



Common English Idioms

Idioms are phrases or expressions with a figurative meaning. In other words, their meaning should not be taken literally; rather, idioms use metaphor to express an idea.

It is generally unwise to use idioms in your academic writing, as they often come across as cliché and informal. However, you are likely to encounter many idioms in your reading.

There are too many idioms in English to list here, but below are some of the most common English idioms. You may wish to purchase a dictionary of idioms that you can refer to when you encounter an unfamiliar idiom.

A dime a dozen: common

Finding a good bass player is difficult, but guitar players are a dime a dozen.

Adding insult to injury: making a bad situation even worse

Jamal was in a bad enough mood already, but Orville added insult to injury by mocking him.

All bark and no bite: seemingly assertive/aggressive but actually harmless

Dana's loud voice makes her seem threatening, but she's all bark and no bite.

All of a sudden: suddenly

I was walking to class when all of a sudden a dog ran out in front of me.

Back to square one/back to the drawing board: having to start over from the beginning

When their experiment failed to produce expected results, they were back to square one.

Barking up the wrong tree: pursuing something unattainable

If you're trying to convince me to change my mind, you're barking up the wrong tree.

Beating a dead horse: continuing to discuss an issue that has already been decided

Stop beating a dead horse! We made our decision a long time ago.

Beating around the bush: not speaking directly about something



Stop beating around the bush and just tell me whether you stole my backpack.

Being between a rock and a hard place: having to decide between two bad options

We're between a rock and a hard place: either we spend money on a lawyer or we try to defend ourselves in court.

Biting off more than you can chew: taking on more responsibilities than one can manage

Taking difficult courses is good for you, but don't bite off more than you can chew.

Biting the hand that feeds: harming someone who has offered or is offering support

For candidates to criticize the sponsors donating money to their campaigns is like biting the hand that feeds them.

Break a leg: good luck!

You're about to give your performance of King Lear? Break a leg!

Coming down to the wire: nearing the deadline or final decision

The team's project was coming down to the wire: all they needed to do was proofread the paper.

Cost an arm and a leg: expensive

This tuxedo looks good, but it cost me an arm and a leg.

Counting one's chickens before they hatch: making a premature assumption

It may look like you'll win the election, but don't count your chickens before they hatch.

Crossing one's fingers: hoping something will happen

I'm crossing my fingers that you'll win the spelling bee!

Crying over spilled milk: complaining about an insignificant loss or failure

Stop crying over spilled milk. I know that was your favorite phone, but you can get a new one.

Crying wolf: raising a false alarm

When Vassar said there was an emergency, we all ran outside, but it turned out he was just crying wolf.



Cutting to the chase: getting to the point

Cut to the chase and tell me: do we need a diversity policy or not?

Driving up the wall: annoying someone

Your constant interruptions are driving me up the wall!

Drop in the bucket: a small, insignificant part

Earth may seem big to us, but to the entire universe, it's just a drop in the bucket.

Every dog has its day: everyone has the opportunity for success or good luck at some point

Things may look rough for you now, but just remember that every dog has its day.

Flash in the pan: something that works well at first but cannot be repeated or sustained; a fad

The store's early success was just a flash in the pan, and it went out of business soon after.

Going out on a limb: doing or saying something risky

I may be going out on a limb here, but I really think we should hire more tech support.

Going the extra mile: doing more than the minimum

Andy only needed to work for three hours, but he went the extra mile and worked for four hours.

Good Samaritan: someone who altruistically helps others

When my brother's car broke down on the highway, a Good Samaritan helped him fix it.

Having the ball in one's court: being in charge of making a decision

The ball is in your court: do you want to stay here in the safe room or go look for help?

Hitting the nail on the head: describing or doing something exactly right

He hit the nail on the head when he said the Civil War was the bloodiest conflict in the U.S.

Icing on the cake: something extra

We already knew which TV we wanted, so finding out it was on sale was just icing on the cake.



In the bag: guaranteed (usually victory)

After Ricky passed the car in first place, he had the race in the bag.

Judging a book by its cover: assuming something based on outside appearance

Pete may look like a weakling, but don't judge a book by its cover—he's actually a pro boxer.

Jumping/hopping on the bandwagon: joining a popular trend

At first, Rob was skeptical about the popular new album, but he eventually jumped on the bandwagon and bought it.

Keeping an eye on something/someone: watching something or someone very carefully

Keep an eye on Del—he's quite the prankster.

Knowing the ropes: knowing how to do something

Lonnie has been working here for twenty years, so he definitely knows the ropes.

Letting the cat out of the bag: revealing a secret

Jerry's party was going to be a surprise, but Stacy let the cat out of the bag.

Off the record: said in confidence

This is purely off the record, but I hate our company's new policy against tennis shoes.

One's own flesh and blood: one's family

Stay close to your friends, but stay even closer to your own flesh and blood.

On the fence: undecided

I'm still on the fence about whether I should take organic chemistry next semester.

On the same page: in agreement

We shouldn't make a decision until everyone is on the same page.

Out of the blue: suddenly and unexpectedly

As I was crossing the street, a pickup truck came speeding down the road out of the blue.



Over the top: excessive

A practical joke every now and then is harmless, but Emily's prank was over the top.

Passing the buck: shifting responsibility to someone else

The mayor, hesitant to make a decision on the new law, passed the buck to the city council.

Piece of cake: something easy

That test was a piece of cake—I got an A without even studying!

Playing devil's advocate: pretending to oppose something in order to show the weaknesses of it

I agree with you, but let me play devil's advocate here: won't this cost the city a lot of money?

Preaching to the choir: speaking or writing persuasively to people who already agree

Trying to convince environmentalists that we need to save trees is preaching to the choir.

Pulling the plug: ending a process

After months of disappointing polls, the candidate pulled the plug on his campaign.

Pulling one's leg: tricking or playing a joke

We thought the lodge might be haunted, but it was just Josh pulling our leg.

Putting all of one's eggs in one basket: investing entirely in just one possibility or option

You should invest in multiple stocks. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

Putting the cart before the horse: doing things in the wrong order

Ordering textbooks before you know what classes you're going to take is like putting the cart before the horse.

Rule of thumb: a simple, practical principle for doing something

A good rule of thumb when revising your papers is to read them out loud to yourself.

Running out of steam: using up all of one's energy



April was doing great at the beginning of the race, but she quickly ran out of steam.

Saved by the bell: saved by a timely intervention

Randal hadn't studied for the exam, but he was saved by the bell when the professor rescheduled it at the last minute.

Slap on the wrist: a minor punishment or scolding

Since this was Hank's first time speeding, the police officer just gave him a slap on the wrist.

Spilling the beans: revealing a secret

Well, did you or did you not steal his wallet? Spill the beans!

Starting from scratch: starting over from the very beginning

When their experiment failed to produce expected results, the scientists had to start from scratch.

Starting/getting off on the wrong foot: getting a bad start to a relationship

Dorothy and Sophia started off on the wrong foot when they first met, but they soon became best friends.

Stealing someone's thunder: taking the credit for someone else's accomplishments; challenging one's authority

How dare you try to steal my thunder by pretending you thought of that idea?

The last straw: something in a series of annoyances that finally causes one to lose one's temper

Burke was doing a good job handling the lawyer's tough questions, but when the lawyer asked him to confess, that was the last straw.

The whole nine yards: everything

Bianca's birthday party had it all: cake, games, and balloons— the whole nine yards.

Tongue-in-cheek: not meant to be taken seriously; ironic

The movie we saw last night was a tongue-in-cheek parody of bad horror movies.

Under the weather: sick



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I'm feeling under the weather today; I think I should stay home.

Water under the bridge: a past event that should be forgotten

Sal, I know we had a nasty fight last summer, but that's water under the bridge.

When pigs fly: never

When Phil asked Dr. Brown if he could have extra credit, she replied, "Sure—when pigs fly!"