



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logos

IDIOMS

An idiom is an expression that has a different meaning from that in the dictionary.

Example: The *Idiom* “piece of cake” means “very easy,” and it has no connection with the cake we eat.

In most cases, the meaning of an idiom is related to some forgotten story or legend. Many ethnic and even religious groups have their own unique idioms. They are often difficult for newcomers to understand and are not commonly used outside the group.

How to learn the meaning of an idiom

1. Find the least common word in the idiom.
2. Look for that word in an American dictionary
3. Read all of the variable meanings of the word.
4. Pick the definition that most fits your case. (Most dictionaries provide the definition of the idiom in the context of the definition of that word).
5. Learn its definition.
6. Use it in a sentence.
7. Use it in everyday life.

Keep in Mind!

- Usually knowing what an idiom means is crucial to understanding what the author intended to say.
- The best way to learn an idiom’s meaning is to read the complete definition of the word in the dictionary, practice it, ask questions, write it out, and learn how to use it correctly.
- Make sure the dictionary you are using is published for American English because the meaning and form of an idiom can vary in context.

- Pay special attention to prepositions because an idiom might lose its meaning if used with an inappropriate preposition.

For example: “To keep an eye *on* something,” “To run *into*” (see the chart for the definitions of the given idioms).

- In most cases, idioms must simply be memorized.

Below is a partial list of some useful idioms and their meanings

A blank look: A look that does not show any emotion, reaction or understanding.

A chicken in every pot: Enough food for every family.

A faraway look: To appear to be thinking of something other than the subject.

Around the clock: All day and night (24 hours).

A skeleton in the closet: A big shameful secret.

A third wheel/ a fifth wheel: To be ignored or not needed.

A golden opportunity: A once in a lifetime excellent opportunity.

A long face: Unhappy expression.

A long shot: Only a slight chance of success.

A pain in the neck: Something troublesome.

Be broke: To be without any money.

Be on someone’s side: To be a supporter.

Be on the go: To be very busy.

Be a sitting duck: To be an easy target.

Bite off more than you can chew: Take more responsibility than one can handle.

Black and white: Only 2 extreme options.

Black out: To forget something or to faint.

Break down: To get frustrated or for a machine to stop working.

Break someone’s heart: Make someone extremely sad.

Burst into tears: To suddenly start crying.

Catch one’s eyes: Grab someone’s attention.

Change one’s mind: Change one’s decision.

Close call: Something that almost turned into an accident.

Cold turkey: To quit something abruptly.

Cool it: Calm down.

Cut it out: Stop doing something

Do me a favor: To ask for help.

Do one's best: Try as hard as you can.

Do your own thing: To be independent, to do what you want.

Down-to-earth: Sensible.

Early bird: A person who gets up early or arrives early.

Fall head over heels in love: To be completely in love.

Give a green light: To give permission.

Give a hand: To help.

Give a lift/ Give a ride: Provide transportation [for someone].

Go with the flow: Agree with the crowd. Operate with others.

Have a big mouth: Be a gossip.

Have a sweet tooth: Like eating sweet things.

Hold one's ground: Stand firm or maintain one's argument.

Inside out: Inner part out and outer part in.

In the red: To be in crisis or in debt.

In time/ on time: Not late.

Keep an eye on something/someone: Stay alert and pay close attention to what is happening.

Make a mountain out of a molehill: Make a big deal out of nothing.

Make the best of it: Be positive in bad situation.

Make yourself at home: Feel comfortable.

None of your business: It is nothing you need to know.

Once in a blue moon: Very rarely.

Out of the blue: Unexpected.

Out of the question: Impossible.

Pull together: Work together.

Put the cart before the horse: Put or do things in the wrong order.

Run into: Meet someone by chance; experience something unexpectedly.

Sharp tongue: Using harsh words.

Scratch the surface: Deal with the subject without analyzing it deeply.

Stand over someone: Supervise someone.

Stop dead: Stop unexpectedly.

Storm something: Capture by sudden attack.

Talk one's ear off: Talk a lot.

Exercise

Fill the gaps with the correct idioms from the Box below. You may need to conjugate the verb and make it agree.

none of your business

change their minds

piece of cake

down to Earth

golden opportunity

do her a favor

1. The test was a _____; I know I aced it.
2. I would ask you kindly not to interfere with what I'm doing as in all honesty it's _____.
3. Mary asked her daughter to _____ and take out the trash.
4. Stop being a dreamer! Be more _____, and look at the problem more sensibly!
5. His argument about the death penalty was so convincing that it made most of the judges _____ about the problem.
6. Don't miss this _____; it can change your whole life!

This handout is based on the following texts:

Anson, Christopher M. *Longman writer's companion*. New York: Longman, 2000.

Gorrell, Donna. *Writer's handbook from A to Z*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994.

"Reading to understand an idiom - Handout 6." Washington State University - Pullman, Washington. 01 Oct. 2000. 01 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.wsu.edu/~mejia/Dict3.htm>>.

All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center.

Please visit our website at <http://www.lavc.edu/WCweb/index.html> for additional resources and services.

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