100 English Idioms and Their Meanings

Each idiom has a clear meaning and a real example. Practice and answers are at the end.

When to use it: casual with friends and family both anywhere formal at work or in writing

😊 Emotions & Feelings

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Bite the bullet both	To face a difficult or unpleasant situation with courage.	I didn't want to work late, but I had to bite the bullet and finish the project.
Get something off your chest casual	To confess something that has been worrying you.	I need to get this off my chest; I broke your favorite mug.
Wear your heart on your sleeve casual	To openly show your emotions and feelings.	She always wears her heart on her sleeve, so everyone knows how she feels.
On cloud nine casual	Extremely happy and joyful.	After winning the lottery, he was on cloud nine for weeks.
Down in the dumps casual	Feeling sad, depressed, or discouraged.	She's been down in the dumps since her dog ran away.
A chip on your shoulder casual	Holding a grudge or feeling resentful about past unfairness.	He has a chip on his shoulder about not getting that promotion.
Butterflies in your stomach casual	Feeling nervous or anxious.	I always get butterflies in my stomach before a big presentation.
Let off steam casual	To release pent-up energy, anger, or stress.	After a stressful week, we went out to let off steam.
Hit the roof casual	To become extremely angry.	My dad hit the roof when he saw the mess in the kitchen.
Keep a stiff upper lip both	To remain brave and determined in difficult times.	Despite the bad news, she kept a stiff upper lip.
Jump for joy casual	To express great happiness or excitement.	When she heard she got the job, she jumped for joy.

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Cry over spilled milk casual	To be upset about something that has already happened and cannot be changed.	There's no use crying over spilled milk; let's focus on the future.

💼 Work & Business

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Get the ball rolling both	To start something, especially a process or activity.	Let's get the ball rolling on this new project.
Think outside the box both	To think creatively and unconventionally.	We need to think outside the box to solve this marketing problem.
Burn the midnight oil both	To work late into the night.	I had to burn the midnight oil to meet the deadline.
Cut corners both	To do something in the easiest, cheapest, or fastest way, often poorly.	They cut corners on quality to save money, and the product failed.
Get your feet wet both	To gain initial experience in a new activity or job.	This internship is a good way to get your feet wet in the industry.
Go the extra mile both	To make a special effort; do more than is expected.	She always goes the extra mile for her clients.
In the same boat both	In the same difficult or unpleasant situation as someone else.	We're all in the same boat with these budget cuts.
Keep your eye on the ball both	To stay focused and attentive to what is important.	With so many distractions, it's hard to keep your eye on the ball.
Learn the ropes both	To learn how to do a particular job or activity.	It took him a few weeks to learn the ropes at the new company.
On the same page both	To have a shared understanding or agreement.	Let's make sure we're all on the same page before the meeting.
Put all your eggs in one basket both	To risk everything on one venture or plan.	Don't put all your eggs in one basket; diversify your investments.

⏰ Time & Opportunity

Idiom	Meaning	Example
The ball is in your court both	It is your turn to make a decision or take action.	I've made my offer; now the ball is in your court.
Once in a blue moon casual	Very rarely.	We only go out for dinner once in a blue moon.

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Against the clock both	Rushed and having very little time to do something.	They were working against the clock to finish the report.
In the nick of time both	At the very last moment; just before it's too late.	The ambulance arrived in the nick of time.
Make up for lost time both	To do something quickly or intensely because you didn't have time before.	After being sick, she's trying to make up for lost time at work.
Time flies casual	Time passes very quickly.	It's hard to believe it's been a year already; time flies!
Call it a day both	To decide to stop working for the day.	We've been working for ten hours; let's call it a day.
Beat the clock both	To finish something before the deadline or time is up.	She managed to beat the clock and submit her application.
Have the time of your life casual	To have an extremely enjoyable experience.	We had the time of our lives on vacation in Hawaii.
Take your time both	Do not hurry; proceed slowly and carefully.	There's no rush, so take your time with the assignment.
A stitch in time saves nine both	Addressing a problem early prevents it from becoming bigger.	Fixing that small leak now is a stitch in time saves nine.
Seize the day both	Make the most of the present moment; live life to the fullest.	Don't wait for the perfect moment; seize the day!

🏆 Success & Failure

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A shot in the arm both	Something that gives encouragement or renewed energy.	The good news was a shot in the arm for the whole team.
Go down in flames both	To fail spectacularly and dramatically.	His business venture went down in flames after only six months.
Hit the jackpot casual	To achieve great success or make a lot of money suddenly.	She hit the jackpot when her invention became a bestseller.
Learn from your mistakes both	To understand what went wrong and avoid repeating it.	Everyone makes errors; the important thing is to learn from your mistakes.
Make a killing casual	To earn a lot of money very quickly.	He made a killing in the stock market last year.
Pass with flying colors both	To succeed easily and brilliantly.	She passed her final exams with flying colors.

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Pull yourself up by your bootstraps both	To improve your situation through your own hard work and determination.	He came from poverty and pulled himself up by his bootstraps.
Reach for the stars both	To aim for very high goals.	Don't be afraid to reach for the stars with your ambitions.
Strike gold both	To find something very valuable or successful.	The company struck gold with its new software.
The sky's the limit both	There are no limits to what can be achieved.	With your talent and dedication, the sky's the limit.
Turn over a new leaf both	To start behaving in a better or more positive way.	After his arrest, he decided to turn over a new leaf.
Win-win situation formal	A situation where everyone involved benefits.	The merger created a win-win situation for both companies.
Get something off the ground both	To start a project or activity successfully.	It took a lot of effort to get the new business off the ground.

💬 Communication & Relationships

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Beat around the bush casual	To avoid saying something directly, usually because it is uncomfortable.	Stop beating around the bush and tell me what you want.
Hear it on the grapevine casual	To hear news or information indirectly from other people.	I heard it on the grapevine that they're getting married.
In a nutshell both	In summary; very briefly.	In a nutshell, the plan is to expand into new markets.
Keep someone at arm's length both	To avoid becoming too friendly or involved with someone.	She tends to keep people at arm's length after her divorce.
Let the cat out of the bag casual	To reveal a secret carelessly or by mistake.	He let the cat out of the bag about the surprise party.
Make a long story short casual	To get to the point quickly, omitting details.	To make a long story short, we missed our flight.
Put someone in the picture both	To inform someone about the latest developments or situation.	Can you put me in the picture about what happened yesterday?
See eye to eye both	To agree with someone.	They don't always see eye to eye on political issues.

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Spill the beans casual	To reveal secret information.	Come on, spill the beans! Who told you?
Get wind of something both	To hear a rumor or piece of information about something.	The press got wind of the scandal and published the story.
Break the ice both	To help people feel relaxed when they first meet.	He told a funny story to break the ice at the meeting.
Speak of the devil casual	Said when the person you are talking about arrives.	Speak of the devil! We were just talking about you.

💰 Money & Resources

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A penny for your thoughts casual	A way of asking what someone is thinking.	You seem quiet today; a penny for your thoughts?
Break the bank casual	To cost too much money; to be very expensive.	Going on a luxury cruise would break the bank.
Cost an arm and a leg casual	To be extremely expensive.	That designer handbag must have cost an arm and a leg.
In the red both	To be in debt; to owe money.	The company has been in the red for three consecutive quarters.
Make ends meet both	To earn just enough money to live on.	It's difficult for many families to make ends meet these days.
Money talks casual	Wealth gives power and influence.	He got the best table in the restaurant because, as they say, money talks.
On a shoestring budget both	With very little money.	They started their business on a shoestring budget.
Penny-pinching casual	Being extremely careful with money; stingy.	His penny-pinching habits meant they never went on vacation.
Save for a rainy day both	To save money for a time when it might be needed unexpectedly.	It's wise to save a little each month for a rainy day.
Tighten your belt both	To spend less money because there is less available.	With the economic downturn, we all need to tighten our belts.
Worth its weight in gold both	Extremely valuable or useful.	A reliable babysitter is worth their weight in gold.
A dime a dozen casual	Very common and therefore not valuable.	Good ideas are a dime a dozen; execution is what matters.

🧗 Challenges & Problems

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Bite off more than you can chew both	To take on a task that is too difficult or too much.	He bit off more than he could chew by accepting three projects.
Caught between a rock and a hard place casual	Facing two equally difficult or unpleasant choices.	I'm caught between a rock and a hard place with these deadlines.
A dead end both	A situation with no possibility of progress.	His job search has reached a dead end.
A hard nut to crack both	A difficult problem or person to understand or deal with.	This math problem is a hard nut to crack.
A sticky situation casual	A difficult, awkward, or embarrassing problem.	He found himself in a sticky situation after lying to his boss.
Add insult to injury both	To make a bad situation worse.	First, they lost the game, and then, to add insult to injury, their star player was injured.
Back to the drawing board both	To start planning something again because the first plan failed.	Our proposal was rejected, so it's back to the drawing board.
Bury your head in the sand both	To ignore an unpleasant reality or problem.	You can't just bury your head in the sand; you must face the issue.
Get out of hand casual	To become difficult to control.	The party started to get out of hand, so we asked people to leave.
In hot water casual	In trouble or difficulty.	He's in hot water with his parents for failing his exam.
Jump through hoops both	To do many difficult or complicated things to achieve something.	We had to jump through hoops to get the necessary permits.
On the rocks both	In a state of serious difficulty or trouble.	Their marriage has been on the rocks for months.
The straw that broke the camel's back both	The final small problem that causes a person or thing to collapse.	His rudeness was the straw that broke the camel's back; she left.
Up against the wall both	In a very difficult situation with no easy way out.	With no money and mounting bills, they felt up against the wall.
Hang in there casual	Do not give up when things are hard.	The first month is hard, but hang in there.

🏠 Everyday Life

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A blessing in disguise both	Something that seems bad at first but results in good.	Losing that job was a blessing in disguise; I found a better one.
A piece of cake casual	Something very easy to do.	Don't worry about the test; it'll be a piece of cake.
Add fuel to the fire both	To make a bad situation even worse.	His comments only added fuel to the fire during the argument.
Barking up the wrong tree casual	Looking in the wrong place or accusing the wrong person.	If you think I took your keys, you're barking up the wrong tree.
By the skin of your teeth casual	Just barely; by a very small margin.	He passed the exam by the skin of his teeth.
Curiosity killed the cat casual	Being too inquisitive can lead to trouble.	Don't ask too many questions about their private life; curiosity killed the cat.
Don't count your chickens before they hatch both	Don't assume success until it has actually happened.	You might get the job, but don't count your chickens before they hatch.
Go with the flow casual	To accept things as they happen and not try to change them.	I don't have a strict plan for the weekend; I'll just go with the flow.
Hit the nail on the head both	To describe exactly what is causing a situation or problem.	You've hit the nail on the head with your analysis.
Let sleeping dogs lie both	To avoid bringing up an old problem or issue.	I know he's upset, but let sleeping dogs lie for now.
Once bitten, twice shy casual	An unpleasant experience makes one more cautious.	After being cheated once, he's once bitten, twice shy.
Under the weather casual	Feeling a little sick.	I stayed home today because I'm feeling under the weather.
Hit the books casual	To start studying hard.	I have a big test tomorrow, so I need to hit the books.

✏️ Practice: fill in the idiom

a piece of cake • call it a day • cost an arm and a leg • hit the roof • in a nutshell • in hot water • make ends meet • on cloud nine • once in a blue moon • see eye to eye • spill the beans • time flies

1. We only eat out _____ because it costs too much.
2. After she got the good news, she was _____ all day.
3. Don't worry about the test. It will be _____.
4. My dad _____ when he saw the mess in the kitchen.
5. We have been working for ten hours. Let's _____.
6. Come on, _____! Who told you?
7. That handbag must _____.
8. It is hard for many families to _____ these days.
9. He's _____ with his parents for failing his exam.
10. _____, the plan is to open two new stores.
11. They don't always _____ on politics.
12. It's been a year already. _____!

📝 Your turn

Choose an idiom you like and complete the sentences.

My favorite idiom is _____

It means _____

I can use it when _____

✅ Answers

1. once in a blue moon
2. on cloud nine
3. a piece of cake
4. hit the roof
5. call it a day
6. spill the beans
7. cost an arm and a leg
8. make ends meet
9. in hot water
10. In a nutshell
11. see eye to eye
12. Time flies

Keep practicing for free. Play Idiom Rush: look at the emojis and guess the idiom.

Teachers: find ready lessons, stories and exercises in our store.