



Why Similar Words Have Different Meanings

KS4 ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Words That Look the Same But Mean Different Things

Have you ever noticed that some words look or sound almost identical, but they actually mean completely different things? For example, **'bark'** can be the sound a dog makes, or the rough covering on a tree. Or **'bank'** could mean a financial institution or the side of a river. These are called **homonyms** or **homophones**, and they show us something really interesting about how language works.

Even words that aren't spelled the same can have meanings that are very close but just slightly different. Think about **'happy'** and **'cheerful'**, or **'scared'** and **'terrified'**. They're not the same thing — they're different shades of the same feeling.

Think of it like colours on a paint palette. **'Red'** and **'crimson'** are both reds, but one is brighter and more intense than the other. The same happens with words.

Why Does Context Matter?

The **context** — the words and sentences around a word — tells us which meaning is correct. If someone says, **'I heard a dog bark in the garden,'** you instantly know they mean the sound, not the tree covering. But if you read, **'The tree's bark was rough and cracked,'** the meaning switches completely.

This is because words don't exist alone in a bubble. They live in a web of other words, and those surrounding words give them their true meaning. This is super important for reading and writing well.

Think of it like how your mood changes depending on who you're with. You might act differently at school than at home — not because you're a different person, but because the context is different. Words work the same way.

How Meanings Change Over Time

Words don't stay the same forever. **'Awful'** originally meant **'full of awe'** (something inspiring and amazing), but now it usually means **'really bad'**. **'Nice'** used to mean

'foolish' hundreds of years ago!

This happens because language changes as society changes. When more and more people use a word in a new way, the meaning shifts. That's why older books sometimes use words we don't recognise or use familiar words in unfamiliar ways.

Understanding these **subtle differences** between similar words helps us communicate more clearly and express exactly what we mean. It's the difference between being okay and being brilliant — and those two words, while both positive, don't mean quite the same thing at all!