

idioms

An idiom is an expression that cannot be understood literally. Even when a person knows the meaning of all the words and understands the grammar, the overall meaning of the idiom may be unclear. When students gain an understanding of American idioms, and the facility to use them, they are truly a part of the American English speech community. This may be one reason why so many students are interested in learning idioms.

Some idioms are so widely used that they are clichés—so commonplace in the spoken language that they are best avoided in writing for fear of suggesting an unoriginal mind! Clichés and proverbs, another form of idiomatic usage, do not vary in form, e.g., “Curiosity killed the cat” not “the dog” and “Too many cooks spoil the broth” not “the meal.” Other idioms may allow for some form of variation, such as “to look (or feel) like death warmed over;” or in the form of taking on modifiers, e.g., “It was (beautiful) music to my ears.”

TEACHING TECHNIQUES. The first two activities in this section can be done in pairs or as a whole class “mingling” activity. If the mingling format is used, the teacher will give each student a piece of paper with a portion of the idiom written upon it. The student’s task is to locate the classmate who has the portion of the sentence which completes the idiom.

The “Fun Time” and “Idiomatic Antonyms” activities should be done in pairs with students identifying the correct idiom and providing a situation and a sentence in which it can be used.

The final activities in this section include (1) idioms that are semantically linked, as expressions relating to sports or food, and (2) idioms derived from specialized vocabulary items that have found their way into current, general American English usage.

Teachers can reproduce the information from these pages for class discussion and then extend the activity in the following ways:

1. Make a list of situations some of which would allow for the use of a designated idiom and others do not. Ask the students to determine whether the idiom applies to the situation or not,

EXAMPLE: Which of the following statements illustrate the idiom “(to) be on target”—to achieve a desired goal; to be correct about something.

A student who answers every question on a test correctly.

ANSWER: She/he is on target.

A basketball player who makes 15% of his shots. ANSWER:
She/he is not on target.

2. Ask the students to work in pairs to identify situations and write sentences in which a particular idiom will apply.
3. Ask the students to personalize an idiom by giving examples of how the idiom applies to their lives.
4. Ask the students to consider whether there are expressions in their native language similar to the idiom in American English. If there are, ask them to describe the situations in which the expressions are used. Have them compare this with the usage of the American idiom.

Bird words

I. Match each word or phrase in the first column with the word or phrase in the second column that produces common saying or idiom.

1. a bird in the hand	a. goose
2. birds of a feather	b. peace
3. bird-	c. the chicken or the egg
4. stool	d. is worth two in the bush
5. bird's eye	e. owl
6. to kill two birds	f. one's neck
7. silly	g. catches the worm
8. which came first	h. pigeon
9. he eats	i. with one stone
10. what's sauce for the goose	j. brain
11. wise old	k. like an ostrich
12. bury one's head in the sand	l. like a bird
13. crane	m. is sauce for the gander
14. dove of	n. view
15. the early bird	o. flock together



II. Match each word in the first column with its correct definition in the second column.

1. birdie	a. foolish, or inept person
2. chicken	b. objectionable or worthless
3. turkey	c. lower the head or body to avoid collision with an object
4. cuckoo	d. repeat by rote
5. duck	e. a golf score of one stroke less than par
6. parrot	f. timid; cowardly
7. for the birds	g. silly, a little crazy

Animal words

I. Match each word or phrase in the first column with the word or phrase in the second column that produces a proverb or idiom.

1. A barking dog	a. the dogs
2. Never look a gift horse	b. out of the bag
3. Curiosity killed	c. but you can't make him drink
4. Dog eat	d. lie
5. You can't teach an old dog	e. never bites
6. Let sleeping dogs	f. new tricks
7. When the cat's away	g. of a different color
8. Let the cat	h. horses
9. There's more than one way	i. hog
10. It's raining	j. dog
11. You may lead a horse to water	k. to skin a cat
12. Go to	l. in the mouth
13. Go whole	m. the mice will play
14. Hold your	n. cats and dogs
15. That's a horse	o. the cat

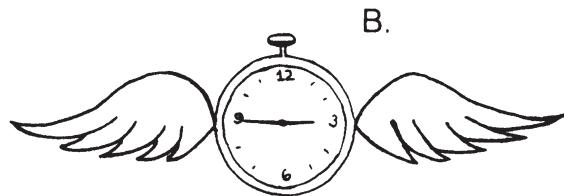
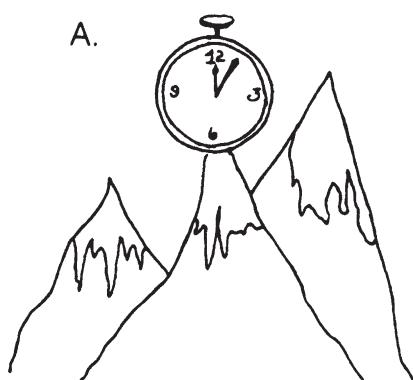


II. Match each word in the first column with its correct definition in the second column.

1. hog	a. to reveal secret information
2. buffalo	b. full of spite, malicious
3. bear	c. timid, fearful
4. mousey	d. nonsense
5. catty	e. to confuse or baffle
6. rat	f. to take selfishly
7. bull	g. something difficult

Fun time

Each picture below illustrates a common English phrase, idiom, or proverb.



C.
Once
a Time

D.
SECOND



E.
Day, Day



G.
TIME

H.

Idiomatic antonyms

I. Add the right words to complete the pairs, and the initial letters reading downward will spell an appropriate word.

1. ____ or NONE
2. ____ or YES*
3. ____ ____ or FALSE
4. ____ and OFF
5. ____ or OLD
6. ____ ____ ____ or OLD
7. ____ ____ ____ or LESS
8. ____ ____ ____ ____ or LARGE

*The idiom is commonly in reverse order from what appears here.

II. Complete the following idioms by adding a word that is opposite in meaning to the other word in the phrase.

1. Stop and _____
2. Lost and _____
3. Ups and _____
4. Do's and _____
5. Friend or _____
6. For better or _____
7. This or _____
8. Hit or _____
9. Heaven or _____
10. Win or _____

Talking sports

A number of idioms heard in everyday conversation began as phrases used in sports. The definitions given below show the meanings of these idioms in common parlance.



BASEBALL

have two strikes against one: to be in a position where success is unlikely (in baseball, one is "out" after three strikes)

She couldn't win. She had two strikes against her before she started.

keep your eye on the ball: to remain alert to the events occurring around one (*informal*)

If you want to succeed in this business, you have to keep your eye on the ball.

pinch-hit (for someone): to substitute for someone (in baseball, it refers to a substitute batter) *I won't be able to conduct the meeting. Would you be willing to pinch-hit for me?*

go to bat for someone: to support or help someone; to stand up for or defend someone (*informal*) *He was being treated unfairly until his friends went to bat for him.*

throw someone a curve: to confuse someone by doing something unexpected (in baseball, to pitch a curve to someone)

I had prepared a speech on the subject I thought they wanted, but they threw me a curve; they asked for a different topic.

out in left field: offbeat; unusual and eccentric (*informal*) *He has some pretty strange ideas. That one's really out in left field.*

get to first base: to make a major advance with someone or something (*informal*)

I'd like to close this business deal, but I can't seem to get to first base with it.

touch base (or someone): to talk to someone; to confer with someone (*slang*) *I'll touch base with John on this question and let you know what he thinks.*



SWIMMING

swim against the tide/current: to do the opposite of everyone else; to go against the trend *She probably won't go along with the rest of us on this; she usually swims against the current.*

make a splash: to receive widespread notice or publicity for a remarkable or successful action
He made quite a splash when he entered the business world.

go off the deep end: to become deeply involved (with someone or something) before one is ready; to follow one's emotions into a situation (*informal*) (refers to going into a swimming pool at the deep end—rather than the shallow end—and finding oneself in deep water. Applies especially to falling in love.)

I hope he'll think carefully about making that decision instead of just going off the deep end.



BOXING

pull one's punches: to hold back in one's criticism (usually in the negative) (*slang*) (in boxing, to strike with light blows to enable the other boxer to win)

I didn't pull any punches. I told him just what I thought of him.

beat someone to the punch: to do something before someone else does it.

I was going to write an article on that subject, but someone beat me to the punch.

hit someone below the belt: to do something unfair or unsporting to someone (*informal*) (in boxing, a blow below the belt line is not permitted) *We shouldn't spread that gossip about him; that would be hitting below the belt.*

blow-by-blow account/description: a detailed description (of an event)

She gave us a blow-by-blow account of their argument.



BILLIARDS

behind the eight ball: in a highly disadvantageous or baffling position (*informal*)

I don't know how I'm going to get out of this situation; I'm really behind the eight ball.



TENNIS

the ball's in your court: it's your turn (or responsibility) to take action

I've done my part of this project. Now the ball's in your court.

Ups and downs of English

Many phrasal (two-word) verbs end in *up* or *down*. In addition to their more literal meaning number of these have idiomatic meanings that are not readily apparent from the individual meanings of the two elements.

TURN UP/TURN DOWN

turn up: (1) to appear. *Three days after he left Portland, John turned up in San Francisco.*

(2) to increase the volume of something, such as a light, heat, a radio, etc. *Please turn up the radio a little, so that we can hear it better.*

turn down: (1) to refuse or deny someone. *I applied for a job there, but they turned me down.*

(2) to lower the volume or amount of something, such as heat, water, air pressure, a radio, etc. *Please turn down the heat, it's much too warm in here.*

BREAK UP/BREAK DOWN

break up: (1) to disintegrate; come apart. *This meeting broke up when the shocking news was received.*

(2) to end a romance. *Alice broke up with her boyfriend last week.*

(3) to be convulsed with laughter. *The comedian was so funny we just broke up when we saw his act.*

breakdown: (1) to fall apart; stop operating. *We couldn't continue our trip because our car broke down.*

(2) to lose control of one's emotions; to have a nervous collapse. *When Tim heard the terrible news, he broke down and wept.*

(3) to tear down; to destroy. *They got an axe and broke down the door.*

CRACK UP/CRACK DOWN

crack up: (1) to go crazy (slang). *After suffering so many setbacks, Arthur finally cracked up.*

(2) to make someone laugh. *Johnny told a couple of jokes that really cracked me up.*

crack down: (1) to be strict with someone or something. *The teacher is cracking down on students who came in late.*

(2) to enforce a rule or law more strenuously. *They're beginning to crack down on drivers who exceed the speed limit.*

WIND UP/WIND DOWN

wind up: (1) to tighten the spring of something such as a clock or mechanical toy. *If you wind that clock up all the way, it will run for eight days.*

(2) to conclude or bring to an end. *We hope to be able to wind up the meeting by about three o'clock.*

(3) to end in a particular place or state or by having to do something. *After exploring all the other possibilities, he wound up in Los Angeles.*

wind down: (1) to decrease or diminish. *Things are very busy now, but I think they'll wind down soon.*

(2) to come gradually to an end. *The party began to wind down at about 10 o'clock.*

LIVE IT UP/LIVE IT DOWN

live it up: to have an exciting time; to do what one pleases, regardless of the cost; to please oneself. *When I go on my vacation, I'm really going to live it up.*

live it down: to overcome the shame or embarrassment of something. *I was so embarrassed about what happened at the party; I'll never be able to live it down.*

RUN UP/RUN DOWN

run up: to add a bill; to add many charges to one's account. *Ellen ran up such a big bill at that store last month that she doesn't have enough money to pay for it.*

run down: to run out of power or energy. *When your watch runs down, you have to wind it or put a new battery in it.*

DRESS UP/DRESS DOWN

dress up: to wear fancy or formal clothes. *The children got all dressed up for the party.*

dress down: (1) to reprimand or scold. *My boss really dressed me down (or, gave me a dressing down) for not getting that order in on time.*

(2) to dress informally or casually. *We were told to dress down for the party; it was not going to be a formal affair.*

TEAR UP/TEAR DOWN

tear up: (1) to rip something into pieces. *Jean angrily tore up Tom's letter off and threw the pieces into the fireplace.*

(2) to cause someone much grief (slang). *The news of Alvin's death really tore her up; she just cried and cried.*

tear down: (1) to criticize or degrade someone. *Our new boss is always tearing somebody down; the morale in the office is at an all-time low.*

(2) to dismantle or destroy something. *They're going to tear down that old building to make way for the new highway that's being planned.*

BACKUP/BACKDOWN

backup: (1) to cause someone or something to move backwards or back. *If you'll back up (your car) a little, we'll be able to park in front of you.*

(2) to support someone or something. *I think that's a good idea; I'll back you up when you present it at the meeting.*

back down: (1) to yield to a person or thing. *George backed down from supporting the plan when he saw that everyone else was against it.*

(2) to fail to carry through on a threat. *Richard had boasted that he would fight anyone who opposed him, but he backed down when he realized he couldn't win.*

American English: A happy marriage

According to an age-old tradition, a bride should wear at her wedding ceremony “something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.” We have borrowed this tradition to examine idiomatic usage in American English.

SOMETHING OLD . . .

The following “old” words are Latin abbreviations of Latin words used in English (and some other languages). Except where otherwise indicated, the meaning given is the literal translation of the Latin word or phrase.

- A.D.** (anno Domini) = in the year of our Lord
- A.M.** (ante meridiem) = before midday; morning
- ca.** (circa) = about, approximately
- cf.** (confer) = compare
- e.g.** (exempli gratia) = for the sake of example
- et al.** (et alii) = and others (people)
- etc.** (et cetera) = and other things; and the rest
- ibid.** (ibidem) = in the same place (used in writing to indicate further reference to the book, chapter, etc. cited just before)
- i.e.** (id est) = that is
- lb.** (libra) = pound
- N.B.** (nota bene) = note well
- op. cit.** (opere citato) = in the work cited
- P.M.** (post meridiem) = after midday; afternoon
- P.S.** (postscriptum) = written after (something written after the signature line of a letter, or added to a book or article)
- [sic]** (thus, so) = [thus] (used to show that a quoted passage, often containing some error, is precisely reproduced)

SOMETHING NEW . . .

The following are new words, new combinations, or new usages.

- ace:** to earn the grade “A” on an examination
Because he studies hard, John aced the exam.
- number crunching:** the performance of long, complex, often repetitive, mathematical calculations
After some intense number crunching he was able to solve the mathematical problem.
- nonstarter:** someone or something that is not productive or effective
That project turned out to be a nonstarter.
- laid-back:** having a relaxed style or character
The summer-school students had a much more laid-back attitude than the full-time students.
- gut course:** a course or class (as in college) that is easily passed
Bill took several gut courses because he didn't have enough time to study.
- anchorman:** a broadcaster who introduces reports by other broadcasters and usually reads the news (also anchorperson, anchorwoman, or anchor)
There's a new anchorman on the ABC News program.

SOMETHING BORROWED . . .

The following words have been taken into English from native Alaskan and Australian languages.

- igloo** (*Esk.*) : an Eskimo house usually made of sod, wood, or stone when permanent, or of blocks of snow in the shape of a dome when built for temporary purposes
- kayak** (*Esk.*) : an Eskimo canoe made of a frame covered with skins except for a small opening in the center, and propelled by a double-bladed paddle.
- parka** (*Aleut from Russia*) : a hooded fur pullover garment for arctic wear (now, any hooded jacket to protect from cold and wind)
- mukluk** (*Esk.*) : a sealskin or reindeer-skin boot worn by Eskimos
- boomerang** (*native Australian*) : a bent or angular throwing club designed so that it soars or curves in flight so as to return near the thrower
- kangaroo** (*Australian*) : any of various herbivorous leaping marsupial mammals of Australia, New Guinea, and adjacent islands
- koala** (*Australian*) : an Australian arboreal marsupial about two feet long that has large hairy ears, gray fur, and sharp claws
- wallaby** (*native Australian*) : any of various small or medium-sized, usually brightly colored, kangaroos

SOMETHING BLUE . . .

The following are a few of the many English idioms that contain the word “blue.”

- feeling blue:** feeling low in spirits, melancholy
- the blues:** a song, often of lamentation, characterized by 12-bar phrases, 3-line stanzas in which the words of the second line repeat those of the first, and continual occurrence of blue or sad notes in melody and harmony
- until one is blue in the face:** to do (or deal with) something or someone for an exasperatingly long time, usually to no avail
- black and blue:** darkly discolored from blood effused by bruising
- blue law:** a statute regulating work, commerce, and amusements on Sundays
- blue jeans:** pants made of blue denim
- blueprint:** a photographic print in white on a blue background used especially for copying maps, mechanical drawings, and architects' plans
- once in a blue moon:** very rarely

O.K. O.K.

More than 30 years ago Bergen and Cornelia Evans, in their book *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (Random House 1957), said of the word *O.K.*:

“Originating in the United States, *O.K.* has spread to almost every country on earth. There is something about the phrase as a term of assent or agreement that gives it universal appeal. It is probably today the most widely used single term in human speech ... used a billion times a day in informal speech and business notes and letters.”

Whence comes this word that has become, even much more during the past 30 years, a universal term for assent or approval?

Its origins are not certain. The most widely accepted explanation is that it was the name of a partisan political organization, the “*O.K. Club*,” formed in 1840 to support the candidacy of Martin Van Buren, the eighth president of the United States, in his try for a second term in office. The letters *O.K.* stood for Old Kinderhook, the small town in New York State where Van Buren was born.

Another possible origin of *O.K.* may be found in the initial letters of a humorous spelling (in vogue in the late 1830s) of the phrase “all correct”—that is, *oll korrecht*. It is, in fact, quite possible that its widespread use in popular speech arose as a result of the combination of these two early uses, both fostering the signification of “good” or “favorable.”

Some linguists have thought that *O.K.* is from the Choctaw Indian word *okeh*, meaning “it is so.” It has even been explained as the initials of Obadiah

Kelly, a mythical railroad clerk who put his initials on all the packages he accepted as shipment.

Whatever its origin, the use of *O.K.* as an informal expression for something good persisted and spread, first in the United States and then abroad. This rapid spread may be at least partly attributable to the invention of the telegraph in 1844 and the comparative ease of tapping out the Morse Code equivalent of *O.K.* in place of the considerably longer *all right*.

The most usual spelling is the one we have used above: *O.K.* Other spellings are *OK* and *okay* (earlier *okeh* was also sometimes used). When employed as a borrowed term in other languages it is often spelled in one of the above ways; however, it is also sometimes incorporated into the spelling or writing systems of the foreign language. Thus we find, among many others, *oké* in Dutch and Indonesian, *O'kej* in Russian, and in Chinese and Japanese, respectively, *O* and *ㄦ*.

K
ㄦ

Like many other English words, *O.K.* can be used as various parts of speech without change of form, always with the meaning of approval or endorsement, or that something is satisfactory, acceptable, or correct. It is used most often as an interjection: *A. You'll do this now, won't you? B. O.K.* As an adjective: *He was hurt pretty badly when he fell, but he's O.K. now* or *That's an O.K. idea; let's do it.* As a noun: *We'll have to get the boss's O.K. on this.* As a verb: *I'll O.K. your proposal if you make the changes I suggested.* As an adverb: *The radio is working O.K. now.*

A Few More Initial-Letter Words

A-OK	very definitely OK	PC	personal computer (a small computer for use by an individual or small business)
ASAP	as soon as possible	PE	physical education
B and B	bed and breakfast (an establishment [as an inn or guesthouse] offering lodging and breakfast)	RN	registered nurse
BLT	a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich	RV	recreational vehicle (a vehicle [as a motor home or trailer] equipped for use in camping)
CD	compact disc (a small plastic optical disc, usually containing a recorded disc)	SOS	1. an internationally recognized signal of distress in radio code ••• _ _ _ ••• used especially by ships calling for help; 2. a call or request for help or rescue
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid (a nucleic acid found in the nucleus of a cell and playing a vital part in heredity)	SST	supersonic transport (a supersonic transport airplane)
LP	long playing (a microgroove phonograph record designed to be played at 33 1/3 revolutions per minute)	TA	teaching assistant (usually, a graduate student at a university, who teaches classes part-time but does not have regular faculty status)
MVP	most valuable player (in team sports such as football, baseball, basketball, etc.)	VCR	videocassette recorder (a videotape recorder that uses videocassettes)
PA	public address (system)—a system for amplifying sound by means of microphones, usually for public speaking	VTR	videotape recorder

American English: A colorful language

RED

caught red-handed: found in the very act of a crime, or in possession of self-incriminating evidence

red-eye: a commercial airline flight between two distant points that departs late at night and arrives early in the morning

red-faced: blushing or flushed with embarrassment, anger, etc.

red-carpet treatment: the kind of courtesy or deference shown to persons of high station

in the red: operating at a loss or being in debt

paint the town red: celebrate boisterously, especially by making a round of stops at bars and nightclubs

see red: become very angry

red-hot: very hot; creating much excitement or demand; violent; intensely excited or enthusiastic; very fresh or new

red tape: excessive formality and routine required before official action can be taken

red-letter day: a memorable, especially important or happy day

redcap: a baggage porter at a railroad station

redneck: a bigot or reactionary, especially from the rural working class

BLUE

out of the blue: suddenly and unexpectedly

talk a blue streak: talk continuously, rapidly, or interminably

blue-pencil: alter, abridge, or cancel, as in editing a manuscript

true-blue: unwaveringly loyal or faithful

bluegrass music: country music that is polyphonic in character and is played on unamplified string instruments, with emphasis especially on the solo banjo

blue-ribbon: of superior quality or prominence



WHITE

white heat: intense heat; a stage of intense activity, excitement, feeling, etc.

white hot: in a state of white heat

white lie: a minor, polite, or harmless lie

wave the white flag: give up; surrender; yield

white-tie: requiring that guests wear formal attire, especially that men wear white bow ties with formal evening dress

whitewash: (*noun*) anything, such as deceptive words or actions, used to cover up or gloss over faults, errors, or wrongdoing; (*verb*) conduct such a cover-up

PURPLE

purple prose: writing that calls attention to itself because of its obvious use of certain effects, as exaggerated sentiment or pathos

BLACK

blacklist: (*noun*) a list of persons under suspicion or disfavor; (*verb*) put a person on such a list

blackmail: (*noun*) payment extorted by intimidation, such as threats of injurious revelations; (*verb*) extort money by the use of threats

black-tie: requiring that guests wear semi-formal attire, especially that men wear black bow ties with tuxedos or dinner jackets

black market: the buying and selling of goods in violation of legal price controls; also, the place where such buying and selling is done

black sheep (of the family): a person who causes shame or embarrassment because of his/her deviation from the standards of the group

blackball: exclude socially; vote against or reject a candidate

black box: an electronic device, such as a flight recorder, that can be removed from an aircraft as a single package

ROSE

rose-colored glasses: a cheerful or optimistic view of things, usually without valid basis

rosy: bright or promising; cheerful or optimistic

GREEN

greenhorn: an untrained, inexperienced, or naive person



green around the gills: having a sickly appearance; pale

get the green light: receive permission or authorization to do something

green with envy: very jealous

green-eyed monster: jealousy

green thumb: an exceptional aptitude for gardening or for growing plants successfully



PINK

tickled pink: greatly pleased

pink slip: a notice of dismissal from one's job

in the pink: healthy; in very good condition

pinkie: the little finger

YELLOW

have a yellow streak: be cowardly

Most of the definitions are from *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition Unabridged.

**SING THE BLUES**

to be disappointed or disillusioned. *Jim is singing the blues since he broke up with Elizabeth.*

PLAY SECOND FIDDLE TO SOMEONE

to be subordinated to someone. *Carol resigned from the company because she was tired of playing second fiddle to George.*

PLAY BY EAR

to play a piece of music without looking at the notes. *I can play all the popular songs by ear.*
to perform without prior preparation. *We haven't had time to prepare for the meeting. We'll have to play it by ear.*

MUSIC TO MY EARS

good news; information that makes someone happy. *When my boss told me about my promotion, it was music to my ears.*

TOOT ONE'S OWN HORN;

BLOW ONE'S OWN HORN
to praise oneself; to brag. *Mary is always tooting (blowing) her own horn. She forgets that other people have a role in our company's success.*

JAZZ SOMETHING UP

to make something more interesting or lively. *Tom jazzed up his gray suit with a red tie.*

SOAP OPERA

an overly dramatic and emotional story broadcast regularly on the radio or television. *Mary's day was not complete unless she saw her favorite soap opera.*

IT'S NOT OVER TILL THE FAT LADY SINGS

to not speculate about something until it is completed. *Though her policies were criticized, and her election in doubt, the candidate reminded the news correspondents that it's not over till the fat lady sings.*

CHANGE ONE'S TUNE

to change one's opinions or manner. *John was critical of Anne's judgment until she was made his supervisor. Now he has changed his tune and agrees with everything she does.*

OFF OF TUNE

not in agreement. *His suggestions were out of tune with reality.*

CALL THE TUNE

make decisions; decide what is to be done. *A lot of people do not get along with Carol. She always wants to call the tune.*

The person who is in charge is the one who makes the final decision. *S/he who pays the piper calls the tune.*

MARCH TO A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

to follow one's own ideas rather than being influenced by the group. *Dick isn't going to support us; he always marches to a different drummer.*

DRUM UP BUSINESS

influence people to buy something. *The big advertisement in today's newspaper should drum up business.*

OFF-BEAT

unusual, not typical. *He dressed in an off-beat manner.*

TUNE OUT

ignore someone or something. *I tuned out when the speaker started quoting statistics.*

TUNE IN

set the television control to receive a program. *I tune in to the news every evening.*

TUNE UP

adjust an engine so that it runs correctly. *I needed a mechanic to tune up my car.*

to adjust instruments in an orchestra so that each musician is in harmony with one another. *The orchestra tuned up before the concert began.*

TO BEAT THE BAND

very much; very fast. *The police car was speeding down the highway to beat the band.*

JUMP ON THE BANDWAGON

take a popular position; join the group that has the greatest popularity. *The politicians jumped on the bandwagon when they saw the governor was so popular.*

FACE THE MUSIC

accept the unpleasant consequences for one's actions. *Jimmy broke his neighbor's window with his baseball. Now he's got to face the music.*

ALL THAT JAZZ

et cetera; and so forth. *The movie was filled with kissing and hugging and all that jazz.*

JAZZY

lively; active. *Phil and Mary throw jazzy parties. Hours pass like minutes at their house.*

Books in language

HERE ARE SOME IDIOMS THAT RELATE TO BOOKS:

turn over a new leaf: to forget the past and start again with the intention of doing better.

I didn't want to keep making those same mistakes, so I decided to turn over a new leaf. Now everything is better.

read someone like a book: to understand someone very well. *I know just why he did that; I can read him like a book.*

read between the lines: to infer something (from something); to see what is really meant by what is written or said. *Don't believe everything you hear; you have to read between the lines.*

you can't tell a book by its cover: You can't tell what a person or thing is like from its outward appearance. *He looks like he'd be able to do the job, but I'm not sure: you can't tell a book by its cover.*

by the book: according to the rules (informal). *He doesn't deviate from the prescribed procedures even a little bit; he always goes by the book.*

throw the book at: to charge or convict (someone) with as many crimes as possible. *We thought he'd get off with a lighter sentence, but they really threw the book at him.*

leaf through: to look through (a book, magazine, or newspaper) without reading it carefully. *Why don't you just leaf through this book to see whether you want to buy it?*

have one's nose in a book: to be reading a book; to read books all the time. *Every time I see him, he has his nose in a book.*

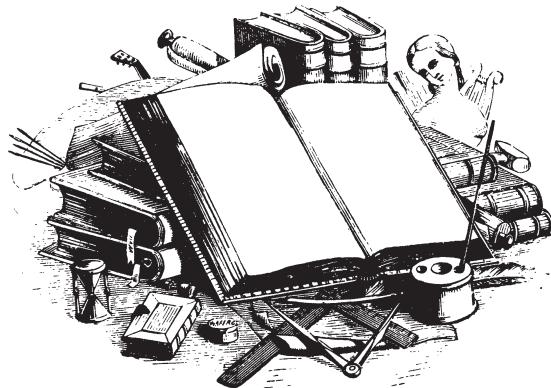
hit the books: to begin to study; to study (slang). *If you want to pass that test tomorrow, you'd better hit the books tonight.*

use every trick in the book: to use every method possible (informal). *We used every trick in the book and we still couldn't get it done.*

crack a book: to open a book to study (slang; almost always used in the negative). *I passed that test without even cracking a book!*

in one's book: in one's opinion (informal). *In my book that's the very best way to do it.*

one for the books: a record-breaking act. *I've never seen it done so fast. That's one for the books!*



SOME WORDS OR PHRASES THAT CONTAIN THE WORD "BOOK" DO NOT REFER TO BOOKS IN THE USUAL SENSE:

book passage (a flight, etc.): to arrange in advance for something; make reservations.

booking office: an office where tickets are sold (e.g., at a railway station).

book of (matches, stamps, etc.): a collection of things fastened together, having its own cover.

book value: the value of something as shown on bookkeeping records, as opposed to its market value (or current selling price).

bookmaker (or bookie): a person who collects bets before a race and pays the winners.

book: to leave, depart (slang). *I'm bored with this party; let's book.*

Food for thought



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in apple-pie order: very well organized; in very good order (informal). *Her desk is so neat; everything's always in apple-pie order.*

bring home the bacon: to earn a salary (informal). *I need to get a job; now I'm the one who has to bring home the bacon.*

full of beans: full of nonsense; talking nonsense (slang). *Don't pay any attention to what Frank says; he's full of beans.*

not know beans (about something): to know nothing about something (slang). *Sam doesn't know beans about using a computer.*

not worth a hill of beans: worthless (informal). Their advice isn't worth a hill of beans.

spill the beans: to reveal a secret or a surprise by accident (cliché). *We wanted the party to be a surprise, but William spilled the beans and spoiled it.*

beef something up: to make something stronger (informal or slang). *We should beef up the program by adding an advanced course.*

bread and butter: (a person's) livelihood or income. *I don't especially like doing this job, but it's my bread and butter.*

know which side one's bread is buttered on: to know what is most advantageous for one (cliché). *Richard will do anything to please the boss; he knows which side his bread is buttered on.*

too many cooks spoil the soup/broth/stew: a proverb meaning that too many people trying to manage something simply spoil it. *Several people were trying to manage that program, and it didn't turn out well. I guess too many cooks spoiled the soup.*

chew the fat: to chat informally with close friends (slang). *We didn't get much done this morning. An old friend came by, and we spent a lot of time chewing the fat.*

the fat is in the fire: a proverb meaning that serious trouble has broken out. *The boss found out that the reports weren't turned in on time. Now the fat's in the fire!*

half a loaf is better than none: a proverb meaning that having part of something is better than having nothing. *I was hoping they would pay me more than that, but at least I have a job now; I guess half a loaf is better than none.*

know one's onions: to have a good knowledge about something one is supposed to know (informal or slang). *I think Mary will do a good job; she really knows her onions.*

salt something away: to store something for future use (originally referred to preserving food and storing it). *Mr. Smith is saving money to use after he retires from work; he salts away \$50 every week.*

worth one's salt: worth one's salary. *Any worker worth his salt would do a better job than that.*

in a stew (about someone or something): bothered or upset about someone or something (informal). *What's Bill in a stew about this morning? Did the boss find mistakes in his work again?*

out of the frying pan into the fire: from a bad situation to a worse situation (cliché). *Kim's situation is bad enough now, but if he quits his job, he'll go from the frying pan into the fire.*

have other fish to fry: to have other, or more important, things to do. *I just can't be bothered dealing with these details; I have other fish to fry.*

hash something over: to discuss something in great detail (informal). *We've already talked about that matter several times; there's no point in hashing it all over again.*

fine kettle of fish: a mess; a very unsatisfactory situation (cliché). *Our guests would arrive at any minute and all the electricity had gone off; that was a fine kettle of fish!*

the pot calling the kettle black: (an instance of) someone with a fault accusing someone else of having the same fault (cliché). *How can Jim accuse Lisa of laziness? That's the pot calling the kettle black.*

simmer down: to become calmer and quieter (informal). *Things have been so hectic here this week; we hope they'll simmer down after the holidays.*

HAVE YOU EVER HAD ROAD RASH?

Take This Quiz and Find Out!

by *Lisa Harshbarger*

NASCAR drivers use special vocabulary, such as *pit stop* and *jack man*, to describe key elements of their sport. They're not alone, of course; race car drivers, truck drivers, mechanics and even motorcycle riders use special vocabulary to talk about the ups and downs of their sport or profession with their colleagues.

Can you join in on these conversations? The quiz below will test how "road-savvy" you are! Read each sentence carefully and pick the best answer. Good luck and safe driving!

1. I got tired of *sitting in the rocking chair* all the time.
 - a. Waiting for the traffic light to change
 - b. Driving between several large trucks
 - c. Parking a vehicle in a very tight space
2. If he were smarter, he wouldn't have all that *road rash*.
 - a. Cuts and bruises from falling onto the road
 - b. Damage to the fenders and sides of a car
 - c. Sunburn from sticking an arm out the window
3. She hates to drive in the *granny lane*.
 - a. Parking lot outside a retirement home
 - b. Shopping district where people walk
 - c. Section of road with strict speed limits
4. One more *invitation* and I'll take the keys away from you!
 - a. Broken headlight
 - b. Speeding ticket
 - c. Empty gas tank
5. I think I need to get me some new *wets*.
 - a. All-weather tires
 - b. Windshield wipers
 - c. Leather car seats
6. Look out for that *alligator*!
 - a. Police car
 - b. Rough road
 - c. Piece of tire
7. She's never *t-boned* her Harley, as far as I know.
 - a. Crashed it into a vehicle
 - b. Broken it down for parts
 - c. Used it to carry groceries
8. There are too many *cash registers* on that road for me.
 - a. Toll booths
 - b. Places to gamble
 - c. Fast food places
9. Did he finally *get the green*?
 - a. Win a prize at the races
 - b. Buy a lime-colored car
 - c. See the green flag wave
10. That *full tuck and roll job* really ruined the look of the car.
 - a. Removal of the car doors
 - b. Upholstery made for the car
 - c. Raising the car's chassis

Reference—Jackson, M. 2003. *Say what? An automotive slang guide*. <http://www.motor-cross.ca/saywhat.html>

Be Creative with English

What's that tune?



Above is an illustration of a "message magnet" that was distributed by the Office of English Language Programs at the international TESOL conference in Baltimore, Maryland in March.

At the bottom of the page are the four opening measures of a famous song recorded by many famous jazz singers including Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Nat King Cole. Need some clues? The title is four words. The first word is a southern state that is famous for peaches, peanuts, and a president elected in 1976. The last three words of the title are a slang expression that means thinking about something.

The first 100 readers who send in the correct answer and their postal address will receive a message magnet from the *Forum*. Please send your entries by post, fax, or email to:

What's That Tune?
 English Teaching Forum
 U.S. Department of State
 301 4th Street SW, Rm 312
 Washington, DC 20547, USA
 Fax: 202-401-1250
 e-mail: etforum@pd.state.gov
etforum@eca.state.gov

Slowly

What is 'Jazz'?

Many English dictionaries have more than one definition for the word *jazz*. In addition to the form of music, there are two other meanings of the noun *jazz*, plus the phrasal verb *jazz up* and the adjective *jazzy*.

JAZZ, noun miscellaneous, unspecified things

- "Oh, no!" cried Bill when he opened the picnic basket. "We brought the buns, cheese, pickles, lettuce, onions, mustard, ketchup and all that jazz to make hamburgers, but we forgot to bring the meat!"
- The Scoutmaster warned the young Boy Scouts, "Remember that you will have to carry everything on your back during our camping trip. So bring only the essential equipment and not a bunch of extra jazz that you won't need on the trail."

JAZZ, noun nonsense, silliness, empty talk

- "The curriculum planning meeting was a waste of time," the teacher complained, "because the consultant just talked about tests and a lot of jazz about assessment. She never mentioned anything about course design."
- "You can forget all that jazz they taught you at the university," the old farmer told the young irrigation expert. "Here we just hope for plenty of rain to grow the crops."

JAZZ UP, verb to make more interesting or appealing

- The university rector used a few quotations from Shakespeare to jazz up his speech to the professors and students from the English department.
- For the second edition of the book, the designer jazzed it up by replacing the black-and-white illustrations with colorful photos and creating an attractive new cover.

JAZZY, adjective fancy, elaborate, flamboyant

- The pop star hired a well-known costume designer from Hollywood to create a jazzy new wardrobe for her upcoming concert tour.
- The software company had the jazziest booth at the conference. While the book publishers were giving away free pens and catalogs, the software company was handing out free CDs, hats, calendars, and note pads.

Energy Idioms

All steamed up: to be angry or worried

*Don't get **all steamed up** and start an argument.
Try to stay calm.*

Burn the candle at both ends: to work too hard without enough rest

*People who **burn the candle at both ends** often have accidents because they are tired.*

Burn the midnight oil: to work late into the night

*Because she had a term paper due the next morning, Paulette was **burning the midnight oil** to finish it on time.*

Burn out: to lose one's interest or desire, often due to overuse

*After the 1994 season, Michael Jordan was **burned out** on basketball. He wanted to play baseball instead.*

Get wind of: to discover or find out

*Once the workers **got wind of** the free drinks, there was a line at the restaurant.*

Hot air: meaningless or unimportant talk

*The presenter promised his workshop would be very informative and exciting, but I left early because I thought he was full of **hot air**.*



limericks

*A swinging young monkey named Fred
Let go and fell smack on his head.*

*He suffers no pain
Except when his brain
Sees yellow bananas as red.*

*The chef made a wonderful stew
from every leftover in view.
His guests cried, "Sublime"
except for the time
he stirred in a leftover shoe.*

*An epicure dining at Crewe
found a very large mouse in his stew.
Said the waiter, "Don't shout
and wave it about,
or the rest will be wanting one too."*

Food for second thoughts

(as) cool as a cucumber: calm; not agitated
Even in the pressure of the competition, Herbert remained as cool as a cucumber.

have your cake and eat it too: to have the advantage of both alternatives

You'll have to decide whether you want to go to the party or study to pass the exam. You can't have your cake and eat it too.



go bananas: (slang) to go crazy or become silly

We were going along all right until all these changes came upon us. When the last one happened, we just went bananas.

(as) slow as molasses (in January): extremely slow
When Ralph is doing something he likes, he's pretty quick, but in doing these other things he's slow as molasses in January.

in a pickle: in trouble; in a mess

Now Sarah has really got herself in a pickle. She accepted two invitations for the same evening.



a lemon: (slang) something defective or unsatisfactory
Paul thought he was getting a bargain when he bought that car, but it turned out to be a lemon.

(as) sweet as sugar: very sweet or good-natured
Melinda has a pretty disagreeable disposition most of the time, but she can be as sweet as sugar when she wants to be.

take the cake: to surpass all others, especially in some undesirable quality

Now that really takes the cake. I've never heard such an impossible demand!



piece of cake: (slang) very easy
Oh, that's a piece of cake. I can do it without even trying.

like (two) peas in a pod: very much alike; almost identical

Bill and Steve have all the same likes and dislikes and ways of doing things. They're just like two peas in a pod.

take something with a grain of salt: to listen to a story or an explanation with considerable doubt.
Walter has a very persuasive way of talking, but you'd better take what he says with a grain of salt.

(as) easy as pie: very easy; simple

Making that dress with my new sewing machine was as easy as pie.

cut the mustard: to achieve the standard of performance necessary for success (usually used in the negative)

Henry hoped he'd be able to succeed in that job, but he just couldn't cut the mustard.



apple of someone's eye: someone's favorite person or thing

Little Audrey's grandfather talks about her all the time. She's the apple of his eye.

sell like hotcakes: (cliché) to be very popular and sought after

Gerald should be happy about the success of his new book. It's selling like hotcakes.

packed (in) like sardines: (cliché) packed very tightly
The tour bus was so crowded we could hardly breathe. We were packed like sardines.

(as) flat as a pancake: very flat

Linda was late to the meeting because she couldn't drive her car. One of the front tires had a puncture and was as flat as a pancake.



put all one's eggs in one basket:

(cliché) to risk everything at once.
If you want to be sure of being accepted by a university, you'd better apply to several different ones. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

Communicating with animals

busy as a bee
 blind as a bat
 hungry as a bear
 busy as a beaver
 free as a bird
 happy as a clam
 sick as a dog
 smart as a fox
 innocent as a lamb
 happy as a lark
 quiet as a mouse
 stubborn as a mule
 wise as an owl
 strong as an ox
 proud as a peacock



go ape over something: (slang) to be extremely enthusiastic about something

eager beaver: a person who is excessively diligent or overly zealous

for the birds: (slang) useless or worthless; not to be taken seriously

like a bull in a china shop: very awkward or clumsy

rain cats and dogs: to rain very hard

chicken out: (slang) to lose one's courage and avoid doing something because one is afraid

clam up: (slang) to refuse to talk or reply; refrain from divulging information

shed crocodile tears: to seem, hypocritically and insincerely, to be sad about something when one is not

as the crow flies: in a straight line; by the most direct route (used in stating the distance between two points)

eat crow: (informal) to be forced to admit to having made a mistake; to have to retract a statement, humiliatingly

like water off a duck's back: having little or no effect

white elephant: a possession unwanted by the owner but difficult to dispose of; something disproportionately expensive with regard to its usefulness or value

ferret something out: to search out, discover, or bring to light

like a fish out of water: out of one's proper or accustomed environment

a big frog in a small pond: someone who is important or outstanding within a small or unimportant group

wild-goose chase: an absurd or hopeless search for something nonexistent or unobtainable

eat like a horse: to eat a large quantity of food

straight from the horse's mouth: (informal) from the original or a trustworthy source

packed in like sardines: many people (or things) being enclosed in a space, like a can (tin) of sardines

at a snail's pace: very slowly

swan song: farewell appearance; the last act of someone or something

weasel out of something: to evade an obligation or duty

cry wolf: to tell people there is great danger when there is not

wolf in sheep's clothing: a person who conceals his evil intentions or character behind an innocent exterior

↗ A GAGGLE of Geese. A SCHOOL of Fish. A TROOP of Kangaroos. A FLOCK of Sheep. A PRIDE of Lions. A PACK of Wolves. A HERD of Elephants. A PARLIAMENT of Owls. A SWARM of Bees. A COLONY of Ants. A PLAGUE of Locusts. A CAST of Hawks. A CLOWDER of Cats. A DROVE of Cattle. An OSTENTATION of Peacocks. A COVEY of Quail.