



English idioms A–Z

Each with its meaning and a sentence using it
virtuousenglishacademy.com/reference/english-idioms

Read for recognition first. Understanding an idiom when somebody else uses it is worth far more, and costs far less, than using one yourself.

When you do start using them, take five — five that describe situations you are actually in — and use those until they are automatic. Native speakers use idioms much more sparingly than idiom lists imply.

The tag on the right says whether an expression is neutral enough for writing or belongs in speech. In an exam essay, use none of them: an examiner reads an idiom as informality rather than as range.

A to Z

Alphabetical, ignoring a and the — so "the bottom line" is filed under B.

IDIOM	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
actions speak louder than words	What you do matters more than what you say.	Remember, actions speak louder than words.
add fuel to the fire	To make a bad situation worse.	Do not add fuel to the fire.
back to the drawing board	To start again after a failed attempt.	The plan failed, so it is back to the drawing board.
the ball is in your court	It is your turn to take action.	I have done my part; the ball is in your court.
beat around the bush	To avoid saying something directly.	Stop trying to beat around the bush.
the best of both worlds	The benefits of two different things at once.	Working from home gives the best of both worlds.
the bigger picture	The most important overall view of a situation.	Try to see the bigger picture.
bite the bullet	To force yourself to do something difficult.	Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet.
a blessing in disguise	Something bad that turns out to be good.	Losing that job was a blessing in disguise.
the bottom line	The most important fact or final result.	The bottom line is that we need money.
break the ice	To make people feel more relaxed in a new situation.	A good host knows how to break the ice.
burn bridges	To destroy relationships you may later need.	Never burn bridges with old employers.
burn the midnight oil	To work late into the night.	Students often burn the midnight oil before exams.
by the skin of your teeth	Only just; barely succeeding.	You only passed by the skin of your teeth.
call it a day	To stop working on something for now.	We worked hard, so let us call it a day.
the calm before the storm	A quiet period before trouble.	It felt like the calm before the storm.
a chip on your shoulder	A lasting feeling of resentment.	Do not carry a chip on your shoulder.

IDIOM	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
cost an arm and a leg	To be very expensive.	Tickets these days cost an arm and a leg.
count your chickens	To assume success before it happens.	Do not count your chickens before they hatch.
cut corners	To do something cheaply or quickly, ignoring quality.	Never cut corners on safety.
a double-edged sword	Something with both good and bad effects.	Fame is a double-edged sword.
a drop in the ocean	A very small amount compared to what is needed.	My donation is a drop in the ocean.
the early bird catches the worm	Those who act first gain an advantage.	Get up early; the early bird catches the worm.
the elephant in the room	An obvious problem no one wants to discuss.	Nobody mentioned the elephant in the room.
every cloud has a silver lining	Every bad situation has a good side.	Cheer up — every cloud has a silver lining.
face the music	To accept the unpleasant results of your actions.	It is time to face the music.
get out of hand	To become impossible to control.	The party began to get out of hand.
go the extra mile	To make more effort than is expected.	We must go the extra mile for clients.
the grass is always greener	Others' situations always seem better.	Remember, the grass is always greener.
hit the nail on the head	To describe exactly what is causing a problem.	Your comment really hit the nail on the head.
a hot potato	A controversial issue people avoid dealing with.	Immigration is a hot potato right now.
the icing on the cake	An extra good thing that improves something.	The award was the icing on the cake.
in the same boat	In the same difficult situation as others.	We are all in the same boat here.
jump on the bandwagon	To join something because it is popular.	Everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon.
kill two birds with one stone	To solve two problems with one action.	I can kill two birds with one stone.
the last straw	The final problem that makes a situation unbearable.	That comment was the last straw.
let sleeping dogs lie	To avoid stirring up an old problem.	It is best to let sleeping dogs lie.
miss the boat	To miss a chance by being too slow.	Buy now, or you will miss the boat.
a needle in a haystack	Something almost impossible to find.	Finding it was like a needle in a haystack.
off the top of my head	From memory, without checking.	Off the top of my head, I cannot say.
on cloud nine	Extremely happy.	She was on cloud nine after the wedding.
on the same page	In agreement and understanding each other.	Let us make sure we are on the same page.

IDIOM	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
once bitten, twice shy	Being cautious after a bad experience.	He won't try again — once bitten, twice shy.
once in a blue moon	Very rarely.	We see them once in a blue moon.
a penny for your thoughts	A way of asking what someone is thinking.	You look quiet — a penny for your thoughts?
piece of cake	Something very easy to do.	For her, the test was a piece of cake.
a piece of the pie	A share of something, such as profit.	Everyone wants a piece of the pie.
put all your eggs in one basket	To risk everything on one thing.	Do not put all your eggs in one basket.
read between the lines	To understand a hidden meaning.	You have to read between the lines.
sit on the fence	To avoid choosing between two sides.	You cannot sit on the fence forever.
a slap on the wrist	A very mild punishment.	He only got a slap on the wrist.
spill the beans	To reveal a secret.	Come on, spill the beans!
steal someone's thunder	To take credit for another person's idea.	Try not to steal someone's thunder.
a storm in a teacup	A lot of anger about an unimportant matter.	It was all a storm in a teacup.
throw in the towel	To give up.	Do not throw in the towel just yet.
the tip of the iceberg	A small sign of a much bigger problem.	These complaints are just the tip of the iceberg.
under the weather	Feeling slightly ill.	I am feeling under the weather today.
when pigs fly	Something that will never happen.	He will apologise when pigs fly.
the whole nine yards	Everything; the full amount.	They gave us the whole nine yards.
a wild goose chase	A hopeless search for something.	The clue sent us on a wild goose chase.