



PRE-READING

Below are pairs of English words that sound alike. Your teacher will say one word from each pair. Circle the word that you hear.

- | | |
|-------------|----------|
| 1. feel | fill |
| 2. they | day |
| 3. men | man |
| 4. ice | eyes |
| 5. cap | cup |
| 6. glass | grass |
| 7. hot | hat |
| 8. thought | taught |
| 9. thick | sick |
| 10. jello | yellow |
| 11. fifteen | fifty |
| 12. bomb | bum |
| 13. Oakland | Auckland |

After you finish this exercise, your teacher will tell you the correct answers. Was the exercise difficult for you? If it was, don't worry—it's difficult for native speakers of English, too. In this story you will learn how the last two pairs of words caused *big* problems for people whose native language is English.

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Misunderstandings

He had uncombed hair, dirty clothes, and only 35 cents in his pocket. In Baltimore, Maryland, he got on a bus and headed straight for the rest room. He thought that if he hid in the rest room, he could ride to New York without paying. But a passenger at the back of the bus saw him. She tapped the person in front of her on the shoulder and said, "There's a bum in the rest room. Tell the bus driver." That passenger tapped the person sitting in front of him. "Tell the bus driver there's a bum in the rest room," he said.

The message was passed from person to person until it reached the front of the bus. But somewhere along the way, the message changed. By the time it reached the bus driver, it was not "There's a *bum* in the rest room" but "There's a *bomb* in the rest room." The driver immediately pulled over to the side of the highway and radioed the police. When the police arrived, they told the passengers to get off the bus and stay far away. Then they closed the highway. That soon caused a 15-mile-long traffic jam. With the help of a dog, the police searched the bus for two hours. Of course, they found no bomb.

Two similar-sounding English words also caused trouble for a man who wanted to fly from Los Angeles to Oakland, California. His problems began at the airport in Los Angeles. He thought he heard his flight announced, so he walked to the gate, showed his ticket, and got on the plane. Twenty minutes after takeoff, the man began to worry. Oakland was north of Los Angeles, but the plane seemed to be heading west, and when he looked out his window all he could see was ocean. "Is this plane going to Oakland?" he asked the flight attendant. The flight attendant gasped. "No," she said. "We're going to *Auckland*—Auckland, New Zealand."

Because so many English words sound similar, misunderstandings among English-speaking people are not uncommon. Not all misunderstandings result in highways being closed or passengers flying to the wrong continent. Most misunderstandings are much less serious. Every day, people speaking English ask one another questions like these: "Did you say seventy or *seventeen*?" "Did you say that you *can* come or that you *can't*?" Similar-sounding words can be

especially confusing for people who speak English as a second language.

When a Korean woman who lives in the United States arrived at work one morning, her boss asked her, "Did you get a plate?" "No . . .," she answered, wondering what in the world he meant. She worked in an office. Why did the boss ask her about a plate? All day she wondered about her boss's strange question, but she was too embarrassed to ask him about it. At five o'clock, when she was getting ready to go home, her boss said, "Please be on time tomorrow. You were 15 minutes late this morning." "Sorry," she said. "My car wouldn't start, and. . . ." Suddenly she stopped talking and began to smile. Now she understood. Her boss hadn't asked her, "Did you get a plate?" He had asked her, "Did you get up late?"

English is not the only language with similar-sounding words. Other languages, too, have words that can cause misunderstandings, especially for foreigners.

An English-speaking woman who was traveling in Mexico saw a sign in front of a restaurant. The sign said that the special that day was "*sopa con jamón y cebollas*." She knew that was Spanish for "soup with ham and onions." That sounded good. As the woman walked to her table, she practiced ordering. She whispered to herself, "*Sopa con jamón y cebollas. Sopa con jamón y cebollas*." Then she sat down, and a waiter came to take her order. "*Sopa con jabón y caballos*," she said. "What?" the waiter asked. No wonder the waiter didn't understand. The woman had just ordered a very unusual lunch: soup with soap and horses.

Auckland and *Oakland*. "A plate" and "up late." *Jamón* and *jabón*. When similar-sounding words cause a misunderstanding, probably the best thing to do is just laugh and learn from the mistake. Of course, sometimes it's hard to laugh. The man who traveled to Auckland instead of Oakland didn't feel like laughing. But even that misunderstanding turned out all right in the end. The airline paid for the man's hotel room and meals in New Zealand and for his flight back to California. "Oh well," the man later said, "I always wanted to see New Zealand."

He had uncombed hair, dirty clothes, and only 35 cents in his pocket. In Baltimore, Maryland, he got on a bus and headed straight for the rest room. He thought that if he hid in the rest room, he could ride to New York without paying. But a passenger at the back of the bus saw him. She tapped the person in front of her on the shoulder and said, "There's a bum in the rest room. Tell the bus driver." That passenger tapped the person sitting in front of him. "Tell the bus driver there's a bum in the rest room," he said.

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Auckland and Oakland. "A plate" and "up late." Jamón and jabón. When similar-sounding words cause a misunderstanding, probably the best thing to do is just laugh and learn from the mistake. Of course, sometimes it's hard to laugh. The man who traveled to Auckland instead of Oakland didn't feel like laughing. But even that misunderstanding turned out all right in the end. The airline paid for the man's hotel room and meals in New Zealand and for his flight back to California. "Oh well," the man later said, "I always wanted to see New Zealand."

VOCABULARY

LOOKING AT THE STORY

Which words have the same meaning as the words in the story? Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. She *tapped* the person in front of her *on the shoulder*.
 - a. touched the person's shoulder lightly with her hand
 - b. pushed hard on the person's shoulder
2. "There's a *bum* in the rest room."
 - a. person who doesn't work and probably doesn't have a home
 - b. person who travels by bus
3. The driver *pulled over* to the side of the highway.
 - a. looked
 - b. moved
4. The driver *radioed* the police.
 - a. called the police on his radio
 - b. got the attention of a police car
5. That soon caused a *15-mile-long traffic jam*.
 - a. line of stopped cars that was 15 miles long
 - b. line of cars going only 15 miles per hour
6. The police *searched the bus* for two hours.
 - a. looked everywhere on the bus
 - b. drove everywhere with the bus
7. Twenty minutes after *takeoff*, the man began to worry.
 - a. the plane went up into the air
 - b. the man took off his jacket
8. "Is this plane going to Oakland?" he asked the *flight attendant*.
 - a. person who flies an airplane
 - b. person who takes care of the passengers on an airplane
9. Misunderstandings among English-speaking people are *not uncommon*.
 - a. never happen
 - b. happen often
10. Not all misunderstandings *result in highways being closed*.
 - a. mean that highways are closed
 - b. cause highways to be closed
11. She *whispered* to herself, "Sopa con jamón y cebollas."
 - a. talked very quietly
 - b. thought very seriously
12. But even that misunderstanding *turned out all right in the end*.
 - a. was OK after the plane turned back
 - b. had a happy ending

LOOKING AT SPECIAL EXPRESSIONS

Find the best way to complete each sentence. Write the letter of your answer on the line.

to head straight for = to go immediately to

1. He got on the bus and _____
2. When the children arrived at the park, _____
3. We were hungry, so when we got home, _____
- a. they headed straight for the playground.
- b. headed straight for the restroom.
- c. we headed straight for the kitchen.

by the time = when

4. By the time it reached the bus driver, _____
5. By the time I got home from the store, _____
6. By the time we got to the theater, _____
- d. the message was "There's a bomb in the rest room."
- e. the best seats were taken.
- f. the ice cream had melted.

The expression "in the world" is used with a question word to show surprise.

7. "No, I didn't get a plate," she answered, wondering _____
8. When the phone rang at 1 A.M. he wondered _____
9. When we told her we were going for a walk, she asked us _____
- g. why in the world we were going outside in such bad weather.
- h. who in the world would call at that hour.
- i. what in the world he meant.

no wonder = it's not surprising

10. No wonder the waiter didn't understand; _____
11. No wonder you're tired; _____
12. No wonder you didn't do well on the test; _____
- j. you didn't go to bed until after midnight last night.
- k. the woman had just ordered a very unusual lunch.
- l. you didn't study.

to feel like = to want to

13. The man who traveled to Auckland instead of Oakland _____
14. Let's go to the party; _____
15. I'll eat just a sandwich; _____
- m. didn't feel like laughing.
- n. I feel like dancing.
- o. I don't feel like eating a big dinner.

3. COMPREHENSION/READING SKILLS

UNDERSTANDING CAUSE AND EFFECT

Find the best way to complete each sentence. Write the letter of your answer on the line.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. The man hid in the rest room _____ | a. because the police closed the highway. |
| 2. There was a 15-mile-long traffic jam _____ | b. because he didn't want to pay for his bus ride. |
| 3. The man who wanted to fly to Oakland was worried _____ | c. because she had arrived at work fifteen minutes late. |
| 4. The Korean woman didn't ask her boss about his strange question _____ | d. because the plane seemed to be heading west, not north. |
| 5. Her boss asked her, "Did you get up late?" _____ | e. because she was too embarrassed. |

UNDERSTANDING DETAILS

Read the sentences from the story. One word in each sentence is not correct. Find the word and cross it out. Write the correct word.

1. He had uncombed hair, dirty clothes, and only 35 dollars in his pocket.
2. In Baltimore, Maryland, he got on a train and headed straight for the rest room.
3. He thought that if he hid in the rest room, he could ride to Washington without paying.
4. But a driver at the back of the bus saw him.
5. She tapped the passenger in front of her on the foot and said, "There's a bum in the rest room."

Now copy three sentences from the story, but change one word in each sentence so that the information is not correct. Give your sentences to a classmate. Your classmate will find the incorrect word in each sentence, cross it out, and write the correct word. When your classmate is finished, check the corrections.

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

DISCUSSION

A. Think about these questions. Discuss your answers with your classmates.

1. In your country, if someone tried to ride a bus without paying, what do you think other passengers would do? What would you do?
2. Have you ever confused two similar-sounding English words? Which two words did you confuse? What happened?
3. In your native language, are there similar-sounding words (like *seventy* and *seventeen*) that people sometimes confuse? What are the words?

B. The message "There's a bum in the rest room" changed as people passed it to the front of the bus. Will a message that is passed around your classroom change, too? To find out, play the telephone game.

One of your classmates (Classmate 1) will whisper a message to a classmate sitting nearby (Classmate 2). The message can be anything, for example, "The weather is nice today, but tomorrow it's going to rain." Classmate 2 will whisper the message to Classmate 3. Classmate 3 will whisper the message to Classmate 4, and so on. (When a classmate whispers the message to you, you may not ask him or her to repeat it. You must pass the message you hear, even if it makes no sense.) The last classmate to hear the message will say it out loud. Is it the same message that Classmate 1 whispered?

WRITING

- A. "I always wanted to see New Zealand," the man who flew to Auckland said. Is there a place that you've always wanted to see? Why do you want to go there? What sights do you want to see? Write about a place you've always wanted to visit.
- B. The woman in the story ordered soup with soap and horses. Have you ever had a misunderstanding about food? Have you ever had a problem eating at someone's house, or buying food at a supermarket, or ordering food at a restaurant? Write about your experience. Here is what one student wrote.

On a visit to the United States, I went to a restaurant with my friends. I ordered a salad. The waitress asked me, "What kind of dressing do you want on your salad—blue cheese, ranch, Thousand Island, Italian, or French?" Of course, I said "French" because I am French. When the waitress brought the salad, I was shocked. The dressing was orange. I had never seen dressing like that in France. Then I tasted it. It tasted terrible. I never ordered "French" dressing again.

Challenge

Some English words and phrases sound so alike, they confuse even native speakers—people who have been speaking English all their lives.

Below are some mistakes that people in the United States—all native speakers—made. Which words did they confuse? Write your answer on the line.

(The words that people confused are listed side by side in the Answer Key. Ask a native speaker of English to read the words aloud. Can you hear any difference in the pronunciation?)

sauce	x-rayed	onion	ice cream
Youth in Asia	only	tennis shoes	
which it stands	self-esteem	a fried-egg	

1. A little boy asked his mother to make him a "Friday sandwich." The boy didn't really want a "Friday" between two slices of bread. He wanted _____ sandwich.
2. A teacher asked a seven-year-old girl if she had any brothers or sisters. "No," the girl answered. "I'm a lonely child." Actually, the expression isn't "a lonely child"; it's "an _____ child."
3. A young woman went to a movie with her boyfriend. As they were driving home, her boyfriend turned to her and said, "I'm going to take you to a place where they have the best diamond rings in the world." The woman was excited. Her boyfriend was going to buy her a diamond ring! A few minutes later, her boyfriend pulled into the drive-thru of a fast-food restaurant. When he ordered the food, the woman realized that her boyfriend hadn't said "the best diamond rings." He had said "the best _____ rings."
4. A little girl named Heather went to a Mexican restaurant with her family. When the waitress put Heather's dinner down in front of her, Heather covered her meal with her hands and told her parents, "Please don't put any hot socks on my food." Actually, it wasn't hot socks that Heather didn't like; it was hot _____.
5. A woman who hurt her arm went to the emergency room of a hospital. Doctors checked her arm and told her it was not badly hurt. After the woman left the hospital, a nurse wrote this on the woman's medical chart: "Patient was examined, X-rated, and sent home." Movies are sometimes X-rated, but patients are _____.
6. A teenaged girl wrote a letter to her girlfriend. She told her friend that her boyfriend had broken up with her, and now she didn't feel good about herself. She wrote that he hurt her "self of steam." Actually, the expression "self of steam" doesn't exist in English. She meant to say that the boy had hurt her _____.

7. A teacher asked her students to name famous Americans in history. One boy replied, "Richard Stans." The teacher was puzzled. She had never heard of Richard Stans. "Who is he?" she asked the boy. "I'm not sure," the boy answered, "but he must be very important. Every morning we all stand and face the flag. Then we say, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for Richard Stans.'" The teacher had to laugh. The boy had misunderstood the correct words, which are: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for _____."
8. A large department store had an optical department where people could get eye exams and buy glasses. One day the optical department was giving free eye exams. So, this was announced over the store's public address system: "The optical department is giving a free eye screening today." A lot of people who were shopping at the store heard the announcement and hurried to the optical department, where a long line formed. It turned out, however, that the people weren't waiting for a free eye screening; they were waiting for free _____.
9. High school students who took a public speaking class had to give a speech. One student chose as her topic euthanasia—the painless killing of people who are incurably sick. After she gave her speech, one student said to another, "Her speech was interesting. But she didn't say anything about teenagers in countries like Japan and China." The student thought the topic of the speech was not "Euthanasia" but "_____."
10. A magazine advertised over the radio. The magazine offered a special price of \$19.95 for a subscription. For \$19.95, people would receive ten issues of the magazine. When some people called the magazine's toll-free number to place their orders, they gave their credit card numbers and then their shoe sizes. Why did they give their shoe sizes? The people had misunderstood the words "ten issues." They thought they were ordering _____.