



**BLOOMSBURY** INTERNATIONAL

10

# Common English Idioms and How to Use Them

Learn the meanings and origins of 10 common idioms and  
how to use them in sentences



## What is an idiom?

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.

**Kevin:** “I just heard that there’s a problem with the company’s computers and we won’t be paid until next week!”

**Steve:** “Oh no! I won’t be able to pay my rent on time! What am I going to do?”

**Kevin:** “Haha I’m just **pulling your leg!** The computers are working fine. You’ve been paid already.”

There are hundreds of [common 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.

Below you will find 10 popular idioms which English people use very often. You can read their meanings, origins and example sentences which will show you how to use them in the future. Try to use them in sentences when you are speaking English with your friends or in your [English language classes](#) – I’m sure you will impress people!



## Between a rock and a hard place

### Meaning

To be in a very difficult situation and to have to make a hard decision between two things that are equally unpleasant.

### Origin

This phrase originated in America and was first printed in 1921. In Arizona at that time, there was a big problem with the mining companies. The miners went on strike and asked for better pay and working conditions but their demands were refused and instead, most of the miners were sent to other places in America.

The miners had a very difficult decision to make – they could either stay in Arizona and continue to work in the mines in bad conditions with low pay (the mines they worked in were the ‘rock’) or move to a new city where they would need to find a new home and a new job (this was the ‘hard place’). So they really were between a rock and a hard place!



### Examples

“Someone drove into my car yesterday and now I’m stuck **between a rock and a hard place** – I can either drive around with a big dent in my car or pay lots of money to have it repaired.”

“I don’t know what to do – if I go to the party I won’t be able to do my homework and my teacher will be really angry tomorrow but if I stay at home and do my homework I’m going to miss a great party! I hate being **between a rock and a hard place!**”

**Paul:** “Jack I need your help. Susie told me I either have to stop smoking or she’s going to break up with me. I really love smoking but I don’t want to lose Susie – what should I do?”

**Jack:** “Wow Paul, I don’t know what to say. You’re really caught **between a rock and a hard place!**”

## A leopard can't change its spots

### Meaning

A person cannot change who they are (their character), no matter how hard they try.



### Origin

This idiom comes from the Old Testament (Jer. 13:23). The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah tries to persuade an evil shepheress to become good but when he realises that it is impossible to convince her, he says: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?”

### Examples

“I don't think Tom will ever order pasta instead of a pizza. **A leopard can't change its spots** you know.”

The waiter tried to be friendly to his customers but **a leopard can't change its spots** and he was still very rude.

**Jane:** “I'm going to book a table in a Chinese restaurant tonight for me and Peter. He's never had Chinese before!”

**Sue:** “Oh Jane, **a leopard can't change its spots**. Peter has never eaten Chinese food before and he's not going to start now!”

# Let the cat out of the bag

## Meaning

To reveal a secret or a surprise, usually by accident.

## Origin

Many years ago, merchants often sold live piglets to customers. After putting a piglet in a bag so the customer could transport it easily, dishonest merchants sometimes swapped the piglet for a cat when the customer looked away. The buyer often didn't discover the trick until they got home and really let the cat out of the bag, revealing the merchant's secret!

## Examples

"It's a secret. Try not to **let the cat out of the bag.**"

"I was really looking forward to seeing the film, until Jack **let the cat out of the bag** and told me the ending!"

"We were going to have a surprise birthday for dad, but my silly brother **let the cat out of the bag** the day before."

"Well **the cat's out of the bag** now. Everyone knows Amy will be given the lead role in the play."



## Get up on the wrong side of the bed

### Meaning

To be in a bad mood – to be grumpy or unpleasant from the moment you wake up for no obvious reason.

### Origin

In Roman times it was considered bad luck to get out of bed on the left side. Therefore, if you got out of bed on the 'wrong' side (the left side), it was thought that you would have a very bad day.

### Examples

"Why are you in such a bad mood today? Did you **get up on the wrong side of the bed?**"

"I feel terrible. I definitely **got up on the wrong side of the bed** today. Actually, maybe it was all the wine I drank last night!"

"You're annoying everyone at the moment. You're not going to have any friends left if you keep **getting up on the wrong side of the bed!**"



## Not my cup of tea

### Meaning

If something is not your cup of tea, you do not like it or you are not interested in it.

### Origin

The positive version of this expression, “it’s my cup of tea”, has been in use since the late 1800s when the British started using the phrase “my cup of tea” to describe something they liked. (We all know that the British love their tea!) In the 1920s, the word ‘not’ was added to the phrase to describe something that they didn’t like.



### Examples

“Some people love playing cricket, but it’s **not my cup of tea.**”

“I know that horror films are **not your cup of tea**, but you should definitely see this one – it’s amazing!”

**Peter:** “Did you listen to the CD I gave you?”

**Kevin:** “Yes, I listened to it twice but it’s **not really my cup of tea.**”

You can also use the opposite:

“I really like Van Gogh’s paintings. They’re just **my cup of tea.**”

# A piece of cake

## Meaning

Something which is very easy to do.

## Origin

It is thought that this idiom originated in the 1870s when it was tradition to give cakes as prizes in competitions. In some parts of the USA at this time, slaves would participate in 'cake walks' where couples would perform a dance mocking the mannerisms of their masters. The most graceful couple would receive a cake as a prize. From this, the expression 'a piece of cake' started being used to describe something that was easy to achieve.

## Examples

"I'm sure the test next week will be **a piece of cake** for me. I've been studying for weeks!"

"The football match today was **a piece of cake!** All the best players in the other team had injuries so we scored 6 goals!"

**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 **a piece of cake!**"





# Under the weather

## Meaning

To feel ill/unwell.

## Origin

This idiom has nautical (sailing) origins. Sailors and passengers aboard ships often became seasick during storms and bad weather, when the boat would rock back and forth. Anyone who felt seasick would be sent below the deck to the bottom of the ship where the rocking was less noticeable. In other words, they were sent under the deck and away from the weather, which is how the phrase 'under the weather' was created. It is now used when people feel unwell for any reason, not just from seasickness.



## Examples

“Hi John, it’s Simon. Sorry but I can’t come to work today – I’m a bit **under the weather.**”

“I’ve been feeling a little **under the weather** today. I had to wait outside in the rain for 2 hours last night and I think I may have caught a cold.”

**Carley:** “Are you coming to the party tonight?”

**Robyn:** “I don’t think I should. I’ve been feeling **under the weather** all week.”

# Play it by ear

## Meaning

To decide what to do in a situation as it develops, instead of planning ahead or keeping to previously arranged plans.

## Origin

This idiom is related to music. When musicians try to play a song from memory or try to reproduce something they have heard without using music sheets, they need to use their ears to check if what they are playing is correct – in other words, they “play it by ear”. Nowadays, this phrase is used when you are in any situation and you need to improvise.

## Examples

“My brother is coming to visit this weekend so I’m not sure I’ll be able to meet you on Saturday. Can we **play it by ear**?”

“I don’t have time to prepare for my meeting tomorrow. I’m just going to have to **play it by ear** and see what happens.”

**Sue:** “I’m really bored. When can we leave?”

**Jen:** “Let’s **play it by ear** - I think they’re going to do the birthday cake soon so the party might get better.”

**Rob:** “Should we play tennis tomorrow?”

**Ian:** “I’d love to but I think it’s going to rain. Let’s just **play it by ear**.”



# Bite the bullet

## Meaning

To make yourself do something difficult or unpleasant that you have been avoiding doing.

## Origin

This idiom is believed to have originated during the American Civil War. When wounded soldiers needed to be operated on and there were no painkillers available, army doctors often gave the patients a bullet to bite on to focus their attention on the biting instead of the painful operation. Patients could either choose to die or 'bite the bullet' and face the extremely painful operation!



## Examples

"I can't believe I haven't found a new job yet. I'm going to have to **bite the bullet** and sell my car so I can pay my rent!"

"My teacher knew I cheated so I had to **bite the bullet** and admit it."

**Ben:** "When are you going to break up with Fiona? I know you don't love her anymore."

**Rory:** "I know. You're right. I just don't want to hurt her feelings."

**Ben:** "The longer you leave it, the harder it will be. You just need to **bite the bullet** and tell her!"

# Sleep on it

## Meaning

To spend time (usually at least a day) thinking about something carefully before making a decision.

## Origin

It is not known where this idiom originated from but people often believe that if they do not have the solution to a problem straight away, a good sleep will help. Some people think that the brain continues to solve problems while we are sleeping and when you wake up the solution will just be there! However, others believe that we can make better decisions after sleep as the brain is 'fresh'.

## Examples

**Mr Davis:** "So Tom, would you like to work here?"

**Tom:** "I'm not sure. Can I **sleep on it** and let you know tomorrow?"

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

**Kate:** "That's it, I've had enough. I'm resigning!"

**Lisa:** "Kate, you're really angry at the moment. Why don't you go home and **sleep on it** before you make any sudden decisions."



## Test yourself

Can you complete these sentences with the idioms above?

(Try to complete them without looking first!)

1.

I don't know why I'm in such a bad mood today. I must have \_\_\_\_\_.

2.

You don't need to give me an answer now. Why don't you \_\_\_\_\_ and tell me when you're ready?

3.

I'm caught \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_.  
If I stay in this job I will be really unhappy but if I quit my job I might not find a new one for months. I don't know what to do.

4.

I don't know if I'll have time to visit you tomorrow. Do you mind if we \_\_\_\_\_?

5.

I thought the exam would be \_\_\_\_\_ but it was really difficult. I wish I'd studied more.

6.

I can't believe you \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. You really ruined the surprise!

7.

I tried to convince John to buy a blue shirt but \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. He only ever wears white shirts!

8.

I hate going to the dentist but I've had a bad toothache for a week. I guess I'll have to \_\_\_\_\_ and book an appointment.

9.

I'm feeling a bit \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. I think I've caught a cold.

10.

Some people love listening to classical music but it's not my \_\_\_\_\_.

Answers:  
1. got up on the wrong side of the bed – 2. sleep on it – 3. between a rock and a hard place  
4. play it by ear – 5. a piece of cake – 6. let the cat out of the bag – 7. a leopard can't change its spots  
8. bite the bullet – 9. under the weather – 10. cup of tea