

Idioms and Phrases

What are Idioms and Phrases?

A phrase is a group of words which represents a part of speech.

- The big bad wolf – Noun Phrase
- Surprisingly good – Adjective Phrase
- Was sleeping – Verb Phrase

When the group of words or a phrase represents an idea or a thought which has a deeper, figurative meaning, it is called an **idiom**.

- Wolf in sheep's clothing – A deceptive person or a thing
- Flesh and blood – related by blood
- No love lost – not on good terms

In this chapter, we shall learn some commonly used English idioms and phrases.

Idioms Related to Animals

- **To cry wolf**

Meaning: To raise a false alarm

Usage: Naresh has a tendency to cry wolf every time, so don't pay attention to him.

- **A bull in a china shop**

Meaning: Someone who is clumsy or unskilled

Usage: Mario was like a bull in a china shop when it came to handling the finances.

- **A fly in the ointment**

Meaning: Something which spoils the beauty or balance

Usage: The only fly in the ointment is the ugly looking house amid the beautiful buildings.

- **To be the underdog**

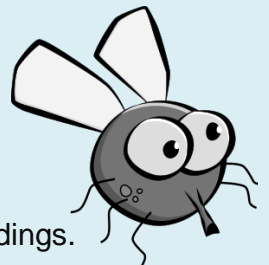
Meaning: A competitor who has little or no chance of winning

Usage: No one had expected an underdog like Floyd to beat the three-time champion.

- **The elephant in the room**

Meaning: A deliberately unaddressed topic which may cause embarrassment or awkwardness if mentioned

Usage: Rohini's ugly divorce was the elephant in the room at the party.



- **Barking up the wrong tree**

Meaning: To make a wrong choice or to ask the wrong person

Usage: If the detectives think the house help is involved in the theft, they are barking up the wrong tree.

- **Cat's got one's tongue**

Meaning: To neither speak nor respond

Usage: Why aren't you answering? Did the cat get your tongue?

- **The lion's share**

Meaning: The biggest part

Usage: Being the person who invested the most, Rajan got the lion's share of the profits.



- **A red herring**

Meaning: A deceptive piece of information intended to mislead someone from the truth

Usage: The scarf at the crime scene was a red herring which made us think that the culprit is a woman.

- **Raining cats and dogs**

Meaning: To rain very heavily

Usage: Last night, it rained cats and dogs. Fortunately, everyone was indoors.

- **Straight from the horse's mouth**

Meaning: Information taken from a reliable or an authorised source

Usage: Jagan, Krishna's best friend, said that he is indeed resigning. I heard it straight from the horse's mouth.

- **Until the cows come home**

Meaning: For a very long time

Usage: We cannot delay the matter till the cows come home.

Idioms Related to the Paranormal

- **Baying for blood**

Wanting to punish or hurt someone

After the con artist decamped with their money, the swindled residents are now baying for his blood.

- **Witch hunt**

A campaign to punish people who may have unconventional views

The authorities launched a witch hunt against the people who voted for the opponent.

- **Devil's advocate**

A person who presents a counter view just for argument

Let me play the devil's advocate and ask you what happens if plan A fails.



- **To come back to haunt someone**

Meaning: A memory which recurs to affect someone in an adverse way

Usage: The mistakes of Sushant's past came back to haunt him.

- **Witching hour**

Meaning: Midnight or the time between 3 and 4 AM when witches and evil spirits are known to be active

Usage: Who could be calling us on the phone during the witching hours?

- **Skeleton staff**

Meaning: The minimum number of people needed to run business

Usage: The office comprised only the skeleton staff after the downsizing.

- **A ghost town**

Meaning: A town in which no or very few residents live

Usage: El Fantasmal is now reduced to a ghost town after the war.

Idioms Related to Food

- **Apple of someone's eye**

Meaning: A beloved person cherished more than any other

Usage: Samantha was the apple of her father's eye.

- **The salt of the earth**

Meaning: A person who is giving, trustworthy and honest

Usage: I am glad that my friend married Kamlesh. He truly is the salt of the earth.

- **With a grain of salt**

Meaning: To not trust something completely; to treat something with suspicion

Usage: The news related to the cricketer's retirement should be taken with a grain of salt.

- **Put all your eggs in one basket**

Meaning: To depend on something entirely

Usage: By depending entirely on the written section of the examination, you have put all your eggs in one basket.

- **Bread and butter**

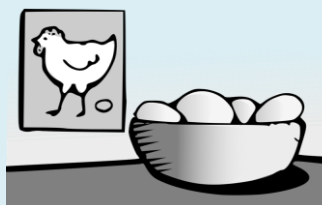
Meaning: Livelihood

Usage: Singing is my bread and butter.

- **Bring home the bacon**

Meaning: Earn a livelihood

Usage: These days, women not only look after the needs of their family but also bring home the bacon.



- **A bad egg**

Meaning: A dishonest person

Usage: Nilesh is a bad egg who was accused of stealing money from his workplace.



- **Cool as a cucumber**

Meaning: A calm and relaxed person

Usage: Our new manager is as cool as a cucumber; he handles everything calmly.

- **Cry over spilled milk**

Meaning: To worry about something which cannot be undone

Usage: You cannot take back the harsh things you said to him; there is no use crying over spilled milk.

- **Full of beans**

Meaning: To be very energetic and spirited

Usage: Gregory who is usually morose is full of beans today.

- **Eat the humble pie**

Meaning: To be humbled by an experience which proves one wrong

Usage: If I am right, I will gloat about it; if I am wrong, I will gladly eat the humble pie.

- **Piece of cake**

Meaning: An extremely easy task

Usage: Test driving the new fully automatic car was a piece of cake.

Idioms Related to Mental State

- **Method to the madness**

Meaning: A plan in somebody's seemingly illogical behaviour

Usage: It is easy to dismiss Van Gogh's works as products of an unstable mind; however, there is a method to his madness.

- **To lose one's marbles**

Meaning: To lose one's mental balance

Usage: The man was rambling about how he fought in the world war. I think he has lost his marbles.

- **Harebrained idea**

Meaning: A silly or impractical idea

Usage: Don't fall for Dinesh's harebrained ideas. He is not the most sensible person around.

- **Stark raving mad**

Meaning: Completely crazy

Usage: Imagine keeping a cobra as a pet. Looks like she is stark raving mad!

- **Not playing with a full deck**

Meaning: Mentally unsound

Usage: It was embarrassing to hear her talk senselessly in front of the audience. Seems like she wasn't playing with a full deck.

- **Mad as a hatter**

Meaning: Crazy or mad

Usage: Gajendra is an eccentric writer who can seem as mad as a hatter to some.

Idioms Related to Household Items and Miscellaneous Things

- **Can't hold a candle to**

Meaning: Cannot be compared to something which is vastly superior

Usage: Darshana cannot hold a candle to Meena when it comes to intelligence.

- **To blow off steam**

Meaning: Do something to relieve pent-up frustration or other negative emotions

Usage: I play cricket with my friends after a long day at school to blow off steam.

- **Too big for his boots**

Meaning: To become overconfident

Usage: After three consecutive wins, Marshall has become too big for his boots.

- **To blow the whistle**

Meaning: To report a wrongdoing

Usage: Manisha blew the whistle on her employers who were procuring material through unlawful means.

- **A pot calling the kettle black**

Meaning: Calling out someone for a wrongdoing which he himself is guilty of in the first place

Usage: The ex-convict turned minister criticising his opponent of having mafia links is a case of a pot calling the kettle black.

- **Not the sharpest knife in the drawer**

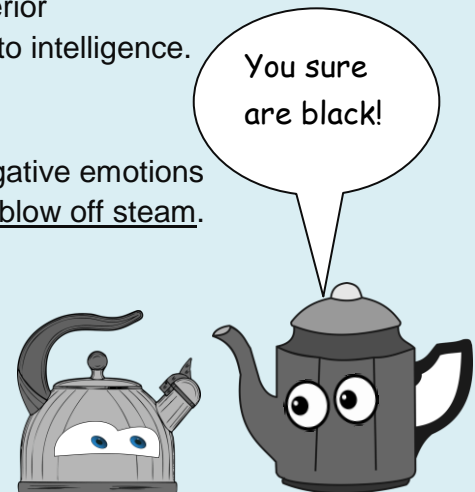
Meaning: Not very intelligent

Usage: I am not surprised that Harish failed the interview. He is not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

- **Dead as a doornail**

Meaning: Lifeless

Usage: These flowers look as dead as a doornail.



- **Born with a silver spoon**

Meaning: Born affluent

Usage: Mark will never know the value of hard-earned money. After all, he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

- **Storm in a teacup**

Meaning: Creating a fuss about trivial things

Usage: The news channels are exaggerating the incident. It's just a storm in a teacup.

- **Writing on the wall**

Meaning: Signs that something may fail

Usage: Many political observers foresaw the dissolution of the party. It was only the party members who refused to see the writing on the wall.

Idioms Related to Parts of the Body

- **Scratch someone's back**

Meaning: Do a favour for someone in the hope that the favour would be returned someday

Usage: I will give you a part of the loot if you co-operate; you scratch my back and I scratch yours.

- **A chip on her shoulder**

Meaning: To be enraged easily

Usage: Maya who tends to have a chip on her shoulder did not take too kindly to Asha's remarks.

- **Take heart**

Meaning: To get courage and comfort from a reassuring fact

Usage: After Puneet's speech, the underprivileged students took heart from his rags-to-riches story.

- **Burn fingers**

Meaning: To suffer as a result of a bad decision

Usage: Neeraj burnt his fingers after foolishly spending crores on property in an inhabitable part of the city.

- **By the skin of one's teeth**

Meaning: Just barely

Usage: Richa escaped the wrath of the teacher by the skin of her teeth.

- **Thick in the head**

Meaning: Dull or stupid

Usage: Roofus is too thick in the head to understand his master's instructions.



- **Down in the mouth**

Meaning: Depressed/sad

Usage: After her friend's departure, Margaret is a little down in the mouth.

- **All ears**

Meaning: To listen attentively

Usage: Tell us all about your trip to Peru. We are all ears!

- **Break a leg**

Meaning: A phrase said to actors in an ironic manner to avoid bad luck before a performance

Usage: I hope you all perform well. Go break a leg!

- **Cost an arm and a leg**

Meaning: Cost a lot/expensive

Usage: Vineeta's new house by the bay cost her an arm and a leg.



- **Get something off one's chest**

Meaning: Make a confession

Usage: I want to get something off my chest; it was my dog that destroyed your flowerbed.

- **Have one's head in the clouds**

Meaning: To be in a fantasy world

Usage: He seems to have his head in the clouds ever since the boss promised him a promotion.

- **Keep one's chin up**

Meaning: To be optimistic during trying times

Usage: Be positive and keep your chin up. Your efforts will be rewarded.

- **Play something by ear**

Meaning: To not have a plan and to take things as they come

Usage: None of us have any formal training; we just play by the ear.

- **Rule of thumb**

Meaning: A basic principle

Usage: The thumb rule for making a delicious cake is getting the proportions of the ingredients right.

- **Wash one's hands of something**

Meaning: To disassociate oneself from a problem

Usage: I have washed my hands of my neighbours; they are on their own now.

Idioms Related to History/Mythology

- **Cross the rubicon**

Meaning: Pass a point of no return

Explanation: Julius Caesar had crossed a river (the rubicon), after which he became a part of a civil war.

Usage: Salim crossed the rubicon by accepting the position of the assistant manager.

- **Achilles' heel**

Meaning: A weak spot/primary weakness

Explanation: Achilles, the greatest warrior on earth, was invincible. The only part of his body which was vulnerable was his heel. He was killed after being struck on the heel with a poisonous arrow.

Usage: Math has always been her Achilles' heel.

- **Pyrrhic victory**

Meaning: A victory which comes at a huge cost

Explanation: It is named after King Pyrrhus who incurred great losses despite his victory over the Romans.

Usage: The king conquered new kingdoms but lost all his best men. It was unfortunately a pyrrhic victory.

- **Trojan horse**

Meaning: Something which looks harmless but intends to harm covertly

Explanation: It is named after the wooden horse the Greeks gifted the Trojans as a peace offering. In reality, it was a ruse and the wooden horse was full of Greek soldiers who were wheeled into Troy by the unsuspecting citizens. The soldiers broke out at night and burnt the city to the ground.

Usage: His seemingly harmless offer is actually a Trojan horse; he will strike when you least expect it.

(Note: Some harmful computer programs are also called Trojans/Trojan horses.)

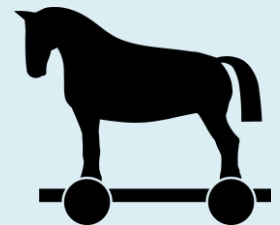
- **Beware the Greeks bearing gifts**

Meaning: Do not trust your enemies even if they seem to have the best intentions

Explanation: Refer to the explanation for 'Trojan Horse'.

Usage: Person A: My arch rival is being good to me these days.

Person B: You know the saying: beware the Greeks bearing gifts.



- **The face that launched a thousand ships**

Meaning: To be the primary cause of a big problem

Explanation: It alludes to Helen of Troy who was the main cause of the war breaking out between the Greeks and the Trojans. She eloped with the young prince Paris which caused her husband King Menelaus to declare war on Troy.

Usage: Hers is a face that launched a thousand ships. Both suitors were warring against each other in a bid to court her.

- **Hounds of hell**

Meaning: To be pursued by evil forces as a retribution for a wrongdoing

Explanation: In Greek mythology, the underworld is guarded by devilish looking hounds. These hounds are also known to pursue sinners to punish them.

Usage: If one dares to oppose the mafia crime boss, one would be pursued by his hounds of hell.

- **Midas touch**

Meaning: An ability to make money easily

Explanation: The phrase is named after king Midas who was known to turn anything he touched into gold.

Usage: Subodh is a rich man today because of his fine business acumen. He is known to have a Midas touch.

- **Caesar's wife should be above suspicion**

Meaning: A person in a high public position should have a very good reputation and should even be free of suspicion

Explanation: Julius Caesar's wife Pompeia was divorced by him since she was suspected of adultery. Even though Caesar knew that his wife was innocent, he still divorced her stating even the taint of suspicion should not befall his wife.

Usage: The new political party positioned themselves as a cleaner alternative to existing corrupt parties. They should guard their reputation with their lives since Caesar's wife should be above suspicion.

Idioms Related to Business and Work

- **Cash cow**

Meaning: A business venture which gives steady returns and good profits

Usage: 50% of our revenue is made of the sales of our renowned jalebi. It is safe to say that the sweetmeat is our primary cash cow.

- **Golden handshake**

Meaning: A payment given to someone who leaves or loses a job

Usage: Hamid was given the golden handshake when he was laid off last year.



- **Grease someone's palms**

Meaning: To offer a bribe

Usage: Whose palms do I have to grease to speed things up?

- **Hold the fort**

Meaning: To take care of a place in the absence of the person who is usually in charge

Usage: When the owner Mrs Sousa is on a business trip, her assistant Mr Cardoza holds the fort.

- **Give a blank cheque**

Meaning: To give someone complete freedom to act in the way they deem fit

Usage: Mr Dutta gave Rajnish a blank cheque for the administrative work in the organisation.

- **Back to the salt mines**

Meaning: To return to work

Usage: After the short vacations, it is back to the salt mines again!

- **Hold all the aces**

Meaning: To have all the advantages

Usage: Manish's rivals are jealous because he holds all the aces in the company.

- **Ace up your sleeve**

Meaning: To have advantages which others have no knowledge of

Usage: Christopher has an ace up his sleeve; he knows how to floor the guests with his signature dessert.

- **Too many chiefs and not enough Indians**

Meaning: Too many people who give orders and not enough people who follow orders

Usage: The work will not be completed if everyone wants to be the boss. There are too many chiefs and not enough Indians.

Idioms Related to Studies

- **By heart**

Meaning: To know something from memory

Usage: After repeating it around a hundred times, I now know the chemical formula **by heart**.

- **Copycat**

Meaning: Someone who has a habit of copying from others

Usage: I am seated beside that copycat Sakshi for the exams.

- **Teacher's pet**

Meaning: A student who enjoys privileges on account of being the favourite of the teacher

Usage: Veena got the best topic for the assignment; could she be the teacher's pet?

- **Thinking cap on**

Meaning: To think hard or to try to find a solution to a difficult problem

Usage: Let us all put on our thinking caps and figure out how to organise the class picnic.



- **Bookworm**

Meaning: Someone who spends most time in reading

Usage: You rarely see Radhika without a book. She is the biggest bookworm I have ever known.

- **A for effort**

Meaning: Acknowledging someone for his or her efforts even if it was not successful

Usage: Although he didn't pass, I have to give Ganesh an A for effort.

- **Back to basics**

Meaning: Learn the basic concepts again

Usage: I have forgotten all the formulas. Looks like I have to go back to basics.

- **Cover a lot of ground**

Meaning: To accomplish a great deal within a short span of time

Usage: Although she was allotted only a week, our substitute teacher covered a lot of ground in History.

- **Show of hands**

Meaning: To put up one's hands for the purpose of votes or survey

Usage: Through a show of hands, how many of you would want Gauri as the class representative?

- **School of hard knocks**

Meaning: Learning through life's negative experiences

Usage: Whatever Bill has learnt in life is through the school of hard knocks.

- **An old head on young shoulders**

Meaning: Someone who is wise for his or her age

Usage: The precocious young child speaks with wisdom which is rare for a child of her age. She is truly an old head on a young body.

- **Learn the ropes**

Meaning: To understand the tricks and workings of a job

Usage: In barely a year, Vinayak has learnt the ropes in the industry.

- **Schoolboy error**

Meaning: A silly mistake

Usage: How can an inveterate lawyer commit such a schoolboy error?