

1 What are idioms?

A Idioms and meaning

Idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words. For example, the idiom **drive someone round the bend** means *make someone angry or frustrated*, but we cannot know this just by looking at the words.

The best way to understand an idiom is to see it in context. If someone says:

That noise is driving me round the bend! It's so annoying!

then the context and common sense tells us that **drive round the bend** means something different from driving a car round a curve in the road. The context tells us the noise is annoying and that it's having an effect on the person hearing it.

B Types of idioms

form	example	meaning
verb + object/complement (and/or adverbial)	kill two birds with one stone	produce two useful results by just doing one action
prepositional phrase	in the blink of an eye	in an extremely short time
compound	a bone of contention	something which people argue and disagree over
simile /'simili/ (as + adjective + <i>as</i> , or <i>like</i> + noun)	as dry as a bone	very dry indeed
binomial (word + <i>and</i> + word)	rough and ready	crude and lacking sophistication
trinomial (word + word + <i>and</i> + word)	cool, calm and collected	relaxed, in control, not nervous
whole clause or sentence	to cut a long story short	to tell the main points, but not all the fine details

C Fixed aspects of idioms

Most idioms are fixed in their form, and cannot be changed or varied. Sometimes, however, the grammar or the vocabulary can be varied slightly. Where this book or a dictionary gives information on what can be varied, always note it in your vocabulary notebook.

variation	example
Occasionally an idiom in the active voice can be used in the passive.	Government Ministers always pass the buck if they are challenged about poverty. [blame someone else / refuse to accept responsibility] The buck has been passed from Minister to Minister. No one seems prepared to accept the responsibility.
Some verb-based idioms also have noun-compound forms.	There is too much buck-passing in government nowadays. No one accepts the blame for anything.
One or more words in the idiom can be varied.	don't give me a hard/rough/tough time . [don't make things difficult for me]

Exercises

1.1 How much can you guess about the meaning of these idioms just by looking at the context? Tick the boxes according to what you can understand about the words in bold.

1 I decided I was going to get a place at university **by hook or by crook**. It had always been my dream to study for a degree in history.

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW/ CAN'T TELL	
means using illegal methods if necessary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means nothing will stop me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means I was very determined	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	See Unit 18.

2 The government and the unions are **at loggerheads**; there may be a general strike.

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW/ CAN'T TELL	
means have a good relationship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means hate each other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means disagree very strongly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	See Unit 22.

3 We had to **pay through the nose** to get our visas in five days instead of the usual 30 days.

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW/ CAN'T TELL	
means suffer in some way	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means pay a small sum of money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
means pay a large sum of money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	See Unit 24.

1.2 Classify the idioms in the sentences below according to their grammatical type:

Type A	verb + object/complement (and/or adverbial)	Type D	simile
Type B	prepositional phrase	Type E	binomial or trinomial
Type C	compound	Type F	whole clause or sentence

- Should we fly or go by train? What are the pros and cons?
Type: **See Unit 11.**
- I'm having second thoughts about going on holiday with Jean. She can be a bit difficult.
Type: **See Unit 6.**
- When I had finished all my exams, I felt as free as a bird.
Type: **See Unit 62.**
- I don't know much about design, so I gave the decorator a free hand in my new flat.
Type: **See Unit 47.**
- She comes from a rather well-to-do family. She's always had a comfortable life.
Type: **See Unit 24.**
- My old school friend Harriet arrived out of the blue. I hadn't seen her for 15 years.
Type: **See Unit 43.**

1.3 Correct the mistakes in the idioms in these sentences. Use the clues in brackets. Use a good general dictionary or a dictionary of idioms if necessary.

- My father's foot was put down when I said I wanted a car for my seventeenth birthday. He said I was too young. (grammar – voice) **See Unit 48.**
- Her words put the cat among the birds; Sam is furious. (vocabulary) **See Unit 38.**
- You'll be pleased to hear we arrived sound and safe in Peru. (binomial) **See Unit 17.**
- He was lying in his teeth when he said he had got a first-class grade in his exam; the truth is he failed. (grammar – small word) **See Unit 53.**

2 Using your dictionary

A What do you look up?

As it can be difficult to work out what an idiom means even when you know all the individual words in the idiom, you will often need to look up idioms in a dictionary. If you are working with an online dictionary, then you will have no problems finding the idiom in question, but working with a traditional dictionary, you have to find where the idiom is listed. As an idiom consists of several words, which of these do you look up in your dictionary? For example, do you try to find **kill two birds with one stone** under *kill*, *two*, *birds* or *stone*, or **let the cat out of the bag** under *let*, *cat* or *bag*?



If you are using either the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI) or the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD), then the easiest way of finding what you need is to look in the alphabetical index at the back of the book. This lists all the expressions included in the dictionary with the word where an entry for the expression will be found in the dictionary highlighted in bold. This shows that in CIDI **kill two birds with one stone** will be found under *two* and **let the cat out of the bag** will be found under *cat*. In CALD these two idioms will be found under *kill* and *cat*.



If you are using a different dictionary, read its introductory notes now to see how it deals with idioms. This will avoid the frustration you would otherwise feel on deciding to look up the wrong element of the idiom first.

B What information does your dictionary give you?

Your dictionary will tell you a lot of other things as well as the meaning of the idiom. As idioms are used in such fixed ways, it is important to read the notes in your dictionary carefully if you want to use idioms as well as to understand them.

You will find all these things in a good dictionary of idioms:

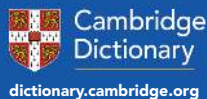
- information about words that are interchangeable, e.g. **drive/send sb round the bend**
- information about how the idiom is used – brackets, for example, show if any words in the idiom can be left out, e.g. **I (can) feel it in my bones**.
- notes about the grammar of the idiom – there may be notes, for example, to say that an idiom is usually used in a passive construction or in a continuous form or in a negative sentence
- examples of the idiom in use
- comments on register – the register labels used in CIDI are *informal*, *formal*, *very informal*, *old-fashioned*, *taboo*, *humorous* and *literary*
- notes about regional variations in use – this is important as many British idioms will sound very strange to an American and vice versa

Tip

It is not possible for this book to include as much information about each idiom as you will find in a dictionary. So, look up the idioms that you particularly want to learn from this book in a dictionary as well. In your vocabulary notebook, write any further information or other examples of the idioms in the context that you find in the dictionary.

Exercises

2.1 Look up the idioms in these sentences in your dictionary. What word is each idiom listed under?



- 1 It's the person in the street who **picks up the bill** for the government's mistakes.
- 2 She had a wonderful trip to Australia, but now she's **come back down to earth with a bump**.
- 3 John had a furious argument with his supervisor, but he managed to **stand his ground**.
- 4 He's feeling very miserable, so there's no need for you to **stick the knife in** too.
- 5 You're **banging your head against a brick wall** trying to get him to help you.
- 6 You **scared the living daylights out of** me by creeping up behind me like that.

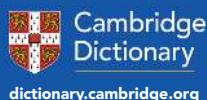
2.2 Which word(s) could be left out of the idioms in these sentences?

- 1 It's always hard when you have to **come back down to earth with a bump** after a holiday.
- 2 No one thought she could climb the mountain without oxygen, but she succeeded **against all the odds**.
- 3 She **hit him where it hurt most** by telling him that he had always been a disappointment to his parents.
- 4 The way he reacted **scared the living daylights out of** me!

2.3 Which word in each idiom could be changed for another word?

- 1 Don't worry about a thing – I'm sure the company will **pick up the bill**.
- 2 I **came back down to earth with a bump** when I saw the pile of post waiting for me after the weekend.
- 3 The army had lost many of its men, but it managed to **stand its ground**.
- 4 Why do critics seem to enjoy **sticking the knife into** untalented actors and writers?
- 5 I feel as if I'm **banging my head against a brick wall** with him at the moment.
- 6 It's a terrifying film – it **scared the living daylights out of** me!

2.4 What grammatical information does your dictionary give about these idioms? Read the information and then write a sentence with each idiom.



- 1 look a gift horse in the mouth
- 2 be banging your head against a brick wall
- 3 be on the brink of
- 4 tie yourself up in knots
- 5 be man enough

2.5 Match the register labels in the box with the idioms in the sentences below.

formal humorous informal literary old-fashioned very informal

- 1 I really don't like him – he's such a **slime ball**.
- 2 OK. I'll do the washing-up. **There's no peace for the wicked!**
- 3 Her family has lived in that village **from time immemorial**.
- 4 My grandma always used to say that **an apple a day keeps the doctor away**.
- 5 The food was so delicious – we **stuffed our faces**.
- 6 I hope that what I have said will **give you pause for thought**.

3 Happiness and sadness

A Extreme happiness

There are many informal idioms which mean *extremely happy*.

I'm **thrilled to bits**.

I am/feel **on top of the world**.



I'm **on cloud nine**.

I'm **over the moon**.

I'm **in seventh heaven**.

B Other happiness idioms

idiom	meaning	example
get a (real) kick out of something	very much enjoy doing something (informal)	I get a (real) kick out of going for a run first thing in the morning before anyone else is up.
do something for kicks	do something because it is exciting, usually something dangerous (informal)	Kate is keen to have a go at bungee-jumping – just for kicks.
jump for joy	be very happy and excited about something that has happened	Rowena jumped for joy when she heard that she'd won first prize.
be floating/walking on air	be very happy about something good that has happened	I've been walking on air ever since Chris and I started going out together.
something makes your day	something makes you feel very happy	It's great to hear from you. It's really made my day.

C Sadness

Reply Forward

Dear Louise,

Hope all goes well with you. Unfortunately, everyone here is **out of sorts**¹. Will is **down in the dumps**² because he doesn't like his teacher this year. I've told him that **it's not the end of the world**³ and that he'd better **just grin and bear it**⁴, but I think he likes being a **misery guts**⁵ and so he complains about her every night. Pat is also suffering from **sour grapes**⁶ because I got the role in the school play that she wanted. This **puts a damper on**⁷ every meal, so I'm really looking forward to staying with you at the weekend.

Love,
 Amelia



¹ slightly unhappy or slightly ill

² unhappy (informal)

³ what has happened won't cause any serious problems

⁴ accept a situation you don't like because you can't change it

⁵ someone who complains all the time and is never happy (very informal)

⁶ being jealous about something you can't have

⁷ stop an occasion from being enjoyable (sometimes *dampener* is used instead of *damper*)

Exercises

- 3.1** Combine the words in the box in order to make five expressions meaning *extremely happy*. Use each word once only.

bits	cloud	heaven	in	moon	nine	of	on	on	over	seventh	the
the	thrilled	to	top	world							

- 3.2** Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?

1



3



5



2



4



6



- 3.3** Correct the mistakes in these idioms.

- The child was thrilled for bits to have her photo in the paper.
- I felt as if I was floating in air as I ran down the hill into his arms.
- Why does Marti look so out of sort today?
- Don't make such a fuss. It's not the finish of the world!
- Your telephone call has really done my day!
- Jill said she was on cloud seven and Jack agreed that he was in ninth heaven.
- Why does Mark always have to be such a miserable guts?
- Stereotypically, happy footballers say that they are over the sun.

- 3.4** Answer these questions.

- Would a piece of good news or a piece of bad news be more likely to make your day?
- If you got top marks in an exam, would you feel down in the dumps?
- Are people more likely to get a kick out of hot-air ballooning or cleaning their boots?
- Do you have to grin and bear it when you are happy or unhappy about something that has happened?
- If you are at someone's birthday party, what would be more likely to put a damper on the event – news of the illness of a close friend or a heavy shower of rain?
- Do people usually enjoy or not enjoy being in the company of a misery guts?
- You have a beautiful new sports car that a colleague is rather envious of. What is your colleague more likely to say out of sour grapes? 'I love its green colour!' or 'Of course, that model is very unreliable!'
- A damper is literally a thing put on piano strings to make the sound less loud. How does knowing this help you to understand the idiom using the word *damper*?
- Do you notice anything that a number of the images in the happiness idioms have in common?

4 Anger

A Being angry

These informal idioms can be used either about yourself or about a third person.

I'm **fed up (to the back teeth)** with trying to live on such a small wage.

I'm **at my wits' end** trying to keep things in order.

(wits = intelligence, brains)

I've **had it up to here** with this organisation!

These informal idioms are generally used about other people.

Your boss will **have/throw a fit** when he finds out you forgot to reply to those letters.

(You can also say **go off the deep end / go spare / do his nut / blow a fuse**.)

These less informal idioms describe other people's anger and are based on the word *blood*.

If **someone's blood is up**, they are very angry and may react in a violent way.

If you are **after someone's blood**, you want to catch them in order to hurt or punish them.

If you are **out for blood**, you are determined to find someone to attack or blame for something bad that has happened.



B Angry relationships

idiom	meaning	example
drive someone up the wall	make someone very angry (or sometimes very bored)	The neighbours' loud music every night is driving me up the wall.
drive/send someone round the bend/twist	make someone very angry (or sometimes very bored)	His lack of consideration is driving me round the twist.
rub someone up the wrong way	make someone annoyed	Jill always manages to say something to rub her father up the wrong way.
get/put someone's back up	make someone annoyed	Roger put his sister's back up by saying she would never be a good driver.
ruffle someone's feathers	make someone annoyed	Jo says what she thinks without worrying about whether she might be ruffling anyone's feathers.
put/send the cat among the pigeons	do or say something that makes a lot of people angry or worried	Danny put the cat among the pigeons by suggesting that the company might have to make some redundancies.
not be on speaking terms	be so angry with each other that they refuse to speak to each other	They haven't been on speaking terms for years although neither can remember what they first quarrelled about.
give someone an earful	tell someone how angry you are with them (informal)	The old lady gave the children an earful for nearly knocking her over.
give someone a piece of your mind	tell someone how angry you are with them	He'll give the boys a piece of his mind if he catches them in his garden.

Exercises

4.1 Put the expressions in the box into pairs that mean more or less the same.

went off the deep end gave him an earful drove him up the wall gave him a piece of her mind
 put his back up did his nut rubbed him up the wrong way sent him round the bend

4.2 Complete each of these idioms.

- 1 Ethan has had it up to with his work.
- 2 It's horrible living with two people who are not on speaking
- 3 It'll really put the among the pigeons if you try to bring that up at the meeting.
- 4 My sister spare when she found out I'd burnt her new top.
- 5 Joel is your blood now he knows it was you who told the police.
- 6 The demonstrators are furious and for blood.
- 7 Your father will throw a if you go out dressed like that.
- 8 The baby hardly sleeps at night and her mother is at her end.

4.3 Correct eight mistakes in this paragraph.

Yesterday I had terrible toothache. It hurt a lot and I guess that's why I was in a bad temper all day. Everything anyone said seemed to put the back up and, in the end, I threw a fuse with the person I share my office with. Even when I'm in a good mood, she sends me up the twist with her constant chatter and yesterday I had had it off to here with her after only ten minutes. I really gave her an eyeful and the result is that we are no longer in speaking terms. I know I'll have to apologise for doing my nuts like that, but perhaps I'll wait a while. It's much easier to work when she isn't talking to me! Perhaps I should give her a peace of my mind more often.



4.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Name one thing that drives you up the wall.
- 2 Find two idioms on the left-hand page that conjure up images of birds.
- 3 Can you remember a teacher ever going off the deep end? If so, what caused it?
- 4 Find seven idioms on the left-hand page that are based on parts of the body.
- 5 Has anyone recently rubbed you up the wrong way? If so, how did they do this?
- 6 Which idiom in A on the left-hand page do you think is usually accompanied by a gesture?
- 7 Have you ever given someone a piece of your mind? If so, what about?
- 8 Find an idiom on the left-hand page connected with electricity.

Over to you

Think about a situation you have experienced in which someone became angry. What idioms from this unit can you use to describe what happened?

5

Knowing and understanding

A

Knowing and not knowing

knowing	meaning
She knows the system inside out .	She knows every detail of it.
When it comes to geography, he certainly knows his stuff .	He has a very good knowledge of it.
That book title has a familiar ring to it . I think I read it a long time ago.	It sounds familiar / I think I've heard it before.
I'm not sure if I know her, but the name rings a bell . (very commonly used with <i>name</i>)	I have a vague memory of someone with that name, but can't remember exactly.

not knowing	meaning
I haven't (got) / don't have a clue how to get to her house.	I don't know at all.
I haven't (got) / don't have the faintest idea where she lives.	I really don't know at all.
I haven't (got) / don't have the foggiest (idea) what this switch is for.	I absolutely don't know at all.
I can't for the life of me remember her first name.	I can't remember at all.
I'm a bit out of touch with computers these days.	I used to know about them, but don't know the latest developments.
I'm sorry, that name doesn't ring any bells with me . (very commonly used with <i>name</i>)	I don't think I've ever heard it before; it is unfamiliar.

B

Coming to conclusions

I didn't actually know where you were staying, but Mark said you were with a relative. So I **put two and two together** and guessed it was that aunt of yours in Manchester. [concluded from the facts I knew]

I'm sorry, I **got (hold of) the wrong end of the stick**. I thought you were complaining about something. [came to the wrong conclusion]



'I think he's got hold of the wrong end of the stick.'

Exercises

5.1 Correct the mistakes in these idioms.

- I don't have even a faint idea where he is today; you'll have to ask somebody else.
- The title of the book has familiar rings to it, but I don't think I've ever read it.
- My cousin knows the tax laws outside and in, so if you want advice on your tax, he'll help you.
- I can't for life think what it was I came into the kitchen for.
- I saw Tom and Lily together in a restaurant looking adoringly into each other's eyes.
I added up two and two, and decided they must be madly in love.

5.2 Use the corrected idioms from exercise 5.1 to rewrite the underlined parts of this paragraph. Use each idiom once only.

I always thought I knew my computer in every detail, but the other day it started to crash every time I opened a certain program. I could not in any way understand why it was doing this, and I didn't have any idea at all about what to do to fix it. I rang the helpline which I had used in the past, and after about 20 minutes I spoke to someone who said his name was Patrick, and that he was there to help me. He gave me some advice which sounded quite familiar to me from previous calls I had made to the same helpline. I thought about all this, put the facts together, and concluded that they give the same advice to everybody, and that it's just a way of getting rid of you. The computer still crashes every time I open the program.

5.3 Write sentences that mean the opposite of these sentences. Use idioms from this unit and make any other necessary changes.

- Yes, that name is very familiar to me. I think I've met her several times.
- I'm really up to date with TV soap operas these days. I watch them every day.
- She knows absolutely nothing when it comes to the history of this area.
- I correctly interpreted what she was trying to tell me and it solved a big problem.
- No, sorry, her name means nothing to me. I may have met her, I just can't remember.

5.4 Complete each sentence with a different idiom which refers to 'not knowing'.

- I how to use the photocopier. Do you think you could help me? (weakest of the three)
- I where I left that letter I brought for you. I'm really sorry. (stronger than 1)
- I what she's talking about. She's crazy! (even stronger than 2)

Over to you

Look up the word *know* in your dictionary or in an online dictionary and find idioms containing this word. Choose three idioms to learn, and make a note of them in your vocabulary notebook. Note down examples of how they are used, too.