



How to Use and Understand Idioms

What is an idiom?

An idiom is a phrase that has a different meaning than the original definitions of the words contained within the phrase. With this said, you cannot use the standard definition of the words to understand the phrase's overall meaning.

Ex: "Costs an arm and a leg" doesn't actually mean that an item costs a literal arm and a leg, but rather means that the item simply costs a lot!

When are idioms used?

Idioms are used mainly as a means of creativity throughout conversation. If an English speaker wanted to add a little more excitement to a conversation, they would "spice it up". The speaker isn't actually adding spices to the conversation, but instead adding a greater variety.

Idioms are like a jigsaw puzzle, one of the reasons they are challenging for English language learners. Someone would have to look at the pieces of the phrase and the context in which the phrase was used, in order to determine its meaning.

Prepositions and Idioms:

- A preposition can often indicate direction throughout a phrase. It's important to keep prepositions in mind when trying to determine an idiom's meaning.
- Examples of prepositions include "into", "on", "above", "off", "at", "for", "to", "across", "around", "after", "below", "before", "by", "along", "among".
- Here is an example of an idiom containing a preposition: "To keep an eye on something". An idiom might lose its meaning if the preposition is changed or absent. In this case, "on" is the preposition, and the speaker isn't actually keeping their eyeball on something, but rather they are watching something carefully.

Here are some examples of common idioms:

Idiom	Meaning
Break a leg	Good luck! (usually told to performers)
Bite the bullet	Decide to do something difficult or challenging, perhaps something unpleasant or uncomfortable for one to perform.
By the skin of your teeth	Barley or narrowly accomplished something.
Beat around the bush	Talking around a certain topic, not bringing

	up or talking about the main points.
Piece of cake	Something that was very easy.
Hit the sack	Go to sleep/bed.
Hold your horses	To wait or hold on before continuing.
Cut somebody some slack Cut me some slack!	To make something easier for someone because of certain situations at the time. To go easier on someone.
Bite off more than you can chew	Tried to accomplish more things than you could.
Hang in there	Remain persistent in tough or challenging situations.
A bad apple	Someone troublesome, a bad influence to others, overall not a very good person.
Give a green light	To tell someone it's okay to continue with something.
Hold one's ground Stand your ground	Maintain your stance, beliefs, opinions, ideals. Keep true to what you believe in over outside influences.
Once in a blue moon	Something that doesn't happen very often.
Scratch the surface	To barely work on something. Ex: Someone started researching articles for an assignment, but hasn't started writing anything yet.
Do me a favor	To help someone out with a given task. A generous act.
Break someone's heart	To make someone sad.
Black and white	Two things that are complete opposites.
Early bird	Someone who tends to wake up early.

Your Turn!

Fill in the blanks with some of the example idioms from the chart above. Feel free to look anything up for further information!

1. Kevin is such an _____! I can't imagine waking up at 5am everyday!
2. Wow that test was a _____! I barely studied and got an A!
3. Sarah had to _____ when she volunteered to present first in front of her class.
4. “_____”, Lisa told Sam! You are doing great, don't give up, keep up the good work!
5. I can't believe Jack broke up with Kelly the other day, he totally _____!

Works Consulted:

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