



BLOOMSBURY INTERNATIONAL

English Idioms with Examples

Learn the meaning and origin of 20 common English idioms. Quiz included.



Why Learn Idioms?

An idiom is a phrase that has a meaning which is different from the meanings of each individual word in it. For example, if someone says to you “I’m pulling your leg”, you might think it is strange because you would definitely be able to feel if someone was holding your leg and pulling it! This idiom actually means that they are teasing you or playing a joke on you.

There are hundreds of common English idioms in the English language which we use every day. In fact, most English people do not even realise they are using them! As the meanings are usually completely different to the meanings of the actual words, it can be very difficult to learn them – you need to learn them in the same way you learn new vocabulary.

One of the most difficult aspects of learning English – or any foreign language for that matter – is how to learn idioms. Idioms are words or phrases whose meaning can’t be worked out from literally translating the words themselves. Therefore, learning idioms can be really quite difficult, as there are no shortcuts or patterns you can use to help you remember them.

Of course, you could always decide that you don’t need to worry about idioms – after all, it’s possible to get your point across in English without using idiomatic expressions. However, failing to learn idioms will mean that you don’t always understand everything you hear or read. It will also mean you miss out on the true ‘colour’ and personality of the English language and British culture. If you can master a range of English idioms, you’ll become a more comfortable and natural English speaker, who is able to chew the fat with native English speakers that you meet.

So, while there are no quick fixes to learning idiomatic expressions, here’s a starter for ten of things you can do to help make remembering them a piece of cake:

Use your diary

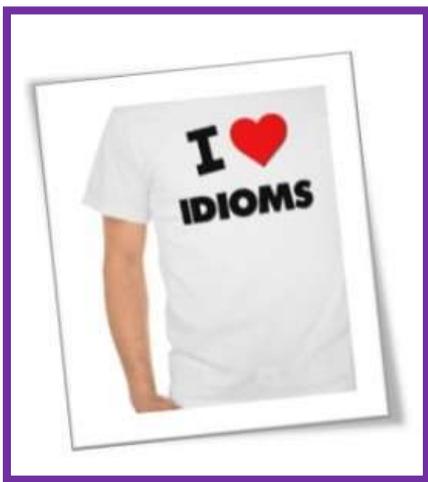
It’s always a good idea to keep a vocabulary diary while you’re learning English in London, as it gives you the chance to note down words or expressions you hear but don’t understand. So if you hear, read or see an expression or phrase, and you can’t work out its meaning from the words



themselves, the chances are that it's an idiom. Note it down and take it to your next lesson, so you can ask your tutor what it means.

Use context

While you can't work out the meaning of an idiom by translating the words in the phrase, sometimes the context can give you clues to help you work it out. For example, if someone is talking about a day out that went wrong, if they say something like "it just added insult to injury," you could use the context of hearing about the problems and issues of the day to work out that this idiom refers to making the situation worse.



Use the idioms you've learned

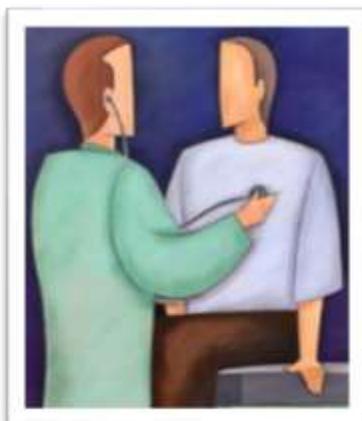
If you think you've mastered the meaning of an idiom and the correct context in which to use it, then don't be shy! If you see an opportunity, then use it, whether in conversation or in writing. It can be nerve-wracking to use a phrase you're not used to, especially if you're not completely certain whether you're using it correctly, but biting the bullet and doing it is the only way to really learn its usage.

A Catch-22 Situation

Meaning

A frustrating situation in which someone is trapped by contradictory rules. Often this is a situation in which the rules and regulations actually stop a problem from being solved. For example, a homeless person needs to find a job so that they can

afford somewhere to live, but they cannot apply for a job because they have nowhere to live – this is a Catch-22 situation.



Origin

"Catch-22" comes from the title of Joseph Heller's 1961 novel. In the story, "Catch-22" was a rule followed by army doctors in The Second World War. If a frightened pilot tried to avoid a dangerous mission

by claiming he was “insane”, this was seen as healthy and the doctor would diagnose him as “sane” and eligible to fly.

In contrast, any pilot who actually wanted to fly was marked as “insane” and would not be allowed to do so. So “Catch 22” was the perfect example of an illogical rule which made everyone unhappy. After the release of a film based on the book in 1970, the phrase “a Catch-22 situation” or “a Catch-22 fix” became widely used to mean a paradoxical problem.

Examples

The Sunday Times: “**Catch-22** Property Crisis: Young people don’t have enough money to get on the property ladder, but banks will only lend money to property-owners.”

Rob: “I’ve been looking everywhere for a job, but no-one will give me an interview because I don’t have any work experience.”

Rachel: It’s a **Catch-22 situation** – until someone offers you a job, you won’t be able to get any experience.”

Hannah: “I’ve found myself in a real **Catch-22 fix** – if I go back to work I can hardly make enough money to pay for childcare, but if I stay at home to look after the baby I can hardly make enough money to pay for food and rent – either way, I’m struggling to survive financially.”

Bring Home the Bacon

Meaning

To earn a living/earn enough money to live on and provide for yourself or your family.

Origin

The idiom bringing home the bacon started in the 1100s in a small town in Essex. The legend goes that the vicar of the church of Dunmow would reward the couple that hadn’t argued for a whole year and a day with “a side of bacon”.



The winners were considered to be role models for the community and the competition was designed to create harmony in the family unit.

However, there are others who believe that the idiom started in the 1500s. In those days one of the most fascinating fairground attractions was to try and catch a greased pig with your bare hands, and whoever managed to do so would be able to

take the prized animal home. So, if you won you would literally be bringing home the bacon.

But where does the connection to money come from? Well, if you consider that in both stories you had to earn your prize and that money was probably short at the time, it would be fair to say that the side of bacon represented a cash prize of sorts.

Examples

- “This is ridiculous! I work all hours under the sun and I still can’t seem to **bring home the bacon.**”
- My husband stays home and looks after the children, and I **bring home the bacon.**
- I always tell my children to follow their passions, but that **bringing home the bacon is also important.**

Cold Feet

Meaning

To become nervous or frightened to do something you had planned to do.



Origin

The exact origin of this idiom is unknown; however, many people believe that it is a military phrase. If a soldier became too scared to go into battle, he would complain that his feet were frozen as a way to avoid fighting or to enter the battle slowly.

Examples

“Jason was just about to bungee jump from that bridge but he got **cold feet** and didn’t do it.”

“They asked me to sing at the concert last night but I couldn’t. After seeing how many people were in the audience I got **cold feet.**”

Sally: “Are you looking forward to your wedding tomorrow?”

Anita: “Of course. I’m a bit worried about Jack though. He’s been acting strange recently and I’m worried he’ll get **cold feet** and not turn up at the church!”

Sally: “Don’t be silly, Jack loves you. I’m sure he’ll be there.”

Cool as a Cucumber

Meaning

Extremely calm, relaxed and in control of your emotions.

Origin

This phrase may have originated from the fact that even in hot weather, the inside of cucumbers are approximately 20 degrees cooler than the outside air.

Therefore, a person who stays cool, calm and relaxed in a difficult situation can be compared to a cucumber staying cool inside, even in hot weather!



Examples

“I know that Tom was really nervous before his bungee jump but he looked as **cool as a cucumber.**”

“I don’t understand how you can stay **cool as a cucumber** when you give presentations to more than 100 people. I get so nervous and I always mix up my words.”

Rob: “When is your job interview?”

Sue: “Tomorrow. I’m so nervous!”

Rob: “Don’t worry. Just act as **cool as a cucumber** and tell them you’re the best person for the job. You’ll be fine!”

Don’t Count your Chickens Before they Hatch

Meaning

You shouldn’t assume that something will definitely happen before it really does. Don’t make plans based on predicted results that haven’t occurred yet. This phrase is often shortened to Don’t count your chickens.

Origin

A hen (female chicken) lays eggs from which young chickens (chicks) “hatch” or emerge. However, not all eggs successfully produce a chicken, so you shouldn’t count the eggs and assume that each one will produce a chick – you should wait to count the actual chickens until they have hatched.



This phrase may have its origins with [Aesop](#), the Greek fable writer who lived around 620 to 560 BC. In his fable “The Milkmaid and Her Pail”, a milkmaid carries a pail (bucket) of milk on her head and daydreams about selling the milk, buying chickens with the money and then becoming so rich from selling the eggs that she becomes independent. She will then have enough money to shake her head to say no to all the young men trying to win her love. However, in the fable she is so immersed in this daydream that she shakes her head and accidentally drops the milk, therefore destroying the possibility of her dream by imagining it too soon. There is a line from the fable which reads *“Ah, my child,” said the mother, “Do not count your chickens before they are hatched.”*

Examples

Mary: “I’m sure my boss will give me a raise next month, so I’ve decided to treat myself to an exotic holiday.”

Dennis: “If I were you I wouldn’t book the holiday until you actually get the raise...**don’t count your chickens...**”

The current Prime Minister seems pretty confident that his party will win the general election in May and get re-elected. However, he **shouldn’t count his chickens until they hatch**.

Harry: “When Liverpool wins the FA Cup, I’m going to have a huge party!”

Beth: “**Don’t count your chickens before they hatch!** They haven’t even played the semi-finals yet!”



Eat my Hat

Meaning

People say “I’ll eat my hat” when they are sure something will not happen.

Origin

No-one would want to literally eat their hat so this expression is only used when someone is very sure about something. One of the earliest appearances of this phrase was in Charles Dickens’ ‘The Pickwick Papers’ in 1837: “If I knew as little of life as that, I’d eat my hat and swallow the buckle whole”.

There are many things that would be very difficult to eat so it is not known why a hat was chosen. However, some people think that it is because the king and his companions used to wear large and elaborate hats that would have been especially difficult to eat!

Examples

“He's always late. If he gets here on time, **I'll eat my hat!**”

“My friends said **they'll eat their hats** if I pass my driving test!”

“**I'll eat my hat** if you can eat 20 burgers in one hour!”

“My mum said **she would eat her hat** if I didn't pass the exam but I got top marks! I'm going to put her hat in the oven when I get home!”

Give Someone the Cold Shoulder

Meaning

To be unfriendly to someone and ignore them deliberately.

Origin

This idiom originated in the early 1800s. It is said that welcome visitors to a house were served a hot meal but someone who was not welcome was given a cold shoulder of whatever meat was being eaten. The shoulder was known to be the coldest and toughest part of the animal and a much inferior meal.



Examples

“I haven't spoken to Susan for months. I've tried calling her a few times but she keeps **giving me the cold shoulder**. I don't even know why.”

“I think you should stop **giving Jeff the cold shoulder**. I know he upset you but he's really sorry and he wants to be your friend again.”

Paul: “Hi Jake. How are you feeling today?”

Jake: “Hi Paul. You're the only person who has spoken to me today. Everyone else is **giving me the cold shoulder**.”

Paul: “Well I'm not surprised. You were very rude to everyone last night. Don't you remember?”

Jake: “Oh no! I must have drunk too much – I don't remember anything!”

Hit the Sack/Hit the Hay

Meaning

To go to bed.

Origin

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, people used to sleep on a cloth sack stuffed with hay. Before they went to bed, they would literally 'hit the hay' to make the mattress more comfortable and to make sure there were no bugs inside. The expression 'hit the sack' is thought to have originated from the sack that was stuffed with hay.



Examples

"I'm exhausted. I think it's time for me to **hit the sack**."

"Hey Steve, you look terrible! What time did you **hit the hay** last night?"

Claire: "Come on Paul, time for bed."

Paul: "But it's before midnight! You don't really think I'm going to **hit the sack** this early do you?"

Claire: "Fine, but remember we have to wake up at 5 tomorrow!"

Tickled Pink

Meaning

Very happy, delighted.

Origin

"Tickling" here doesn't mean light stroking of the skin - it's the metaphorical sense of the word that means 'to give pleasure'. The idea is of enjoyment great enough to make the recipient go pink with pleasure.



That meaning of tickling has found its way into several phrases relating to pleasure, dating back to the early 17th century, but it was first used in 1910, in an Illinois' newspaper - The Daily Review, said in a piece titled 'Lauder Tickled at Change', we have:

"Grover Laudermilk was **tickled pink** over Kinsella's move in buying him from St. Louis."

The inclusion of the term in a newspaper, without any explanation of meaning, indicates that the writer expected readers would already be familiar with it.

Examples

- I was **tickled pink** to have you visit us.
- We were **tickled pink** when your flowers arrived.
- Aunt Sophia was **tickled pink** to receive a photo of the family.



In a Nutshell

Meaning

in only a few words / concisely

Origin

A nutshell is the hard outer casing of a nut, which protects the edible nut inside. A nutshell has enough space to contain something small –

therefore “in a nutshell” has come to mean “in a small number of words”. It is believed that this idiom may have been created nearly 2000 years ago, when the Roman writer, Pliny, described a copy of Homer’s Iliad as being written so small that it could fit in the shell of a walnut. Around 1600, Shakespeare’s Hamlet also used the phrase, exclaiming “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams”.

Examples

“**In a nutshell**, the film [Titanic](#) is about a ship that sinks.”

“The Sunday Newspapers often include a page explaining the biggest news stories of the past week **in a nutshell**.”

“This is our business plan **in a nutshell** – we want to make delicious food and sell it to hungry people!”

Caught Red-Handed

Meaning



To be discovered in the middle of doing something wrong or committing a crime (e.g. cheating or stealing).

Origin

This idiom originated in Scotland in the 15th century. At that time, it was very common for thieves to steal and kill other peoples' livestock (animals) but it was difficult to prove unless the thief was actually caught with the animal or with blood of the dead animal on his hands. In this case, he would literally be 'caught red-handed'. The phrase has now been expanded to refer to any crime or wrongdoing.

Context

"I was trying to steal the private documents from the office for you but I was **caught red-handed**. I didn't realise there was a CCTV camera in the room!"

"Did you hear what happened to Greg last week? He was fired from his job after he was **caught red-handed** stealing money from the till!"

Teacher: "Jeremy! Are you cheating in your exam?"

Jeremy: "No, of course not. I... I... was just looking for my pencil."

Teacher: "Don't lie Jeremy, I **caught you red-handed** copying from Sue's exam. And look, your answers are all exactly the same as hers!"

Jump on the Bandwagon

Meaning

To support a hobby, an idea a person etc after it has become popular or successful.

Origin

This idiom originated in the USA probably in the 18th century when musicians were carried in a bandwagon ahead of everyone else when going to a parade or a political rally. The phrase suggests that people will follow any event for the excitement of it rather than actually knowing if it is true or not. The transition from the literal to the figurative use we now know was complete by the 1890s.



Examples

- They always jump on the bandwagon when they start watching a new tv programme that has become popular.
- People should make up their own minds instead of jumping on the bandwagon so often.
- I am certainly not going to jump on the bandwagon of trashing teachers.

Money Doesn't Grow on Trees

Meaning

This means that money is something that must be earned and that it is not easy to acquire it. It often means that you should be careful how much you spend, because money is not an infinite resource.



Origin

With enough water and sunshine, a tree will grow strong roots to further sustain its growth, taking nutrients from the soil and needing no more help from a human to continue living. When a tree has matured, it will start to produce fruit, which can be gathered and enjoyed for free. Therefore, for very little personal effort, humans can enjoy the continuous offerings of fruit from a tree. On the other hand, money is not nearly as easy to obtain. You can't just walk up to a tree and gather cash from it like you would fruit – money requires considerable *effort* to earn, and some people, especially children, may not always understand that.

This idiom became widely used more than 100 years ago, emerging in writings near the end of the 1800s. For example, the *Statesville Landmark* newspaper from 1891, reads “*Money doesn't grow on trees here yet.*”

Examples

Child: “Can I have ten pounds to go to the cinema?”

Parent: “Ten pounds?! That’s too expensive! **Money doesn’t grow on trees** you know!”

Mother: “If you want to buy a new Smartphone, you will need to find a job and save up for it. **Money doesn’t grow on trees** - you will appreciate something more if you have worked for it!”

"In the national elections the people have voted for higher wages and lower taxes, but they must realise that governmental **money doesn't grow on trees**."

Pull a Fast One (on Somebody)

Meaning



To lie or deceive somebody, to play a trick / prank / practical joke on somebody.

Origin

This idiom may have originated with magicians. Many magicians practise deception by "sleight of hand", where they fool an audience by making movements which are too fast to see.

The idiom can also be used for other kinds of trick or lie where deception is involved.

Examples

- Don't try to **pull a fast one** on me! I know what you're doing.
- I paid him for six bottles of champagne, but he **pulled a fast one** on me and gave me six bottles of cheap wine.
- She said she had a headache and went home, he must have been **pulling a fast one** because I saw her laughing as she walked out the door.

Thick as Thieves

Meaning

Very close friends who share secrets, etc.

Origin

This idiom originated in the 1800s'. At that time, thieves often worked together in gangs and were extremely close, telling each other everything and completely replying on each other. 'Thick' in this case means 'very close' or 'closely packed', for example thick hair, thick grass, etc. These were put



together to make the phrase ‘thick as two thieves’ which was later shortened to ‘thick as thieves’.

Examples

“Jane and Thomas are as **thick as thieves** – they do everything together!”

“Susan and I were **thick as thieves** when we were younger. We lived on the same street, went to the same school and spend most of our time together.”

Carrie: “How’s John? I haven’t seen him for a while.”

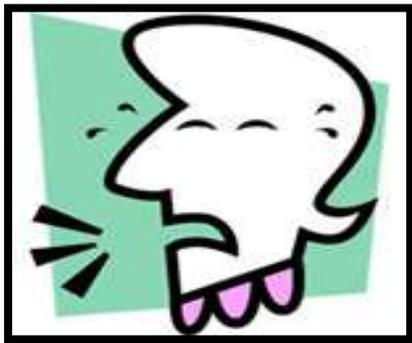
Daniel: “Neither have I. We had an argument last month and we haven’t spoken since.”

Carrie: “Wow, I’m shocked. You two used to be **thick as thieves!**”

Quit your Bellyaching

Meaning

You can say this to someone if you want them to stop complaining or moaning.



Origin

The origin of this idiom is unknown. ‘Bellyaching’ was first used as slang for ‘complaining’ in the 1880s but no-one is sure why. It is possible that it started being used as people who have belly aches often complain about them! The phrase ‘quit it’ is often used if you want to tell someone to stop

doing something; so ‘quit your bellyaching’ combines ‘quit it’ and the slang word ‘bellyaching’ to mean ‘stop your complaining’!

Examples

“**Quit your bellyaching!** You’ve been moaning all day!”

“I know she doesn’t have any money but I wish she would **quit her bellyaching** and get a job.”

Steve: “Hi Julie. How are you today?”

Julie: “Not good actually. I have a headache, my back hurts, I’m exhausted, I have no money, I hate my job... Hey, Steve, where are you going? Why doesn’t anyone want to talk to me?”

Steve: “Well, if you **quit your bellyaching** maybe they would!”

Rings a Bell



Meaning

Something that sounds familiar to you or causes you to remember something or someone (usually when you cannot remember the exact details).

Origin

Before most people had watches or clocks, bells were used as a signal to alert people of events, for example the start of church or the start of school. Someone would ring a bell to remind people of something taking place. Therefore, if someone asks you if a name “rings a bell”, they are asking if the name reminds you of anything, in the same way that hearing a bell used to remind people of something.

Examples

“The name of the restaurant **rings a bell** but I’m not sure if I’ve actually been there. Someone may have told me about it.”

“Does the name Peter Johnson **ring a bell**? I’m sure we’ve met him but I can’t remember where.”

James: “Are you free on June 6th? Some people are coming to our house for dinner and we’d love if you and Anna could come.”

Martin: “Thanks James, that sounds great. The date **rings a bell** though but I can’t remember why. I’ll check with Anna later and let you know.”

You can also use the opposite:

“Sorry, but that name really **doesn’t ring a bell**. I don’t think I’ve met him before.”



The Elephant in the Room

Meaning

The big problem or issue that everyone knows about but nobody wants to talk about.

Origin

The exact origin of this idiom is unknown but there are some suggestions about how it may have come into use.

Wikipedia suggests that in 1814 [Ivan Andreevich Krylove](#), a poet and fabulist, wrote a fable entitled “The Inquisitive Man” which tells a story of a man who goes to museum and notices all sorts of tiny things, but fails to notice an elephant.

In its current meaning it first appeared in an American newspaper. The meaning dates back to the 1950s and the first reference to the phrase was found in a newspaper The Charleston Gazette – “Chicago, that’s an old Indian word meaning get that elephant out of your room.” The writer’s intention is unknown but it was nothing to do with elephants.

Examples

- There was an elephant in the room last night when my brother came in with a black eye but didn’t say anything about how it happened.
- We all sat sipping our tea quietly, no one wanted to bring up the elephant in the room about Tom going to prison.

It's not Rocket Science

Meaning

It’s not rocket science is used to say that you do not think something is very difficult to do or understand.

Origin



This is an American phrase. America was one of the first English-speaking countries to start a programme for the development of rocket science. The first people who were widely known as rocket scientists were a group of German military technologists, who were transported to the USA in 1945. Their success during the 1940s and 50s in

developing the sophisticated technology required for military and space rockets, was the reason for rocket science being equated in the US public's mind with outstanding expertise. The perceived equation of 'rocket scientist = German = clever' can only have been enhanced by the persona of another German scientist of acknowledged genius, who was also working in the USA at the time - [Albert Einstein](#).

Examples

- Coaching football is **not rocket science** and it's not brain surgery. It's a game, nothing more?
- Driving a car is **not rocket science**. I don't know why people don't know how to drive better.
- Using the internet **isn't rocket science**. Anyone can learn how to use it..



To be on the Ball

Meaning

If you're on the ball it means that you're very quick to understand certain things, very prepared for something or react quickly (and correctly) to a situation.

Origin

Whilst there are several theories floating around regarding the origins of

the idiom "on the ball" there is one theory that has the highest likelihood of being correct, and this theory relates to the ball games, particularly baseball.

In the early 1900s, baseball pitchers would try to put special spins, curves, speeds and tricks on the ball to outwit the batter. A good pitcher always puts something on the ball, and the commentators and sports journalists of the time would note this. These sports commentators provide the first documented use of the phrase "on the ball".

Another use of the phrase "on the ball" was also used during training in ball games where coaches encouraged the players to keep their eye on the ball for optimal performance. The best players had this focus on the ball which enabled them to play better. The term "keep your eye on the ball" was recorded to be used in baseball, cricket, croquet, football, golf, soccer and rounders. "Keeping your eye on the ball" is documented even earlier than the "putting something on the ball" phrase, with one citation talking about keeping your eye on a rounders ball dating back to 1864 in a novel by [WHG Kingston](#) called "Ernest Bracebridge, Or, Schoolboy Days".

Source: <http://www.saywhydoi.com/on-the-ball-origin-and-meaning/>

Examples

- The staff in that company are really **on the ball** and also get projects done on time.

- If you **were on the ball**, this wouldn't have happened.

To Talk Someone's Ear Off

Meaning

To talk so much to cause someone to be bored to death; to talk excessively or far more than is wanted or appreciated.



Origin

This idiom dates back to the beginning of the 1900s'. It is thought that it originated from a Yiddish saying that implies that if someone talks to you too much and too long, you get so bored that your ear will eventually fall off. The idiom has slight negative connotations as the topic of the conversation might not be as interesting or important to the listener as it is to the speaker, causing (mild)

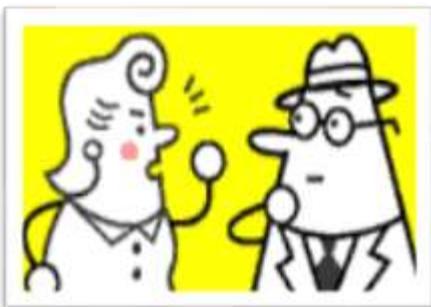
irritation and annoyance.

In English, we can also use the idiom to *bend someone's ear* in the same way, but the expression to talk someone's ear off is far more emphatic and indicates a higher level of annoyance. Other variations: *to talk someone's head off*; *to talk the hind legs off a donkey*.

Examples

- I had a drink with an old school friend I found on [Facebook](#) and we had so much to catch up on that she **talked my ear off!**
- I warned my colleague not to spend too much time in the boss' office as he has a tendency **to talk your ear off!**
- My mother will **talk your ear off**, if you give her a chance!

Wear the Trousers



Meaning

To be the person in a relationship who is in control and makes all the important decisions.

Origin

This idiom originated in the 19th century. At that time, women always wore skirts or dresses (only men wore

trousers). Women were considered less important than men so the husband was usually the dominant person in the relationship/family. Sometimes, however, the roles were reversed and the woman was the dominant one in the relationship. Although women weren't allowed to actually wear trousers, the phrase 'wear the trousers' started being used to describe women who were in charge in a relationship.

Examples

"Even though Paul seems bossy, we all know it's Jane who really **wears the trousers** in that relationship!"

Jenny: "I can't believe how much Tom has changed since he got married. He used to be such a happy guy."

Brian: "I know, but Julie makes him stay at home every day, cleaning and cooking. Poor guy."

Jenny: "Yeah, it's clear who **wears the trousers** in their relationship!"

Wild Goose Chase

Meaning

An unsuccessful search for something that does not exist or you are unlikely to discover.

Origin

It seems easy to imagine how this idiom originated because trying to chase a wild goose would almost always be unsuccessful. However, the actual origins are very different. In the 1500s, there was a popular type of horse race where riders had to follow a lead rider through an unpredictable course. This reminded many people of flying geese in formation following (or chasing) a leader, so the sport was called 'a wild-goose chase'. It was first printed as an idiom in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "Nay, if thy wits run the wild-goose chase, I have done, for thou hast more of the wild-goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five: was I with you there for the goose?"



Examples

"After 2 hours walking around the art gallery, a security guard told me I was on a **wild-goose chase** because the painting had been moved to a different gallery last

year.”

“I went on a **wild-goose chase** looking for John before I realised he was in a different shopping centre!”

Lisa: “Hi Mark. I think I’ve lost my keys, I can’t find them anywhere.”

Mark: “Oh, sorry, I picked them up by accident this morning. I have them with me.”

Lisa: “Are you serious?! You mean I’ve wasted my whole morning on a **wild-goose chase**?! I can’t believe it.”



Wipe the Slate Clean / Start with a Clean Slate

Meaning

To forgive and forget mistakes made in the past and start again in a new way.

Origin

In Victorian times, schoolchildren used to write on boards made from a piece of flat rock called “slate” set in a wooden frame. A pencil, also made of slate, was used to write the letters. Slate was more commonly used than paper because it could be wiped clean and used again and again. Around the same time, people could go into a grocer’s shop and buy things “on account”, meaning they did not pay immediately, but the grocer recorded how much money they owed on a slate. On payday (when people received their salary) they paid their debt to the grocer and their slate was wiped clean. Therefore to wipe the slate clean means to start things afresh: this is a phrase often used to describe the fresh start in a new year or a second chance at success.

Examples

“Danny got into a lot of trouble at school last year, but with a new school year and new teachers, he's **starting with a clean slate.**”

“This year I've got into some bad habits, but for the new year I have good intentions, so on January 1st I'm going to **start with a clean slate.**”

“My brother and I had a huge argument last month, but yesterday we met up and talked through our problems, so now we've forgiven each other and **wiped the slate clean.**”

Have Fun with Idioms



Complete the sentences below with the correct idiom.

a. Can't change its spots	g. On cloud nine
b. A piece of cake	h. Take a rain check
c. Sleep on it	i. Under the weather
d. Once in a blue moon	j. Stole my thunder
e. Play it by ear	k. Come rain or shine
f. Bite the bullet	l. Do a runner

1. "I can't believe Sarah just _____! I just announced that I passed my exam and Sarah came in and told everyone she was pregnant!"

2. "Tony and Michelle just got engaged and they're both _____."

3. "I've been feeling a little _____ today. I had to wait outside in the rain for 2 hours last night and I think I may have caught a cold."

4. "Can we _____ on the cinema? I'm completely _____ and can't leave work at the moment."

5. "I know that Monday is a very important day for you. _____ I will be there!"

6. He thought he would have to _____ if he did not find the money to pay the landlord his rent.

7. "I know it will be difficult seeing Julie tonight but if you don't _____ you'll regret it tomorrow."

8. Jane: "Thank you so much for changing my tyre. I had no idea how to do it!"
Pete: "No problem. When you've been a mechanic for 30 years, changing a tyre is _____!"

9. "I don't think Tom will ever order pasta instead of a pizza. A leopard _____ you know."

10. Carley: "Are you coming to the party tonight?"

Robyn: "I don't think I should. I've been feeling _____ all week."



11. "She told me she would _____ and let me know her decision but it's been 3 days now and she still hasn't called!"

12. I don't have time to prepare for my meeting tomorrow. I'm just going to have to _____ and see what happens."

13. "My teacher knew I cheated so I had to _____ and admit it."

14. "I only see my brother _____ because he lives in New York."

1. j 2. g 3. i 4. h 5. k 6. l 7. f 8. b 9. a 10. i 11. c 12. e 13. f 14. d

Answers

- Check our [Idiom](#) of the Week every Wednesday to help broaden your knowledge of English
- Read our bi-weekly [blog](#) which includes study tips, interesting aspects of the English language, worldwide facts and much more!
- Read what our [students](#) have to say about studying at Bloomsbury International and life in London.