

ENGLISH IDIOMS

English idioms, proverbs, and expressions are an important part of everyday English. They come up all the time in both written and spoken English. Because idioms don't always make sense literally, you'll need to familiarize yourself with the meaning and usage of each idiom. That may seem like a lot of work, but learning idioms is fun, especially when you compare English idioms to the idioms in your own language.

Learning to use common idioms and expressions will make your English sound more native, so it's a good idea to master some of these expressions. The tables below are organized by how common the idioms are in American English. You can start by learning the very common English idioms, since these are the ones you'll encounter regularly watching American movies or TV, or visiting the United States. When you've mastered those, move on to rest. None of the idioms on this page are unusual or old fashioned, so you can be confident using any of them with native English speakers from all English-speaking countries.

THE MOST COMMON ENGLISH IDIOMS

These English idioms are extremely common in everyday conversation in the United States. You will hear them in movies and TV shows and can use them to make your English sound more like that of a native speaker.

| Idiom | Meaning | Usage |
|------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| A blessing in disguise | a good thing that seemed bad at first | as part of a sentence |
| A dime a dozen | Something common | as part of a sentence |
| Beat around the bush | Avoid saying what you mean, usually because it is uncomfortable | as part of a sentence |
| Better late than never | Better to arrive late than not to come at all | by itself |
| Bite the bullet | To get something over with because it is inevitable | as part of a sentence |
| Break a leg | Good luck | by itself |
| Call it a day | Stop working on something | as part of a sentence |

Cut somebody some slack Don't be so critical as part of a sentence

Cutting corners Doing something poorly in order to save time or money as part of a sentence

Easy does it Slow down by itself

Get out of hand Get out of control as part of a sentence

Get something out of your system Do the thing you've been wanting to do so you can move on as part of a sentence

Get your act together Work better or leave by itself

Give someone the benefit of the doubt Trust what someone says as part of a sentence

Go back to the drawing board Start over as part of a sentence

Hang in there Don't give up by itself

Hit the sack Go to sleep as part of a sentence

It's not rocket science It's not complicated by itself

Let someone off the hook To not hold someone responsible for something as part of a sentence

Make a long story short Tell something briefly as part of a sentence

Miss the boat It's too late as part of a sentence

No pain, no gain You have to work for what you want by itself

On the ball Doing a good job as part of a sentence

Pull someone's leg To joke with someone as part of a sentence

Pull yourself together Calm down by itself

So far so good Things are going well so far by itself

Speak of the devil The person we were just talking about showed up! by itself

That's the last straw My patience has run out by itself

The best of both worlds An ideal situation as part of a sentence

Time flies when you're having fun You don't notice how long something lasts when it's fun

by itself

To get bent out of shape To get upset as part of a sentence

To make matters worse Make a problem worse as part of a sentence

Under the weather Sick as part of a sentence

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it Let's not talk about that problem right now
by itself

Wrap your head around something Understand something complicated as part of a sentence

You can say that again That's true, I agree by itself

Your guess is as good as mine I have no idea by itself

COMMON ENGLISH IDIOMS & EXPRESSIONS

These English idioms are used quite regularly in the United States. You may not hear them every day, but they will be very familiar to any native English speaker. You can be confident using any of them when the context is appropriate.

| Idiom | Meaning | Usage |
|-------|---------|-------|
|-------|---------|-------|

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush What you have is worth more than what you might have later by itself

A penny for your thoughts Tell me what you're thinking by itself

A penny saved is a penny earned Money you save today you can spend later by itself

A perfect storm the worst possible situation as part of a sentence

A picture is worth 1000 words Better to show than tell by itself

Actions speak louder than words Believe what people do and not what they say by itself

Add insult to injury To make a bad situation worse as part of a sentence

Barking up the wrong tree To be mistaken, to be looking for solutions in the wrong place
as part of a sentence

Birds of a feather flock together People who are alike are often friends (usually used negatively)

by itself

Bite off more than you can chew Take on a project that you cannot finish as part of a sentence

Break the ice Make people feel more comfortable as part of a sentence

By the skin of your teeth Just barely as part of a sentence

Comparing apples to oranges Comparing two things that cannot be comparedas part of a sentence

Costs an arm and a leg Very expensive as part of a sentence

Do something at the drop of a hat Do something without having planned beforehand as part of a sentence

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you Treat people fairly. Also known as "The Golden Rule" by itself

Don't count your chickens before they hatch Don't count on something good happening until it's happened. by itself

Don't cry over spilt milk There's no reason to complain about something that can't be fixed by itself

Don't give up your day job You're not very good at this by itself

Don't put all your eggs in one basket What you're doing is too risky by itself

Every cloud has a silver lining Good things come after bad things by itself

Get a taste of your own medicine Get treated the way you've been treating others
(negative) as part of a sentence

Give someone the cold shoulder Ignore someone as part of a sentence

Go on a wild goose chase To do something pointless as part of a sentence

Good things come to those who wait Be patient by itself

He has bigger fish to fry He has bigger things to take care of than what we are talking about now
by itself

He's a chip off the old block The son is like the father by itself

Hit the nail on the head Get something exactly right by itself

Ignorance is bliss You're better off not knowing by itself

It ain't over till the fat lady sings This isn't over yet by itself

It takes one to know one You're just as bad as I am by itself

It's a piece of cake It's easy by itself

It's raining cats and dogs It's raining hard by itself

Kill two birds with one stone Get two things done with a single action by itself

Let the cat out of the bag Give away a secret as part of a sentence

Live and learn I made a mistake by itself

Look before you leap Take only calculated risks by itself

On thin ice On probation. If you make another mistake, there will be trouble. as part of a sentence

Once in a blue moon Rarely as part of a sentence

Play devil's advocate To argue the opposite, just for the sake of argument as part of a sentence

Put something on ice Put a project on hold as part of a sentence

Rain on someone's parade To spoil something as part of a sentence

Saving for a rainy day Saving money for later as part of a sentence

Slow and steady wins the race Reliability is more important than speed by itself

Spill the beans Give away a secret as part of a sentence

Take a rain check Postpone a plan as part of a sentence

Take it with a grain of salt Don't take it too seriously as part of a sentence

The ball is in your court It's your decision by itself

The best thing since sliced bread A really good invention as part of a sentence

The devil is in the details It looks good from a distance, but when you look closer, there

are problems by itself

The early bird gets the worm The first people who arrive will get the best stuff by itself

The elephant in the room The big issue, the problem people are avoiding as part of a sentence

The whole nine yards Everything, all the way. as part of a sentence

There are other fish in the sea It's ok to miss this opportunity. Others will arise. by itself

There's a method to his madness He seems crazy but actually he's clever by itself

There's no such thing as a free lunch Nothing is entirely free by itself

Throw caution to the wind Take a risk as part of a sentence

You can't have your cake and eat it too You can't have everything by itself

You can't judge a book by its cover This person or thing may look bad, but it's good inside by itself

FAMILIAR ENGLISH IDIOMS & PROVERBS

These English idioms and proverbs are familiar and easily understood by native English speakers, but they are not usually used in everyday conversation. If you haven't mastered the more frequent idioms yet, they are a better place to start, but if you're already familiar with those expressions, the idioms below will further spice up your English.

| Idiom | Meaning | Usage |
|--|---|-----------------------|
| A little learning is a dangerous thing | People who don't understand something fully are dangerous | by itself |
| A snowball effect | Events have momentum and build upon each other | as part of a sentence |
| A snowball's chance in hell | No chance at all | as part of a sentence |
| A stitch in time saves nine | Fix the problem now because it will get worse later | by itself |
| A storm in a teacup | A big fuss about a small problem | as part of a sentence |
| An apple a day keeps the doctor away | Apples are good for you | by itself |

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure You can prevent a problem with little effort. Fixing it later is harder. by itself

As right as rain Perfect as part of a sentence

Bolt from the blue Something that happened without warning as part of a sentence

Burn bridges Destroy relationships as part of a sentence

Calm before the storm Something bad is coming, but right now it's calm as part of a sentence

Come rain or shine No matter whatas part of a sentence

Curiosity killed the cat Stop asking questions by itself

Cut the mustard Do a good job as part of a sentence

Don't beat a dead horseMove on, this subject is over by itself

Every dog has his day Everyone gets a chance at least once by itself

Familiarity breeds contempt The better you know someone the less you like him by itself

Fit as a fiddle In good health as part of a sentence

Fortune favours the bold Take risks by itself

Get a second wind Have more energy after having been tired as part of a sentence

Get wind of something Hear news of something secret as part of a sentence

Go down in flames Fail spectacularly as part of a sentence

Haste makes waste You'll make mistakes if you rush through something by itself

Have your head in the clouds Not be concentrating as part of a sentence

He who laughs last laughs loudest I'll get you back for what you did by itself

Hear something straight from the horse's mouth Hear something from the person involved as part of a sentence

He's not playing with a full deck He's dumb by itself

He's off his rocker He's crazy by itself

He's sitting on the fence He can't make up his mind by itself

It is a poor workman who blames his tools If you can't do the job, don't blame it on others
by itself

It is always darkest before the dawn Things are going to get better by itself

It takes two to tango One person alone isn't responsible. Both people are involved. by itself

Jump on the bandwagon Follow a trend, do what everyone else is doing as part of a sentence

Know which way the wind is blowing Understand the situation (usually negative) as part of a sentence

Leave no stone unturned Look everywhere as part of a sentence

Let sleeping dogs lie Stop discussing an issue as part of a sentence

Like riding a bicycle Something you never forget how to do as part of a sentence

Like two peas in a pod They're always together as part of a sentence

Make hay while the sun shines Take advantage of a good situation as part of a sentence

On cloud nine Very happy as part of a sentence

Once bitten, twice shy You're more cautious when you've been hurt before by itself

Out of the frying pan and into the fire Things are going from bad to worse by itself

Run like the wind Run fast as part of a sentence

Shape up or ship out Work better or leave by itself

Snowed under Busy as part of a sentence

That ship has sailed It's too late by itself

The pot calling the kettle black Someone criticizing someone else he is just as bad as part of a sentence

There are clouds on the horizon Trouble is coming by itself

Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones People who are morally questionable
shouldn't criticize others by itself

Through thick and thin In good times and in bad times as part of a sentence

Time is money Work quickly by itself

Waste not, want not Don't waste things and you'll always have enough by itself

We see eye to eye We agree by itself

Weather the storm Go through something difficult as part of a sentence

Well begun is half done Getting a good start is important by itself

When it rains it pours Everything is going wrong at once by itself

You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar You'll get what you want by being nice by itself

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink You can't force someone to make the right decision by itself

You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs There's always a cost to doing something by itself

IDIOMS

AN IDIOM IS A PHRASE, SAYING OR A GROUP OF WORDS THAT HAS A METAPHORICAL (NOT LITERAL) MEANING, WHICH HAS BECOME ACCEPTED IN COMMON USAGE.

AN IDIOM'S SYMBOLIC SENSE IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE LITERAL MEANING OR DEFINITION OF THE WORDS OF WHICH IT IS MADE. THERE ARE A LARGE NUMBER OF IDIOMS AND THEY ARE USED VERY COMMONLY IN ALL LANGUAGES. THERE ARE ESTIMATED TO BE AT LEAST 25,000 IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

IDIOMS IN FACT, EVOLVE THE LANGUAGE; THEY ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A LANGUAGE AND CIVILIZATION. THEY ALSO HAVE GREAT INTENSITY TO MAKE A LANGUAGE INTERESTING AND DYNAMIC. IDIOMS BRING A SPECTACULAR ILLUSTRATION TO EVERYDAY SPEECH. THEY PROVIDE INTERESTING INSIGHTS INTO THE USE OF WORDS, LANGUAGES AND THE THOUGHT PROCESSES OF THEIR SPEAKERS. THEY HAVE A SENSE OF MYSTERY AND FUN ABOUT THEM.

SO WHAT MAKES IDIOMS DIFFICULT?

THE ANSWER IS THEIR "MEANING". IDIOMS ARE NOT EASY TO UNDERSTAND - ESPECIALLY FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS, BECAUSE THEIR MEANINGS ARE USUALLY METAPHORICAL. THIS CHARACTERISTIC OF IDIOMS MAKES THEM STRANGE AND DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS.

TOP 10 COMMON IDIOMS

LIST OF TOP 10 MOST COMMON ENGLISH IDIOMS AND PHRASES, WITH THEIR MEANING AND EXAMPLES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS. THEY ARE ALSO FREQUENTLY ASKED IN COMPETITIVE EXAMS. THOUGH THE POPULARITY OF THE IDIOMS MAY VARY FROM REGION TO REGION, STILL THE LIST IS RATHER POPULAR AROUND THE GLOBE.

A HOT POTATO

MEANING: A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE OR SITUATION THAT IS AWKWARD OR UNPLEASANT TO DEAL WITH.

EXAMPLE: THE SUBJECT OF BULLYING AND FIGHTING IN MY SCHOOL IS A HOT POTATO. READ ON

PIECE OF CAKE

MEANING: SOMETHING THAT IS EASY TO DO

EXAMPLE: LEARNING ENGLISH IS A PIECE OF CAKE AS LONG AS YOU DO IT WITH OUR WEBSITE. READ ON

ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

MEANING: VERY RARELY

EXAMPLE: I GO TO VISIT MY GRANDFATHER ONLY ONCE IN A BLUE MOON; HE LIVES IN A REMOTE FARM HOUSE. READ ON

A BED OF ROSES

MEANING: EASY OPTION

EXAMPLE: TAKING CARE OF MY YOUNGER SISTER IS NO BED OF ROSES; SHE IS VERY SILLY. READ ON

RAINING CATS AND DOGS

MEANING: RAINING VERY HEAVILY

EXAMPLE: I WANTED TO GO TO PLAY OUTSIDE, BUT IT WAS RAINING CATS AND DOGS YESTERDAY. READ ON

WHEN PIGS FLY

MEANING: SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVER HAPPEN OR IS IMPOSSIBLE.

EXAMPLE: WILLIAM WILL KEEP QUIET ONLY WHEN PIGS FLY. READ ON

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

MEANING: ONE WHO PRESENTS A COUNTER ARGUMENT

EXAMPLE: HEY JACK! YOU'RE ALWAYS PLAYING DEVIL'S ADVOCATE! GIVE IT A REST AND MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS. READ ON

MISS THE BOAT

MEANING: MISS THE CHANCE.

EXAMPLE: PETER WANTED TO ENTER THE DRAWING COMPETITION, BUT HE WAS TOO LATE TO ENTER, AND HE MISSED THE BOAT. READ ON

APPLE OF EYE

MEANING: SOMEONE VERY PRECIOUS OR DEAR

EXAMPLE: EVERY KID IN THE WORLD IS THE APPLE OF THEIR PARENTS' EYE(S). READ ON

ZIP YOUR LIP

MEANING: TO STOP TALKING

EXAMPLE: I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANOTHER SOUND OUT OF YOU. NOW DO AS YOU'RE TOLD AND ZIP YOUR LIP. READ ON

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LATEST IDIOMS!

DOES EXACTLY WHAT IT SAYS ON THE TIN

MEANING: SOMEONE OR SOMETHING IS EXACTLY AS THEY SEEM

EXAMPLE: THIS MEDICINE DOES EXACTLY WHAT IT SAYS ON THE TIN, BECAUSE I FEEL SO MUCH BETTER. READ ON

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

MEANING: A PLACE YOU FEEL CONNECTED TO EMOTIONALLY

EXAMPLE: NO MATTER WHERE I GO, IT'S ALWAYS SO LOVELY TO COME BACK HERE. HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS AFTER ALL. READ ON

STICKY FINGERS

MEANING: KEEP OBJECTS THAT DON'T BELONG TO YOU

EXAMPLE: MONEY HAD STARTED DISAPPEARING FROM THE TREASURY COFFERS SO, THEY

REALISED THAT SOMEONE HAD STICKY FINGERS. READ ON

APPLE PIE ORDER

MEANING: NEAT AND TIDY IN THE ARRANGEMENT

EXAMPLE: MY MOTHER IS ALWAYS CLEANING. THE HOUSE IS IN APPLE-PIE ORDER. READ ON

ON A TEAR

MEANING: VERY ACTIVE OR SUDDENLY ACTIVE

EXAMPLE: PETER CALLED TO SAY HE WAS GETTING AN EARLIER TRAIN SO, I BEEN ON A TEAR TO GET TO THE STATION IN TIME. READ ON

VIEW ALL IDIOMS

VIEW THE COMPLETE LIST OF ALL IDIOMS WE HAVE ON OUR WEBSITE.

IDIOM OF THE DAY

BANKERS' HOURS

MEANING: SHORT WORKING HOURS

EXAMPLE: WITH OUR BOSS ON LEAVE, MOST OF US WORKED BANKER'S HOURS FOR THE WHOLE WEEK. READ ON

COOL IDIOMS

COME WHAT MAY

SMITTEN WITH

PUT DAMPER ON

HARP ON

THE CORRIDORS OF POWER

ENGLISH GRAMMAR

ADJECTIVES

NOUNS

PRONOUNS

VERBS

ADVERBS

PUNCTUATION

Idiom: a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of a language

Every language has its own collection of wise sayings. They offer advice about how to live and also transmit some underlying ideas, principles and values of a given culture / society. These sayings are called "idioms" - or proverbs if they are longer. These combinations of words have (rarely complete sentences) a "figurative" meaning - they basically work with "pictures".

This list of commonly used idioms and sayings (in everyday conversational English) can help you to speak English by learning English idiomatic expressions. This is a list, which contains exactly 66 of the most commonly used idioms and their meaning.

Smart Idioms

A hot potato

Speak of an issue (mostly current) which many people are talking about and which is usually disputed

A penny for your thoughts

A way of asking what someone is thinking

Actions speak louder than words

People's intentions can be judged better by what they do than what they say.

Add insult to injury

To further a loss with mockery or indignity; to worsen an unfavorable situation.

At the drop of a hat

Meaning: without any hesitation; instantly.

Back to the drawing board

When an attempt fails and it's time to start all over.

Ball is in your court

It is up to you to make the next decision or step

Barking up the wrong tree

Looking in the wrong place. Accusing the wrong person

Be glad to see the back of

Be happy when a person leaves.

Beat around the bush

Avoiding the main topic. Not speaking directly about the issue.

Best of both worlds

Meaning: All the advantages.

Best thing since sliced bread

A good invention or innovation. A good idea or plan.

Bite off more than you can chew

To take on a task that is way to big.

Blessing in disguise

Something good that isn't recognized at first.

Burn the midnight oil

To work late into the night, alluding to the time before electric lighting.

Can't judge a book by its cover

Cannot judge something primarily on appearance.

Caught between two stools

When someone finds it difficult to choose between two alternatives.

Costs an arm and a leg

This idiom is used when something is very expensive.

Cross that bridge when you come to it

Deal with a problem if and when it becomes necessary, not before.

Cry over spilt milk

When you complain about a loss from the past.

Curiosity killed the cat

Being Inquisitive can lead you into an unpleasant situation.

Cut corners

When something is done badly to save money.

Cut the mustard [possibly derived from "cut the muster"]

To succeed; to come up to expectations; adequate enough to compete or participate

Devil's Advocate

To present a counter argument

Don't count your chickens before the eggs have hatched

This idiom is used to express "Don't make plans for something that might not happen".

Don't give up the day job

You are not very good at something. You could definitely not do it professionally.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket

Do not put all your resources in one possibility.

Drastic times call for drastic measures

When you are extremely desperate you need to take drastic actions.

Elvis has left the building

The show has come to an end. It's all over.

Every cloud has a silver lining

Be optimistic, even difficult times will lead to better days.

Far cry from

Very different from.

Feel a bit under the weather

Meaning: Feeling slightly ill.

Give the benefit of the doubt

Believe someone's statement, without proof.

Hear it on the grapevine

This idiom means 'to hear rumors' about something or someone.

Hit the nail on the head

Do or say something exactly right

Hit the sack / sheets / hay

To go to bed.

In the heat of the moment

Overwhelmed by what is happening in the moment.

It takes two to tango

Actions or communications need more than one person

Jump on the bandwagon

Join a popular trend or activity.

Keep something at bay

Keep something away.

Kill two birds with one stone

This idiom means, to accomplish two different things at the same time.

Last straw

The final problem in a series of problems.

Let sleeping dogs lie

Meaning - do not disturb a situation as it is - since it would result in trouble or complications.

Let the cat out of the bag

To share information that was previously concealed

Make a long story short

Come to the point - leave out details

Method to my madness

An assertion that, despite one's approach seeming random, there actually is structure to it.

Miss the boat

This idiom is used to say that someone missed his or her chance

Not a spark of decency

Meaning: No manners

Not playing with a full deck

Someone who lacks intelligence.

Off one's rocker

Crazy, demented, out of one's mind, in a confused or befuddled state of mind, senile.

On the ball

When someone understands the situation well.

Once in a blue moon

Meaning: Happens very rarely.

Picture paints a thousand words

A visual presentation is far more descriptive than words.

Piece of cake

A job, task or other activity that is easy or simple.

Put wool over other people's eyes

This means to deceive someone into thinking well of them.

See eye to eye

This idiom is used to say that two (or more people) agree on something.

Sit on the fence

This is used when someone does not want to choose or make a decision.

Speak of the devil!

This expression is used when the person you have just been talking about arrives.

Steal someone's thunder

To take the credit for something someone else did.

Take with a grain of salt

This means not to take what someone says too seriously.

Taste of your own medicine

Means that something happens to you, or is done to you, that you have done to someone else

To hear something straight from the horse's mouth

To hear something from the authoritative source.

Whole nine yards

Everything. All of it.

Wouldn't be caught dead

Would never like to do something

Your guess is as good as mine

To have no idea, do not know the answer to a question

Although it is difficult to draw a clear line, "an 'idiom' can not be defined as a synonym for aphorism. It is more than that. To be an idiom, a word or phrase must be distinctive to a specific language and have a meaning that is not obvious from the common meaning of the words employed. For example: "raining cats and dogs", "hangover", "jonesing" [drug withdrawal symptoms]. "You're pulling my leg" is an English idiom for "teasing", while "You're winding my clock" is an English translation of a German idiom that means the same thing. Note that in both cases, the meaning is transferred by the culture, not the words themselves." [Author:Robert Hard]