

American Idiom Guide

idiom	meaning	example
a clean slate	to start new or afresh	She wants to start her new job with a clean slate.
a piece of cake	a very easy or simple task	Speaking Chinese is a piece of cake for her.
a breeze	a very easy or simple task	Preparing the daily financial report is a breeze.
a slight hiccup	a small problem or delay	We had a slight hiccup in the rollout of the new software program.
a stretch	to exaggerate	His explanation was a stretch, but some people believe him.
ahead of the curve	to be better prepared than in general or overall	I think she is ahead of the curve and will do well compared to the
all in all	in general or overall	All in all, I had a good time last night at the party.
already on the water	to already be on the way (in	The shipment is already on the water, so the order could not be
ants in his pants	to be impatient	I think he's got ants in his pants to go home early for the dinner
artsy-fartsy	someone who is very creative	My sister is very artsy fartsy.
back out	to reverse an action or decline	I'm sorry to back out of the meeting today, but I had another
back pedal	to right a wrongful comment or	After he said her dress looked ugly, he tried to back pedal by
bark up the wrong tree	to challenge the wrong person	The driver was barking up the wrong tree, by arguing with the
be there or be square	to pressure someone to attend	Everyone will be at the party tonight, so be there or be square.
beat a dead horse	to already be a past incident	Let's not beat a dead horse by still worrying about it.
beef up	to strengthen	We need to beef up our workforce before we expand our
bent over backwards	to exceed expectations (by a lot)	He bent over backwards to help his colleagues every day this
benefit of the doubt	to think positively of someone	Let's give him the benefit of the doubt since he started the job last
between a rock & hard	a no win situation	Because of his lie, he was caught between a rock and a hard
big deal	significant subject or issue	Let's not make a big deal of it since it's already a past issue.
bigger fish to fry	to prioritize the important things	He shouldn't worry about the little details, since there are bigger
bird dog	to pursue and investigate	You need to bird dog this issue until it is resolved.
bite off...than (you) can	to over-commit; take on too	Be careful not to bite off more than you can chew with this
black and white	to be extremely clear	The vacation policy is very black and white.
blow off	to ignore or disregard	I'm sorry to blow off dinner tonight, and I will try to join next time.
blown out of proportion	to exaggerate	The issue got blown out of proportion, since nobody really cared.
bog down	to slow down or burden	The extra luggage will bog down our traveling time.
bread and butter	to be the main source of revenue	This model is our bread and butter product for the company.
bright spot	a positive occurrence or event	Drinking coffee was the first bright spot in my day.
bump on a log	to be passive; to not participate	Don't be a bump on a log during the next meeting, we need your
call it out	to bring to attention	If you discover a product problem, then call it out in the next
call off	to cancel	Can you call off the meeting?
came along for the ride	to join, but not participate	He just came along for the ride and sat quietly at the meeting.
can't make hide nor hair	to not understand	This report is really confusing and I can't make hide nor hair of it.
carry the torch	to carry on the responsibility	Since my boss is out of the office, she will carry the torch for the
catch heat	to be blamed	He'll probably catch heat from headquarters for not meeting the
cat got (your) tongue	to be silent	Why don't you say something? Does the cat got your tongue?
chit chat	non-important talk or gossip	He likes to chit chat in the break room.
come off it	stop complaining or whining	She needs to come off it and stop complaining about her job every
come out of one's shell	to actively participate (don't be	I need everyone to come out of their shell during the next
cop out	change your mind at the last	Some runners cop out before race day, because they are nervous.
cry over spilt milk	an unrecoverable	She shouldn't cry over spilt milk, since she will have more
cut loose	to relax and enjoy	Let's cut loose after work and go out for a drink.
cut (her) loose	to extend responsibility	It's time to cut her loose and give her more responsibility.
cut (him) loose	to layoff/terminate	Unfortunately, we had to cut him loose last week.
cut (her) losses	to accept failure and move on	She wanted to gamble all day, but cut her losses after one hour at
dial back	to reduce or scale back	I need to dial back my golf dates so I can spend more time with my
did (you) get it	to understand	I'm still confused, did you get it?
difficult pill to swallow	hard to believe or accept	The presentation was a difficult pill to swallow, since he wasn't
ding dong	to act dumb or silly	Whenever she is with her friends, she acts like a ding dong.
dog and pony show	a standardized presentation	The sales manager did the typical dog and pony show for the new
dose of decisiveness	leader with initiative	We need a dose of decisiveness from someone in management.
dot your 'i's & cross your	't's to be very complete and	Did you dot your "I's", & cross your "T's" before presenting the
down the road	in the future	Fluctuating oil costs eventually impact consumers down the road.
drives (me) crazy	to become frustrated	It drives me crazy when drivers talk on their cell phone while driving.

idiom

meaning

example

drop the ball
dropped off
ducks in a row
duke it out

to fail in your responsibilities
to cancel or remove
to be well prepared
to fight
the final outcome
steadfast and calm behavior

It's critical we complete the project in time, so don't drop the ball
Do you know why the appointment dropped off from my calendar
I need to get my ducks in a row before I leave for Europe.
The two drivers wanted to duke it out because of the accident.
What did you end up deciding in the meeting?

E: even keel

She can always be relied on because of her even keel attitude.

F f fall for

fall-back plan
far fetched
fend for yourself
fine tooth comb
flip flop
full fledged
fun loving

to be gullible
a second option or backup plan
unbelievable
to rely on oneself
to be extremely detailed
to be opposite
to be completely
to be enjoyable

Don't fall for that explanation, he's trying to manipulate you.
We need a fall back plan so we don't interrupt business operations.
He says he can earn \$1 million next year, but I think his idea is far
You need to fend for yourself since I will be out of the office next
Please review this contract again with a fine tooth comb before
His work schedule is flip flop from mine.

G get after

get cracking
get going
get moving
get my (your) act together
get off my (your) soap box
get through
get underway
gift of gab
go girl [boy]
go over
goes along with
going against the grain
gray area

to pursue aggressively
to start or begin immediately
to begin moving quickly
to begin taking action
to be organized
to stop lecturing or reminding
to overcome
to begin or start
to talk easily with anyone
just do it; encouragement
to review or clarify
to follow along; meek
to oppose the majority
unclear, ambiguous

I want to hire a full fledged person for this finance position.
Everybody likes her because she has a fun loving personality.
We need to get after this problem since it occurs every week.
You need to get cracking on this report, since it is due today!
We need to get going or we're going to be late!
You need to get moving on this project. It's due this Friday!
I need to get my act together since I'm falling behind in work.
I will get off my soapbox now, but I wanted to share my opinion!
If he can get through this crisis, then he will be a stronger person.
What time will the meeting get underway?
She has the gift of gab and meets people easily at parties.

**greener...other side of the hill
grow on (me)**

to seek out better opportunities
become accustomed to

You go girl! You can do it!
Please go over this consolidation report with her, before you take
He usually goes along with what his boss says.
His disruptive behavior goes against the grain of the rest of the
There is a lot of gray area in the policy since many people are still
He left the company thinking it is greener on the other side of the
I didn't like the color of the dress at first but it's beginning to grow

H:half baked

handle it
hard to stomach
hash out
hashing over
headed back
heads up
healthy clip
hemming and hawing
hit a snag
hit the nail on the head
hitting a brick wall
hold down the fort
holy mackerel [cow]
hook, line and sinker
hook up
hot button
humming away
I:in a nutshell
in good hands
in (his) sleep
in the cards
in the doghouse
in the same boat
in (your) neck of the
irons in the pot/fire

a plan that is not well thought out
to be capable
difficult to accept
to discuss until a decision is
to review or discuss fully
to return or go back
to be made aware
to maintain a consistently strong
to be undecided
to be faced with a problem
to predict accurately
to be faced with resistance
be responsible during another's absence
bewilderment or astonishment
to naively believe what you are
to connect or meet up
a sensitive or critical issue
to function or operate smoothly
an overall brief summary
to be taken well care of
to do a task extremely easily
to be destiny
to be in trouble
under the same conditions
in a specific location/area/region
agree to too many

A half baked idea will lead to problems later on.
I'm not worried, since she has a lot of experience and can handle
Hearing about the accident was hard to stomach, since he is a close
We need to hash out these problems before the next review
They were hashing over the report this morning, but should be
My family is headed back to Shanghai today and will return
Thanks for giving me a heads up on the new job posting.
Our new product sales are increasing this year at a very healthy
They are still hemming and hawing over the issue.
Jeff hit a snag when he was developing the latest product.
You hit the nail on the head when you said it would be raining to
Every time I apply for a visa I'm hitting a brick wall.
Will you hold down the fort for me next week, while I'm on
Holy mackerel [cow], I can't believe you ran home from the office!
The audience swallowed the sales pitch hook, line and sinker.
Do you want to hook up for dinner after work?
Know your audience's hot buttons before you present your
The factory was already humming away at 7:00 am this morning.
In a nutshell the trip was a success.
You will be in good hands if you stay at the Sheraton.
He can program that software in his sleep!
I don't think a job promotion is in the cards for him this year.
He was in the doghouse with his wife, since he came home late
We need to work together to finish this job because we're in the
I will be in your neck of the woods soon.
He is stressed because he has so many irons in the pot.
All the brands are jumping on the bandwagon with this new
Before we jump the gun let's listen to what they have to say.

**I jump on the band wagon
jump the gun**

to follow the majority
to take action too quickly
to guard or monitor
to maintain contact
to accomplish two goals with one activity
opposite of humble
to not receive any benefit

Can you please keep an eye on my purse, while I go to the
Let's keep in touch after you move to the United States.
You can kill two birds with one stone and send your email to
Her colleagues do not respect her, because she acts like a
The factory was left holding an empty bag when all orders were

**K keep an eye
keep in touch**

kill two birds with one
know-it-all

[I] left holding an empty bag

meaning

example

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idiom

light hearted conversation	casual and enjoyable	We had a light hearted conversation after the meeting.
lighten up	to relax or be more friendly	He needs to lighten up during his presentation.
like the back of (her) hand	to be very familiar	She knows the product details like the back of her hand.
lion's share	the majority	The U.S. generates the lion's share of the global revenues.
lock, stock & barrel	to include everything	He took everything, lock, stock and barrel, when he moved
look a gift horse in the mouth	to impolitely complain about a	Don't look a gift horse in the mouth by wondering how much it
look up to	to admire or respect (regardless of age)	I look up to her because of her character and leadership.
loop in	to include in communication	We should loop in the team members, so everyone is aware of the
loose cannon	dangerously unpredictable	He might be fired since he is such a loose cannon.
lost (him)	to not understand; confused	We lost him during the presentation and he left the meeting
m map out	to plan in detail; step by step	Please map out your agenda for next week's corporate meetings.
mom and pop store	small independently owned store	Many distributors are not big retailers, but small mom and pop
money talks	using money to influence	His philosophy is money talks, but he was accused of bribery.
move on	to continue on; to make a change	Let's move on to the next topic; She moved on to a new position in
n name is mud	a poor reputation	His name is mud, if he comes in late to work one more time.
neck and neck	to compete at an even pace	The two candidates were neck and neck in the most recent polls.
nest egg	a money fund for a specific	His retirement nest egg began to diminish when the stock market
never a dull moment	one problem after another	We had two strikes at the factory this week. It's never a dull
nibble away	to slowly erode or diminish	Smoking every day will nibble away at your health.
nip it in the bud	to eliminate the problem early	Let's try to nip it in the bud, before we take the model into
no doubt	absolutely confident (100%)	There is no doubt he will be the next president after this year's
no baggage	to leave past problems behind	She has no baggage since she was hired from the outside.
no sweat	no problem (your welcome)	A) Thanks for driving me to work this morning. B) No sweat!
not written in stone	not a formal requirement	It's not written in stone that he must tip the taxi driver.
r off the top of (your) head	to remember quickly (without research)	Do you know his telephone number, off the top of your
once and for all	the final time	She took care of the problem, once and for all, by telling to the
on the horizon	within reach	I don't think company bonuses are on the horizon for this year.
on the same page	to have common understanding	After that email, we are all on the same page now.
on the tip of (my) tongue	to almost remember	Wait just a minute, his name is on the tip of my tongue.
open door policy	to have open, informal communication	A good manager has an open door policy with subordinates.
out of pocket	personal expense money	The company will reimburse a maximum of \$50 for out of pocket
out of sight, out of mind	less likely to take part, if not final results	It is easier to quit smoking if it is out of sight, out of mind.
p pan out	to provide energy/support	How did your meeting with the customer yesterday, pan out?
pick me up	to understand (or learn) quickly	I need a pick me up each morning and is the reason I drink coffee.
picked up	to have high expectations	He picked up the new order entry system quickly.
pie in the sky	to participate in the benefit	I know it's pie in the sky, but I would like to be President someday.
piece of the action	to be spontaneous (no planning)	Most employees want a piece of the action in the stock purchase
play it by ear	to disregard or not accept	Let's just play it by ear and find a hotel after we arrive.
poo poo	to ask an important question	Management doesn't respect him and usually poo-poo his ideas.
pop the question	to suddenly appear unexpectedly	I will pop the question to my girlfriend in Hawaii and ask her to
pop up	to strongly emphasize action	I couldn't meet for lunch, since I had a meeting pop up at the last
prod (him) into action	to achieve	We need to prod him into action, since he's the only one who can
pull off	to cancel or decline participation	I will try and pull off this project by next week.
pull out	to overcome a difficult situation	I decided to pull out of the competition since I hurt my leg.
pulled off	to demand/enforce	He pulled off a surprising victory against the number one seeded
put (our) foot down	to brainstorm	We put our foot down and removed the violating supplier from our
put (your) heads together	to intentionally embarrass	Please put your heads together and come up with a new marketing
put (me) on the spot	to rain heavily	He put me on the spot when he asked why I wasn't married.
raining cats and dogs	to scold or lecture	It was raining cats and dogs so we canceled the golf appointment.
read (him) the riot act	too much bureaucracy	She read him the riot act because he was late again.
red tape	in the very near future	Obtaining a US visa can involve a lot of red tape.
right around the corner	to do immediately/first thing	I need to be prepared since the next meeting is right around the
right off the bat	to remember or be familiar with	They need to fix this problem right off the bat tomorrow morning.
ring a bell	to affect successive groups of	Her name does not ring a bell but I do remember the face.
ripple effect	to present for the first time	The economic news had a negative ripple effect on many
roll out	to give special treatment	Let's roll out the new policy on Monday to all the employees.
rolls out the red carpet	estimate to the nearest whole	That company always rolls out the red carpet for their customers.
round off	to complete or make whole	Let's round off the class size requirement to ten people.
rounded out	to be depleted in energy or enthusiasm	Her attendance rounded out the group of managers at the
run out of steam	to surprise or scare	He finished the marathon, but appeared to run out of steam
s scared	to move in; to move over	That car scared the daylight out of me since I didn't see it turn
daylights out of	to explain clearly	Please scoot in your chair for her, or scoot over so she can sit
scoot in; scoot over		I don't understand this report. Can you please shed some light on
shed some light		this?

idiom

meaning

example

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shell game	a mystery; confusing	Trying to create and predict a forecast is like a shell game.
shotgun approach	to communicate in the same way	I prefer to invite them individually, instead of the email shotgun
show (her) stuff	to demonstrate capabilities	Since her boss is traveling, it is a good chance for her to show her
slip down	a decline in performance	The supplier had a slip down in their performance this month.
slip out	to become delayed	If shipments slip out one more time, the customer will cancel all the
slot in	to insert in; queue in	Can you slot in Lela for the next class when you have a chance?
smoke out	to expose the issues	We need to smoke out these concerns at the next staff meeting.
sock away	to save money for a specific	He wants to sock away enough of money for his daughter's college
spot (me)	to borrow or share	Can you please spot me \$10.00 since I forgot my wallet?
stand up (guy)	a person of integrity	People respect him because he's a stand up guy.
start from scratch	to start at the very beginning	The calculations were incorrect, so we had to start from scratch
stay tuned	to await more information	I will have more information for everyone tomorrow, so stay tuned.
step out of the picture	no more participation or	As parents step out of the picture, young adults have to rely on
step up	to improve	The boss told her she needs to step up her performance.
stepped up to the plate	to meet or exceed expectations	He really stepped up to the plate after his promotion.
straighten out	to resolve or fix	We need to get this situation straightened out, or we will lose the
straighten up	to behave properly	The boss said he needs to straighten up his attitude.
stuck in a rut	unable to change a routine or	His life was stuck in a rut, so he quit his job and went back to
stuck up	to act snobbish	Everyone thinks she has become stuck up because of her new
stumbling along	to be challenged in unfamiliar	I've been stumbling along, because I'm not familiar with the
stunning upset	a surprising success or win	The visiting team pulled off a stunning upset over the home team.
suck down	to drink quickly until finished	She can suck down a can of beer faster than any guy in the room.
suck it up	to unwillingly accept	She should just suck it up and accept the new job assignment
sure thing	to have confidence in	Your promotion is a sure thing if keep performing well.
take a look	to review or evaluate	Let's take a look at that report this afternoon.
take a rain check	to postpone until next time	I can't go with you today, but can I take a rain check?
take a toll	to diminish/degrade	All of her personal problems began to take a toll on her work
take...to the next level	to improve significantly	She wants to take the team to the next level.
the ball is in (your) court	it is your decision this time	We gave the proposal to the team, so the ball is in their court now.
the writing on the wall	clues or hints	He should have seen the writing on the wall when he was fired.
the bottom line is	the main point	The bottom line is you must follow the new procedures.
the get go	from the beginning	You need to understand the entire process from the get go.
the realm of cool	everything that is cool	Most designers are inspired by anything related to the realm of
thick of things	center of activity	Since he was in the thick of things his story was more believable.
throw out	to consider or propose	Let her throw out his ideas during the next meeting.
ticks (me) off	makes me upset	It ticks me off when drivers are talking on their cell phones while
ticky tacky	unimportant details	Let's not worry about ticky tacky details, but focus on the main
tie up loose ends	to complete final details	I need to tie up loose ends so I can leave work early tonight.
tighten up	to improve control	I wish I could tighten up my golf skills before next week's game.
tip (him) off	to hint or signal	She tried to help him by tipping him off during the presentation
to a "T"	done perfectly	The report he did, was done to a "T".
too much on (my) plate	a full list of tasks	I'm sorry I can't help you, I already have too much on my plate.
to spiral	to stray away from the subject or	topic I don't mean to spiral but we need address this problem before
touch base	to meet and discuss	Will you please touch base with each employee about the new
trace (our) roots	to research original family background	I can trace our roots back to Korea.
tuckered out	to be exhausted	I work hard all day and am usually tuckered out in the evening.
under the gun	extreme pressure or stress	After moving to Finance, I've been under the gun with new
up and coming	rising potential	I think he is an up and coming designer with a lot of potential.
up the creek without a	to be in a very difficult situation	We will all be up the creek without a paddle if we don't solve this
up to something	to scheme or plan	He looks very suspicious. I think he's up to something.
walk in the park	simple task	Creating the report will be a walk in the park.
walk the talk	to follow your words with action	People admire her because she knows how to walk the talk.
walk (him) through	to explain step by step	Can you walk him through the new manufacturing process next
walking a thin line	to be in a precarious situation	My boss says I'm walking a thin line if I don't improve my
was over (my) head	to not understand	His explanation was over my head. Can you re-explain it to me?
water under the bridge	already history; past event	Don't worry, that issue is already water under the bridge.
well oiled	to operate efficiently or	With our well oiled ordering process, we don't expect any
what...around, comes	treat well and receive well	He should remember what goes around comes around and be nicer
whole nine yards	to do completely or entirely	When you give the presentation you need to explain the whole nine
with a grain of salt	be cautious of what you	Take her advice with a grain of salt, since she is sometimes
work out	to find a solution; to do fitness	Can you work out the issue for the client; I'm going to work out after
work up	to create or calculate	Please have the factory work up the materials cost and forward it on
work off some steam	to shed stress or weight	I need to work off some steam and go to the fitness center after work.