

English Grammar : Word Usage

Lay vs. Lie

Lay and **lie** both have a variety of meanings.

Lay could be used as a noun referring to "the general appearance of an area, including the direction of streams, hills, and similar features."

On the other hand, **lie** can be used as a noun meaning "a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive" or as a verb denoting "to speak falsely or utter untruth knowingly, as with intent to deceive."

However, the definitions that often cause confusion among writers are the use of the verb **lay** meaning "to put down, especially gently or carefully" and the use of the verb **lie** denoting "to be in or assume a horizontal or resting position on a supporting surface." The distinction is actually simple. **Lay** needs a direct object, something to be laid.

"the **lay** of the surrounding countryside"

"Hundreds brave weather to **lay** wreaths at Arlington Cemetery"

"Police **lay** murder charge following death of elderly man in Watson Lake, Yukon"

Meanwhile, **lie** cannot be used with an object.

"He was familiarizing himself with the **lie** of the streets"

"They are not going to **lie** down': Boxing Day hunt crowds remain strong amid fight to scrap fox hunting ban"

"This new office trend lets you **lie** down at work"

In this present tense forms of the two words, it is actually easy to remember. You cannot **lay** on the sofa and the army soldiers cannot lie down their guns. It would make no sense to use these terms in this manner. However, the tricky part would be their past tense and past participle forms. Below is a table showing the different forms of these two verbs.

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Present Past Past Participle Present Participle

Lay Laid Laid Laying

Lie Lay Lain Lying

Notice that while the forms of **lay** are quite easy to remember, the forms of the verb **lie** may cause a little confusion to some especially the past tense of **lie** which is **lay**. The present participle forms may also be tricky as they only differ with the additional letter **a**. Here are examples on how to properly use the different forms of **lay** and **lie**:

Examples

Present Tense

The bird **lays** its eggs on the nest at the top of the tree.

She **lies** down on that sofa during break time.

Past Tense

The bird **laid** its eggs on that nest last week.

the body **lay** face downwards on the grass.

Past Participle

she **laid** the baby in his cot.

She has **lain** on that sofa for hours.

Present Participle

The bird has been **laying** its eggs on that nest since last year.

he was **lying** on a bed.