

Idioms

Description: Like most languages, English people often use idioms to give ‘colour’ to the meaning of what they are saying. Some are amusing, some critical. Some have an obvious origin while the origin of others is obscure.

Here is a list of some more-or-less common English idioms (*=studied one Club morning)

Idiom	Meaning
Achilles' heel	A small but fatal weakness in spite of overall strength.
Actions speak louder than words*	What you do is more important than what you say.
Add insult to injury	Make a bad situation worse.
Alive and kicking*	A person who is available and able, though may have been overlooked
All ears	Eagerly and attentively waiting to hear something.
All thumbs	Clumsy, awkward.
Another string to your bow	An extra skill that you can use if you don't succeed using your main skill
Arm and a leg	Very expensive.
Around the clock	When something happens at all times of the day and night.
As easy as pie*	Very easy
As rare as hen's teeth*	Never exists; never happens
At the drop of a hat	Without hesitation, with the smallest encouragement.
Back to the drawing board*	Start again from the beginning.
Back to the grindstone	Return to a hard and long-lasting task.
Back to square one*	Start again from the beginning.
A bad apple	A person who creates problems for their group
Bail out (or <i>bale</i> out)*	To relieve the debt of someone else (usually short-term) OR to leave or escape a harmful or difficult situation.
Ball is in their court	The responsibility for the next action is now someone else's.
Barking up the wrong tree*	Looking in the wrong place / Following the wrong reasoning.
Basket case	Someone made ineffective by panic or stress.
Beat about (or around) the bush	Avoid saying what you mean, because it is uncomfortable
Bed of roses	A situation or activity that is comfortable or easy.
Bees' knees	Outstandingly good, excellent, or wonderful.
Benefit of the doubt	Trust what someone says even if it seems unlikely.
Best of both worlds*	An ideal situation that achieves two objectives.
Best thing since sliced bread	A new person or thing that's really great or amazing
Between a rock and a hard place	A situation having two equally unsatisfactory options.
Better late than never	Better to achieve something late than never to achieve it.
Big head	Someone who has a high opinion of their own intelligence.
Big mouth	Someone who talks too much, often making exaggerated claims or revealing private information.
Bird brain	A person who acts stupidly, particularly by not thinking logically through an issue.
Bite off more than you can chew*	To take on more responsibility than one can manage.
Bite the bullet	To start an undesirable task in order to reach a desirable or unavoidable end.
Bite the dust	To die / to get destroyed
Bitter pill to swallow	A situation or information that is unpleasant but must be accepted
Blessing in disguise	A good thing that seemed bad at first.
Blow hot and cold*	To keep changing from one attitude to the opposite attitude
Blow off steam	To reduce frustration by harmless, strong physical action.
Bob's your uncle	The last phrase in a series of instructions (indicating success).

Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth	Describes someone who comes from a wealthy or favoured family – who has an unfairly advantaged start in life
Bread and butter	How you obtain the basic necessities of life.
Break even	To neither gain nor lose money.
Break the bank	To pay more than you can afford
Break the ice	To do something to help friendship develop.
Bring home the bacon	To earn enough money to support a family
As broad as it's long	Two options are equally selectable
Budge up	To make room for someone to sit down.
Bundle (or bag) of nerves*	Very nervous
Burn the midnight oil	To keep working very late at night.
Bury your head in the sand	To try to avoid a bad situation by pretending that it doesn't exist / it won't happen
Butter up	To flatter someone so as to get a benefit from the person
Butterflies in your stomach*	To feel very nervous
By the skin of your teeth	To succeed, but avoiding disaster only by a very small margin.
By the way*	Incidental to the main point
Call a spade a spade*	To speak the truth, even if it will seem blunt or rude.
Call it a day	Stop working on something.
Can of worms*	A problem that, if you try to solve it, will lead to many more
Can't judge a book by its cover	It's unwise to make a decision based on the first (or outward) appearance
Can't see the wood for trees	Unable to appreciate the whole situation clearly because you're looking too closely at small details.
Chalk and cheese	So different that no sensible comparison is possible
Champ / chomp at the bit	To show impatience or frustration when delayed.
Chasing rainbows	Pursuing a goal that is unattainable
Chew the cud	To consider a problem for a long time, oneself or verbally with others
Chink in one's armour	A small weakness in a person's viewpoint/defences.
Chockablock*	So close together it's impossible to move
The calm before the storm*	A problem is coming, but hasn't arrived yet
Clam up	To suddenly stop giving information (verbally).
Clear as mud	Not clear at all.
Close-fisted	Mean / reluctant to spend money
Cold feet*	When, due to nervousness, you no longer want to do what you'd planned / promised.
Cold turkey	The suffering a person experiences when they stop a (usually bad) behaviour.
Come rain or shine	Whether the situation is positive or not
Cool as a cucumber	Very calm and relaxed.
Cost a bomb*	Very expensive.
Cost an arm and a leg*	Very expensive.
Couch potato*	A lazy person – they don't exercise, but watch a lot of TV
Couldn't care less	Completely lacking in interest.
Crocodile tears	Fake tears or drama tears; fake crying.
Curiosity killed the cat	Being inquisitive about other people's affairs may get you into trouble
Cut off your nose to spite your face	To pursue revenge in a way that would damage oneself more than the object of one's anger.
Cut to the chase	To start speaking directly about an important issue (instead of speaking indirectly or with too much unnecessary detail)
Cutting corners	Doing something poorly in order to save time or money
Dig one's heels in	To strongly oppose a process, action or motion.

Dig one's own grave	To act in a way that's likely to cause problems for oneself.
Dog's breakfast	A mess.
(in the) Doldrums*	Being depressed or lethargic
Don't count chickens before they hatch	Don't make plans for something that may not happen; alternatively, don't make an assumption about something that does not have a definitively predetermined outcome.
Don't give up the day job*	Don't try an action at which you may fail, unless you have a reserve action, even if that's not so exciting
Don't run before you can walk	Don't try something difficult before you've understood/practiced the basic principles.
Down to earth	Someone who's practical and sensible.
Easy does it	Do something slowly/carefully.
Eat like a bird	To eat very little food
Eat like a horse	To eat a lot of food
Egg on your/their face*	To be embarrassed as the result of an action
Elephant in the room	An obvious, pressing issue left unaddressed due to its sensitive/unwelcome nature.
Eleventh hour	At the last minute; the latest time before it is too late.
Elvis has left the building	The event is over; there's nothing more to see
Every cloud has a silver lining*	There's a good aspect to every bad situation.
Eyes in the back of your head	Being aware of what's happening without looking.
Face like thunder*	The appearance of someone who is very angry
Face the music	Accept the consequences of an action.
Find your feet	Begin to get accustomed to a new experience.
Finger in every pie	Be involved in many different things/activities (a criticism).
Fish out of water	Lacking confidence in an unfamiliar situation.
Fit as a fiddle*	Good physical health.
Flogging a dead horse	To uselessly continue when there's no possibility of success.
Fly in the ointment	A minor drawback or imperfection, especially one that was not at first apparent, that detracts from something positive, spoils something valuable, or is a source of annoyance.
Fly on the wall	To watch / listen to other people without them noticing.
Flying colours*	with distinction / successfully, without any negative points
Fob someone off*	Attempt to satisfy someone's desire with a sub-standard response.
Food for thought	Worth considering.
For a song	Almost free; very cheap.
Fork out	To pay for something (usually something expensive).
From A to Z	Covering a complete range; comprehensively.
From scratch	To make from original ingredients; to start from the beginning with no prior preparation.
Full of beans	Energetic, lively or enthusiastic.
Gain ground	To make progress
Get a grip	Calm down.
Get a taste your own medicine	Act on your own advice and see what difficulties occur.
Get bent out of shape	To take offense; to get worked up, aggravated or annoyed.
Get into deep water	To be in trouble (usually due to a bad decision).
Get on your nerves*	Something/someone that annoys or irritates you.
Get one's knickers in a twist	To become unnecessarily upset over a trivial matter.
Get out of hand*	Get out of control.
Get over something	To recover from a traumatic experience.
Get something out of your system	Do the thing you've been wanting to do, so you can move on.
Get the drift*	To understand the general idea, but not the details

Get to the point	To reach the main idea/issue in a conversation or writing
Get your act together*	Improve your behaviour. Start organising yourself.
Get your goat	To be irritated by someone.
Give it all you've got*	Apply all your energy, time, money, etc. to achieve something
Give them the cold shoulder	To refuse to talk to someone.
Glad to see the back of ...	Happy you no longer have to deal with a person/problem.
Glass ceiling	A real, but not obvious, barrier to career progress.
Go down that road	To take a particular course of action.
Go Dutch	Everyone pays for their own meal in a restaurant
Go like hot cakes*	Very easy to sell (or give)
Go over/through it with a fine toothcomb	To examine something very carefully, usually to see if there's a problem or to make sure there isn't
Go the extra mile*	To do more than is expected or is needed
Go with the flow	To relax and accept whatever other people are doing.
Grasp the nettle	To tackle a problem, boldly, despite any difficulties, complexities or short-term adverse consequences.
The grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)*	what you don't have seems to better than what you do have ... even though that probably isn't true
Green fingers	Good at gardening.
Grist to the mill	Experience, material or knowledge that will help an activity
Guilty secret	Something that you are embarrassed about liking.
Have a blast	To have a good time; to enjoy oneself.
Have all your Christmases come at once	To have extreme good fortune.
Have eyes bigger than one's stomach	To have asked for, or taken, more of something (especially food) than one is actually capable of handling (or eating).
Head in the clouds*	Out of touch with the everyday world and, thus, unrealistic
Head in the sand	Deliberately ignoring a truth that isn't likeable
Head over heels	Be smitten, infatuated.
Head start	Having an advantage over others when an activity starts.
Heard it through the grapevine	To learn something through gossip, hearsay or a rumour.
Hit the books	To study (from written material), especially for an exam
Hit the ceiling/roof*	To become enraged, possibly as an over-reaction.
Hit the nail on the head*	Completely right about something.
Hit the road*	To start a journey.
Hit the sack/sheets/hay*	To go to bed; to go to sleep.
Hit the spot*	To be particularly pleasing or appropriate; to be just right.
Hold all the cards	Have control over everything important.
Hold your horses	Wait. Slow down.
Hook, line and sinker	To be completely absorbed by something or someone, often as the result of a deception.
Hot potato	A controversial issue or situation that is awkward or unpleasant to deal with.
In hot water	In serious trouble
Icing on the cake*	An attractive, but not necessary, addition (a bonus)
In the black	Making more money than your costs / having a positive balance in a bank account
In the red	In debt / having a negative balance in a bank account
If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen	Please don't interfere/participate if this activity makes you nervous.
Ignorance is bliss	It's better not to know the facts.
It's not rocket science	It's not complicated.
It takes 2 to tango	An activity can't be successful unless the 2 people involved

	agree with each other
Jump ship*	To leave a job, organization, or activity suddenly.
Jump the gun	To start something before it is prudent or permitted; to act too hastily.
Keep your chin up	Don't get discouraged; stay strong in a challenging situation.
Kickback	A bribe
Kick the bucket	A euphemism for dying or death.
Kick the habit	To stop engaging in a habitual practice.
Kill two birds with one stone	To accomplish two different tasks at the same time and/or with a single action.
Knuckle down	To work seriously at a task, especially when it would be easier not to do so
Last straw*	Something that prevents you being patient any longer.
Let the cat out of the bag	To reveal a secret.
Let the dust settle	To allow time for a situation to become calm after something exciting or unusual has happened
Lightning fast*	Very fast
Lightning never strikes the same place twice*	An encouragement given when a problem has passed and won't happen again
Like a cat on hot bricks*	To be very nervous, especially when demonstrated physically
Like pulling hens' teeth	Having difficulty in getting a person or item to act in a desired fashion; reference to an impossible task.
Like water off a duck's back*	Advice/instructions that are completely ignored
Lit up like a Christmas tree	Very brightly illuminated or dressed.
Living hand to mouth	Only having enough money to survive at a basic level
Loaded	Describes someone who is rich (even if this isn't obvious)
Look a gift horse in the mouth	To find fault with something that was received as a gift.
Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves	If you carefully limit your small spending, you'll soon build up a large amount of money
Loose cannon*	A person who is uncontrollable and unpredictable but likely to cause damage to the group of which they are a member.
Lose touch*	To cease to be in communication
Lose your touch*	An ability or talent you once had, but that you've now lost.
Lose your nerve*	When you can't do something due to nervousness.
Make a long story short	Tell something briefly.
Make a mountain out of a molehill*	Exaggerate the severity of a situation.
Make ends meet	Getting enough money to pay the bills, but with nothing more
Make matters worse	Make a problem more difficult.
Make waves	To change a situation (for good or bad)
Many moons ago	A long time in the past.
Method to (one's) madness	Despite one's seemingly random approach, there is actually orderly structure or logic to it.
Midas touch	Able to easily make money
A mine of useful information	Someone with a lot of useful knowledge.
Miss the boat*	It's too late (usually for something desirable).
My neck of the woods	The place (or nearby) where I grew up.
Nail your colours to the mast*	To defiantly display, and intend to keep, your opinions/beliefs
Neck and neck	When two things are equally likely to succeed
Needle in a haystack*	Something that is impossible or extremely difficult to find
Nervous wreck*	Someone rendered ineffective by their nervousness
It never rains but it pours	One bad event is always followed by others

Nip (something) in the bud	To stop something at an early stage, before it can develop into something worse (especially an obstacle or frustration).
No pain, no gain	You have to work for what you want.
Not one's cup of tea	Not the type of thing the person likes.
Not out of the woods yet	Making progress although there are still difficulties
Off one's rocker / trolley	Crazy, demented, out of one's mind, in a confused or befuddled state of mind, senile.
Off the hook	To escape a situation of responsibility or obligation, or, less frequently, danger.
Off the top of my head	My immediate answer, given without much thinking
Olive branch	An offer of peace in a troubled situation/relationship
On cloud 9*	Very happy & contented (because of some news)
On the ball	Appreciates the issues and is alert / attentive.
Once in a blue moon*	Very rarely.
Out of the frying pan, into the fire*	An escape from a difficult situation that leads to something worse
Over the hill	Past the age of peak ability (physical or mental)
Over the moon	To be excited and happy
Own goal	Something done accidentally that's negative / bad for yourself or your own team.
Packed like sardines	A crowd of people in a small space
Part and parcel	An essential component of something.
Passed away	Died.
A penny for your thoughts	An invitation to a quiet person to share their preoccupation
Piece of cake*	Something that's easy to do.
Pigs might fly*	That's never going to happen.
Pitch in	To contribute (give) – usually money or ideas
Play it by ear	Doing an activity without a detailed plan, but responding to each event at the time of that event
Pop one's clogs	A euphemism for dying or death.
Pot calling the kettle black*	Used when someone making an accusation is equally as guilty as those being accused.
Pour oil on troubled waters	To calm a dispute
Pull oneself together	To recover control of one's emotions. Calm down.
Pull out all the stops	Do everything possible to succeed; keep nothing in reserve
Pull somebody's leg*	To tease or joke by telling a lie.
Push the boundaries	To act at the limit of what's legally or socially acceptable.
Pushing up daisies	A euphemism for dying or death.
Put all your eggs in one basket*	Direct all your effort/resources to attempt something risky
Put the cart before the horse*	To do, understand or plan, something in the wrong sequence
Put the cat among the pigeons*	To create a disturbance and cause trouble.
Put two and two together*	To guess the truth from your observations
Practice makes perfect*	To achieve a good result, keep practising
Raining cats and dogs*	Raining very hard or strongly.
Rags to riches	To go having little to having lots (usually money)
Raise the stakes	To increase a possible benefit and, thus, the increased undesirability of failure
Raring to go	Very eager to get started.
Right as rain	Perfect, absolutely correct or everything in order.
The right lines	Close to being correct
Right on your doorstep	Very close to where you live
Rings a bell	Half recall a forgotten experience or knowledge.

Rock the boat*	Say or do something that causes a problem or disturbance.
Rule of thumb	A procedure that is proved by experience, but not by science.
A run for their money	To make someone work hard for a benefit/success
Sailing close to the wind*	Behaving in a manner only just acceptable/legal
Sandwich short of a picnic	Lacking intelligence.
Salt of the earth	A good and honest person on whom you can rely
See eye to eye	Full agreement between two people.
Shed light on something	To give some information that helps to make clear.
Shell out	To pay for something
Show your true colours*	To reveal your genuine opinion, often after seeming to favour the opposite opinion (i.e. you were 'showing false colours')
Sit on the fence*	To neither agree nor disagree.
Sit tight	To deliberately do nothing while waiting for news or for a challenging situation to pass.
Sleep on it	To delay making a decision for a short while.
A slice of the cake*	A share in a benefit that other people are getting
A smart cookie	A person who behaves wisely
Smell a rat	To suspect a situation isn't as positive as it first seemed.
Snowed under*	To have so much to do that you can't do any more
So far, so good	Things have gone well until now (but I'm uncertain of the future).
Spanner in the works	To disrupt, foil, or cause problems to one's plan, activity, or project.
Spare tire*	An oversized waistline
Speak of the devil	The person we were just talking about showed up!
Speaks volumes*	Used when some non-verbal behaviour gives an observer a lot of information
Spend a penny	Urinate
Spice things up	Make a situation more exciting
Spill the beans	To reveal someone's secret.
Splash out	To spend a lot of money (usually on multiple things).
Stab someone in the back	To betray someone you'd previously supported.
Steal someone's thunder	To reveal someone's ideas or information before they can, typically in order to look better at that person's expense
Sticks out like a sore thumb	Something that is clearly out of place.
Sticky fingers	Describe someone who steals other people's belongings
Stone's throw	Nearby.
A storm in a teacup*	Unnecessary anger/worry about a minor problem
A storm is brewing	Trouble is coming
Straw that broke the camel's back*	The final (but small) event that led to a change of decision.
Sweet tooth	Likes sweet foods/drinks.
Take (or grab) the bull by the horns*	To deal bravely and decisively with a difficult or dangerous situation, especially when others might have avoided it.
Take a shine	To develop a liking or fondness for someone or something.
Take it with a pinch of salt*	Doubt the accuracy of what you've heard.
Take on board	Listen to advice and to think about acting on it.
Take the biscuit	To be particularly bad or objectionable.
Take to heart	Listen to advice and plan to act on it
Take with a grain of salt	To not take what someone says too seriously; to treat someone's words with a degree of scepticism.
A taste of your own medicine	Someone who has given an unpleasant experience another person must now experience it themselves

That's the way the cookie crumbles*	The result of an action that couldn't be controlled; you must accept that result without complaint
Thinking outside the box*	Solving problems by not limiting yourself to the conventional approach(es)
Through thick and thin	In both good and bad times.
Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones	Someone who is vulnerable to criticism regarding a certain issue should not criticize others about the same issue.
Throw the baby out with the bathwater	To discard, especially inadvertently, something valuable while in the process of removing or rejecting something unwanted.
Thumb one's nose	To express scorn or disregard.
Tide over*	Make a small amount last until you can get some more
Time flies when you're having fun	You don't notice how long something lasts when it's fun
Tip of the iceberg	A small part of something much bigger
Toe the line*	To keep to the group's policies / rules
Top drawer*	Of the highest quality
Touch a raw nerve*	To upset someone, usually accidentally, by talking about an issue to which they are very sensitive.
A tough nut to crack	Someone who is difficult to persuade or a situation that can't easily be changed
Trip the light fantastic	To dance.
Turn over a new leaf*	To change one's behaviour (in a positive way)
Turn up like a bad penny	To re-appear when unwelcome or unwanted
Twist someone's arm	To overcome someone's reluctance by persuasion
Two a penny	Cheap or common
Under the sun	Anywhere
Under my thumb / ... the thumb	Under my control / ... or under someone else's control
Under the weather*	Feeling sick or poorly
Up in the air	It's uncertain what decision will be made
Up the ante	To raise the stakes (see above!)
Walk on air	To be excited and happy
I wasn't (they weren't) born yesterday*	I'm not/they aren't gullible enough to believe you
Weather the storm	To endure a difficulty
We'll cross that bridge when we come to it	Let's not talk about that problem yet. Usually said when there are some other things that must be addressed first
Wild goose chase*	A frustrating or lengthy activity that accomplishes little
A win-win situation*	An action that benefits two groups/persons, although in different ways
Wolf something down	To eat (food) greedily
Wrap your head around it	Understand something complicated.
You can say that again*	That's true, I fully agree.
You can't have it both ways*	It's not possible to have 2 incompatible things
You can't have your cake and eat it!*	It's not possible to have 2 incompatible things
Your guess is as good as mine*	I have no idea.