

Writing & Language Support

Idioms, Metaphors & Proverbs

What is an Idiom?

An **idiom** is a group of words that has a special meaning, which is different from the meanings of all or some of the individual words. Idioms are typically used in a fixed and definite way.

- **Example:** Ryan is out to lunch ≠ Ryan has gone out to lunch

To say someone is talking or behaving strangely, we would say that he or she is out to lunch - this is an idiom that indicates that this person's mind is somewhere else. But saying they have **gone out to lunch** would be incorrect - this is not an idiom and simply tells us that the person has literally gone to eat lunch.

Although many multilingual speakers think that using idioms will help their spoken English sound more "natural", idioms are often used incorrectly, and an overuse can have the opposite effect and make one's spoken English sound less natural. It is important to have an understanding of what idioms mean and how and when they are used, but use idioms with caution when speaking.

For a list of idioms, visit: <http://www.eslcafe.com/idioms/id-list.html>

What is a Metaphor?

A **metaphor** is a way of describing something, by referring to it as something different.

- **Example:** Jacky is a cold person ≠ Jacky is feeling cold

When someone is being unfriendly, insensitive, or rude towards you, you may describe them as being **cold** - this does not mean that they are feeling cold physically.

Identifying Idioms

Pairs of Words: Many idioms are a pair of words, which are separated by the word **and**.

NOTE: It is important to remember that the order of these two words cannot be changed. Changing the words in an idiom, (by adding, removing or rearranging words) often changes the meaning of it.

- **Example:** Our new computers are already **up-and-running**.

The idiom **up-and-running** means to be operational (a technological process), to be ready to use.

Similes: A **simile** is an adjective phrase that uses **as** or **like**. Some similes have become idiomatic.

- **Example:** That crossword puzzle was **as easy as pie**.

The idiom **as easy as pie** means that something is very easy to do.

Sayings: Some idioms come from common sayings. Often, only part of a saying is used. This is because the listener is usually able to anticipate what is coming next, without having to hear the entire saying.

- **Example:** Don't count your chickens (before they've hatched).

The complete idiom **don't count your chickens before they've hatched** means that you should not assume that all outcomes will be good, i.e. a lot can happen between now and then – just because you have 10 eggs, does not mean you'll have 10 chickens. Because many people are familiar with this idiom, it is usually not necessary to say: *before they've hatched*.

Metaphorical Actions (that represent a feeling or type of behaviour). Some idioms describe an imaginary action, which represents a specific feeling or type of behaviour.

- **Example:** It **broke her heart** to see him lose the race.

The idiom **to break someone's heart** means to make someone feel very sad or disappointed – this is figurative and not literal, i.e. her heart would not really *break*.

Variable Idioms: Normally, idioms are used in a very fixed and limited way. However, English speakers often play with idioms by making up their own versions of them.

- **Example:** Sometimes, my little brother **drives me bananas**.

There are many ways of saying that something or someone annoys you. Notice that all these idioms start with the word **drive**:

- drives me *crazy*
- drives me *nuts*
- drives me *mad*
- drives me *up the wall*
- drives me *bananas*

Idioms vs. Proverbs

Idioms: common phrases used in different cultures. New meanings are given to existing words individually, or as a whole. For example:

- *Back to the drawing boards* = to start all over again NOT returning to the place you draw

Proverbs: Statements with a message or moral, often based on common sense or experience. The meaning is cross-cultural and can be understood across languages – often different symbols are used by different cultures, but the message remains the same. For example:

- *Money doesn't grow on trees* = Money does not come easy
- *Practice makes perfect* = the more you do something, the better you become
- *Don't judge a book by its cover* = do not make assumptions based on external factors
- *A stitch in time saves nine* = do not delay doing something or it will become a bigger task