

Quick Handbook Series



Idiomatic Expressions



Ivan Moreno

maestro
handbooks

CARTA AO LEITOR

Este pequeno manual de expressões idiomáticas foi compilado com o objetivo de auxiliar os aprendizes do idioma a desenvolverem o seu conhecimento através do contato com algumas singularidades da língua inglesa.

As mais diversas expressões idiomáticas, no inglês “*idioms*”, são usadas diariamente pelos nativos da língua e o seu entendimento, por parte dos falantes não-nativos, enriquecem suas experiências no idioma.

Lembre-se de sempre folhar este manual e decorar duas ou três novas expressões e tente entender os detalhes de cada uma.

Ótima leitura!
Ivan Moreno

A bit much

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

A day late and a dollar short

(USA) If something is a day late and a dollar short, it is too little, too late.

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 little bird told me

If someone doesn't want to say where they got some information from, they can say that a little bird told them.

A OK

If things are A OK, they are absolutely fine.

A penny for your thoughts

This idiom is used as a way of asking someone what they are thinking about.

A penny saved is a penny earned

This means that we shouldn't spend or waste money, but try to save it.

A poor man's something

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

A pretty penny

If something costs a pretty penny, it is very expensive.

A rolling stone gathers no moss

People say this to mean that a go-getter type person is more successful than a person not doing any thing.

A steal

If something is a steal, it costs much less than it is really worth.

A 1

If something is A 1, 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.

Above board

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

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

This idiom means that when people are apart, their love grows stronger.

Accident waiting to happen

If something is an accident waiting to happen, there's definitely going to be an accident or it's bound to go wrong. ('Disaster waiting to happen' is also used.)

Ace up your sleeve

If you have an ace up your sleeve, you have something that will give you an advantage that other people don't know about.

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.

Actions speak louder than words

This idiom means that what people actually do is more important than what they say- people can promise things but then fail to deliver.

Add fuel to the fire

If people add fuel to the fire, they make a bad situation worse.

Add insult to injury

When people add insult to injury, they make a bad situation even worse.

After your own heart

A person after your own heart thinks the same way as you.

Against the clock

If you do something against the clock, you are rushed and have very little time to do it.

Age before beauty

When this idiom is used, it is a way of allowing an older person to do something first, though often in a slightly sarcastic way.

Ahead of the pack

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

Ahead of time

If something happens ahead of time, it happens early or before the set time.

All along

If you have known or suspected something all along, then you have felt this from the beginning.

All ears

If someone says they're all ears, they are very interested in hearing about something.

All eyes on me

If all eyes are on someone, then everyone is paying attention to them.

All hat, no cattle

(USA) When someone talks big, but cannot back it up, they are all hat, no cattle.

All heart

Someone who is all heart is very kind and generous.

All hell broke loose

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

All in your head

If something is all in your head, you have imagined it and it is not real.

All of the above

This idiom can be used to mean everything that has been said or written, especially all the choices or possibilities.

All over the map

(USA) If something like a discussion is all over the map, it doesn't stick to the main topic and goes off on tangents.

All over the place

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

All roads lead to Rome

This means that there can be many different ways of doing something.

All set

If you're all set, you are ready for something.

All skin and bone

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

All square

If something is all square, nobody has an advantage or is ahead of the others.

All that glitters is not gold

This means that appearances can be deceptive and things that look or sound valuable can be worthless. ('All that glistens is not gold' is an alternative.)

All the rage

If something's all the rage, it is very popular or fashionable at the moment.

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.

All your eggs in one basket

If you put all your eggs in one basket, you risk everything at once, instead of trying to spread the risk. (This is often used as a negative imperative- 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket'. 'Have your eggs in one basket' is also used.)

All's fair in love and war

This idiom is used to say that where there is conflict, people can be expected to behave in a more vicious way.

Alter ego

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

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.

And all that jazz

This idiom means that everything related or similar is included.

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.

Armchair critic

An armchair critic is someone who offers advice but never shows that they could actually do any better.

Armed to the teeth

If people are armed to the teeth, they have lots of weapons.

As a rule

If you do something as a rule, then you usually do it.

As cold as ice

This idiom can be used to describe a person who does not show any emotion.

As cold as stone

If something is as cold as stone, it is very cold. If a person is as cold as stone, they are unemotional.

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 crow flies

This idiom is used to describe the shortest possible distance between two places.

As you sow, so shall you reap

This means that if you do bad things to people, bad things will happen to you, or good things if you do good things.

Asleep at the wheel

If someone is asleep at the wheel, they are not doing their job or taking their responsibilities very carefully. 'Asleep at the switch' is an alternative.

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 each other's throats

If people are at each other's throats, they are fighting, arguing or competing ruthlessly.

At full tilt

If something is at full tilt, it is going or happening as fast or as hard as possible.

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 odds

If you are at odds with someone, you cannot agree with them and argue.

At sea

If things are at sea, or all at sea, they are disorganized and chaotic.

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 the day

This is used to mean 'in conclusion' or 'when all is said and done'.

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 your wits' end

If you are at your wits' end, you have no idea what to do next and are very frustrated.

Average Joe

An average Joe is an ordinary person without anything exceptional about them.

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, a resentment and you want to get revenge or sort it out. In American English, it is 'ax'.

- B -

Baby boomer

(USA) A baby boomer is someone born in the years after the end of the Second World War, a period when the population was growing very fast.

Back burner

If an issue is on the back burner, it is being given low priority.

Back the wrong horse

If you back the wrong horse, you give your support to the losing side in something.

Back to back

If things happen back to back, they are directly one after another.

Back to square one

If you are back to square one, you have to start from the beginning again.

Back to the drawing board

If you have to go back to the drawing board, you have to go back to the beginning and start something again.

Back to the salt mine

If someone says they have to go back to the saltmine, they have to return to work.

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 blood

If people feel hate because of things that happened in the past, there is bad blood between them.

Bad egg

A person who cannot be trusted is a bad egg. Good egg is the opposite.

Bad shape

If something's in bad shape, it's in bad condition. If a person's in bad shape, they are unfit or unhealthy.

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.

Bag of nerves

If someone is a bag of nerves, they are very worried or nervous.

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.

Bandit territory

An area or an industry, profession, etc, where rules and laws are ignored or flouted is bandit territory.

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.

Bare your heart

If you bare your heart to someone, you tell them your personal and private feelings. ('Bare your soul' is an alternative form of the idiom.)

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

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.

Batten down the hatches

If you batten down the hatches, you prepare for the worst that could happen to you.

Battle of nerves

A battle of nerves is a situation where neither side in a conflict or dispute is willing to back down and is waiting for the other side to weaken. ('A war of nerves' is an alternative form.)

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.

Bear fruit

If something bears fruit, it produces positive results.

Bear the brunt

People who bear the brunt of something endure the worst of something bad.

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 the daylights out of someone

If someone beats the daylights out of another person, they hit them repeatedly. ('Knock' can also be used and it can be made even stronger by saying 'the living daylights'.)

Beat to the punch

If you beat someone to the punch, you act before them and gain an advantage.

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.

Beauty is only skin deep

This idiom means that appearances can be deceptive and something that seems or looks good may turn out to be bad.

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.

Beeline for

If you make a beeline for a place, you head there directly.

Before the ink is dry

If people make an agreement or contract and then the situation changes very quickly, it changes before the ink is dry.

Before you can say Jack Robinson

The term Jack Robinson represents 'a short amount of time'. When you do something before you can say Jack Robinson, you do it very quickly.

Beggars can't be choosers

This idiom means that people who are in great need must accept any help that is offered, even if it is not a complete solution to their problems.

Behind bars

When someone is behind bars, they are in prison.

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.

Bells and whistles

Bells and whistles are attractive features that things like computer programs have, though often a bit unnecessary.

Bells on

(USA) To be somewhere with bells on means to arrive there happy and delighted to attend.

Belly up

If things go belly up, they go badly wrong.

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.

Belt and suspenders

(USA) Someone who wears belt and suspenders is very cautious and takes no risks.

Bend over backwards

If someone bends over backwards, they do everything they can to help someone.

Beside the point

If something is beside the point, it's not relevant to the matter being discussed or considered.

Beside yourself

If you are beside yourself, you are extremely angry.

Best thing since sliced bread

If something is the best thing since sliced bread, it is excellent. ('The greatest thing since sliced bread' is also used.)

Bet your bottom dollar

(USA) If you can bet your bottom dollar on something, you can be absolutely sure about it.

Better late than never

This idiom suggests that doing something late is better than not doing it at all.

Better safe than sorry

This idiom is used to recommend being cautious rather than taking a risk.

Better than a stick in the eye

If something is better than a stick in the eye, it isn't very good, but it is better than nothing.

Better the devil you know

This is the shortened form of the full idiom, 'better the devil you know than the devil you don't', and means that it is often better to deal with someone or something you are familiar with and know, even if they are not ideal, than take a risk with an unknown person or thing.

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.

Between you and me and the cat's whiskers

This idiom is used when telling someone something that you want them to keep secret.

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

An important person in a company or an organisation is a big fish.

Big fish in a small pond

A big fish in a small pond is an important person in a small place or organisation.

Big hitter

A big hitter is someone who commands a lot of respect and is very important in their field.

Big nose

If someone has a big nose, it means they are excessively interested in everyone else's business.

Big picture

The big picture of something is the overall perspective or objective, not the fine detail.

Big time

This can be used to with the meaning 'very much'- if you like something big time, you like it a lot.

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 between your teeth

If you take or have the bit between your teeth, you take or have control of a situation. (Bit = piece of metal in a horse's mouth)

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.

Bite your lip

If you have to bite your lip, you have to make a conscious effort not to react or to keep quiet about something that displeases you.

Bite your tongue

If you bite your tongue, you refrain from speaking because it is socially or otherwise better not to.

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.

Bitter pill to swallow

A bitter pill to swallow is something that is hard to accept.

Black and white

When it is very clear who or what is right and wrong, then the situation is black and white.

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.

Bleeding edge

Similar to 'cutting edge', this implies a technology or process that is at the forefront or beyond current practices. However, because it is unproven, it is often dangerous to use (hence the 'bleeding').

Bleeding heart

A bleeding heart is a person who is excessively sympathetic towards other people.

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.

Blind leading the blind

When the blind are leading the blind, the people in charge of something don't know anything more than the people they are in charge of, when they should have greater knowledge.

Blink of an eye

If something happens in the blink of an eye, it happens so fast it is almost impossible to notice it.

Blood and thunder

An emotional speech or performance is full of blood and thunder.

Blood is thicker than water

This idiom means that family relationships are stronger than others.

Blood out of a stone

If something is like getting blood out of a stone, it is very difficult indeed.

Blood, sweat and tears

If something will take blood, sweat and tears, it will be very difficult and will require a lot of effort and sacrifice.

Blow a gasket

If you blow a gasket, you get very angry.

Blow by blow

A blow-by-blow description gives every detail in sequence.

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 off steam

(USA) If you blow off steam, you express your anger or frustration.

Blow out of the water

If something, like an idea, is blown out of the water, it is destroyed or defeated comprehensively.

Blow your own trumpet

If someone blows their own trumpet, they boast about their talents and achievements.

Blow your stack

If you blow your stack, you lose your temper.

Blow your top

If someone blows their top, they lose their temper.

Blue blood

Someone with blue blood is royalty.

Blue-eyed boy

Someone's blue-eyed boy is their favourite person.

Body politic

A group of people organised under a single government or authority (national or regional) is a body politic.

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.

Boot is on the other foot

When the boot's on the other foot, a person who was in a position of weakness is now in a position of strength.

Born to the purple

Someone who is born to the purple is born in a royal or aristocratic family. ("Born in the purple" is also used.)

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.

Bounce off the walls

If someone's bouncing off the walls, they are very excited about something.

Bouquet of orchids

If someone deserves a bouquet of orchids, they have done something worthy of praise.

Box and dice

Box and dice means everything.

Boxing and coxing

If people are boxing and coxing, they are sharing responsibilities so that one of them is working while the other isn't. It can also be used when couples are sharing a house, but their relationship has broken down and when one is at home, the other stays out.

Brain surgery

If something is not brain surgery, it isn't very complicated or difficult to understand or master.

Brass monkey

If it's brass monkey weather, or cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, it is extremely cold.

Brass tacks

If you get down to brass tacks, you get down to the real business.

Bread and butter

Bread and butter issues are ones that affect people directly and in a very important way.

Breadwinner

Used to describe the person that earns the most money. For example - She's the breadwinner in the family.

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 ground

If you break ground, or break new ground, you make progress, taking things into a new area or going further than anyone has gone before. 'Ground-breaking' is used as an adjective.

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.

Break your heart

If someone upsets you greatly, they break your heart, especially if they end a relationship.

Breathe down your neck

If someone follows you or examines what you're doing very closely, they are breathing down your neck.

Breathe your last

When you breathe your last, you die.

Bright as a button

A person who is as bright as a button is very intelligent or smart.

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed

If someone's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, they are full of energy and enthusiasm.

Brighten up the day

If something brightens up your day, something happens that makes you feel positive and happy all day long.

Bring a knife to a gunfight

If someone brings a knife to a gunfight, they are very badly prepared for something.

Bring home the bacon

A person who brings home the bacon earns the money that a family live on.

Bring someone to book

If somebody is brought to book, they are punished or made to account for something they have done wrong.

Bring the house down

Something that brings the house down is acclaimed and praised vigorously.

Broad church

If an organisation is described as broad church, it is tolerant and accepting of different opinions and ideas.

Broad strokes

If something is described or defined with broad strokes, then only an outline is given, without fine details.

Brown nose

When someone tries to make themselves popular with somebody, usually in a position of authority, especially by flattering them, they are brown nosing.

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.

Bundle of nerves

Someone who is a bundle of nerves is very worried or nervous.

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.

Burn your bridges

If you burn your bridges, you do something that makes it impossible to go back from the position you have taken.

Bury the hatchet

If you bury the hatchet, you make peace with someone and stop arguing or fighting.

Bury your head in the sand

If someone buries their head in the sand, they ignore something that is obviously wrong.

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.

Busted flush

Someone or something that had great potential but ended up a useless failure is a busted flush.

Busy as a beaver

If you're as busy as a beaver, you're very busy indeed.

Butter wouldn't melt in their mouth

If someone looks as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouth, they look very innocent.

Butterflies in your stomach

The nervous feeling before something important or stressful is known as butterflies in your stomach.

Button your lip

If you button your lip, you keep quiet and don't speak. It is also used as a way of telling someone to shut up.

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 whisker

If you do something by a whisker, you only just manage to do it and come very near indeed to failing.

By dint of

This means 'as a result of' or 'because of': It would be good to think he'd risen to position of Chief Executive by dint of hard work.

By heart

If you learn something by heart, you learn it word for word.

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 leaps and bounds

Something that happens by leaps and bounds happens very quickly in big steps.

By the back door

If something is started or introduced by the back door, then it is not done openly or by following the proper procedures.

By the book

If you do something by the book, you do it exactly as you are supposed to.

By the same token

If someone applies the same rule to different situations, they judge them by the same token: If things go well, he's full of praise, but, by the same token, when things go wrong he gets furious.

By the seat of your pants

If you do something by the seat of your pants, you do it without help from anyone.

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 -

Cake's not worth the candle

If someone says that the cake's not worth the candle, they mean that the result will not be worth the effort put in to achieve it.

Call a spade a spade

A person who calls a spade a spade is one who speaks frankly and makes little or no attempt to conceal their opinions or to spare the feelings of their audience.

Call the dogs off

If someone calls off their dogs, they stop attacking or criticising someone.

Call the shots

If you call the shots, you are in charge and tell people what to do.

Call the tune

The person who calls the tune makes the important decisions about something.

Can of worms

If an action can create serious problems, it is opening a can of worms.

Can't dance and it's too wet to plow

(USA) When you can't dance and it's too wet to plow, you may as well do something because you can't or don't have the opportunity to do anything else.

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.

Carpetbagger

A carpetbagger is an opportunist without any scruples or ethics, or a politician who wants to represent a place they have no connection with.

Carrot and stick

If someone offers a carrot and stick, they offer an incentive to do something combined with the threat of punishment.

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.

Case by case

If things are done case by case, each situation or issue is handled separately on its own merits and demerits.

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 pearls before swine

If you cast pearls before swine, you offer something of value to someone who doesn't appreciate it- 'swine' are 'pigs'.

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.

Cast your net widely

If you cast your net widely, you use a wide range of sources when trying to find something.

Castles in the air

Plans that are impractical and will never work out are castles in the air.

Cat among the pigeons

If something or someone puts, or sets or lets, the cat among the pigeons, they create a disturbance and cause trouble.

Cat burglar

A cat burglar is a skillful thief who breaks into places without disturbing people or setting off alarms.

Cat fur and kitty britches

(USA) When I used to ask my grandma what was for dinner, she would say "cat fur and kitty britches". This was her Ozark way of telling me that I would get what she cooked. (Ozark is a region in the center of the United States)

Cat got your tongue?

If someone asks if the cat has got your tongue, they want to know why you are not speaking when they think you should.

Cat nap

If you have a short sleep during the day, you are cat napping.

Cat's pajamas

(USA) Something that is the cat's pajamas is excellent.

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.

Catch someone red-handed

If someone is caught red-handed, they are found doing something wrong or illegal.

Caught with your hand in the cookie jar

(USA) If someone is caught with his or her hand in the cookie jar, he or she is caught doing something wrong.

Chalk and cheese

Things, or people, that are like chalk and cheese are very different and have nothing in common.

Change horses in midstream

If people change horses in midstream, they change plans or leaders when they are in the middle of something, even though it may be very risky to do so.

Change of heart

If you change the way you think or feel about something, you have a change of heart.

Change tack

If you change tack, you use a different method for dealing with something.

Change your tune

If someone changes their ideas or the way they talk about them, they change their tune.

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.

Cheap at half the price

If something's cheap at half the price, it's very cheap indeed.

Cheap shot

A cheap shot is an unprincipled criticism.

Cheat death

If someone cheats death, they narrowly avoid a major problem or accident.

Cheek by jowl

If things or people are cheek by jowl, they are very close together.

Cherry pick

If people cherry pick, they choose things that support their position, while ignoring things that contradict it.

Chew on a bone.

If someone is chewing on a bone, he or she is thinking about something intently.

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 walls

Chinese walls are regulatory information barriers that aim to stop the flow of information that could be misused, especially in financial corporations.

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.

Chip on your shoulder

If someone has a chip on their shoulder, they are resentful about something and feel that they have been treated badly.

Cigarette paper

If you cannot get or put a cigarette paper between people, they are so closely bonded that nothing will separate them or their positions on issues.

Circle the wagons

(USA) If you circle the wagons, you stop communicating with people who don't think the same way as you to avoid their ideas.

Class act

Someone who's a class act is exceptional in what they do.

Clean as a whistle

If something is as clean as a whistle, it is extremely clean, spotless. It can also be used to mean 'completely'.

Clean bill of health

If something or someone has a clean bill of health, then there's nothing wrong; everything's fine.

Clean break

If you make a clean break, you break away completely from something.

Clean hands

Someone with clean hands, or who keeps their hands clean, is not involved in illegal or immoral activities.

Clean sheet

When someone has a clean sheet, they have got no criminal record or problems affecting their reputation. In football and other sports,

Clean slate

If you start something with a clean slate, then nothing bad from your past is taken into account.

Clean sweep

If someone makes a clean sweep, they win absolutely everything in a competition or contest.

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.

Climb on the bandwagon

When people climb on the bandwagon they do something because it is popular and everyone else is doing it.

Close at hand

If something is close at hand, it is nearby or conveniently located.

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 shave

If you have a close shave, you very nearly have a serious accident or get into trouble.

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.

Close to your heart

If something is close to your heart, you care a lot about it. ('Dear to your heart' is an alternative.)

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.

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 fish

A cold fish is a person who doesn't show how they feel.

Cold light of day

If you see things in the cold light of day, you see them as they really are, not as you might want them to be.

Cold shoulder

If you give or show someone the cold shoulder, you are deliberately unfriendly and uncooperative towards them.

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 clean

If someone comes clean about something, they admit to deceit or wrongdoing.

Come hell or high water

If someone says they'll do something come hell or high water, they mean that nothing will stop them, no matter what happens.

Come out in the wash

If something will come out in the wash, it won't have any permanent negative effect.

Come out of your shell

If someone comes out of their shell, they stop being shy and withdrawn and become more friendly and sociable.

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 to grips

If you come to grips with a problem or issue, you face up to it and deal with it.

Come up roses

If things come up roses, they produce a positive result, especially when things seemed to be going badly at first.

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.

Come with the territory

If something comes with the territory, it is part of a job or responsibility and just has to be accepted, even if unpleasant.

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.

Cook someone's goose

If you cook someone's goose, you ruin their plans.

Cook up a storm

If someone cooks up a storm, they cause a big fuss or generate a lot of talk about something.

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

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.

Couldn't give two hoots

If you couldn't give two hoots about something, you don't care at all about it.

Cover all the bases

If you cover all the bases, you deal with all aspects of a situation or issue, or anticipate all possibilities. ('Cover all bases' is also used.)

Crack a nut with a sledgehammer

If you use a sledgehammer to crack a nut, you apply too much force to achieve a result. ('Jackhammer' is also used.)

Crash a party

If you crash a party, or are a gatecrasher, you go somewhere you haven't been invited to.

Cream of the crop

The cream of the crop is the best there is.

Creature comforts

If a person said "I hate camping. I don't like giving up my creature comforts." the person would be referring, in particular, to the comfortable things he/she would have at home but not when camping. At home, for example, he/she would have complete shelter from the weather, a television, a nice comfortable warm bed, the ability to take a warm bath or shower, comfortable lounge chairs to relax in and so on. The person doesn't like giving up the material and psychological benefits of his/her normal life.

Crème de la crème

The crème de la crème is the very best of something.

Crocodile tears

If someone cries crocodile tears, they pretend to be upset or affected by something.

Cross to bear

If someone has a cross to bear, they have a heavy burden of responsibility or a problem that they alone must cope with.

Cry wolf

If someone cries wolf, they raise a false alarm about 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.

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.

Curry favour

If people try to curry favour, they try to get people to support them. ('Curry favor' is the American spelling.)

Curve ball

(USA) If something is a curve ball, it is deceptive.

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 corners

If people try to do something as cheaply or as quickly as possible, often sacrificing quality, they are cutting corners.

Cut it fine

If you cut it fine, you only just manage to do something- at the very last moment. 'Cut things fine' is the same. 'Cut it a bit fine' is a common variation.

Cut off your nose to spite your face

If you cut off your nose to spite your face, you do something rash or silly that ends up making things worse for you, often because you are angry or upset.

Cut the Gordian knot

If someone cuts the Gordian knot, they solve a very complex problem in a simple way.

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 coat according to your cloth

If you cut your coat according to your cloth, you only buy things that you have sufficient money to pay for.

Cut your teeth on

The place where you gain your early experience is where you cut your teeth.

Cute as a bug

(USA) If something is as cute as a bug, it is sweet and endearing.

Cuts no ice

If something cuts no ice, it doesn't have any effect or influence.

Cutting edge

Something that is cutting edge is at the forefront of progress in its area.

- D -

Dark horse

If someone is a dark horse, they are a bit of a mystery.

Day in the sun

If you have your day in the sun, you get attention and are appreciated.

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 air

When there is a period of total silence, there is dead air.

Dead and buried

If something is dead and buried, it has all long been settled and is not going to be reconsidered.

Dead as a doornail

This is used to indicate that something is lifeless.

Dead duck

If something is a dead duck, it is a failure.

Dead from the neck up

Someone who's dead from the neck up is very stupid indeed.

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 man walking

A dead man walking is someone who is in great trouble and will certainly get punished, lose their job or position, etc, soon.

Dead meat

This is used as a way of threatening someone: You'll be dead meat if you don't go along.threatening

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 of a thousand cuts

If something is suffering the death of a thousand cuts, or death by a thousand cuts, lots of small bad things are happening, none of which are fatal in themselves, but which add up to a slow and painful demise.

Demon weed

Tobacco is the demon weed.

Derring-do

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

Devil finds work for idle hands

When people say that the devil finds work for idle hands, they mean that if people don't have anything to do with their time, they are more likely to get involved in trouble and criminality.

Devil is in the detail

When people say that the devil is in the detail, they mean that small things in plans and schemes that are often overlooked can cause serious problems later on.

Devil may care

If you live a devil-may-care life it means you are willing to take more risks than most people.

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.

Diamond in the rough

A diamond in the rough is someone or something that has great potential, but isn't not refined and polished.

Die is cast

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

Different kettle of fish

If something is a different kettle of fish, it is very different from the other things referenced.

Different ropes for different folks

(USA) This idiom means that different people do things in different ways that suit them.

Different strokes for different folks

(USA) This idiom means that different people do things in different ways that suit them.

Dime a dozen

(USA) If something is a dime a dozen, it is extremely common, possibly too common.

Dip your toes in the water

If you dip your toes in the water, you try something tentatively because you are not sure whether it will work or not.

Dirty dog

A dirty dog is an untrustworthy person.

Discerning eye

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

Discretion is the better part of valour

This idiom means that it is often better to think carefully and not act than to do something that may cause problems.

Dish the dirt

If you dish the dirt on something or someone, you make unpleasant or shocking information public.

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'.

Do's and don't's

The do's and don't's are what is acceptable or allowed or not within an area or issue, etc.

Dog and pony show

(USA) A dog and pony show is a presentation or some marketing that has lots of style, but no real content.

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 tired

If you are dog tired, you are exhausted.

Dog's dinner

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.

Dollars for doughnuts

(USA) If something is dollars for doughnuts, it is a sure bet or certainty.

Don't catch your chickens before they're hatched

This means that you should wait until you know whether something has produced the results you desire, rather than acting beforehand. ('Don't count your chickens until they've hatched' is an alternative.)

Don't give up the day job

This idiom is used a way of telling something that they do something badly.

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.

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 push my buttons!

This can be said to someone who is starting to annoy you.

Don't sweat the small stuff

(USA) This is used to tell people not to worry about trivial or unimportant issues.

Don't take any wooden nickels

(USA) This idiom is used to advise people not to be cheated or ripped off.

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.

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 take

If someone does a double take, they react very slowly to something to show how shocked or surprised they are.

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.

Doubting Thomas

A Doubting Thomas is someone who only believes what they see themselves, not what they are told.

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.

Down in the mouth

If someone is down in the mouth, they look unhappy or depressed.

Down the drain

If something goes down the drain, especially money or work, it is wasted or produces no results.

Down the pan

If something has gone down the pan, it has failed or been ruined.

Down the tubes

If something has gone down the tubes, it has failed or been ruined.

Down to the wire

(USA) If something goes down to the wire, like a competition, then it goes to the very last moment before it is clear who has won.

Down-to-earth

Someone who's down-to-earth is practical and realistic. It can also be used for things like ideas.

Drag your feet

If someone is dragging their feet, they are taking too long to do or finish something, usually because they don't want to do it.

Drag your heels

If you drag your heels, you either delay doing something or do it as slowly as possible because you don't want to do it.

Draw a blank

If you try to find something out and draw a blank, you don't get any useful information.

Draw a line in the sand

If you draw a line in the sand, you establish a limit beyond which things will be unacceptable.

Draw a long bow

If someone draws a long bow, they lie or exaggerate.

Draw the line

When you draw the line, you set out limits of what you find acceptable, beyond which you will not go.

Draw the shortest straw

If someone draws the shortest straw, they lose or are chosen to do something unpleasant.

Dress to kill

When someone is dressed to kill, they are dressed very smartly.

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.

Drive a wedge

If you drive a wedge between people, you exploit an issue so that people start to disagree.

Drive someone up the wall

If something or someone drives you up the wall, they do something that irritates you greatly.

Drop in the bucket

(USA) A drop in the bucket is something so small that it won't make any noticeable difference.

Drop in the ocean

A drop in the ocean implies that something will have little effect because it is small and mostly insignificant.

Drop someone a line

If you drop someone a line, you send a letter to them.

Drop the ball

If someone drops the ball, they are not doing their job or taking their responsibilities seriously enough and let something go wrong.

Dry as a bone

If your lawn is as dry as a bone, the soil is completely dry.

Dry spell

If something or someone is having a dry spell, they aren't being as successful as they normally are.

Duck soup

(USA) If something is duck soup, it is very easy.

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.

Ducks in a row

(USA) If you have your ducks in a row, you are well-organized.

Dutch auction

If something is sold by setting a price, then reducing it until someone buys it, it is sold in a Dutch auction. It can also mean that something is changed until it is accepted by everyone.

Dutch courage

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

Dutch treat

If something like a meal is a Dutch treat, then each person pays their own share of the bill.

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

If someone is a dyed-in-the-wool supporter of a political party, etc, they support them totally, without any questions.

- 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.

Face value

If you take something at face value, you accept the appearance rather than looking deeper into the matter.

Facts of life

When someone is taught the facts of life, they learn about sex and reproduction.

Fair and square

If someone wins something fair and square, they follow the rules and win conclusively.

Fair shake of the whip

(USA) If everybody has a fair shake of the whip, they all have equal opportunities to do something.

Fairweather friend

A fairweather 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 turnip truck

(USA) If someone has just fallen off the turnip truck, they are uninformed, naive and gullible. (Often used in the negative)

Fall on our feet

If you fall on your feet, you succeed in doing something where there was a risk of failure.

Fall on your sword

If someone falls on their sword, they resign or accept the consequences of some wrongdoing.

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.

Fast and furious

Things that happen fast and furious happen very quickly without stopping or pausing.

Fat cat

A fat cat is a person who makes a lot of money and enjoys a privileged position in society.

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.

Feather your own nest

If someone feathers their own nest, they use their position or job for personal gain.

Feathers fly

When people are fighting or arguing angrily, we can say that feathers are flying.

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 the pinch

If someone is short of money or feeling restricted in some other way, they are feeling the pinch.

Feeling blue

If you feel blue, you are feeling unwell, mainly associated with depression or unhappiness.

Feet of clay

If someone has feet of clay, they have flaws that make them seem more human and like normal people.

Feet on the ground

A practical and realistic person has their feet on the ground.

Fiddle while Rome burns

If people are fiddling while Rome burns, they are wasting their time on futile things while problems threaten to destroy them.

Fifth wheel

(USA) A fifth wheel is something unnecessary or useless.

Fight an uphill battle

When you fight an uphill battle, you have to struggle against very unfavourable circumstances.

Fight tooth and nail

If someone will fight tooth and nail for something, they will not stop at anything to get what they want. ('Fight tooth and claw' is an alternative.)

Fighting chance

If you have a fighting chance, you have a reasonable possibility of success.

Find your feet

When you are finding your feet, you are in the process of gaining confidence and experience in something.

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 out of the gate

When someone is first out of the gate, they are the first to do something that others are trying to do.

First port of call

The first place you stop to do something is your first port of call.

Fish or cut bait

(USA) This idiom is used when you want to tell someone that it is time to take action.

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.

Fit of pique

If someone reacts badly because their pride is hurt, this is a fit of pique.

Fit the bill

If something fits the bill, it is what is required for the task.

Fit to be tied

If someone is fit to be tied, they are extremely angry.

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.

Fleet of foot

If someone is fleet of foot, they are very quick.

Flesh and blood

Your flesh and blood are your blood relatives, especially your immediate family.

Flowery speech

Flowery speech is full of lovely words, but may well lack substance.

Fly by the seat of one's pants

If you fly by the seat of one's pants, you do something difficult even though you don't have the experience or training required.

Fly in the ointment

A fly in the ointment is something that spoils or prevents complete enjoyment of something.

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.

Fly the coop

When children leave home to live away from their parents, they fly the coop.

Fly the flag

If someone flies the flag, they represent or support their country. ('Wave the flag' and 'show the flag' are alternative forms of this idiom)

Food for thought

If something is food for thought, it is worth thinking about or considering seriously.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me

This means that you should learn from your mistakes and not allow people to take advantage of you repeatedly.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread

This idiom is used where people who are inexperienced or lack knowledge do something that more informed people would avoid.

Foot the bill

The person who foots the bill pays the bill for everybody.

For a song

If you buy or sell something for a song, it is very cheap.

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.

Forbidden fruit

Something enjoyable that is illegal or immoral is forbidden fruit.

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.

Forest for the trees

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

Foul play

If the police suspect foul play, they think a crime was committed.

Four corners of the earth

If something goes to, or comes from, the four corners of the earth, it goes or comes absolutely everywhere.

Four-square behind

If someone stands four-square behind someone, they give that person their full support.

Fourth estate

This is an idiomatic way of describing the media, especially the newspapers.

Free rein

If someone has a free rein, they have the authority to make the decisions they want without any restrictions. ('Free reign' is a common mistake.)

Fresh from the oven

If something is fresh from the oven, it is very new.

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.

Friendly footing

When relationships are on a friendly footing, they are going well.

From a different angle

If you look at something from a different angle, you look at it from a different point of view.

From Missouri

(USA) If someone is from Missouri, then they require clear proof before they will believe something.

From pillar to post

If something is going from pillar to post, it is moving around in a meaningless way, from one disaster to another.

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 soup to nuts

If you do something from soup to nuts, you do it from the beginning right to the very end.

From the bottom of your heart

If someone does something from the bottom of their heart, then they do it with genuine emotion and feeling.

From the get-go

(USA) If something happens from the get-go, it happens from the very 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 circle

When something has come full circle, it has ended up where it started.

Full of beans

If someone's full of beans, they are very energetic.

Full of hot air

Someone who is full of hot air talks a lot of rubbish.

Full of piss and vinegar

Someone who's full of piss and vinegar is full of youthful energy.

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 -

Game plan

A game plane is a strategy.

Garbage in, garbage out

If a computer system or database is built badly, then the results will be bad.

Gather pace

If events gather pace, they move faster.

Get your feathers in a bunch

If you get your feathers in a bunch, you get upset or angry about something.

Get along famously

If people get along famously, they have an exceedingly good relationship.

Get away scot-free

If someone gets away scot-free, they are not punished when they have done something wrong. ('Get off scot-free' is an alternative.)

Get in on the ground floor

If you get in on the ground floor, you enter a project or venture at the start before people know how successful it might be.

Get my drift

If you get someone's drift, you understand what they are trying to say. ('Catch their drift' is an alternative form.)

Get on like a house on fire

If people get on like a house on fire, they have a very close and good relationship.

Get on your nerves

If something gets on your nerves, it annoys or irritates you.

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.

Get the green light

If you get the green light to do something, you are given the necessary permission, authorisation.

Get to grips

If you get to grips with something, you take control and do it properly.

Get up and go

If someone has lots of get up and go, they have lots of enthusiasm and energy.

Get your feet wet

If you get your feet wet, you gain your first experience of something.

Get your goat

If something gets your goat, it annoys you.

Get your hands dirty

If you get your hands dirty, you become involved in something where the realities might compromise your principles. It can also mean that a person is not just stuck in an ivory tower dictating strategy, but is prepared to put in the effort and hard work to make the details actually happen.

Get your head around something

If you get your head around something, you come to understand it even though it is difficult to comprehend.

Get your teeth into

If you get your teeth into something, you become involved in or do something that is intellectually challenging or satisfying. ('Dig your teeth into' and 'sink your teeth into' are also used.)

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.

Gild the lily

If you gild the lily, you decorate something that is already ornate.

Gilded cage

If someone is in a gilded cage, they are trapped and have restricted or no freedom, but have very comfortable surroundings- many famous people live in luxury but cannot walk out of their house alone.

Girl Friday

A girl Friday is a female employee who assists someone without any specific duties.

Give a dog a bad name

A person who is generally known to have been guilty of some offence will always be suspected to be the author of all similar types of offence. Once someone has gained a bad reputation, it is very difficult to lose it.

Give and take

Where there is give and take, people make concessions in order to get things they want in negotiations.

Give as good as you get

If you give as good as you get, you are prepared to treat people as badly as they treat you and to fight for what you believe.

Give me a hand

If someone gives you a hand, they help you.

Give someone a leg up

If you give someone a leg up, you help them to achieve something that they couldn't have done alone.

Give someone a piece of your mind

If you give someone a piece of your mind, you criticise them strongly and angrily.

Give someone a run for their money

If you can give someone a run for the money, you are as good, or nearly as good, as they are at something.

Give someone enough rope

If you give someone enough rope, you give them the chance to get themselves into trouble or expose themselves. (The full form is 'give someone enough rope and they'll hang themselves')

Give up the ghost

People give up the ghost when they die.

Give your eye teeth

If you really want something and would be prepared to sacrifice a lot to get it, you would give your eye teeth for it.

Glass ceiling

The glass ceiling is the discrimination that prevents women and minorities from getting promoted to the highest levels of companies and organisations.

Gloves are off

When the gloves are off, people start to argue or fight in a more serious way. ('The gloves come off' and 'take the gloves off' are also used. It comes from boxing, where fighters normally wear gloves so that they don't do too much damage to each other.)

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.

Gnaw your vitals

If something gnaws your vitals, it troubles you greatly and affects you at a very deep level. ('Gnaw at your vitals' is also used.)

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 awry

If things go awry, they go wrong.

Go blue

If you go blue, you are very cold indeed. ('Turn blue' is an alternative form.)

Go bust

If a company goes bust, it goes bankrupt.

Go Dutch

If you go Dutch in a restaurant, you pay equal shares for the meal.

Go fly a kite

(USA) This is used to tell someone to go away and leave you alone.

Go for broke

If someone goes for broke, they risk everything they have for a potentially greater gain.

Go fry an egg

(USA) This is used to tell someone to go away and leave you alone.

Go hand in hand

If things go hand in hand, they are associated and go together.

Go off on a tangent

If someone goes off on a tangent, they change the subject completely in the middle of a conversation or talk.

Go pear-shaped

If things have gone wrong, they have gone pear-shaped.

Go play in traffic

This is used as a way of telling someone to go away.

Go round in circles

If people are going round in circles, they keep discussing the same thing without reaching any agreement or coming to a conclusion.

Go south

If things go south, they get worse or go wrong.

Go the extra mile

If someone is prepared to go the extra mile, they will do everything they can to help or to make something succeed, going beyond their duty what could be expected of them .

Go the whole hog

If you go the whole hog, you do something completely or to its limits.

Go to seed

If someone has gone to seed, they have declined in quality or appearance.

Go under the hammer

If something goes under the hammer, it is sold in an auction.

Go west

If something goes west, it goes wrong. If someone goes west, they die.

Go with the flow

If you go with the flow, you accept things as they happen and do what everyone else wants to do.

Go-to guy

A go-to guy is a person whose knowledge of something is considerable so everyone wants to go to him or her for information or results.

Golden handshake

A golden handshake is a payment made to someone to get them to leave their job.

Golden touch

Someone with a golden touch can make money from or be successful at anything they do.

Gone fishing

If someone has gone fishing, they are not very aware of what is happening around them.

Gone to pot

If something has gone to pot, it has gone wrong and doesn't work anymore.

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 fences make good neighbours

This means that it is better for people to mind their own business and to respect the privacy of others. ('Good fences make good neighbors' is the American English spelling.)

Good shape

If something's in good shape, it's in good condition. If a person's in good shape, they are fit and healthy.

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 you expected.

Good walls make good neighbours

Your relationship with your neighbours depends, among other things, on respecting one another's privacy.

Goody two-shoes

A goody two-shoes is a self-righteous person who makes a great deal of their virtue.

Grab the bulls by its horns

If you grab (take) the bull by its horns, you deal head-on and directly with a problem.

Grain of salt

If you should take something with a grain of salt, you shouldn't accept it as true without looking more carefully at it.

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.

Grease the skids

If you grease the skids, you facilitate 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 Scott

An exclamation of surprise.

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 around the gills

If someone looks green around the gills, they look ill.

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 area

A grey/gray area is one where there is no clear right or wrong.

Grey matter

Grey/gray matter is the human brain.

Grey suits

The men in grey suits are people who have a lot of power in business or politics, but aren't well-known or charismatic.

Grin and bear it

If you have to grin and bear it, you have to accept something that you don't like.

Grin like a Cheshire cat

If someone has a very wide smile, they have a grin like a Cheshire cat.

Grist for the mill

Something that you can use to your advantage is grist for the mill. ('Grist to the mill' is also used.)

Guinea-pig

If you are a guinea-pig, you take part in an experiment of some sort and are used in the testing.

Gunboat diplomacy

If a nation conducts its diplomatic relations by threatening military action to get what it wants, it is using gunboat diplomacy.

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.

Hale and hearty

Someone who is hale and hearty is in very good health.

Half a mind

If you have half a mind to do something, you haven't decided to do it, but are thinking seriously about doing it.

Half-baked

A half-baked idea or scheme hasn't not been thought or planned very well.

Hammer and tongs

If people are going at it hammer and tongs, they are arguing fiercely. The idiom can also be used when people are doing something energetically.

Hand in glove

If people are hand in glove, they have an extremely close relationship.

Hand that rocks the cradle

Women have a great power and influence because they have the greatest influence over the development of children the hand that rocks the cradle. ('The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world' is the full form.)

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.

Hands down

If someone is better hands down than everyone else, they are much better.

Handwriting like chicken scratch

If your handwriting is very hard to read, it is like chicken scratch.

Hang by a thread

If something hangs by a thread, there is a very small chance indeed of it being successful or surviving.

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.

Hang out to dry

If you hang someone out to dry, you abandon them when they are in trouble.

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 daren'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 as nails

A person who is as hard as nails is either physically tough or has little or no respect for other people's feelings.

Hard of hearing

Someone who's hard of hearing is a bit deaf.

Hard sell

If someone puts a lot of pressure on you to do or buy something, they are hard selling it.

Haste makes waste

This idiom means that if you try to do something quickly, without planning it, you're likely to end up spending more time, money, etc, doing it.

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 bash

If you have a bash at something, you try to do it, especially when there isn't much chance of success.

Have a go

If you have a go, you try to do something, often when you don't think you have much chance of succeeding.

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.

Have the floor

If someone has the floor, it is their turn to speak at a meeting.

Have your cake and eat it too

If someone wants to have their cake and eat it too, they want everything their way, especially when their wishes are contradictory.

Have your collar felt

If someone has their collar felt, they are arrested.

Have your tail up

If someone has their tail up, they are optimistic and expect to be successful.

Have your work cut out

If you have your work cut out, you are very busy indeed.

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 for the hills

If people head for the hills, they run away from trouble.

Head is in the clouds

If a person has their head in the clouds, they have unrealistic, impractical ideas.

Head nor tail

If you can't make head nor tail of something, you cannot understand it at all or make any sense of it.

Head on a spike

If someone wants a head on a spike, they want to be able to destroy or really punish a person.

Head on the block

If someone's head is on the block, they are going to be held responsible and suffer the consequences for something that has gone wrong.

Head over heels in love

When someone falls passionately in love and is intoxicated by the feeling has fallen head over heels in love.

Heads will roll

If heads will roll, people will be punished or sacked for something that has gone wrong.

Headstrong

A headstrong person is obstinate and does not take other people's advice readily.

Healthy as a horse

If you're as healthy as a horse, you're very healthy.

Hear a pin drop

If there is complete silence in a room, you can hear a pin drop.

Hear on the grapevine

To receive information indirectly through a series of third parties, similar to a rumour.

Heart in the right place

If someone's heart is in the right place, they are good and kind, though they might not always appear to be so.

Heart in the right place

If someone's heart is in the right place, their intentions and feelings are good.

Heart in your boots

If your heart is in your boots, you are very unhappy.

Heart in your mouth

If your heart is in your mouth, then you feel nervous or scared.

Heart isn't in it

If your heart is not in something, then you don't really believe in it or support it.

Heart misses a beat

If your heart misses a beat, you are suddenly shocked or surprised. ('Heart skips a beat' is an alternative)

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.

Heavy-handed

If someone is heavy-handed, they are insensitive and use excessive force or authority when dealing with a problem.

Hedge your bets

If you hedge your bets, you don't risk everything on one opportunity, but try more than one thing.

Hell for leather

If you do something hell for leather, especially running, you do it as fast as you can.

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.

Herding cats

If you have to try to coordinate a very difficult situation, where people want to do very different things, you are herding cats.

Here today, gone tomorrow

Money, happiness and other desirable things are often here today, gone tomorrow, which means that they don't last for very long.

Hiding to nothing

If people are on a hiding to nothing, their schemes and plans have no chance of succeeding. 'Hiding to nowhere' is an alternative.

High and dry

If you are left high and dry, you are left alone and given no help at all when you need it.

High and mighty

The high and mighty are the people with authority and power. If a person is high and mighty, they behave in a superior and condescending way.

High-handed

If someone is high-handed, they behave arrogantly and pompously.

High-wire act

A high-wire act is a dangerous or risky strategy, plan, task, etc.

Himalayan blunder

A Himalayan blunder is a very serious mistake or error.

Hit a nerve

If something hits a nerve, it upsets someone or causes them pain, often when it is something they are trying to hide.

Hit and miss

Something that is hit and miss is unpredictable and may produce results or may fail.

Hit the airwaves

If someone hits the airwaves, they go on radio and TV to promote something or to tell their side of a story.

Hit the bull's-eye

If someone hits the bull's-eye, they are exactly right about something or achieve the best result possible. "Bulls-eye" and "bullseye" are alternative spellings.

Hit the ceiling

If someone hits the ceiling, they lose their temper and become very angry.

Hit the fan

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

Hit the ground running

If someone hits the ground running, they start a new job or position in a very dynamic manner.

Hit the hay

When you hit the hay, you go to bed.

Hit the mark

If someone hits the mark, they are right about something.

Hit the nail on the head.

If someone hits the nail on the head, they are exactly right about something.

Hit the road

When people hit the road, they leave a place to go somewhere else.

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 the fort

If you hold the fort, you look after something or assume someone's responsibilities while they are away.

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.

Hold your own

If you can hold your own, you can compete or perform equally with other people.

Holier-than-thou

Someone who is holier-than-thou believes that they are morally superior to other people.

Hollow victory

A hollow victory is where someone wins something in name, but are seen not to have gained anything by winning.

Holy smoke!

This is a way of expressing surprise: "Holy smoke! Look at all of those geese!"

Home stretch

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

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.

Hop, skip, and a jump

If a place is a hop, skip, and a jump from somewhere, it's only a short distance away.

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.

Hornets' nest

If you stir up a hornets' nest, you do something very controversial that causes a lot of trouble and anger.

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.

Horse of a different color

(USA) If something is a horse of a different color, it's a different matter or separate issue altogether.

Horse trading

Horse trading is an idiom used to describe negotiations, especially where these are difficult and involve a lot of compromise.

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 air

Language that is full of words but means little or nothing is hot air.

Hot as blue blazes

If something's as hot as blue blazes, it's extremely hot.

Hot as Hades

If something's as hot as Hades, it's extremely hot.

Hot button

(USA) A hot button is a topic or issue that people feel very strongly about.

Hot foot

If you hot foot it out of a place, you leave very quickly, often running.

Hot ticket

(USA) A hot ticket is something that is very much in demand at the moment.

Hot under the collar

If you're hot under the collar, you're feeling angry or bothered.

Hot water

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

Hot-blooded

Someone who is hot-blooded is easily excitable or passionate.

Hot-headed

A hot-headed person gets angry very easily. (The noun 'hothead' can also be used.)

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 do you like them apples

(USA) This idiomatic expression is used to express surprise or shock at something that has happened. It can also be used to boast about something you have done.

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.

How's tricks?

This is used as a way of asking people how they are and how things have been going in their life.

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's or the writer's affirmation. People will say it sometimes to emphasise their sincerity and correctness.

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.

I've got your number

You have made a mistake and I am going to call you on it. You are in trouble (a threat). I have a disagreement with you. I understand your true nature.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

Any attempt to improve on a system that already works is pointless and may even hurt it.

If the cap fits, wear it

This idiom means that if the description is correct, then it is describing the truth, often when someone is being criticised. ('If the shoe fits, wear it' is an alternative)

If wishes were horses, beggars would ride

This means that wishing for something or wanting it is not the same as getting or having it.

If you will

'If you will' is used as a way of making a concession in a sentence: He wasn't a very honest person, a liar if you will. Here, it is used a way of accepting that the reader or listener might think of the person as a liar, but without commit the writer or speaker to that position fully.

If you'll pardon my French

(UK) This idiom is used as a way of apologising 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 heartbeat

If something happens very quickly or immediately, it happens in a heartbeat.

In a jam

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

In a jiffy

If something happens in a jiffy, it happens very quickly.

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 broad daylight

If a crime or problem happens in broad daylight, it happens during the day and should have been seen and stopped.

In cahoots

If people are in cahoots, they are conspiring together.

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 droves

When things happen in droves, a lot happen at the same time or very quickly.

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 full swing

If things are in full swing, they have been going for a sufficient period of time to be going well and very actively.

In high gear

(USA) If something is in high gear, it is in a quick-paced mode. If someone is in high gear, they are feverishly on the fast track.

In hot water

If you are in hot water, you are in serious trouble.

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 my good books

If someone is in your good books, you are pleased with or think highly of them at the moment.

In one ear and out the other

If something goes in one ear and out the other, you forget it as soon as you've heard it because it was too complicated, boring etc.

In over your head

If someone is in over their head, they are out of the depth in something they are involved in, and may end up in a mess.

In someone's pocket

If a person is in someone's pocket, they are dependent, especially financially, on them.

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 dock

If someone is in the dock, they are on trial in court.

In the doghouse

If someone is in the doghouse, they are in disgrace and very unpopular at the moment.

In the doghouse

If someone is in the doghouse, they are in disgrace because they have done something wrong.

In the face of

If people act in the face of something, they do it despite it or when threatened by it.

In the family way

If a woman is in the family way, she is pregnant.

In the flesh

If you meet or see someone in the flesh you actually meet or see them, rather than seeing them on TV or in other media.

In the hot seat

If someone's in the hot seat, they are the target for a lot of unwelcome criticism and examination.

In the know

If you are in the know, you have access to all the information about something, which other people don't have.

In the long run

This means 'over a long period of time', 'in the end' or 'in the final result'.

In the loop

If you're in the loop, you are fully informed about what is happening in a certain area or activity.

In the making

When something is in the making, it means it is in the process of being made.

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 same boat

If people are in the same boat, they are in the same predicament or trouble.

In the soup

If you're in the soup, you're in trouble.

In the swim

If you are in the swim, you are up-to-date with and fully informed about something.

In the swing

If things are in the swing, they are progressing well.

In the twinkling of an eye

If something happens in the twinkling of an eye, it happens very quickly.

In turn

This means one after the other. Example: She spoke to each of the guests in turn.

In two minds

If you are in two minds about something, you can't decide what to do.

In your element

If you are in your element, you feel happy and relaxed because you are doing something that you like doing and are good at. "You should have seen her when they asked her to sing; she was in her element."

In your face

If someone is in your face, they are direct and confrontational. (It is sometime written 'in yer face' colloquially)

In your sights

If you have someone or something in your sights, they are your target to beat.

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.

Ins and outs

If you know the ins and outs of something, you know all the details.

Into each life some rain must fall

This means that bad or unfortunate things will happen to everyone at some time.

Into thin air

If something vanishes or disappears without trace, it vanishes into thin air; no-one knows where it has gone.

Iron fist

Someone who rules or controls something with an iron fist is in absolute control and tolerates no dissent. An iron fist in a velvet glove is used to describe someone who appears soft on the outside, but underneath is very hard. 'Mailed fist' is an alternative form.

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.

Is Saul also among the prophets?

It's a biblical idiom used when somebody known for something bad appears all of a sudden to be doing something very good.

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 never rains but it pours

'It never rains but it pours' means that when things go wrong, they go very wrong.

It takes two to tango

This idiom is used to suggest that when things go wrong, both sides are involved and neither side is completely innocent.

It's an ill wind that blows no good

This is said when things have gone wrong; the idea being that when bad things happen, there can also be some positive results.

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.

Ivory tower

People who live in ivory towers are detached from the world around them.

- J -

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 female who may be party to legal proceedings, or to an unidentified person in hospital, or dead. John Doe is the male equivalent.

Jersey justice

(UK) Jersey justice is very severe justice.

Jet-black

To emphasise just how black something is, such as someone's hair, we can call it jet-black.

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')

Jobs for the boys

Where people give jobs, contracts, etc, to their friends and associates, these are jobs for the boys.

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.

Johnny-come-lately

A Johnny-come-lately is someone who has recently joined something or arrived somewhere, especially when they want to make changes that are not welcome.

Joined at the hip

If people are joined at the hip, they are very closely connected and think the same way.

Juggle frogs

If you are juggling frogs, you are trying to do something very difficult.

Jump on the bandwagon

If people jump on the bandwagon, they get involved in something that has recently become very popular.

Jump the gun

If you jump the gun, you start doing something before the appropriate time.

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.

Jury's out

If the jury's out on an issue, then there is no general agreement or consensus on it.

Just around the corner

If something is just around the corner, then it is expected to happen very soon.

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.

Just off the boat

If someone is just off the boat, they are naive and inexperienced.

Just what the doctor ordered

If something's just what the doctor ordered, it is precisely what is needed.

- K -

Kangaroo court

When people take the law into their own hands and form courts that are not legal, these are known as kangaroo court.

Keep abreast

If you keep abreast of things, you stay informed about developments.

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.

Keep it under your hat

If you keep something under your hat, you keep it secret.

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 someone at arm's length

If you keep someone or something at arm's length, you keep a safe distance away from them.

Keep the wolf at bay

If you keep the wolf at bay, you make enough money to avoid going hungry or falling heavily into debt.

Keep up with the Joneses

People who try to keep up with the Joneses are competitive about material possessions and always try to have the latest and best things.

Keep your chin up

This idiom is used as a way of encouraging someone and telling them not to give up.

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 eye on the ball

If you keep your eye on the ball, you stay alert and pay close attention to what is happening.

Keep your eyes peeled

If you keep your eyes peeled, you stay alert or watchful.

Keep your fingers crossed

If you are keeping your fingers crossed, you are hoping for a positive outcome.

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 nose to the grindstone

If you keep your nose to the grindstone, you work hard and seriously.

Keep your options open

If someone's keeping their options open, they aren't going to restrict themselves or rule out any possible course of action.

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 powder dry

If you keep your powder dry, you act cautiously so as not to damage your chances.

Keep your shirt on!

This idiom is used to tell someone to calm down.

Kettle of fish

A pretty or fine kettle of fish is a difficult problem or situation.

Kick a habit

If you kick a habit, you stop doing it.

Kick away the ladder

If someone kicks away the ladder, they remove something that was supporting or helping someone.

Kick in the teeth

Bad news or a sudden disappointment are a kick in the teeth.

Kick something into the long grass

If an issue or problem is kicked into the long grass, it is pushed aside and hidden in the hope that it will be forgotten or ignored.

Kick the ballistics

It means you realise the intensity of a situation. For example, there is too much unemployment now, so the prime minister must kick the ballistics and change his policy.

Kick the bucket

When someone kicks the bucket, they die.

Kick up your heels

If you kick up your heels, you go to parties or celebrate something.

Kid gloves

If someone is handled with kid gloves, they are given special treatment and handled with great care.

Kill the goose that lays the golden egg

If you kill the goose that lays the golden egg, you ruin something that is very profitable.

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.

King of the castle

The king of the castle is the person who is in charge of something or in a very comfortable position compared to their companions.

Kiss of death

The kiss of death is an action that means failure or ruin for someone, a scheme, a plan, etc.

Kiss something goodbye

If someone tells you that you can kiss something goodbye, you have no chance of getting or having it.

Kissing cousin

A kissing cousin is someone you are related to, but not closely.

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.

Knight in shining armour

A knight in shining armour is someone who saves you when you are in great trouble or danger.

Knit your brows

If you knit your brows, you frown or look worried.

Knock 'em dead

'Knock 'em dead' is used as a way of wishing someone luck before they give a performance or have to appear before people, as in an interview, etc. ('em = them)

Knock on wood

This idiom is used to wish for good luck. ('Touch wood' is also used.)

Knock your socks off

If something knocks your socks off, it amazes and surprises you, usually in a positive way.

Know a hawk from a handsaw

If someone knows a hawk from a handsaw, they are able to distinguish things and assess them.

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 know 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 onions

If someone is very well-informed about something, they know their onions.

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.

Lame duck

If something or someone is a lame duck, they are in trouble.

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 laugh

The person who has the last laugh ends up with the the advantage in a situation after some setbacks.

Last straw

The last straw is the final problem that makes someone lose their temper or the problem that finally brought about the collapse of something. 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.

Laughing stock

If someone becomes a laughing stock they do something so stupid or wrong that no one can take them seriously and people scorn and laugh at them.

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.

Lead someone up the garden path

If someone leads you up the garden path, they deceive you, or give you false information that causes you to waste your time. 'Lead someone down the garden path' is also used.

Lead with the chin

If someone leads with their chin, they speak or behave without fear of the consequences.

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, organisation, 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.

Left to your own devices

If someone is left to their own devices, they are not controlled and can do what they want.

Left-handed compliment

A left-handed compliment is one that sounds like praise but has an insulting meaning. ('Backhanded compliment' is an alternative form.)

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.

Lend an ear

If you lend an ear, you listen to what someone has to say. ('Lend your ear' is an alternative form.)

Leopard can't change its spots

This idiom means that people cannot change basic aspects of their character, especially negative ones. ("A leopard doesn't change its spots" is also used.)

Lesser of two evils

Something that is the lesser of two evils, is an unpleasant option, but not as bad as the other.

Let alone

This is used to emphasise how extreme something could be: 'We hadn't got the money to phone home, let alone stay in a hotel.' This emphasises the utter impossibility of staying in a hotel.

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.

Let the chips fall where they may

This means that we shouldn't try to control events, because destiny controls them.

Let the devil take the hindmost

This idiom means that you should think of yourself and not be concerned about other people; look after yourself and let the devil take the hindmost.

Let the genie out of the bottle

If people let the genie out of the bottle, they let something bad happen that cannot be put right or controlled.

Let the grass grow round your feet

If you let the grass grow round your feet, you delay doing things instead of taking action.

Let your hair down

If someone lets their hair down, they relax and stop feeling inhibited or shy.

Letter of the law

If people interpret laws and regulations strictly, ignoring the ideas behind them, they follow the letter of the law.

Level playing field

If there's a level playing field everybody is treated equally.

Lie low

If someone lies low, they try not to be found or caught.

Lie through your teeth

Someone who is always lying, regardless of what people know, lies through their teeth.

Life and limb

When people risk life and limb, they could be killed or suffer serious injuries.

Light at the end of the tunnel

If you can see light at the end of the tunnel, then you can see some signs of hope in the future, though things are difficult at the moment.

Light bulb moment

A light bulb moment is when you have a sudden realisation about something, like the light bulbs used to indicate an idea in cartoons.

Light years ahead

If you are light years ahead of others, you are a long way in front of them in terms of development, success, etc.

Lightning rod

Someone or something that attracts a lot of negative comment, often diverting attention from other problems, is a lightning rod.

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 on hot bricks

If someone is like a cat on hot bricks, they are very nervous or excited.

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 hawk

If you watch something or someone like a hawk, you observe very closely and carefully.

Like a headless chicken

If someone rushes about like a headless chicken, they move very fast all over the place, usually without thinking.

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 clockwork

If something happens like clockwork, it happens at very regular times or intervals.

Like father, like son

This idiom is used when different generations of a family behave in the same way or have the same talents or defects.

Like lambs to the slaughter

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

Like peas in a pod

If people or things are like peas in a pod, they look identical.

Like pulling teeth

If something is like pulling teeth, it is very difficult, especially if trying to extract information or to get a straight answer from someone.

Like taking candy from a baby

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

Like the back of your hand

If you know something like the back of your hand, you know it very well indeed.

Like the clappers

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

Like there's no tomorrow

If you do something like there's no tomorrow, you do it fast or energetically.

Like two peas in a pod

Things that are like two peas in a pod are very similar or identical,

Like white on rice

(USA) If you do something like white on rice, you do it very closely: When Bob found out I had front row tickets for the concert, he stuck to me like white on rice.

Like wildfire

If something happens or spreads like wildfire, it happens very quickly and intensely.

Lily-livered

Someone who is lily-livered is a coward.

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.

Lion's share

The lion's share of something is the biggest or best part.

Lip service

When people pay lip service to something, they express their respect, but they don't act on their words, so the respect is hollow and empty.

Little pitchers have big ears

(USA) This means that children hear more and understand the world around them better than many adults realize.

Live wire

A person who is very active, both mentally and physically, is a live wire.

Lo and behold

This phrase is used to express surprise.

Loan shark

A loan shark lends money at very high rates of interest.

Lock horns

When people lock horns, they argue or fight about something.

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 after number 1

You are number one, so this idiom means that you should think about yourself first, rather than worrying about other people.

Look before you leap

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

Look on the bright side

If you look on the bright side, you try to see things in an optimistic way, especially when something has gone wrong.

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.

Look what the cat dragged in

This idiom is used when someone arrives somewhere looking a mess or flustered and bothered.

Lose the plot

If someone loses the plot, they have stopped being rational about something.

Lose your marbles

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

Lose your shirt

If someone loses their shirt, they lose all their money through a bad investment, gambling, etc.

Low-hanging fruit

Low-hanging fruit are things that are easily achieved.

Lower than a snake's belly

Someone or something that is lower than a snake's belly is of a very low moral standing.

Lower the bar

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

Lower your sights

If you lower your sights, you accept something that is less than you were hoping for.

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 badger

If someone is as mad as a badger, they are crazy.

Mad as a hornet

(USA) If someone is as mad as a hornet, they are very angry indeed.

Mad as a March hare

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

Mailed fist

Someone who rules or controls something with a mailed fist is in absolute control and tolerates no dissent. A mailed fist in a velvet glove is used to describe someone who appears soft on the outside, but underneath is very hard. 'Iron fist' is an alternative form.

Major league

Something major league is very important.

Make a better fist

If someone makes a better fist of doing something, they do a better job.

Make a killing

If you make a killing, you do something that makes you a lot of money.

Make a meal

If someone makes a meal of something, they spend too long doing it or make it look more difficult than it really is.

Make a mint

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

Make a monkey of someone

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 bets in a burning house

(USA) If people are making bets in a burning house, they are engaged in futile activity while serious problems around them are getting worse.

Make ends meet

If somebody finds it hard to make ends meet, they have problems living on the money they earn.

Make hay

If you make hay, or may hay while the sun shines, you take advantage of an opportunity as soon as it arises and do not waste time.

Make headway

If you make headway, you make progress.

Make money hand over fist

If you make money hand over fist, you make a lot of money without any difficulty.

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 out like a bandit

(USA) If someone is extremely successful in a venture, they make out like a bandit.

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.

Make your flesh crawl

If something makes your flesh crawl, it really scares or revolts you. ('Make your flesh creep' is an alternative. 'Make your skin crawl' is also used.)

Make your hair stand on end

If something makes your hair stand on end, it terrifies you.

Make yourself scarce

If someone makes themselves scarce, they go away from a place, especially to avoid trouble or so that they can't be found.

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 his word

A man of his word is a person who does what he says and keeps his promises.

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 parts

A man of parts is a person who is talented in a number of different areas or ways.

Man of straw

A man of straw is a weak person or argument that is easily defeated.

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.

Many a slip twixt cup and lip

There's many a slip twixt cup and lip means that many things can go wrong before something is achieved.

Many hands make light work

This idiom means that when everyone gets involved in something, the work gets done quickly.

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.

Mark someone's card

If you mark someone's card, you correct them in a forceful and prompt manner when they say something wrong.

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.

Meat and potatoes

The meat and potatoes is the most important part of something. A meat and potatoes person is someone who prefers plain things to fancy ones.

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 Maker

If someone has gone to meet their Maker, they have died.

Meet your match

If you meet your match, you meet a person who is at least as good if not better than you are at something.

Megaphone diplomacy

If negotiations between countries or parties are held through press releases and announcements, this is megaphone diplomacy, aiming to force the other party into adopting a desired position.

Melting pot

A melting pot is a place where people from many ethnicities and nationalities live together.

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.

Mend fences

When people mend fences, they try to improve or restore relations that have been damaged by disputes or arguments.

Method in his madness

If there's method in someone's madness, they do things in a strange and unorthodox way, but manage to get results.

Mickey Mouse

If something is Mickey Mouse, it is intellectually trivial or not of a very high standard.

Midas touch

If someone has the Midas touch, they make a lot of money out of any scheme they try.

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow

Big or great things start very small.

Millstone around your neck

A millstone around your neck is a problem that prevents you from doing what you want to do.

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 own beeswax

(USA) This idiom means that people should mind their own business and not interfere in other people's affairs.

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.

Monday morning quarterback

(USA) A Monday morning quarterback is someone who, with the benefit of hindsight, knows what should have been done in a situation.

Money for jam

If something's money for jam, it's a very easy way of making money.

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 makes many things

This means that money is important.

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. In the U.S., this expression usually means that there is no point in debating something, because it just doesn't matter. An example: If you are arguing over whether to go the beach or to the park, but you find out the car won't start and you can't go anywhere, then the destination is said to be a moot point.

Moral fibre

Moral fibre is the inner strength to do what you believe to be right in difficult situations Example: He lacked the moral fibre to be leader (In American English the correct spelling is 'fiber'.)

Moral high ground

If people have/take/claim/seize, etc, the moral high ground, they claim that their arguments, beliefs, etc, are morally superior to those being put forward by other people.

More haste, less speed

The faster you try to do something, the more likely you are to make mistakes that make you take longer than it would had you planned it.

More heat than light

If a discussion generates more heat than light, it doesn't provide answers, but does make people angry.

More than meets the eye

If there is more than meets the eye to something, it is more complex or difficult than it appears.

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.

More than one way to skin a cat

When people say that there is more than one way to skin a cat, they mean that there are different ways of achieving the same thing.

Mountain to climb

If you have a mountain to climb, you have to work hard or make a lot of progress to achieve something.

Move mountains

If you would move mountains to do something, you would make any effort to achieve your aim. When people say that faith can move mountains, they mean that it can achieve a lot.

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.

Much ado about nothing

If there's a lot of fuss about something trivial, there's much ado about nothing.

Mud in the fire

The things that cannot be changed in the past that we usually forget about are mud in the fire.

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.

Mum's the word

When people use this idiom, they mean that you should keep quiet about something and not tell other people.

Murder will out

This idiom means that bad deeds can't be kept secret forever.

Murky waters

Where people are behaving in morally and ethically questionable ways, they are in murky waters.

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 dogs are barking

(USA) When someone says this, they mean that their feet are hurting.

My eye

This idiom is added to an adjective to show that you disagree with it: 'He's shy.' 'Shy my eye- he's just planning something secret.'

My foot!

This idiom is used to show that you do not believe what someone has just said.

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.

My heart bleeds

If your heart bleeds for someone, you feel genuine sympathy and sadness for them.

My heart goes out to someone

If your heart goes out to someone, you feel genuine sympathy for them.

My way or the highway

This idiom is used to say that if people don't do what you say, they will have to leave or quit the project, etc.

- N -

Nail in the coffin

A nail in someone or something's coffin is a problem or event that is a clear step towards an inevitable failure.

Nail-biter

If a game, election, contest, etc, is a nail-biter, it is exciting because the competitors are so close that it is impossible to predict the result.

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.

Neck of the woods

If someone talks about their neck of the woods, they mean the area where they live.

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.

Neither use nor ornament

Something that serves no purpose and is not aesthetically pleasing is neither use nor ornament.

Nerves of steel

If someone has nerves of steel, they don't get frightened when other people do.

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.

Never darken my door again

This is a way of telling someone never to visit you again.

New blood

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

New brush sweeps clean

'A new brush sweeps clean' means that someone with a new perspective can make great changes. However, the full version is 'a new brush sweeps clean, but an old brush knows the corners', which warns that experience is also a valuable thing. Sometimes 'broom' is used instead of 'brush'.

New kid on the block

A new kid on the block is a person who has recently joined a company, organisation, team, etc, and does not know how things work yet.

New lease of life

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

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.

Nick of time

If you do something in the nick of time, you do it at the very last minute or second.

Nickel tour

(USA) If someone gives you a nickel tour, they show you around a place. ('Fifty-cent tour' is also used.)

Night owl

A night owl is someone who goes to bed very late.

Ninth circle of hell

In Dante's *Inferno*, the ninth circle of hell is the centre where the worst punishments are found, so it is used idiomatically for something that couldn't get worse.

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 bed of roses

If something isn't a bed of roses, it is difficult.

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.

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 skin off my nose

If something's no skin off your nose, it doesn't affect or bother you at all.

No smoke without fire

This idiom means that when people suspect something, there is normally a good reason for the suspicion, even if there is no concrete evidence. ('Where's there's smoke, there's fire' is also used.)

No spine

If someone has no spine, they lack courage or are cowardly.

No spring chicken

If someone is no spring chicken, they are not 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.

No use to man or beast

If something or someone is no use to man or beast, they or they are utterly useless.

None so blind as those who will not see

This idiom is used when people refuse to accept facts presented to them. ('None so deaf as those who will not hear' is an alternative.)

Nose in the air

If someone has their nose in the air, they behave in a way that is meant to show that they are superior to others.

Not all there

If someone isn't all there, they are a little bit stupid or crazy.

Not bat an eye

If someone doesn't bat an eye, they do not react when other people normally would.

Not born yesterday

When someone says that they weren't born yesterday, they mean that they are not naive or easily fooled.

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 have two pennies to rub together

If someone hasn't got two pennies to rub together, they are very poor indeed.

Not know beans about

(USA) If someone doesn't know beans about something, they know nothing about 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.

Not the only pebble on the beach

If something is not the only pebble on the beach, there are other possibilities or alternatives.

Not to be sneezed at

If something is not to be sneezed at, it should be taken seriously.

Not wash

If a story or explanation will not wash, it is not credible.

Notch on your belt

A success or achievement that might help you in the future is a notch on your belt.

Nothing to crow about

If something's nothing to crow about, it's not particularly good or special.

Now and then

This idiom means 'occasionally'.

Null and void

If something's null and void, it is invalid or is no longer applicable.

Number cruncher

A number cruncher is an accountant or someone who is very good at dealing with numbers and calculations.

Nuts and bolts

The nuts and bolts are the most essential components of something.

Nutty as a fruitcake

Someone who's nutty as a fruitcake is irrational or crazy. (This can be shortened to 'a fruitcake'.)

- O -

Object lesson

An object lesson serves as a warning to others. (In some varieties of English 'abject lesson' is used.)

Odds and ends

Odds and ends are small, remnant articles and things, the same as bits and bobs.

Off colour

If someone looks off colour/color, they look ill.

Off the beaten track

Somewhere that's off the beaten track is in a remote location.

Off the chart

If something goes off the chart, it far exceeds the normal standards, good or bad, for something.

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 mark

If something is off the mark, it is inaccurate or incorrect.

Off the rails

If someone has gone off the rails, they have lost track of reality.

Off the scale

If something goes off the scale, it far exceeds the normal standards, good or bad, for something.

Off the shelf

If a product is off the shelf, it can be used straightaway without any setting-up.

Off the track

If something puts or throws you off your track, it distracts you or keeps you from achieving what you want.

Off the wall

Something that is off the wall is unconventional.

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 chestnut

An old chestnut is something that has been repeated so many times that it has lost its impact.

Old friends and old wine are best

This idiom means that the things and people that we know well are better than the unfamiliar.

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 a fishing expedition

If someone is on a fishing expedition, they are trying to get information, often using incorrect or improper ways to find things out.

On a roll

If you're on a roll, you're moving from success to success.

On a silver platter

If you hand or give something on a silver platter to someone, you let them have it too easily.

On good terms

If people are on good terms, they have a good relationship.

On hold

If something is on hold, no action is being taken.

On ice

If plans are put on ice, they are delayed and no action will be taken for the foreseeable future.

On pins and needles

If you are on pins and needles, you are very worried about something.

On tenterhooks

This means that she is waiting impatiently and excitedly for something.

On the ball

If someone's on the ball, they are well-informed and know what's going on in their area of responsibility or interest.

On the case

If someone is on the case, they are dealing with a problem.

On the cheap

If you do something on the cheap, you spend as little as possible to do it.

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 factory floor

On the factory floor means the place where things are actually produced.

On the fly

If you do things on the fly, you do things without preparation, responding to events as they happen.

On the ground

Events on the ground are where things are actually happening, not at a distance.

On the hoof

If you decide something on the hoof, you do it without planning, responding to events as they happen.

On the house

If you get something for free that would normally have to be bought, especially in a bar or restaurant, it is on the house.

On the lam

If someone is on the lam, they are hiding from the police or authorities, especially to avoid arrest or prison.

On the level

If someone is honest and trustworthy, they are on the level.

On the line

If somebody's job is on the line, they stand a very good chance of losing it.

On the make

If someone is on the make, they are trying to make a lot of money, usually illegally.

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 rebound

If someone is on the rebound, their relationship has recently ended and they are emotionally unstable.

On the right foot

If you start something or set off on the right foot, you get off to a good start.

On the ropes

When something or someone is on the ropes, it or they are doing badly and likely to fail.

On the run

If someone is on the run, they are avoiding arrest and hiding from the police.

On the same page

If people are on the same page, they have the same information and are thinking the same way.

On the shelf

If something like a project is on the shelf, nothing is being done about it at the moment.

On the sly

If someone does something on the sly, they do it furtively or secretly.

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 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.

Once in a blue moon

If something happens once in a blue moon, it happens very rarely indeed.

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 for the road

A last drink before leaving a pub or bar is one for the road.

One hand washes the other

This idiom means that we need other people to get on as cooperation benefits us all.

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 swallow does not make a summer

This means that one good or positive event does not mean that everything is all right.

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.

One-trick pony

A one-trick pony is someone who does one thing well, but has limited skills in other areas.

Open all hours

If a shop or such like 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.

Other side of the coin

The other side of the coin is a different, usually opposing, view of a situation. ('Flip side of the coin' is an alternative.)

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 hand

If something gets out of hand, it gets out of control.

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 box

Thinking out of the box is thinking in a creative way. However, it can also be used for a ready-made product that requires no specialist knowledge to set it up.

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.

Out of the woods

If you are out of the woods, you have emerged safely from a dangerous situation, though the idiom is often used in the negative.

Out of this world

If something is out of this world, it is fantastic.

Out of your hair

If you get someone out of your hair, you get them to stop bothering or annoying you. ('Stay/keep/get out of my hair!' can be used as imperatives)

Out of your mind

If someone is out of the mind, they are so emotional about something that they are no longer rational.

Out of your own pocket

If someone does something out of their own pocket, they pay all the expenses involved.

Out on a limb

If somebody's out on a limb, they are in a very exposed position and could get into difficulties.

Out to lunch

If someone's out to lunch, they are crazy or out of touch.

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 and over

If something happens over and over, it happens repeatedly.

Over my dead body

If you say that something will happen over your dead body, you will not let it happen.

Over the counter

Medicines and drugs that can be sold without a doctor's prescription are sold over the counter.

Over the hill

If someone is over the hill they have reached an age at which they can no longer perform as well as they used to.

Over the moon

If you are over the moon about something, you are overjoyed.

Over the top

If something is over the top, it is excessive or unnecessary.

Over your head

If something is over your head, or goes over your head, it is too complex or difficult for you to understand.

- P -

Packed like sardines

If a place is extremely crowded, people are packed like sardines, or packed in like sardines.

Paddle your own canoe

(USA) If you paddle your own canoe, you do things for yourself without outside help.

Pain in the neck

If someone is very annoying and always disturbing you, they are a pain in the neck. Pain in the butt, or pain in the ass (USA), and 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.

Paint yourself into a corner

(USA) If someone paints themselves into a corner, they get themselves into a mess.

Painted Jezebel

A painted Jezebel is a scheming woman.

Pandora's box

If you open a Pandora's box, something you do causes all sorts of trouble that you hadn't anticipated.

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 parrot fashion, you learn it word for word. A parrot is a bird from South America that can talk.

Part and parcel

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.

Patience of Job

If something requires the patience of Job, it requires great patience.

Pay on the nail

If you pay on the nail, you pay promptly in cash.

Pay the piper

When you pay the piper, you have to accept the consequences of something that you have done wrong or badly.

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.

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.

Penny ante

(USA) Something that is very unimportant is penny ante.

Penny wise, pound foolish

Someone who is penny wise, pound foolish can be very careful or mean with small amounts of money, yet wasteful and extravagant with large sums.

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.

Pick-up game

(USA) A pick-up game is something unplanned where people respond to events as they happen.

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.

Pieces of the same cake

Pieces of the same cake are things that have the same characteristics or qualities.

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.

Pigs might fly

If you think something will never happen or succeed, you can say that 'pigs might fly' (or 'pigs can fly' and 'pigs will fly'- the idiom is used in many forms)

Pinch of salt

If what someone says should be taken with a pinch of salt, then they exaggerate and distort things, so what they say shouldn't be believed unquestioningly. ('with a grain of salt' is an alternative.)

Pink slip

If someone receives a pink slip, they receive a letter telling them they have lost their job.

Pipe dream

A pipe dream is an unrealistic, impractical idea or scheme.

Piping hot

If food is piping hot, it is very hot indeed.

Place in the sun

If you have your place in the sun, you find wealth, happiness or whatever you are looking for in life.

Plain as the nose on your face

If something is as plain as the nose on your face, it is very clear and obvious.

Plain Jane

A plain Jane is a woman who isn't particularly attractive.

Plain sailing

If something is relatively easy and there are no problems doing it, it is plain sailing.

Plan B

Plan is an alternate or fall-back position or method when the initial attempt or plan goes wrong.

Plastic smile

When someone is wearing a plastic smile, they appear 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 fast and loose

If people play fast and loose, they behave in an irresponsible way and don't respect rules, etc.

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 hooky

If people play hooky, they don't attend school when they should and don't have a valid reason for their absence.

Play into someone's hands

If you play into someone's hands, you do what they were expecting you to do and take advantage of this.

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 out of your skin

If someone plays out of their skin, they give an outstanding performance.

Play second fiddle

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

Play the field

Someone who plays the field has sexual relationships with many people.

Play the fool

If someone plays the fool, they behave in a silly way to make people laugh. ('Act the fool' is an alternative form.)

Play with fire

If people take foolish risks, they are playing with fire.

Playing to the gallery

If someone plays to the gallery, they say or do things that will make them popular, but which are not the right things to do.

Poetry in motion

Something that is poetry in motion is beautiful to watch.

Pointy-heads

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

Poison pill

A poison pill is a strategy designed to prevent a company from being taken over.

Pop the question

When someone pops the question, they ask someone to marry them.

Pop your clogs

When someone pops their clogs, they die.

Pork barrel

Pork barrel politics involves investing money in an area to get political support rather than using the money for the common good.

Pot calling the kettle black

If someone hypocritically criticises a person for something that they themselves do, then it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Pot-luck

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

Pound of flesh

If someone wants their pound of flesh, the force someone to pay or give back something owed, even though they don't need it and it will cause the other person a lot of difficulty.

Pour oil on troubled waters

If someone pours oil on troubled waters, they try to calm things down.

Powder your nose

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

Powers that be

The powers that be are the people who are in charge of something.

Preaching to the choir

If someone preaches to the choir, they talking about a subject or issue with which their audience already agrees. ('Preaching to the converted' is an alternative form.)

Presence of mind

If someone behaves calmly and rationally in difficult circumstances, they show presence of mind.

Press the flesh

When people, especially politicians, press the flesh, they meet members of the public and shake their hands, usually when trying to get support.

Pressed for time

If you are pressed for time, you are in a hurry or working against a very tight schedule.

Primrose path

The primrose path is an easy and pleasurable lifestyle, but one that ends in unpleasantness and problems.

Prince charming

A prince charming is the perfect man in a woman's life.

Problem is thirty

If a problem is 30, the problem is the person who sits 30 cm from the computer screen. It is used to describe people that lack technical knowledge and can be used when you insult someone who's having computer problems.

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 no punches

If you pull no punches, you hold nothing back.

Pull out all the stops

If you pull out all the stops, you do everything you possibly can to achieve the result you want.

Pull out of the fire

(USA) If you pull something out of the fire, you save or rescue it.

Pull someone's leg

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

Pull strings

If you pull strings, you use contacts you have got to help you get what you want.

Pull the fat from the fire

If you pull the fat from the fire, you help someone in a difficult situation.

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 trigger

The person who pulls the trigger is the one who does the action that closes or finishes something.

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 chain

(USA) If someone pulls your chain, they take advantage of you in an unfair way or do something to annoy you.

Pull your punches

If you pull your punches, you do not use all the power or authority at your disposal.

Pull your weight

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

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps

If you pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you make the effort to improve things for yourself.

Punching bag

A punching bag (or punch bag) is a person who gets a lot of unfair criticism.

Pup's chance

A pup's chance is no chance.

Push comes to shove

If or when push comes to shove, the situation has become some bad that you are forced to do something: If push comes to shove, we'll just have to use our savings.

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 some mustard on it!

(USA) I think its used to encourage someone to throw a ball like a baseball hard or fast.

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 someone out to pasture

If someone is put out to pasture, they are forced to resign or give up some responsibilities.

Put the pedal to the metal

If you put the pedal to the metal, you go faster.

Put to the sword

If someone is put to the sword, he or she is killed or executed.

Put two and two together

If someone puts two and two together, they reach a correct conclusion from the evidence.

Put you in mind

If something suggests something to you, it puts you in mind of that thing.

Put you in the picture

If you put someone in the picture, you tell them the information they need to know about something.

Put your foot down

When someone puts their foot down, they make a firm stand and establish their authority on an issue.

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.

Put your foot in your mouth

If you put your foot in your mouth, you say something stupid or embarrassing.

Put your hand on your heart

If you can put your hand on your heart, then you can say something knowing it to be true.

Put your heads together

If people put their heads together, they exchange ideas about something.

Put your money where your mouth is

If someone puts their money where their mouth is, they back up their words with action.

Putting the cart before the horse

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

Pyrrhic victory

A Pyrrhic victory is one that causes the victor to suffer so much to achieve it that it isn't worth winning.

- 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

If someone queers your pitch, they interfere in your affairs and spoil things.

Question of time

If something's a question of time, it's certain to happen, though we don't know exactly when.

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 off the mark

If someone is quick off the mark, they are very quick to use, start or do something new.

Quick on the trigger

Someone who is quick on the trigger acts or responds quickly.

Quiet as a mouse

If someone's as quiet as a mouse, they make absolutely no noise.

- R -

Rack and ruin

If something or someone goes to rack and ruin, they are utterly destroyed or wrecked.

Rack your brain

If you rack your brain, you think very hard when trying to remember something. ('Rack your brains' is an alternative.)

Ragged blue line

(USA) This term was used to signify the Union forces (who wore blue uniforms) in the American Civil war .

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.

Raise Cain

(USA) If someone raises Cain, they make a big fuss publicly, causing a disturbance.

Raise eyebrows

If something raises eyebrows, it shocks or surprises people.

Rake someone over the coals

(USA) If you rake someone over the coals, you criticize or scold them severely.

Rank and file

The rank and file are the ordinary members of a company, organisation, etc, excluding the managers and directors.

Rat race

The rat race is the ruthless, competitive struggle for success in work, etc.

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 from the same page

When people are reading from the same page, they say the same things in public about an issue.

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 deal

If something is the real deal, it is genuine and good.

Real McCoy

Something that's the real McCoy is the genuine article, not a fake.

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 carpet

If you give someone the red-carpet treatment, you give them a special welcome to show that you think they are important. You can roll out the red carpet, too.

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 light district

The red light district is the area of a town or city where there is prostitution, sex shops, etc.

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.

Reinvent the wheel

If someone reinvents the wheel, they waste their time doing something that has already been done by other people, when they could be doing something more worthwhile.

Renaissance man

A Renaissance man is a person who is talented in a number of different areas, especially when their talents include both the sciences and the arts.

Rest is gravy

(USA) If the rest is gravy, it is easy and straightforward once you have reached that stage.

Rest on your laurels

If someone rests on their laurels, they rely on their past achievements, rather than trying to achieve things now.

Revenge is sweet

When you are happy to be proved right, then you know that revenge is sweet.

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.

Rhyme or reason

If something is without rhyme or reason, it is unreasonable. ('Beyond rhyme or reason' is an alternative.)

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.

Ride roughshod

If someone rides roughshod over other people, they impose their will without caring at all for other people's feelings.

Right as rain

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

Right up my alley

If something is right up your alley, it suits you perfectly.

Right up your street

If something is ideal for you, it is right up your street.

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.

Rip van Winkle

Rip van Winkle is a character in a story who slept for twenty years, so if someone is a Rip van Winkle, they are behind the times and out of touch with what's happening now.

Rise and shine

If you wake up full of energy, you rise and shine.

Rise from the ashes

If something rises from the ashes, it recovers after a serious failure.

Road to Damascus

If someone has a great and sudden change in their ideas or beliefs, then this is a road to Damascus change, after the conversion of Saint Paul to Christianity while heading to Damascus to persecute Christians.

Rob Peter to pay Paul

If you rob Peter to pay Paul, you try to solve one problem, but create another in doing so, often through short-term planning.

Rock the boat

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

Rocket science

If something is not rocket science, it is not very complicated or difficult to understand. This idiom is normally used in the negative.

Roll out the red carpet

If you roll out the red carpet, you treat someone in a special way, especially when welcoming them.

Roll with the punches

If you roll with the punches, you are flexible and able to adapt to difficult circumstances.

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.

Rooted to the spot

If someone is rooted to the spot, they cannot move, either physically or they cannot think their way out of a problem.

Rose-colored glasses

If people see things through rose-colored (coloured) glasses, they see them in a more positive light than they really are.

Rose-tinted glasses

If people see things through rose-tinted glasses, they see them in a more positive light than they really are.

Rough and ready

If something is rough and ready, it has not been carefully prepared, but is fit for its purpose. If a person is rough and ready, they are not very refined.

Rough around the edges

If someone is rough around the edges, they haven't mastered something, though they show promise.

Rough diamond

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

Rough edges

If something has rough edges, it is still not a finished product and not all of a uniform standard.

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 shoulders

If you rub shoulders with people, you meet and spend time with them, especially when they are powerful or famous.

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.

Rudderless ship

If an organisation, company, government, etc, is like a rudderless ship, it has no clear direction and drifts about without reaching its goals.

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 a mile

If someone "runs a mile", they do everything they can to avoid a situation. Example: "I was worried that he'd take one look at me and run a mile."

Run around the bush

(USA) If you run around the bush, it means that you're taking a long time to get to the point.

Run before you can walk

If someone tries to run before they can walk, they try to do something requiring a high level of knowledge before they have learned the basics.

Run circles around someone

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

Run into the sand

If something runs into the sand, it fails to achieve a result.

Run out of gas

If a campaign, project, etc, runs out of gas, it loses energy and momentum, and progress slows or halts.

Run rings around someone

If you run rings around someone, you are so much better than them that they have no chance of keeping up with you.

Run the gauntlet

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

Run the show

If someone runs the show, they like to be in control and make all the decisions.

Run your mouth off

If someone runs their mouth off, they talk too much.

Run-of-the-mill

If something is run-of-the-mill, there is nothing exceptional about it- it is ordinary or average.

Running on empty

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

Russian roulette

If people take a dangerous and unnecessary risk, they are playing Russian roulette.

Rusty needle

When something is described as a rusty needle, it is badly damaged but still works, or if someone very is sick or tired but still manages to do things at a fairly good level. An alternative form is "a tarnished needle".

- S -

Sacred cow

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

Safe and sound

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

Safe bet

A proposition that is a safe bet doesn't have any risks attached.

Safe pair of hands

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

Safety in numbers

If a lot of people do something risky at the same time, the risk is reduced because there is safety in numbers.

Saigon moment

(USA) A Saigon moment is when people realise that something has gone wrong and that they will lose or fail.

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.

Sail under false colours

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 in a wound

If you rub salt in a wound, you make someone feel bad about something that is already a painful experience. 'Pour salt on a wound' is an alternative form of the idiom.

Salt of the earth

People who are salt of the earth are decent, dependable and unpretentious.

Save face

If someone saves face, they manage to protect their reputation.

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.

Save your skin

If someone saves their skin, they manage to avoid getting into serious trouble.

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 uncle

(USA) If you say uncle, you admit defeat. ('Cry uncle' is an alternative form.)

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.

Scales fall from your eyes

When the scales fall from your eyes, you suddenly realise the truth about something.

Scare the daylights out of someone

If you scare the daylights out of someone, you terrify them. (This can be made even stronger by saying 'the living daylights!')

Scarlet woman

This idiom is used as a pejorative term for a sexually promiscuous woman, especially an adulteress.

Scattered to the four winds

If something's scattered to the four winds, it goes out in all directions.

Scent blood

If you can scent blood, you feel that a rival is having difficulties and you are going to beat them.

Scot free

If someone escapes scot free, they avoid payment or punishment. 'Scot' is an old word for a tax, so it originally referred to avoiding taxes, though now has a wider sense of not being punished for someone that you have done.

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.

Scream blue murder

If someone shouts very loudly in anger, or fear, they scream blue murder.

Screw loose

If someone has a screw loose, they are crazy.

Seamy side

The seamy side of something is the unpleasant or sordid aspect it has.

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 thoughts

If some has second thoughts, they start to think that an idea, etc, is not as good as it sounded at first and are starting to have doubts.

Second wind

If you overcome tiredness and find new energy and enthusiasm, you have second wind.

See eye to eye

If people see eye to eye, they agree about everything.

See red

If someone sees red, they become very angry about something.

See the light

When someone sees the light, they realise the truth.

Seed money

Seed money is money that is used to start a small business.

Seeing is believing

This idiom means that people can only really believe what they experience personally.

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 down the river

If you sell someone down the river, you betray their trust.

Sell like hot cakes

If a product is selling very well, it is selling like hot cakes.

Sell your birthright for a mess of pottage

If a person sells their birthright for a mess of pottage, they accept some trivial financial or other gain, but lose something much more important. 'Sell your soul for a mess of pottage' is an alternative form.

Sell your soul

If someone sells their soul, they betray the most precious beliefs.

Separate the sheep from the goats

If you separate the sheep from the goats, you sort out the good from the bad.

Separate the wheat from the chaff

When you separate the wheat from the chaff, you select what is useful or valuable and reject what is useless or worthless.

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.

Set your sights on

If you set your sights on someone or something, it is your ambition to beat them or to achieve that goal.

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.

Shaggy dog story

A shaggy dog story is a joke which is a long story with a silly end.

Shake a leg

If you shake a leg, you are out of bed and active.

Shape up or ship out

If someone has to shape up or ship out, they have to improve or leave their job, organisation, etc.

Sharp as a tack

(USA) If someone is as sharp as a tack, they are very clever indeed.

Sharp cookie

Someone who isn't easily deceived or fooled is a sharp cookie.

Shed light

If you shed light on something, you make it clearer and easier to understand.

Shifting sands

If the sands are shifting, circumstances are changing.

Shilly-shally

If people shilly-shally, they can't make up their minds about something and put off the decision.

Ship came in

If your ship has come in, something very good has happened to you.

Shipshape and Bristol fashion

If things are shipshape and Bristol fashion, they are in perfect working order.

Shoe is on the other foot

If the shoe is on the other foot, someone is experiencing what they used to make others experience, normally negative things.

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

If you shoot yourself in the foot, you do something that damages your ambition, career, etc.

Shooting fish in a barrel

If something is like shooting fish in a barrel, it is so easy that success is guaranteed.

Short end of the stick

If someone gets the short end of the stick, they are unfairly treated or don't get what they deserve.

Short shrift

If somebody gives you short shrift, they treat you rudely and brusquely, showing no interest or sympathy.

Shot across the bow

A shot across the bow is a warning to tell someone to stop doing something or face very serious consequences.

Shot in the dark

If you have a shot in the dark at something, you try something where you have little hope of success.

Shotgun marriage

A shotgun marriage, or shotgun wedding, is one that is forced because of pregnancy. It is also used idiomatically for a compromise, agreement or arrangement that is forced upon groups or people by necessity.

Show me the money

When people say this, they either want to know how much they will be paid for something or want to see evidence that something is valuable or worth paying for.

Show someone a clean pair of heels

If you show someone a clean pair of heels, you run faster than them when they are chasing you.

Shrinking violet

A shrinking violet is a shy person who doesn't express their views and opinions.

Sick and tired

If you are sick and tired of something, it has been going on for a long time and you can no longer tolerate it.

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 for sore eyes

Someone or something that is a sight for sore eyes is a pleasure to see.

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.

Signed, sealed and delivered

If something's signed, sealed and delivered, it has been done correctly, following all the necessary procedures.

Silence is golden

It is often better to say nothing than to talk, so silence is golden.

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 bullet

A silver bullet is a complete solution to a large problem, a solution that seems magical.

Silver screen

The silver screen is the cinema.

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.

Sing from the same hymn sheet

If people are singing from the same hymn sheet, they are expressing the same opinions in public.

Sink or swim

Of you are left to sink or swim, no one gives you any help and it's up to you whether you fail or succeed.

Sit on the fence

If someone sits on the fence, they try not to support either side in a dispute.

Sit pretty

Someone who's sitting pretty is in a very advantageous situation.

Sitting duck

A sitting duck is something or someone that is easy to criticise or target.

Six feet under

If someone is six feet under, they are dead.

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.

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.

Sixty-four-thousand-dollar-question

The sixty-four-thousand-dollar-question is the most important question that can be asked about something.

Skate on thin ice

If someone is skating on thin ice, they are taking a big risk.

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.

Skin and bones

If someone is skin and bones, they are very underweight and look bad.

Skin in the game

A person who has skin in the game has invested in the company they are running.

Skin someone alive

If someone skins you alive, they admonish and punish you hard.

Skunkworks

An unauthorised, or hidden program or activity, often research-oriented, and out of the bureaucratic chain of command is known as a 'skunkworks'.

Slap on the wrist

If someone gets a slap on the wrist, they get a very minor punishment when they could have been punished more severely.

Sleep like a baby

If you sleep very well, you sleep like baby.

Sleep like a log

If you sleep like a log, you sleep very soundly.

Sleep well- don't let the bedbugs bite

This is a way of wishing someone a good night's sleep.

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.

Slip of the tongue

If you say something accidentally, it is a slip of the tongue.

Slippery customer

A person from whom it is difficult to get anything definite or fixed is a slippery customer.

Slippery slope

A slippery slope is where a measure would lead to further worse measures.

Slough of despond

If someone is very depressed or in despair, they're in a slough of despond.

Slow boat to China

This idiom is used to describe something that is very slow and takes a long time.

Slow but sure

If something or someone is slow but sure, they may take their time to do something, but they are reliable.

Smack in the face

If something is a smack in the face, it is a shock, usually one that impedes progress.

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.

Smarty pants

A smarty pants is someone who displays the intelligence in an annoying way.

Smell a rat

If you smell a rat, you know instinctively that something is wrong or that someone is lying to you.

Smoke and mirrors

An attempt to conceal something is smoke and mirrors.

Smoke like a chimney

Someone who smokes very heavily smokes like a chimney.

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.

Smooth sailing

If something is smooth sailing, then you can progress without difficulty. ('Plain sailing' is also used.)

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.

Snow job

(USA) A snow job is an attempt to persuade or deceive someone, especially when flattery is used.

Snug as a bug in a rug

If you're as snug as a bug in a rug, you are feeling very comfortable indeed.

So it goes

This idiom is used to be fatalistic and accepting when something goes wrong.

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.

Something nasty in the woodshed

Something nasty in the woodshed means that someone has a dark secret or an unpleasant experience in their past.

Sound as a bell

If something or someone is as sound as a bell, they are very healthy or in very good condition.

Sour grapes

When someone says something critical or negative because they are jealous, it is a case of sour grapes.

Sow the seeds

When people sow the seeds, they start something that will have a much greater impact in the future.

Spare the rod and spoil the child

This means that if you don't discipline children, they will become spoilt.

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 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 is willing, but the flesh is weak

If the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, someone lacks the willpower to change things they do because they derive too much pleasure from them.

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.

Spit blood

If someone is spitting blood, they are absolutely furious.

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.

Spot on

If something is spot on, it is exactly right.

Sprat to catch a mackerel

If you use a sprat to catch a mackerel, you make a small expenditure or take a small risk in the hope of a much greater gain.

Spur of the moment

If you do something on the spur of the moment, you do it because you felt like it at that time, without any planning or preparation.

Sputnik moment

A Sputnikmoment is a point where people realise that they are threatened or challenged and have to redouble their efforts to catch up. It comes from the time when the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, the Sputnik 1, and beat the USA into space.

Square meal

A squaremeal is a substantial or filling meal.

Square peg in a round hole

If somebody's in a situation, organisation, etc, where they don't fit in and feel out of place, they are a square peg in a round hole.

Squeaky clean

If something is squeaky clean, it is very clean indeed- spotless. If a person is squeaky clean, they have no criminal record and are not suspected of illegal or immoral activities.

Squeaky wheel gets the grease

(USA) When people say that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, they mean that the person who complains or protests the loudest attracts attention and service.

Squeeze blood out of a turnip

(USA) When people say that you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, it means that you cannot get something from a person, especially money, that they don't have.

Stand in good stead

If something will stand you in good stead, it will probably be advantageous in the future.

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.

Steal someone's thunder

If someone steals your thunder, they take the credit and praise for something you did.

Steer clear of

If you steer clear of something, you avoid it.

Stem the tide

If people try to stem the tide, they are trying to stop something unpleasant from getting worse, usually when they don't succeed.

Step on it

This idiom is a way of telling someone to hurry up or to go faster.

Step up to the plate

If someone steps up to the plate, they take on or accept a challenge or a responsibility.

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 criticise you.

Stick your neck out

If you stick your neck out, you take a risk because you believe in something.

Stick-in-the-mud

A stick-in-the-mud is someone who doesn't like change and wants things to stay the same.

Sticking point

A sticking point is a controversial issue that blocks progress in negotiations, etc, where compromise is unlikely or impossible.

Stiff-necked

A stiff-necked person is rather formal and finds it hard to relax in company.

Still in the game

If someone is still in the game, they may be having troubles competing, but they are not yet finished and may come back.

Still waters run deep

People use this idiom to imply that people who are quiet and don't try to attract attention are often more interesting than people who do try to get attention.

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 or movement.

Stone's throw

If a place is a stone's throw from where you are, it is a very short distance away.

Stool pigeon

(USA) A stool pigeon is a police informer.

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.

Straw man

A straw man is a weak argument that is easily defeated. It can also be a person who is used as to give an illegal or inappropriate activity an appearance of respectability.

Straw poll

A straw poll is a small unofficial survey or ballot to find out what people think about an issue.

Straw that broke the camel's back

The straw that broke the camel's back is the problem that made you lose your temper or the problem that finally brought about the collapse of something.

Streets ahead

If people are streets ahead of their rivals, they are a long way in front.

Strike a chord

If strikes a chord, it is familiar to you, reminds you of something or is connected to you somehow.

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. (You can also 'take a trip down memory lane'.)

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.

Stuffed to the gills

If someone is stuffed to the gills, they have eaten a lot and are very full.

Sure as eggs is eggs

This means absolutely certain, and we do say 'is' even though it is grammatically wrong.

Sure-fire

If something is sure-fire, it is certain to succeed. ('Surefire' is also used.)

Swansong

A person's swansong is their final achievement or public appearance.

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.

Sweat blood

If you sweat blood, you make an extraordinary effort to achieve something.

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. ('Go against the tide' is an alternative form.)

Swim with the fishes

If someone is swimming with the fishes, they are dead, especially if they have been murdered. 'Sleep with the fishes' is an alternative form.

Swim with the tide

If you swim with the tide, you do the same as people around you and accept the general consensus. ('Go with the tide' is an alternative form.)

Swimmingly

If things are going swimmingly, they are going very well.

Swings and roundabouts

If something's swings and roundabouts, it has about as many disadvantages as it has advantages.

- T -

Tables are turned

When the tables are turned, the situation has changed giving the advantage to the party who had previously been at a disadvantage.

Tackle an issue

If you tackle an issue or problem, you resolve or deal with it.

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 punch

If somebody takes a blow, something bad happens to them.

Take a rain check

If you take a rain check, you decline an offer now, suggesting you will accept it later. ('Raincheck' is also used.)

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 by the scruff of the neck

If you take something by the scruff on the neck, you take complete control of it.

Take for granted

If you take something for granted, you don't worry or think about it because you assume you will always have it. If you take someone for granted, you don't show your appreciation to them.

Take it on the chin

If you take something on the chin, something bad happens to you and you take it directly without fuss.

Take someone down a peg

If someone is taken down a peg (or taken down a peg or two), they lose status in the eyes of others because of something they have done wrong or badly.

Take someone for a ride

If you are taken for a ride, you are deceived by someone.

Take someone to the woodshed

If someone is taken to the woodshed, they are punished for something they have done.

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 chair

If you take the chair, you become the chairman or chairwoman of a committee, etc.

Take the floor

Start talking or giving a speech to a group

Take the plunge

If you take the plunge, you decide to do something or commit yourself even though you know there is an element of risk 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.

Take up the torch

If you take up the torch, you take on a challenge or responsibility, usually when someone else retires, or leaves an organisation, etc.

Take your breath away

If something takes your breath away, it astonishes or surprises you.

Take your eye off the ball

If someone takes their eye off the ball, they don't concentrate on something important that they should be looking at.

Take your eye off the ball

If you take your eye off the ball, you don't pay attention to something when you should be and miss something important.

Take your hat off to somebody

If you take your hat off to someone, you acknowledge that they have done something exceptional or otherwise deserve your respect.

Taken as read

If something can be taken as read, it is so definite that it's not necessary to talk about it.

Talk a blue streak

(USA) If someone talks a blue streak, they speak quickly and at length. ('Talk up a blue streak' is also used.)

Talk nineteen to the dozen

If someone talks very quickly, they talk nineteen to the dozen.

Talk of the town

When everybody is talking about particular people and events, they are the 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 through your hat' is also used.)

Talk shop

If you talk shop, you talk about work matters, especially if you do this outside work.

Talk the hind legs off a donkey

A person who is excessively or extremely talkative can talk the hind legs off a donkey.

Tall order

Something that is likely to be hard to achieve or fulfil 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.

Taste blood

If someone has tasted blood, they have achieved something and are encouraged to think that victory is within their grasp.

Taste of your own medicine

If you give someone a taste of their own medicine, you do something bad to someone that they have done to you to teach them a lesson.

Teach your grandmother to suck eggs

When people say 'don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs', they mean that people shouldn't try to teach someone who has experience or is an expert in that area.

Tear your hair out

If someone is tearing their hair out, they are extremely worried or agitated about something.

Teething problems

The problems that a project has when it's starting are the teething problems.

Tempest in a teapot

If people exaggerate the seriousness of a situation or problem, they are making a tempest in a teapot.

Test the waters

If you test the waters, or test the water, you experiment to see how successful or acceptable something is before implementing it.

That is the way the cookie crumbles

"That's the way the cookie crumbles" means that things don't always turn out the way we want.

That's all she wrote

(USA) This idiom is used to show that something has ended and there is nothing more to say about something.

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 plot thickens

When the plot thickens, a situation become more complicated and difficult.

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

If you take the short straw, you lose a selection process, which means that you have to do something unpleasant.

The sun might rise in the west

When people say this, they mean that they don't expect something to happen.

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 and fast

If things are happening thick and fast, they are happening so fast they seemed to be joined together.

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.

Thin-skinned

A person who is thin-skinned is very sensitive to things like criticism.

Think outside the box

If you think outside the box, you think in an imaginative and creative way.

Think the world of

To hold something or someone in very high esteem. To love or admire immensely.

Third degree

If someone is given the third degree, they are put under a great deal of pressure and intimidation to force them to tell the truth about something.

Third rail

The third rail of something is dangerous to alter or change. Originally, the third rail is the one carrying the electricity for a train.

Thorn in your side

A thorn in your side is someone or something that causes trouble or makes life difficult for you.

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 the ceiling

If prices go through the ceiling, they rise very quickly.

Through the floor

If prices go, or fall, through the floor, they fall very quickly.

Through thick and thin

If someone supports you through thick and thin, they support you during good times and bad.

Throw a sickie

If you pretend to be ill to take a day off work or school, you throw a sickie.

Throw caution to the wind

When people throw caution to the wind, they take a great risk.

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 someone a line

If someone throws you a line, they give you help when you are in serious difficulties.

Throw someone in at the deep end

If you are thrown in at the deep end, you have to deal with serious issues the moment you start something like a job, instead of having time to acquire experience.

Throw someone to the wolves

If someone is thrown to the wolves, they are abandoned and have to face trouble without any support.

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.

Throw your hat in the ring

If someone throws their hat in the ring, they announce that they want to take part in a competition or contest. 'Toss your hat in the ring' is an alternative.

Throw your weight around

If someone throws their weight around, they use their authority or force of personality to get what they want in the face of opposition.

Thumb your nose at

If you thumb your nose at something, you reject it or scorn it.

Thumbs down & thumbs up

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

Tickle your fancy

If something tickles your fancy, it appeals to you and you want to try it or have it.

Tickled pink

If you are very pleased about something, you are tickled pink.

Tie the knot

When people tie the knot, they get married.

Tight rein

If things or people are kept on a tight rein, they are given very little freedom or controlled carefully.

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 economise.

Till the pips squeak

If someone will do something till the pips squeak, they will do it to the limit, even though it will make other people suffer.

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 and again

If something happens time and again, it happens repeatedly. ('Time and time again' is also used.)

Time and tide wait for no man

This is used as a way of suggestion that people should act without delay.

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.

Tipping point

Small changes may have little effect until they build up to critical mass, then the next small change may suddenly change everything. This is the tipping point.

Tit for tat

If someone responds to an insult by being rude back, it's tit for tat - repaying something negative the same way.

To a fault

If something does something to a fault, they do it excessively. So someone who is generous to a fault is too generous.

To a man

If a group of people does, believes, thinks, etc, something to a man, then they all do it.

To a T

If something is done to a T, it is done perfectly.

To err is human, to forgive divine

This idiom is used when someone has done something wrong, suggesting that they should be forgiven.

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'.

Toe the line

If someone toes the line, they follow and respect the rules and regulations.

Tomorrow's another day

This means that things might turn out better or that there might be another opportunity in the future.

Tongue in cheek

If something is tongue in cheek, it isn't serious or meant to be taken seriously.

Too big for your boots

If someone is too big for their boots, they are conceited and have an exaggerated sense of their own importance.

Too big for your britches

If someone is too big for their britches, they are conceited and have an exaggerated sense of their own importance.

Too many chiefs and not enough Indians

When there are too many chiefs and not enough Indians, there are too many managers and not enough workers to work efficiently.

Too many cooks spoil the broth

This means that where there are too many people trying to do something, they make a mess of it.

Toot your own horn

If someone toot their own horn, they like to boast about their achievements.

Top dog

The most important or influential person is the top dog.

Top notch

If something is top notch, it's excellent, of the highest quality or standard.

Touch base

If you touch base with someone, you contact them.

Touch wood

This idiom is used to wish for good luck. ('Knock on wood' is also used.)

Touch-and-go

If something is touch-and-go, it is very uncertain; if someone is ill and may well die, then it is touch-and-go.

Tough as old boots

Something or someone that is as tough as old boots is strong and resilient.

Tough cookie

A tough cookie is a person who will do everything necessary to achieve what they want.

Tough nut to crack

If something is a tough nut to crack, it is difficult to find the answer or solution. When used about a person, it means that it is difficult to get them to do or allow what you want. 'Hard nut to crack' is an alternative.

Tough row to hoe

(USA) A tough row to hoe is a situation that is difficult to handle. ('A hard row to hoe' is an alternative form.)

Trade barbs

If people trade barbs, they insult or attack each other.

Tread the boards

When someone treads the boards, they perform on stage in a theatre.

Tread water

If someone is treading water, they are making no progress.

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.

True colours

If someone shows their true colours, they show themselves as they really are. ('True colors' is the American spelling.)

Trump card

A trump card is a resource or strategy that is held back for use at a crucial time when it will beat rivals or opponents.

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 organisations are fighting for control of something, it is a turf war.

Turn a blind eye

When people turn a blind eye, they deliberately ignore something, especially if people are doing something wrong.

Turn a deaf ear

If someone turns a deaf ear to you, they don't listen to you.

Turn a new leaf

If someone turns a new leaf, they change their behaviour and stop doing wrong or bad things.

Turn the corner

To get over a bad run. When a loss making venture ceases to make losses, it has "turned the corner".

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.

Turn the tables

If circumstances change completely, giving an advantage to those who seemed to be losing, the tables are turned.

Turn up like a bad penny

If someone turns up like a bad penny, they go somewhere where they are not wanted.

Turn your nose up

If someone turns their nose up at something, they reject it or look down on it because they don't think it is good enough for them.

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.

Twist someone's arm

If you twist someone's arm, you put pressure on them to try to make them do what you want them to do.

Two cents

If you add or throw in your two cents, you give your opinion on an issue.

Two left feet

A person with two left feet can't dance.

Two peas in a pod

If things or people are like two peas in a pod, they look very similar or are always together.

Two sides of the same coin

If two things are two sides of the same coin, there is much difference between them.

Two-faced

Someone who is two-faced will say one thing to your face and another when you're not there.

- 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 as a stick

(USA) If someone is as ugly as a stick, they are very ugly indeed.

Ugly duckling

An ugly duckling is a child who shows little promise, but who develops later into a real talent or beauty.

Uncharted waters

If you're in uncharted waters, you are in a situation that is unfamiliar to you, that you have no experience of and don't know what might happen. ('Uncharted waters' is an incorrect form that is a common mistake.)

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 a flag of convenience

If a ship sails under a flag of convenience, it is registered in a country where taxes, etc, are lower than in the country it comes from, so if someone does something under a flag of convenience, they attempt to avoid regulations and taxes by a similar means.

Under false colours

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 criticised heavily, they are under fire.

Under lock and key

If something is under lock and key, it is stored very securely.

Under the radar

If something slips under the radar, it isn't detected or noticed.

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 the wire

(USA) If a person does something under the wire, they do it at the last possible moment.

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.

Under your skin

If someone gets under your skin, they really annoy you.

Under your thumb

Someone who is manipulated or controlled by another person is under his or her thumb.

Unwavering loyalty

Unwavering loyalty does not question or doubt the person or issue and supports them completely.

Up for grabs

If something is up for grabs, it is available and whoever is first or is successful will get it.

Up in the air

If a matter is up in the air, no decision has been made and there is uncertainty about it.

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 creek

If someone or something is up the creek, they are in real trouble. 'Up the creek without a paddle' is an alternative, and 'up shit creek (without a paddle)' is a ruder form.

Up the spout

(UK) If something has gone up the spout, it has gone wrong or been ruined.

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

If something isn't up to snuff, it doesn't meet the standard expected.

Up to speed

If you bring someone up to speed, you update them on something.

Up to the eyes

You you are up to your eyes in something, you are deeply involved or to have too much of something like work. ('Up the neck', 'up to the eyeballs' and 'up to the ears' are also used.)

Up to the neck

If someone's in something up to the neck, they are very involved in it, especially when it's something wrong.

Upper crust

The upper crust are the upper classes and the establishment.

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. ('Iron fist in a velvet glove' is the full form.)

Vent your spleen

If someone vents their spleen, they release all their anger about something.

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... 'Vicious cycle' is also used.

Virgin territory

If something is virgin territory, it hasn't been explored before.

Volte-face

If you do a volte-face on something, you make a sudden and complete change in your stance or position over an issue.

- 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.

Wake-up call

A wake-up call is a warning of a threat or a challenge, especially when it means that people will have to change their behaviour to meet it.

Walk a fine line

If you have to walk a fine line, you have to be very careful not to annoy or anger people or groups that are competing. ('Walk a thin line' is an alternative.)

Walk a mile in my shoes

This idiom means that you should try to understand someone before criticizing them.

Walk a tightrope

If you walk a tightrope, you have to be very careful not to annoy or anger people who could become enemies.

Walk in the park

An undertaking that is easy is a walk in the park. The opposite is also true - "no walk in the park".

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.

Walk the green mile

Someone or something that is walking the green mile is heading towards the inevitable.

Wallflower

A woman politician given an unimportant government position so that the government can pretend it takes women seriously is a wallflower.

War of words

A war of words is a bitter argument between people or organisations, etc.

Warm the cockles of your heart

If something warms the cockles of your heart, it makes you feel happy.

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.

Waste not, want not

If you don't waste things, you are less likely to end up lacking.

Watch your six

(USA) This idiom means that you should look behind you for dangers coming that you can't see.

Watching paint dry

If something is like watching paint dry, it is really boring.

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

If something belongs to the past and isn't important or troubling anymore, it is water under the bridge.

Watering hole

(UK) A watering hole is a pub.

Weak at the knees

If people go weak at the knees, they have a powerful emotional reaction to something and feel that they might fall over.

Wear sackcloth and ashes

If someone displays their grief or contrition publicly, they wear sackcloth and ashes.

Wear your heart on your sleeve

Someone who wears their heart on their sleeve shows their emotions and feelings publicly.

Weather a storm

If you weather a storm, you get through a crisis or hard times.

Weight off your shoulders

If something is a weight off your shoulders, you have relieved yourself of a burden, normally a something that has been troubling you or worrying you.

Wet behind the ears

Someone who is wet behind the ears is either very young or inexperienced.

Wet blanket

A wet blanket is someone who tries to spoil other people's fun.

Wet your whistle

If you are thirsty and have an alcoholic drink, you wet your whistle. "Whet your whistle" is also used.

What can you expect from a hog but a grunt?

(USA) This means that you can't expect people to behave in a way that is not in their character - a 'hog' is a 'pig', so an unrefined person can't be expected to behave in a refined way.

What goes around comes around

This saying means that of people do bad things to other people, bad things will happen to them.

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 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.

What's your take on that?

This idiom is way of asking someone for their opinion and ideas.

Whatever floats your boat

When people say this, they mean that you should do whatever makes you happy.

Wheels fall off

When the wheels fall off something, it goes wrong or fails. (Wheels come off' is an alternative.)

When hell freezes over

An impossible or very unlikely situation or event.

When in Rome, do as the Romans

This idiom means that when you are visiting a different place or culture, you should try to follow their customs and practices.

When it rains, it pours

This idiom means that when things go wrong, a lot of things go wrong at the same time.

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 whets 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.

Whistle for it

If someone says that you can whistle for something, they are determined to ensure that you don't get it.

Whistle-stop tour

A whistle-stop tour is when someone visits a number of places quickly, not stopping for long.

Whistling Dixie

(USA) If someone is whistling Dixie, they talk about things in a more positive way than the reality.

Whistling in the dark

If someone is whistling in the dark, they believe in a positive result, even though everybody else is sure it will not happen.

Whistling past the graveyard

(USA) If someone is whistling past the graveyard, they are trying to remain cheerful in difficult circumstances. ('Whistling past the cemetery' is also used.)

White as a sheet

A bad shock can make somebody go as white as a sheet.

White as snow

If something or someone is as white as snow, they are perfect or completely uncorrupted and honest.

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.

White lie

If you tell a white lie, you lie in order not to hurt someone's feelings.

White-bread

If something is white-bread, it is very ordinary, safe and boring.

Who wears the pants?

(USA) The person who wears the pants in a relationship is the dominant person who controls things.

Who wears the trousers?

(UK) The person who wears the trousers in a relationship is the dominant person who controls things.

Whole ball of wax

(USA) The whole ball of wax is everything.

Whole kit and caboodle

The whole kit and caboodle means 'everything' required or involved in something. ('Kaboodle' is an alternative spelling.)

Whole new ball game

If something's a whole new ball game, it is completely new or different.

Whole shebang

The whole shebang includes every aspect of something.

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 something is wide of the mark, it is inaccurate or incorrect.

Wild goose chase

A wild goose chase is a waste of time - time spent trying to do something unsuccessfully.

Will never fly

If an idea or project, etc, will never fly, it has no chance of succeeding.

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.

Wing and a prayer

If you do something on a wing and a prayer, you try to do something and hope you'll succeed even though you have very little chance of success.

Winner takes all

If everything goes to the winner, as in an election, the winner takes all.

Wipe the floor with

(UK) If you wipe the floor with someone, you destroy the arguments or defeat them easily.

Wipe the smile of someone's face

If you wipe the smile of someone's face, you do something to make someone feel less pleased with themselves.

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.

With flying colours (colors)

If you pass something with flying colours (colors), you pass easily, with a very high mark or grade.

Wither on the vine

If something withers on the vine, it fails to get the intended result, doesn't come to fruition.

Without a hitch

If something happens without a hitch, nothing at all goes wrong.

Wolf in sheep's clothing

A wolf in sheep's clothing is something dangerous that looks quite safe and innocent.

Wood for the trees

(UK) 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 law makers 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.

Work your tail off

If you work your tail off, you work extremely 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 who's worse for wear is drunk or high on drugs and looking rough.

Worse things happen at sea

This idiomatic expression is used as a way of telling someone not to worry so much about their problems.

Worth your salt

Someone who is worth their salt deserves respect.

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)

Wrap yourself in the flag

If someone wraps themselves in the flag, they pretend to be doing something for patriotic reasons or out of loyalty, but their real motives are selfish. ('Drape yourself in the flag' is an alternative form of this idiom)

Wrench in the works

(USA) If someone puts or throws a wrench, or monkey wrench, in the works, they ruin a plan. In British English, 'spanner' is used instead of 'wrench'.

Writ large

If something is writ large, it is emphasised or highlighted.

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 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.

- 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.

Zip it

This is used to tell someone to be quiet.

Idioms (Expressões Idiomáticas)

This is a quick reference handbook for easy and comprehensive learning and practice.



Ivan Moreno
Quick Handbook Series