

377 common IDIOMS and their meanings

An IDIOM is an expression or manner of speaking that's used in common parlance. IDIOMS are culture specific and may be based on past history not necessarily evident in the modern world. Understanding where the IDIOM comes from will help to understand its meaning.

IDIOM	MEANING
Acid test	Proves the effectiveness of something.
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 unfavourable situation.
After the watershed	A time when after which programmes for older audiences may be aired on TV.
Against the clock	Being rushed and having little time to complete something.
Ahead of time	Something that happens early or before it is supposed to.
All ears	Awaiting an explanation.
An arm and a leg	Very expensive or costly. A large amount of money.
Around the clock	At any time of the day or night
Around the corner	Will happen soon.
As time goes by	The passing of one moment to the next.
At the drop of a hat	Without any hesitation; instantly.
Back to basics	An approach that uses traditional ideas that have previously worked.
Back to the drawing board	When an attempt fails and it's time to start all over.
Bad apple	Troublemaker or undesirable person in a group.
Ball is in your court	It is up to you to make the next decision or take the next 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.
Beat the clock	Do something quickly before it's too late.
Bee in one's bonnet	Carrying an idea that's constantly in your thoughts.
Behind the times	Being old-fashioned.
Bells and whistles	Lots of desirable features.
Best of both worlds	Enjoying the advantage of two things simultaneously.
Best thing since sliced bread	A good invention or innovation. A good idea or plan.
Better late than never	It is better to do something late than not at all.
Bide one's time	Waiting for further developments before taking action or making decisions.
Big cheese	Influential person
Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush	Better to be satisfied with what you have than risk losing it by trying to get something better.
Bite off more than you can chew	To take on a task that is way too big.
Black and blue	Badly bruised.
Black and white	Take everything into consideration and over simply. Judge everything good or bad.
Black as night	Very dark and hard to see.
Black eye	Bruise around the eye.
Black market	Where goods are illegally bought and sold for profit.
Black out	Darken by turning off or dimming the lights. Lose consciousness.
Black sheep	Undesirable member of a group.
Blackball	Exclude or ostracise someone socially. Reject someone.
Blacklist	Exclude someone.
Blackmail	Extort or take money from someone by threatening to use their secrets against them.
Blessing in disguise	Something good that isn't recognised as such at first.
Blind date	Pre-arranged social interaction between people who have never met.
Blood red	Description of something with a deep red colour.
Blood, sweat & tears	Something that requires a lot of effort and hard work.
Blow a fuse	Suddenly get very angry, perhaps over something unexpected.
Blow up in the face	A plan or project that suddenly fails.
Blue blood	From noble, aristocratic or wealthy family.
Blue collar	Working in a manual labour job.
Blue in the face	Try hard to win an agreement but usually unsuccessful.
Blue ribbon	Superior quality or distinction. The best of a group.
Bolt from the blue	Unexpected bad news.
Bookworm	Someone who reads a lot.
Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth	Born into a rich and affluent family.

IDIOM	MEANING
Bottom falls out	A plan or project that fails.
Brainstorm	Develop or think of new ideas.
Bread-winner	Person that is the primary source of income for a family.
Bring home the bacon	Earn a living.
Broken watch is right twice a day	When something is lucky or successful but undeserving.
Buckle down	Working hard with determination and full attention.
Bun in the oven	Pregnant.
Burn the midnight oil	To work late into the night, alluding to the time before electric lighting.
Butter up	Flatter someone, usually because you want something from them.
By degrees	Something happens or develops gradually or little by little.
By the skin of your teeth	Only just succeed.
Call it a day (or night)	Stop doing something for a while or until the next day (or night).
Calling time	Deciding to end something.
Carry the torch for	Having strong feelings for someone who cannot be yours.
Cash cow	Dependable source of income.
Cat burglar	Thief who climbs into buildings.
Catch someone at a bad time	When it is inconvenient.
Catch someone red-handed	Catch someone in the act of committing a crime or doing something they shouldn't.
Chance one's arm	Deciding to do something even though the chances of success are slim or unknown.
Chase rainbows	Try to achieve something that is very difficult, impossible or very desirable.
Chase your tail	Spend a lot of time and energy but achieve nothing.
Cheesy	Tacky, silly, inauthentic or cheap.
Clock-in/clock-out	Record the time of arrival and the time of departure.
Close to home	A comment that is true and makes you uncomfortable.
Cold shoulder	Pay no attention to.
Coming of age	When something develops completely and reached maturity. When a child becomes an adult.
Cook someone's goose	Spoil the person's chance of success.
Copypat	Someone who copies the work of another.
Costs an arm and a leg	When something is very expensive.
Couch potato	Lazy person who watches too much TV.
Cover a lot of ground	Complete a lot of work or a wide range of things.
Crack of dawn	Very early in the morning. The first moments of sunrise.
Cross that bridge when you come to it	Deal with a problem if and when it becomes necessary, not before.
Crunch time	When an important decision needs to be made by.
Cry over spilt milk	Complain about a loss from the past.
Curiosity killed the cat	Being inquisitive can lead you into an unpleasant or dangerous situation.
Cut corners	When something is done quickly, and typically badly, to save money.
Cut one's own throat	Doing something that will cause your own failure or downfall.
Cut the mustard	To succeed; to come up to expectations; adequate enough to compete or participate.
Cut to the chase	Getting to the point.
Day to day	Part of a usual routine.
Days are numbered	Expected to be in a role or to die soon.
Dead duck	Plan or event that has failed or is certain to fail and therefore not worth discussing.
Dead in the water	Plan or project that has ceased to function and is not expected to re-activate.
Dead wood	People or things that are no longer useful or necessary.
Deep down	Describing what a person really feels deep inside them
Deliver the goods	Do what is expected or required.
Devil's Advocate	To present a counter argument.
Do time (serve time)	Spend time in prison.
Donkey's years	A very long period of time.
Don't count your chickens before they've hatched	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	Don't make everything dependent on only one thing.
Double date	Social interaction that involves two couples.
Drastic times call for drastic measures	When you are extremely desperate you need to take drastic actions.
Drawing a blank	Get no response from someone when you ask them a question or to have no answer yourself.
Dropout	Stop attending school before it is time.
Dwell on the past	Thinking too much about something that happened in the past.
Eager beaver	Enthusiastic and hard worker.
Easy as ABC	Very simple or easy.
Eat, sleep & breathe something	Being so enthusiastic and passionate about something that you think about it all the time.

IDIOM	MEANING
Egg head	Studious and academic person.
Elbow room	Enough space to move or work in.
Eleventh hour	At the very last minute or just in time.
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. Good can come from a bad situation.
Explore all avenues	Investigating or examining every option.
Eye-catching	Tending to attract attention.
Fallen in love	Start feeling love towards someone.
Far cry from	Very different from.
Feeling blue	Feeling depressed or disconnected.
Feeling under the weather	Feeling unwell.
Fever pitch	When a feeling is very intense and exciting.
Fill in the blanks	Supply missing words or information.
First in, best dressed	The opportunity is afforded to the first to arrive or present themselves.
First out of the gate	Being the first one to make a start at something
Fish out of water	Feeling uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings
Foot in the door	Small but good start with the possibility of a bright future.
For the time being	An action or state will continue into the future but is temporary.
From now on	From this time forward.
From time to time	Occasionally or not very often.
Full of beans	Excited or very energetic and lively.
Full of the joys of spring	Very happy and full of energy.
Getting sacked (or axed, or fired)	To lose your job.
Getting the show on the road	Putting a plan or idea into action.
Give the benefit of the doubt	Believe someone's statement, without proof.
Give the green light	Provide permission to proceed.
Go belly up	Fail completely.
Going places	Demonstrating talent and ability that will lead to success.
Golden boy	Young man idolised for a great skill, typically in sport.
Golden handshake	Large sum of money given to someone when they retire from a company.
Golden opportunity	A very good opportunity that may never present itself again.
Grass is always greener on the other side	The alternative solution may seem better even if that isn't always the case.
Grease someone's palm	Give someone money in order to persuade them to do something dishonest.
Green thumb	Ability to make plants grow or be good at gardening.
Green with envy	Extremely jealous or full of envy.
Grey area	Unclear or undefined.
Hanging on by fingernails	Continuing to do something in a very difficult situation.
Hard as nails	Without sentiment or sympathy for anyone.
Hard time	Something that is difficult or to suffer hardship.
Having one's heart set on something	Possessing a determination to achieve something.
Head in the clouds	Having unrealistic or impractical ideas.
Head over heels in love	Very much in love with someone.
Hear it on the grapevine	Hear something through informal or unofficial means, like gossip.
Heart is in the right place	Having good intentions, even if the results may not be impressive.
Here today, gone tomorrow	When desirable things, such as money or happiness, are temporary.
High time	When something should have been done already and is overdue.
Hit the big time	To become successful.
Hit the books	Begin studying hard.
Hit the nail on the head	Do or say something exactly right.
Hit the panic button	Act quickly and without thinking in reaction to an unexpected event.
Hit the road	Begin travelling or leave.
Hit the sack (or sheets, or hay)	Go to bed.
Hold the fort	Have responsibility for something or care about someone while others are away or out.
Honest as the day is long	Someone that is trustworthy and honest.
Hot potato	Speak of a current issue which many people are talking about and which is usually disputed.
Hour of need	When someone really needs something – their last chance.
In due course	Everything will happen when it is supposed to or at the appropriate time.
In one's own time	Taking as long as you want to complete something or completing something at your own pace.
In someone's black book	Be in disgrace or disfavour with someone.
In the bag	Something that is assured or a guaranteed success.
In the black	In profit.

IDIOM	MEANING
In the blink of an eye (or an instant)	Something that happens very quickly.
In the heat of the moment	Overwhelmed by what is happening in the moment.
In the interim	Between two events or something that is temporary.
In the long run	Over a period of time.
In the nick of time.	Just before it is too late.
In the red	In debt with your bank. To have a negative bank balance or to owe money to the bank.
In the right place at the right time	When something happens fortuitously or when given an unexpected opportunity.
In the wrong place at the wrong time	When something unlucky happens that would not normally have happened.
In tune with someone (on the same wavelength)	Have the same ideas and be in agreement with someone else.
It takes two to tango	Actions or communications need more than one person.
Itchy feet	Strong impulse to travel or go somewhere.
Judge a book by its cover	Judge something primarily on appearance.
Jump on the bandwagon	Join a popular trend or activity.
Keep something at bay	Keep something away or prevent something from happening.
Keeping up appearances	Maintaining an outward show of prosperity or well-being while hiding your difficulties.
Keeping your finger on the pulse	Being constantly aware of current developments.
Kept in the dark	Not knowing the secrets or truth.
Kill time	Do something whilst waiting.
Kill two birds with one stone	Accomplish two different things at the same time.
Landslide victory	Overwhelming victory.
Last straw	The final problem in a series of problems that leads to a bad thing happening.
Laugh a minute	Someone or something that is very funny.
Learn by rote	Learn something by memorising it without thought to what is being learnt.
Learn something off by heart	Memorise so well, that it can be written or recited without thinking.
Learn the ropes	Learn how to do a job or task properly.
Lemon	New vehicle that has many faults.
Let me see the colour of your money	Prove that you can afford something.
Let sleeping dogs lie	Leave a situation undisturbed, since it would otherwise result in trouble or complications.
Let slip through fingers	Failing to obtain or retain a good opportunity.
Let the cat out of the bag	Share information that was previously concealed.
Lick one's wounds	Trying to regain confidence after a defeat.
Lightning fast	Very fast.
Lights are on but nobody is home	Someone is stupid or lacking intelligence.
Like clockwork	Happens at very regular times or intervals without fail.
Like there's no tomorrow	Do something fast or energetic, as if it were the last opportunity to do so.
Lining up all the ducks in a row	Being well organised in preparation for something.
Living beyond your means	Spending more than you can afford.
Living in an ivory tower	Living a lifestyle that saves or obscures you from real world issues.
Living on the breadline	Having very little income.
Long arm of the law	Far-reaching power of the authorities.
Long time no see	Not seen since long ago.
Look on the bright side	View an unpleasant situation in a positive light.
Love at first sight	Start feeling love towards someone the first time you see them.
Lovey-dovey	Making an excessive display of affection.
Lump in your throat	Tight feeling in the throat because of an emotion like sadness, pride or gratitude.
Make a long story short	Come to the point without superfluous or unnecessary details.
Make my day	Something that makes me very happy or satisfies me.
Make or break	Circumstances causing total success or total failure.
Make the grade	Be satisfactory or at an accepted level.
Make time	Find time to do something as a priority.
Makes your flesh crawl	Something that makes you feel disgusted or nervous.
Making a go of it	Attempting to succeed at something.
Making good time	Completing something faster than expected.
Making headway	Making progress in what you are trying to do.
Match made in heaven	Relationship that is likely to be happy and successful.
Method to my madness	Despite one's approach seeming random, there actually is structure to it.
Mile a minute	Happens very quickly.
Miss the boat	Miss a chance or opportunity.
Monkey business	Mischievous or deceitful behaviour.
Month of Sundays	A very long period of time.
Murphy's law	Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

IDIOM	MEANING
Never in a million years	Will never happen.
No time like the present	The belief it is better to do something right away instead of waiting.
No time to lose	Start something right away, otherwise it won't be finished on time.
Not letting grass grow under your feet	Not delaying in getting something done.
Not letting moss grow over	Doing something now or without delay.
Not playing with a full deck	Lacking intelligence.
Now and then (or again)	Occasionally.
Now or never	Something that should be done now or it will never be done.
Off colour	Unwell.
Off one's rocker	Crazy; demented; out of one's mind; in a confused or befuddled state of mind; senile.
Off to a flying start	Something that is immediately successful or has begun well.
Old hand	Person with a lot of experience in something.
Old school	Holding ideas that were popular and important in the past but which are no longer so.
On the ball	When someone understands the situation well or is doing well.
On the brain	Thinking or talking about something constantly.
On the rocks	Relationship experiencing problems.
On time	Not being late or something happening at the expected time.
Once in a blue moon	Happens very rarely or once in a lifetime.
Once upon a time	Something that happened a long time ago.
Only time will tell	The truth, answer or result, will be revealed at some future point.
Out of the blue	Appear suddenly from nowhere and without warning.
Out of the red	No longer in debt.
Out of time	No time left to do something or a set time has been reached.
Paint the town red	Go out and have a really good time at a party.
Pass with flying colours	Pass with a high score.
Penny for your thoughts	A way of asking what someone is thinking.
Picture paints a thousand words	Visual presentations are far more descriptive than words.
Piece of cake	A job, task or other activity that is easy or simple.
Pitch black	Very dark with zero or almost zero visibility.
Place in the sun	A position that provides you all the success and happiness you want.
Pop the question	Propose marriage to someone.
Pot calling the kettle black	Hypocritically criticise or accuse someone else is as guilty as the person criticising.
Pressed for time	Being rushed or not having enough time to complete something.
Proud as a peacock	Very proud
Pull the plug	Terminate or discontinue something.
Pull wool over other people's eyes	Deceive someone into thinking well of them.
Pulling out all the stops	Doing everything you can to make something happen.
Punch above one's weight	Performing beyond your ability.
Puppy love	Temporary infatuation between young people.
Put it in black and white	Write down for confirmation or evidence.
Put your thinking cap on	Engage your mind and think in a serious manner.
Rags to riches	Becoming very rich whilst starting very poor.
Raining cats and dogs	Raining very heavily.
Raise the white flag	Accept defeat and surrender to the other party.
Raring to go	Being very eager or enthusiastic about the idea.
Rat race	Exhausting and repetitive routine.
Red flag	Signal or indication that something is not working properly or correctly.
Red herring	Unimportant matter that misleads and draws attention away.
Red hot	New and exciting, creating much demand.
Red in the face	Embarrassed.
Red tape	Set of rules and/or regulations that slow or stop progress.
Red-eye	Journey that leaves late in the night and arrives early in the morning.
Road hog	Dangerous driver.
Roll out the red carpet	Greet a person with great respect and give them a big, warm welcome.
Sail through something	Being successful as something without difficulty.
Save time	Do something quickly or in a way that allow time for other things.
School of hard knocks	Learning through difficult experiences, as opposed to formal, classroom education.
School of thought	Particular philosophy or way of thinking about something.
Schoolboy error	Very basic or foolish mistake.
Seeing eye to eye	Two or more people agree on something.
Seeing red	React with uncontrollable rage.

IDIOM	MEANING
Sell ice to Eskimos	Persuade people to go against their best interests or to accept something unnecessary.
Shelf life	The expected duration of lifespan of something (typically food, drink or medicine).
Show of hands	Raising hands to vote about something.
Shown the red card	Dismissed or told to leave.
Silver screen	Film industry
Single file	Line of people with one person standing behind another.
Sink or swim	Fail or succeed.
Sinking teeth into something	Doing something with a lot of energy and enthusiasm.
Sit on the fence	Unable or unwilling choose or make a decision.
Skip class	Not go to school when you should.
Sleeping (or silent) partner	Person who has put money into a business or venture but who is not involved in running it.
Slice of the pie	Share of something, such as money, profits, etc.
Smash hit	A big success.
Snowed under	Having too much to do.
Sooner or later	Something is certain to happen but it isn't known when exactly.
Sour grapes	Pretending to dislike something you cannot have.
Spanner in the works	Suddenly disrupt something by introducing something unexpected or unwanted.
Speak of the devil	When the person you have just been talking about arrives.
Speaks volumes	Express a reaction without words.
Spill the beans	Reveal a secret.
Standing ground	Maintaining your position
Standing the test of time	Something that lasts or continues to work well for a long time.
Steal someone's thunder	Take the credit for something someone else did.
Stiff upper lip	Not showing emotions.
Storm in a teacup	Exaggerate a problem.
Straight from the horse's mouth	From the authoritative source.
Stuck in a time warp	Not changed for a very long time, when everything else around has.
Swallow one's pride	Accepting something humiliating or embarrassing.
Sweet tooth	Liking for sweet-tasting foods.
Take each day as it comes	Deal with things as and when they happen.
Take with a grain (or pinch) of salt	Not to take what someone says too seriously. Be sceptical about something.
Taste of your own medicine	Something happens to you, or is done to you, that you have done to someone else.
Teacher's pet	Teacher's favourite student.
The big time	The top level of a profession
The moment of truth	When an important decision is made or the truth about something is revealed.
The ship has sailed	A particular opportunity has passed and is no longer available.
The time is ripe	The right or most opportune moment to do something.
Thinking on your feet	Adjusting quickly to change and making fast decisions.
This day and age	These or modern times.
Tickled pink	Very pleased, thrilled or delighted about something.
Tie the knot	Get married.
Time after time (time and time again)	Do something repeatedly
Time flies	When time passes quickly.
Time for a change	Stop what you are doing and start doing something else.
Time heals all wounds (or time is a great healer)	Feelings of hurt (usually emotional) will go away after some time has passed.
Time is money	Time is a valuable commodity. Payment is needed before doing something.
Time is of the essence	When meeting a deadline is very important or critical.
Time of one's life	A time when someone is enjoying themselves.
Time on one's hands (or side)	When you can afford to wait before doing or achieving something.
Tongue-tied	Difficulty in expressing yourself because of nervousness or embarrassment.
Too many chiefs and not enough Indians	Too many people telling others what to do.
Too much (free) time on one's hand	When someone doesn't have enough to do.
Top banana	Most important person in a group.
Top dog	Most important person.
Tough cookie	Very determined person.
Tricks of the trade	Clever or expert way of doing something.
True colours	Someone's actual character.
Turn back the hands of time	Reverse something or go back to a time in the past.
University of life	Daily life and work where you learn more than you would through formal education.
Until hell freezes over	Something will never happen, no matter how hard or long you try for it to.
Up in smoke	Something that ends before getting a result.

IDIOM	MEANING
Waiting in the wings	Waiting for an opportunity to take action.
Walk out on someone	Leave a partner and end the relationship.
Wasting time	Doing something with no purpose.
Well-oiled machine	Unit of people or a group of things working well together.
Whale of a time	Enjoying something thoroughly.
White as a sheet (or ghost)	In a state of great fear or anxiety.
White collar	Officer worker.
White elephant	Expensive item that's costly to maintain and not particularly useful.
White lie	Little or harmless lie told to be polite and avoid hurting someone's feelings.
Whitewash	Cover up or gloss over faults.
Whole nine yards	Everything. All of it.
With bells on	When you are delighted and eager to go somewhere.
Wooden spoon	Imaginary prize for the last person in a race.
Works like a charm	Works very well or as expected.
Wouldn't be caught dead	Would never like to do something.
Year in, year out	Happens every year for many years in a row.
Yellow-bellied	Coward
You can't teach an old dog new tricks	People used to doing things a certain way are often unable to change their ways.
Your guess is as good as mine	Not knowing the answer.