Idioms

vol 1

EC FUNDAMENTALS

An illustrated guide for English Learners

PUT YOUR HEART INTO IT
WHAT ARE IDIOMS?

Idioms are words, phrases, or expressions which are often grammatically ‘strange’ and are not meant to be understood literally. Idioms are a very important part of any language, so learning a few of the most common ones is useful in two main ways.

1. The more idioms you know how to use correctly, the more ‘natural’ your speech will sound.
2. Idioms can teach us a lot about the culture or community who speak that language.

CONTENTS

- Like lightning  4
- Put your heart into it  4
- My lips are sealed  5
- Don’t stand in my way  5
- Rub it in  6
- Long face  6
- Float my boat  7
- Sweeping the nation  7
- Take a shot  8
- Get a grip  8
- On the house  9
- What’s the catch?  9
- Wires crossed  10
- Rub me the wrong way  10
- On the way out  11
- A stone’s throw away  11
- Hole in one  12
There are hundreds of idioms in the English language.
Let’s take a look at illustrated examples of some of the most useful ones!

**LIKE LIGHTNING**

What are the boys in this cartoon trying to say? Well, to do something ‘like lightning’ means ‘to do it very quickly’ – that’s the idiom here.

The boy rides his bicycle very fast, but he is not very good at it because he is ‘always hitting trees’ (that’s why he’s hurt). The boy wearing glasses is joking, because it is also quite common for lightning flashes to hit trees! Let’s look at a couple more examples to make sure we’ve understood this idiom:

* e.g. As soon as the race began, the cars were off like lightning.
* e.g. Muhammad Ali was a fantastic professional boxer. He moved like lightning!

**PUT YOUR HEART INTO IT**

If you say you ‘put your heart into’ something, it means that you’ve put a lot of work or effort into it.

* e.g. He’s the kind of person who puts his heart into his job.
* e.g. She wanted her company to be a success and really put her heart into it. She worked hard every day.

To ‘put your heart and soul into (something)’ is also used and has the same meaning.

* e.g. The author put his heart and soul into the writing of this book.

1 ‘Really’ is used here to add emphasis.

**MY LIPS ARE SEALED**

When you promise to keep something a secret you can say ‘my lips are sealed’. It’s something you say to let someone know that they can trust you and that you will not tell anyone else what they have just told you.

* e.g. Don’t worry, Joseph. I won’t tell anyone what you told me. My lips are sealed.

In the cartoon above, the man’s lips are LITERALLY sealed – they are stuck because he accidentally ate some glue!

* Another common way of telling someone that they can trust you is to say ‘your secret is safe with me.’

**DON’T STAND IN MY WAY**

If something is ‘in the way’, then it is stopping you from getting to where you want to go. For example:

* e.g. We had to stop the car because a cow was in the way! (I couldn’t continue driving because the cow was in the middle of the road)

We use the idiom ‘stand in the way’ when we want to talk about something or someone that tries to stop or prevent something from happening. Let’s look at some examples to make this clearer:

* e.g. You know I won’t stand in your way if you want to apply for a job abroad. (If you want to work in another country, I will not stop you)
* e.g. I’d never stand in the way of her plans. (I would never stop her from doing what she wants to do)
* e.g. She plans to become a doctor and no one had better stand in her way. (She wants to become a doctor and nothing will stop her)
**RUB IT IN**

There are two ways of using this idiom: we can say ‘rub it in’ or ‘rub it in (someone’s) face’. If someone ‘rubs it in’, they continue talking about something or doing something that makes you upset or embarrassed.

*e.g.* We all know she made a mistake, but you don’t have to rub it in.

*e.g.* I wanted to rub it in their faces, so I said, “I’ll be thinking of you working while I’m on vacation.”

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**FLOAT MY BOAT**

If something ‘does not float your boat’, you do not really enjoy it or want it; it’s not well-suited to you or your tastes.

When something ‘floats your boat’, you like it.

*e.g.* The idea of playing football on a cold winter morning doesn’t float my boat. (I don’t like the idea of playing football when it is cold)

*e.g.* Reading books doesn’t really float my boat. (I don’t like reading so much)

*e.g.* What kind of music floats your boat? (What kind of music do you enjoy?)

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**LONG FACE**

Here’s a popular, old joke that everyone in the English-speaking world knows:

A horse walks into a bar. The bartender asks, “Why the long face?”

*Why the long face?* is an idiomatic expression meaning ‘why do you look sad?’

As you know, a horse, compared to a human, really does have a long face! We can use ‘long face’ to describe someone’s physical appearance.

*e.g.* “I have a long face but my brother’s is quite round, but as an idiom long face means to look unhappy or sad:

*e.g.* “Why the long face, Chiharu?” “I failed my exam!”

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**SWEEPING THE NATION**

In the cartoon we can see a woman using her broom to sweep the large map he is standing on. Here, she’s literally sweeping the country on the map, but what does this phrase mean as an idiom?

Well, when something is ‘sweeping the nation’ it is becoming very popular everywhere.

*e.g.* There’s a new style of music that is sweeping the nation. (Everyone in the country seems to be listening to this music)

*e.g.* iPhones swept the nation from the moment they were released in 2007. (When iPhones were released, they immediately became extremely popular)
TAKE A SHOT

‘To take a shot’ is an informal way of saying ‘to try to do something’; ‘to attempt to do something without knowing if you will succeed.’

e.g. I don’t know the answer to your question, but I’ll take a shot anyway. (I’ll try to guess the answer)
e.g. I haven’t played tennis before but I’m going to take a shot this weekend. (I’m going to try to play tennis, but I don’t know how)

*‘To take a shot’ can also mean (literally) to use a gun to try and shoot at something.

GET A GRIP

‘To get a grip’ is an idiomatic way of saying ‘to understand how to deal with something’ or ‘to control your emotions.’

e.g. This book really helped me get a grip on politics. (This book helped me to understand politics.)
e.g. Angie – get a grip! You are behaving like a child and need to calm down. (Angie, please control yourself and calm down!)

ON THE HOUSE

If food or drink is ‘on the house’ in a bar or restaurant, it is given to you free by the owner.

e.g. The waiter gave us a cup of coffee on the house. (The waiter gave us a free coffee.)
e.g. It was my birthday, so the waiter said my ice-cream was on the house. (It was my birthday, so the restaurant gave me my ice-cream for free.)

WHAT’S THE CATCH?

‘What’s the catch?’ is not an idiom about fishing! In this sense, ‘catch’ is used as a noun, not a verb.

We use it when something sounds good, but we are worried or suspicious about any hidden problems. We are asking ‘what are the drawbacks? What are the negative points?’ So when something is too good to be true, we say ‘what’s the catch?’

e.g. This job offer sounds too good to be true. What’s the catch? (This job sounds so amazing that I don’t believe it’s true. There must be something ‘bad’ about it)
e.g. The restaurant is offering free lunch, but what’s the catch? (This offer sounds too good to be possible. What’s the negative side of this?)
WIRES CROSSED

When people 'get their wires crossed', they have a different understanding of the same situation. They get confused, mixed up or make a mistake; there is a misunderstanding.

e.g. I think we got our wires crossed because I thought we were going to meet at the coffee shop and Sarah thought we were meeting at the bar.

RUB ME THE WRONG WAY

When we ‘rub (someone) up the wrong way’, we annoy, anger or irritate them.

e.g. The way he talks to his employees really rubs me up the wrong way. (I don’t like the way he speaks to the people who work for him. It annoys me.)

This expression comes from the idea that if you rub a dog or cat’s fur the wrong way, you annoy it or make it angry (just like the dog in the cartoon).

ON THE WAY OUT

Two meanings of the expression on the way out:

On the way out: Near the exit.

e.g. If it’s raining, take one of the umbrellas on your way out. (Before you leave the house, take an umbrella with you)

On the way out: Going out of fashion, becoming obsolete.

e.g. Big cars are on the way out. They have no future. People now prefer smaller, more economical cars. (Big cars are becoming less popular.)

A STONE’S THROW AWAY

What’s happening here? In the cartoon above, the two geologists are neighbours. The two scientists in the cartoon live close to one another, so they are a stone’s throw apart or a stone’s throw away from one another. Let’s look at another two examples using this idiom:

e.g. This hotel is perfect – it’s just a stone’s throw away from the train station! (The hotel is just a few minutes away from the train station)

e.g. My parents and my grandparents live a stone’s throw apart, so it’s easy for them to visit. (My parents live very close to my grandparents.)
HOLE IN ONE

This joke is an example of a play on words - meaning that a phrase or word can be used for more than one meaning to make a joke.

Hole in one - is used in golf when a golfer gets the ball into the hole with just one shot.

e.g. I was playing a round of golf with my father when I got a hole in one! (I got the golf ball into the hole in one turn!)

Hole in one - in this case the 'hole' means a hole in one pair of trousers.

e.g. I need some new socks. There's a hole in one of these. (These socks are old and there is a hole in them. I need new ones)
Exercise 1:
Fill in the gap with one word to complete the idiom in each sentence.

1. A new fashion trend from Italy is sweeping the _____________.
2. Francesca is determined to become a great politician. She won't let anyone or anything ________ in her way.
3. 75% off everything in the shop? That sounds too good to be true – what's the ____________?
4. I know you've never tried karaoke, but you should give it a ________! It's fun.
5. You have to calm down and get a ________. Panicking isn't going to help us here.
6. These drinks are on the ___________. Happy anniversary!
7. The party was very last minute, so we had to move like ____________ to organise it and book a cake.
8. I know you're going on holiday next week – don't rub it ____!
9. We were supposed to meet this morning but she thought we were meeting tomorrow. We got our wires ____________.
10. Jack finally finished writing his book! He really worked hard and put his ____________ into it.
11. I didn't enjoy that dinner last night. The waitress really ____________ me the wrong way with her attitude.
12. I don't really want to watch that film tonight. Horror films don't float my ________ at all.
13. You can trust me to keep your secret. My ________ are sealed.
14. Why such a _______ face? It's your birthday! Smile a little more.

Exercise 2:
Sentence Scramble

1. like He moved lightning
2. into it my really put heart into I
3. lips sealed are My
4. won't I in way your stand
5. not to it Try rub in
6. long face? the Why
7. doesn't Chocolate float boat my
8. sweeping This trend is the nation new
9. take I'll shot a
10. and grip a down get Calm
11. the house was cake on The
12. catch? What's the
13. they think got their crossed wires I
14. me wrong They way the rubbed
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXERCISE 1</th>
<th>EXERCISE 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. nation</td>
<td>1. He moved like lightning</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. get</td>
<td>2. I really put my heart into it</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. catch</td>
<td>3. My lips are sealed</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. shot</td>
<td>4. I won’t stand in your way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. grip</td>
<td>5. Try not to rub it in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. house</td>
<td>6. Why the long face?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. lighting</td>
<td>7. Chocolate doesn’t float my boat</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. in</td>
<td>8. This new trend is sweeping the nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. crossed</td>
<td>9. I’ll take a shot</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. heart</td>
<td>10. Calm down and get a grip/ Get a grip and calm down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. rubbed</td>
<td>11. The cake was on the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. boat</td>
<td>12. What’s the catch?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. lips</td>
<td>13. I think they got their wires crossed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. long</td>
<td>14. They rubbed me the wrong way</td>
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