

Idioms

Use of Idioms

Idioms are expressions that convey a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements.

Example :

The meaning of “to break ice” in the literal and idiomatic senses is:

Literal meaning: Before the bartender made the drink, he broke the ice with a spoon and dropped it into the glass.

Idiomatic meaning: Before the conference began, the speaker broke the ice with a joke.

The meaning of the idiom *to break the ice* is:

1. to make a beginning and / or
2. to get through the first difficulties in starting a conversation or discussion.

Taking another example, the idiom ‘**jaundiced eye**’ does not refer to a person afflicted with jaundice but that the person views something with a prejudice or bias. In a sentence, it would be used as: Since the terrorist attacks, all members of a certain community have been viewed with the jaundiced eye.

In this section, you are provided with a short conversation between **A** and **B**. A makes a statement or asks a question, to which B responds with an idiom. You are required to choose from the three options given as to what it is that B means to say.

Let us work out an example:

A : The situation in this company is deteriorating drastically.

B : It is bound to happen when you have the tail wagging the dog.

The obvious clue is that B has referred to something that is bad for business. The idiom “the tail wagging the dog” reverses the subject and the object - in normal circumstances a dog would wag the tail. So we need to look for something that is contrary to the normal and good business practices.

The options for what B means to say are:

- (a) The economy is run down
- (b) The Board of Directors is inefficient
- (c) The CEO’s secretary is playing a dominating role

What would you choose?

Not (a) as it is bad for business but does not show a reversal of doer and deed.

Not (b) for the same reason.

(c) is the correct answer as it refers to the secretary being dominating when actually he/she is in a subordinate role.

There are no hard and fast rules to attempting this section. The more fiction and literary pieces you read, the greater the chances that you will understand meanings of idioms. You should also study these in grammar books and practise using them in your conversations. There are some websites that provide lists of idioms and their meanings. You could also get online practice. Finally, if you have to rely on guessing, common sense and logical thinking could help you through. To carry the day, you need to have more than two strings in your bow. (Can you decipher the meaning of this sentence?)

Now, try to solve the questions given below.

You have to select, from the three options, which one explains what **B** means, in response to **A**.

1. A: Manohar deserved to be promoted; it is a pity he was not.

B: That’s what happens if you rub your boss the wrong way.

What does B mean:

- (a) Manohar did not get along with his boss.
- (b) The boss favoured someone else.
- (c) Something Manohar had done or said had upset the boss.

2. A: These are difficult times my family is going through.

B: I know, but remember, every cloud has a silver lining!

What does B mean?

- (a) The family will soon come into money and wealth.
- (b) Every bad situation has something good coming out of it.
- (c) Things are not what they seem.

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3. A: Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' speech is a sample of great oratory.

B: It makes my hair stand on end, each time I hear or read it.

What does B mean?

- (a) B is scared with what the speech conveys.
 - (b) B is emotionally moved by the speech.
 - (c) B thinks Nehru was a great orator.
4. A: Are you all set for the entrance exam tomorrow?

B: I know most topics like the back of my hand.

What does B mean?

- (a) I am not well prepared in some areas.
- (b) I am putting most topics to memory.
- (c) I know most topics very well.

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5. A: I am finding it rather difficult to negotiate a higher salary with my boss.

B: I suggest you spell out your demands in black and white.

What does B mean?

- (a) Be clear and specific about what you want.
- (b) Give your demands in writing.
- (c) Take care of the presentation of your letter.

[Answers: 1. (c), 2. (b), 3. (a), 4. (c), 5. (b)]