

## SIT or SET? . . . LIE or LAY? UWF Writing Lab

Do not confuse the intransitive verbs sit and lie with the transitive verbs set and lay. A transitive verb has a direct object; an intransitive verb does not.

NOTE the different forms of the four different verbs:

PRESENT	PRESENT PARTICIPLE	PAST TENSE	PAST PARTICIPLE
sit	(is) sitting	sat	(has) sat
set	(is) setting	set	(has) set
lie	(is) lying	lay	(has) lain
lay	(is) laying	laid	(has) laid

When used as verbs, the present and past participles must have auxiliary (helping) verbs.

I. SIT MEANS “to be seated” or “in a resting position.” See how the idea of either “being seated” or “in a resting position” can be substituted for the verb sit, with the sentences retaining their original meanings.

1. Good students usually sit in the first row.  
(Good students usually “are seated” in the first row.)
2. The dog sat when his owner commanded him to.  
(The dog “became seated” when his owner commanded him to.)
3. That plant has sat in the same spot for five years.  
(That plant has “rested” in the same spot for years.)
4. I fell over the vacuum cleaner that was sitting in the hallway.  
(I fell over the vacuum cleaner that was “in a resting position” in the hallway.)

II. LIE MEANS “to rest” or “to recline.” Note the verb substitution in each sentence.

1. Small children should lie down for a nap after lunch.  
(Small children should “recline” for a nap after lunch.)
2. The baby lay awake and cried all night.  
(The baby “reclined” awake and cried all night.)
3. Your clothes have lain on the floor for two days.  
(Your clothes have “rested” on the floor for two days.)
4. I found your keys lying under the couch.  
(I found your keys “resting” under the couch.)

REMEMBER that sit and lie, as intransitive verbs, have no direct objects. A common misconception exists that sit and lie are used only with animate subjects, and set and lay with inanimate subjects. As you can see in each preceding example numbered 3 and 4, the subject is not important in determining whether to choose lie or lay, sit or set: what determines the correct choice is the idea that the verb represents (whether the subject is a thing or a person, if it is “in a resting position,” the correct verb will be sit or lie.)

III. To SET or LAY is “to put” or “place” something somewhere. Notice the direct objects of these transitive verbs in the sentences below. After each sentence, by substituting a form of “put” or “place,” you can see that the direct objects of the verbs set and lay are receiving the action of being placed or put down.

1. Please set the groceries on the counter.  
(Please “put” the groceries on the counter.)
2. Yesterday you set them in the wrong place.  
(Yesterday you “put” them in the wrong place.)
3. John has set the plants too close together.  
(John has “placed” the plants too close together.)
4. The students are setting the desks in a circle.  
(The students are “placing” the desks in a circle.)
1. We will lay the new carpet next week.  
(We will “put down” the new carpet next week.)
2. Sara laid the stones for her walkway.  
(Sara “put down” the stones for her walkway.)
3. Someone has laid my keys in the wrong place.  
(Someone has “placed” my keys in the wrong place.)
4. When laying tile, you must be careful to get it straight.  
(When “putting down” tile, you must be careful to get it straight.)

NOTE: As transitive verbs which take direct objects, set and lay may be used in the passive voice. A verb in passive voice technically has no object, but it does have a receiver of its action. In a sentence in passive voice, the SUBJECT of the sentence receives the action of the verb. The DIRECT OBJECT of an active voice sentence becomes the SUBJECT when the sentence is rephrased in passive voice.

(active) You should set your luggage in the corner.

(passive) Your luggage should be set in the corner.

(active) We will lay the new foundation tomorrow.

(passive) The foundation will be laid tomorrow.

(active) The batboy laid the bats in a row.

(passive) The bats were laid in a row by the batboy.

REMEMBER: The verbs set and lay mean “to place” or “to put down.” If you mean “to rest,” use a form of lie; if you mean “to be seated,” use a form of sit.

## YOUR TURN

1. Because Jeff (lay, laid) in bed after his alarm rang, he was late to class.
2. The ice cream has been (sitting, setting) out too long and has melted.
3. Joan wearily (sat, set) in the rocking chair and (lay, laid) her books aside.
4. (Lying, Laying) down her brush with relief, Linda studied the freshly painted room and then (sat, set) down to rest.
5. My lazy cat has (lain, laid) in the windowsill all afternoon. I should have (sat, set) his bed by the window so he could (lie, lay) on it.
6. You have let the baby (sit, set) in the sandbox long enough; you should be (lying, laying) her down for a nap.
7. After you have (lain, laid) out the silverware, (sit, set) the flowers in the center of the table.
8. Before (sitting, setting) the hot pan down, be sure to (lie, lay) a pot holder under it. Otherwise, it will leave a burn mark where it (sits, sets).

## KEY

1. lay
2. sitting
3. sat, laid
4. laying, sat
5. lain, set, lie
6. sit, laying
7. laid, set
8. setting, lay, sits