

IDIOMATIC PHRASES

Section H- Idiomatic Language

(Fine Tune Your English)

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Learning Objectives

- What are Idioms/ Idiomatic expressions.
- Various Idioms and their meanings
- Story behind the origin of various idioms
- How to use these idioms in sentences.

What are Idioms?

Idiomatic expressions are groups of words with an established meaning unrelated to the meanings of the individual words.

Or

An idiom is a group of words which as a whole give a distinct meaning.

Idioms can be used to form phrases - Idiomatic phrases.

Idiomatic phrases- Meanings & Background

1. **To keep one's fingers crossed-** to wish for good luck

Eg:- Rose kept his fingers crossed when the teacher distributed the progress cards.



1. **A lion's share-** the major part.

Eg:- Diya got the lion's share of the cake.

Story behind the idiom (<https://read.gov/aesop>)



The Lion's Share

A long time ago, the Lion, the Fox, the Jackal, and the Wolf agreed to go hunting together, sharing with each other whatever they found.

One day the Wolf ran down a Stag and immediately called his comrades to divide the spoil.

Without being asked, the Lion placed himself at the head of the feast to do the carving, and, with a great show of fairness, began to count the guests.

"One," he said, counting on his claws, "that is myself the Lion. Two, that's the Wolf, three, is the Jackal, and the Fox makes four."

He then very carefully divided the Stag into four equal parts.

"I am King Lion," he said, when he had finished, "so of course I get the first part. This next part falls to me because I am the strongest; and this is mine because I am the bravest."

He now began to glare at the others very savagely. "If any of you have any claim to the part that is left," he growled, stretching his claws meaningly, "now is the time to speak up."

Might makes right.

3. Naked Truth- the complete truth.

Eg: The police asked the culprit to tell the naked truth.

Story behind the idiom:

This expression supposedly alludes to a fable in which Truth and Falsehood went bathing, Falsehood then dressed in Truth's clothes, and Truth, refusing to take another's clothes, went naked.

(Source: dictionary.com)

4. To get the sack- to be dismissed from a job

Eg:- George got the sack yesterday.

Story behind the idiom:

The probable derivation of this phrase is an allusion to tradesmen, who owned their own tools and took them with them in a bag or sack when they were dismissed from employment.

It has been known in France since the 17th century, as 'On luy a donné son sac'.

(Source: phrases.org.uk)



5. To kick the bucket- to die

Eg: Our old neighbour kicked the bucket yesterday.

Story behind:- The word bucket used to mean beam in 16th century England. A bucket, or beam, was used to hang animals by the feet for slaughter, and they would kick it while dying (Source: www.theidioms.com)

6. To blow hot and cold- to behave in an inconsistent manner

To keep changing one's attitude towards something, sometimes being very enthusiastic and at other times expressing no interest at all.

Eg: He has been blowing hot and cold about their family tour

Story behind the idiom- (<https://read.gov/aesop/029.html>)



The Man & the Satyr- A long time ago a Man met a Satyr in the forest and succeeded in making friends with him. The two soon became the best of comrades, living together in the Man's hut. But one cold winter evening, as they were walking homeward, the Satyr saw the Man blow on his fingers.

"Why do you do that?" asked the Satyr.

"To warm my hands," the Man replied.

When they reached home the Man prepared two bowls of porridge. These he placed steaming hot on the table, and the comrades sat down very cheerfully to enjoy the meal. But much to the Satyr's surprise, the Man began to blow into his bowl of porridge.

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"To cool my porridge," replied the Man.

The Satyr sprang hurriedly to his feet and made for the door.

"Goodbye," he said, "I've seen enough. A fellow that blows hot and cold in the same breath cannot be friends with me!"

- **7. To have an axe to grind-** have a private or selfish reason for doing something; have an ulterior motive (Source: www.theidioms.com)

The phrase is used with the meaning “having ulterior motive” in America and “having a dispute to take or point of view to express” in Britain. Both the versions however have a sense of having an agenda in common. (Source: www.theidioms.com)

Eg: Whenever John comes for a visit, he has an axe to grind.

Story behind the idiom

(<https://democraticthinker.wordpress.com/2012/11/27/weekly-story-an-axe-to-grind/>)

- Who'll Turn the Grindstone?

Essay from the Desk of Poor Robert the Scribe.

WHEN I was a little boy, Messrs. Printers, I remember one cold winter's morning, I was accosted by a smiling man with an ax on his shoulder,—

“My pretty boy,” said he, “has your father a grindstone?”

“Yes, sir,” said I. “You are a fine little fellow,” said he,

“will you let me grind my ax on it?” Pleased with his compliment

of “fine little fellow”—“O, yes, sir,”—I answered, “it is down in the shop.” “And

will you my man,” said he, patting me on the head, “get a little hot water?” How

could I refuse? I ran and soon brought a kettle full. “How old are you, and what's

your name,” continued he without waiting for a reply. “I am sure you are one of the

finest lads that I have ever seen, will you just turn a few minutes for me?”



Tickled with the flattery like a little fool I went to work, and bitterly did I rue the day. It was a new ax—and I toiled and tugged, till I was almost tired to death. The school bell rung, and I could not get away,—my hands were blistered, and it was not half ground. At length, however, the ax was sharpened, and the man turned to me, with “Now, you little rascal, you’ve played the truant,—scud to school, or you’ll rue it.” Alas, thought I, it was hard enough to turn grindstone this cold day, but now to be called “little rascal” was too much. It sunk deep in my mind, and often have I thought of it since. When I see a Merchant, over polite to his customers, begging them to taste a little brandy, and throwing half his goods on the counter—thinks I, that man has an ax to grind.

When I have seen a man of doubtful character, patting a girl on the cheek, praising her sparkling eye and ruby lip, and giving her a sly squeeze,—Beware my girl, tho’t I, or you will find to your sorrow, that you have been turning a grindstone for a villain.

When I see a man flattering the people, making great professions of attachment to liberty, who is in private life a tyrant, Methinks, look out good people, that fellow would set you to turning grindstones.

When I see a man hoisted in office by party spirit—without a single qualification to render him either respectable or useful—Alas! methinks, deluded people, you are doomed for a season to turn the grindstone for a booby.

—Charles Miner (1810).

- **8. A cock and bull story-** a story that is obviously not true, especially one given as an excuse. (Source- dictionary.cambridge.org)

Eg: Remya told a cock and bull story when she came late.

- **9. Hobson's choice-** an obviously free choice that actually offers no other alternative; no real choice at all. (Source: www.theidioms.com)

Eg: They must move out of their rental house. It's Hobson's choice.

Story behind the idiom- (<https://historicengland.org.uk/>)

The famous phrase 'Hobson's choice' can be traced back to a Cambridge carrier who operated a livery stable delivering mail and providing transport to and from London in the early 17th century. Thomas Hobson, who was born in 1545, recognized that his best horses were in most demand and that they were also the most overworked. He therefore devised a strict rotation system, only allowing customers to rent the next horse in line. This 'take that one or none' ultimatum ensured Hobson's reputation as an astute businessman and city character.



- **10. Pandora's box-** something that creates a lot of new problems that you did not expect.

(Source- dictionary.cambridge.org)

Eg: The minister's reforms opened a Pandora's box of economic problems.



Story behind the idiom: The god Prometheus stole fire from heaven to give to the human race, which originally consisted only of men. To punish humanity, the other gods created the first woman, the beautiful Pandora. As a gift, Zeus gave her a box, which she was told never to open. However, as soon as he was out of sight she took off the lid, and out swarmed all the troubles of the world, never to be recaptured. Only Hope was left in the box, stuck under the lid. Anything that looks ordinary but may produce unpredictable harmful results can thus be called a Pandora's box.

(Source- <https://www.merriam-webster.com>)

- **11. Gordian Knot-** an intricate problem; a problem insoluble in its own terms.

(Source-<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>)

Eg: The teacher asked the students to cut the gordian knot by solving the equation.

Story behind the idiom-

(<https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/Gordian%20knot>)

According to Greek mythology, when the peasant Gordius became king of Gordium in Phrygia, he dedicated his wagon to Jupiter and fastened its yoke to a beam with a very complex knot. Centuries later, when Alexander the Great arrived on the scene, he was told that he couldn't conquer and rule Asia unless he proved himself worthy by untying the knot. Alexander quickly solved his problem - and gained a new kingdom – by slicing the knot in half with his sword.



- **12. Sop to Cerberus-** a bribe; something offered to appease someone.

Eg: These days you have to give a sop to Cerberus in every office for getting your work done.

Story behind-

In Greek mythology, Cerberus was the three-headed watchdog which guarded the entrance of Hades. In the *Aeneid* Virgil describes how the Sibyl guiding Aeneas to the underworld threw a drugged cake to Cerberus, thus enabling the hero to pass the monster in safety.

According to Greek mythology, a slice of cake is kept in the hands of the dead to help them pacify Cerberus on their way to the Hades.

(Source- <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com>)



- **13. Between the devil and the deep sea-** to have two choices that are both equally unpleasant or not convenient. (Source- <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>)

Eg: When Rahul was encountered by his principal and his class teacher, he felt that he was between the devil and the deep sea.

- **14. Ugly duckling-** a person who turns out to be beautiful or talented against all expectations.

Eg: To his friend's surprise, Tony turned out to be a ugly duckling.

Story behind-

The Ugly Duckling is a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in which the 'ugly duckling', mocked and jeered at by his peers, eventually develops into a beautiful swan, hence the idiom derived- an ugly duckling. (Source: www.theidioms.com)



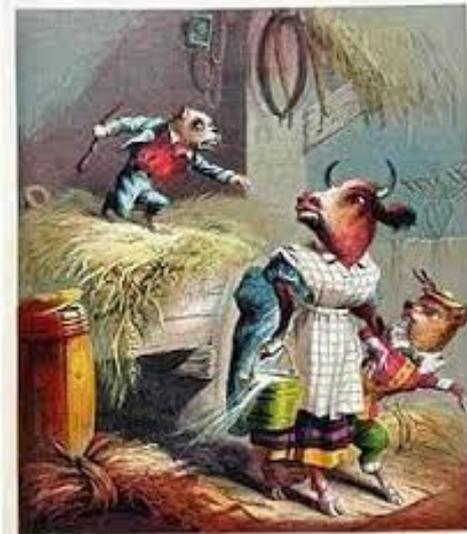
- **15. Dog in the manger-** a person who selfishly withholds from others something useless to himself. (Source-<https://www.merriam-webster.com>)

Eg: Kids often behave like dog in the manger when they have to share their toys.

Story behind the idiom- A Dog asleep in a manger filled with hay, was awakened by the Cattle, which came in tired and hungry from working in the field. But the Dog would not let them get near the manger, and snarled and snapped as if it were filled with the best of meat and bones, all for himself. The Cattle looked at the Dog in disgust.

"How selfish he is!" said one. "He cannot eat the hay and yet he will not let us eat it who are so hungry for it! "Now the farmer came in. When he saw how the Dog was acting, he seized a stick and drove him out of the stable with many a blow for his selfish behavior.

Do not grudge others what you cannot enjoy yourself.



- **16. Sword of Damocles-** in a situation in which something very bad could happen to any time.

Eg:- The fear about the collapse of the Mullaperiyar dam is hanging like a sword of Damocles.

Story behind the idiom- The expression comes to us from the writings of the Roman politician, orator, and philosopher Cicero (106-43 BC). Damocles was the name of a sycophant (one of the several yes-men) in the court of Dionysius, a 4th century BC tyrant. Dionysius ruled Syracuse, a city in Magna Graecia, the Greek area of southern Italy. To his subjects, Dionysius appeared to be very rich and comfortable, with all the luxuries money could buy, tasteful clothing and jewelry, and access to delectable food in lavish feasts. Damocles was prone to compliment the king on his army, his resources, the majesty of his rule, the abundance of his storehouses, and the greatness of his royal palace: surely, said Damocles to the king, there had never been a happier man. Dionysius turned to him and asked Damocles if he would like to try living Dionysius's life. Damocles readily agreed.

Dionysius had Damocles seated on a golden couch, in a room decorated with beautiful woven tapestries embroidered with magnificent designs and furnished with sideboards chased in gold and silver. He arranged for a feast for him, to be served by waiters hand-picked for their beauty. There were all kinds of exquisite food and ointments, and even incense was burned.

Then Dionysius had a glittering sword hung from the ceiling by a single horsehair, directly over Damocles' head. Damocles lost his appetite for the rich life and begged Dionysius to let him go back to his poor life, for, he said, he no longer wanted to be happy.

(source-<https://www.thoughtco.com>)



- **17. Apple of discord-** cause of dispute, misunderstanding, fight.

(source-www.theidioms.com)

Eg:- The best assignment award has been an apple of discord among the three students.

Story behind the idiom-

It is a reference to the Golden Apple of Discord in the story The Judgement of Paris which, according to Greek mythology, was what the goddess Eris tossed in the midst of the feast of the gods at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis as a prize of beauty, thus sparking a vanity-fueled dispute among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite that eventually led to the Trojan War. (source- wikipedia.org)



- **18. Sour grapes-** an attitude in which someone adopts a negative attitude to something because they cannot have it themselves.

Eg:- Government officials dismissed many of the complaints as sour grapes.

(source- <https://languages.oup.com>)

Story behind the idiom-

The Fox & the Grapes

A Fox one day spied a beautiful bunch of ripe grapes hanging from a vine trained along the branches of a tree. The grapes seemed ready to burst with juice, and the Fox's mouth watered as he gazed longingly at them.

The bunch hung from a high branch, and the Fox had to jump for it. The first time he jumped he missed it by a long way. So he walked off a short distance and took a running leap at it, only to fall short once more. Again and again he tried, but in vain.

Now he sat down and looked at the grapes in disgust.

"What a fool I am," he said. "Here I am wearing myself out to get a bunch of sour grapes that are not worth gaping for."

And off he walked very, very scornfully.

Moral- There are many who pretend to despise and belittle that which is beyond their reach.

(Source- <https://read.gov/aesop>)



- **19. To clear the Augean stable-** a condition or place marked by great accumulation of filth or corruption (source-www.merriam.webster.com)

Eg:- Every government promises to clear the Augean stable, but they never do.

Story behind the idiom-

The quest to cleanse the Augean Stables was one of the Twelve Labours of Heracles in Greek mythology appointed to the hero by King Eurystheus after the capture of the Erymanthian Boar. The Augean Stables were so named for they belonged to Augeas, the king of Elis. The wealth and prestige of King Augeas was represented by the number of cattle he had; for it was said that Augeas owned in excess of 3000 cattle, possibly divine cattle, if they had been given to Augeas by Helios.

Each night for 30 years these 3000 cattle had been housed in an enormous cattle shed, referred to as “stables”, but for 30 years these stables had not been cleared out of the dung that had been deposited in them. With the job of cleaning the stables having been put off 30 years ago, it was now deemed an impossible job to clean them.

Thus it was that the cleaning of the Augean Stables in one day was given to Heracles by King Eurystheus as the hero's Fifth Labour. This labour was not designed to kill Heracles, unlike the preceding Labours, but rather to humiliate the hero, both in the action of cleaning dung, but also humiliating when Heracles would fail at the task.

So Heracles came to Elis and the royal court of Augeas, but with no wish to humiliate himself, Heracles told Augeas that he would clean the Augean Stables in one day if the king of Elis would give him a tenth of the cattle. Unaware that Heracles had been tasked by Eurystheus to complete the task, which would have negated the need to pay the hero, and also incredulous that the task could be done, Augeas agreed to Heracles' terms.

Heracles thus set out for the Augean Stables in the company of Phyleus, the son of Augeas.

Again, Heracles had no wish to humiliate himself by carrying the dung out of the stables, so instead, Heracles knocked a hole into the side of the stables, and then set about diverting two local rivers, the Alpheus and Peneus, so that they would flow through this hole. When completed, the water of these two rivers flowed through the Augean Stables, carrying all of the accumulated dung with it.

(source-<https://www.greeklegendsandmyths.com/augean-stables.html>)



- **20. Many a slip between the cup and the lip-** a plan may easily go wrong before it is completed, and you can never be sure of what will happen

(source- <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/there-is-many-a-slip-twixt-cup-and-lip>)

Eg:- The new bridge will be finished by December, but there can be many a slip between the cup and the lip.

Story behind-

One possible origin for the expression is said to be a comment by a seer who told Ancaeus (who, according to Greek mythology, set out with Jason to find the Golden Fleece) that he would never taste wine from his newly planted vineyard. When Ancaeus returned from the quest he filled a cup of wine and reproached the seer for the false prophecy, to which the seer responded with the proverb. At that moment, an alarm went out that a wild boar was in the vineyard. Ancaeus rushed out, leaving his drink untouched, and was summarily killed by the boar.

Source-(https://www.bookbrowse.com/expressions/detail/index.cfm/expression_number/601/there-is-many-a-slip-between-cup-and-lip)

- **21. The die is cast-** the decision has been already taken.
Eg:- Regarding the migrants, the die has been cast by the European countries.
- **22. One's number is up-** one is in serious trouble.
Eg: Riya has bunked the class again. Her number is up.
- **23. To make both ends meet-** to have just enough money.
Eg: Poor John is struggling to make both ends meet.
- **24. In the red-** to have more liabilities than assets.
Eg:- Akash found himself in the red after the lockdown.
- **25. Swan song-** a farewell appearance or final act or pronouncement.
Eg:- The Tempest is said to be the swan song of William Shakespeare.
- **26. To go off at a tangent-** to move from one line of thought to another; to start talking about something that is only slightly or indirectly related to the original subject. (source-
www.merriamwebster.com)
Eg:- Diya went off on a tangent about her visit to the zoo.

- **27. to give short shrift-** treated without sympathy and given little attention
(source-dictionary.cambridge.org)

Eg: My mother gave short shrift to my brother's complaints.

- **28. a shot in the arm-**something that has a sudden and positive effect on something, providing encouragement and new activity. (source-dictionary.cambridge.org)

Eg:- The best team award was a shot in the arm for the students.

- **29. Indian summer-** a period of great success late in someone's life or career, often after a period of not being successful. (source-<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com>)

Eg:- There are many artists who have experienced Indian summer in the film industry.

- **30. A shot in the dark-** a wild guess

Eg:- Evan made a shot in the dark and he won the quiz competition.

- **31. Mumbo Jumbo-** great show without any sincerity

Eg:- When Tony won the elections, Sony made a mumbo jumbo.

- **32. To give one the cold shoulder-** to distance oneself from somebody.
Eg:- My friends gave me a cold shoulder when I had chicken pox.
- **33. To be between Scylla and Charybdis-** to be caught between two equally unpleasant alternatives; Facing two equally unpleasant, dangerous, or risky alternatives, where the avoidance of one ensures encountering the harm of the other.

(Sources- <https://www.britannica.com>; <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com>)

Eg:- She found herself between Scylla and Charybdis when she saw her teachers coming from either side.

Story behind-

In classical mythology, Scylla was a female sea monster who devoured sailors when they tried to navigate the narrow channel between her and the whirlpool Charybdis.

(source- <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/>)



- **34. Achilles heel-** the weakest point in their character or nature, where it is easiest for other people to attack or criticize them; a specific weakness or vulnerability that might lead to failure.

(sources- <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/achilles-heel>;
<https://www.vocabulary.com>)

Eg:- I am trying to reduce my intake of sweets but diary milk is my achilles' heel.

Story behind-

The term 'Achilles' heel' comes from the myth of Achilles, who was said to have been dipped into the river Styx by his mother Thetis in order to make him invulnerable. His heel wasn't covered by the water and he was later killed by an arrow wound to his heel.



thank
you

