**Lay versus Lie**

With help from Carol Bly’s *Beyond the Writers’ Workshop*

In order to understand the difference between “lay” and “lie,” it is helpful to understand the following parts of speech: direct object, transitive verb, and intransitive verb.

The **direct object** is the person or thing that receives the action of the verb. For example, in the sentence, “I read the book,” “the book” is the direct object because it receives the action of reading. You can identify the direct object by asking a question of the verb. In this case: “Reads what?” Direct objects are rarely single words. More often, they are noun phrases, such as “pretty books with pictures.”

A **transitive verb** has a direct object. An example of a sentence with a transitive verb is “The wise man contemplates murder.” Contemplated what? Murder. Murder is the direct object. Because this sentence contains a direct object, “contemplates” is a transitive verb.

An **intransitive verb** does not have a direct object. An example of a sentence with a transitive verb is “The old woman snores.” Snores what? That doesn’t make sense. You can’t snore someone or something. Because this sentence does not contain a direct object, “snores” is an intransitive verb.

**To lay**

Lay is a transitive verb. It always takes an object. It always lays *something* or *someone*. Tenses: lay / lay(s) / laid / laying.

**Correct**

Whenever I tire of it, I **lay** down my work.

Englishmen like **laying** hedges.

Yesterday I **laid** bread to rise under white cloth.

The bricklayers had already **laid** a course.

**Incorrect**

Sherman the sheep was laying in the hay all night long.

\*Check the sentence for a direct object. “Lay what?” There isn’t an answer. This sentence does not have a direct object, so it requires an intransitive verb. The verb in this sentence should be “was lying.”

**To Lie**

Lie is an intransitive verb. It never takes an object. In its sentences, there is only the subject (the actor) and a word or phrase telling where, or when, or how the subject does or did the lying down. Tenses: lie / lie (s) / lay / lain / lying.

**Correct**

The balsam trees **lie** where the fallers cut them.

Timber left **lying** soon becomes cover for voles and rabbits scared of hawks.

Fussell describes how his squad **lay** all night among dead German soldiers without knowing it.

The young Germans had **lain** there so long their faces were mottled white and green as marble.

**Incorrect**

Marcus **lies** down his book when it gets boring.

\*Book is a direct object, indicating that this sentence needs a transitive verb. The verb in this sentence should be **lay.**

**A caveat**

Note that “lay” is the past tense conjugation of “to lie.” Therefore “his squad lay all night” is correct *even though* the sentence does not have an object.