

Grammar Worksheets: Lie vs. Lay

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Many native and non-native speakers of English alike do not understand the difference between using the word **lie** and using the word **lay**. This worksheet attempts to clarify the difference.

Both **lie** and **lay** are verbs, meaning that they indicate an action of some sort. However, the verb **lie** and the verb **lay** are two absolutely different words, like **rhinoceros** and **apple**. They are not variants of the same word.

If we want to use formal grammatical terms (and we must), the verb **lie** is "intransitive"; the verb **lay** is "transitive."

The Verb Lay

A "transitive" verb indicates that something is being done to someone or something. For example, take a look at the following sentence:

Transitive Verb (lay): Every morning, I lay the newspaper on the table.

I (the subject) do something to the newspaper (direct object) every morning. I lay the newspaper on the table. The word **lay** is the verb (in the present tense), and the noun **newspaper** is the thing that something is done to (the direct object).

Think of it this way: You have to lay something.

The Verb Lie

An "intransitive" verb, on the other hand, does not indicate that anything is being done to anything or anyone. The person or thing does the action of just lying (NOT laying) there.

Intransitive Verb (lie): In the afternoon, my dog, Maxi, lies on the living room couch.

Maxi is not doing anything to anyone or anything. Maxi is simply lying on the couch; the verb **lie** is "intransitive." A common error occurs when parents tell children, incorrectly, to "lay" down. Sadly, the children grow up thinking that this use of **lay** is correct, thus perpetuating the cycle of misuse.

Incorrect: Scott, I want you to lay down this minute or you have a time out.

Correct: Scott, I want you to lie down this minute or you have a time out.

So What Causes All This Confusion?

People do not confuse the words **rhinoceros** and **apple**, so why do people confuse the verbs **lie** and **lay**? Well, both words start with the letter "L" and are made up of three letters. And they both mean similar things.

After all, if you **LAY** an apple on the table, the apple **LIES** on the table. And if you **LAY** a rhinoceros, ... Well, let's just not go there.

Unfortunately, these two verbs have different forms, and those different forms cause some confusion.

Take a look at the following table:

Base Form	Past Tense	Past Participle	Present Participle
Lie (to stretch out, recline)	lay	lain	lying
Lay (to place, to put)	laid	laid	laying

The past tense of the verb **lie** is **lay**, as in "Yesterday, Maxi lay on the living room couch."

Even though we use the letters **l-a-y**, the actual verb is **lie**; it's just in the past tense. Do you understand this? If not, these examples may help.

Correct Forms of LIE

- Jerry lies on the bed every day after school.
- The dog just lay on the rug as the burglars ransacked the house.
- That apple has lain on the table for two days now.
- Roberta is lying on the recliner in the family room.

Correct Forms of LAY

- Jerry lays his head on the pillow when he lies in bed.
- Susan laid her books down when she walked through the door.
- The contractors have laid the tile in the kitchen.
- The President is laying the foundation for comprehensive health reform.

Exercises: Circle the correct word in each sentence below.

1. Mrs. Khan (lies, lays) an eraser on her desk as soon as she enters the room.
2. When Kieran saw the beach, he thought he had (lain, laid) his eyes on paradise.
3. Lester likes to (lie, lay) in his room for about an hour after he wakes up.
4. The dog (lies, lays) her paws all over the furniture when we go out.
5. This clay pot has (lain, laid) in the underground cave for thousands of years.
6. Uday, please (lie, lay) down before you faint from exhaustion!
7. The factory will dismiss employees if they (lie, lay) down on the job.
8. The factory will dismiss employees if they (lie, lay) down their tools.
9. When farmers harvest mangoes, they must (lie, lay) mulch so that the harvest trucks have proper traction.
10. EMX has (lain, laid) aside its prejudices and will consider all applicants, regardless of background.
11. The goat enjoys (lying, laying) on the haystack in the afternoon.