

Dictionary of English Idioms & Idiomatic Expressions

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An idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words, which can make them hard for ESL students and learners to understand. Here, we have a dictionary of 1059 English idiomatic expressions with definitions.

Please note that idioms marked with "✓✓" are more common and "✓" a little less common and with no mark much less common in North American circles.
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~ A ~

A bit much

If something is excessive or annoying, it is a bit much.

✓✓

A fool and his money are soon parted

This idiom means that people who aren't careful with their money spend it quickly. 'A fool and his money are easily parted' is an alternative form of the idiom.

A OK

If things are A OK, they are absolutely fine.

✓✓

A poor man's something

Something or someone that can be compared to something or someone else, but is not as good as a poor man's version; a writer who uses lots of puns but isn't very funny would be a poor man's Oscar Wilde.

A1

If something is A1, it is the very best or finest.

✓✓

Abide by a decision

If you abide by a decision, you accept it and comply with it, even though you might disagree with it.

✓✓

About face

If someone changes their mind completely, this is an about face. It can be used when companies, governments, etc, change their position on an issue.

✓✓

Above board

If things are done above board, they are carried out in a legal and proper manner.

✓✓

Achilles' heel

A person's weak spot is their Achilles' heel.

✓✓

Acid test

An acid test is something that proves whether something is good, effective, etc, or not.

Across the board

If something applies to everybody, it applies across the board.

✓✓

Against the Grain

If doing something goes against the grain, you're unwilling to do it because it contradicts what you believe in, but you have no real choice.

✓✓

Ahead of the pack

If you are ahead of the pack, you have made more progress than your rivals.

✓✓

Albatross around your neck

An albatross around, or round, your neck is a problem resulting from something you did that stops you from being successful.

✓

All and sundry

This idiom is a way of emphasizing 'all', like saying 'each and every one'.

✓

All hell broke loose

When all hell breaks loose, there is chaos, confusion and trouble.

✓✓

All over the place

If something is completely disorganized or confused, it is all over the place.

✓✓

All over the shop

If something is completely disorganized or confused, it is all over the shop.

✓

All skin and bone

If a person is very underweight, they are all skin and bone, or bones.

✓

All talk and no trousers

(UK) Someone who is all talk and no trousers, talks about doing big, important things, but doesn't take any action.

All the tea in China

If someone won't do something for all the tea in China, they won't do it no matter how much money they are offered.

✓✓

Alter ego

An alter ego is a very close and intimate friend. It is a Latin phrase that literally means 'other self'.

Ambulance chaser

A lawyer who encourages people who have been in accidents or become ill to sue for compensation is an ambulance chaser.

Amen

Some use 'Amen' or 'Amen to that' as a way of agreeing with something that has just been said.

✓✓

An old flame

An old flame is a person that somebody has had an emotional, usually passionate, relationship with, who is still looked on fondly and with affection.

✓

Ants in your pants

✓

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|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| | If someone has ants in their pants, they are agitated or excited about something and can't keep still. | |
| Apple of your eye | Something or, more often, someone that is very special to you is the 'apple of your' eye. | ✓ |
| Arm and a leg | If something costs an arm and a leg, it is very expensive. | ✓✓ |
| As cold as ice | This idiom can be used to describe a person who does not show any emotion. | ✓ |
| As cool as a cucumber | If someone is as cool as a cucumber, they don't get worried by anything. | ✓✓ |
| As mad as a hatter | This simile means that someone is crazy or behaves very strangely. In the past many people who made hats went insane because they had a lot of contact with mercury. | |
| As neat as a new pin | This idiom means tidy and clean. | |
| As one man | If people do something as one man, then they do it at exactly the same time or in complete agreement. | ✓ |
| As the actress said to the bishop | (UK) This idiom is used to highlight a sexual reference, deliberate or accidental. | |
| As the crow flies | This idiom is used to describe the shortest possible distance between two places. | ✓ |
| At a loose end | (UK) If you are at a loose end, you have spare time but don't know what to do with it. | |
| At death's door | If someone looks as if they are at death's door, they look seriously unwell and might actually be dying. | ✓ |
| At loggerheads | If people are at loggerheads, they are arguing and can't agree on anything. | ✓✓ |
| At loose ends | (USA) If you are at a loose end, you have spare time but don't know what to do with it. | |
| At the coalface | If you work at the coalface, you deal with the real problems and issues, rather than sitting in an office discussing things in a detached way. | |
| At the drop of a hat | If you would do something at the drop of a hat, you'd do it immediately. | ✓✓ |
| At the end of your rope | (USA) If you are at the end of your rope, you are at the limit of your patience or endurance. | ✓✓ |
| At the end of your tether | (UK) If you are at the end of your tether, you are at the limit of your patience or endurance. | ✓ |
| Avowed intent | If someone makes a solemn or serious promise publicly to attempt to reach a certain goal, this is their avowed intent. | |
| Awe inspiring | Something or someone that is awe inspiring amazes people in a slightly frightening but positive way. | ✓✓ |
| AWOL | AWOL stands for Absent Without Leave, or Absent Without Official Leave. Originally a military term, it is used when someone has gone missing without telling anyone or asking for permission. | ✓ |
| Axe to grind | If you have an axe to grind with someone or about something, you have a grievance, or resentment and you want to get revenge or sort it out. | ✓✓ |
| ~ B ~ | | |
| Babe in arms | | ✓ |

| | | |
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| | A babe in arms is a very young child, or a person who is very young to be holding a position. | ✓✓ |
| Babe in the woods | A babe in the woods is a naive, defenseless, young person. | ✓✓ |
| Baby boomer | A baby boomer is someone born during 1945-1965, a period when the population was growing fast. | ✓✓ |
| Baby boomer | (USA) A baby boomer is someone born during 1945-1965, a period when the population was growing fast. | ✓✓ |
| Back burner | If an issue is on the back burner, it is being given low priority. | ✓✓ |
| Back foot | (UK) If you are on your back foot, you are at a disadvantage and forced to be defensive of your position. | |
| Back the wrong horse | If you back the wrong horse, you give your support to the losing side in something. | ✓✓ |
| Back to square one | If you are back to square one, you have to start from the beginning again. | |
| Backseat driver | A backseat driver is an annoying person who is fond of giving advice to the person performing a task or doing something, especially when the advice is either wrong or unwelcome. | ✓✓ |
| Bad egg | A person who cannot be trusted is a bad egg. Good egg is the opposite. | ✓✓ |
| Bad taste in your mouth | If something leaves you with a bad taste in your mouth, you feel there is something wrong or bad about it. | ✓✓ |
| Bad workers always blame their tools | "A bad worker always blames their tools" - If somebody does a job badly or loses in a game and claims that they were let down by their equipment, you can use this to imply that this was not the case. | ✓ |
| Baker's dozen | A Baker's dozen is 13 rather than 12. | ✓✓ |
| Bald as a coot | A person who is completely bald is as bald as a coot. | |
| Ball is in your court | If the ball is in your court, it is up to you to make the next decision or step. | ✓✓ |
| Ballpark figure | A ballpark figure is a rough or approximate number (guesstimate) to give a general idea of something, like a rough estimate for a cost, etc. | ✓✓ |
| Banana republic | Banana republic is a term used for small countries that are dependent on a single crop or resource and governed badly by a corrupt elite. | ✓ |
| Baptism of fire | A baptism of fire was a soldier's first experience of shooting. Any unpleasant experience undergone, usually where it is also a learning experience, is a baptism of fire. | ✓ |
| Bar fly | A bar fly is a person who spends a lot of time drinking in different bars and pubs. | ✓ |
| Barefaced liar | A barefaced liar is one who displays no shame about lying even if they are exposed. | ✓✓ |
| Bark is worse than their bite | Someone whose bark is worse than their bite may well get angry and shout, but doesn't take action. | ✓✓ |
| Barking up the wrong tree | If you are barking up the wrong tree, it means that you have completely misunderstood something or are totally wrong. | ✓✓ |
| Barrel of laughs | | ✓✓ |

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| | If someone's a barrel of laughs, they are always joking and you find them funny. | ✓ |
| Basket case | If something is a basket case, it is so bad that it cannot be helped. | ✓ |
| Bat an eyelid | If someone doesn't bat an eyelid, they don't react or show any emotion when surprised, shocked, etc. | ✓ |
| Be that as it may | Be that as it may is an expression which means that, while you are prepared to accept that there is some truth in what the other person has just said, it's not going to change your opinions in any significant manner. | ✓✓ |
| Bean counter | A bean counter is an accountant. | ✓ |
| Beard the lion in his own den | If you confront a powerful or dangerous rival on their territory, you are bearding the lion in his own den. | |
| Beat about the bush | If someone doesn't say clearly what they mean and try to make it hard to understand, they are beating about (around) the bush. | ✓✓ |
| Beat it to death (see done it to death) | | |
| Beating a dead horse | (USA) If someone is trying to convince people to do or feel something without any hope of succeeding, they're beating a dead horse. This is used when someone is trying to raise interest in an issue that no-one supports anymore; beating a dead horse will not make it do any more work. | ✓✓ |
| Beauty is in the eye of the beholder | Beauty is in the eye of the beholder means that different people will find different things beautiful and that the differences of opinion don't matter greatly. | ✓✓ |
| Beck and call | Someone who does everything for you, no matter when you ask, is at your beck and call. | ✓✓ |
| Bedroom eyes | Someone with bedroom eyes has a sexy look in their eyes. | ✓ |
| Bee in your bonnet | If someone is very excited about something, they have a bee in their bonnet. | ✓ |
| Bee's Knees | If something is the bee's knees, it's outstanding or the best in its class. | |
| Beeline for | If you make a beeline for a place, you head there directly. | ✓✓ |
| Behind closed doors | If something happens away from the public eye, it happens behind closed doors. | ✓ |
| Behind someone's back | If you do something behind someone's back, you do it without telling them. | ✓✓ |
| Behind the times | Someone that is behind the times is old-fashioned and has ideas that are regarded as out-dated. | ✓✓ |
| Believe in the hereafter | A belief in the hereafter is a belief in the afterlife, or life after death. It is, therefore, associated with religions and the soul's journey to heaven or to hell, whichever way being just deserts for the person based on how they led their life. | ✓✓ |
| Below par | If something isn't up to standard, or someone isn't feeling or doing very well, they are below par. | ✓✓ |
| Below the belt | If someone says something that is cruel or unfair, it is below the belt, like the illegal punches in boxing. | ✓✓ |
| Bet your bottom dollar/Bet your life (you betcha!) | (USA) If you can bet your bottom dollar on something, you can be absolutely sure about it. | ✓✓ |
| Better safe than sorry | | ✓✓ |

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| | This idiom is used to recommend being cautious rather than taking a risk. | |
| Between a rock and a hard place | If you are caught between a rock and a hard place, you are in a position where you have to choose between unpleasant alternatives, and your choice might cause you problems; you will not be able to satisfy everyone. | ✓✓ |
| Between the devil and the deep blue sea. | If you are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, you are in a dilemma; a difficult choice. | ✓ |
| Between the lines | If you read between the lines, you find the real message in what you're reading or hearing, a meaning that is not available from a literal interpretation of the words. | ✓✓ |
| Beyond a shadow of a doubt | If something's beyond a shadow of a doubt, then absolutely no doubts remain about it. | ✓✓ |
| Beyond belief | If people behave in such a way that you find it almost impossible to accept that they actually did it, then you can say that their behaviour was beyond belief. | ✓✓ |
| Beyond our ken | If something's beyond your ken, it is beyond your understanding. | |
| Beyond the pale | If something's beyond the pale, it is too extreme to be acceptable morally or socially. | |
| Big Apple | (USA) The Big Apple is New York. | ✓ |
| Big bucks | If someone is making big bucks, they are making a lot of money. | ✓✓ |
| Big cheese | The big cheese is the boss. | ✓✓ |
| Big fish in a small pond | A big fish in a small pond is an important person in a small place or organization. | ✓ |
| Big hitter | A big hitter is someone who commands a lot of respect and is very important in their field. | ✓ |
| Bigger fish to fry | If you aren't interested in something because it isn't important to you and there are more important things for you to do, you have bigger fish to fry. | ✓✓ |
| Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush | 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' is a proverb meaning that it is better to have something that is certain than take a risk to get more, where you might lose everything. | ✓✓ |
| Bird's eye view | If you have a bird's eye view of something, you can see it perfectly clearly. | ✓✓ |
| Bird-brain | Someone who has a bird-brain, or is bird-brained, is stupid. | ✓✓ |
| Birds and the bees | If a child is taught about the birds and the bees, they are taught about sex. | ✓✓ |
| Birds of a feather flock together | This idiom means that people with similar interests will stick together. | ✓✓ |
| Birthday suit | If you are in your birthday suit, you are naked. | ✓✓ |
| Bit part | If someone has a small or unimportant role in something, they have a bit part. | |
| Bit player | A bit player has a small or unimportant role in something. | ✓ |
| Bite off more than you can chew | If you bite off more than you can chew, you take on more responsibilities than you can manage. 'Don't bite off more than you can chew' is often used to advise people against agreeing to more than they can handle. | ✓✓ |
| Bite the bullet | If you have to bite the bullet, you have to accept or face something unpleasant because it cannot be avoided. | ✓✓ |

- Bite the dust** ✓✓
This is a way of saying that somebody has died, especially if they are killed violently like a soldier in battle.
- Bits and bobs**
Bits and bobs are small, remnant articles and things- the same as odds and ends.
- Bitter end** ✓✓
If you do something to the bitter end, you do it to the very end, no matter how unsuccessful you are.
- Black and white** ✓✓
When it is very clear who or what is right and wrong, then the situation is black and white.
- Black as Newgate's knocker**
(UK) If things are as black as Newgate's knocker, they are very bad. Newgate was an infamous prison in England, so its door knocker meant trouble.
- Black hole** ✓
If there is a black hole in financial accounts, money has disappeared.
- Black sheep** ✓✓
Someone who is the black sheep doesn't fit into a group or family because their behaviour or character is not good enough.
- Blessing in disguise** ✓✓
If some bad luck or misfortune ultimately results in something positive, it's a blessing in disguise.
- Blind as a bat**
If you are in total darkness and can't see anything at all, you are as blind as a bat.
- Blood is thicker than water** ✓✓
This idiom means that family relationships are stronger than others.
- Blow a gasket** ✓
If you blow a gasket, you get very angry.
- Blow hot and cold** ✓✓
If you blow hot and cold on an idea, your attitude and opinion keeps changing; one minute you are for it, the next you are against.
- Blow the cobwebs away** ✓
If you blow the cobwebs away, you make sweeping changes to something to bring fresh views and ideas in.
- Blue-eyed boy**
Someone's blue-eyed boy is their favourite person.
- Bolt from the blue**
If something happens unexpectedly and suddenly, it is a bolt from the blue.
- Bone of contention** ✓✓
If there is an issue that always causes tension and arguments, it is a bone of contention.
- Bone to pick** ✓✓
If you have a bone to pick with someone, you are annoyed about something they have done and want to tell them how you feel.
- Born with a silver spoon in your mouth** ✓✓
If you are born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you are born into a rich family.
- Bottom line** ✓✓
In accountancy, the bottom line is net income, and is used idiomatically to mean the conclusion.
- Brass tacks** ✓✓
If you get down to brass tacks, you get down to the real business.
- Break a leg** ✓✓
This idiom is a way of wishing someone good luck.
- Break even** ✓✓
If you break even, you don't make any money, but you don't lose any either.
- Break the ice** ✓✓
When you break the ice, you get over any initial embarrassment or shyness when you meet someone for the first time and start conversing.
- Breathe your last**

- When you breathe your last, you die. ✓✓
- Brighten up the day** ✓✓
If something brightens up your day, something happens that makes you feel positive and happy all day long.
- Broad church**
If an organization is described as broad church, it is tolerant and accepting of different opinions and ideas.
- Broken his duck**
(UK) If you "Break your duck" you score for the first time.
- Brownie points** ✓✓
If you try to earn Brownie points with someone, you do things you know will please them.
- Brush under the carpet** ✓✓
If you brush something under the carpet, you are making an attempt to ignore it, or hide it from others.
- Bull in a China shop** ✓✓
If someone behaves like a bull in a China shop, they are clumsy when they should be careful.
- Bun in the oven** ✓✓
If a woman has a bun in the oven, she is pregnant.
- Burn the candle at both ends** ✓✓
Someone who burns the candle at both ends lives life at a hectic pace, doing things which are likely to affect their health badly.
- Burn the midnight oil** ✓✓
If you stay up very late working or studying, you burn the midnight oil.
- Bury the hatchet** ✓✓
If you bury the hatchet, you make peace with someone and stop arguing or fighting.
- Busman's holiday** ✓✓
A busman's holiday is when you spend your free time doing the same sort of work as you do in your job.
- By a hair's breadth**
If a person escapes from some danger by a hair's breadth, they only just managed to avoid it. The breadth is the thickness of a hair, so they probably feel somewhat lucky because the margin between success and what could easily have been failure was so close.
- By a long chalk**
(UK) If you beat somebody by a long chalk, you win easily and comfortably.
- By a whisker** ✓✓
If you do something by a whisker, you only just manage to do it and come very near indeed to failing.
- By hook or by crook** ✓✓
If you are prepared to do something by hook or by crook, you are willing to do anything, good or bad, to reach your goal.
- By the book** ✓✓
If you do something by the book, you do it exactly as you are supposed to.
- By the skin of your teeth** ✓✓
If you do something by the skin of your teeth, you only just manage to do it and come very near indeed to failing.
- By word of mouth** ✓✓
If something becomes known by word of mouth, it gets known by being talked about rather than through publicity or advertising, etc.

~ C ~

- Call a spade a spade** ✓✓
A person who calls a spade a spade is one speaks frankly and makes little or no attempt to conceal their opinions or to spare the feelings of their audience.
- Call the shots** ✓✓
If you call the shots, you are in charge and tell people what to do.
- Can of worms** ✓✓

- If an action can create serious problems, it is opening a can of worms. ✓✓
- Can't hold a candle**
If something can't hold a candle to something else, it is much worse. ✓✓
- Card up your sleeve** ✓
If you have a card up your sleeve, you have a surprise plan or idea that you are keeping back until the time is right.
- Carry the can**
If you carry the can, you take the blame for something, even though you didn't do it or are only partly at fault.
- Cash in your chips** ✓
If you cash in your chips, you sell something to get what profit you can because you think its value is going to fall. It can also mean 'to die'.
- Cast doubt on**
If you make other people not sure about a matter, then you have cast doubt on it.
- Cast your mind back**
If somebody tells you to cast your mind back on something, they want you to think about something that happened in the past, but which you might not remember very well, and to try to remember as much as possible.
- Cat's whiskers** ✓✓
Something excellent is the cat's whiskers.
- Catch as catch can**
This means that people should try to get something any way they can.
- Charity begins at home** ✓
This idiom means that family members are more important than anyone else, and should be the focus of a person's efforts.
- Chase rainbows** ✓✓
If someone chases rainbows, they try to do something that they will never achieve.
- Chew the cud** ✓
If you chew the cud, you think carefully about something.
- Chew the fat** ✓✓
If you chew the fat with someone, you talk at leisure with them.
- Chickenfeed** ✓✓
If something is small or unimportant, especially money, it is chickenfeed.
- Chinese whispers**
(UK) When a story is told from person to person, especially if it is gossip or scandal, it inevitably gets distorted and exaggerated. This process is called Chinese whispers.
- Chip off the old block** ✓✓
If someone is a chip off the old block, they closely resemble one or both of the parents in character.
- Clapham omnibus**
(UK) The man on the Clapham omnibus is the ordinary man in the street.
- Clean bill of health** ✓✓
If something or someone has a clean bill of health, then there's nothing wrong; everything's fine.
- Clean slate** ✓✓
If you start something with a clean slate, then nothing bad from your past is taken into account.
- Clear as mud** ✓✓
If something is as clear as mud, then it is very confusing and unclear.
- Cliffhanger** ✓✓
If something like a sports match or an election is a cliffhanger, then the result is so close that it cannot be predicted and will only be known at the very end.
- Close but no cigar** ✓✓
(USA) If you are close but no cigar, you are close to success, but have not got there.
- Close call** ✓✓
If the result of something is a close call, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the parties involved and to say who has won or whatever.

Close the stable door after the horse has bolted

If people try to fix something after the problem has occurred, they are trying to close the stable door after the horse has bolted. 'Close the barn door after the horse has bolted' is alternative, often used in American English.

Closed book to me

If a subject is a closed book to you, it is something that you don't understand or know anything about.

Cloud cuckoo land

If someone has ideas or plans that are completely unrealistic, they are living on cloud cuckoo land.

Cloud nine

If you are on cloud nine, you are extremely happy. ('cloud seven' is a less common alternative)

Cloud of suspicion

If a cloud of suspicion hangs over an individual, it means that they are not believed or are distrusted.

Cloud on the horizon

If you can see a problem ahead, you can call it a cloud on the horizon.

Clutch at straws

If someone is in serious trouble and tries anything to help them, even though their chances of success are probably nil, they are clutching at straws.

Coals to Newcastle

(UK) Taking, bringing, or carrying coals to Newcastle is doing something that is completely unnecessary.

Cock and bull story

A cock and bull story is a lie someone tells that is completely unbelievable.

Cold feet

If you get cold feet about something, you lose the courage to do it.

Cold sweat

If something brings you out in a cold sweat, it frightens you a lot.

Cold turkey

If someone suddenly stops taking drugs, instead of slowly cutting down, they do cold turkey.

Collateral damage

Accidental or unintended damage or casualties are collateral damage.

Collect dust

If something is collecting dust, it isn't being used any more.

Come a cropper

(UK) Someone whose actions or lifestyle will inevitably result in trouble is going to come a cropper.

Come rain or shine

If I say I'll be at a place COME RAIN OR SHINE, I mean that I can be relied on to turn up; nothing, not even the vagaries of British weather, will deter me or stop me from being there.

Come what may

If you're prepared to do something come what may, it means that nothing will stop or distract you, no matter how hard or difficult it becomes.

Comfort zone

It is the temperature range in which the body doesn't shiver or sweat, but has an idiomatic sense of a place where people feel comfortable, where they can avoid the worries of the world. It can be physical or mental.

Constitution of an ox

If someone has the constitution of an ox, they are less affected than most people by things like tiredness, illness, alcohol, etc.

Corner a market

If a business is dominant in an area and unlikely to be challenged by other companies, it has cornered the market.

Couch potato

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| | A couch potato is an extremely idle or lazy person who chooses to spend most of their leisure time horizontal in front of the TV and eats a diet that is mainly junk food. | |
| Could eat a horse | If you are very hungry, you could eat a horse. | ✓✓ |
| Crash a party | If you crash a party, or are a gatecrasher, you go somewhere you haven't been invited to. | ✓✓ |
| Crocodile tears | If someone cries crocodile tears, they pretend to be upset or affected by something. | ✓✓ |
| Cry your eyes out | If you cry your eyes out, you cry uncontrollably. | ✓✓ |
| Cry-baby | A cry-baby is a person who gets emotional and cries too easily. | ✓✓ |
| Curate's egg | (UK) If something is a bit of a curate's egg, it is only good in parts. | |
| Curiosity killed the cat | As cats are naturally curious animals, we use this expression to suggest to people that excessive curiosity is not necessarily a good thing, especially where it is not their business. | ✓✓ |
| Cut and dried | If something is cut and dried, then everything has already been decided and, in the case of an opinion, might be a little stale and predictable. | ✓✓ |
| Cut the mustard | (UK) If somebody or something doesn't cut the mustard, they fail or it fails to reach the required standard. | ✓ |
| Cut to the chase | If you cut to the chase, you get to the point, or the most interesting or important part of something without delay. | ✓✓ |
| Cut to the quick | If someone's cut to the quick by something, they are very hurt and upset indeed. | ✓✓ |
| Cut your teeth on | The place where you gain your early experience is where you cut your teeth. | ✓ |
| Cutting edge / leading edge | Something that is cutting edge is at the forefront of progress in its area. | ✓✓ |
| ~ D ~ | | |
| Daft as a brush | (UK) Someone who is daft as a brush is rather stupid. | |
| Dark horse | If someone is a dark horse, they are a bit of a mystery. | ✓ |
| Daylight robbery | If you are overcharged or underpaid, it is a daylight robbery; open, unfair and hard to prevent. Rip-off has a similar meaning. | |
| Dead as a dodo | If something's dead as a dodo, it is lifeless and dull. The dodo was a bird that lived the island of Mauritius. It couldn't fly and was hunted to extinction. | ✓ |
| Dead as a Doornail | This is used to indicate that something is lifeless. | ✓✓ |
| Dead heat | If a race ends in a dead heat, two or more finish with exactly the same result. | ✓✓ |
| Dead in the water | If something is dead in the water, it isn't going anywhere or making any progress. | ✓✓ |
| Dead men's shoes | If promotion or success requires replacing somebody, then it can only be reached by dead men's shoes' by getting rid of them. | |
| Dead to the world | If somebody's fast asleep and completely unaware of what is happening around them, he or she's dead to the world. | ✓✓ |

Dear John letter

A letter written by a partner explaining why they are ending the relationship is a Dear John letter.

Death warmed up

(UK) If someone looks like death warmed up, they look very ill indeed. ('death warmed over' is the American form)

Derring-do

If a person shows derring-do, they show great courage.

Devil's advocate

If someone plays Devil's advocate in an argument, they adopt a position they don't believe in just for the sake of the argument

Die is cast

If the die is cast, a decision has been made that cannot be altered and fate will decide the consequences.

Discerning eye

If a person has a discerning eye, they are particularly good at judging the quality of something.

Do a runner

(UK) If people leave a restaurant without paying, they do a runner.

Do their dirty work

Someone who does someone's dirty work, carries out the unpleasant jobs that the first person doesn't want to do. Someone who seems to enjoy doing this is sometimes known as a 'henchman'.

Dog days

Dog days are very hot summer days.

Dog eat dog

In a dog eat dog world, there is intense competition and rivalry, where everybody thinks only of himself or herself.

Dog in the manger

(UK) If someone acts like a dog in the manger, they don't want other people to have or enjoy things that are useless to them.

Dog tired

If you are dog tired, you are exhausted.

Dog's dinner / dog's breakfast

Something that is a dog's dinner is a real mess.

Dog's life

If some has a dog's life, they have a very unfortunate and wretched life.

Dog-eared

If a book is dog-eared, it is in bad condition, with torn pages, etc.

Doggy bag

If you ask for a doggy bag in a restaurant, they will pack the food you haven't eaten for you to take home.

Doldrums

If a person is in the doldrums, they are depressed. If a project or something similar is in the doldrums, it isn't making any progress.

Don't judge a book by the cover

This idiom means that you should not judge something or someone by appearances, but should look deeper at what is inside and more important.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth

This means that if you are given something, a present or a chance, you should not waste it by being too critical or examining it too closely.

Don't upset the applecart

If you are advised not to upset the applecart, you are being told not to disturb the way things are done because it might ruin things.

Don't hold your breath

If you are told not to hold your breath, it means that you shouldn't have high expectations about something.

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| Don't wash your dirty laundry in public | ✓✓ |
| (UK) People, especially couples, who argue in front of others or involve others in their personal problems and crises, are said to be washing their dirty laundry in public; making public things that are best left private. (In American English, 'don't air your dirty laundry in public' is used.) | |
| Done to death | ✓✓ |
| If a joke or story has been done to death, it has been told so often that it has stopped being funny. | |
| Donkey's years | ✓✓ |
| This idiom means 'a very long time'. | |
| Doormat | ✓✓ |
| A person who doesn't stand up for themselves and gets treated badly is a doormat. | |
| Double Dutch | |
| (UK) If something is double Dutch, it is completely incomprehensible. | |
| Double whammy | ✓✓ |
| A double whammy is when something causes two problems at the same time, or when two setbacks occur at the same time. | |
| Double-edged sword | ✓✓ |
| If someone uses an argument that could both help them and harm them, then they are using a two-edged sword; it cuts both ways. | |
| Down and out | ✓✓ |
| If someone is down and out, they are desperately poor and need help. | |
| Down at heel | |
| Someone who is down at heel is short of money. ('Down in heel' is used in American English) | |
| Down for the count | ✓✓ |
| If someone is down for the count, they have lost a struggle, like a boxer who has been knocked out. | |
| Down in the doldrums | ✓✓ |
| If somebody's down in the doldrums, they are depressed and lacking energy. | |
| Down in the dumps | ✓✓ |
| If someone's down in the dumps, they are depressed. | |
| Draw a blank | ✓✓ |
| If you try to find something out and draw a blank, you don't get any useful information. | |
| Draw the line | ✓✓ |
| When you draw the line, you set out limits of what you find acceptable, beyond which you will not go. | |
| Dressed to the nines | ✓✓ |
| If you are in your very best clothes, you're dressed to the nines. | |
| Drink like a fish | ✓✓ |
| If someone drinks like a fish, they drink far too much alcohol. | |
| Drop in the Ocean | ✓✓ |
| A drop in the ocean implies that something will have little effect because it is small and mostly insignificant. | |
| Drunk as a lord | |
| (UK) Someone who is very drunk is as drunk as a lord. | |
| Dry as a bone | ✓✓ |
| If your lawn is as dry as a bone, the soil is completely dry. | |
| Duck to water | ✓✓ |
| If you take to something like a duck to water, you find when you start that you have a natural affinity for it. | |
| Dull as ditchwater | |
| (UK) If something is as dull as ditchwater, it is incredibly boring. A ditch is a long narrow hole or trench dug to contain water, which is normally a dark, dirty colour and stagnant (when water turns a funny colour and starts to smell bad). (In American English, 'things are 'dull as dishwater'.) | |
| Dunkirk spirit | |

(UK) Dunkirk spirit is when people pull together to get through a very difficult time.

Dutch courage

Dutch courage is the reckless bravery caused by drinking too much.

Dutch uncle

A Dutch uncle is a person who gives unwelcome advice.

Dwell on the past

Thinking too much about the past, so that it becomes a problem is to dwell on the past. ✓✓

Dyed in the wool

A person with dyed in the wool beliefs, has very strong opinions that will not be affected by what others think. ✓

~ E ~

Each to their own

Different people have different preferences. In American English, 'Each to his own' is more common. ✓✓

Eager beaver

A person who is extremely keen is an eager beaver. ✓✓

Early bird catches the worm

The early bird catches the worm means that if you start something early, you stand a better chance of success. ✓✓

Easier said than done

If something is easier said than done, it is much more difficult than it sounds. It is often used when someone advises you to do something difficult and tries to make it sound easy. ✓✓

Easy as pie

If something is easy as pie, it is very easy indeed. ✓✓

Easy come, easy go

This idiom means that money or other material gains that come without much effort tend to get spent or consumed as easily. ✓✓

Eat humble pie

If someone apologizes and shows a lot of contrition for something they have done, they eat humble pie. ✓✓

Eat like a bird

If someone eats like a bird, they eat very little. ✓

Eat like a horse

Someone who eats like a horse, eats a lot. ✓✓

Eat like a pig

If some eats like a pig, they either eat too much or they have bad table manners. ✓✓

Economical with the truth

(UK) If someone, especially a politician, is economical with the truth, they leave out information in order to create a false picture of a situation, without actually lying.

Egg on your face

If someone has egg on their face, they are made to look foolish or embarrassed. ✓✓

Elbow grease

If something requires elbow grease, it involves a lot of hard physical work. ✓✓

Elbow room

If you haven't got enough elbow room, you haven't got enough space. ✓✓

Eleventh Hour

If something happens at the eleventh hour, it happens right at the last minute. ✓✓

Even keel

If something is on an even keel, it is balanced. ✓✓

Even Stevens

If everything is equal between people, they are even Stevens. ✓✓

Every cloud has a silver lining

People sometimes say that every cloud has a silver lining to comfort somebody who's having problems. They mean that it is always possible to get something positive out of a situation, no matter how unpleasant, difficult or even painful it might seem. ✓✓

- Every man for himself** ✓✓
If it's every man for himself, then people are trying to save themselves from a difficult situation without trying to help anyone else.
- Every man jack**
If every man jack was involved in something, it is an emphatic way of saying that absolutely everybody was involved.
- Every Tom, Dick and Harry** ✓
If every Tom, Dick and Harry knows about something, then it is common knowledge.
- Every trick in the book** ✓✓
If you try every trick in the book, you try every possible way, including dishonesty and deceit, to get what you want.
- Explore all avenues** ✓
If all avenues are being explored, then every conceivable approach is being tried that could possibly get the desired result.
- Eye for an eye** ✓
This is an expression for retributive justice, where the punishment equals the crime.

~ F ~

- Face like thunder**
If someone has a face like thunder, they are clearly very angry or upset about something.
- Face the music** ✓✓
If you have to face the music, you have to accept the negative consequences of something you have done wrong.
- Fairweather friend** ✓
A fair-weather friend is the type who is always there when times are good but forgets about you when things get difficult or problems crop up.
- Fall off the back of a lorry** ✓
(UK) If someone tries to sell you something that has fallen off the back of a lorry, they are trying to sell you stolen goods.
- Familiarity breeds contempt** ✓✓
This means that the more you know something or someone, the more you start to find faults and dislike things about it or them.
- Fat chance!** ✓✓
This idiom is a way of telling someone they have no chance.
- Fat head** ✓
A fat head is a dull, stupid person.
- Fat hits the fire** ✓
When the fat hits the fire, trouble breaks out.
- Fat of the land**
Living off the fat of the land means having the best of everything in life.
- Fate worse than death** ✓✓
Describing something as a fate worse than death is a fairly common way of implying that it is unpleasant.
- Feather in your cap** ✓✓
A success or achievement that may help you in the future is a feather in your cap.
- Fed up to the back teeth**
When you are extremely irritated and fed up with something or someone, you are fed up to the back teeth.
- Feel at home** ✓✓
If you feel relaxed and comfortable somewhere or with someone, you feel at home.
- Feel free** ✓✓
If you ask for permission to do something and are told to feel free, the other person means that there is absolutely no problem.
- Feeling Blue** ✓✓
If you feel blue, you are feeling unwell, mainly associated with depression or unhappiness.
- Feet on the ground** ✓✓

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| A practical and realistic person has their feet on the ground. | | |
| Fifth columnist | (UK) A fifth columnist is a member of a subversive organization who tries to help an enemy invade. | |
| Fifth wheel | (USA) A fifth wheel is something unnecessary or useless. | ✓✓ |
| Fighting chance | If you have a fighting chance, you have a reasonable possibility of success. | ✓✓ |
| Fine tuning | Small adjustments to improve something or to get it working are called fine tuning. | ✓✓ |
| Fine words butter no parsnips | This idiom means that it's easy to talk, but talk is not action. | |
| Finger in the pie | If you have a finger in the pie, you have an interest in something. | ✓✓ |
| Fingers and thumbs | If you are all fingers and thumbs, you are being clumsy and not very skilled with your hands. | ✓ |
| Fire away | If you want to ask someone a question and they tell you to fire away, they mean that you are free to ask what you want. | ✓✓ |
| Fire on all cylinders | If something is firing on all cylinders, it is going as well as it could. | ✓✓ |
| First come, first served | This means there will be no preferential treatment and a service will be provided to those that arrive first. | ✓✓ |
| Fish out of water | If you are placed in a situation that is completely new to you and confuses you, you are like a fish out of water. | ✓✓ |
| Fishy | If there is something fishy about someone or something, there is something suspicious; a feeling that there is something wrong, though it isn't clear what it is. | ✓✓ |
| Fit as a fiddle | If you are fit as a fiddle, you are in perfect health. | ✓✓ |
| Fit for a king | If something is fit for a king, it is of the very highest quality or standard. | ✓✓ |
| Flash in the pan | If something is a flash in the pan, it is very noticeable but doesn't last long, like most singers, who are very successful for a while, then forgotten. | ✓✓ |
| Flat out | If you work flat out, you work as hard and fast as you possibly can. | ✓✓ |
| Flesh and blood | Your flesh and blood are your blood relatives, especially your immediate family. | ✓✓ |
| Flogging a dead horse | (UK) If someone is trying to convince people to do or feel something without any hope of succeeding, they're flogging a dead horse. This is used when someone is trying to raise interest in an issue that no-one supports anymore; beating a dead horse will not make it do any more work. | ✓✓ |
| Flowery speech | Flowery speech is full of lovely words, but may well lack substance. | ✓ |
| Fly off the handle | If someone flies off the handle, they get very angry. | ✓✓ |
| Fly on the wall | If you are able to see and hear events as they happen, you are a fly on the wall. | ✓✓ |
| Football's a game of two halves | (UK) If something's a game of two halves, it means that it's possible for someone's fortunes or luck to change and the person who's winning could end up a loser. | |
| For a song | If you buy or sell something for a song, it is very cheap. | ✓✓ |

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| For donkey's years | ✓✓ |
| (UK) If people have done something, usually without much if any change, for an awfully long time, they can be said to have done it for donkey's years. | |
| For kicks | ✓✓ |
| If you do something for kicks, or just for kicks, you do it purely for fun or thrills. | |
| For my money | ✓✓ |
| This idiom means 'in my opinion'. | |
| For the time being | ✓✓ |
| For the time being indicates that an action or state will continue into the future, but is temporary. I'm sharing an office for the time being. | |
| Foregone conclusion | ✓✓ |
| If the result of, say, a football match is a foregone conclusion, then the result is obvious before the game has even begun. | |
| Foul play | ✓✓ |
| If the police suspect foul play, they think a crime was committed. | |
| Fourth estate | |
| This is an idiomatic way of describing the media, especially the newspapers. | |
| Freudian Slip | ✓✓ |
| If someone makes a Freudian slip, they accidentally use the wrong word, but in doing so reveal what they are really thinking rather than what they think the other person wants to hear. | |
| From rags to riches | ✓✓ |
| Someone who starts life very poor and makes a fortune goes from rags to riches. | |
| From scratch | ✓✓ |
| This idiom means 'from the beginning'. | |
| From the horse's mouth | ✓✓ |
| If you hear something from the horse's mouth, you hear it directly from the person concerned or responsible. | |
| From the sublime to the ridiculous | ✓✓ |
| If something declines considerably in quality or importance, it is said to have gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. | |
| From the word go | ✓✓ |
| From the word go means from the very beginning of something. | |
| Full Monty | ✓✓ |
| (UK) If something is the Full Monty, it is the real thing, not reduced in any way. | |
| Full of the joys of spring | ✓ |
| If you are full of the joys of spring, you are very happy and full of energy. | |
| Full swing | ✓✓ |
| If a something is in full swing, it is going or doing well. | |
| Fullness of time | ✓ |
| If something happens in the fullness of time, it will happen when the time is right and appropriate. | |

~ G ~

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| Get along famously | ✓✓ |
| If people get along famously, they have an exceedingly good relationship. | |
| Get my drift | ✓✓ |
| Understand my meaning, dig me | |
| Get on your soapbox | ✓✓ |
| If someone on their soapbox, they hold forth (talk a lot) about a subject they feel strongly about. | |
| Get out of bed on the wrong side | ✓ |
| If you get out of bed on the wrong side, you wake up and start the day in a bad mood for no real reason. | |
| Get the ball rolling | ✓✓ |
| If you get the ball rolling, you start something so that it can start making progress. | |

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| Get the green light | ✓✓ |
| If you get the green light to do something, you are given the necessary permission, authorization. | |
| Get up and go | ✓✓ |
| If someone has lots of get up and go, they have lots of enthusiasm and energy. | |
| Ghost of a chance | ✓✓ |
| If something or someone hasn't got a ghost of a chance, they have no hope whatsoever of succeeding. | |
| Ghostly presence | |
| You can feel or otherwise sense a ghostly presence, but you cannot do it clearly only vaguely. | |
| Gift of the gab | ✓ |
| If someone has the gift of the gab, they speak in a persuasive and interesting way. | |
| Give it some stick | |
| (UK) If you give something some stick, you put a lot of effort into it. | |
| Give someone a piece of your mind | ✓✓ |
| If you give someone a piece of your mind, you criticize them strongly and angrily. | |
| Give someone stick | |
| (UK) If someone gives you stick, they criticize you or punish you. | |
| Give up the ghost | ✓✓ |
| People give up the ghost when they die. | |
| Glutton for punishment | ✓✓ |
| If a person is described as a glutton for punishment, they happily accept jobs and tasks that most people would try to get out of. A glutton is a person who eats a lot. | |
| Go against the grain | ✓✓ |
| A person, who does things in an unconventional manner, especially if their methods are not generally approved of, is said to go against the grain. Such an individual can be called a maverick. | |
| Go Dutch | ✓✓ |
| If you go Dutch in a restaurant, you pay equal shares for the meal. | |
| Go pear-shaped | |
| If things have gone wrong, they have gone pear-shaped. | |
| Go spare | |
| (UK) If you go spare, you lose your temper completely. | |
| Go the whole hog | ✓ |
| If you go the whole hog, you do something completely or to its limits. | |
| Golden rule | ✓✓ |
| The golden rule is the most essential or fundamental rule associated with something. | |
| Gone pear-shaped | |
| (UK) If things have gone pear-shaped they have either gone wrong or produced an unexpected and unwanted result. | |
| Gone to pot | ✓✓ |
| If something has gone to pot, it has gone wrong and doesn't work any more. | |
| Gone to the dogs | ✓✓ |
| If something has gone to the dogs, it has gone badly wrong and lost all the good things it had. | |
| Good antennae | |
| Someone with good antennae is good at detecting things. | |
| Good egg | ✓ |
| A person who can be relied on is a good egg. Bad egg is the opposite. | |
| Good spell | |
| A spell can mean a fairly or relatively short period of time; you'll hear weather forecasts predict a dry spell. Sports commentators will say that a sportsperson is going through a good spell when they're performing consistently better than they normally do. | |
| Good time | ✓✓ |
| If you make good time on a journey, you manage to travel faster than expected. | |
| Grasp the nettle | |

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| | (UK) If you grasp the nettle, you deal bravely with a problem. | ✓✓ |
| Grass roots | This idiom is often used in politics, where it refers to the ordinary people or voters. It can be used to mean people at the bottom of a hierarchy. | ✓✓ |
| Grass widow | A grass widow is a woman whose husband is often away on work, leaving her on her own. | |
| Graveyard shift | If you have to work very late at night, it is the graveyard shift. | ✓ |
| Gravy train | If someone is on the gravy train, they have found an easy way to make lots of money. | ✓✓ |
| Grease monkey | A grease monkey is an idiomatic term for a mechanic. | ✓ |
| Grease someone's palm | If you grease someone's palm, you bribe them to do something. | ✓ |
| Greased lightning | If something or someone moves like greased lightning, they move very fast indeed. | ✓ |
| Great guns | If something or someone is going great guns, they are doing very well. | |
| Great unwashed | This is a term used for the working class masses. | ✓ |
| Great white hope | Someone who is expected to be a great success is a great white hope. | ✓ |
| Greek to me | If you don't understand something, it's all Greek to you. | ✓✓ |
| Green fingers | (UK) Someone with green fingers has a talent for gardening. | |
| Green light | If you are given the green light, you are given approval to do something. | ✓✓ |
| Green thumb | (USA) Someone with a talent for gardening has a green thumb. | ✓✓ |
| Green-eyed monster | The green-eyed monster is an allegorical phrase for somebody's strong jealousy. | ✓✓ |
| Greenhorn | A greenhorn or someone who is described simply as green lacks the relevant experience and knowledge for their job or task. | ✓✓ |
| Grey pound | (UK) In the UK, the grey pound is an idiom for the economic power of elderly people. | |
| Grey/gray area | A grey/gray area is one where there is no clear right or wrong. | ✓✓ |
| Grey/gray matter | Grey/gray matter is the human brain. | ✓ |
| Grin like a Cheshire cat | If someone has a very wide smile, they have a grin like a Cheshire cat. | ✓ |
| Guinea-pig | If you are a guinea-pig, you take part in an experiment of some sort and are used in the testing. | ✓✓ |
| Gung Ho | If someone is gung ho about something, they support it blindly and don't think about the consequences. | ✓ |

~ H ~

Hair of the dog

If someone has a hair of the dog, they have an alcoholic drink as a way of getting rid of a hangover, the unpleasant effects of having drunk too much alcohol the night before. It is commonly used as a way of excusing having a drink early on in the day.

Hand in glove

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| | If people are hand in glove, they have an extremely close relationship. | |
| Hand to mouth | Someone who's living from hand to mouth, is very poor and needs the little money they have coming in to cover their expenses. | |
| Handwriting like chicken scratch | If your handwriting is very hard to read, it is like chicken scratch. | |
| Hang in the balance | If an outcome is hanging in the balance, there are at least two possibilities and it is impossible to predict which will win out. | ✓✓ |
| Hangdog expression | A hangdog expression is one where the person's showing their emotions very clearly, maybe a little too clearly for your liking. It's that mixture of misery and self-pity that is similar to a dog when it's trying to get something it wants but doesn't take without permission. | |
| Hanged for a sheep as a lamb | This is an expression meaning that if you are going to get into trouble for doing something, then you ought to stop worrying and should try to get everything you can before you get caught. | |
| Hard cheese | (UK) Hard cheese means hard luck. | |
| Hard of hearing | Someone who's hard of hearing is a bit deaf. | ✓✓ |
| Hat trick | Three successes one after the other is a hat trick. | |
| Hatchet job | A piece of criticism that destroys someone's reputation is a hatchet job. | ✓ |
| Have a trick up your sleeve | If you have a trick up your sleeve, you have a secret strategy to use when the time is right. | ✓✓ |
| Having a gas | If you're having a gas, you are having a laugh and enjoying yourself in company. | ✓✓ |
| He'll rue the day | He'll rue the day that he crossed me. This means that the person will one day bitterly regret what they have done. | ✓ |
| Head is in the clouds | If a person has their head in the clouds, they have unrealistic, impractical ideas. | ✓✓ |
| Head over heels in love | When someone falls passionately in love and is intoxicated by the feeling has fallen head over heels in love. | ✓✓ |
| Headstrong | A headstrong person is obstinate and does not take other people's advice readily. | ✓✓ |
| Hear a pin drop | If there is complete silence in a room, you can hear a pin drop. | ✓ |
| Heart of gold | Someone with a heart of gold is a genuinely kind and caring person. | ✓✓ |
| Heaven knows | If you ask someone a question and they say this, they have no idea. | ✓✓ |
| Heavenly bodies | The heavenly bodies are the stars. | ✓✓ |
| Hedge your bets | If you hedge your bets, you don't risk everything on one opportunity, but try more than one thing. | ✓✓ |
| Hell in a handcart | If something is going to hell in a handcart, it is getting worse and worse, with no hope of stopping the decline. | ✓✓ |
| Here today, gone tomorrow | Money, happiness and other desirable things are often here today, gone tomorrow, which means that they don't last forever. | ✓✓ |
| Hit the fan | | ✓ |

When it hits the fan, or, more rudely, the shit hits the fan, serious trouble starts.

Hit the road

Hit the roof

If you lose your temper and get very angry, you hit the roof.

✓✓

Hit the sack

When you hit the sack, you go to bed.

✓✓

Hoist with your own petard

If you are hoist with your own petard, you get into trouble or caught in a trap that you had set for someone else.

Hold all the aces

If you hold all the aces, you have all the advantages and your opponents or rivals are in a weak position.

✓

Hold the baby

(UK) If someone is responsible for something, they are holding the baby.

Hold the bag

(USA) If someone is responsible for something, they are holding the bag.

✓✓

Hold your horses

If someone tells you to hold your horses. you are doing something too fast and they would like you to slow down.

✓✓

Home stretch

The home stretch is the last part of something, like a journey, race or project.

✓✓

Home, James

(UK) This is a clichéd way of telling the driver of a vehicle to start driving. It is supposed to be an order to a chauffeur (a privately employed driver).

Honest truth

If someone claims that something is the honest truth, they wish to sound extra-sincere about something.

✓✓

Honours are even

If honours are even, then a competition has ended with neither side emerging as a winner.

Hook, line, and sinker

If somebody accepts or believes something hook, line, and sinker, they accept it completely.

✓✓

Hope against hope

If you hope against hope, you hope for something even though there is little or no chance of your wish being fulfilled.

Hope in hell

If something hasn't got a hope in hell, it stands absolutely no chance of succeeding.

✓✓

Horns of a dilemma

If you are on the horns of a dilemma, you are faced with two equally unpleasant options and have to choose one.

Horses for courses

Horses for courses means that what is suitable for one person or situation might be unsuitable for another.

Hostile takeover

If a company is bought out when it does not want to be, it is known as a hostile takeover.

✓✓

Hot water

If you get into hot water, you get into trouble.

✓✓

How come

If you want to show disbelief or surprise about an action, you can ask a question using 'how come'. How come he got the job? (You can't believe that they gave the job to somebody like him)

✓✓

How long is a piece of string?

If someone has no idea of the answer to a question, they can ask 'How long is a piece of string?' as a way of indicating their ignorance.

Hue and cry

Hue and cry is an expression that used to mean all the people who joined in chasing a criminal or villain. Nowadays, if you do something without hue and cry, you do it discreetly and without drawing attention.



I hereby give notice of my intention

Hereby is used sometimes in formal, official declarations and statements to give greater force to the speaker' or the writer's affirmation. People will say it sometimes to emphasize their sincerity and correctness.

I should cocoa

(UK) This idiom means 'I should think so'.

I'll eat my hat

You can say this when you are absolutely sure that you are right to let the other person know that there is no chance of your being wrong.

I've got a bone to pick with you

If somebody says this, they mean that they have some complaint to make against the person they are addressing.

If you'll pardon my French

(UK) This idiom is used as a way of apologizing for swearing.

Ill-gotten gains

Ill-gotten gains are profits or benefits that are made either illegally or unfairly.

In a cleft stick

If you are in a cleft stick, you are in a difficult situation, caught between choices.

In a flash

If something happens in a flash, it happens very quickly indeed.

In a jam

If you are in a jam, you are in some trouble.

In a nutshell

This idiom is used to introduce a concise summary.

In a pickle

If you are in a pickle, you are in some trouble or a mess.

In all honesty

If you say something in all honesty, you are telling the complete truth. It can be used as a way of introducing a negative opinion whilst trying to be polite; in all honesty, I have to say that I wasn't very impressed.

In an instant

If something happens in an instant, it happens very rapidly.

In cold blood

If something is done in cold blood, it is done ruthlessly, without any emotion.

In dire straits

If you're in dire straits, you're in serious trouble or difficulties.

In donkey's years

'I haven't seen her in donkey's years.' - This means for a very long time.

In dribs and drabs

If people arrive in dribs and drabs, they come in small groups at irregular intervals, instead of all arriving at the same time.

In for a penny, in for a pound

If something is worth doing then it is a case of in for a penny, in for a pound, which means that when gambling or taking a chance, you might as well go the whole way and take all the risks, not just some.

In my bad books

If you are in someone's bad books, they are angry with you. Likewise, if you are in their good books, they are pleased with you.

In my book

This idiom means 'in my opinion'.

In stitches

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| | If someone is in stitches, they are laughing uncontrollably. | ✓✓ |
| In tandem | If people do things in tandem, they do them at the same time. | ✓✓ |
| In the black | If your bank account is in credit, it is in the black. | ✓✓ |
| In the club | (UK) If a woman's in the club, she's pregnant. 'In the pudding club' is an alternative form. | ✓✓ |
| In the doghouse | If someone is in the doghouse, they are in disgrace and very unpopular at the moment. | ✓✓ |
| In the family way | If a woman is in the family way, she is pregnant. | |
| In the long run | This means 'over a long period of time', 'in the end' or 'in the final result'. | ✓✓ |
| In the offing | If something is in the offing, it is very likely to happen soon. | ✓ |
| In the pink | If you are in very good health, you are in the pink. | ✓ |
| In the pipeline | If something's in the pipeline, it hasn't arrived yet but its arrival is expected. | ✓ |
| In the red | If your bank account is overdrawn, it is in the red. | ✓✓ |
| In the swim | If you are in the swim, you are up-to-date with and fully informed about something. | ✓ |
| In the twinkling of an eye | If something happens in the twinkling of an eye, it happens very quickly. | ✓✓ |
| In your face | If someone is in your face, they are direct and confrontational. (It is sometime written 'in yer face' colloquially) | ✓✓ |
| Indian file | If people walk in Indian file, they walk in a line one behind the other. | |
| Indian giver | An Indian giver gives something, then tries to take it back. | ✓ |
| Indian summer | If there is a period of warmer weather in late autumn, it is an Indian summer. | ✓✓ |
| Into thin air | If something vanishes or disappears without trace, it vanishes into thin air; no-one knows where it has gone. | ✓✓ |
| Irons in the fire | A person who has a few irons in the fire has a number of things working to their advantage at the same time. | ✓✓ |
| It ain't over till the fat lady sings | This idiom means that until something has officially finished, the result is uncertain. | ✓ |
| It cost an arm and a leg | If something costs an arm and a leg, it is very expensive indeed. | ✓ |
| It cost the earth | If something costs the earth, it is very expensive indeed. | ✓ |
| It's no use crying over spilt milk | This idiom means that getting upset after something has gone wrong is pointless; it can't be changed so it should be accepted. | ✓✓ |
| It's six of one and half-a-dozen of the other | This is an idiom used when there is little or no difference between two options. | ✓✓ |
| It'll stand you in good stead | If something will stand you in good stead, it will probably be advantageous in the future. | ✓✓ |
| Ivory tower | People who live in ivory towers are detached from the world around them. | ✓✓ |

~ J ~

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| Jack Frost | If everything has frozen in winter, then Jack Frost has visited. | ✓ |
| Jack-of-all-trades | A jack-of-all-trades is someone that can do many different jobs. | ✓✓ |
| Jane Doe | Jane Doe is a name given to an unidentified male who may be party to legal proceedings, or to an unidentified person in hospital, or dead. John Doe is the female equivalent. | ✓✓ |
| Jersey justice | (UK) Jersey justice is very severe justice. | |
| Jet-black | To emphasize just how black something is, such as someone's hair, we can call it jet-black. | ✓✓ |
| Jobs for the boys | Where people give jobs, contracts, etc, to their friends and associates, these are jobs for the boys. | |
| Job's comforter | Someone who says they want to comfort, but actually discomforts people is a Job's comforter. (Job's is pronounced 'jobes', not 'jobs') | |
| Jockey for position | If a number of people want the same opportunity and are struggling to emerge as the most likely candidate, they are jockeying for position. | ✓✓ |
| John Doe | John Doe is a name given to an unidentified male who may be party to legal proceedings, or to an unidentified person in hospital, or dead. Jane Doe is the female equivalent. | ✓✓ |
| John Q Public | (USA) John Q Public is the typical, average person. | ✓✓ |
| Jump the gun | If you start something too early, you jump the gun. | ✓✓ |
| Jump through hoops | If you are prepared to jump through hoops for someone, you are prepared to make great efforts and sacrifices for them. | ✓✓ |
| Jungle out there | If someone says that it is a jungle out there, they mean that the situation is dangerous and there are no rules. | ✓✓ |
| Just coming up to | If the time is just coming up to nine o'clock, it means that it will be nine o'clock in a very few seconds. You'll hear them say it on the radio in the morning. | ✓✓ |
| Just deserts | If a bad or evil person gets their just deserts, they get the punishment or suffer the misfortune that it is felt they deserve. | ✓✓ |
| Just in the nick of time | If you do something in the nick of time, you just manage to do it just in time, with seconds to spare. | ✓✓ |

~ K ~

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| Kangaroo court | When people take the law into their own hands and form courts that are not legal, these are known as kangaroo court. | ✓ |
| Keen as mustard | (UK) If someone is very enthusiastic, they are as keen as mustard. | |
| Keep at bay | If you keep someone or something at bay, you maintain a safe distance from them. | ✓✓ |
| Keep body and soul together | If you earn enough to cover your basic expenses, but nothing more than that, you earn enough to keep body and soul together. | ✓ |

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| Keep mum | If you keep mum about something, you keep quiet and don't tell anyone. | |
| Keep posted | If you keep posted about something, you keep up-to-date with information and developments. | ✓✓ |
| Keep your ear to the ground | If you keep your ear to the ground, you try to keep informed about something, especially if there are rumours or uncertainties. | ✓✓ |
| Keep your hair on | Keep your hair on is advice telling someone to keep calm and not to over-react or get angry. | |
| Keep your head above water | If you are just managing to survive financially, you are keeping your head above water. | ✓✓ |
| Keep your nose clean | If someone is trying to keep their Nose Clean, they are trying to stay out of trouble by not getting involved in any sort of wrong-doing. | ✓✓ |
| Keep your pecker up | If someone tells you to keep your pecker up, they are telling you not to let your problems get on top of you and to try to be optimistic. | ✓ |
| Keep your shirt on! | This idiom is used to tell someone to calm down. | ✓✓ |
| Keeping your options open | Is someone's keeping her or his options open, they aren't going to restrict themselves or rule out any possible course of action. | ✓✓ |
| Kick in the teeth | Bad news or a sudden disappointment is a kick in the teeth. | ✓✓ |
| Kick the bucket | When someone kicks the bucket, they die. | ✓✓ |
| Kill two birds with one stone | When you kill two birds with one stone, you resolve two difficulties or matters with a single action. | ✓✓ |
| Kindred spirit | A kindred spirit is someone who feels and thinks the way you do. | ✓ |
| Kiss of death | The kiss of death is an action that means failure or ruin for someone, a scheme, a plan, etc. | ✓✓ |
| Kith and kin | Your kith and kin are your family; your next of kin are close relations you nominate to deal with your affairs in the event of your death on a document, like a passport. | |
| Knee-jerk reaction | A knee-jerk reaction is an instant, instinctive response to a situation. | ✓✓ |
| Know full well | When you know full well, you are absolutely sure that you know. | ✓✓ |
| Know the ropes | Someone who is experienced and knows how the system works knows the ropes. | ✓✓ |
| Know which side one's bread is buttered on | If you know which side one's bread is buttered on, you know where your interests lie and will act accordingly to protect or further them. | ✓ |
| Know your place | A person who knows their place doesn't try to impose themselves on others. | ✓✓ |
| ~ L ~ | | |
| Labor of love | A labor of love is a project or task undertaking for the interest or pleasure in doing it rather than the reward, financial or otherwise. | ✓✓ |
| Labour of love | A labour of love is a project or task undertaking for the interest or pleasure in doing it rather than the reward, financial or otherwise. | ✓✓ |

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| Land of nod | If someone has gone to the land of nod, they have fallen asleep or gone to bed. | |
| Lap of the gods | If something is in the lap of the gods, it is beyond our control and fate will decide the outcome. | ✓✓ |
| Larger than life | If something is excessive or exaggerated, it is larger than life. | ✓✓ |
| Last hurrah | If an elderly person does something special before they die, it is a last hurrah. | ✓✓ |
| Last straw | The last straw is the final problem that made you lose your temper. It comes from an Arabic story, where a camel was loaded with straw until a single straw placed on the rest of the load broke its back. | ✓✓ |
| Last-ditch | A last-ditch attempt is a desperate attempt that will probably fail anyway. | ✓✓ |
| Law unto yourself | If somebody's a law unto themselves, they do what they believe is right regardless of what is generally accepted as correct. | ✓✓ |
| Lay down the law | If someone lays down the law, they tell people what to do and are authoritarian. | ✓✓ |
| Leading edge (see cutting edge) | | |
| Leave no stone unturned | If you look everywhere to find something, or try everything to achieve something, you leave no stone unturned. | ✓✓ |
| Leave well alone | If you leave something well alone, you keep a safe distance from it, either physically or metaphorically. | ✓✓ |
| Left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing | If the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, then communication within a company, organization, group, etc, is so bad that people don't know what the others are doing. | ✓✓ |
| Left in the dark | If you are left in the dark about something, you aren't given the information that you should have. | ✓✓ |
| Legend in your own lunchtime | Somebody who becomes a legend in their own lifetime acquires fame, but often only to a select or specialist audience, while they are still alive. | ✓ |
| Let bygones be bygones | If people decide to let bygones be bygones, they decide to forget old problems or grievances they have with each other. | ✓✓ |
| Let sleeping dogs lie | If someone is told to let sleeping dogs lie, it means that they shouldn't disturb a situation as it would result in trouble or complications. | ✓✓ |
| Let the cat out of the bag | If you accidentally reveal a secret, you let the cat out of the bag. | ✓✓ |
| Level playing field | If there's a level playing field everybody is treated equally. | ✓✓ |
| Lie through your teeth | Someone who is always lying, regardless of what people know, lies through their teeth. | ✓✓ |
| Like a beached whale | Once a whale is on a beach, it cannot get back into the easily, so if you are completely stuck somewhere and can't get away, you are stranded like a beached whale. | ✓ |
| Like a cat that got the cream | If someone looks very pleased with themselves and happy, they look like a cat that got the cream. | ✓ |
| Like a duck to water | | ✓✓ |

If someone has a natural talent for something and enjoys it, they take to it like a duck to water.

Like a fish needs a bicycle

If someone needs something like a Fish Needs a Bicycle, they do not need it at all, originally a feminist slogan: A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.

Like a fish out of water

If someone feels like a fish out of water, they are very uncomfortable in the situation they are in.

Like a rat deserting a sinking ship

If people leave a company because they know that it's about to have serious problems, or turn their back on a person about to be in a similar situation, they are said to be like rats deserting a sinking ship.

Like lambs to the slaughter

If somebody does something unpleasant without any resistance, they go like lambs to the slaughter.

Like taking candy from a baby

(USA) If something is like taking candy from a baby, it is very easy to do.

Like the clappers

If something is going like the clappers, it is going very fast.

Lines of communication

Lines of communication are the routes used to communicate by people or groups who are in conflict; a government might open lines of communication with terrorists if it wished to negotiate with them.

Lock the stable door after the horse has bolted

If someone takes action too late, they do this; there is no reason to lock an empty stable.

Lock, stock and barrel

This is an expressions that means 'everything'; if someone buys a company lock, stock and barrel, they buy absolutely everything to do with the company.

Long in the tooth

If someone is long in the tooth, they are a bit too old to do something.

Long time no see

Long time no see means that the speaker has not seen that person for a long time.

Look before you leap

This idiom means that you should think carefully about the possible results or consequences before doing something.

Look out for number one

If you look out for number one, you take care of yourself and your interests, rather than those of other people.

Lose your lunch

(UK) If you lose your lunch, you vomit.

Lose your marbles

If someone has lost their marbles, they've gone mad.

Lower the bar

If people change the standards required to make things easier, they lower the bar.

Luck of the draw

To have the 'Luck of the draw' is to win something in a competition where the winner is chosen purely by chance.

~ M ~

Mad as a March hare

Someone who is excitable and unpredictable is as mad as a March hare.

Major league

Something major league is very important.

Make a mint

If someone is making a mint, they are making a lot of money.

Make a monkey of someone

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| | If you make a monkey of someone, you make them look foolish. | ✓✓ |
| Make a mountain out of a molehill | If somebody makes a mountain out of a molehill, they exaggerate the importance or seriousness of a problem. | ✓✓ |
| Make a pitch | If you make a pitch for something, you make a bid, offer or other attempt to get it. | ✓✓ |
| Make a request | If you request something, or make a request, you are asking for something you want or need. | ✓✓ |
| Make an enquiry | If you make an enquiry, you ask for general information about something. | ✓✓ |
| Make ends meet | If somebody finds it hard to make ends meet, they have problems living on the money they earn. | ✓✓ |
| Make headway | If you make headway, you make progress. | ✓✓ |
| Make no bones about it | If somebody make no bones about a scandal in their past, they are open and honest about it and show no shame or embarrassment. | ✓✓ |
| Make waves | If someone makes waves, they cause a lot of trouble. | ✓✓ |
| Make your blood boil | If something makes your blood boil, it makes you very angry. | ✓✓ |
| Man in the street | The man in the street is an idiom to describe ordinary people, especially when talking about their opinions and ideas. | ✓ |
| Man of letters | A man of letters is someone who is an expert in the arts and literature, and often a writer too. | |
| Man of means | A man, or woman, of means is wealthy. | ✓✓ |
| Man of straw | A weak person that can easily be beaten or changed is a man of straw. | ✓ |
| Man of the cloth | A man of the cloth is a priest. | ✓✓ |
| Man's best friend | This is an idiomatic term for dogs. | ✓✓ |
| Man's man | A man's man is a man who does things enjoyed by men and is respected by other men. | ✓ |
| Mark my words | Mark my words is an expression used to lend an air of seriousness to what the speaker is about to say when talking about the future. You often hear drunks say it before they deliver some particularly spurious nonsense. | ✓✓ |
| Marked man | A marked man is a person who is being targeted by people who want to do them harm or cause them trouble. | ✓✓ |
| Matter of life and death | If something is a matter of life and death, it is extremely important. | ✓✓ |
| Mealy-mouthed | A mealy-mouthed person doesn't say what they mean clearly. | ✓ |
| Meet someone halfway | If you meet someone halfway, you accept some of their ideas and make concessions. | ✓✓ |
| Meet your expectations | If something doesn't meet your expectations, it means that it wasn't as good as you had thought it was going to be; a disappointment. | ✓✓ |
| Meet your match | | ✓✓ |

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| | If you meet your match, you meet a person who is at least as good if not better than you are at something. | |
| Memory like a sieve | If somebody can't retain things for long in his or her memory and quickly forgets, he or she has a memory like a sieve. A sieve has lots of tiny holes in it to let liquids out while keeping the solids inside. | ✓✓ |
| Memory like an elephant | 'An elephant never forgets' is a saying, so if a person has a memory like an elephant, he or she has a very good memory indeed. | ✓ |
| Midas touch | If someone has the Midas touch, they make a lot of money out of any scheme they try. | ✓ |
| Mind the gap | Mind the gap is an instruction used on the Underground in the UK to warn passengers to be careful when leaving the tube or train as there is quite a distance between the train and the platform. | ✓ |
| Mind Your P's and Q's | If you are careful about the way you behave and are polite, you mind Your P's and Q's. | ✓✓ |
| Mint condition | If something is in mint condition, it is in perfect condition. | ✓✓ |
| Misery guts | A misery guts is a person who's always unhappy and tries to make others feel negative. | |
| Miss is as good as a mile | A miss is as good as a mile means that if you fail, even by the smallest margin, it is still a failure. | ✓ |
| Miss the boat | If you miss the boat, you are too late to take advantage of an opportunity. | ✓✓ |
| Money laundering | If people launder money, they get money made illegally into the mainstream so that it is believed to be legitimate and clean. | ✓✓ |
| Money to burn | If someone is very rich, they have money to burn. | ✓✓ |
| Monkey business | If children get up to monkey business, they are behaving naughtily or mischievously. This is the same as MONKEYING AROUND. | ✓✓ |
| Moot point | If something's a moot point, there's some disagreement about it; a debatable point. | ✓✓ |
| More than one string to their bow | A person who has more than one string to their bow has different talents or skills to fall back on. | |
| Move the goalposts | When people move the goalposts, they change the standards required for something to their advantage. | ✓✓ |
| Mover and shaker | A person who is a mover and shaker is a highly-respected, key figure in their particular area with a lot of influence and importance. | ✓ |
| Mud in your eye | This is a way of saying 'cheers' when you are about to drink something, normally alcohol. | ✓ |
| Mud-slinging | If someone is mud-slinging, they are insulting someone and trying to damage that person's reputation. | ✓✓ |
| Muddy the waters | If somebody muddies the waters, he or she makes the situation more complex or less clear. | ✓✓ |
| Music to my ears | If something someone says is music to your ears, it is exactly what you had wanted to hear. | ✓✓ |
| Mutton dressed as lamb | Mutton dressed as lamb is term for middle-aged or elderly people trying to look younger. | |
| My hands are full | | ✓✓ |

If your hands are full, you have so much to do that you cannot take on any more work, responsibilities and so on.

My hands are tied

✓✓

If your hands are tied, you are unable to act for some reason.

~ N ~

Nature abhors a vacuum

✓

This idiom is used to express the idea that empty or unfilled spaces are unnatural as they go against the laws of nature and physics.

Neck and neck

✓✓

If two competitors or candidates, etc, are neck and neck, then they are very close and neither is clearly winning.

Needle in a haystack

✓✓

If trying to find something is like looking for a needle in a haystack, it means that it is very difficult, if not impossible to find among everything around it.

Neither fish nor fowl

✓

Something or someone that is neither fish nor fowl doesn't really fit into any one group.

Nest egg

✓✓

If you have some money saved for the future, it is a nest egg.

Never a rose without the prick

✓

This means that good things always have something bad as well; like the thorns on the stem of a rose.

New blood

✓✓

If something needs new blood, it has become stale and needs new ideas or people to invigorate it.

New lease of life

✓✓

If someone finds new enthusiasm and energy for something, they have a new lease of life.

New man

✓✓

(UK) A New man is a man who believes in complete equality of the sexes and shares domestic work equally.

New York minute

✓✓

(USA) If something happens in a New York minute, it happens very fast.

Newfangled

✓✓

People, who don't like new methods, technologies, etc, describe them as newfangled, which means new but not as good or nice as the old ones.

Nip it in the bud

✓✓

If you nip something in the bud, you deal with a problem when it is still small, before it can grow into something serious.

Nitty gritty

✓✓

If people get down to the nitty gritty, they concentrate on the most important and serious issues.

No can do

✓✓

No can do means that the speaker can't do whatever it is that has been asked of him or her.

No great shakes

✓✓

If someone is no great shakes at something, they are not very good at it.

No holds barred

✓✓

If there are no holds barred, there are no rules of conduct; you can do anything.

No ifs or buts

✓✓

Ifs and Buts is a term used to describe the reasons people give for not wanting to do something. To show that you don't wish to accept any excuses, you can tell somebody that you wish to hear no ifs or buts Here IF & BUT have become nouns

No love lost

✓✓

If there is no love lost between two people they have a strong enmity towards or hate for the other and make no effort to conceal it.

No quarter

This means without mercy. We can say no quarter given or asked.

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| No question | This idiom means that something is certain or definite. | ✓✓ |
| No questions asked | If something is to be done and no questions asked, then it doesn't matter what methods are used or what rules are broken to ensure that it gets done. | ✓✓ |
| No spring chicken | If someone is no spring chicken, they aren't very young. | ✓✓ |
| No time for | If you have no time for an activity, you have absolutely no desire to spend or waste any time doing it. You can have no time for people, too. | ✓✓ |
| No time like the present | If people say that there's no time like the present, they believe that it is far better to do something now than to leave it for later, in which case it might never get done. | ✓✓ |
| No time to lose | If there's no time to lose, then it's time to get started otherwise it won't be finished on time. | ✓✓ |
| Not all there | If someone isn't all there, they are a little bit stupid or crazy. | ✓✓ |
| Not cricket | (UK) If something is not cricket, it is unfair. | ✓ |
| Not enough room to swing a cat | If a room is very small, you can say that there isn't enough room to swing a cat in it. | ✓ |
| Not much cop | Describing a film or something as not much cop is a way of saying that you didn't think much of it. | |
| Not my cup of tea | If something is not your cup of tea, you don't like it very much. | ✓✓ |
| Notch on your belt | A success or achievement that might help you in the future is a notch on your belt. | ✓ |
| ~ O ~ | | |
| Odds and ends | Odds and ends are small, remnant articles and things- the same as bits and bobs. | ✓✓ |
| Off colour/color | If someone looks off colour/color, they look ill. | ✓ |
| Off the cuff | If you do something off the cuff, you do it without any preparation. | ✓ |
| Off the hook | If someone is off the hook, they have avoided punishment or criticism for something they have done. | ✓✓ |
| Off the rails | If someone has gone off the rails, they have lost track of reality. | ✓ |
| Off the wall | Something that is off the wall is unconventional. | ✓✓ |
| Off your rocker | (UK) Someone who is off their rocker is crazy. | ✓✓ |
| Off-hand | Off-hand means without preparation. People say that they don't know the answer off-hand, meaning that they don't know it at that time. | ✓✓ |
| Old hat | If something's old hat, it seems rather old fashioned and dated. | ✓✓ |
| Oldest trick in the book | The oldest trick in the book is a well-known way of deceiving someone, though still effective. | ✓✓ |
| Olive branch | If you hold out or offer an olive branch, you make a gesture to indicate that you want peace. | ✓ |
| On Carey Street | (UK) If someone is on Carey Street, they are heavily in debt or have gone bankrupt. | |

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| On tenterhooks | This means that she is waiting impatiently and excitedly for something. | ✓ |
| On the dot | If someone says that they're leaving at seven on the dot, don't be late; they mean at exactly seven o'clock. | ✓ |
| On the fiddle | (UK) Someone who is stealing money from work is on the fiddle, especially if they are doing it by fraud. | ✓ |
| On the fly | If you do things on the fly, you do things without preparation, responding to events as they happen. | ✓✓ |
| On the level | If someone is honest and trustworthy, they are on the level. | ✓✓ |
| On the map | If a place becomes widely known, it is put on the map. A place that remains unknown is off the map. | ✓✓ |
| On the never-never | (UK) If you buy something on the never-never, you buy it on long-term credit. | ✓ |
| On the nod | Someone who has taken a lot of drugs and is barely conscious is on the nod. | ✓ |
| On the right foot | If you start something or set off on the right foot, you get off to a good start. | ✓✓ |
| On the shelf | If something like a project is on the shelf, nothing is being done about it at the moment. | ✓✓ |
| On the stump | When politicians are campaigning for support and votes, they are on the stump. | ✓✓ |
| On the take | (UK) Someone who is stealing from work is on the take. | ✓✓ |
| On the tip of your tongue | If a word is on the tip of your tongue, you know you know the word, but you just can't quite remember it at the moment. | ✓✓ |
| On the trot | (UK) This idiom means 'consecutively'; I'd saw them three days on the trot, which means that I saw them on three consecutive days. | ✓✓ |
| On the up and up | If you are on the up and up, you are making very good progress in life and doing well. | ✓✓ |
| On the wagon | If someone is on the wagon, they have stopped drinking alcohol. | ✓✓ |
| On top of the world | If you are on top of the world, everything is going well for you. | ✓✓ |
| On your high horse | When someone is on their high horse, they are being inflexible, arrogant and will not make any compromises. | ✓✓ |
| On your last legs | If someone's on their last legs, they're close to dying. | ✓✓ |
| Once bitten, twice shy | If somebody is said to be once bitten twice shy, it means that someone who has been hurt or who has had something go wrong will be far more careful the next time. | ✓ |
| One bad apple | The full form of this proverb is 'one bad apple spoils the barrel', meaning that a bad person, policy, etc, can ruin everything around it. | ✓✓ |
| One fell swoop | If something is done at one fell swoop, it is done in a single period of activity, usually swiftly and ruthlessly. | ✓✓ |
| One man's meat is another man's poison | This idiom means that one person can like something very much, but another can hate it. | ✓ |
| One over the eight | | |

(UK) Someone who is one over the eight is drunk.

- One-man band** ✓✓
If one person does all the work or has all the responsibility somewhere, then they are a one-man band.
- One-off** ✓✓
A one-off event only happens once and will not be repeated.
- Open all hours** ✓✓
If a shop or suchlike is open all hours, it only closes, if at all, terribly late.
- Open book** ✓✓
If a person is an open book, it is easy to know what they think or how they feel about things.
- Opening a can of worms** ✓✓
If you open a can of worms, you do something that will cause a lot of problems and is, on balance, probably going to cause more trouble than it's worth.
- Opportunity knocks but once** ✓✓
This idiom means that you only get one chance to achieve what you really want to do.
- Out and about** ✓✓
If someone is out and about, they have left their home and are getting things done that they need to do.
- Out like a light** ✓✓
If you are out like a light, you fall fast asleep.
- Out of pocket** ✓✓
If you are out of pocket on a deal, you have lost money.
- Out of sight, out of mind** ✓✓
Out of sight, out of mind is used to suggest that someone will not think or worry about something if it isn't directly visible or available to them.
- Out of sorts** ✓✓
If you are feeling a bit upset and depressed, you are out of sorts.
- Out of the blue** ✓✓
If something happens out of the blue, it happens suddenly and unexpectedly.
- Out of the frying pan, into the fire** ✓✓
If you get out of one problem, but find yourself in a worse situation, you are out of the frying pan, into the fire.
- Over a barrel** ✓✓
If someone has you over a barrel, they have you in a position where you have no choice but to accept what they want.
- Over the Counter** ✓✓
Medicines and drugs that can be sold without a doctor's prescription are sold over the counter.
- Over the moon**
If you are over the moon about something, you are overjoyed.

~ P ~

- Pain in the neck** ✓✓
If someone is very annoying and always disturbing you, they are a pain in the neck. Pain in the butt/ass (USA) or Pain in the arse (UK) are less polite alternative forms.
- Paint the town red** ✓✓
If you go out for a night out with lots of fun and drinking, you paint the town red.
- Paper tiger** ✓
A paper tiger is a person, country, institution, etc, that looks powerful, but is actually weak.
- Par for the course** ✓✓
If something is par for the course, it is what you expected it would be. If it is above par, it is better, and if it is below par, it is worse.
- Parrot fashion** ✓
If you learn something parrots fashion, you learn it word for word. A parrot is a bird from South America that can talk and imitate human expressions.
- Part and parcel** ✓✓

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| | If something is part and parcel of your job, say, it is an essential and unavoidable part that has to be accepted. | |
| Pass muster | If something passes muster, it meets the required standard. | ✓✓ |
| Pass the buck | If you pass the buck, you avoid taking responsibility by saying that someone else is responsible. | ✓✓ |
| Pass the time of day | If you pass the time of day with somebody, you stop and say hello, enquire how they are and other such acts of social politeness. | ✓✓ |
| Pay on the nail | If you pay on the nail, you pay promptly in cash. | |
| Pay through the nose | If you pay through the nose for something, you pay a very high price for it. | ✓✓ |
| Pecking order | The pecking order is the order of importance or rank. | ✓✓ |
| Peeping Tom | A peeping Tom is someone who likes spy on people when they are naked or having sex: a voyeur. | ✓✓ |
| Pen is mightier than the sword | The idiom 'the pen is mightier than the sword' means that words and communication are more powerful than wars and fighting. | ✓✓ |
| Perfidious Albion | England is known to some as perfidious Albion, implying that it is not trustworthy in its dealings with foreigners. | |
| Perish the thought | Perish the thought is an expression meaning that you really hope something will not happen. | ✓ |
| Pick up the Tab | A person who pays for everyone picks up the tab. | ✓✓ |
| Pie in the sky | If an idea or scheme is pie in the sky, it is utterly impractical. | ✓✓ |
| Piece of cake | If something is a piece of cake, it is really easy. | ✓✓ |
| Pig in a poke | If someone buys a pig in a poke, they buy something without checking the condition it was in, usually finding out later that it was defective. | ✓ |
| Pink pound | (UK) In the UK, the pink pound is an idiom for the economic power of gay people. | |
| Pipe dream | A pipe dream is an unrealistic, impractical idea or scheme. | ✓✓ |
| Piping hot | If food is piping hot, it is very hot indeed. | ✓✓ |
| Plain sailing | If something is relatively easy and there are no problems doing it, it is plain sailing. | ✓✓ |
| Plastic Smile | When someone is wearing a plastic smile, they are appearing to be happier with a situation or events than they actually are. This is actually a description of the forced smile you might see in many photographs. | |
| Play hardball | If someone plays hardball, they are very aggressive in trying to achieve their aim. | ✓✓ |
| Play havoc | Playing havoc with something is creating disorder and confusion; computer viruses can play havoc with your programs. | ✓✓ |
| Play it by ear | If you play it by ear, you don't have a plan of action, but decide what to do as events take shape. | ✓✓ |
| Play second fiddle | | ✓✓ |

If you play second fiddle, you take a subordinate role behind someone more important.

Pointy-heads

Pointy-heads are supposed intellectuals or experts, but who don't really know that much.

Pop your clogs

When someone pops their clogs, they die.

Pot-luck

If you take pot-luck, you take whatever happens to be available at the time.

Powder your nose

If somebody goes to powder your nose, it is a euphemism for going to the lavatory (toilet).

Proclaim it from the rooftops

If something is proclaimed from the rooftops, it is made as widely known and as public as possible.

Prodigal son

A prodigal son is a young man who wastes a lot on money on a lavish lifestyle. If the prodigal son returns, they return to a better way of living.

Pull in the reins

When you pull in the reins, you slow down or stop something that has been a bit out of control.

Pull someone's leg

If you pull someone's leg, you tease them, but not maliciously.

Pull the other one, it's got brass bells on

This idiom is way of telling somebody that you don't believe them. The word 'brass' is optional.

Pull the wool over someone's eyes

If you pull the wool over someone's eyes, you deceive or cheat them.

Pull up your socks

If you aren't satisfied with someone and want them to do better, you can tell them to pull up their socks.

Pull your finger out!

If someone tells you to do this, they want you to hurry up.

Pull your weight

If someone is not pulling their weight, they aren't making enough effort, especially in group work.

Push the envelope

This means to go to the limits, to do something to the maximum possible.

Pushing up the daisies

If someone is said to be pushing up the daisies, they are dead.

Put all your eggs in one basket

If you put all your eggs in one basket, you risk everything on a single opportunity which, like eggs breaking, could go wrong.

Put or get someone's back up

If you put or get someone's back up, you annoy them.

Put somebody's nose out of joint

If you put someone's nose out of joint, you irritate them or make them angry with you.

Put your foot in it

If you put your foot in it, you do or say something embarrassing and tactless or get yourself into trouble.

Putting the cart before the horse

When you put the cart before the horse, you are doing something the wrong way round.

~ Q ~

Queen of Hearts

A woman who is pre-eminent in her area is a Queen of Hearts.

Queer Street

If someone is in a lot of trouble, especially financial, they are in Queer Street.

Queer your pitch

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| | If someone queers your pitch, they interfere in your affairs and spoil things. | ✓ |
| Queue jumping | Someone who goes to the front of a queue instead of waiting is jumping the queue. | ✓✓ |
| Quick as a flash | If something happens quick as a flash, it happens very fast indeed. | ✓✓ |
| Quick buck | If you make some money easily, you make a quick buck. | ✓✓ |
| Quick on the trigger | Someone who is quick on the trigger acts or responds quickly. | ✓✓ |
| Quids in | (UK) If somebody is quids in, they stand to make a lot of money from something. | ✓✓ |
| Quiet as a mouse | If someone's as quiet as a mouse, they make absolutely no noise. | ✓✓ |

~ R ~

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| Rack and ruin | If something or someone goes to rack and ruin, they are utterly destroyed or wrecked. | ✓✓ |
| Rags to riches | Someone who starts life very poor and becomes rich, goes from rags to riches. | ✓✓ |
| Raining cats and dogs | When it is raining cats and dogs, it is raining very heavily. | ✓✓ |
| Rainy day | If you save something, especially money, for a rainy day, you save it for some possible problem or trouble in the future. | ✓✓ |
| Rather you than me | Rather you than me is an expression used when someone has something unpleasant or arduous to do. It is meant in a good natured way of expressing both sympathy and having a bit of a laugh at their expense. | ✓✓ |
| Raw deal | If you get a raw deal, you are treated unfairly. | ✓✓ |
| Read someone the riot act | If you read someone the riot act, you give them a clear warning that if they don't stop doing something, they will be in serious trouble. | ✓✓ |
| Real trooper | A real trooper is someone who will fight for what they believe in and doesn't give up easily. | ✓✓ |
| Recipe for disaster | A recipe for disaster is a mixture of people and events that could only possibly result in trouble. | ✓✓ |
| Red herring | If something is a distraction from the real issues, it is a red herring. | ✓✓ |
| Red letter day | A red letter day is a one of good luck, when something special happens to you. | ✓ |
| Red mist | If someone sees red or the red mist, they lose their temper and self-control completely. | ✓ |
| Red rag to a bull | If something is a red rag to a bull, it is something that will inevitably make somebody angry or cross. | ✓ |
| Red tape | This is a negative term for the official paperwork and bureaucracy that we have to deal with. | ✓✓ |
| Rest is gravy | (USA) If the rest is gravy, it is easy and straightforward once you have reached that stage. | ✓✓ |
| Rewrite history | If you rewrite history, you change your version of past events so as to make yourself look better than you would if the truth was told. | ✓✓ |
| Rice missionary | A rice missionary gives food to hungry people as a way of converting them to Christianity. | |

Rich as Croesus

Someone who is as rich as Croesus is very wealthy indeed.

Right as rain

If things are right as rain, then everything is going well in your life.

Right royal

A right royal night out would be an extremely exciting, memorable and fun one.

Ring a bell

If something rings a bell, it reminds you of something you have heard before, though you may not be able to remember it very well. A name may ring a bell, so you know you have heard the name before, but cannot place it properly.

Ringside seat

If you have a ringside seat, you can observe something from a very close and clear position.

Rock the boat

If you rock the boat, you destabilize a situation by making trouble. It is often used as advice; 'Don't rock the boat'.

Rolling in the aisles

If the audience watching something are laughing loudly, the show has them rolling in the aisles.

Rome was not built in a day.

This idiom means that many things cannot be done instantly, and require time and patience.

Rough diamond

A rough diamond is a person who might be a bit rude but who is good underneath it all.

Rough-hewn

If something, especially something made from wood or stone, is rough-hewn, it is unfinished or unpolished.

Round the bend

If someone has gone round the bend, they have stopped being rational about something. If something drives you round the bend, it irritates you or makes you angry.

Round the houses

If you go round the houses, you do something in an inefficient way when there is a quicker, more convenient way.

Rub someone up the wrong way

If you annoy or irritate someone when you didn't mean to, you rub them up the wrong way.

Ruffle a few feathers

If you ruffle a few feathers, you annoy some people when making changes or improvements.

Rule of thumb

Rule of thumb means approximately.

Run circles around someone

If you can run circles around someone, you are smarter and intellectually quicker than they are.

Run the gauntlet

If somebody is being criticized harshly by a lot of people, they are said to run the gauntlet.

Running on empty

If you are exhausted but keep going, you are running on empty.

~ S ~

Sacred cow

Something that is a sacred cow is held in such respect that it cannot be criticized or attacked.

Safe and sound

If you arrive safe and sound, then nothing has harmed you on your way.

Safe pair of hands

A person who can be trusted to do something without causing any trouble is a safe pair of hands.

Sail close to the wind

If you sail close to the wind, you take risks to do something, going close to the limit of what is allowed or acceptable.

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| Sail under false colours/colors | ✓ |
| Someone who sails under false colours/colors is hypocritical or pretends to be something they aren't in order to deceive people. | |
| Salad days | |
| Your salad days are an especially happy period of your life. | |
| Salt of the earth | ✓✓ |
| People who are salt of the earth are decent, dependable and unpretentious. | |
| Save someone's bacon | ✓✓ |
| If something saves your bacon, it saves your life or rescues you from a desperate situation. People can also save your bacon. | |
| Saved by the bell | ✓✓ |
| If you are saved by the bell, you are rescued from a danger or a tricky situation just in time. | |
| Saving grace | ✓✓ |
| If someone has some character defects, but has a characteristic that compensate for their failings and shortcomings, this is their saving grace. | |
| Say when | ✓✓ |
| People say this when pouring a drink as a way of telling you to tell them when there's enough in your glass. | |
| Say-so | ✓✓ |
| If you do something on someone else's say-so, you do it on the authority, advice or recommendation. | |
| Scarlet woman | ✓ |
| This idiom is used as a pejorative term for a sexually promiscuous woman, especially an adulteress. | |
| Scraping the barrel | ✓✓ |
| When all the best people, things or ideas and so on are used up and people try to make do with what they have left, they are scraping the barrel. | |
| Screw loose | ✓✓ |
| If someone has a screw loose, they are crazy. | |
| Searching question | ✓✓ |
| A searching question goes straight to the heart of the subject matter, possibly requiring an answer with a degree of honesty that the other person finds uncomfortable. | |
| Second wind | ✓✓ |
| If you overcome tiredness and find new energy and enthusiasm, you have second wind. | |
| Seen better days | ✓✓ |
| If something's seen better days, it has aged badly and visibly compared to when it was new. The phrase can also be used to describe people. | |
| Sell like hot cakes | ✓✓ |
| If a product is selling very well, it is selling like hot cakes. | |
| Set in stone | ✓✓ |
| If something is set in stone, it cannot be changed or altered. | |
| Set the wheels in motion | ✓✓ |
| When you set the wheels in motion, you get something started. | |
| Seven sheets to the wind | ✓✓ |
| If someone is seven sheets to the wind, they are very drunk. | |
| Seventh heaven | ✓✓ |
| If you are in seventh heaven, you are extremely happy. | |
| Shades of meaning | |
| Shades of meaning is a phrase used to describe the small, subtle differences in meaning between similar words or phrases; 'kid' and 'youth' both refer to young people, but carry differing views and ideas about young people. | |
| Sharp cookie | ✓✓ |
| Someone who isn't easily deceived or fooled is a sharp cookie. | |
| Shoestring | ✓✓ |
| If you do something on a shoestring, you try to spend the absolute minimum amount of money possible on it. | |
| Shoot yourself in the foot | ✓✓ |

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| | If you shoot yourself in the foot, you do something that damages your ambition, career, etc. | ✓ |
| Short Shrift | If somebody gives you short shrift, they treat you rudely and brusquely, showing no interest or sympathy. | ✓ |
| Shot in the dark | If you have a shot in the dark at something, you try something where you have little hope of success. | ✓✓ |
| Show the ropes (see know the ropes) | | |
| Sick as a dog | If somebody's as sick as a dog, they throw up (=vomit) violently. | ✓✓ |
| Sick as a parrot | If someone's sick as a parrot about something, they are unhappy, disappointed or depressed about it. | ✓ |
| Sick to death | If you are sick to death of something, you have been exposed to so much of it that you cannot take any more. | ✓✓ |
| Sight to behold | If something is a sight to behold, it means that seeing it is in some way special, either spectacularly beautiful or, equally, incredibly ugly or revolting, etc. | ✓✓ |
| Silly season | The silly season is midsummer when Parliament is closed and nothing much is happening that is newsworthy, which reduces the press to reporting trivial and stupid stories. | |
| Silver surfer | A silver surfer is an elderly person who uses the internet. | |
| Since time immemorial | If something has happened since time immemorial, it's been going on for such a long time that nobody can remember a time without it. | ✓✓ |
| Sixes and sevens | If something is all at sixes and sevens, then there is a lot of disagreement and confusion about what should be done. | ✓ |
| Skeleton in the closet | If someone has a skeleton in the closet, they have a dark, shameful secret in their past that they want to remain secret. | ✓✓ |
| Sleep like a baby | If you sleep very well, you sleep like a baby. | ✓✓ |
| Sleight of hand | Sleight of hand is the ability to use your hands in a clever way, like a magician performing tricks you can't see. | ✓✓ |
| Slim chance | A slim chance is a very small chance. | ✓✓ |
| Slippery customer | A person from whom it is difficult to get anything definite or fixed is a slippery customer. | ✓✓ |
| Slough of despond | If someone is very depressed or in despair, they're in a slough of despond. | |
| Small beer | If something is small beer, it's unimportant. | |
| Small fry | If someone is small fry,, they are unimportant. The term is often used when the police arrest the less important criminals, but are unable to catch the leaders and masterminds. | ✓✓ |
| Smart Alec | A smart Alec is a conceited person who likes to show off how clever and knowledgeable they are. | ✓✓ |
| Smell a rat | If you smell a rat, you know instinctively that something is wrong or that someone is lying to you. | ✓✓ |
| Smoke like a chimney | Someone who smokes very heavily smokes like a chimney. | ✓✓ |

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| Smoke the peace pipe | ✓ |
| If people smoke the peace pipe, they stop arguing and fighting. | |
| Smokestack industry | |
| Heavy industries like iron and steel production, especially if they produce a lot of pollution, are smokestack industries. | |
| Smoking gun | ✓✓ |
| A smoking gun is definitive proof of someone's guilt. | |
| Smooth as a baby's bottom | ✓✓ |
| If something is smooth as a baby's bottom, it has a regular, flat surface. | |
| Snake in the grass | ✓✓ |
| Someone who is a snake in the grass betrays you even though you have trusted them. | |
| Snake oil salesperson | ✓ |
| A person who promotes something that doesn't work is selling snake oil. | |
| So on and so forth | ✓✓ |
| And so on and so forth mean the same as etcetera (etc.). | |
| Sod's law | |
| Sod's law states that if something can go wrong then it will. | |
| Soft soap someone | ✓ |
| If you soft soap someone, you flatter them. | |
| Some other time | ✓✓ |
| If somebody says they'll do something some other time, they mean at some indefinite time in the future, possibly never, but they certainly don't want to feel obliged to fix a specific time or date. | |
| Speak of the devil! | ✓✓ |
| If you are talking about someone and they happen to walk in, you can use this idiom as a way of letting them know you were talking about them. | |
| Spend a penny | ✓ |
| (UK) This is a euphemistic idiom meaning to go to the toilet. | |
| Spend like a sailor | ✓ |
| Someone who spends their money wildly spends like a sailor. | |
| Spick and span | ✓✓ |
| If a room is spick and span, it is very clean and tidy. | |
| Spill the beans | ✓✓ |
| If you spill the beans, you reveal a secret or confess to something. | |
| Spinning a line | ✓✓ |
| When someone spins you a line, they are trying to deceive you by lying. | |
| Spinning a yarn | ✓ |
| When someone spins you a yarn, they are trying to deceive you by lying. | |
| Spirit of the law | ✓✓ |
| The spirit of the law is the idea or ideas that the people who made the law wanted to have effect. | |
| Spitting image | ✓✓ |
| If a person is the spitting image of somebody, they look exactly alike. | |
| Split hairs | ✓✓ |
| If people split hairs, they concentrate on tiny and unimportant details to find fault with something. | |
| Square peg in a round hole | ✓✓ |
| If somebody's in a situation, organization, etc, where they don't fit in and feel out of place, they are a square peg in a round hole. | |
| Stars and stripes | ✓✓ |
| The stars and stripes is the American flag. | |
| Stars in your eyes | ✓✓ |
| Someone who dreams of being famous has stars in their eyes. | |
| State of the art | ✓✓ |
| If something is state of the art, it is the most up-to-date model incorporating the latest and best technology. | |
| Status quo | ✓✓ |

Someone who wants to preserve the status quo wants a particular situation to remain unchanged.

- Steer clear of** ✓✓
If you steer clear of something, you avoid it.
- Stick out like a sore thumb** ✓✓
If something sticks or stands out like a sore thumb, it is clearly and obviously different from the things that are around it.
- Stick to your guns** ✓✓
If you stick to your guns, you keep your position even though people attack or criticize you.
- Sticky wicket** ✓
(UK) If you are on a sticky wicket, you are in a difficult situation.
- Stiff upper lip** ✓
(UK) If you keep your emotions to yourself and don't let others know how you feel when something bad happens, you keep a stiff upper lip.
- Stiff-necked** ✓
A stiff-necked person is rather formal and finds it hard to relax in company.
- Stitch in time saves nine** ✓✓
A stitch in time saves nine means that if a job needs doing it is better to do it now, because it will only get worse, like a hole in clothes that requires stitching.
- Stone dead** ✓✓
This idiom is a way of emphasizing that there were absolutely no signs of life.
- Storm in a teacup** ✓
If someone exaggerates a problem or makes a small problem seem far greater than it really is, then they are making a storm in a teacup.
- Stroll down memory lane** ✓✓
If you take a stroll down memory lane, you talk about the past or revisit places that were important to you in the past.
- Strong as an ox** ✓✓
Someone who's exceedingly strong physically is said to be as strong as an ox.
- Stubborn as a mule** ✓✓
Someone who will not listen to other people's advice and won't change their way of doing things is as stubborn as a mule.
- Sure as eggs is eggs** ✓
These means absolutely certain, and we do say 'is' even though it is grammatically wrong.
- Swear like a sailor** ✓
Someone who is foul-mouthed and uses bad language all the time, swears like a sailor.
- Swear like a trooper** ✓✓
Someone who is foul-mouthed and uses bad language all the time, swears like a trooper.
- Sweep things under the carpet** ✓✓
If people try to ignore unpleasant things and forget about them, they sweep them under the carpet.
- Swim against the tide** ✓✓
If you swim against the tide, you try to do something that is very difficult because there is a lot of opposition to you.
- Swimmingly** ✓
If things are going swimmingly, they are going very well.

~ T ~

- Take a leaf out of someone's book** ✓
If you take a leaf out of someone's book, you copy something they do because it will help you.
- Take a straw poll** ✓
If you take a straw poll, you sound a number of people out to see their opinions on an issue or topic.
- Take it on the chin** ✓

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| | If you take something on the chin, something bad happens to you and you take it directly without fuss. | |
| Take someone for a ride | If you are taken for a ride, you are deceived by someone. | ✓✓ |
| Take the bull by its horns | Taking a bull by its horns would be the most direct but also the most dangerous way to try to compete with such an animal. When we use the phrase in everyday talk, we mean that the person we are talking about tackles their problems directly and is not worried about any risks involved. | ✓✓ |
| Take the rough with the smooth | People say that you have to take the rough with the smooth, meaning that you have to be prepared to accept the disadvantages as well of the advantages of something. | ✓✓ |
| Taken as read | If something can be taken as read, it is so definite that it's not necessary to talk about it. | ✓ |
| Talk of the town | When everybody is talking about particular people and events, they are he talk of the town. | ✓✓ |
| Talk out of the back of your head | If someone is talking out of the back of their head, they are talking rubbish. | ✓ |
| Talk out of your hat | If someone is talking out of their hat, they're talking utter rubbish, especially if compounded with total ignorance of the subject on which they are pontificating. | ✓ |
| Talk shop | If you talk shop, you talk about work matters, especially if you do this outside work. | ✓✓ |
| Tall order | Something that is likely to be hard to achieve or fulfill is a tall order. | ✓✓ |
| Tall story | A tall story is one that is untrue and unbelievable. | ✓✓ |
| Tally ho! | (UK) This is an exclamation used for encouragement before doing something difficult or dangerous. | ✓ |
| Teething problems | The problems that a project has when it's starting are the teething problems. | ✓✓ |
| That's the way the cookie crumbles. | This idiom means that things don't always turn out the way we want. | ✓✓ |
| The ball's in your court | If somebody says this to you, they mean that it's up to you to decide or take the next step. | ✓✓ |
| The be all and end all | The phrase 'The be all and end all' means that a something is the final, or ultimate outcome or result of a situation or event. | ✓✓ |
| The common weal | If something is done for the common weal, it is done in the interests and for the benefit of the majority or the general public. | ✓ |
| The grass is always greener | This idiom means that what other people have or do looks preferable to our life. The complete phrase is 'The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence'. | ✓✓ |
| The more the merrier | The more the merrier means that the greater the quantity or the bigger the number of something, the happier the speaker will be. | ✓✓ |
| The penny dropped | When the penny drops, someone belatedly understands something that everyone else has long since understood. | |
| The sands of time | The sands of time is an idiom meaning that time runs out either through something reaching an end or through a person's death. It comes from the sand used in hourglasses, an ancient way of measuring time. | ✓ |
| The short straw | | ✓✓ |

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| | If you take the short straw, you lose a selection process, which means that you have to do something unpleasant. | |
| The world and his wife | If the world and his wife were somewhere, then huge numbers of people were present. | |
| Their bark is worse than their bite | If someone's bark is worse than their bite, they get angry and shout and make threats, but don't actually do anything. | ✓✓ |
| There are many ways to skin a cat | This is an expression meaning there are many different ways of doing the same thing. | ✓ |
| There's no such thing as a free lunch. | This idiom means that you don't get things for free, so if something appears to be free, there's a catch and you'll have to pay in some way. | ✓✓ |
| There's the rub | The meaning of this idiom is 'that's the problem'. | ✓✓ |
| Thick as thieves | If people are thick as thieves, they are very close friends who have no secrets from each other. | ✓ |
| Thick-skinned | If a person is thick-skinned, they are not affected by criticism. | ✓✓ |
| Thin as a rake | A rake is a garden tool with a long, thin, wooden handle, so someone very thin is thin as a rake. | ✓✓ |
| Thin end of the wedge | The thin end of the wedge is something small and seemingly unimportant that will lead to something much bigger and more serious. | ✓ |
| Thin line | If there's a thin line between things, it's hard to distinguish them- there's a thin line between love and hate. | |
| Thin-skinned | If somebody is thin-skinned, they are very sensitive to any sort of criticism. | ✓✓ |
| Thinking outside of the box | Being able to solve problems by using unfamiliar points of reference and never-before thought of ideas. By not using the conventional approach. | |
| Think the world of (someone / something) | To hold something or someone in very high esteem. To love or admire immensely. | ✓✓ |
| Those who live by the sword die by the sword | This means that violent people will be treated violently themselves. | ✓✓ |
| Three sheets to the wind | If someone is three sheets to the wind, they are drunk. | ✓✓ |
| Thrilled to bits | If you are thrilled to bits, you are extremely pleased or excited about something. | ✓✓ |
| Through thick and thin | If a friend helps you through thick and thin, they help you through the good and the bad times, regardless of the difficulties and circumstances. | ✓✓ |
| Throw a sickie | If you pretend to be ill to take a day off work or school, you throw a sickie. | ✓ |
| Throw down the gauntlet | Throw down the gauntlet is to issue a challenge to somebody. | ✓✓ |
| Throw in the towel | If you throw in the towel, you admit that you are defeated or cannot do something. | ✓✓ |
| Throw the baby out with the bath-water | If you get rid of useful things when discarding inessential things, you throw the baby out with the bath-water. | ✓✓ |
| Throw the book at someone | If you throw the book at someone, you punish them as severely as possible. | ✓✓ |
| Thumbs down/up | | ✓✓ |

If something gets the thumbs up, it gets approval, while the thumbs down means disapproval.

- Tie the knot** ✓✓
When people tie the knot, they get married.
- Tight ship** ✓✓
If you run a tight ship, you control something strictly and don't allow people much freedom of action.
- Tighten your belt** ✓✓
If you have to tighten your belt, you have to economize.
- Till you're blue in the face** ✓✓
If you do something till you're blue in the face, you do it repeatedly without achieving the desired result until you're incredibly frustrated.
- Tilt at windmills**
A person who tilts at windmills, tries to do things that will never work in practice.
- Time of your life** ✓✓
If you're having the time of your life, you are enjoying yourself very much indeed.
- Time-honoured practice** ✓✓
A time-honoured practice is a traditional way of doing something that has become almost universally accepted as the most appropriate or suitable way.
- Tip of the iceberg** ✓✓
The tip of the iceberg is the part of a problem that can be seen, with far more serious problems lying underneath.
- Tired and emotional** ✓
(UK) This idiom is a euphemism used to mean 'drunk', especially when talking about politicians.
- To a man** ✓
If a group of people does, believes, thinks, etc, something to a man, then they all do it.
- To little avail** ✓✓
If something is to little avail, it means that, despite great efforts, something ended in failure, but taking comfort from the knowledge that nothing else could have been done to avert or avoid the result.
- To the end of time** ✓
To the end of time is an extravagant way of saying 'forever'.
- To the ends of the earth** ✓✓
If someone will go to the ends of the earth for something, no distance is too great for them they are so determined to get it.
- Top dog** ✓✓
The most important or influential person is the top dog.
- Touch wood** ✓✓
If someone says 'Touch wood' before they do something, they are wishing for good luck.
- Tough cookie** ✓✓
A tough cookie is a person who will do everything necessary to achieve what they want.
- Tried and tested** ✓✓
If a method has been tried and tested, it is known to work or be effective because it has been successfully used long enough to be trusted.
- True blue** ✓✓
A person who is true blue is loyal and dependable, someone who can be relied on in all circumstances.
- Truth will out** ✓
Truth will out means that, given time, the facts of a case will emerge no matter how people might try to conceal them.
- Turf war** ✓✓
If people or organizations are fighting for control of something, it is a turf war.
- Turn the other cheek** ✓✓
If you turn the other cheek, you are humble and do not retaliate or get outwardly angry when someone offends or hurts you, in fact, you give them the opportunity to re-offend instead and compound their unpleasantness.

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| Twenty-four seven | ✓✓ |
| Twenty-four seven or 24/7 means all the time, coming from 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. | |
| Twinkling of an eye | ✓✓ |
| If something happens in the twinkling of an eye, it happens very quickly. | |
| Two left feet | ✓✓ |
| A person with two left feet can't dance. | |
| ~ U ~ | |
| U-turn | ✓✓ |
| If a government changes its position radically on an issue, especially when they have promised not to do so, this is a U-turn. | |
| Ugly duckling | ✓✓ |
| An ugly duckling is a child who shows little promise, but who develops later into a real talent or beauty. | |
| Uncle Sam | ✓✓ |
| (USA) Uncle Sam is the government of the USA. | |
| Under a cloud | ✓✓ |
| If someone is suspected of having done something wrong, they are under a cloud. | |
| Under false colours/colors | ✓✓ |
| If someone does something under false colours/colors, they pretend to be something they are not in order to deceive people so that they can succeed. | |
| Under fire | ✓✓ |
| If someone is being attacked and criticized heavily, they are under fire. | |
| Under the table | ✓✓ |
| Bribes or illegal payments are often described as money under the table. | |
| Under the weather | ✓✓ |
| If you are feeling a bit ill, sad or lack energy, you are under the weather. | |
| Under your breath | ✓✓ |
| If you say something under your breath, you whisper or say it very quietly. | |
| Under your nose | ✓✓ |
| If something happens right in front of you, especially if it is surprising or audacious, it happens under your nose. | |
| Unwavering loyalty | ✓✓ |
| Unwavering loyalty does not question or doubt the person or issue and supports them completely. | |
| Up in the air | ✓✓ |
| If a matter is up in the air, no decision has been made and there is uncertainty about it. | |
| Up sticks | ✓ |
| If you up sticks, you leave somewhere, usually permanently and without warning- he upped sticks and went to work abroad. | |
| Up the ante | ✓✓ |
| If you up the ante, you increase the importance or value of something, especially where there's an element of risk as the term comes from gambling, where it means to increase the stake (the amount of money bet). | |
| Up the duff | ✓ |
| (UK) If a woman is up the duff, she's pregnant. | |
| Up the stick | ✓ |
| (UK) If a woman is up the stick, she's pregnant. | |
| Up the wall | ✓✓ |
| If someone goes up the wall, they get very angry. | |
| Up to scratch | ✓✓ |
| If something doesn't come up to scratch, it doesn't meet the standard required or expected. | |
| Up to snuff | ✓✓ |
| (UK) If something isn't up to snuff, it doesn't meet the standard expected. | |
| Upper crust | ✓✓ |
| (UK) In the UK, the upper crust are the upper class and establishment. | |

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| Upper hand | If you have the upper hand, you have the advantage. | ✓✓ |
| Upset the apple cart | If you upset the apple cart, you cause trouble and upset people. | ✓✓ |
| ~ V ~ | | |
| Vale of tears | This vale of tears is the world and the suffering that life brings. | ✓ |
| Velvet glove | This idiom is used to describe a person who appears gentle, but is determined and inflexible underneath. | ✓ |
| Vicar of Bray | (UK) A person who changes their beliefs and principles to stay popular with people above them is a Vicar of Bray | |
| Vicious circle | A vicious circle is a sequence of events that make each other worse- someone drinks because they are unhappy at work, then loses their job... | ✓✓ |
| Virgin territory | If something is virgin territory, it hasn't been explored before. | ✓✓ |
| ~ W ~ | | |
| Waiting in the wings | If someone is waiting in the wings, or in the wings, they are in the background, but nearby, ready to act on short notice. | ✓✓ |
| Walk on eggshells | If you have to walk on eggshells when with someone, you have to be very careful because they get angry or offended very easily. | ✓✓ |
| Wallflower | A woman politician given an unimportant government position so that the government can pretend it takes women seriously is a wallflower. | ✓✓ |
| Warpath | If someone is on the warpath, they are very angry about something and will do anything to get things sorted the way they want. | ✓✓ |
| Warts and all | If you like someone warts and all, you like them with all their faults. | ✓✓ |
| Wash your hands of something | If you wash your hands of something, you disassociate yourself and accept no responsibility for what will happen. | ✓✓ |
| Water off a duck's back | If criticism or something similar is like water off a duck's back to somebody, they aren't affected by it in the slightest. | ✓✓ |
| Water over the dam | (USA) If something has happened and cannot be changed, it is water over the dam. | |
| Water under the bridge | (UK) If something belongs to the past and isn't important or troubling any more, it is water under the bridge. | ✓✓ |
| Watering hole | (UK) A watering hole is a pub. | ✓✓ |
| Wear sackcloth and ashes | If someone displays their grief or contrition publicly, they wear sackcloth and ashes. | |
| Weather a storm | If you weather a storm, you get through a crisis or hard times. | ✓✓ |
| Wet behind the ears | Someone who is wet behind the ears is either very young or inexperienced. | |
| Wet blanket | | ✓✓ |

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| A wet blanket is someone who tries to spoil other people's fun. | ✓✓ |
| What will be will be | ✓✓ |
| The expression, what will be will be, is used to describe the notion that fate will decide the outcome of a course of events, even if action is taken to try to alter it. | |
| What's your take on that? | ✓✓ |
| This idiom is way of asking someone for their opinion and ideas. | |
| What's good for the goose is good for the gander | ✓✓ |
| This idiom means that the sexes should be treated the same way and not be subjected to different standards. | |
| Where the rubber meets the road | ✓✓ |
| (USA) Where the rubber meets the road is the most important point for something, the moment of truth. An athlete can train all day, but the race is where the rubber meets the road and they'll know how good they really are. | |
| Where there's a will, there's a way | ✓✓ |
| This idiom means that if people really want to do something, they will manage to find a way of doing it. | |
| Whet your appetite | ✓✓ |
| If something whet your appetite, it interests you and makes you want more of it. | |
| Which came first the chicken or the egg? | ✓✓ |
| This idiomatic expression is used when it is not clear who or what caused something. | |
| While the cat's away, the mouse will play | ✓✓ |
| People whose behaviour is strictly controlled go over the top when the authority is not around, which is why most teenagers have parties when their parents have gone on holiday. The parents are the scary authority figures, but the cat's away and the kids are the mice partying and enjoying their freedom. | |
| White as a sheet | ✓✓ |
| A bad shock can make somebody go as white as a sheet. | |
| White elephant | ✓✓ |
| A white elephant is an expensive burden; something that costs far too much money to run, like the Millennium Dome in the UK. | |
| Who wears the trousers? | ✓ |
| The person who wears the trousers in a relationship is the dominant person who controls things. | |
| Wide berth | ✓✓ |
| If you give someone a wide berth, you keep yourself well away from them because they are dangerous. | |
| Wide of the mark | ✓✓ |
| If you are wide of the mark, you are either wrong or not close to understanding it. | |
| Will-o'-the-wisp | |
| Something that deceives by its appearance is a will-o'-the-wisp; it looks good, but turns out to be a disappointment. | |
| Win by a nose | ✓ |
| If somebody wins by a nose, they only just beat the others. | |
| Window dressing | ✓✓ |
| If something is done to pretend to be dealing with an issue or problem, rather than actually dealing with it, it is window dressing. | |
| Winner takes all | ✓✓ |
| If everything goes to the winner, as in an election, the winner takes all. | |
| With a heavy hand | ✓✓ |
| If someone does something with a heavy hand, they do it in a strict way, exerting a lot of control. | |
| With child | ✓✓ |
| (UK) If a woman's with child, she's pregnant. | |
| Wolf in sheep's clothing | ✓✓ |
| A wolf in sheep's clothing is something dangerous that looks quite safe and innocent. | |
| Wood for the trees | ✓✓ |

If someone can't see the wood for the trees, they get so caught up in small details that they fail to understand the bigger picture.

Word of mouth

If something becomes known by word of mouth, it is because people are talking about it, not through publicity, etc.

Word of the law

The word of the law means that the law is interpreted in an absolutely literal way which goes against the ideas that the lawmakers had wished to implement.

Words fail me

If words fail you, you can't find the words to express what you are trying to say.

Work like a dog

If you work like a dog, you work very hard.

Work your fingers to the bone

If you work your fingers to the bone, you work extremely hard on something.

Work your socks off

If you work your socks off, you work very hard.

World at your feet

If everything is going well and the future looks full of opportunity, you have the world at your feet.

World is your oyster

When the world is your oyster, you are getting everything you want from life.

Worm information

If you worm information out of somebody, you persuade them to tell you something they wanted to keep from you.

Worm's eye view

A worm's eye view of something is the view from below, either physically or socially.

Worse for wear

If something's worse for wear, it has been used for a long time and, consequently, isn't in very good condition. A person worse for wear is usually drunk.

Wouldn't touch it with a bargepole

(UK) If you wouldn't touch something with a bargepole, you would not consider being involved under any circumstances. (In American English, people say they wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole)

Wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole

(USA) If you wouldn't touch something with a ten-foot pole, you would not consider being involved under any circumstances. (In British English, people say they wouldn't touch it with a bargepole)

Writing on the wall

If the writing's on the wall for something, it is doomed to fail.

Written all over your face

If someone has done something wrong or secret, but cannot hide it in their expression, it is written all over their face.

Wrong end of the stick

If someone has got the wrong end of the stick, they have misunderstood what someone has said to them.

Wrong foot

If you start something on the wrong foot, you start badly.

~ X ~

X factor

The dangers for people in the military that civilians do not face, for which they receive payment, are known as the X factor.

X marks the spot

This is used to say where something is located or hidden.

X-rated

If something is x-rated, it is not suitable for children.

~ Y ~

Yah boo sucks

Yah boo & yah boo sucks can be used to show that you have no sympathy with someone.

Yellow press

The yellow press is a term for the popular and sensationalist newspapers.

Yellow-bellied

A yellow-bellied person is a coward.

✓✓

Yen

If you have a yen to do something, you have a desire to do it.

✓✓

Yes-man

Someone who always agrees with people in authority is a yes-man.

✓✓

Yesterday's man/woman

Someone, especially a politician or celebrity, whose career is over or on the decline is yesterday's man or woman.

✓✓

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink

This idiom means you can offer something to someone, like good advice, but you cannot make them take it.

✓✓

You can say that again

If you want to agree strongly with what someone has said, you can say 'You can say that again' as a way of doing so.

✓✓

You can't have your cake and eat it

This idiom means that you can't have things both ways. For example, you can't have very low taxes and a high standard of state care.

✓✓

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear

If something isn't very good to start with, you can't do much to improve it.

✓

You can't make an omelets without breaking eggs.

This idiom means that in order to achieve something or make progress, there are often losers in the process.

✓✓

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours

This idiom means that if you do something for me, I'll return the favour.

✓✓

You what?

This is a very colloquial way of expressing surprise or disbelief at something you have heard. It can also be used to ask someone to say something again.

✓✓

Young Turk

A Young Turk is a young person who is rebellious and difficult to control in a company, team or organization.

Your name is mud

If someone's name is mud, then they have a bad reputation.

✓✓

~ Z ~

Zero hour

The time when something important is to begin is zero hour.

✓✓

Zero tolerance

If the police have a zero tolerance policy, they will not overlook any crime, no matter how small or trivial.

✓✓