words “this, that, these, those” have many meanings and uses in English.

One meaning of “this/these” is to note someone or something is near in physical distance. “That/those” can note someone or something that is far in physical distance. Here are two examples:

You can say, “This book is mine” while holding it in your hand.

And you can say, “That book is yours” while pointing at one on the table across the room.



Near and far can also demonstrate time. "This" can mean now or current, and "that" can mean before or earlier. For example,

The solareclipsewill not happen againthisyear.

The last supermoon came in September. Atthattime, the moon's orbit brought it closer than usual to Earth.

In the first sentence, "this" notes the current year. In the second sentence, "that" refers to a time in the past.

We can also use "this/that" to show preference or a desirable choice. "This" can demonstrate a more desirable choice, and "that" can demonstrate a less desirable choice. Here are two examples:

Thisis my favorite restaurant.

Thatdoesn't sound very fun.

In the first sentence, "this" shows the restaurant is the best choice, and "that" in the second sentence demonstrates the idea is not a desirable one.

Focus, or attention

"This/these" also has an additional use. We can use "this/these" for focus, or attention, to establish new information. Using "this/these" can direct the reader's or listener's attention to important information. Here is an example.

Andthisis one major concern about the use of artificial intelligence: ownership.

"This" directs the reader to pay attention to the new information that is coming in the sentence. The important information in the sentence is a major concern. Ownership is the major concern.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Odilon.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at[learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that'sAsk a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

notion—n. idea or belief

eclipse—n. an event in which the sun is blocked by the moon, or when the moon passes through the Earth's shadow

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## Article 100: "in which" and "to which"

Date: 2023-11-03T22:05:27+00:00 | 290 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the use of prepositions with “which.”

Dear VOA Ask a Teacher,

I am Shohei from Japan. I enjoy many contents of VOA learning English every day. I have a grammatical question for using "which" such as, in which, of which, from which, and so on. How do native English speakers immediately decide to use the correct preposition? I cannot understand these differences.

Thank you (^^)!

Thank you for writing, Shohei. This is a good question.

When we use “which” with a preposition, it is mostly in written English to note place, time, or manner (or the way that something is happening.)

The most often used prepositions with “which” are “in” and “to.” The Corpus of Contemporary American English shows that “in” is used five times more often than “to.” And they both make up more than 60 percent of all uses of a preposition with “which.”

Many times, “in which” and “to which” are used as part of an expression in English. They include “the extent to which,” “the way in which,” and “the manner in which.” Here are some examples:

We can explore the way in which nature changes.

Our future depends on the extent to which humans can stop climate change.

Fans were not pleased with the manner in which the trainer talked about the team.

One more thing, if you’re not sure which preposition to use with “which”, a good choice is “in” because it’s used the most often.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Shohei.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 101: The Many Uses of ‘Get’

Date: 2023-11-10T22:05:13+00:00 | 482 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the use of the word "get."

I would like to know more about the use of the word “get.” Over time I have realized that it is an important word used in different ways, but I would like a clearer and broader explanation about its use.

Could you explain more about this word, please? Thank you very much.

Thank you for writing, Mireya. This is a good question.

"Get" is the most common verb in any situation, and it is around the 40th most used word in the English language. In speech, "get" is used almost once per minute on average.

So, your interest in it is well placed.

VOA Learning English has explored "get" several times.

In an earlier Ask a Teacher program we discussed the difference between "take" and "get." And in an earlier Everyday Grammar program we discussed that "get" can be used with the passive voice although it is rare.

We also discussed many meanings of "get" in another Everyday Grammar program. We shared that "get" has more than 50 uses, and it appears as part of at least 12 phrasal verbs or other expressions.

In earlier programs, we discussed meanings of "get" such as understand, know, obtain, receive, feel, become, buy, fetch, location, and its use to express impatience or frustration.

As you can see, there is a lot to know about "get."

Examples of "get"

Here is some additional information about the use of "get."

"Get" is extremely common in spoken language, but it is rare in written language. Careful writers avoid "get" because it is usually informal.

"Get" is often used with subjects that are not living things. This is important because most verbs in speech are used with animate, or live, subjects.

"Get" is the second most common verb used with "do" to demonstrate special importance or difference. For example:

She finally ~~did~~ get better.

There is the structure "get" + adjective presented in the Everyday Grammar program. Adjectives used with "get" describe physical and mental changes.

The most common adjective used with "get" is "worse." Other common adjectives include "older" and "better."

In addition, "get" is often used with adjectives to describe an increasing amount. The most often used phrases for this use are

get worse and worse and get bigger and bigger.

We should explain one final use of "get." Some words are used in a fixed series in English. "Get" is used in many fixed series of words in spoken English. They are:

You're going to get

I'll have to get

I haven't gotten any

If you/I can get

I got one of them

haven't got a clue

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Mireya.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

frustration--n. a poor feeling from lack of solving a problem

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## Article 102: Source or Resource?

Date: 2023-11-17T22:05:00+00:00 | 432 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the words "source" and "resource."

Thanks for your question, Isac. Both "source" and "resource" have similar word histories. One is the root of the other. That is the reason they look similar and might be confused. But these two words are quite different! Let's consider each one.

"Source" can be a noun or a verb. As a noun, a "source" is the origin or beginning of something.

For example, we often talk about the source of rivers. This source is where the river starts, like another body of water such as a lake.

The Nile River has two sources, the Blue Nile and the White Nile.

A source can also be a person or something like a book or an article that supplies information.

When you write an essay, you should write down your sources.

A source can also be what something is made of.

Red bugs called cochineal are the source for a red color used in dyes.

"Source" can also be verb. It can mean to find materials for something, or it can mean to provide something.

The cook sourced ingredients for the dish from her own garden.

Many jewelry companies source diamonds grown in a lab.

Let's move onto "resource."

The word "resource" is a noun. It has many meanings. A "resource" is something that can be easily found and used quickly in a time of need. It can be a supply of something, support or aid.

This kind of resource can include money, assets or human power in cases of emergencies.

The United States supplies military resources to its allies in times of conflict.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent provide resources to people following natural disasters.

A "resource" can also be something naturally found in the Earth's environment or underneath its surface.

Natural resources include metals, oil, water and even sunlight.

And lastly, a "resource" can be something or someone that can help you get information or is an expert in a subject or industry.

Her college advisor became a great resource to her when she was choosing her field of study.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Isaac.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

ingredient— n. something that enters into a compound or is a component part of any combination or mixture

asset— n. something that is owned and that has value

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## Article 103: Danger vs. Hazard

Date: 2023-11-24T22:05:27+00:00 | 382 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the words "danger" and "hazard."

Thanks for your question, Roberto. Both "danger" and "hazard" are nouns that can mean a dangerous or life-threatening situation. But each can refer to a more specific possibility of harm that separate meanings.

Let's start with "danger."

"Danger" has a few meanings. It can be used as a substitute for risk, for example.

Ellie's job is in danger since she protested the pay changes at her workplace.

The danger of wrecking a car is greater when it begins to rain because the water spreads the oil on the roads before it washes it away.

A "danger" is something or someone that can hurt you.

The escaped prisoner was a danger to the area surrounding the prison.

Dangers usually involve immediacy.

This is different from "hazard," in which the exposure might be extremely low, but there is a higher chance of great harm or death.

Let's look more closely at "hazard" now.

A "hazard" is a source of danger or harm to a person or environment.

Deep frying turkeys on Thanksgiving is a fire hazard.

Radiation exposure is a hazard to our health.

"Hazard" is a known threat. Yet, there is an unpredictable element to a "hazard."

Take for example a volcano. Volcanoes are a hazard to not only the people that live near them, but they are also a hazard to the environment. Volcanoes have a great possibility of harm and the possibility of eruptions is difficult to predict.

As a plural noun, "hazards" are special lights on cars that flash on and off to warn other drivers. They are used when a vehicle is either not working properly or if the road or weather conditions are hazardous.

Drivers often turn on their hazards when there is thick fog to make it easier for other drivers to see them.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Roberto.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

exposure—n. the fact or condition of being affected by something or experiencing something

flash—n. a sudden burst of light

## Article 104: Price vs. Rate

Date: 2023-12-01T22:05:35+00:00 | 415 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we will answer a question about the difference between the words "price" and "rate."

Hello VOA Learning English,

I am confused by the words "price" and "rate." Could you please explain these words for me?

Irfan from Pakistan

This is a great question, Irfan. Both words can describe an amount of money in exchange for either goods, services or a certain amount of time spent. We use them in different situations. "Rate" has more meanings and uses as well.

Let's start with "price."

"Price" is a noun that can be countable or singular. As a countable noun, it means the amount of money that is exchanged for something. It can also be the amount asked for or paid.

The price for twelve eggs was almost \$5.00.

The asking price of the house was \$300,000, but it was sold for under \$289,000 after negotiations.

As a singular noun, "price" is the cost, result or loss that is paid to get something else.

Amanda's loss of a flexible schedule is the price of going back to school.

We can also use "price" as a verb that takes a direct object.

Marc priced his used TV at \$200.

Let's look more closely at "rate" now.

A "rate" is a cost or value per unit for services or time. This is different from the "price" of something.

For example, you hire a gardener, and their rate is \$50 an hour. If the gardener worked three hours at a rate of \$50 per hour, then the total price is \$150.

"Rate" can also be used to talk about amounts, degrees, or speed of something in comparison to something else.

Your heart rate is the number of beats per minute.

The United States obesity rate is almost double that of Italy.

"Rate" can also be a verb that means to apply a value, worth, strength or estimation. It can take a direct object or not.

Finland, Denmark and Iceland rate their happiness level as very high.

Saratoga Springs is rated as one of the best small cities in the U.S.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Irfan.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

flexible—adj. readily changed or changing

gardener— n.a person who cares for a garden

obesity— n.the state of being overweight in an unhealthy way

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## Article 105: Ability or Capability?

Date: 2023-12-08T22:05:15+00:00 | 395 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the difference between the words “ability” and “capability.”

Hello VOA Ask a Teacher,

I am Lyla from China. I am confused about “ability” and “capability.” I looked them up in the dictionary, but I still can't tell them apart.

Can you explain the difference?

Thanks, and best regards,

Thanks for your question, Lyla. The words are so similar that their use can even trouble native English speakers! Generally, ability describes special skills and qualities now in use. “Capability” speaks more to the possible power or use of those skills and qualities.

Let's take a closer look at each.

“Ability” is a noun that comes from the adjective “able.” If you are “able,” you can do something. You can carry out an action. “Ability” means a quality, skill, or aptitude that you have that makes it possible for you to do something. Compare these sentences:

I have the ability to speak Russian and English.

Courtney's disabilities are the result of a car accident.

Henry's cooking abilities increased over years of practice in his own home.

Let's move onto “capability.”



“Capability” is the quality or state of being capable. “To be capable” means having qualities or skills to successfully perform some future action. Your “capability” depends more on the situation, environment, or your desire to do something rather than just your ability to do it.

He has the capability of lifting very heavy weights, but he injured himself last year, so he chooses to lift light weights while he recovers.

“Capability” also can mean a skill set that can be further developed.

The new employees have strong capabilities in marketing. They just need more experience in the business world.

Finally, “capability” is the possibility to be affected by use or treatment.

The movie Oppenheimer is about the development of the United States’ nuclear capabilities and eventual use of those weapons.

Critics question the administration’s capability to compromise on a solution.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Lyla.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

confused—adj. lost or unsure of something

aptitude— n. the ability to learn something

We want to hear from you.

Our comment policy is [here](#).

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## Article 106: Wondering About Wonder?

*Date: 2023-12-15T22:05:00+00:00 | 424 words | [Source](#)*

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the word “wonder” as a noun and a verb.

I am one of your followers from Iran.

I have question about the word "wonder."

How can I use it as a noun and a verb in a sentence in various ways?

This is a great question, especially for the month of December, Ali. We sometimes describe Christmas as “the most wonderful time of the year.” The expression comes from a song by Andy Williams.

“Wonderful” means full of wonder. But what exactly is “wonder?”

In today’s Ask a Teacher will we answer your question by looking at “wonder” as a noun and a verb.

Wonder as a noun

“Wonder” is the feeling of surprise and amazement usually caused by something that is new, strange, unexpected or different. It can also be something that people can admire or love and want to protect.

The roaming cats of Old San Juan are one of the wonders of Puerto Rico.

You may have heard people say, “no wonder.” This is another way of saying “it is not surprising.” For example:

It is no wonder that the meeting started late. Everyone was stuck in traffic!

Now let’s look at “wonder” as a verb.

“Wonder” can mean to be in a state of surprise.

I always wonder at Amaury Guichon’s life-size chocolate sculptures of things like dragons and giraffes!

It can also mean to think about something because it interests you.

I wonder what the economy will be like after inflation.

Jessica wondered where her next vacation would be: Scotland or Thailand?

We can also use “wonder” to make formal and polite requests.

I wonder if you could pick me up at the train station next week.

“Wonder” can also be used as an adjective. We use “wonder” to describe something that is extraordinary.

Wonder Woman has superhuman strength and the ability to fly!

There were many wonder drugs developed in the 20th century, including penicillin and insulin.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Ali.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

amazement— n. a feeling of being very surprised or shocked

admire—v. to feel respect or approval of someone

roam—v.to go to different places without having a particular purpose or plan

sculpture— n. a form of art in which hard materials are worked into object that has width, height, and depth

formal—adj.serious and official

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## Article 107: Assessment and Evaluation

*Date: 2023-12-22T22:05:00+00:00 | 381 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the words “assessment” and “evaluation.”

What is difference between Assessment and evaluation?

Thank you for writing, Noor. This is a good question.

Many people use the terms assessment and evaluation interchangeably. That means they see little or no difference between them in most cases. The terms are related. They both involve performance and education, but they are not the same thing. It is a mistake to use them interchangeably.

Assessment focuses on student learning, documenting what students know and what they can do. Assessment has many purposes. They include finding out a student’s overall ability, measuring to what degree a student has gained control of an identified set of criteria, and providing students with information about their strengths and weaknesses. Assessment is a continual process. Its goal is to help students improve.

Here are some sentences using assessment.

Teachers should use classroom assessments to inform instruction.

The students completed a weekly assessment.

The school uses a variety of assessment tools.

Evaluation often focuses on the performance of an organization. Evaluation involves using criteria and evidence to find out if an organization is meeting its goals. Evaluation only happens at set times, and its goal is to judge the quality of an organization. Assessment can be a part of the evaluation process. That is because assessment results are often used to make judgements.

Here are some sentences using evaluation.

The class was canceled due to results from the curriculum evaluation.

The school district completed its special education program evaluation last month.

The governor focused on the lack of school counseling evaluations.

Although assessment and evaluation are both used in education and relate to measuring performance, they have different focuses, purposes, timing, and outcomes. The terms are also used a lot in other fields such as finance, medicine and engineering.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Noor.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

focus on—v. pay attention to

degree—n. a level which can be measured in some way and compared to other levels

criteria—n. conditions which must be met

outcome—n. final product or end result

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## Article 108: Change and Vary

*Date: 2023-12-29T22:05:00+00:00 | 433 words | Source*

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the words “change” and “vary.”

I'm Ali, and I live in Mashhad, Iran.

What is the difference between "change" and "vary?"

Thanks for writing to us, Ali!

Here is the first major difference between the word “change” and the word “vary”: Only one of them is a noun and a verb.

“Change” is that word. You can “change your opinion” for example. That's change as a verb.

You can also have “a change of opinion.” That's change as a noun!

“Vary” is more narrow in meaning. It means to make a partial change in something, or to diversify something.

Sometimes change and vary are synonyms.

Let's look at each one more closely.

Change as a verb

While “change” can be either a noun or a verb, we will compare the verbal meanings and uses to “vary.”

It can be used in a lot of different situations and can be a synonym for many other verbs like transform, exchange, switch or alter.

“Change” meanings range from making a difference or altering something particular to completely transforming or replacing something.

Many schools are changing the college application requirements in response to the ending of Affirmative Action.

Water changes from a liquid to a solid when it freezes at zero degrees Celsius.

“Change” can also mean making a slight modification in something to switching or making a shift from one thing to another.

The leaves change colors every autumn.

Emma changed her shirt because she spilled something on it.

Derek changed his money from dollars to euros when he went to France.

Andrey’s accent changed after he moved to the big city.

Now let’s look at “vary.”

“Vary” is a verb. It can mean to make a partial change or to differentiate between items by size, amount or degree.

I like to vary my meals with different types of grains and greens.

Insects vary in size from large to very small.

It can also mean to show or experience a change.

The night sky varies depending on the Earth’s rotation and orbit around the sun.

Interest rates vary due to how the economy is.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Ali.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonyms—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

accent—n. a way of pronouncing words that occurs among the people in a particular region or country

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## Article 109: What Does Slender Mean?

Date: 2024-01-05T22:05:00+00:00 | 375 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Nirmala about the meaning of the word “slender.”

What does the word “slender” mean?

Thank you for writing to us, Nirmala!

As the year starts, many people make new goals. A large number of them center on losing weight. This is a great time for this question! We will talk about the word “slender” and offer some synonyms to help you compare and understand this word better.

The word “slender” is an adjective.

The first meaning has to do with body shape. Something slender is small around, especially in comparison to its length. A slender person has no extra fat and little roundness, usually in an appealing way.

In other words, slender has a positive connotation when used to describe a person. The word “skinny” on the other hand, suggests an underweight condition that is not appealing.

The slender girl could walk through the narrow opening in the fence.

Many cultures considered a long, slender neck beautiful.

Some synonyms that you can use in place of “slender” include “slim,” “lean” and “thin.” These words all have a more positive association to them than “skinny.” But what separates them from “slender” is the idea that “slender” also includes the association of “graceful.”

Slender can also be used to describe non-physical things.

The mayoral candidate won by a slender number of votes.

In that sentence, slender means small.

Spending money is slender just before payday.

In that one, it means limited.

The slender glass tube was all that protected the rare sample.

In that last sentence, slender means small but also suggests a delicate, or easily breakable, quality.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Nirmala.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

synonym—n. a word that is similar in meaning to another word

connotation— n.the feelings or ideas that words give in addition to their meanings

sample— n.a part (as a set of individuals chosen from a whole population) used for investigating the whole

graceful— n.n form or action: pleasing or attractive in line, proportion, or movement

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## Article 110: Adverbs, Gerunds, Participles

Date: 2024-01-12T22:05:00+00:00 | 409 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from an English learner named Sidra.

I want to know the difference between adverb[s] of frequency and degree and...between participle[s] and gerunds.

Thank you for writing, Sidra. First, let's answer your question about adverbs.

Different adverbs show different kinds of information.

Adverbs of time tell us four things: when, how long, how often, and relationship in time.

When something takes place. For example:

I finished the project yesterday.

How long something lasts, or duration.

The class seemed to last forever.

Frequency, or how often something happens.

Sometimes I skip breakfast.

And, the relationship of two things in time.

He still has my laptop.

Adverbs of degree answer the questions “How much/many?” or “To what extent?” For example,

She’s staying with us for a bit.

We’re fairly certain it’s a good idea.

Degree adverbs can also demonstrate intensity. Some show high intensity. These kinds of adverbs are known as amplifiers.

The food was completely gone.

Others show low intensity, called diminishers.

I'm almost finished with the book.

So, adverbs of frequency tell how often, and adverbs of degree tell how much or to what extent.

Now for the second question – the difference between participles and gerunds.

Participles and gerunds

We know that verbs can end in -ing. Participles and gerunds are also words that end in -ing. Let's look at the differences.

When a verb ends in -ing, it is the progressive or continuous aspect. That means the event is incomplete or temporary.

We are listening to the podcast.

She was studying at the library.

Gerunds also have an -ing ending, but they do not act like verbs. A gerund is a noun. This means it can be the subject or object of a sentence. For example:

Listening to music is my favorite hobby.

She loves running.

Participles have an -ing ending, too. They also do not act as verbs. A participle is an adjective. We usually use a participle when we are describing an experience that makes us feel certain emotions. For example:

Her answer was surprising.

In this sentence, the participle "surprising" describes how you feel about "her answer."

Some other words that are often used as participles are amazing, boring, calming, exciting, and worrying.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Sidra.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

a bit—adv. a little, a small amount

extent—n. the size or amount of something; how much it covers

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## Article 111: University vs. College

Date: 2024-01-19T22:05:00+00:00 | 639 words | Source

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Le about the difference between the words “university” and “college.”

I love this program.

Would you mind explaining the difference between "university" and "college?"

I often misunderstand these two nouns.

We are glad you love our programs, Le, and thank you for writing to us.

This is an important question, especially for international students who might want to apply to U.S. colleges and universities.

Both places provide higher education. But their degree offerings, number of students and costs differ.

Let's start with “university.”

“Universities” are large schools offering higher education that includes undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

Most faculty at universities are not only teachers but also researchers.

Large universities have tens of thousands of students and have students from all over the U.S. and the world.

Since universities offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees, they may offer many classes in many fields. But the cost of attending a university can be high, especially at private universities in the U.S. which are not supported by state governments.

An example of a public university is West Virginia University.

An example of a private university is Yale University in the state of Connecticut.

Let's move on to “college.”

“College” can also mean a school where students receive higher education. Many high school students are asked:

Where do you want to go to college?

The answer to this question could be a university, a community college or even a trade school.

We also refer to students in higher education as “college students.”

When Liz was a college student, she took classes during the day and worked in a hotel at night.

“College” is often used as a general word for a school offering education after high school. But “college” can have more specific meanings too.

Colleges are smaller schools that focus on undergraduate programs. They include community colleges, private and liberal arts colleges and even technical colleges and trade schools.

Faculty at community colleges mainly teach and advise students, rather than do research.

A college can also be a division within a university. For example, a university might have a “college of arts and sciences,” which gives bachelor’s degrees.

Colleges are smaller and have fewer students: hundreds to thousands of students rather than tens of thousands of students.

Because colleges, especially community colleges, serve a smaller population, they have fewer international students.

Classes are also likely to be limited at colleges, especially at some community colleges. They might offer general education classes, career or technical degrees. Community colleges might offer some four-year undergraduate degrees, but many offer two-year programs. The aim might be for students to transfer to a four-year school. Career or technical certificates permit students to immediately enter the workforce upon completing the classes.

She went to a community college to study cooking to get a job working in a restaurant.

The cost of attending a community college is lower. The schools offer a low-cost way to gain college credits. However, private colleges and some technical schools may be just as costly as private universities.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Le.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

degree—n.a document that shows a person has complete a series of classes at a college or university

undergraduate—adj.related to a degree for four years of schooling after high school

graduate—adj.related to studies after a person has received a four-year degree

faculty—n.the group of teachers at a school

trade—n.a job that requires special skills and training which is done by using your hands

career—n.the path of a job or jobs, that are usually related, which a person takes over a long period of time

certificate—n.a document showing that a person is has completed training or classes

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## Article 112: Meanings of 'As'

Date: 2024-01-26T22:05:00+00:00 | 389 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Bill in China about the word “as.”

Thank you for your high quality American English teaching!

The following sentence is from one of your recent news, and I can’t understand a bit of it. Would you like to help me?

And the comedy “Poor Things” upset summer hit “Barbie,” as Hollywood threw its biggest party since labor disputes shut down much of show business last year.

To be precise, I can’t understand the part after “as Hollywood...”

I think “as Hollywood...” might be a reason to describe the part before.

Yours sincerely,

Bill YANG from Beijing, China

Thank you for writing, Bill. This is a very good question. The word “as” has many meanings and uses in English. In your example, “as” is a subordinator. Subordinators are used to join two clauses and add information.

In this sentence, “as” shows that the events were happening at the same time. The movie “Poor Things” upset the movie “Barbie” at the same time that Hollywood threw its biggest party. Both things happened at the Golden Globes earlier this month.

In addition to meaning “at the same time,” “as” can be used to establish a reason.

I don’t need to write it down, as I trust myself.

“I trust myself” is the reason I don’t need to write it down.

“As” can also be used to point to the future. For example:

As you’re coming to the station, you’ll see a pub in front of you.

In this sentence, “as” points to a future time.

“As” is often used as a subordinator in many longer phrases. These phrases include “as long as”, “as soon as”, “as far as”.

There are many other ways to use “as” in a sentence. It can be a preposition, part of a prepositional verb, and used with adjectives or adverbs for comparison. But we can talk about those meanings another time.

We hope this explanation helps you understand the meaning of “as” in your example, Bill.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

a bit—adv. a little, a small amount

precise—adj. exact

upset—v. to push out of place

clause—n. a group of words with a verb

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## Article 113: Reduction and Assimilation

Date: 2024-02-02T22:05:00+00:00 | 437 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about reduced syllables and assimilation.

I would like you to explain to me in detail, if that is possible...

In spoken English, why do native speakers change or omit these letters, for example:

What's the rule behind this?

Thanks, Adam, for your question.

You have found that people do not always say words the same way all the time. They sometimes change sounds to make them easier to say.

One example is syllable dropping, which we discussed in an earlier Ask a Teacher. Assimilation and reduction are other ways sounds can change when people are speaking quickly.

Two different sounds can start to sound the same when they are said quickly. This is called “assimilation.”

This is what is happening in the word “handbag.”

The /n/ sound is a nasal sound, which is made by air moving through our nose. The sound /b/ is produced by pressing the lips together. So, the /n/ sound is affected by the /b/ sound in “bag.” The sound becomes /m/, a combination of a nasal sound and the labial sound.

The /d/ sound is then dropped.

Sometimes it is not just one sound within a word that is reduced, but a whole word, like in the examples of “wanna” or “A n’ B.”

Function words, like “to” and “and” are often reduced in everyday speech. This helps us to pay more attention to the more important words that carry meaning.

Most unstressed syllables and function words become shorter, softer and less clear. The vowel sound in “to,” /oo/, gets reduced to another vowel sound “schwa,” /ə/.

“Want to” becomes “wanta,” /n̩/. The two /t/ sounds drop off in fast speech. So, “want ta” becomes “wanna.”

In “A and B,” the “and” gets reduced to /n̩/. So, phrases like “A and B” or “cream and sugar” become “A ‘n B” and “cream ‘n sugar.”

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Adam.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

**syllable**— n. a unit of spoken language that consists of one or more vowel sounds alone or with one or more consonant sounds preceding or following

**assimilation**—n. a sound changes in which some sounds (typically consonants or vowels) change to become more similar to other nearby sounds

**labial**—adj. involving one or both lips

**phrase**— n. a word or group of words forming a syntactic constituent with a single grammatical function

**cream**—n. a thick white liquid taken from milk used in cooking, baking and coffee

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## Article 114: Surge and Soar

*Date: 2024-02-09T22:05:00+00:00 | 580 words | Source*

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Hi there! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question about the difference between “surge” and “soar.”

Hi my dear teacher,

While “surge” and “soar” have a similar verbal meaning of rising or increasing quickly, there are some big differences! Let’s look at each word with some examples.

As a verb, “surge” means to rise or increase very quickly in an abnormal way.

Food prices surged due to inflation.

“Surge” can also mean to rise rapidly and fall quickly.

The boat was surging through the water during the storm.

When talking about something coming in waves, we can use “surge.”

The waves surged to the shore as the hurricane approached.

Kaitlyn's emotions surged as she accepted her award.

And lastly as a verb, we use "surge" to talk about physical things like electricity or water moving rapidly through something and with force or power.

Electricity can surge through electronic devices unexpectedly causing damage.

As a noun, the most basic meaning is a powerful rise or increase in something that was once steady or not moving. This could be physical things like water or power, or it could be more abstract like your feelings.

There has been a surge of interest in American football from young women due to Taylor Swift.

The storm surge left residents along the coast unable to return to their homes for months.

Surge protectors can keep computers and other electronics safe during thunderstorms.

Carol felt a surge of sadness move over her when her dog died.

Let's move onto "soar."

Much like "surge," "soar" is a verb that can mean to rise rapidly. However, "soar" is used mostly to talk about a position, value or price.

Pat's blood pressure always soars to 140/90 when she goes to the doctor because she is worried.

Stock prices soared after the new CEO of the company was announced.

Soar can also be used to talk about things that fly, like birds or planes.

The geese soared in formation as they flew south for the winter.

The skydiver felt as though she was soaring through the air after she jumped out of the plane.

And lastly, "soar" means to rise or move to a higher state. This can be physically like a voice or abstractly like your spirit or feelings. It can also be used to talk about how tall or high things are.

The singer's voice soared over the other members of the choir.

Her spirit soared when she learned of the good news.

One World Trade Center soars above all other buildings in New York City, standing at a height of 541 meters or 1776 feet.

Please let us know if these explanations and examples have helped you, Hamid.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher. Thank you for joining me over the past two years. I have enjoyed answering your questions. I hope that your English skills "soar" ever higher!

I'm Faith Pirlo.

Faith Pirlo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

shore— n.the land along the edge of an area of water (such as an ocean, lake, etc.)

steady—adj.something that is strong and keeps working over time

abstract— adj.relating to or involving general ideas or qualities rather than specific people, objects, or actions

geese—n.(pl.)birds that live in and close to water and migrate in the winter to warmer areas.

spirit— n.a force within a human being thought to give the body life, energy, and power

choir—n.a group of singers especially in a church

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## Article 115: Sure as Heck

*Date: 2024-02-16T22:05:00+00:00 | 487 words | Source*

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Hello! Welcome to Ask a Teacher. This week, we answer a question that relates not just to language, but also politeness and foreign policy. It comes from Hai in Vietnam. He writes,

I would highly appreciate it if you could let me know the meaning of this phrase: “It sure as heck ain’t good.”

Thank you for writing to us and providing a link to the place where you read the sentence. The quote that you asked about is from a January 31 press conference at the White House. The Press Secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, invited spokesman John Kirby to answer questions from reporters. One reporter said the European Union had recently offered to give Ukraine only half of what it had been promised. The reporter asked:

How bad is all this for the Ukrainian forces and do you see an impact on the battlefield already?

Kirby gave this answer:

It sure as heck ain’t good. And this is why we need the supplemental funding.

There are three things an English learner needs to know to understand Kirby’s answer. The first one has to do with the language that Kirby used.

“Heck” is in the class of words called euphemisms. They are words or expressions people use instead of saying something that might be offensive or could sound uneducated. “Heck” is a euphemism for the word “hell.” Kirby, like most government officials, is trying to use more formal language, but he also wants to bring attention to the serious nature of the problem. So, he uses “heck” instead of “hell,” a word that is much stronger. “Hell,” in many religions, is a very unpleasant place where bad people go.

The second thing learners need to know is the short form, “ain’t.” The contraction “ain’t” is usually a short form of “am not,” but it can also mean “is not” or “are not” as well as “have not” or “has not.” In our example, Kirby could have said, “It is not good.”

Like most informal contractions, we must tell you it is best to avoid "ain't" in all writing for school or work and in speech. For more information, see our [Everyday Grammar](#) on this subject, [This Ain't It and Other Short Forms](#).

Kirby said: “It sure as heck ain’t good. And this is why we need the supplemental funding.” The United States Congress must approve all spending by the U.S. government. A supplemental funding request can be made to ask Congress to approve additional spending that has not been provided for in earlier spending legislation.

I hope this helps you understand Kirby’s comments, Hai.

What question do you have about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com)

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

politeness—n.the quality of being mindful of the feelings of others

impact—n.influence or effect

supplemental—adj.something added to another thing in order to increase or improve it

contraction—n.a shortened form of a word or words

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## Article 116: 'Do' for Emphasis

*Date: 2024-02-23T22:05:00+00:00 | 326 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Teacher Sahraoui.

My student answered a question I asked in a written test as follows:

Yes, consumers do adopt new habits.

Shall I consider the answer grammatically incorrect because of the use of auxiliary do, even though the rest of the sentence is ok?

Thanks for answering.

Thanks for writing, Sahraoui. Your question points out an important purpose for “do” in statements.

We know that “do” does many things in English. It can serve as an auxiliary verb in negative statements. For example:

I don’t have any money.

It can also serve as an auxiliary verb in questions:



Does Brent have to work on weekends?

What do you think?

Or it can provide a short answer to a yes/no question.

In addition to all that, it can make imperatives, or commands, more polite.

“Do” can also be used to make sentences clearer and shorter.

Bill likes to swim, and so does Betty.

You asked if the sentence your student wrote is grammatically incorrect because of the use of “do.” Well, there is one function of “do,” which we have not yet discussed: emphasis.

“Do” is one way users of English bring attention to a whole or part of a message.

A whole sentence can be emphasized by adding “do.” For example:

It does taste good!

We did enjoy the play.

I do want to learn.

The sentence you ask about is grammatically correct. The use of “do” shows emphasis.

I’m not sure if this is what your student meant when he wrote “do.” He might need a little more help with answering questions. But the sentence is grammatically correct.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Sahraoui.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

function—n. the part that a thing plays; a purpose

emphasis—n. special importance, value, or attention

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## Article 117: ‘Must’ or ‘Have To’?

Date: 2024-03-01T22:05:00+00:00 | 300 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Mequanent Antigegn.

"Must vs have to"--I find it difficult to differentiate them.

You must wear your uniform in the classroom. Or You have to wear your uniform in the classroom.

Which one is correct?

Thank you for this question. "Must" and "have to" can have the same meaning. We have talked about "must" and "have to" in an earlier Ask a Teacher.

Both of the sentences you provide are correct. Sometimes it is better to choose "must" over "have to" or "have to" over "must."

When we use must in spoken English, usually it is to express something we think is likely. In that case, it is similar in meaning to the word "probably."

You must be cold after working all day in the rain.

You are probably cold after working all day in the rain.

My supervisor must not care about the budget cuts.

My supervisor probably doesn't care about the budget cuts.

But, we also use it as we use "have to," although more commonly in writing.

Climate change must be stopped.

You must see the doctor before Friday.

"Have to," "have got to" and its reduced form "gotta," are used very often in spoken language to communicate requirement.

I have to get up at 5am tomorrow.

So, which sentence should you use? It depends on the context. Are you wanting to express a probability? Or are you trying to give an order or announce a rule?

And now we must say goodbye! We have to check the mail for new questions about American English! If you have one, send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Caty Weaver wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

uniform—n. a special set of clothes someone has to wear to work or school

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## Article 118: 'Yet'

Date: 2024-03-08T22:05:00+00:00 | 330 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Al.

My name is Al from Indonesia. I am still not sure how to use the word "yet" in a sentence, positive or negative.

Would you like to inform us more about that?

Thank you very much.

Thank you for writing, Al.

We have talked about how to use the word "yet" in comparison to "already" and "still" in earlier Ask a Teacher articles. Now, let's talk about "yet" by itself.

"Yet" is almost always used as an adverb of time. It means from some time in the past until now. "Yet" is used in both positive and negative sentences.

#### Yes-No Questions

In spoken English, "yet" is often used in both yes or no questions. For example,

Have you heard from your boss yet?

Did you finish your homework yet?

We can ask these questions without "yet". Why use it then?

When we add "yet" to a question, we not only want to know if it happened, but we expect it to happen. And, we want it to happen.

We can use yet with negative questions, too. For example,

Have you not heard from your boss yet?

Have you not finished your homework yet?

Using a negative question expresses an even stronger expectation or desire, almost disbelief that something has not happened "yet!"

Most statements with "yet" are negative, especially in informal spoken language.

But you don't have to make a decision yet.

We are not there yet.

In these negative statements, "yet" expresses an expectation that it will happen at some point in the future.

We hope this explanation has helped you, Al.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

positive—adj. in grammar, a positive sentence does not have any negative words

negative—adj. in grammar, a negative sentence shows that something cannot be the case, is not true or not happening

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## Article 119: Using 'Just' and 'Only'

Date: 2024-03-15T22:05:00+00:00 | 369 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Mohammad.

What is the difference between just and only?

Thank you for writing, Mohammad. This is a good question.

In an earlier Ask a Teacher, we explained how the two words, “just” and “only,” seem to mean the same thing. For example:

She was just a baby when she came to America.

She was only a baby when she came to America.

In that article, we also explained how the two words have different meanings and when you should use one and not the other. The difference in usage is so small that you might not even notice at first. But it is very important.

So, let’s look at more ways to use the two words today.

Usage is the way in which a word or phrase is normally used.

The word “only” can be used in an undesirable situation. For example:

He only finished half his homework.

Only two banks stay open after 4 p.m.

You’re only coming on Saturday? I wish you could come earlier.

Its usage is also common when we are not happy about something:

It’s only right that they get the same pay for the same work.

The noise is fine, only if it does not hurt my ear.

However, we use the word “just” when we want to make an emphasis, or a stronger statement. Let’s compare the last two examples with these:

It’s just not right that he gets more pay for the same work.

The noise hurts my ear. Just be quiet, please!

In spoken English, believe it or not, we also use “just” when we want to make something smaller or less important.

For example, when someone thinks the distance is too far, we might say:

Your friend lives just down the road.

If they do not have a lot of time, we might ask:

Can you wait just a minute?

And when someone appears to be busy, we might say:

Could I just ask you something?

I was just wondering, can we meet tomorrow?

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Mohammad.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

emphasis—n. special importance, value, or attention

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## Article 120: How To Say 'l-i-v-e'

Date: 2024-03-22T22:05:00+00:00 | 282 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Lola.

My question is about the pronunciation of the word "live". Sometimes the pronunciation is "liv" and others "laiv." The same with the word "lives." Why?

Thank you very much.

Thank you for writing, Lola. This is such a good question!

“Live” is an example of a heteronym, or words that have the same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings.

There are nearly 100 heteronyms in English. But let’s get to your question about the word spelled l-i-v-e today.

It can be either an adjective, an adverb, or a verb.

When it is used as an adjective or adverb, we use the /a/ sound, like “laiv.”

I love live music.

Are you watching the game live?

When it is used as a verb, we use the /lɪv/ sound, like “live.”

Where do you live?

We live just outside the city.

As for the word spelled l-i-v-e-s, it can be either a plural noun (from the singular “live”) or third person singular verb.

When it is a plural noun, we use the /ə/ sound:

Cats have nine lives.

When it is used as third person singular, we use the /s/ sound.

She lives with her mother.

So, in order to know which pronunciation to use for l-i-v-e and -s, you want to look carefully at how it is used in a sentence.

Please let us know if this explanation has helped you, Lola.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

spelling—n. the correct order of letters to form a word

pronunciation—n. the way a word is spoken

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## Article 121: Types of Sentences

Date: 2024-03-29T22:05:00+00:00 | 434 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from a reader in Burma, also known as Myanmar.

I am from Burma. I read the following sentence from a book.

In Norway, there's an art museum for children's art.

The book mentioned it is a complex sentence. I am wondering if it's right or not. Please tell me.

Thank you! I wish you all the best!

Your loyal reader

Thank you for writing, Kyaw. Before we answer your question, we need to review some terms and their meanings.

A clause is a grammar unit organized around a verb phrase. A clause is made of two parts: a subject (the topic of a clause) and a verb (what is said about the topic).

For example, “we laughed” is a clause. “We” is the subject, and “laughed” is the verb.

“In the morning” is not a clause because it does not have a verb.

There are two main kinds of clauses. Independent clauses are not dependent on any other clause. They are sentences on their own. “We laughed” is an independent clause.

A dependent clause depends on an independent clause. It cannot be a sentence on its own. “Before I went,” for example, is a dependent clause because, although it has a subject and a verb, it requires additional information to be a full thought.

We can sort sentences into three groups by the clauses they have. A sentence must have at least one independent clause. The independent clause is a simple sentence. For example:

It snowed last night.

When a sentence has two or more independent clauses, it is a compound sentence. For example:

I went to the party, but he stayed home.

When a sentence has at least one independent clause as well as one or more dependent clauses, it is a complex sentence. For example:

I’ll call you when I get home.

Now, to answer your question, Kyaw! Your example has only one clause. This means it is a simple sentence, not a complex sentence.

There are seven simple sentence patterns in English, but we can talk about those another day.

We hope this explanation has helped you, Kyaw.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

mention—v. to briefly talk about a subject

unit—n. an amount of something; one thing

phrase—n. a group of words that form an idea but that do not contain a subject or verb

topic—n. a subject or idea

pattern—n. the repeated way something happens most of the time

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## Article 122: different 'from' or 'than'?

Date: 2024-04-05T22:05:00+00:00 | 278 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question that was posted on our YouTube channel.

Question to English teachers,

What is correct to say: different from or different than?

In the example below, which is correct?

- a) Cost of life has a different meaning than cost of living.
- b) Cost of life has a different meaning from cost of living.

Thank you for this question. It is a good one!

Some people say that “different than” is incorrect. Your grammar textbook may say you should never use “different than.”

However, in American English, we use both “different from” and “different than” to mean “not the same”.

We use them before a noun phrase. For example,

It's different from other shows.

State laws may be different from national laws.

Their ideas are a little different than ours.

We can also use them before a clause. For example,

How are these different from the ones we had before?

That is not any different than what I said.

Dating is different than it was 10 years ago.

Both phrases have the same meaning, but their usage is different.

We use “different than” mostly in spoken English. It is more informal, and it is almost always used before a clause.

We use “different from” mostly in written English, and we use it far more often than “different than.”



So, either sentence is okay in spoken American English, but “different from” is the better choice because it comes before a noun phrase.

We hope this explanation has helped you.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 123: Misinformation & Disinformation

*Date: 2024-04-12T22:05:00+00:00 | 370 words | Source*

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from a reader in South Korea.

Hello, dear my teacher.

I’m Lim from South Korea.

This year 2024, there are many news reports about elections all over the world. I see the word ‘fake news’ in many articles, but I can’t tell the difference between ‘disinformation’ and ‘misinformation.’ Could you explain exactly the difference showing different example expressions?

I always thank you.

Thank you for writing, Lim. This is a very good question.

Mis- and dis- are both common prefixes in English. Prefixes are letters we add to the beginning of a word. Each prefix has a meaning. Adding a prefix to a word makes a new word with a new meaning.

Let’s start with mis- and misinformation.

Mis- means “bad” or “wrong.” For example, add mis- to adventure and we get the new word misadventure. A misadventure is an unlucky event or a bad adventure or experience.

So, misinformation means “wrong or bad information.” Misinformation often comes from someone misunderstanding something.

We often use misinformation with the phrase “a lot of.”

There is a lot of misinformation on the internet.

Next let’s look at disinformation. Dis- means “not” or “none.” For example, if we add dis- to agree, the new word disagree means to “not agree.”

It might seem like disinformation just means “not information.” But its meaning is more complex than that. Disinformation means false information that is spread on purpose. A person, group, or government

can spread disinformation. Their goal is to hide the truth or trick people.

We often use disinformation with the word campaign. For example:

I hope the disinformation campaign does not work.

Someone who spreads disinformation knows that the information is untrue. But when misinformation spreads, it is generally not done to deceive, or trick, people.

We often use both misinformation and disinformation with the word spread. Note that “spread” can be a verb or a noun.

The internet spreads a lot of misinformation.

The government should stop the spread of disinformation.

We hope this explanation has helped you, Lim.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 124: 'When' or 'That'

Date: 2024-04-19T22:05:00+00:00 | 314 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question that [sanjibganguli3084](#) posted on our YouTube channel.

Ma'am, which of the following sentences is grammatically correct? -It was last Saturday that we met him/It was last Saturday when we met him.

Thank you for writing, Sanjib. This is a very good question.

We talked about relative pronouns in an earlier Everyday Grammar article. The article explains that relative pronouns help identify or give more information about a noun.

English has many relative pronouns. Most relative pronouns are the same as question words: who, which, whose, whom, where, when, and why. That is also a relative pronoun.

Often, there is more than one grammatically acceptable relative pronoun. For example, we can say:

I have more friends who are boys.

This is something which everyone knows.

I have more friends that are boys.

This is something that everyone knows.

All the sentences are grammatically correct.

Usually, choosing the best pronoun depends on the usage. In spoken English, we use “that” more often than other relative pronouns. In academic written English, we use “which” more often than other relative pronouns. In news writing, we use “which” and “who” the most.

Sanjib, you asked about “that” or “when.” We do not use “when” as a relative pronoun very often. We sometimes use “when” with expressions of time. For example,

There are a lot of times when we disagree.

But more often, we do not use a relative pronoun.

There are a lot of times we disagree.

So, either of your sentences is grammatically correct. But most of the time in English, we would use “that” in your sentence, especially if it were spoken.

We hope this explanation has helped you, Sanjib.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

academic—adj. related to schools and education

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## Article 125: 'Young' or 'Younger'

Date: 2024-04-26T22:05:00+00:00 | 456 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from David in China.

My name is David, and I am from China.

Here comes a sentence “My mother had a sweet singing voice when she was younger”. My question is that whether we can use “young” instead “younger” or not?

I am looking forward to receiving your reply.

Thank you very much.

Thank you for writing, David. This is a good question.

The short answer is yes. You can use “young” instead of “younger.” But using “young” instead of “younger” does change the meaning of the sentence just a bit.

Let's look at the differences between the two choices.

“Young” and “younger” are both adjectives. Adjectives are words that describe nouns. “Younger” is a comparative adjective. Comparative adjectives are used to compare two people or things. Comparative adjectives are easy to recognize because they often have an “-er” ending. They are also often, but not always, followed by the conjunction “than.”

Let's look again at David's original example sentence:

My mother had a sweet singing voice when she was younger.

In this situation, “younger” is describing “mother.” But it is not so clear what is being compared. That is because we sometimes leave out information from a sentence. Even without the extra information, however, the listener or reader is still likely to understand the full thought or meaning.

As readers, we understand the full meaning of David's sentence to be: My mother had a sweet singing voice when she was younger than she is now.

We do not know how old the mother is now. But we know she had a sweet singing voice when she was younger than her current age.

Let's say, for example, that the writer's mother is 60 years old. The writer of the sentence could mean that his mother had a sweet singing voice when she was 40 years old, for example. Or the writer could mean that his mother had a sweet singing voice when she was 15 years old. Both 15 years old and 40 years old are younger than 60.

Now let's consider how the sentence's meaning might change if we were to use “young” instead of “younger.” The sentence would be:

My mother had a sweet singing voice when she was young.

The meaning has changed just a bit. Now it is clear that the writer means his mother had a sweet singing voice when she was a young person, or in her youth.

We hope this explanation has helped you, David.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 126: 'Ever' in Questions

Date: 2024-05-03T22:05:00+00:00 | 327 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Shenchuan in China.

I really want to know the meaning of will ever be able to.

Shenchuan from China

Thank you for writing, Shenchuan. I am happy to answer this question.

“Will ever be able to” is a verb phrase. “Will be able to” refers to possibility at a future time. “Ever” is an adverb. In an Ask a Teacher years ago, we explained several meanings of “ever.” One meaning is “at any time.”

The word often appears in the phrase when someone is asking a question. For example,

Have you ever been to Zanzibar?

What is the best movie you have ever seen?

The difference in usage of “ever” in a question is so small that you might not even notice at first. But it is important to fully understand the meaning of “will ever be able to.”

Often, we use “ever” in questions such as “have you ever” to add emphasis, or strength, to a sentence. We might use “ever” if we expect people to agree with us, or have the same answer. For example,

Have you ever heard a better definition?

Have you ever been yelled at for just asking a question?

In these examples, “ever” shows a strong feeling.

We can also use “ever” with a question we believe will have a negative answer or feeling. And, we might not even expect an answer. For example,

Did you ever think about me?

Will I ever be able to climb Mount Everest?

In these examples, we use “ever” because we think the answer is no. And we may not expect anyone to actually answer the question.

We hope this explanation has helped you fully understand the meaning of “will ever be able to,” Shenchuan.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

usage—the way a word or phrase is used

## Article 127: 'Call'

Date: 2024-05-10T22:05:00+00:00 | 400 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Mohammad about the word "call."

Hi, my name is Mohammad.

I hope this email finds you well. First of all, I'd like to gratefully thank you because of your attempts and commitment.

I [would] appreciate if you let me know the differences between [the] different meaning[s] of this word.

Thank you for writing, Mohammad. This is a very good question.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists almost 50 definitions for the word "call". It is, as you say, a challenging word.

We cannot talk about all the meanings of "call," but we have time to look at some of the more common ones.

Note that "call" can be both a noun and a verb. The verb "call" is much more common and has many more meanings.

"Call" is a communication verb. We use it to talk about speaking and writing. One simple meaning might be to contact someone by phone.

I need to call my wife.

Call me back later.

We can also use "call" to ask someone to come to us. For example,

There was an accident. Call the police.

It's late. Let's call a taxi.

Very often, "call" describes someone or something. Usually, it is linked to an unpleasant description. For example,

I would not call the man bright.

It's not nice to call people stupid.

We often use "call" in the passive voice when we do not want to say or do not know who is causing the action.

The show has been called long and boring.

Some phrasal verbs also use "call," such as "call for," "call out." These are very common in news writing.

“Call for” means to plan something or demand that something happen.

The organization called for a members’ meeting.

This calls for change.

“Call out” means to criticize someone or ask them to explain their actions. For example,

The man was called out for being rude.

The teacher called out the students who were late.

We also use “call” in many expressions such as call in sick, call it a day, call it quits, call into question, and call the shots. But we are out of time now. In other words, we have to call it quits.

We hope this explanation has helped you, Mohammad.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

challenging—adj. requiring a lot of effort

call it quits—phrase to agree to stop

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## Article 128: Improve Your Vocabulary: Part 1

*Date: 2024-05-17T22:05:00+00:00 | 522 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we talk about how you can improve your vocabulary.

This is a good question, VOA fans.

Many learners think the best way to improve their vocabulary is to learn the definition of many words. But this is not necessarily the best way to improve. The best way is to fully know a word.

To know a word, we must know its form, meaning, and usage. Today let’s talk about the form of a word. In the coming weeks, we will talk about meaning and usage.

The form of a word can relate to how it sounds, is written and what its parts are. Knowing the sounds of a word includes recognizing it when it is spoken and being able to say it correctly. This includes the individual sounds and also how the sounds may change when people are saying the word quickly. For example,

It’s nice to meet you.

When some people say this sentence at a natural speed, they might make a /ch/ sound at the end of the word “meet” and the beginning of the word “you” although the words’ spellings do not suggest this.

This sound change does not affect the meaning of the words. But it might cause you trouble when you are trying to understand the sentence.

In English, stress is important to the sound of a word, and it can even decide whether a word is a noun or a verb.

For example, the word spelled r-e-c-o-r-d can be thought of as two words. When we stress the first part of the word, RE-cord, it is a noun. When we stress the second part of the word, re-CORD, it is a verb. What appears to be one word is really two parts of speech. This is part of knowing what form a word takes.

The form of a word also involves its parts. It is important to recognize the root word in addition to prefixes or suffixes. These are added beginnings or endings, which change the meaning of the word’s root.

For example, knowing that the word “addition” includes recognizing the verb “to add” plus the suffix –t-i-o-n, which suggests a state or an action. Knowing the word “untrue” includes recognizing the base word “true” and the prefix -un, which means “not.”

When we look at English words in this way, we can see that our vocabulary expands by understanding a word’s form.

As we saw in the word “record,” the same word can work as two parts of speech.

VOA fans, the best way to improve your vocabulary is to really “know a word,” its form, meaning, and usage, not just a definition.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Gena Bennett.

Yaroslav Khrokalo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

vocabulary—n. all the words a particular person knows

stress—n. giving attention to one part of a word when speaking it

prefix—n. a group of letters appearing at the beginning of a word that changes the word’s meaning

suffix—n. a group of letters appearing at the end of a word that changes the word’s meaning

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## Article 129: Improve Your Vocabulary: Part 2

Date: 2024-05-24T22:05:00+00:00 | 373 words | Source

No media source currently available



Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we continue our answer about the best way to expand your vocabulary.

Last week, we said the best way to improve vocabulary is to really “know a word.” We talked about the form of a word -- or how it sounds, is written, and what its parts are.

Today let's talk about the meaning of words.

Knowing the meaning of a word seems easy: translate it into your native language or look up the definition in a dictionary. But, to fully know the meaning of a word in English, one definition is often not enough.

English words are famous for having more than one definition. For example, look at the word “run” in these sentences.

I'm going to the shop.

She runs the local bakery.

Water was running down the table.

All the papers are running the story.

The first definition in Merriam-Webster's dictionary for “run” is to go faster than a walk. That is certainly the meaning of run in the first sentence but not in the others.

When we say, “she runs the local bakery”, we mean she is the person who operates, manages or owns the shop.

We could say “Water was running down the table” or “Water was flowing down the table.”

And when “all the papers are running the story”, they publish it.

We also have to know the ideas or feelings that a word suggests to fully understand the meaning of a word.

Let's look at the first example with the word “run.”

I'm going to the shop.

This is different than saying:

I'm going to go to the shop.

The second example simply states that we are going to the shop. But the word “run” tells that the trip will be fast.

When we look at the meaning of English words in this way, we can see that our vocabulary expands by fully understanding a word's meaning.

However, we cannot just exchange one word for another without changing the overall meaning of the sentence. So, next week we will take a look at synonyms - or words that have the same or nearly the

same meaning.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Yaroslav Khrokalo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

vocabulary—n. all the words a person knows

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## Article 130: Improve Your Vocabulary: Part 3

*Date: 2024-05-31T22:05:00+00:00 | 370 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we finish our answer about the best way to expand your vocabulary.

We have said the best way to improve vocabulary is to really “know a word.” To fully know a word, we have to know its form: how it sounds, how it is written, and what its parts are. We have to know its meanings and the ideas or feelings it suggests. We also have to know how the word is normally used.

Synonyms are words that have the same or nearly the same meaning. For example, “big” and “large” are used to talk about size. But often, we cannot exchange one for the other. They have different usages.

Both “big” and “large” can be used to describe the size of something. “Big” is usually used in conversation. “Large” is more formal.

John is standing next to the big tree.

The large tree fell on the house.

We use “big” to talk about something or someone that is important.

This is a big decision.

We use “large” when talking about an amount of something.

The company received a large number of complaints.

“Large” is also a clothing size. It is bigger than a small and a medium.

The shirt is a size large.

Collocations are words that go together. Some words go together with other words, but their synonyms might not. For example, we say “big surprise,” but we would not say “large surprise.”

Another example is “unhappy” and “sad.” They are synonyms, but they cannot always be used with the same words. For example, we would say “unhappy childhood.” Saying “sad childhood” instead does not sound as natural.

When we look at English words in this way, we can see that our vocabulary expands by understanding the usage of a word.

VOA fans, the best way to improve your vocabulary is to really know a word: its form, meaning and usage.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett

Yaroslav Khrokalo wrote this lesson with Gena Bennett for VOA Learning English.

vocabulary—n. all the words a person knows

synonyms—n. words that have the same or nearly the same meaning

collocation—n. a word that is used regularly with another word

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## Article 131: 'Nobody' & 'No one'

*Date: 2024-06-07T22:05:00+00:00 | 239 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Imtiyaz in India about the words “nobody” and “no one.”

My name is md imtiyaz from India bihar state. My question is that what is difference between nobody and no one?

“Nobody” and “no one” are indefinite pronouns. Indefinite pronouns refer to people in a general and open way. “No” is part of both “nobody” and “no one.” That tells us there are not any people.

No one knows his name.

Nobody knows his name.

Both sentences mean there is not one person who knows his name.

There are no major differences in the meanings of “no one” and “nobody.” Both are treated as singular nouns.

But there are some small differences in how and when we use the two. “Nobody” is more informal. It is used mostly in spoken English. “No one” is a little more formal. It is used more in written English.

“Nobody” can also be used as a noun in English. For example,

He was just anybody five years ago.

This is an unkind way to say that someone is not important or not well-known.

We hope this explanation helps you, Imtiyaz.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

indefinite—adj. not clearly defined; general

refer to—phrasal verb. to speak or write about someone or something

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## Article 132: Feel, Feel like

Date: 2024-06-14T22:05:00+00:00 | 343 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Ana in Brazil about the difference between “feel” and “feel like.”

I've... learned a lot from VOA English.

I'm so grateful for helping us with our difficulties on English learning.

My question is about the use of the verb “to feel”. What's the difference between “feel” and “feel like” and other uses of this verb? And if its use is followed by a verb plus ING.

Thank you so much in advance.

Ana Lúcia from Brazil

Thank you for writing, Ana. We're happy you learn a lot from Learning English. And I'm happy to answer your question.

The verb "feel" has many meanings in English. It can mean to experience an emotion:

I always feel thankful to my parents.

Or experience something in your body:

She felt a pain in her back.

“Feel” can mean to touch something:

I feel the rough sand under my feet.

Or to describe the weather:

It feels cold outside.

“Feel” can also show an opinion:

Do you feel strongly about the situation?

He feels sure we are right.

"Feel like" is a phrasal verb. We often use "feel like" in a sentence to go with (someone or something) and (doing something).

"Feel like" someone or something means that you are similar to the person or thing:

My feet feel like blocks of ice.

Maria feels like her mother.

"Feel like" doing something means that you want to do it. This is when the verb is often followed by -ing.

Jose feels like eating ice cream.

She feels like watching a movie.

Sometimes, "feel like" can be used in this way without -ing:

Jose feels like ice cream.

She feels like a movie.

It is understood that he wants to eat ice cream or that she wants to watch a movie.

And we also use "feel like" to show an opinion:

I feel like this isn't a good idea.

We hope this explanation helps you, Ana.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Gena Bennett.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

grateful—n. thankful

advance—n. forward in time

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## Article 133: Using 'Though' and 'However': Part 1

Date: 2024-06-21T22:05:00+00:00 | 377 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Edilson in Brazil about the difference between "though" and "however."

Hi, this is Edilson, from Brazil, I follow Ask a Teacher and I love the way you approach explanations, I have a question, could you please explain? What is the difference between the use of the words "THO" and "HOWEVER".

Thank you for writing, Edilson. This is a good question.

“Though” and “however” are words that show a relationship between ideas. Often, they both express a difference in two or more things. For example,

John is nice, though he's not as nice as Michael.

Sofia wants to be a teacher. However, her parents want her to be a doctor.

Sometimes, the words show a difference that is not expected. For example,

Mohammed makes me angry sometimes. I like him, though.

The team did not win the competition. However, they are happy they played well.

They have a similar meaning, but there are differences in how and when we use the two words.

“Though” can show that one idea is not as important as another. When we use “though” in this way, we use it after the main idea. For example,

The event was fun, though I don't know why.

The most important part of the sentence is that the event was fun.

We use “though” a lot in spoken English, and it is very common at the end of a sentence, like in the example I like him, though.

We can use “however” to emphasize a difference. For example,

I always feel busy. However, I am not as busy as you.

“However” is very common in written English.

In spoken English, “however” can be used as a more forceful way of saying “how.” When we use it this way, we stress the second part of the word, -ever. For example,

However will I choose?

There are other differences between these two words, but we can talk about them another time.

We hope this explanation helps you, Edilson.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Ashley Thompson.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

emphasize—v. to give special importance, value, or attention

stress—v. to give attention to one part of a word when speaking it

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## Article 134: Using 'Though' and 'However': Part 2

Date: 2024-06-28T22:05:00+00:00 | 521 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we continue to answer the question from Edilson in Brazil about the difference between “though” and “however.”

Hi, this is Edilson, from Brazil, I follow Ask a Teacher and I love the way you approach explanations, I have a question, could you please explain? What is the difference between the use of the words "THO" and "HOWEVER".

Last week we said “though” and “however” are words that show a relationship between ideas. They express a difference in two or more things. We explained some differences in how and when we use the two words.

Their use in a clause is another difference between “though” and “however.” This is one of the biggest problems English learners have using words like “though” and “however,” so it is important to talk about.

First, let's review some terms and their meanings.

A clause is a grammar unit organized around a verb phrase. A clause is made of two parts: a subject and a verb.

For example, “We laughed” is a clause. “We” is the subject, and “laughed” is the verb.

“In the morning” is not a clause because it does not have a verb.

There are two main kinds of clauses. Independent clauses are not dependent on any other clause. They are sentences on their own. “We laughed” is an independent clause.

A dependent clause depends on an independent clause. It cannot be a sentence on its own. “Before I went,” for example, is a dependent clause. While it has a subject and a verb, it requires additional information to be a full sentence or thought.

Now, let's return to “though” and “however.”

We only use "however" to show a relationship between independent clauses. This means it must be used with two full thoughts.

Climate change affects every part of the world. However, it affects some countries more than others.

The school can receive \$2 million for improving attendance; however, the staff may not be able to keep records.

In writing, we must always use a period or semicolon between the two clauses.

“Though” can be used with a dependent or independent clause.

Using “though” at the beginning of a clause makes a dependent clause.

Though Ava does well in school

Although this clause does have a subject and a verb, it requires additional information to be a full thought. It must be used with an independent clause. For example:

Though Ava does well in school, she is not sure if she wants to go to university.

As we learned last week, “though” can also be used at the end of an independent clause. For example:

Mohammed makes me angry sometimes. I like him, though.

We hope this explanation helps you, Edison.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Gena Bennett wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

clause—n. a grammar unit organized around a verb phrase

unit—n. an amount of something; one thing

phrase—n. a group of words that form an idea but that do not contain a subject or verb

topic—n. a subject or idea

semicolon—n. ; used to separate two independent clauses

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## Article 135: Only Had, Had Only

Date: 2024-07-05T22:05:00+00:00 | 546 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Madhur about the usage of “had only” and “only had” in English.

I would like to clear my concept regarding usage of “had only” and “only had” in written English.

Thank you for writing, Madhur. I'm happy to answer this question.

In general, differences in meaning between “had only” and “only had” depend on the situation. And in many cases, there is no difference in meaning between the two.



In spoken English, the tone of voice we use helps make the meaning clear. But without the help of the voice, a writer must write carefully to avoid confusion about “had only” and “only had.”

Let’s look at the usage of these terms with the following three cases.

Case One: the same sentence, two meanings

Consider two situations. In the first, you wanted to give something to drink to five people, but you only had enough to give two people drinks.

In this situation, the sentence “I only had two drinks” means you did not have enough drinks for five people. It expresses the idea that there was a problem.

In the second situation, someone said you drank too much alcohol at a party, but you disagreed. So, you said:

“I only had two drinks.”

In this case, you have expressed the idea that there was not a problem with how much you drank.

So, the same sentence, “I only had two drinks,” can express a problem or the lack of a problem.

The sentence “I only had two drinks”, by itself, without any situation connected to it, is ambiguous. Ambiguous means that something is unclear because it can be understood in more than one way.

Case two: two different sentences, same meaning.

Consider these two sentences:

“We had only one liter of water.”

“We only had one liter of water.”

Each sentence can mean that there is a problem, that we needed more than one liter.

In general, when the adverb “only” follows the verb “had,” the adverb is closer to the object of the sentence and helps show that there is, or might be, a problem.

Case three: two sentences, different meanings

The sentence “We had only one liter of water” usually means that we wanted or needed more water.

On the other hand, “We only had one liter of water,” might mean that there is no problem. For example, if there were 50 liters of water, drinking one liter would usually not be a problem.

The examples from all of the above cases help us see how important it is to explain the situation. That is because “only had” can have two meanings, depending on the situation.

Last, there is another use of “had only” which comes from conditional statements such as the following:

“If I had only been there sooner, I could have seen her.”

Here, the use of “had only” following the word “if” expresses regret.

We hope this explanation helps you, Madhur.

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

absence—n. the state of being away; not present

lack of—n phrase. the absence of or not enough of something

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## Article 136: Zest, Drive, Desire

Date: 2024-07-12T22:05:00+00:00 | 425 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Anora in China about the usage of three similar words.

Dear teacher, I am confused by the three words “zest,” “drive,” and “desire.” I sincerely hope to know their differences.

Thank you for writing to us, Anora. I'm happy to answer this question.

While “drive” and “desire” can be verbs, in today's lesson we look at their use as nouns. “Zest” is also a noun.

The words “zest,” “drive,” and “desire” can each describe a state of having strong or positive energy. The three words differ mostly by the words we connect to them.

We usually put the preposition “for” directly after the word “zest.” For example, we can say:

She has a zest for life.

With the nouns “drive” and “desire,” we put the preposition “to” after them, as in these examples:

He really has a drive to succeed.

She has a desire to do good.

Try to memorize words and their prepositions as a unit, such as “a zest for” and “a drive to.” That will help you improve how you use your vocabulary.

“Zest” is a noncount noun, so we cannot put the determiner “many” before it. Instead, we can say “so much zest,” “a lot of zest,” or “full of zest.” We also say we can do something “with zest.”

“Drive” is also a noncount noun. As with “zest,” we cannot use the determiner “many” before it.

“Filled with” are words we put before “desire,” as in this example:

From a young age, he was filled with a desire to travel the world.

“Zest” and “drive” can differ slightly in meaning. Zest generally means having a lot of energy and enjoyment connected to activities you do. For example, you can have a lot of zest for playing a sport or for the work you do. But “drive” is more often used to describe a strong desire to reach a goal.

We hope this explanation helps you, Anora. We hope you have a zest for learning new things about English!

Do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

preposition—n. a word that usually connects a noun or pronoun with another part of a sentence, such as with, by, for, to, and the like

unit—n. one thing

vocabulary—n. the words that a person knows how to use in a particular language

determiner—n. a group of words that includes articles, possessive adjectives, demonstratives and others

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## Article 137: Who’s and Whose

Date: 2024-07-19T22:05:00+00:00 | 448 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Mei Jen in China about the usage of two words that sound the same.

I have some question(s) about the words whose and who’s. I sometimes have confusion when I hear. I am not always sure what word I am hearing. Can you please share with me your advice?

Thank you for writing to us Mei Jen. I’m happy to answer this question.

The easiest way to know which word you are hearing is to listen for the words that follow it.

We contract, or join together, the two words who is to make the contraction “who’s.” Often, the next word you hear after “who’s” is a verb, as in these examples:

Who’s going to help us?

Who’s making all that noise?

Who’s using this computer?

Sometimes, you will hear a prepositional phrase or a noun phrase after the contraction “who’s.”

Who's in the office today?

Who's the director of that film?

Last, we can contract the word "who" with the verb "has." So, the sentence "Who has already seen this film?" sounds like this:

Who's already seen this film?

Now, let's look at the possessive "whose," spelled w-h-o-s-e.

We use it to ask about who owns or has something. So, you should listen for a noun after the pronoun "whose," or you can listen for the adjectives "this," "that," "these," or "those."

For example, if we see a book on a desk and we do not know who owns it, we can ask either of the following questions:

Whose book is this?

Whose book is that?

You can hear the noun "book," and you can also hear the adjectives "this" and "that" at the end of the question.

We use the word "this" if we are close to the book. If we are farther away from the book, we use the word "that."

We use the adjectives "these" and "those" for plural things.

Whose shoes are these?

Whose bags are those?

We can also place the contraction "who's" and the possessive "whose" at the beginning of a noun clause. The noun clause begins after the main verb of the sentence, as in these examples:

I want to know who's going to drive the bus.

I want to know whose idea this was.

You can learn more about the possessive "whose," including its use in relative clauses, in this Everyday Grammar on The Mysterious Word 'Whose'.

We hope today's lesson is helpful, Mei Jen.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

## Article 138: Methodology, Strategy, Plan

Date: 2024-07-26T22:05:00+00:00 | 415 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Bassam in Yemen about the usage of three words connected with project management.

In project management, we face three confused terms: “methodology”, “strategy”, and “plan”. Could [you] please help me to know how [to] differentiate among them and use each one in a correct way?

Thank you for writing to us, Bassam. I’m happy to answer this question.

The main difference between these words is how general or specific they are. “Plan” usually has the most general meaning, “strategy” tends to be more specific, and “methodology” is the most specific.

In its most general sense, “plan” means the same thing as “goal.” For example, a company may have a “plan,” or “goal,” to expand its business into more countries. And the company’s “strategy” is the specific steps it takes to reach that goal.

However, we sometimes use “strategy” in a general way. We could say the company’s “strategy” is to expand its business into more countries. But when we use “strategy” in this general sense, we tend to express the reasons for the “strategy.” So, we might say:

The company hopes its strategy to expand into more countries will lower production costs.

Note that “plan” can sometimes be specific. For example, if police need to catch a criminal, they can list the things they need to do to catch that person. The police can call this list their “plan.”

Now let’s look at the most specific term, “methodology.” This word often refers to the details of how people do research. For example, when scientists write research papers, they include a section called “methods,” or “methodology.” This section explains exactly how the scientists did their experiments or other research.

Project management methodology can differ depending on the goals or kind of research needed. For example, marketing researchers study what kind of products people want to buy, while companies study manufacturing costs to help them set prices.

So, it is important to remember that the words “plan” and “strategy” can be general or specific. And “methodology” is the specific method we use to help our “strategy” or “plan” be successful.

We hope today’s lesson is helpful, Bassam.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

specific-adj.exact or particular

refer to-v.relate to or point to the meaning or details of something

section-n.a part of a whole

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## Article 139: Spoiled Food and Drink

*Date: 2024-08-02T22:05:00+00:00 | 397 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Noura about how to describe food that is no longer safe to eat.

Would you please tell us the words we use to describe spoiled food? Now I use only one or two words for all of food types, such as "rotten" or "spoiled." However, in my native language we use different words for different categories like spoiled vegetables, bread, beverages, [and] meat-dishes. I wonder if it is the same in English too.

Thank you for writing to us, Noura. I'm happy to answer this question.

Let's begin with the two words you mention, "rotten," and "spoiled". We can use both words to talk about food in general. So, we can say either of the following:

That food is rotten.

That food is spoiled.

But for some foods, we use "rotten" much more than we use "spoiled." For example, we can say rotten eggs, rotten tomatoes, rotten apples, rotten vegetables, rotten fruit, and so on. The most common usage of "rotten" is with eggs.

We use "spoiled" mostly when talking about meat or milk.

Another general term for spoiled food or drink is the expression "gone bad".

Now let's look at some other terms we use with certain foods and drinks.

"Rancid" describes foods that contain fats that have started to go bad. These typically include nuts, seeds, and oils. Fish, meat, and poultry can also become rancid.

We use the word "stale" to describe bread that has become hard and difficult to eat. And "wilted" describes lettuce or other greens that are no longer fresh.

Mold is a kind of very small fungus. It makes food go bad and can be found on fruit, bread and cheese. The adjective we use for mold is "moldy."

We use the adjective “sour” or the expression “to go sour” to describe milk or cream that has started to spoil. Note that there is also a food called sour cream, which is safe to eat – and quite tasty!

As you can see, a meal with rancid, stale, sour, wilted, moldy, rotten and spoiled food is one to avoid!

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 140: Ego and Arrogance

*Date: 2024-08-09T22:05:00+00:00 | 374 words | Source*

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Ahmed in Egypt about the usage of the words “arrogance” and “ego.”

Thank you for writing to us, Ahmed. I’m happy to answer this question.

First, let’s explain the word “interchangeably.” It describes using two things for the same purpose. For example, when we talk about the weather, the words “cloudy” and “overcast” mean the same thing.

“Ego” and “arrogance” are both nouns and are often interchangeable. The American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster defines “ego” as having a sense of self-worth and “arrogance” as having a much greater sense of self-worth over others.

“Arrogant” and “egotistical” are the adjective forms of these words. An arrogant or egotistical person thinks he or she is better than other people.

You have heard actors using both terms because they usually mean the same thing. But we have particular ways of using each of these words. Here are some examples of how to use the two words:

That actor has such a big ego. He agrees to be in movies only if he gets to play the leading role.

You can feel her arrogance when she makes all those negative comments about other artists.

We sometimes say that a person “has a big ego.” But we do not say that a person “has a big arrogance.” That is because “arrogance” is a non-count noun.

To have “an inflated ego” is another common way of saying that a person is egotistical.

“Arrogance” is often used with a negative meaning. But “ego,” defined as a sense of self-worth, is neither positive nor negative. For example:

The teenage years are important for the development of a healthy ego.

When a person feels their ego has been affected negatively, we say that person has “a wounded ego.”

And while we can use the expression “a big ego,” we rarely say “a small ego.” Instead, we say a person “is not egotistical.” Or, we simply say a person is humble.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

humble-adj. not too proud, not believing one is better than other people.

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## Article 141: Combine and Integrate

Date: 2024-08-16T22:05:00+00:00 | 487 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Simona in China about the words "combine" and "integrate."

Hi! I have a question. What is the difference between "combine" and "integrate?" Thank you!

Thank you for writing to us, Simona. I’m happy to answer this question.

"Combine" and "integrate" are similar in meaning. But, there are some small differences in usage.

The word "combine" is in our Learning English Word Book. We define it as a verb meaning to mix or bring together.

"Integrate" is not in our Word Book. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary says the word means to unite or form into a whole.

Now, let’s look at the prefixes that begin each word. "Combine" begins with the prefix *co-*, such as in the word "copilot." This prefix means "with."

"Integrate" begins with the prefix *inter-* but with the letter "r" removed. This means "among" or "between," as in the word "international."

The prefix *co-* generally gives the sense of joining two or more things together. For example, oxygen combines with hydrogen to make water. However, "combine" can also mean to mix things together, such as mixing the ingredients in a recipe.

"Integrate" can be used that same way. But, it also can mean to add something to one or more other things and mix them so well that they fully unite.



For example, a school might try to integrate healthy foods into its school meals. Or, a jazz group might try to integrate elements of country music into their songs.

Notice that we use the preposition "into" with the word integrate. We say that we "integrate into y." Here is another example:

New technologies can quickly become integrated into our lives.

But when we use "combine," we use the preposition "with." We say we "combine with y," or "combine and y," as in these examples:

The management team is trying to combine youth with experience.

When you combine talent and hard work, you will see positive results.

"Integrate" can sometimes give a sense of deeper connection among two or more things than "combine." To see this, consider the word "integral." This word comes from the same root as 'integrate.'

We say that something is an integral part of something else. This means that the things are deeply connected or important to each other. For example:

Bicycles are an integral part of traffic and culture in the Netherlands.

Fishing is an integral part of the coastal economy.

Last, both the words "integral" and "integration" have technical meanings in calculus, a field of mathematics.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? You can ask about many different areas of English, such as speaking, listening, culture, and more. Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

ingredient-n.a food or item that goes into making a meal or dish

recipe-n.a set of directions for making a meal or dish and which includes a list of ingredients

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## Article 142: Speaking Fluently

Date: 2024-08-23T22:05:00+00:00 | 428 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Aaron Ali in Sudan about how to become a fluent speaker.

I have been learning English since 2010, but I can't speak English fluently, even now. Could you tell me how to get my English fluent?

Thank you for writing to us, Aaron Ali. I'm happy to answer this question.

To help you reach your goal, consider the following two questions:

1. What is making it difficult for you to become fluent?

Being fluent does not mean speaking a language without any mistakes. Instead, fluency is the ability to speak without stopping too much. It is also the ability to speak about a large number of issues.

Try to identify what is preventing you from being fluent. Maybe you worry about making grammar mistakes. Maybe pronunciation problems slow you down. Perhaps you simply might not know enough words. Or, you might need more confidence, or belief in yourself. If that is the case, our VOA Learning English article linked here gives advice for gaining more confidence in your speaking.

Two things to know

Remember, you can be fluent even if you make many grammar mistakes. But you cannot speak fluently if you do not know enough words and expressions.

The second thing learners need is a lot of practice speaking in different kinds of situations.

Try to find an English-speaking partner and practice often. Online sites can help you find a language partner. You can have a conversation with this person over a mobile phone or computer. And this VOA Learning English article gives advice for great language exchanges.

Other suggestions

Practice speaking about particular topics. For example, if you are interested in health and exercise, learn the words and expressions connected to that topic. Next, try to write about it. Writing can help you organize your ideas and remember vocabulary. Last, practice speaking about the topic, using the special vocabulary you have learned.

Storytelling is another way to practice. It helps you learn expressions and grammatical forms. Tell a story many times. That will help you feel what it is like to speak fluently.

Reading out loud is another way to practice, and the video and article linked here gives advice about doing that.

Finally, our How to Pronounce series shows you how to say common phrases quickly and easily.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

topic-n.a subject under consideration or discussion

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## Article 143: Learning English Expressions or Idioms

Date: 2024-08-30T22:05:00+00:00 | 296 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we consider expressions, or idioms, and offer some advice for learning them.

An idiom is an expression formed from two or more words. But an idiom's meaning often cannot be understood just by knowing each of the words in it.

Let's look at the following sentence as an example:

We want our students to think outside the box.

Here, the words outside the box form an idiom. If you only heard this one sentence, you might not be sure what it means. But people use idioms in connection to situations. For that reason, they usually say more than one sentence, and this can help you understand the idiom. For example:

We want our students to think outside the box. That's why we push them to find creative ways to solve problems.

By looking at these two sentences together, it can be easier to understand the meaning of outside the box. It means to think in new or creative ways.

In addition to considering the situation to help you understand the meaning of idioms, here is some other advice:

When learning English, it will likely be easier for you to understand idioms than to use them in speaking. However, if you can use idioms correctly, that can help deepen your connection to native speakers.

With thousands of idioms in English, there is a lot to learn. But do not throw in the towel, in other words, do not give up. Instead, knock yourself out, or try hard, and do your best to learn them. And you will feel proud as a peacock!

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

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## Article 144: How to Summarize

Date: 2024-09-06T22:05:00+00:00 | 441 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Yutaro in Japan about how to summarize what you hear or read.

I enjoy listening to VOA Learning English every night. I have a question about "summarizing." How do I summarize a speech, paper, or other text I've listened to? I have to improve my summary skills to pass the upcoming entrance exam.

Thank you for writing to us, Yutaro. I'm happy to answer this question.

"Summarize" is the verb form of the word "summary." A summary briefly explains the main ideas of a piece of writing or a speech but does not include all the details. It is often only one or two paragraphs long.

Being able to summarize is a useful skill to have, not only for passing exams but also for working in professions. To summarize well, you need to separate the main ideas from less important details.

You can use the following method to do this:

Next, take a separate piece of paper and try to write only the main ideas. Then, decide which details are necessary to include so that the main ideas are clear. Remember, in a summary, you cannot include every detail. This is sometimes difficult to do at first and requires careful thought.

If you can, let a few hours pass between the time when you first take notes and the time when you write the main ideas. This is a good way to see if you can remember and organize the main points in your mind.

You can also try the following method to prepare a summary:

Try to explain the material as if you were talking about it with your friends or family. In those situations, you would naturally just focus on the main ideas and possibly add a few important details. Practice explaining the ideas by speaking out loud. When you speak, you will probably discover the things you can explain clearly and those things you need to check again.

Finally, you can write the summary, keeping in mind the way you presented the main ideas when you spoke about them.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

text—n. written words; a piece of writing

paragraph—n. usually a group of sentences that explain one idea

focus—v. to direct your attention on something

practice—v. to do a task several times in an effort to learn it and to do it better

check—v. to look or read over something you have already done to make sure it is correct

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## Article 145: Perhaps and Maybe

Date: 2024-09-13T22:05:00+00:00 | 488 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Renata in Brazil about the usage of the words “perhaps” and “maybe.”

Thank you for writing to us, Renata. I’m happy to answer this question.

The two words mean the same thing. We use them to express the idea that we are guessing or unsure about something. However, there are some differences in how we use the two words.

Language researchers use the Corpus of Contemporary American English to study the usage of words. They have found that speakers of American English use “maybe” more than twice as often as the word “perhaps.” The Corpus contains over one billion words collected from American print, video, and audio media.

Here is an example of the use of “maybe:”

A: Are you going to the beach this weekend?

B: Maybe—but I need to check the weather first.

In this situation, if a speaker used the word “perhaps” instead of “maybe,” it might sound too formal, or serious, in American English.

However, in written English, we often use the word “perhaps” instead of “maybe.” You can find many examples of both of these words in stories on our website [at learningenglish.voanews.com](https://learningenglish.voanews.com).

In writing, we can use commas to place the word “perhaps” between phrases or clauses in a sentence. Consider this example:

It is easy, perhaps, to train a young dog to obey its owner. But training an older dog might not be so easy.

Note that if we put the word “maybe” in place of “perhaps” in this writing example, it might not seem like good writing to a native speaker.

Sometimes a writer will choose to use the word “maybe” instead of “perhaps” to communicate a particular feeling. Consider the following example:

Government officials say the new trade deal will help the economies of both countries. Maybe. Such predictions have often been wrong in the past.

Here, by using the word “maybe,” the writer communicates more strongly a feeling that the government officials might be wrong.

Finally, be careful not to confuse the adverb “maybe” with the verb phrase “may be.” You can learn more about this by reading the Ask a Teacher program called “Maybe and May Be Are ‘Driving Me Crazy.’”

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Perhaps you would like to know how American English has changed over the years. Or maybe you just need to know how to use particular words. Whatever your question may be, send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

comma—n. a punctuation mark that often separates clauses, phrases, or words in a series

phrase—n. a group of words that express an idea but do not form a complete sentence

clause—n. a group of words expressing an idea that can, on their own, form a sentence

adverb—n. a word that modifies a word expressing action, time, place, manner or degree

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## Article 146: Avant-garde and Vanguard

Date: 2024-09-20T22:05:00+00:00 | 407 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Mohammadreza about the usage of the words “avant-garde” and “vanguard.”

Could you please explain (the) meaning of avant-garde and vanguard? And what's the difference?

Thank you for writing to us, Mohammadreza. I’m happy to answer this question.

We use both of these words to help us describe new ways of doing things or the people involved in those new methods.

However, we can use “vanguard” for more situations than “avant-garde.” “Avant-garde” mostly describes the newest styles in the arts — such as writing, music, painting and filmmaking. It can also describe the people who make those new styles. Consider these examples:

To some listeners, the music of avant-garde composers may sound strange.

Her paintings fit within the avant-garde style of the 1960s.

We usually use the definite article “the” before “avant-garde” to describe the people involved in the new style, as in the following example:

This style of filmmaking became popular among the avant-garde.

Note that we can use “avant-garde” as either a noun or an adjective. However, “vanguard” is almost always a noun.

“The vanguard” often refers to the people leading new developments. When we use the term “the vanguard,” we usually use the prepositions “at,” “in,” or “among” before it, as in these examples:

The research team works at the vanguard of computer science.

The university students were in the vanguard of political change.

She is among the vanguard of doctors supporting the new treatment.

“Vanguard” also means the advance guard of an army that goes ahead of the main group.

Both “avant-garde” and “vanguard” come from the French language. In fact, English has hundreds of words that come from French. Some examples include *coup-d’état*, *chef*, *chic*, and *chauffeur*.

For our readers and listeners, do you have a question about American English? Perhaps you would like to know how American English has changed over the years. Or maybe you just need to know how to use particular words. Whatever your question may be, send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com).

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

**style**—n. a way of behaving, writing or creating something in a particular way, often that is different from the majority

**article**—n. (grammar) a small word before a noun that shows whether the noun is definite or indefinite

**preposition**—n. (grammar) a small word that gives additional information about a noun related to things such as place, direction or time

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## Article 147: Insights and Thoughts

Date: 2024-09-27T22:05:00+00:00 | 460 words | Source

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Alvaro about the usage of the words “insight” and “thought.”

I want to ask you the difference between “insights” and “thoughts.”

Thank you for writing to us, Alvaro. I’m happy to answer this question.

“Thoughts” is a more general word than “insights.” A thought can be specific, as the following examples show:

I think we should go shopping tomorrow.

I think the dog might be hungry.

Thoughts can also be a collection of ideas about a subject. For example, we ask, “What are your thoughts on this?” That can mean we want people to share any ideas that they have about the subject. It can also mean that we want to know a person’s opinion.

To have insight means to have a special understanding of something. A person with insight might notice something that most people do not see or understand. A person with insight might find a new solution to a problem. Insight often results from having a lot of experience with a particular subject or activity.

We can say that someone has “insight into someone or something.” For example, a good psychologist might have insight into why a person is feeling or behaving in a particular way.

Notice that with the noun “insight,” we often use the preposition “into” after it.

With “insight,” we often use the verbs “have” or “gain,” as in the following examples:

Their manager has a lot of insight into what the workers need.

By carefully watching the children’s behavior, the researchers gained insight into how children try to solve problems.

The adjective form of “insight” is “insightful,” and the adjective form of “thought” is “thoughtful.” To be thoughtful has two meanings. It can mean to be kind or to take care of the needs of others. For example, a thoughtful person may listen carefully to a friend who is upset and then offer to help that person. So, when someone does something nice to help us, we might say:

Oh, that is so thoughtful of you. Thanks.

“Thoughtful” can also describe someone who has been thinking carefully.

For our readers and listeners, what are your thoughts about American English? Do you have any insights to share? Or perhaps you simply have a question about particular words. We’d like to hear from you. Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). And please include where you are from in your email, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.



I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

specific—adj. the exact example of something and not any of other similar things

particular—adj. the specific thing that is being discussed

preposition—n. a small word that provides additional information about a noun, such as direction, degree or location

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## Article 148: Do People Still Say That?

Date: 2024-12-27T22:05:00+00:00 | 529 words | Source

No media source currently available

Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Emmanuel in France about how to know if an expression is still popular in English.

Sometimes when I am reading or watching the older films, I find some interesting expressions. But I do not know if the people are speaking them nowadays. How can I figure this out?

I'm happy to answer this question, Emmanuel.

It can sometimes be very difficult for learners of English to know if a word or expression sounds like it belongs to an earlier time.

For example, if you watch an older American film from the 1930s, you might hear the expression:

Gee, that's swell!

The expression "that's swell" means that something is good, and that the speaker is pleased. But nowadays people do not commonly say that. And if they do say it, they are probably saying it in a joking way because they know the expression is rare and not currently used.

Here are some ways to help you find out if an expression belongs to an earlier time:

Language exchange partners

Find a native English language partner. Then you can ask him or her if expressions are no longer used very much. Our VOA Learning English article "Five Tips for Great Language Exchanges" gives advice on how you can do a language exchange.

Note, however, that native English speakers can have different opinions about what expressions are still popular. That is because people in different age groups use different expressions. For example, a 20-year-old person might not even know a few of the expressions that older people still use. And some older people do not know expressions that young people, such as teenagers, use. Also, some older people might not even know that expressions they use are becoming less popular over time.

Using a corpus and dictionaries

You can also use technology to get more information about expressions.

Language researchers have collected over one billion words in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The examples come from American printed writing, video, and sound recordings.

You can use COCA to get information about how often an expression is used. It will not tell you if an expression sounds out-of-date. But an expression might rarely be used because it sounds old.

This VOA Learning English Education Tips article gives information on how to use COCA.

Lastly, dictionaries will show if a word belongs to an earlier time by putting the word “archaic” before its definition.

Remember that it is more important to understand idiomatic expressions than to be able to use them. That’s because you can always express your ideas without using idioms in simple language.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

out-of-date—adj. old, not current, or no longer in use

archaic—adj. from an earlier time, not used any longer

idiomatic—adj. related to the use of idioms which are terms that do not mean what the words that form them would suggest

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## Article 149: How to Summon Others

Date: 2025-01-03T22:05:00+00:00 | 512 words | [Source](#)

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Hello! This week on Ask a Teacher, we consider part of a message from Henry.

Here is one of Henry’s questions:

Greetings VOA Learning English team. I am a regular listener of your learning English program....

I would like to ask this question about the correct or proper way to summon someone (i.e., asking someone to come and see you .... at home, school or work) in English:

What expressions are used in summoning someone?

Thank you for your question, Henry. It is an important and useful one.

To summon means to call for a person or persons to be present, often for an important meeting.

Please note that there are many ways to summon others. In this lesson, we will present a few general ways.

#### Summoning others directly

When we speak to others directly, we can summon them with the following:

Could you come here, please?

We might also be more exact about the meeting place. For example, a supervisor or principal might say:

Could you come to my office, please?

You might also be more exact with what you would like to do. For example, you might ask:

Could I talk to you for a moment?

These questions are very general, polite, and useful in a lot of situations.

But the way in which we summon others can differ depending on the situation, how familiar people are with each other, and the rank or status the speakers have.

For example, consider a situation at home or school.

A parent or teacher might summon a child or student with language like this:

Come over here!

Generally, this kind of a summons is followed by scolding, or criticism.

#### Summoning others indirectly

So far, we have considered how English speakers might directly summon another person. But what do we say if we ask another person to communicate the information for us?

When an intermediary communicates the information, they might use the very general formula:

We can use an example to clarify this point.

Boss: Tanya, could you ask Joe to come see me?

Tanya: Joe, the boss would like to see you.

Joe: Ok. I'll be there right away.

Our examples can be used in a number of situations.

At school, a teacher might say, "The principal would like to see you" or "The principal wants to see you."

At home, a brother or sister might say, "Mom would like to see you" or "Mom wants to see you."

English speakers usually consider the structure "would like" to be a little more polite and formal.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). Please let us know where you are from, too.

And that's Ask a Teacher!

I'm John Russell.

John Russell wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

principal— n.the chief or leader of a school

polite—adj.showing good manners or behavior that shows respect and formality

intermediary—n.a person who aids the communications of two parties which are not communicating directly with each other

formal— adj.following established custom or rule

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## Article 150: Remaining, Remainder, and Rest of

*Date: 2025-01-10T22:05:00+00:00 | 481 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Ann. Here is part of Ann's question:

Dear Teachers,I don't really understand the difference between "remaining," "remainder" and "rest" when using these words to describe what is left of something.

For example, . . . can I replace "the remaining countries" by "the remain" or "the rest"?

Thank you, Ann.

I'm happy to answer this question, Ann.

English has many words that share the same meaning or that are close in meaning. So, you might wonder why we usually use one word instead of another that is very similar to it.

We often use one word instead of another because of grammar. Let's look at how this works by considering the last part of your question. You asked:

can I replace "the remaining countries" by "the remain" or "the rest"?

The answer is no. That's because the word "remain" is a verb, and the term "the rest" is a quantifier. To describe the word "countries," we need to use an adjective. The -ing ending on the word "remaining" makes it an adjective when we place it before a noun.

If you want to use the words "the rest" to describe a noun, you need to use four words. These four words are "the rest of the." These four words mean the same thing as the two words "the remaining." The following example shows this:

The rest of the countries use more land for farming.

Now let's look at the first part of your question:

I don't really understand the difference between "remaining," "remainder" and "rest" when using these words to describe what is left of something.

The word “remainder” is a noun, but when we use it to describe what is left of something, we change it to a quantifier. To do this, we usually say or write the four words “the remainder of the.” In this way, it works the same way as the quantifier “the rest of the.”

However, we use the quantifier “the rest of the” much more often, especially in spoken English, than “the remainder of the.”

Also, you should know that as a noun, “the remainder” is a term used in mathematics. It can mean the decimal fraction that remains when one number is divided by another number that is not one of its factors. For example, six-tenths, or .6, is the remainder when 33 is divided by five. It can also be what is left over from the process of subtraction.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

factor—n. (math) any of two or more numbers that, when multiplied, produce a product

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## Article 151: Apply and Application

*Date: 2025-01-17T22:05:00+00:00 | 396 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Krystyna in Poland. Here is Krystyna's question:

Dear Teacher, I would like to know of different ways to use words such as “apply” and “application” for getting jobs or other purposes.

Thank you, Krystyna.

I'm happy to answer this question, Krystyna.

The word “apply” is a verb, and the word “application” is a noun. We can use both words when discussing the process of looking for a job.

We say we “apply for a job” when we go through the official process of asking an employer for work. To do this, we usually have to complete a job application. The application is a form, either online or on

paper, that gives the employer information about the person applying for the job.

We commonly use the phrasal verb “fill out” to express the act of completing an application. Consider the following examples:

You must fill out this application first.

Did you fill out the application?

While we say “apply for” when trying to get a job, we say “apply to” when we are trying to get accepted into a school or other program, as in the following example:

She applied to three medical schools in California.

However, we say “apply for” when we are trying to get financial aid or special awards.

The new rule only applies to people who work more than 40 hours each week.

The right of freedom of speech should apply to all citizens.

The word “application” has other meanings besides a form people fill out. Among these is a computer program that does a specific task, or kind of work. From this meaning, we get the term “Apps,” which we use in our smartphones and computers.

There also is another expression with the verb “apply.” If you “apply yourself,” that means that you are working hard over a period of time to complete a project or develop a skill.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? Are you applying yourself to your study of English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

form—n. a document or application that people add information to for official use

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## Article 152: Minimal Pairs for Pronunciation

*Date: 2025-01-24T22:05:00+00:00 | 505 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from Doraemon in Japan. Here is Doraemon’s question:

For me, as an English learner, words like clash, crash, and crush sound like the same word. Can you help me to tell one word from others? Thank you.

I’m happy to answer this question, Doraemon.

When a foreign language contains sounds that do not exist in a person's native language, it can be difficult for learners to hear those sounds.

The reason you have difficulty hearing the difference between “crash” and “clash” is because the Japanese language does not have the consonant sounds “r” or “l.” And when English speakers are talking quickly, the difference between the sounds of “r” and “l” becomes very small. As a result, those two consonants can sound the same to a native Japanese speaker.

Some vowel sounds can also be difficult to hear or pronounce depending on the vowels a person's native language has. For example, consider the difference between the following two words:

The Spanish language has the vowel sound in the word “heat,” but it does not have the vowel sound in the word “hit.”

As a result, Spanish speakers will sometimes pronounce words like “hit,” “bit,” and “little” with an “ee” sound. For example, the two words “hit” and “heat” will both sound like “heat” when spoken with a Spanish accent.

Train your ears using minimal pairs

You can learn to hear the difference between sounds in a foreign language by carefully practicing using minimal pairs. Minimal pairs are two words that differ from each other by only one sound.

For example, the two words “hit” and “heat” differ from each other by only one sound.

Here are some tips for using minimal pairs:

Find lists and recordings of minimal pairs through a Google search or on YouTube. For Japanese speakers, find minimal pairs that differ between the sounds of “r” and “l.” Be sure to include minimal pairs that place the two sounds at the beginning, middle, and end of words. Here are examples:

correct collect

Also practice pronouncing these sounds. Learning to pronounce them can help you hear them. To pronounce them, you need to practice putting your tongue in the correct position.

The tongue is a muscle. Just as we can train our muscles to play a sport, we can train our tongue to move to the correct positions for pronouncing a foreign language. This [How to Pronounce](#) video from VOA Learning English shows the tongue positions you need to pronounce the letters “r” and “l” correctly.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

accent—n.a way of speaking typical of a particular group of people and especially of the natives or residents of a region

practice—v.to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient

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## Article 153: Accountability, Responsibility, Liability

Date: 2025-01-31T22:05:00+00:00 | 576 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Saeed in Iran about words that can express the idea of duty.

Here is Saeed’s question:

What is the difference between accountability, responsibility, and liability?

Especially from the point of view of law.

Sincerely, Saeed

I’m happy to answer this question, Saeed.

All three of the words you ask about express the idea of duty. A duty is what a person must do because it is right and just.

Let’s begin with the noun “responsibility.” It is the most common word of the three, and we use it in everyday speech. However, when we talk about responsibility in legal terms, we are more likely to use the noun “duty.”

We often refer to it when we use the word “responsibility” or its adjective form, “responsible.” The following examples show this:

It is a pilot’s responsibility to safely fly the airplane.

A pilot is responsible for safely flying the airplane.

When we want to say that only one person or subject is responsible for something, we can use the adjective “sole,” spelled s-o-l-e, or the adverb “solely,” as in these examples:

Any mistakes are the sole responsibility of the writer.

The writer is solely responsible for what he or she posts on social media.

To express the idea that someone should agree to having a duty, we can use the expression “take responsibility for,” as in the following example:

People must take responsibility for their own actions.

Accountability and liability



We usually use the noun “accountability” to refer to possible penalties or bad results people may face if they do not do their duty. To do this, we use the verb “hold” before the adjective “accountable,” as in this example:

The problem was that no one in the office was held accountable for their actions.

We often use the noun “accountability” when discussing organizations. For example, if a business has a “system of accountability,” that means the company’s leaders and workers likely face a penalty if they do not carry out their duties.

“Liability” is the most specific term of the three nouns. If someone or some group has legal liability, that means they have a duty that can be judged in a court of law. We use the adjective form, “liable,” to say that a person or group can face legal penalties because they were not as careful as they should have been. The following example shows this usage:

The company was held liable for failure to warn about the danger of its product.

Notice that we use the verb “hold” before the adjective “liable,” just like we do before the adjective “accountable.”

There is also a common use of the noun “liability” in everyday speech that is not linked to legal issues. We can say that something or someone is “a liability” if they make bad results more likely. The following example shows this usage:

That football player is getting old and is too slow. He has become a liability for the team.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

task—n. a piece of work or a job that needs to be done

penalty—n. anything that has the effect of punishing a person or group for what they have or have not done

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## Article 154: Regarding and Regardless

Date: 2025-02-07T22:05:00+00:00 | 446 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher we answer a question from Ramatoulaye in Senegal. Here is Ramatoulaye’s question:

Thank you and all the VOA Learning English team for their great work! My question is: what is the difference between “regarding” and “regardless?”

Thank you for your comments, Ramatoulaye. And I am happy to answer your question.

Both words are very useful in speaking and writing. That’s because the words give us a quick way to connect to other ideas.

“Regarding” simply means what someone is talking or writing about. Consider the following two examples:

We have all the information we need about the project.

We have all the information we need regarding the project.

The word “regarding” in the second example means the same thing as the preposition “about” in the first example. We generally use the word “about” more than “regarding.” However, it is more common to use “regarding” in formal speech than in informal communication.

Also, the expression “in regard to” means the same thing as “regarding.” Here are some examples:

In regard to the price, I think it was too expensive.

In regard to what you said, I don’t think we know all the facts yet.

Note that we use a noun, noun phrase, or noun clause after the expression “in regard to.” Also, you will sometimes hear native speakers say “in regards to” instead of “in regard to.”

Here is something you may find interesting when we compare the expression “in regard to” and the verb “regard.” The verb “regard” is a somewhat formal way to say, “look at.” So, just as we can direct someone’s attention to something by having them look at it, the expression “in regard to” directs us to something we are talking about.

The word “regardless” expresses the idea that one or more things do not affect the current situation or what we want to express now. When you look at the word, you will see that it ends with the suffix-less. This suffix means the same thing as the word “without.” So, “regardless” means “without regard to.”

Consider the following examples.

Regardless of religion, all people want happiness.

All people want happiness, regardless of religion.

Notice that you can use the word “regardless” either before or after the sentence or phrase it modifies.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? Regardless of your level of English, we want to hear from you! Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

modify-v.in grammar, to limit or specify the meaning of another word

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## Article 155: Regimen

*Date: 2025-02-14T22:05:00+00:00 | 431 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Marco in Italy. Here is Marco's question:

I want to understand more when to use the word “regimen” for exercise or other actions.

I'm happy to answer this question, Marco.

A regimen is usual and repeated action, especially in training. In health care, it is a systematic plan to improve a person's health.

A training regimen, for example, can include exercises people can do to help them get the results they want. For example, a long-distance runner's regimen might include runs of 10 or 20 kilometers every week.

Note that we often put another noun before the word “regimen” to help identify it more clearly. These are called attributive nouns. They act similarly to adjectives, as in the following examples:

a weightlifting regimen, a workout regimen, a running regimen, a walking regimen, a stretching regimen

In fact, you can more clearly identify any kind of regimen by placing an attributive noun before it. For example, musicians can have a “practice regimen,” and students can have a “study regimen.”

To express what actions or steps are in a regimen, we can use the verb and preposition “consist of,” as the following example shows:

My exercise regimen consists of strength training two days a week and running or walking most other days.

Note that native speakers might substitute the word “routine” for “regimen” in some situations. Here are some examples:

What practice routine do you follow?

You can use this daily routine to improve your fitness.

A medical regimen is a series of repeated treatments. For example, a doctor might tell a patient to take a certain medicine two times a day for two weeks.

We often put adjectives, like medical, before the word “regimen,” also. “Daily,” and “effective” are commonly used, as in:

Try to include long walks in your daily regimen.

You need an effective regimen for losing weight.

And it is not unusual to use both an adjective and an attributive noun, like in this example:

She swims two kilometers a day as part of a strict training regimen.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? Do you have a special study regimen? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

consist of-verb phrase. To be formed or made of

fitness-n. the state of being in strong physical condition

certain-adj. specific, exact

strict-adj. exact and precise, with little variation

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## Article 156: Extend, Expand, etc.

Date: 2025-02-21T22:05:00+00:00 | 462 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Ann in China. Here is part of Ann's question:

Hello Teachers, Could you please help me understand the difference between "extend," "expand," "stretch," [and] "enlarge" when I describe an activity that makes something larger than its current state?

Thank you, Ann.

We can use the four verbs Ann asked about to express an increase in physical size or amount. We can also use them to express increasing the time an activity takes.

We often use the verb "extend" to talk about increasing the amount of time for an activity or program. For example:

Officials want to extend the school year by six weeks.

We can use the verb "extend" to express an increase in people, things, or ideas. Consider the following examples:

The new rule extends to all employees in the company.

They want to extend the benefits of freedom to people around the world.

This research will extend our knowledge.

We can also use “extend” to express the distance or the area something reaches. For example:

The Rocky Mountains extend from the United States into Canada.

We use “expand” to express an increase in the size of a project or program. And, like “extend,” we can use “expand” to talk about including more people. Consider the following example:

Officials want to expand the program to include people from developing countries.

We commonly use “expand” in connection with business or industry:

We want to expand our business to reach more customers.

We can use the phrasal verb “stretch out” to express increasing the time to continue an activity:

I wanted to stretch out my vacation for an extra two or three days.

We can use the verb “stretch” to express improving our ability to do something:

Learning a new language will stretch your mind and improve your problem-solving abilities.

Note that when we use the verb “stretch” in this way, we communicate the idea that the improvement might be a little difficult or take a lot of effort.

Unlike the verb “extend,” we do not use “enlarge” to talk about an increase in time. Instead, it simply means to increase in size or scope. Scope means all of the things connected to an activity or project. Consider the following example:

They have enlarged their research team to examine the effects of pollution on animals.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? How are you trying to expand your knowledge? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that's Ask a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

benefits—n. the good things that result from an action or situation

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## Article 157: Appeal

Date: 2025-02-28T22:05:00+00:00 | 526 words | Source

No media source currently available

This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer the following question from a listener.

Could you please say more about the meaning of “appeal?”

Like many words in English, “appeal” has more than one meaning. It can also be more than one part of speech. A part of speech means the grammatical function a word has, such as a noun, verb, adverb or adjective. Let’s look at the many ways we can use the word “appeal.”

As a verb, “appeal” means to make a request, often in official situations or involving important things. Generally, we do not use “appeal” for normal, everyday requests. For example, we would not say:

I appeal for you to get some milk at the store.

But we would say something like:

The earthquake victims appealed to the government for more aid.

We can change the meaning of “appeal” by making it an adjective. One way to do this is to use the -ing ending. This forms the word “appealing,” which describes something that has a pleasing quality. Consider the following examples:

That job is really appealing to me.

Her dress looks really appealing.

The nice weather makes that city so appealing.

That argument is appealing to many voters.

As shown in these examples, we can use the adjective “appealing” to describe many different things.

The word “appeal” can also be used as a noun. One meaning as a noun describes a formal or urgent request, as shown in the following examples:

Their appeal for help was not answered.

The employees made an appeal to reduce the number of hours of work.

The second example above shows that we often use the verb “make” before the noun “appeal.”

The word “appeal” can also be used as a noun to describe a quality that creates interest, sympathy, or attraction. Here are some examples of that usage:

The museum’s design has a lot of appeal.

The appeal of that music is its simplicity.

Using “appeal” in the law

“Appeal” is also often used in legal matters – both as a noun or a verb. As a noun, it means a formal request to a court to review a decision by another court. If one court accepts the other’s request, we can say the court “granted” the appeal. If the court rejects the appeal, we can say the court “denied” it.

The following example shows “appeal” being used as a verb in legal English:

The defense team will likely appeal the decision.

An adjective form of “appeal” is also used in the legal system. The adjective “appellate” describes a kind of court that deals with cases that have been appealed.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? Was this lesson appealing to you? We want to hear your thoughts! Send us an email [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

function—n.the special action something or someone does to do a task or job

attraction—n.a positive feeling toward something that makes you interested in it or like it

grant—v.give permission

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## Article 158: Beach, Coast, Shore

*Date: 2025-03-07T22:05:00+00:00 | 470 words | Source*

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Doyeon in Korea about the usage of three similar words. Here is the question:

I want to know the differences between

the beach, . . . coast and shore.

You ask a useful question, Doyeon. Beach, shore and coast are related words, but they have some important differences.

The word “beach” is the most specific of the three words. The Collins online dictionary defines beach as “a nearly level stretch of pebbles and sand beside a sea, lake, etc., often washed by high water.”

Ocean beaches are popular places to visit. We often use the phrase “at the beach” to express the idea of spending time in the general area of the beach, as in the following example:

They will vacation at the beach this summer.

We usually say “on the beach” when describing specific activities we do there:

She went for a walk on the beach.

I’m going to spend my afternoon on the beach.

They are playing football on the beach.

The Learning English Word Book defines coast as “land on the edge of the ocean.” We can use the word to describe a wide area, however. For example, Baltimore, Maryland is an East Coast city even

though it is several kilometers from the Atlantic Ocean.

Here are more examples of how we can use “coast” in a sentence.

The Florida coast has many nice towns and beaches.

The coast of California extends over 1,300 kilometers.

Like the expression “at the beach,” we can say “on the coast” when describing the general area, as in the following example:

Her mother has lived on the coast for 30 years.

We can use the expression “off the coast of” to describe an area of ocean or sea relative to a place on land:

The island is about 60 kilometers off the coast of Africa.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the word “shore” as “the land bordering a usually large body of water.” Shore can sometimes mean the beach, but not always. For example, you might swim to shore and come out of the water onto a beach. But you could also come to shore at a port with no beach in sight.

And we can use “shore” when discussing the general area, just like we do with the word “coast.” The following example shows this meaning:

The northern shore has many nice towns and beaches.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? We want to hear from you! Do you like to spend time at the coast? Send us an email at [atlearningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:atlearningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that’s Ask a Teacher.

I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

specific—adj. precise, relating to one thing and not others

pebble— n.a small rock

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## Article 159: Sew and Knit

Date: 2025-03-14T22:05:00+00:00 | 468 words | Source

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This week on Ask a Teacher, we answer a question from Rohullah in Afghanistan about using the words “sew” and “knit” and related terms.

Dear VOA Learning English,



I am sending this email to know what the differences are between "sewing andknitting" or "sew andknit." Besides [that], I wanted to know what I can call a woman or a man that makes clothes.

I'm happy to answer this question, Rohullah.

An important difference between sewing and knitting is that when we sew, we connect pieces offabricor cloth that are already made. When we knit, we make the cloth itself from strings called yarn.

Also, the word "sewing" can describe many ways people connect or repair fabric and clothes. For example, people can sew many kinds of clothes, such as socks, shirts, dresses, hats, and gloves. People can also sew larger things, such as window coverings ortents.

A person can sew using a sewing machine or simply by using their hands with aneedleandthread. Knitting does not generally require use of a machine or a needle and thread. To knit, a person uses thicker strings called yarn, along with two thin sticks called knitting needles. Yarn is usually made of small, natural pieces, called fibers, such as wool or cotton.

While sewing thread is often less than one millimeter thick, knitting yarn is generally two to five millimeters thick.

Many people who knit make clothing for cold weather, such as wool sweaters, hats, and scarves. They may also knitblanketsor other things that can be used in the home.

More than 50 years ago, most Americans who earned money sewing clothes in a factory were women. They were called "seamstresses."

Today, we sometimes call any person who sews a "sewist." Or we can simply say "a person who sews." And a person whose job is to sew or repair clothes to make them fit well is called a tailor.

For our readers and listeners, what are your questions about American English? Do you like to knit or sew? We want to hear from you! Send us an email at[learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). And please let us know where you are from, too.

And that'sAsk a Teacher.

I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

fabric– n.cloth or other material made from cotton, wool, silk, nylon or other threads

tent– n.a shelter made of nylon or strong, heavy cloth held up by poles, typically used for camping

needle– n.a small, very thin piece of metal with a sharp point at one end and a hole at the other for a thread to go through

thread– n.a long, thin piece of material such as cotton, nylon or silk used for sewing

blanket– n.a large square or rectangular piece of cloth, typically put on bed to keep you warm

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## End of Corpus

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