



In a previous edition of Writing Tip Wednesday, we asked for topic ideas. The colleague who suggested this one said, “thinking about it makes me even more ready for a nap.” That’s probably not an uncommon sentiment. The “lay/lie/lain/laid” conundrum is a tough one.

Before we start, we need to get one issue out of the way. There are multiple definitions of “lie” and “lying.” This writing tip doesn’t deal with telling untruths. We’re here to discuss the confusion that can come with setting something down—or reclining yourself.

The present tense is pretty straightforward. “Lie” means “to be in or assume a horizontal position.” You lie down in bed. “Lay” means “to put or set something down.” You don’t lay *yourself* down—you lay *something else* down. If you want to get technical about it, “lay” is a transitive verb that refers to a direct object, and “lie” is an intransitive verb that does not refer to a direct object.

It’s the past tense where things start to go sideways. “Lay,” as it turns out, is also the past form of “lie.” “Laid” can be both the past form and the past participle of “lay.” And “layed” is not a word, FYI. Here are some examples that we hope will help you make sense of it all.

LIE

Present:	I want to lie down and take a nap.
Past:	I lay down for a nap yesterday afternoon.
Present Participle:	I am lying down for a nap right now.
Past Participle:	I have lain down for a nap many times. (We defy you to find anyone who has said this one correctly.)

LAY

Present:	I lay the blanket on the sofa.
Past:	I laid the blanket on the sofa earlier today.
Present Participle:	I am laying the blanket on the sofa.
Past Participle:	I wish I had laid the blanket on the sofa before the dog jumped up.

Think you have it straight? Here are some test sentences. Are they grammatically correct?

- 1) I was outside laying in the sun when the phone rang.
- 2) If I hadn’t lain outside, I wouldn’t have missed the phone call.
- 3) I asked him if he had lain the folder on my desk.
- 4) I asked him why he was laying the folder on my desk.
- 5) You can’t believe politicians; they lie all the time.

Resources:

- [Chicago Manual of Style: When is “lay” or “lie” used?](#)
- [Writer’s Digest: Lay vs. Lie vs. Laid vs. Lain](#)

Quiz Answers:

- 1) No (correct answer is “lying”)
- 2) Yes
- 3) No (correct answer is “laid”)
- 4) Yes
- 5) Yes