The word lay means to put or place something, but it is also the past tense of the word lie when it means to recline. The more common usage of lie is used to mean telling a falsehood, but this past tense is lied.

This may seem confusing now, but it will all become clearer with the following examples!

The answers to these practice examples are located at the Rolvaag Writing Desk!

Have more questions? Still don’t understand the difference between lay and lie? Make an appointment with a writing tutor!

1.) Visit the Writing Desk homepage, or stolaf.edu/asc/writing-help/
2.) Click on the Appointments box
3.) Sign in with your St. Olaf email, then click an appointment that works with your schedule!

Or just drop on by!

Information retrieved from:
Lay vs. Lie

Why is learning the difference so difficult? The overall misuse comes from not using lay and lie as transitive and intransitive verbs. What does that mean?

Lay is a transitive verb, meaning it has an object it acts upon.

Example: I lay my textbook on my desk.

In this example, lay is acting upon the object, textbook.

In contrast with lay, lie is an intransitive verb, which means it is only used when there is no direct object.

Example: I love to lie down in the Natural Lands to look at the stars.

Because there is no object that the subject (“I”) is acting on, use lie in this context instead of lay.

The trickiest part of lay vs. lie is that lay is the past tense of lie only when it means “to recline.”

Example: I lay on the couch in Rolvaag reading all day yesterday.

In present tense, the action would say lie, but because it happened yesterday, use lay.

Easiest trick: “lay” has a direct object, and “lie” does not.

Try picking the right usage of lay or lie to make these sentences correct:

I like to lay/lie in bed and relax before my work shift at the Pause.

My friends will lay/lie their backpacks outside the Caf before they go in to eat.

He was so tired after the Hall Council event last night that he lay/lay on the floor of the lounge.

Now try making your own sentences using these rules!