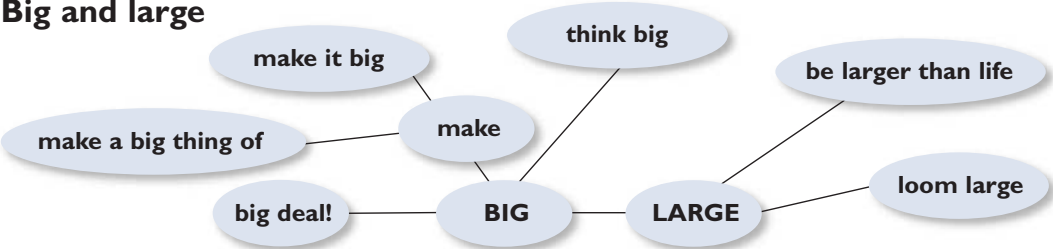


23

A

Size and position

Big and large



example	meaning
She's a great singer. She'll <b>make it big</b> one day.	succeed; become famous
It's my birthday on Saturday, but I don't want to <b>make a big thing of</b> it, so don't tell anyone.	make it a special occasion; have a big celebration
If you're going to invest your money, you should <b>think big</b> . Put twenty thousand into oil shares.	have ambitious plans and ideas, and be keen to achieve a lot
So? You won ten pounds on the lottery. <b>Big deal!</b>	said when something happens but you are not impressed/excited, even if others are
The characters in his films are always <b>larger than life</b> .	much more exciting and interesting than average people
The threat of an earthquake <b>looms large</b> in the lives of the city's inhabitants.	something which could happen and which is a huge worry for people

B

Inch, mile and distance

Note: Although British people now use metric measurements, many expressions are still used which include old measurements. An inch is 2.54 centimetres, a mile is 1.6 kilometres.

Mary: Is she willing to change her mind?  
Tony: No, she refuses to **budge an inch**.  
[refuses to change her position even a little bit]

Tom: It's obvious Ruth really likes Jack.  
Noel: Yes, you can **see/spot** that **a mile off!**  
Or It **sticks/stands out a mile**.  
[it's very easy to see / obvious]

Luke: Are you listening to me?  
Anne: Sorry, I was **miles away!**  
[not concentrating, but thinking about something else]

Dave: It's a very ugly hotel and the food's awful.  
Fran: Yes, it's **a far cry from** that lovely hotel we stayed in last year.  
[very different from]

C

Other related expressions

Relatives are nice **in small doses**, but can be very boring if they stay a long time. [you like them only for short periods]

His new house cost **a small fortune**. [a huge amount of money]

You can buy sunglasses in **all shapes and sizes** these days. [in a wide variety of types/sizes, etc.]

Joss is **an unknown quantity**. We'll have to be careful with him. [we know very little about him]

TIP

Networks can sometimes help you to visualise and remember a lot of information more easily than memorising a list. Try making networks for groups of idioms from different units in this book.

Exercises

- 23.1 Answer these questions.

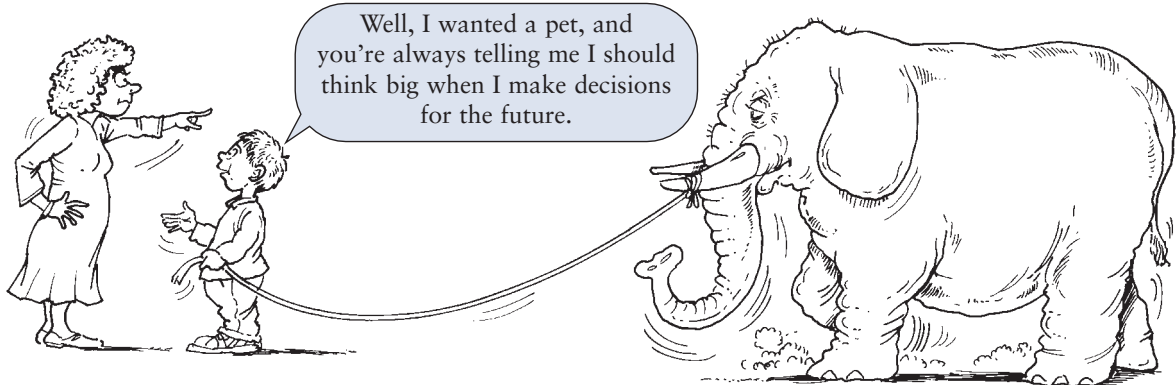
1 In which idiom does *small* mean big/huge? (clue: money)  
2 In which idiom does *big* really mean small/insignificant? (clue: not impressed)  
3 Which idiom means someone is more exciting/interesting than the average human being?  
4 Which idiom with *big* means to become famous?
- 23.2 Use an idiom in each sentence to summarise the situation.

1 Maria is not listening to what Eddie is saying. Her mind is on something else.  
Maria is .....  
2 There are big chairs and small chairs, armchairs, garden chairs and office chairs.  
Chairs are sold in .....  
3 Our old school was dark and depressing. Our new school is light and pleasant.  
The new school is a .....  
4 Jerry looks at Jenny with a romantic look in his eyes. He always wants to sit next to her,  
and always wants to talk about her.  
You can see he's in love. It .....  
Or: He's in love. You can see/spot it .....
- 23.3 Complete each of these idioms.

1 She's 40 next week, but she doesn't want to ..... She'd prefer  
just to go out for a meal with her husband rather than have a big party with lots of people.  
2 For any person in a temporary job, the possibility of unemployment  
....., especially in a time of economic recession.  
3 The unions are prepared to discuss the problem, but the employers will not  
..... They say they have made their final offer, and  
that's that.  
4 We have a new boss starting next week. He's a bit of .....  
– nobody has met him or knows much about him.  
5 I like having friends to stay in my flat, but only for a couple of days. In general, friends  
are nice .....; if they stay too long, they always irritate me.  
6 We should think ..... when we come to plan the new  
website. There's no point in having one single, dull page; we should have lots of links and  
video clips, and as many colour pictures as possible, and sound.
- 23.4 Use a dictionary to check the meaning of these idioms and then write a sentence for each one.

A-Z

the middle ground   the middle of nowhere   be caught in the middle



24

Money

A

People's financial circumstances

idiom	meaning	example
be on the breadline	be very poor	More people in Britain are on the breadline now than thirty years ago.
live in the lap of luxury	live an extremely comfortable life, because you have a lot of money	We live simply during the year, but enjoy living in the lap of luxury in a nice hotel for our summer holiday.
well off / well-to-do / well-heeled	having plenty of money	Most of the people living here are clearly very well-to-do, but there are a few poorer families.
spend money like water	spend too much, often without thinking about it	He spends money like water – I wonder where he gets it all from.
tighten your belt	spend less than you did before, because you have less money	I'm afraid we'll have to tighten our belts now there's another mouth to feed.
make a killing	earn a lot of money very easily	The new Internet companies have made an instant killing.
be a money spinner	be a successful way of making money	My dog-walking business was quite a money spinner when I was at college.

B

Costs

We had to **pay through the nose** to get our car repaired, but at least it's working now.  
[pay a lot of money]

If you say that something is a **rip-off** (informal), you mean that it is not worth the money that you paid for it.

We had to spend a **small fortune** on getting everything we needed for our holiday. [a lot of money. (You can also say that something **cost a small fortune**)]

Someone can also **make a small fortune** out of a business or they can **lose a small fortune**.

C

Idioms based on the money metaphor

Bill is a generous man who is happy to **pick up the tab/bill**<sup>1</sup> for anything. He managed to rise to the top of his profession in the police force, but it was **at a considerable price**<sup>2</sup>. His marriage suffered as a result. This was largely because his dedication to his work **put paid to**<sup>3</sup> his wife's career as a nurse as soon as their first child came along. Unfortunately, Bill is **paying the price for**<sup>4</sup> his ambitiousness now as his wife has left him and taken their son.

TIP

Help yourself to remember idioms by making a picture of their literal meaning in your mind (or on a piece of paper if you like drawing) as you learn them. To help you remember *well-heeled*, for instance, you might imagine or draw a pair of smart high-heeled shoes.

<sup>1</sup> pay for something, often something that is not your responsibility (informal)

<sup>2</sup> by sacrificing a lot or by doing something unpleasant in order to get it

<sup>3</sup> stopped someone from doing something that they were planning to do

<sup>4</sup> experiencing the unpleasant consequences of

Exercises

24.1 Put these expressions describing how much money someone has on a scale from poor on the left to rich on the right.

living in the lap of luxury    on the breadline    well-to-do    well-heeled

24.2 Which person in each pair of speakers is probably more satisfied?

- 1 Anne: Our new business venture means we're going to have to tighten our belts.  
Bob: We're making a killing with our new business venture.
- 2 Colin: Our new car cost a small fortune.  
Daisy: Our new car was a rip-off.
- 3 Ed: My daughter spends money like water.  
Fred: My daughter's quite well off.
- 4 Gill: This business venture has put paid to our hopes of success.  
Harry: This business venture has brought success, but at a considerable price.

24.3 Complete each of these idioms with one word.

- 1 Gina is ..... a killing in her new job.
- 2 I was put in the position where I had no choice but to ..... up the tab.
- 3 We spent a weekend at the hotel living in the ..... of luxury.
- 4 Our neighbours spent a small ..... on their new conservatory.
- 5 The first book Marvin wrote turned out to be more of a ..... spinner than anything he has written since then.
- 6 As Zak has lost his job, we're going to have to ..... our belts for a while.
- 7 We had to pay through the ..... to get tickets for the match.
- 8 If you don't study now, you'll ..... the price later on in the year.
- 9 Another expression that means *spend money like* ..... is *spend money like there was no tomorrow*.
- 10 He started his own business after ..... a small fortune on the stock exchange and deciding that he should put his luck to good use.

24.4 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



25

Work

A One man's career

When Simon started work, he was at the very **bottom of the career ladder**<sup>1</sup>. He had quite a **dead-end job**<sup>2</sup> doing **run-of-the-mill**<sup>3</sup> tasks. He stayed there for a couple of years, but then decided he had to **get out of a rut**<sup>4</sup>. He **pulled out all the stops**<sup>5</sup> and managed to persuade his manager that he should be given more responsibility. The deputy manager **got the sack**<sup>6</sup> for incompetence and Simon **stepped into his shoes**<sup>7</sup>. For several months he was **rushed off his feet**<sup>8</sup> and **he had his work cut out**<sup>9</sup> to keep on top of things. But he was soon recognised as an **up-and-coming**<sup>10</sup> young businessman and he was **headhunted**<sup>11</sup> by a rival company for one of their top jobs. Simon had **climbed to the top of the career ladder**<sup>12</sup>.

- 1

in a low position in a work organisation or hierarchy
- 2

job without a good future
- 3

boring, routine
- 4

escape from a monotonous, boring situation (see picture of horse)
- 5

made a great effort to do something well (see picture of organ; stops increase the sound of an organ)
- 6

was dismissed from his job (also *be given the sack*)
- 7

took over his job
- 8

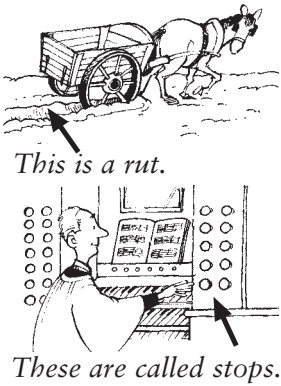
very busy
- 9

had something very difficult to do
- 10

becoming more and more successful
- 11

invited to join a new workplace which had noticed his talents
- 12

got to a top position in a work organisation or hierarchy



B Being busy

To be **rushed off your feet** is just one way of saying that you are very busy at work. Here are some other idioms which give the same idea.

Are you very busy at work at the moment?

Yes, I'm snowed under.

Yes, I've certainly got my hands full.

Yes, I'm up to my eyes/ears in work.

Yes, I'm on the go all the time.

C Other idioms connected with work

Plans for building the extension have been **put on hold** until our finances are in a better state. [left until a later date (usually used in the passive)]

The plans look great **on paper**, but you never know quite how things will turn out, of course. [when you read about it, but might not turn out to be so]

A lot of preparation has gone on **behind the scenes** for the opening ceremony for the Olympics. [in secret, often when something else is happening publicly]

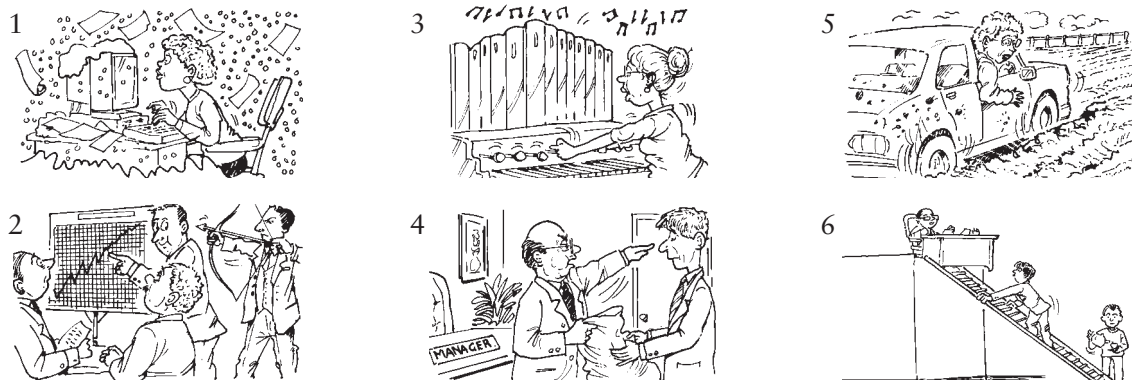
Please don't **talk shop**. It's too boring for the rest of us. [talk about work when you are not at work]

Exercises

25.1 Complete each of these idioms with one word.

- 1 The job looks good on ..... , but the reality is quite different.
- 2 I'd hate to work in a run-of-the-..... job.
- 3 Mary has been up to ..... eyes in work all day.
- 4 When John retires, his son will ..... into his shoes.
- 5 My cousin's an up-and-..... musician.
- 6 I must try to get out of a ..... at work.
- 7 I've been on the ..... all day.
- 8 Why did Kirsty's boss give her the ..... ?
- 9 I wish you wouldn't talk ..... all the time!
- 10 Rosie was very thrilled to be .....hunted for her new job.

25.2 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



25.3 Match each idiom on the left with its definition on the right.

- |                          |                   |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 behind the scenes      | very busy         |
| 2 dead-end               | be dismissed      |
| 3 get the sack           | make an effort    |
| 4 off the record         | promising         |
| 5 on hold                | hidden            |
| 6 pull out all the stops | unofficially      |
| 7 rushed off your feet   | delayed           |
| 8 up-and-coming          | without prospects |

25.4 Complete each of these idioms.

We had a difficult day at work today. We were all (1) ..... under because we are having some important visitors next week and management has decided to pull out all the (2) ..... to impress them. We are going to have our work (3) ..... out to get everything done in time. Long-term tasks have been put on (4) ..... so that everything is ready for our visitors. Anyone who objects has been told that they will (5) ..... the sack and everyone who wants to (6) ..... the career ladder will have their (7) ..... full until the week is over. The visitors would be horrified if they knew what was going on (8) ..... the scenes!

25.5 Write sentences using six of the idioms from the left-hand page about your own work at present and your hopes and plans for work in the future.



26

A

Speed, distance and intensity

Speed

idiom	meaning	example
by/in leaps and bounds	very quickly	Club membership has grown by leaps and bounds this year.
get a move on	hurry (often used as an order)	Get a move on! You'll be late for school.
be on the run	try to avoid being caught (especially by the police)	The bank robbers are still on the run ten years after the crime.
fast and furious	full of speed and excitement	The car chase at the end of the film was fast and furious.
step by step (step-by-step when used as an adjective before a noun)	slowly; gradually	Changes need to be introduced step by step, not all at once.
drag your feet/heels	deal with something slowly because you don't really want to do it	We mustn't drag our heels over implementing the new legislation.

B

Distance and intensity

idiom	meaning	example
the word spread	the news went from one person to the next	I told only Joy about it, but the word quickly spread and soon everyone seemed to know.
keep track	continue to know what is happening to someone or something	The school likes to keep track of its former pupils.
get off to a flying start	start well	The evening got off to a flying start as everyone was very impressed by the restaurant.
on the spot (on-the-spot when used as an adjective before a noun)	immediately or in the place where something is happening or has just happened	The police can impose on-the-spot fines on people found drunk in the street.
all over the place	in or to many places	I looked for you all over the place.
left, right and centre	happening in a lot of places or to a lot of people	People have been coming down with flu left, right and centre.
reach / be at fever pitch	(used of emotions) to get so strong that people can't control them	By the end of the match, feelings had reached fever pitch.
be in full swing	to have been happening for a long time and there is a lot of activity	The party was in full swing by the time we arrived.
get/go beyond a joke	be/become extremely serious and worrying	The children's behaviour has gone beyond a joke this time.

Exercises

26.1 Put the idioms in the box into two groups: those focusing on time and those focusing on place. You can use one idiom for both.

all over the place	by leaps and bounds	drag your feet	fast and furious	get a move on
left, right and centre	on the spot	step by step	the word spread	

26.2 Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.

1 Juan is making progress by	a joke.
2 Excitement is at	step.
3 Within minutes the fire brigade was on	the run.
4 The situation has gone beyond	the place.
5 The holiday got off to	fever pitch.
6 I looked for you all over	the spot.
7 The film is about two men on	a flying start.
8 I'll take you through it step by	leaps and bounds.

26.3 Choose the correct answer.

- 1 Grandma is recovering ... .  
a) left, right and centre      b) step by step      c) all over the place
- 2 My first day at school ... .  
a) was at fever pitch      b) kept track      c) got off to a flying start
- 3 Why are you ... ?  
a) dragging your heels      b) getting a move on      c) going beyond a joke
- 4 When I arrived at Jane's house, preparations for the party were ... .  
a) in full swing      b) getting a move on      c) dragging their heels
- 5 The football match was ... .  
a) fast and furious      b) on the spot      c) in leaps and bounds

26.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Would you be pleased if your English teacher said you were making progress by leaps and bounds?
- 2 Would you be pleased if you were told that your behaviour at work had gone beyond a joke?
- 3 What would you be expected to do if you were told to get a move on?
- 4 Is it athletes who spend life on the run?
- 5 Do you drag your feet when you are ill?
- 6 What kind of films tend to be fast and furious?
- 7 Would you be pleased if a party of yours got off to a flying start?
- 8 What can you do to help yourself keep track of all your appointments and other commitments?
- 9 If things are all over the place in a room, what does the room look like?
- 10 If feelings reach fever pitch, how are people probably feeling?



27

Communication 1: commenting on language

A Commenting on things people say

In these remarks, the speaker uses an idiom to repeat or sum up the underlined part of what he/she has just said.

I knew everything Bella said was completely untrue. It was all a pack of lies.

I find it very hard to believe he was just hugging her because he thought she was feeling sad. That's a likely story!

I didn't say it seriously or even think about it. It was just an off-the-cuff remark.

I'm sorry. I said 'Iceland', but I meant 'Ireland'. It was just a slip of the tongue.

We didn't talk about any serious topics, you know, just the weather, holidays, that sort of thing. It was just small talk really.

He just said two completely opposite things. He said he wanted to marry me and live with me, and in the same breath he said he wanted to go off travelling on his own.

They asked me to make a speech, but I was so overwhelmed by the presents they gave me I couldn't think of anything to say. I was completely lost for words.

I have a feeling inside me that what she said was a lie. It just didn't ring true.

I couldn't understand what he was trying to tell me. I just didn't know what he was on about. (very informal)

B Commenting on the words you are using

You ask if I think we should help him. **In a word**, no. [said when you are about to give your opinion in a short, direct way]

I think he's behaved very stupidly. He's an idiot, **for want of a better word**. [not quite the exact or best word, but good enough for the situation]

I was, **to coin a phrase**, as sick as a parrot. [said when you use a phrase that sounds a bit silly]

C Joking and being serious

joking	meaning	serious	meaning
People are always <b>taking the mick/mickey out of</b> him.	laughing at him, by copying funny things he does or says	Hiccups are funny when other people have them, but they're <b>no laughing matter</b> when you get them yourself.	not something to laugh at, quite serious
We shouldn't <b>make light of</b> her troubles; she's very upset.	treat as a joke something that is serious	I have to do the work of three people. <b>It's no joke</b> .	used about serious or difficult situations

Exercises

- 27.1 Answer these questions.

1 If someone says ‘Swedish’ instead of ‘Swiss’ then quickly corrects themselves, what can we call this?

2 If someone makes people laugh by copying the way someone else talks, what are they doing to that person?

3 If someone can’t find words to express their feelings, what are they?

4 If two people talk about the weather, or about hair styles, just to pass the time, what kind of a conversation is it?

5 If someone tells stories or relates a series of events which are all deliberately untrue, what can we call it?
- 27.2 Use the idioms from exercise 27.1 to rewrite these sentences.

1 I didn’t know what to say. I .....

2 Not one word of his story was true. It .....

3 I didn’t mean to say it; it .....

4 I didn’t mean to offend her. I was just .....

5 It wasn’t a very serious conversation, just .....
- 27.3 Rewrite each sentence with an idiom that means the opposite of the underlined words. Make any other changes necessary.

1 She’s had a big personal problem. We should have a good laugh at it.

2 He told me he had studied maths at Harvard, and it sounded as if he was telling the truth.

3 She said she was a princess who had lost all her money and position in a revolution.  
That’s a story anyone can believe!

4 She has to get up at 5 a.m. and drive 50 miles to work every day. It’s great fun.

5 I said I thought she should get herself a boyfriend. It was a carefully prepared remark.
- 27.4 Complete the crossword.

						1					
2				3							
4						5					

- Across

3 Do I want to be a millionaire?  
In a ....., no.

4 You can do this to a phrase.

5 I don’t know what you’re on  
.....
- Down

1 She said it in the same .....

2 Stop taking the ..... !

3 For ..... of a better word.
- English Idioms in Use 63
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