

IDIOMS

Animal Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
ants in one's pants	unable to sit still or remain calm out of nervousness or excitement	Lisa had ants in her pants the day before her interview.
(the) birds and the bees	sex education	I learned about the birds and the bees when my baby brother was born.
cat nap	a short sleep	I'm going to have a cat nap while you're cooking dinner.
cat's got one's tongue	said about someone who doesn't speak (usually due to shyness)	It looks like the cat's got your tongue , Lucy. Are you always this quiet?
chicken out	to decide not to do something out of fear (usually just before)	I was going to take a ride on Geoff's motorcyle, but I chickened out when he gave me a helmet to wear.
clam up	become quiet suddenly	Arthur clammed up when I asked him about his family.
copy cat	a person who does the same thing as someone else	My sister is such a copy cat . First she bought the same car as me, and now she's applying to my school.
dog days	very hot days	I sleep in the basement during the dog days of August.
dropping like flies	dying/giving up quickly	My roses are dropping like flies in this early frost.
eager beaver	a person who is excited about doing certain work	Ever since he got his new drill set my husband has been an eager beaver around the house.
fishy	odd, suspicious	I knew something fishy was going on when I saw all of my friends' cars in my mom's driveway.
have a cow	get extremely upset (often over something minor)	My teacher had a cow when she realized nobody had done the homework.
hold your horses	wait and be patient	Hold your horses! I'll be done in the washroom in a minute.
holy cow!	Wow, I'm surprised!	Holy cow! I can't believe you ate everything on your plate.
horse around	play roughly	If you're going to horse around , please go outside.
get the lion's share	get the greatest percentage	My aunt got the lion's share of the inheritance.
in the dog house	in trouble with another person	I don't think Marsha is coming out tonight. She's

		still in the dog house for forgetting Aaron's birthday.
kill two birds with one stone	get two things done at once	If you pick the groceries up when you drop George off for his shift, you will kill two birds with one stone .
kitty corner	diagonal direction	The gas station is kitty corner to the library.
let the cat out of the bag	reveal a secret	Who let the cat out of the bag about the surprise party?
(a) little bird told me	I heard something (usually secretive or unknown) from someone (not named)	A little bird told me that you are thinking of quitting your job.
make a beeline	go straight for something	My grandma made a beeline for the smoking room as soon as she got off the airplane.
monkey see, monkey do	silly/unintelligent people tend to copy each other's actions	Our one-year-old is saying bad words now. I told my husband, " Monkey see, monkey do! "
nest egg	money saved for the future	We have a nest egg that we might have to use if Jim goes on sick leave.
pig out	eat a lot of something	I pigged out on pancakes so I don't have room for lunch.
raining cats and dogs	raining heavily	I forgot my umbrella, and it was raining cats and dogs .
rat race	fierce, competitive struggle for power, position etc	I'm ready to leave this rat race and retire in Mexico.
smell a rat	begin to suspect trickery etc	I asked my brothers not to tell my parents that I went out, but I could smell a rat as soon as I opened the door.
straight from the horse's mouth	directly from the original source	I know Jenny is pregnant, because I heard it straight from the horse's mouth .
take the bull by the horns	face a challenge or danger boldly	If you really think you deserve a promotion, you'll have to take the bull by the horns .
until the cows come home	for a very long time	I could eat pizza and ice-cream until the cows come home .

Body Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
all ears	fully listening	Give me a minute to finish my work and then I'll be all ears to hear about your project.
break a leg	good-luck	Today's the big game, eh? Break a leg!
cold feet	nervous just before a big event	My sister didn't get cold feet until she put her wedding gown on.
cost an arm and a leg	be very expensive	These cakes are delicious, but they cost an arm and a leg .
cry your heart out	cry very hard	I cried my heart out when my best friend moved away.
face the music	meet, stand up to unpleasant consequences, for example criticism or punishment	I stayed out all night. When I eventually got home I had to face the music from my wife.
(my) flesh and blood	relative	I have to hire Mia. She's my own flesh and blood .
get something off one's chest	tell someone your problems	Thanks for listening to me complain about my boss. I just needed to get this off my chest .
give a hand, lend a hand	help (someone) do something	I can give you a hand when you move if you like.
have one's head in the clouds	be unaware or unrealistic about something	Amy has her head in the clouds if she thinks she's going to pass her exams without studying.
head over heels	deeply in love	My brother is head over heels for his new girlfriend.
head start	an earlier start	The kids gave Anthony a head start in the bicycle race because he was the youngest.
in over one's head	taking on a task that you can't handle	I was in over my head when I agreed to babysit the triplets and the dogs.
keep an eye on	take care of, watch in order to protect	I'll keep an eye on the dinner while you're on the phone.
keep one's chin up	try to be cheerful	Keep your chin up . I'm sure you'll make some friends soon.
learn by heart, know by heart	memorize	I learned my multiplication tables by heart in the fourth grade.
let one's hair down	relax, have fun	Go to the cottage and let your hair down this weekend.



(my) lips are sealed	promise to keep a secret	Don't worry, I won't tell your mother how much you spent. My lips are sealed.
makes my blood boil	makes me very angry	It makes my blood boil when people don't tie up their dogs.
neck of the woods	nearby location or region	I heard that they might be opening a post office in our neck of the woods soon.
(an) old hand	an experienced person	My uncle's an old hand at car repair. He'll know what the problem is.
over my dead body	not unless I'm dead and can't stop you	My daughter wants a tattoo. I told her she'd get one over my dead body.
pat on the back	recognition or a thank-you	The party organizers deserve a pat on the back for a job well done.
play something by ear	do something without a plan	We don't know if the weather will be good enough for camping. We'll have to play it by ear.
pull one's leg	joke or tease someone	I was just pulling your leg. I'm not really a police officer.
rule of thumb	basic rule (not always followed)	The rule of thumb is that the students wear black pants and white shirts.
see eye to eye	agree	The couple don't see eye to eye on how to train their pets.
(by the) skin of one's teeth	just barely	I passed my exam by the skin of my teeth.
stick your neck out	help someone a lot, with possible bad consequences for oneself	I stuck my neck out for Bessie when she was thrown out of her house.
sweet tooth	a love of sugar or sweet things	I need three spoonfuls of sugar in my tea. I have a sweet tooth.
thick in the head	not very intelligent	I'm a bit thick in the head when it comes to reading a map.
wash one's hands of something	stop dealing with an issue or problem	I'm washing my hands of Mary's addiction. She is going to have to get some professional help.

Color Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
beet red	dark red (usually to describe face)	My sister's face turned beet red when I caught her singing in front of a mirror.
black and blue	bruised and beaten	We found the poor guy black and blue near the train tracks.
black and white	straight forward, very clear	The rules we gave the kids were black and white . No answering the phone or the door.
black out	faint	I always black out at the sight of blood.
black sheep	the odd or bad member of the group	My oldest brother was the black sheep in our family. He dropped out of school at fifteen.
born with a silver spoon in one's mouth	born into a rich family	Keiko hasn't worked a day in her life. She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth .
catch red handed	catch someone in the act of doing something wrong or illegal	The kids were caught red handed stealing chocolate bars.
golden opportunity	the perfect chance	The models' conference was a golden opportunity for me to sell my beauty products.
grass is always greener on the other side	you always want what you don't have	I always wanted to go to university, but now I wish I had time to get a job. Grass is always greener on the other side .
grey area, gray area	something without a clear rule or answer	Writing personal email in the office is a grey area that needs to be discussed at the next meeting.
the green light	permission	The builders were given the green light to begin the tower.
green with envy	very jealous	I am green with envy over Julio's new wardrobe.
(have a) green thumb	be skillful in the garden	You can tell by her flower garden that Sheila has a green thumb .
have the blues	be sad or depressed	I always have the blues during the winter time.
in the dark	unaware	Antoine left his wife in the dark about their honeymoon destination until they got to the airport.
in the red	in debt	When we were in the red we almost had to sell the house.
once in a blue moon	very rarely	We only go out for dinner once in a blue moon .



out of the blue	unexpectedly	I got a phone call from a long lost cousin out of the blue last week.
red tape	official or bureaucratic tasks	There is still some red tape to deal with in terms of the inheritance.
red eye	an airplane flight that takes off after midnight	I caught the red eye so that I would see the sunrise over the mountains.
roll out the red carpet	treat someone like royalty	When relatives come to town my grandmother rolls out the red carpet .
rose coloured glasses	unrealistic view	Paula imagines Hollywood with rose coloured glasses .
see red	be very angry	I saw red when that guy grabbed my sister's purse.
tickled pink	very pleased and appreciative	My mom was tickled pink when my father brought roses home for her.
true colours	real self	Suzanne doesn't show her true colours when we have guests over.
white lie	an innocent lie to protect another person's feelings	We told Grandma that her cake was delicious, which was actually a white lie .
with flying colours	with distinction	I passed my road test with flying colours .

Clothing Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
at the drop of a hat	without needing any advance notice	My Grandma will babysit for anyone at the drop of a hat .
(have a) bee in one's bonnet	something that is annoying someone	Milan has had a bee in his bonnet all day, but he won't tell me what's wrong.
below the belt	beyond what is fair or socially acceptable	His comment about Manfred's handicap was below the belt .
bursting at the seams	not fitting anymore	I ate too much. I'm bursting at the seams in these jeans.
caught with one's pants down	unprepared	My students caught me with my pants down on Monday. I forgot about the field trip.
(have a) card up one's sleeve	have a secret or reserve plan	I think Josh has a card up his sleeve cause he wants me to wear a dress to the fast-food restaurant.
buckle down	work extra hard	It's almost exam time, so I need to buckle down this weekend.



burn a hole in one's pocket	money that one is tempted to spend	Let's go to the mall after school. There's a hundred dollar bill burning a hole in my pocket .
dress to kill, dress to the nines	dress in nice or sexy clothes	My cousin was dressed to kill on her birthday.
fit like a glove	fit perfectly (tight to one's body)	Anita's prom dress fits me like a glove .
fine-tooth comb	in great detail, extremely carefully	The police looked for fingerprints with a fine-tooth comb .
fly by the seat of one's pants	do by instinct, not by plan	I had never taught art to kids before. I had to fly by the seat of my pants .
handle with kid gloves	treat delicately	Please handle my grandmother's tea set with kid gloves .
hand-me-down	used clothing	We buy hand-me-down skates because the kids' feet grow so quickly.
hat trick	three goals scored by one person	The fans cheered when the hockey player got a hat trick .
in one's birthday suit	in the nude	The swimmers in the lake were in their birthday suits .
keep one's shirt on	try to stay calm	I know you're in a hurry, but please keep your shirt on .
keep something zipped	keep something a secret	We know we're having a boy, but we're keeping it zipped from the grandparents.
off the cuff	said without planning	I didn't have a speech prepared. Everything I said was off the cuff .
pull up one's socks	try harder	Marco will have to pull up his socks if he wants to make the football team.
put a sock in it	stop talking	Put a sock in it! I'm trying to tell a story.
put one's thinking cap on	think hard in order to solve a problem	I can't remember where the Christmas decorations are. I'll have to put my thinking cap on .
put oneself in someone else's shoes	imagine what it would be like to be in someone else's situation	Put yourself in Amber's shoes . She doesn't even have a car to drive.
ride one's coattails	let someone else do all of the work	It was a group project, but everyone rode Andrew's coattails .
roll up one's sleeves	get down to hard work	The celebrities rolled up their sleeves and washed cars for charity.
take one's hat off to someone	recognize or honour someone for something	I take my hat off to Jim . The doctors said he'd never walk, and he just ran a marathon.



wear one's heart on one's sleeve	display emotions openly	My Dad's not afraid to cry. He always wears his heart on his sleeve .
wear the trousers	be in charge, make the rules	By the looks of things, the kids wear the trousers in this household.

Food Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
apple of one's eye	a person that is adored by someone	Baby Jessica is the apple of her father's eye .
(have a) bun in the oven	be pregnant	I don't think Jan will come to the bar because she has a bun in the oven .
bad egg	a person who is often in trouble	I don't want my little brother hanging around with the bad eggs on the street.
big cheese	very important person (VIP)	I thought I was just going to interview the secretary, but they let me talk to the big cheese himself.
bread and butter	necessities, the main thing	Just explain the bread and butter of your report. You don't have to go into details.
bring home the bacon	earn the income	My husband has had to bring home the bacon ever since I broke my leg.
butter someone up	be extra nice to someone (usually for selfish reasons)	We'll have to butter Angie up before we tell her the news about the broken vase.
(have one's) cake and eat it too	want more than your fair share or need	Rick wants to have his cake and eat it too . He wants to be single but he doesn't want me to date anyone else.
carrot top	person with red or orange hair	Simon is the first carrot top I've ever gone out with.
cheesy	silly	I love reading cheesy romance novels because I don't have to think.
cool as a cucumber	very relaxed	I thought I was afraid of flying, but I was cool as a cucumber all the way to England.
cream of the crop	the best	We hired the cream of the crop to entertain us at the Christmas party.
(don't) cry over spilled milk	get upset over something that has happened and cannot be changed	The mirror is broken and we can't fix it. There's no need to cry over spilled milk .
cup of joe	cup of coffee	Let's stop for a cup of joe before we head to work.



(not my) cup of tea	something you enjoy (usually used negatively)	Opera isn't exactly my cup of tea .
egg someone on	urge someone to do something	The gang tried to egg us on but we didn't want to fight.
freeze one's buns off	be very cold	I froze my buns off at the ice rink.
full of beans	have a lot of (silly) energy	The kids were full of beans after the circus.
gravy train	extremely good pay for minimal work	The unionized grocers have been enjoying the gravy train for twenty years.
(have something) handed to someone on a silver platter	receive without working for something	The professor's daughter had her college diploma handed to her on a silver platter .
hard nut to crack	difficult to understand (often a person)	Angelo is a hard nut to crack when something is bothering him like this.
hot potato	a controversial or difficult subject	Choosing a location for our new store is a hot potato right now.
in a nutshell	simply	In a nutshell , I'm having a bad day.
nuts about something, someone	like a lot	I'm nuts about classical music these days.
out to lunch	crazy or mad	Harry has been out to lunch ever since he lost his job.
one smart cookie	a very intelligent person	Your daughter is one smart cookie . She reads much higher than her grade level.
peach fuzz	small amount of hair growth	Except for a bit of peach fuzz , the baby came out bald.
piece of cake	very easy	The exam was a piece of cake .
put all of ones eggs in one basket	rely on one single thing	Even though I'm majoring in Art, I'm taking a maths course because my Dad says I shouldn't put all of my eggs in one basket .
souped up	made more powerful or stylish	The car was souped up with shiny rims and a loud stereo.
sell like hot cakes	bought by many people	The new Harry Potter books sold like hot cakes .
spice things up	make something more exciting	I wanted to spice things up in the office, so I bought some red and gold paint.
spill the beans	reveal the truth	On Monday, I'm going to spill the beans about my travel plans.
take something with a pinch (grain) of salt	don't consider something 100% accurate	Take Mandy's advice with a pinch of salt . She doesn't always do her research.

use your noodle	use your brain	You're going to have to really use your noodle on this crossword puzzle. It's an extra difficult one.
------------------------	----------------	--

Geography and Weather Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example Sentence
(on) cloud nine	extremely happy	Andrea was on cloud nine when she bought her new car.
dig deep	look hard for information	I had to dig deep to find my old report cards.
dirt cheap	very inexpensive	The clothes at the thrift shop are dirt cheap .
down to earth	natural or real (personality)	Lucile is really down to earth for a woman with so much money.
fair-weather friend	a person who is only a friend in good times	I can't talk to Nancy about my boyfriend problems. She's only a fair-weather friend .
a field day	a very enjoyable time	The kids had a field day at the water slide park.
go downhill	get progressively worse	My grades started going downhill when I got a part-time job.
go with the flow	continue in the same way as others	Nobody trained me at work. I just went with the flow .
hit the hay	go to sleep	I'm exhausted. I think I'll hit the hay early tonight.
hit the road	leave	It's getting late. We had better hit the road .
keep one's head above water	have just enough money to live	It's hard to keep my head above water with all of these medical bills.
know which way the wind blows	know how things will turn out	Who knows which way the wind will blow ? I just hope Jesse gets one of the jobs he's applied for.
make a mountain out of a molehill	make a small problem seem big	The car only got a tiny dent. You're making a mountain out of a molehill .
out of the woods	clear of danger	The doctor said my heart is doing better, but I'm not out of the woods yet .
over the hill	past middle age	I knew I was over the hill when I started needing glasses to read.
rain on someone else's parade	ruin somebody else's happiness	Whenever I had a dance recital, my older brother always rained on my parade .
stick-in-the-mud	a loner or person who won't join in	They didn't bother inviting Charles to the party

		because he's always a stick-in-the-mud .
(as) quick as lightning	very fast	Wow! Your shower was as quick as lightning .
the tip of the iceberg	a small part of a large problem	The lost tickets were just the tip of the iceberg .
take a raincheck	accept at a later date	I'd love to go out for dinner, but can I take a raincheck ?
under the weather	ill	I was feeling under the weather so I went back to bed.
up the creek	in trouble	If my Dad finds out I had a party I'll be up the creek .
win by a landslide	win by a lot of points	The skier in the green coat won by a landslide .
(get) wind of something	overhear something about someone or something (often gossip)	My Dad has a new girlfriend. I got wind of it over dinner tonight.

Sports Idioms

Idiom <i>sport of origin</i>	Meaning	Example Sentence
across the board <i>cards</i>	equal for everyone	Ten percent raises were given across the board .
at this stage in the game <i>any sport</i>	at this time	Nobody knows who is going to win the election at this stage in the game .
the ball is in your court <i>tennis</i>	it's your decision or responsibility to do something now	"Do you think I should accept the job offer?" "Don't ask me. The ball is in your court now".
bark up the wrong tree <i>hunting</i>	you've got the wrong person or idea	I think you're barking up the wrong tree by blaming Matt for the missing money.
blind-sided <i>any sport</i>	to not see something coming	George blind-sided Eric with his fist at the bar.
blow the competition away <i>any sport</i>	win easily	If you wear that dress to the beauty pageant you are going to blow the competition away .
call the shots <i>billiards</i>	make the decisions	While our boss is on vacation, Bob will call the shots .
chip in	help by donating money or time	The staff members chipped in 5 dollars each to buy



<i>gambling</i>		Jody a birthday gift.
down to the wire <i>horse racing</i>	right at the end	It's coming down to the wire to get these done on time.
front runner <i>track</i>	one of the people who is expected to win	Angela is a front runner for the new supervisor position.
get a head start <i>horse racing</i>	start before all others	They gave the walkers a head start in the run for cancer.
get into the full swing <i>tennis</i>	be comfortable doing something after some time	It will probably take a month of working at my new job before I get into the full swing of things.
get off the hook <i>fishing</i>	escape, have responsibility removed	The child got off the hook for stealing because the security camera was broken.
give something or someone a fair shake <i>gambling</i>	try for a while before giving up	You should give Nadine a fair shake before you decide she isn't good enough for the job.
get a second wind <i>sailing</i>	have a burst of energy after tiring	I was exhausted after 3 kilometres of running, but I got a second wind after I passed the beach.
give it your best shot <i>hunting</i>	try your hardest	Give it your best shot and you may just make it to the finals.
give one a run for one's money <i>horseracing</i>	try one's hardest to defeat another person	I know the other team is expected to win, but let's give them a run for their money tonight.
go overboard <i>sailing</i>	do or say more than you need to	You can't believe everything Janice says about Rick. She tends to go overboard when she's complaining about him.
go to bat for someone <i>baseball</i>	defend someone	Andy is asking for a salary increase, and I'm going to go to bat for him if the boss says no.
have the upper hand <i>cards</i>	have a better chance of winning or succeeding	The Blues have the upper hand in the tournament, because none of their players is injured.
hit below the belt <i>martial arts</i>	do or say something that is very unfair or cruel	Amanda was hitting below the belt when she called Adrian an unfit father.
hit a snag <i>boating</i>	come up against a problem	The renovations were going along great until we hit a snag with the carpet installation.
hold all the aces <i>cards</i>	expected to win or succeed	The children hold all the aces when it comes to the father-son baseball tournament.
the home stretch <i>baseball</i>	almost the end	I think Alice's pregnancy is in the home stretch .
hot shot (big shot)	a person who thinks they are the	Even though Luke only placed 20th in the ski race, he



<i>hunting</i>	best	thinks he's a hot shot .
jump the gun <i>track</i>	start too early	I guess I jumped the gun by buying Pam and Steve a wedding gift. They called off the engagement.
keep one's head above water <i>swimming</i>	try not to fall behind in work or other duties	We are so busy during the tourist season I can barely keep my head above water .
learn the ropes <i>sailing</i>	understand new things	The first week on the job you will just be learning the ropes .
let her rip <i>boating</i>	go ahead now	Okay, here are the keys to your new car. Let her rip!
level playing field <i>any field sport</i>	everyone has an equal chance	The spelling bee is a level playing field because all of the kids are in grade nine.
long shot <i>hunting</i>	a very difficult thing to accomplish	Jim thinks we can afford the house, but I think it's a long shot .
make the cut <i>any sport</i>	be chosen to be part of a team or group	I didn't get a second interview, so I'm pretty sure I won't make the cut .
neck and neck <i>horse racing</i>	to be in a close tie with someone	George and Stan are neck and neck in the hockey pool. Either of them could win the money.
no sweat <i>any sport</i>	no problem	I told Lily it was no sweat for us to babysit next weekend.
not playing with a full deck of cards <i>cards</i>	not having full brain capacity	I think Jerry was still drunk at work on Sunday because he wasn't playing with a full deck of cards .
not up to par <i>golf</i>	not good enough for a job or position	I'm afraid your resume isn't up to par for the engineering position.
to be off base <i>baseball</i>	not making a fair or true remark	You were way off base when you said Bill needed to lose weight.
on target <i>darts</i>	doing the right thing to succeed	We are on target to meet our budget this month.
on the ball <i>baseball</i>	ready and able	The new receptionist is really on the ball when it comes to answering the phone.
out in left field <i>baseball</i>	nowhere near being true, nowhere near doing something correctly	All of the students laughed when Joe gave an answer that was out in left field .
out of someone's league <i>team sport</i>	not as good as someone	I'd like to date Maria, but I'm afraid I'm out of her league .



par for the course <i>golf</i>	an expected circumstance	Waiting in line is par for the course at Christmas time.
plenty of other fish in the sea <i>fishing</i>	there are many other men and women to date	I know you still love Jack, but remember there are plenty of other fish in the sea .
race against time <i>track</i>	there is almost no time left to accomplish something	It's a race against time to find a kidney donor for my cousin.
settle a score with someone <i>any sport</i>	get even with a person after a previous battle	My brother wants to settle the score with that guy who stole my wallet.
shot in the dark <i>hunting</i>	a guess	I was lucky to win the quiz. All my answers were shots in the dark .
skate on thin ice <i>skating</i>	do something risky, take a chance	You're skating on thin ice by not sending in your college application before now.
start the ball rolling <i>ball sports</i>	begin something	Please can everyone be seated so we can start the ball rolling .
step up to the plate <i>baseball</i>	do the honourable thing, take responsibility	It's time you stepped up to the plate and apologized for your mistake.
take a rain check <i>baseball</i>	accept at a later time	Sorry, I can't go to the movies today, but I'd love to take a rain check .
take sides <i>any sport</i>	choose a person or group to support	I hate to take sides , but I think Jerry is right about the paint colour.
take the bull by the horns <i>bull fighting</i>	accept the challenge and try your hardest	Even though this new job will mean relocating, I think you should take the bull by the horns for once.
take the wind out of one's sails <i>sailing</i>	make someone feel deflated	I think I took the wind out of Angela's sails when I told her she was a terrible singer.
throw in the towel <i>boxing</i>	give up	If they don't accept our offer this time we are going to throw in the towel and look at houses elsewhere.
time out <i>any sport</i>	break	Let's take some time out and grab a coffee.
three strikes and you're out <i>baseball</i>	you only get three chances	The school's no smoking policy is three strikes and you're out .
two strikes against <i>baseball</i>	you only have one chance remaining	Nancy is going to be fired in no time. She already has two strikes against her for coming in late.
under the table	illegally	I don't have a work visa, so they have to pay me under



<i>gambling</i>		the table.
win hands down <i>gambling</i>	easy victory	The other team was missing half of its players. Wewon hands down.