

~ A ~

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 poor man'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 person who is always moving around doesn't acquire many possessions.

A1

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

Abide by a decision

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

About face

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

Above board

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

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.)

Achilles' heel

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

Acid test

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

Across the board

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

Against the grain

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

Agony aunt

An agony aunt is a newspaper columnist who gives advice to people having problems, especially personal ones.

Ahead of the pack

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

Albatross around your neck

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

All along

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

All and sundry

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

All ears

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

All fingers and thumbs

If you're all fingers and thumbs, you are too excited or clumsy to do something properly that requires manual dexterity. 'All thumbs' is an alternative form of the idiom.

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 mod cons

If something has all mod cons, it has all the best and most desirable features. It is an abbreviation of 'modern convenience' that was used in house adverts.

All mouth and trousers

(UK) Someone who's all mouth and trousers talks or boasts a lot but doesn't deliver. 'All mouth and no trousers' is also used, though this is a corruption of the original.

All over the place

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

All over the shop

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

All 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 talk and no trousers

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

All the 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-singing, all-dancing

If something's all-singing, all-dancing, it is the latest version with the most up-to-date features.

Alter ego

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

Always a bridesmaid, never a bride

If someone is always a bridesmaid, never a bride, they never manage to fulfill their ambition- they get close, but never manage the recognition, etc, they crave.

Ambulance chaser

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

Amen

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

An old flame

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

Ants in your pants

If someone has ants in their pants, they are agitated or excited about something and can't keep still.

Any port in a storm

This means that in an emergency any solution will do, even one that would normally be unacceptable.

Any Tom, Dick or Harry

If something could be done by any Tom, Dick or Harry, it could be done by absolutely anyone.

Apple of your eye

Something or, more often, someone that is very special to you is the 'apple of your' eye.

Apron strings

A man who is tied to a woman's apron strings is excessively dependent on her, especially when it is his mother's apron strings.

Argue the toss

(UK) If you argue the toss, you refuse to accept a decision and argue about it.

Arm and a leg

If something costs an arm and a leg, it is very expensive.

Armed to the teeth

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

Arrow in the quiver

An arrow in the quiver is a strategy or option that could be used to achieve your objective.

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 cool as a cucumber

If someone is as cool as a cucumber, they don't get worried by anything.

As mad as a hatter

This simile means that someone is crazy or behaves very strangely. In the past many people who made hats went insane because they had a lot of contact with mercury.

As neat as a new pin

This idiom means tidy and clean.

As one man

If people do something as one man, then they do it at exactly the same time or in complete agreement.

As the actress said to the bishop

(UK) This idiom is used to highlight a sexual reference, deliberate or accidental.

As the crow flies

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

Asleep at the switch

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

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 a loose end

(UK) If you are at a loose end, you have spare time but don't know what to do with it.

At death's door

If someone looks as if they are at death's door, they look seriously unwell and might actually be dying.

At each other's throats

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

At loggerheads

If people are at loggerheads, they are arguing and can't agree on anything.

At loose ends

(USA) If you are at a loose end, you have spare time but don't know what to do with it.

At 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 coalface

If you work at the coalface, you deal with the real problems and issues, rather than sitting in a office discussing things in a detached way.

At the drop of a hat

If you would do something at the drop of a hat, you'd do it immediately.

At the end of your rope

(USA) If you are at the end of your rope, you are at the limit of your patience or endurance.

At the end of your tether

(UK) If you are at the end of your tether, you are at the limit of your patience or endurance.

At your wit's end

If you're at your wit's end, you really don't know what you should do about something, no matter how hard you think about it.

Avowed intent

If someone makes a solemn or serious promise publicly to attempt to reach a certain goal, this is their avowed intent.

Awe inspiring

Something or someone that is awe inspiring amazes people in a slightly frightening but positive way.

AWOL

AWOL stands for "Absent Without Leave", or "Absent Without Official Leave". Originally a military term, it is used when someone has gone missing without telling anyone or asking for permission.

Axe to grind

If you have an axe to grind with someone or about something, you have a grievance, a resentment and you want to get revenge or sort it out. In American English, it is 'ax'.

~ B ~**Babe in arms**

A babe in arms is a very young child, or a person who is very young to be holding a position.

Babe in the woods

A babe in the woods is a naive, defenceless, young person.

Baby boomer

(USA) A baby boomer is someone born during 1945-1965, a period when the population was growing fast.

Back burner

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

Back foot

(UK) If you are on your back foot, you are at a disadvantage and forced to be defensive of your position.

Back number

Something that's a back number is dated or out of fashion.

Back the wrong horse

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

Back to square one

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

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.

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 taste in your mouth

If something leaves you with a bad taste in your mouth, you feel there is something wrong or bad about it.

Bad workers always blame their tools

"A bad worker always blames their tools" - If somebody does a job badly or loses in a game and claims that they were let down by their equipment, you can use this to imply that this was not the case.

Baker's dozen

A Baker's dozen is 13 rather than 12.

Bald as a coot

A person who is completely bald is as bald as a coot.

Ball is in your court

If the ball is in your court, it is up to you to make the next decision or step.

Ballpark figure

A ballpark figure is a rough or approximate number (guesstimate) to give a general idea of something, like a rough estimate for a cost, etc.

Banana republic

Banana republic is a term used for small countries that are dependent on a single crop or resource and governed badly by a corrupt elite.

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.

Barrack-room lawyer

(UK) A barrack-room lawyer is a person who gives opinions on things they are not qualified to speak about.

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.

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.

Be up the spout

(UK) If a woman is up the spout, she is pregnant.

Bean counter

A bean counter is an accountant.

Bear fruit

If something bears fruit, it produces positive results.

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 someone to the draw

(USA) If you beat someone to the draw, you do something before they do.

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.

Bee in your bonnet

If someone is very excited about something, they have a bee in their bonnet.

Bee's Knees

If something is the bee's knees, it's outstanding or the best in its class.

Beeline for

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

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 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.

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.

Bend over backwards

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

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.

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 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.

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 as Newgate's knocker

(UK) If things are as black as Newgate's knocker, they are very bad. Newgate was an infamous prison in England, so its door knocker meant trouble.

Black hole

If there is a black hole in financial accounts, money has disappeared.

Black sheep

Someone who is the black sheep doesn't fit into a group or family because their behaviour or character is not good enough.

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.

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 out of a stone

'You can't get blood out of a stone' means that it is impossible to get something from someone if they don't have it. We also say that it was 'like getting blood from a stone' when it was very hard to get an answer from someone. 'Blood from a rock' is an alternative.

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 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 the cobwebs away

If you blow the cobwebs away, you make sweeping changes to something to bring fresh views and ideas in.

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.

Blue blood

Someone with blue blood is royalty.

Blue-eyed boy

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

Bob's your uncle

(UK) This idiom means that something will be successful: Just tell him that I gave you his name and Bob's your uncle- he'll help you.

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.

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.

Box and dice

Box and dice means everything.

Box clever

(UK) If you box clever, you use your intelligence to get what you want, even if you have to cheat a bit.

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.

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 duck

(UK) If you break your duck, you do something for the first time.

Break your heart

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

Breathe your last

When you breathe your last, you die.

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 lives 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.

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.

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.

By a hair's breadth

If a person escapes from some danger by a hair's breadth, they only just managed to avoid it. The breadth is the thickness of a hair, so they probably feel somewhat lucky because the margin between success and what could easily have been failure was so close.

By a long chalk

(UK) If you beat somebody by a long chalk, you win easily and comfortably.

By a whisker

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

By 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 isn't 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 skin of your teeth

If you do something by the skin of your teeth, you only just manage to do it and come very near indeed to failing.

By word of mouth

If something becomes known by word of mouth, it gets known by being talked about rather than through publicity or advertising, etc.

C ~

Call a spade a spade

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

Call the shots

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

Can of worms

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

Can't hold a candle

If something can't hold a candle to something else, it is much worse.

Card up your sleeve

If you have a card up your sleeve, you have a surprise plan or idea that you are keeping back until the time is right.

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.

Cash in your chips

If you cash in your chips, you sell something to get what profit you can because you think its value is going to fall. It can also mean 'to die'.

Cast doubt on

If you make other people not sure about a matter, then you have cast doubt on it.

Cast your mind back

If somebody tells you to cast your mind back on something, they want you to think about something that happened in the past, but which you might not remember very well, and to try to remember as much as possible.

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 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.

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 as chips

(UK) If something is very inexpensive, it is as cheap as chips.

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 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.

Chinese whispers

(UK) When a story is told from person to person, especially if it is gossip or scandal, it inevitably gets distorted and exaggerated. This process is called Chinese whispers.

Chip off the old block

If someone is a chip off the old block, they closely resemble one or both of the parents in character.

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.

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', though this meaning is less common nowadays.

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, a goalkeeper has a clean sheet when let no goals in.

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.

Close but no cigar

(USA) If you are close but no cigar, you are close to success, but have not got there.

Close call

If the result of something is a close call, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the parties involved and to say who has won or whatever.

Close the stable door after the horse has bolted

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

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.

Coals to Newcastle

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

Cock and bull story

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

Cold feet

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

Cold 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 unco-operative 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 a cropper

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

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 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.

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.)

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.

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.

Curate's egg

(UK) If something is a bit of a curate's egg, it is only good in parts.

Curiosity killed the cat

As cats are naturally curious animals, we use this expression to suggest to people that excessive curiosity is not necessarily a good thing, especially where it is not their business.

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 down the tall poppies

(AU) If people cut down the tall poppies, they criticize people who stand out from the crowd.

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 the mustard

(UK) If somebody or something doesn't cut the mustard, they fail or it fails to reach the required standard.

Cut to the chase

If you cut to the chase, you get to the point, or the most interesting or important part of something without delay.

Cut to the quick

If someone's cut to the quick by something, they are very hurt and upset indeed.

Cut your teeth on

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

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

D ~

Daft as a brush

(UK) Someone who is daft as a brush is rather stupid.

Damp squib

(UK) If something is expected to have a great effect or impact but doesn't, it is a damp squib.

Dark horse

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

Daylight robbery

If you are overcharged or underpaid, it is a daylight robbery; open, unfair and hard to prevent. Rip-off has a similar meaning.

Dead and buried

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

Dead as a dodo

If something's dead as a dodo, it is lifeless and dull. The dodo was a bird that lived the island of Mauritius. It couldn't fly and was hunted to extinction.

Dead as a doornail

This is used to indicate that something is lifeless.

Dead duck

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

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 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.

Death warmed up

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

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'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.

Discerning eye

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

Do a Devon Loch

(UK) If someone does a Devon Loch, they fail when they were very close to winning. Devon Loch was a horse that collapsed just short of the winning line of the Grand National race.

Do a runner

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

Do the running

(UK) The person who has to do the running has to make sure that things get done. ('Make the running' is also used.)

Do their dirty work

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

Dog 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 in the manger

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

Dog tired

If you are dog tired, you are exhausted.

Dog's dinner

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

Dog's life

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

Dog-eared

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

Doggy bag

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

Doldrums

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

Don't 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 judge a book by the cover

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

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth

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

Don't upset the applecart

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

Don't hold your breath

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

Don't wash your dirty laundry in public

(UK) People, especially couples, who argue in front of others or involve others in their personal problems and crises, are said to be washing their dirty laundry in public; making public things that are best left private. (In American English, 'don't air your dirty laundry in public' is used.)

Done to death

If a joke or story has been done to death, it has been told so often that it has stopped being funny.

Donkey's years

This idiom means 'a very long time'.

Doormat

A person who doesn't stand up for themselves and gets treated badly is a doormat.

Double Dutch

(UK) If something is double Dutch, it is completely incomprehensible.

Double 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 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.

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.

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 the ball

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

Drunk as a lord

(UK) Someone who is very drunk is as drunk as a lord.

Dry as a bone

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

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.

Dull as ditchwater

(UK) If something is as dull as ditchwater, it is incredibly boring. A ditch is a long narrow hole or trench dug to contain water, which is normally a dark, dirty color and stagnant (when water turns a funny color and starts to smell bad). (In American English, 'things are 'dull as dishwater'.)

Dunkirk spirit

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

Dutch 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 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.

E ~

Each to their own

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

Eager beaver

A person who is extremely keen is an eager beaver.

Eagle eyes

Someone who has eagle eyes sees everything; no detail is too small.

Early bath

(UK) If someone has or goes for an early bath, they quit or lose their job or position earlier than expected because things have gone wrong.

Early bird catches the worm

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

Easier said than done

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

Easy as pie

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

Easy come, easy go

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

Eat crow

(USA) If you eat crow, you have to admit that you were wrong about something.

Eat humble pie

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

Eat like a bird

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

Eat like a horse

Someone who eats like a horse, eats a lot.

Eat like a pig

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

Eat someone alive

If you eat someone alive, you defeat or beat them comprehensively.

Eat your heart out

If someone tells you to eat your heart out, they are saying they are better than you at something.

Economical with the truth

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

Egg on your face

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

Elbow grease

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

Elbow room

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

Elephant in the room

An elephant in the room is a problem that everyone knows very well but no one talks about because it is taboo, embarrassing, etc.

Eleventh hour

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

Even keel

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

Even Stevens

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

Every cloud has a silver lining

People sometimes say that every cloud has a silver lining to comfort somebody who's having

problems. They mean that it is always possible to get something positive out of a situation, no matter how unpleasant, difficult or even painful it might seem.

Every man for himself

If it's every man for himself, then people are trying to save themselves from a difficult situation without trying to help anyone else.

Every man jack

If every man jack was involved in something, it is an emphatic way of saying that absolutely everybody was involved.

Every Tom, Dick and Harry

If every Tom, Dick and Harry knows about something, then it is common knowledge.

Every trick in the book

If you try every trick in the book, you try every possible way, including dishonesty and deceit, to get what you want.

Explore all avenues

If all avenues are being explored, then every conceivable approach is being tried that could possibly get the desired result.

Eye for an eye

This is an expression for retributive justice, where the punishment equals the crime.

F ~

Face like thunder

If someone has a face like thunder, they are clearly very angry or upset about something.

Face the music

If you have to face the music, you have to accept the negative consequences of something you have done wrong.

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 crack of the whip

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

Fair shake of the whip

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

Fair-weather friend

A fair-weather friend is the type who is always there when times are good but forgets about you when things get difficult or problems crop up.

Fall off the back of a lorry

(UK) If someone tries to sell you something that has fallen off the back of a lorry, they are trying to sell you stolen goods.

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 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.

Fed up to the back teeth

When you are extremely irritated and fed up with something or someone, you are fed up to the back teeth.

Feel at home

If you feel relaxed and comfortable somewhere or with someone, you feel at home.

Feel free

If you ask for permission to do something and are told to feel free, the other person means that there is absolutely no problem

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 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 columnist

(UK) A fifth columnist is a member of a subversive organisation who tries to help an enemy invade.

Fifth wheel

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

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.

Fine and dandy

(UK) If things are fine and dandy, then everything is going well.

Fine tuning

Small adjustments to improve something or to get it working are called fine tuning.

Fine words butter no parsnips

This idiom means that it's easy to talk, but talk is not action.

Finger in the pie

If you have a finger in the pie, you have an interest in something.

Fingers and thumbs

If you are all fingers and thumbs, you are being clumsy and not very skilled with your hands.

Fire away

If you want to ask someone a question and they tell you to fire away, they mean that you are free to ask what you want.

Fire on all cylinders

If something is firing on all cylinders, it is going as well as it could.

First come, first served

This means there will be no preferential treatment and a service will be provided to those that arrive first.

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 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.

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.

Flogging a dead horse

(UK) If someone is trying to convince people to do or feel something without any hope of succeeding, they're flogging a dead horse. This is used when someone is trying to raise interest in an issue that no-one supports anymore; beating a dead horse will not make it do any more work.

Flowery speech

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

Fly 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 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.

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.

Football's a game of two halves

(UK) If something's a game of two halves, it means that it's possible for someone's fortunes or luck to change and the person who's winning could end up a loser.

For a song

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

For donkey's years

(UK) If people have done something, usually without much if any change, for an awfully long time, they can be said to have done it for donkey's years.

For England

(UK) A person who talks for England, talks a lot- if you do something for England, you do it a lot or to the limit.

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.

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.)

Freudian Slip

If someone makes a Freudian slip, they accidentally use the wrong word, but in doing so reveal what they are really thinking rather than what they think the other person wants to hear.

From 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 Monty

(UK) If something is the Full Monty, it is the real thing, not reduced in any way.

Full of beans

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

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 plan is a strategy.

Gardening leave

(UK) If someone is paid for a period when they are not working, either after they have given in their notice or when they are being investigated, they are on gardening leave.

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 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, authorization.

Get the nod

(UK) If you get the nod to something, you get approval or permission to do it.

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 hands dirty

If you get your hands dirty, you become involved in something where the realities might compromise your principles.

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.

Give it some stick

(UK) If you give something some stick, you put a lot of effort into it.

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 someone stick

(UK) If someone gives you stick, they criticize you or punish you.

Give the nod

(UK) If you give the nod to something, you approve it or give permission to do it.

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.

Glutton for punishment

If a person is described as a glutton for punishment, they happily accept jobs and tasks that most people would try to get out of. A glutton is a person who eats a lot.

Go against the grain

A person, who does things in an unconventional manner, especially if their methods are not generally approved of, is said to go against the grain. Such an individual can be called a maverick.

Go awry

If things go awry, they go wrong.

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 for broke

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

Go pear-shaped

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

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 spare

(UK) If you go spare, you lose your temper completely.

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 with the flow

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

Golden handshake

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

Golden rule

The golden rule is the most essential or fundamental rule associated with something.

Gone for a burton

(UK) If something's gone for a burton, it has been spoiled or ruined. If a person has gone for a burton, they are either in serious trouble or have died.

Gone pear-shaped

(UK) If things have gone pear-shaped they have either gone wrong or produced an unexpected and unwanted result.

Gone to pot

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

Gone to the dogs

If something has gone to the dogs, it has gone badly wrong and lost all the good things it had.

Good antennae

Someone with good antennae is good at detecting things.

Good egg

A person who can be relied on is a good egg. Bad egg is the opposite.

Good spell

A spell can mean a fairly or relatively short period of time; you'll hear weather forecasts predict a dry spell. Sports commentators will say that a sportsperson is going through a good spell when they're performing consistently better than they normally do.

Good time

If you make good time on a journey, you manage to travel faster than you expected.

Good walls make good neighbors

Your relationship with your neighbors 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 necessarily believe it all. ('pinch of salt' is an alternative)

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.

Grasp the nettle

(UK) If you grasp the nettle, you deal bravely with a problem.

Grass roots

This idiom is often used in politics, where it refers to the ordinary people or voters. It can be used to mean people at the bottom of a hierarchy.

Grass widow

A grass widow is a woman whose husband is often away on work, leaving her on her own.

Graveyard shift

If you have to work very late at night, it is the graveyard shift.

Gravy train

If someone is on the gravy train, they have found an easy way to make lots of money.

Grease monkey

A grease monkey is an idiomatic term for a mechanic.

Grease someone's palm

If you grease someone's palm, you bribe them to do something.

Greased lightning

If something or someone moves like greased lightning, they move very fast indeed.

Great guns

If something or someone is going great guns, they are doing very well.

Great unwashed

This is a term used for the working class masses.

Great white hope

Someone who is expected to be a great success is a great white hope.

Greek to me

If you don't understand something, it's all Greek to you.

Green fingers

(UK) Someone with green fingers has a talent for gardening.

Green light

If you are given the green light, you are given approval to do something.

Green thumb

(USA) Someone with a talent for gardening has a green thumb.

Green-eyed monster

The green-eyed monster is an allegorical phrase for somebody's strong jealousy

Greenhorn

A greenhorn or someone who is described simply as green lacks the relevant experience and knowledge for their job or task

Grey 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 pound

(UK) In the UK, the grey pound is an idiom for the economic power of elderly people.

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 like a Cheshire cat

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

Guinea-pig

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

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-baked

A half-baked idea or scheme hasn't not been thought through 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 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 doesn't take without permission.

Hanged for a sheep as a lamb

This is an expression meaning that if you are going to get into trouble for doing something, then you ought to stop worrying and should try to get everything you can before you get caught.

Hard 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 cheese

(UK) Hard cheese means hard luck.

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 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 your collar felt

If someone has their collar felt, they are arrested.

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.

Hear a pin drop

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

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 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 co-ordinate 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-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.

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.

Hollow victory

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

Home stretch

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

Home, James

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

Honest truth

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

Honors are even

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

Hook, line, and sinker

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

Hope against hope

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

Hope in hell

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

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 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.

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.

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 emphasize their sincerity and correctness.

I should cocoa

(UK) This idiom comes from 'I should think so', but is normally used sarcastically to mean the

opposite.

I'll eat my hat

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

I've got a bone to pick with you

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

If 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 criticized. ('If the shoe fits, wear it' is an alternative)

If you'll pardon my French

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

Ill-gotten gains

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

In a cleft stick

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

In a flash

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

In a 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 nutshell

This idiom is used to introduce a concise summary.

In a pickle

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

In a tick

(UK) If someone will do something in a tick, they'll do it very soon or very quickly.

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 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 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 rude health

(UK) If someone's in rude health, they are very healthy and look it.

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 club

(UK) If a woman's in the club, she's pregnant. 'In the pudding club' is an alternative form.

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 family way

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

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 long run

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

In the offing

If something is in the offing, it is very likely to happen soon.

In the pink

If you are in very good health, you are in the pink.

In the pipeline

If something's in the pipeline, it hasn't arrived yet but its arrival is expected.

In the red If your bank account is overdrawn, it is in the red.

In the 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 two minds

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

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.

Into thin air

If something vanishes or disappears without trace, it vanishes into thin air;

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.

It ain't over till the fat lady sings

This idiom means that until something has officially finished, the result is uncertain.

It cost an arm and a leg

If something costs an arm and a leg, it is very expensive indeed.

It cost the earth

If something costs the earth, it is very expensive indeed.

It's no use crying over spilt milk

This idiom means that getting upset after something has gone wrong is pointless; it can't be changed so it should be accepted.

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 emphasize 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.

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 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.

Keen as mustard

(UK) If someone is very enthusiastic, they are as keen as mustard.

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 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 (UK) This expression is used to tell someone to have confidence.

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 rumors 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 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 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.

Keep your wig on!

(UK) This idiom is used to tell someone to calm down.

Keeping your options open

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

Kettle of fish

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

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 is 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 bucket

When someone kicks the bucket, they die.

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.

Kiss of death

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

Kith and kin

Your kith and kin are your family; your next of kin are close relations you nominate to deal with your affairs in the event of your death on a document, like a passport.

Knee-jerk reaction

A knee-jerk reaction is an instant, instinctive response to a situation.

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 hope for good luck.

Knock your socks off

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

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.

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 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.

Last-ditch

A last-ditch attempt is a desperate attempt that will probably fail anyway.

Laugh to see a pudding crawl

(UK) Someone who would laugh to see a pudding crawl is easily amused and will laugh at anything.

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.

Leave no stone unturned

If you look everywhere to find something, or try everything to achieve something, you leave no stone unturned.

Leave well alone

If you leave something well alone, you keep a safe distance from it, either physically or metaphorically.

Left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing

If the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, then communication within a company, organization, group, etc, is so bad that people don't know what the others are doing.

Left in the dark

If you are left in the dark about something, you aren't given the information that you should have.

Legend in your own lunchtime

Somebody who becomes a legend in their own lifetime acquires fame, but often only to a select or specialist audience, while they are still alive.

Lesser of two evils

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

Let bygones be bygones

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 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 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 through your teeth

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

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 that got the cream

If someone looks very pleased with themselves and happy, they look like a cat that got the cream.

Like a duck to water

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

Like a fish needs a bicycle

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

Like a fish out of water

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

Like a rat deserting a sinking ship

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

Like 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 taking candy from a baby

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

Like the clappers

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

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.

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 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 expression 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 after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves

(UK) If you look after the pennies, the pounds will look after themselves, meaning that if someone takes care not to waste small amounts of money, they will accumulate capital. ('Look after the pence and the pounds will look after themselves' is an alternative form of this idiom.)

Look before you leap

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

Look out for number one

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

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 lunch

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

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.

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 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 a song and dance

(UK) If someone makes a song and dance, they make an unnecessary fuss about something unimportant.

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 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 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 letters

A man of letters is someone who is an expert in the arts and literature, and often a writer too.

Man of means

A man, or woman, of means is wealthy.

Man of straw

A weak person that can easily be beaten or changed is a man of straw.

Man of the cloth

A man of the cloth is a priest.

Man on the Clapham omnibus

(UK) The man on the Clapham omnibus is the ordinary person in the street.

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.

Marked man

A marked man is a person who is being targeted by people who want to do them harm or cause them trouble.

Matter of life and death

If something is a matter of life and death, it is extremely important.

Mealy-mouthed

A mealy-mouthed person doesn't say what they mean clearly.

Meet someone halfway

If you meet someone halfway, you accept some of their ideas and make concessions.

Meet your expectations

If something doesn't meet your expectations, it means that it wasn't as good as you had thought it was going to be; a disappointment.

Meet your 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 round 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 P's and Q's

If you are careful about the way you behave and are polite, you mind Your P's and Q's.

Mint condition

If something is in mint condition, it is in perfect condition.

Misery guts

A misery guts is a person who's always unhappy and tries to make others feel negative.

Miss is as good as a mile

A miss is as good as a mile means that if you fail, even by the smallest margin, it is still a failure.

Miss the boat

If you miss the boat, you are too late to take advantage of an opportunity.

Money for old rope

(UK) If something's money for old rope, 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 to burn

If someone is very rich, they have money to burn.

Monkey business

If children get up to monkey business, they are behaving naughtily or mischievously. This is the same as MONKEYING AROUND.

Moot point

If something's a moot point, there's some disagreement about it: a debatable point.

More 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 have 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 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

~ 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.

Nest egg

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

Never a rose without the prick

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

New blood

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

New 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 lease of life

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

New man

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

New York minute

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

Newfangled

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

Nick of time

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

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 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.

Nod's as good as a wink

(UK) 'A nod's as good as a wink' is a way of saying you have understood something that someone has said, even though it was not said directly.

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.)

Not all there

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

Not cricket

(UK) If something is not cricket, it is unfair.

Not enough room to swing a cat

If a room is very small, you can say that there isn't enough room to swing a cat in it.

Not have two pennies to rub together

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

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 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.

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.

~ O ~

Odds and ends

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

Off color

If someone looks off color, they look ill.

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 wall

Something that is off the wall is unconventional.

Off your rocker

(UK) Someone who is off their rocker is crazy.

Off-hand

Off-hand means without preparation. People say that they don't know the answer off-hand, meaning that they don't know it at that time.

Old hat

If something's old hat, it seems rather old fashioned and dated.

Oldest trick in the book

The oldest trick in the book is a well-known way of deceiving someone, though still effective.

Olive branch

If you hold out or offer an olive branch, you make a gesture to indicate that you want peace.

On 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 Carey Street

(UK) If someone is on Carey Street, they are heavily in debt or have gone bankrupt.

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 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 blink

(UK) If a machine is on the blink, it isn't working properly or is out of order.

On the blower

(UK) If someone is on the blower, they are on the phone.

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 fiddle

(UK) Someone who is stealing money from work is on the fiddle, especially if they are doing it by fraud.

On the fly

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

On the game

(UK) A person who is on the game works as a prostitute.

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 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 map

If a place becomes widely known, it is put on the map. A place that remains unknown is off the map.

On the never-never (UK) If you buy something on the never-never, you buy it on long-term credit.

On the nod

(UK) If something is accepted by parliament or a committee majority, it is on the nod.

On the nod

(UK) Someone who's on the nod is either asleep or falling asleep, especially when they shouldn't or are in a position unusual for sleep, like sitting or standing.

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 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 trot

(UK) This idiom means 'consecutively'; I'd saw them three days on the trot, which means that I saw them on three consecutive days.

On the up and up

If you are on the up and up, you are making very good progress in life and doing well.

On the wagon

If someone is on the wagon, they have stopped drinking alcohol.

On top of the world

If you are on top of the world, everything is going well for you.

On your high horse

When someone is on their high horse, they are being inflexible, arrogant and will not make any compromises.

On your last legs

If someone's on their last legs, they're close to dying.

Once bitten, twice shy

If somebody is said to be once bitten twice shy, it means that someone who has been hurt or who has had something go wrong will be far more careful the next time.

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 man's meat is another man's poison

This idiom means that one person can like something very much, but another can hate it.

One over the eight

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

One-man band

If one person does all the work or has all the responsibility somewhere, then they are a one-man band.

One-off

A one-off event only happens once and will not be repeated.

Open all hours

If a shop or suchlike is open all hours, it only closes, if at all, terribly late.

Open book

If a person is an open book, it is easy to know what they think or how they feel about things.

Opening a can of worms

If you open a can of worms, you do something that will cause a lot of problems and is, on balance, probably going to cause more trouble than it's worth.

Opportunity knocks but once

This idiom means that you only get one chance to achieve what you really want to do.

Out and about

If someone is out and about, they have left their home and are getting things done that they need to do.

Out in the sticks

(UK) If someone lives out in the sticks, they live out in the country, a long way from any metropolitan area.

Out like a light

If you are out like a light, you fall fast asleep.

Out of pocket

If you are out of pocket on a deal, you have lost money.

Out of sight, out of mind

Out of sight, out of mind is used to suggest that someone will not think or worry about something if it isn't directly visible or available to them.

Out of sorts

If you are feeling a bit upset and depressed, you are out of sorts.

Out of the blue

If something happens out of the blue, it happens suddenly and unexpectedly.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire

If you get out of one problem, but find yourself in a worse situation, you are out of the frying pan, into the fire.

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 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 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.

Over-egg the pudding

(UK) If you over-egg the pudding, you spoil something by trying to improve it excessively. It is also used nowadays with the meaning of making something look bigger or more important than it really is. ('Over-egg' alone is often used in this sense.)

~ 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 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.

Perfidious Albion

England is known to some as perfidious Albion, implying that it is not trustworthy in its dealings with foreigners.

Perish the thought

Perish the thought is an expression meaning that you really hope something will not happen.

Pick up the tab

A person who pays for everyone picks up the tab.

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.

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)

Pin money

(UK) If you work for pin money, you work not because you need to but because it gives you money for extra little luxuries and treats.

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 pound

(UK) In the UK, the pink pound is an idiom for the economic power of gay people.

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.

Plain as a pikestaff

(UK) If something is as plain as a pikestaff, it is very clear.

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.

Plastic smile

When someone is wearing a plastic smile, they are appearing to be happier with a situation or events than they actually are. This is actually a description of the forced smile you might see in many photographs.

Play 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 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 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.

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 take 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 criticizes 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.

Presence of mind

If someone behaves calmly and rationally in difficult circumstances, they show presence of mind.

Primrose path

The primrose path is an easy and pleasurable lifestyle, but one that ends in unpleasantness and 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 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 other one, it's got brass bells on

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

Pull the wool over someone's eyes

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

Pull up your socks

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

Pull your chain

(USA) If someone pulls your chain, they take advantage of you in an unfair way or do something to annoy you.

Pull your finger out!

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

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 the envelope

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

Pushing up the daisies

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

Put all your eggs in one basket

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

Put or get someone's back up

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

Put somebody's nose out of joint

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

Put two and two together

If someone puts two and two together, they reach a correct conclusion from the evidence.

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 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 fish

(UK) A strange person is a queer fish.

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.

Quids in

(UK) If somebody is quids in, they stand to make a lot of money from something.

Quiet as a mouse

If someone's as quiet as a mouse, they make absolutely no noise.

~ R ~

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.)

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.

Rake over old coals

(UK) If you go back to old problems and try to bring them back, making trouble for someone, you are raking over old coals.

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, organization, 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 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 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.

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 royal

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

Ring a bell

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

Ringside seat

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

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.

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 destabilize 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.

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 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 diamond

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

Rough-hewn

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

Round the bend

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

Round the houses

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

Rub someone up the wrong way

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

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 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 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 criticized 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-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.

~ S ~

Sacred cow

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

Safe and sound

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

Safe 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.

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 colors

Someone who sails under false colors are 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 realize the truth about something.

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.

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.

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 someone 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 the light

When someone sees the light, they realize the truth.

See you anon

(UK) If somebody says this when leaving, they expect to see you again soon.

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.

Send someone to Coventry

(UK) If you send someone to Coventry, you refuse to talk to them or co-operate with them.

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.

Shake a leg

If you shake a leg, you are out of bed and active.

Shanks's pony

(UK) If you go somewhere by Shanks's pony, you walk there.

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.

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.

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 shrift

If somebody gives you short shrift, they treat you rudely and brusquely, showing no interest or sympathy.

Shot in the dark

If you have a shot in the dark at something, you try something where you have little hope of success.

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 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 as a dog

If somebody's as sick as a dog, they throw up (=vomit) violently.

Sick as a parrot

If someone's sick as a parrot about something, they are unhappy, disappointed or depressed about it.

Sick to death

If you are sick to death of something, you have been exposed to so much of it that you cannot take

any more.

Sight to behold

If something is a sight to behold, it means that seeing it is in some way special, either spectacularly beautiful or, equally, incredibly ugly or revolting, etc.

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 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.

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 criticize or target.

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.

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.

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 a 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.

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.

Small beer

If something is small beer, it's unimportant.

Small fry

If someone is small fry, they are unimportant. The term is often used when the police arrest the less important criminals, but are unable to catch the leaders and masterminds.

Smart Alec

A smart Alec is a conceited person who likes to show off how clever and knowledgeable they are.

Smell a rat

If you smell a rat, you know instinctively that something is wrong or that someone is lying to you.

Smoke 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.

Snake in the grass

Someone who is a snake in the grass betrays you even though you have trusted them.

Snake oil salesperson

A person who promotes something that doesn't work, is selling snake oil.

So on and so forth

And so on and so forth mean the same as etcetera (etc.).

Sod's law

Sod's law states that if something can go wrong then it will.

Soft soap someone

If you soft soap someone, you flatter them.

Some other time

If somebody says they'll do something some other time, they mean at some indefinite time in the future, possibly never, but they certainly don't want to feel obliged to fix a specific time or date.

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.

Spanner in the works

(UK) If someone puts or throws a spanner in the works, they ruin a plan. In American English, 'wrench' is used instead of 'spanner'.

Speak of the devil!

If you are talking about someone and they happen to walk in, you can use this idiom as a way of letting them know you were talking about them.

Spend a penny

(UK) This is a euphemistic idiom meaning to go to the toilet.

Spend like a sailor

Someone who spends their money wildly spends like a sailor.

Spick and span

If a room is spick and span, it is very clean and tidy.

Spill the beans

If you spill the beans, you reveal a secret or confess to something.

Spinning a line

When someone spins you a line, they are trying to deceive you by lying.

Spinning a yarn

When someone spins you a yarn, they are trying to deceive you by lying.

Spirit 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.

Spoil the ship for a ha'pworth of tar

(UK) If someone spoils the ship for a ha'pworth (halfpenny's worth) of tar, they spoil something completely by trying to make a small economy.

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 Sputnik moment is a point where people realize 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 square meal is a substantial or filling meal.

Square Mile

(UK) The Square Mile is the City, the financial area of London.

Square peg in a round hole

If somebody's in a situation, organization, etc, where they don't fit in and feel out of place, they are a square peg in a round hole.

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.

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 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 criticize 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.

Sticky wicket

(UK) If you are on a sticky wicket, you are in a difficult situation.

Stiff upper lip

(UK) If you keep your emotions to yourself and don't let others know how you feel when something bad happens, you keep a stiff upper lip.

Stiff-necked

A stiff-necked person is rather formal and finds it hard to relax in company.

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.

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 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.

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.

Sure as eggs is eggs

These means absolutely certain, and we do say 'is' even though it is grammatically wrong.

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.

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.

Swimmingly

If things are going swimmingly, they are going very well.

~ T ~

Take a leaf out of someone's book

If you take a leaf out of someone's book, you copy something they do because it will help you.

Take a straw poll

If you take a straw poll, you sound a number of people out to see their opinions on an issue or topic.

Take it on the chin

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 biscuit

(UK) If something takes the biscuit, it is the absolute limit.

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 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 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 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 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 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.

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.

Ten a penny

(UK) If something is ten a penny, it is very common. ("Two a penny" is also used.)

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.

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 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 as thieves

If people are thick as thieves, they are very close friends who have no secrets from each other.

Thick-skinned

If a person is thick-skinned, they are not affected by criticism.

Thin as a rake

A rake is a garden tool with a long, thin, wooden handle, so someone very thin is thin as a rake.

Thin end of the wedge

The thin end of the wedge is something small and seemingly unimportant that will lead to something much bigger and more serious.

Thin line

If there's a thin line between things, it's hard to distinguish them- there's a thin line between love and hate.

Thin-skinned

If somebody is thin-skinned, they are very sensitive to any sort of criticism.

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.

Those who live by the sword die by the sword

This means that violent people will be treated violently themselves.

Three sheets to the wind

If someone is three sheets to the wind, they are drunk.

Thrilled to bits

If you are thrilled to bits, you are extremely pleased or excited about something.

Through thick and thin

If 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 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 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.

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 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.

Tired and emotional

(UK) This idiom is a euphemism used to mean 'drunk', especially when talking about politicians.

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'.

To the ends of the earth

If someone will go to the ends of the earth for something, no distance is too great for them they are so determined to get it.

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 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

If someone says 'Touch wood' before they do something, they are wishing for good luck.

Touch wood

(UK) This idiom is used to wish for good luck.

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.

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.

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 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 left feet

A person with two left feet can't dance.

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 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 colors

If someone does something under false 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 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.

Unwavering loyalty

Unwavering loyalty does not question or doubt the person or issue and supports them completely.

Up in the air

If a matter is up in the air, no decision has been made and there is uncertainty about it.

Up sticks

(UK) If you up sticks, you leave somewhere, usually permanently and without warning- he upped sticks and went to work abroad.

Up the ante

If you up the ante, you increase the importance or value of something, especially where there's an element of risk as the term comes from gambling, where it means to increase the stake (the amount of money bet).

Up the 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 duff

(UK) If a woman is up the duff, she's pregnant.

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 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.

Vicar of Bray

(UK) A person who changes their beliefs and principles to stay popular with people above them is a Vicar of Bray

Vicious circle

A vicious circle is a sequence of events that make each other worse- someone drinks because they are unhappy at work, then loses their job... 'Vicious cycle' is also used.

Virgin territory

If something is virgin territory, it hasn't been explored before.

~ W ~

Waiting in the wings

If someone is waiting in the wings, or in the wings, they are in the background, but nearby, ready to act on short notice.

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 on eggshells

If you have to walk on eggshells when with someone, you have to be very careful because they get angry or offended very easily.

Wallflower

A woman politician given an unimportant government position so that the government can pretend it takes women seriously is a wallflower.

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.

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 any more, it is water under the bridge.

Watering hole

(UK) A watering hole is a pub.

Wear sackcloth and ashes

If someone displays their grief or contrition publicly, they wear sackcloth and ashes.

Weather a storm

If you weather a storm, you get through a crisis or hard times.

Wet behind the ears

Someone who is wet behind the ears is either very young or inexperienced.

Wet blanket

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 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.

Wheels fall off

When the wheels fall off something, it goes wrong or fails.

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 behavior is strictly controlled go over the top when the authority is not around, which is why most teenagers have parties when their parents have gone on holiday. The parents are the scary authority figures, but the cat's away and the kids are the mice partying and enjoying their freedom.

White as a sheet

A bad shock can make somebody go as white as a sheet.

White elephant

A white elephant is an expensive burden; something that costs far too much money to run, like the Millennium Dome in the UK.

White lie

If you tell a white lie, you lie in order not to hurt someone's feelings.

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 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.

Winner takes all

If everything goes to the winner, as in an election, the winner takes all.

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 colors

If you pass something with flying 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.

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 lawmakers had wished to implement.

Words fail me

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

Work like a dog

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

Work your fingers to the bone

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

Work your socks off

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

World at your feet

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

World is your oyster

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

Worm information

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

Worm's eye view

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

Worse for wear

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

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 emphasized 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 ~

X factor

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

X marks the spot

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

X-rated

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

~ Y ~

Yah boo sucks

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

Yellow press

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

Yellow streak

If someone has a yellow streak, they are cowardly about something.

Yellow-bellied

A yellow-bellied person is a coward.

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

Yes-man

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

Yesterday's man or Yesterday's woman

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

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

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

You can say that again

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

You can't have your cake and eat it

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

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

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

You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs

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

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours

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

You what?

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

You've made your bed- you'll have to lie in it

This means that someone will have to live with the consequences of their own actions.

Young blood

Young people with new ideas and fresh approaches are young blood.

Young Turk

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

Your name is mud

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

Your sins will find you out

This idiom means that things you do wrong will become known.

~ 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.

