

# **Common Idioms in English**

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# Introduction

## What is an idiom?

Idiom is a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own. For example, to *«have bitten off more than you can chew»* is an idiom that means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you.

To put in other words, an idiom is figurative expression or phrase used to express an idea vaguely, so it doesn't relate directly to the person you're speaking to.

A good example of this would be, *«you can't have your cake and eat it too»*. This idiom is saying that in some situations in life, you can't have two good things if they contradict with each other.

Some idioms are funny or silly while others can be quite profound. People love to use and teach idioms because they make the language a lot more enjoyable.

Idioms share cultural and historical information and broadens people's understanding and manipulation of a language.

Among the various definitions of idioms are: (1) the language peculiar to a people, country, class, community or, more rarely, an individual; (2) a contraction or expression having a meaning different from the literal one or not according to the usual patterns of the language (New Webster's Dictionary, 1993).

Idioms include all the expressions we use that are unique to English, including clichés and slang. Prepositional usage is also a common part of idiomatic expressions (Princeton Review, 1998).

Idiomatic Expression; an expression whose meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of the words that make it up.

## Why idioms are important for English language learners?

The English language has more than 1,000,000 words and is one of the most flexible languages in the world. It's a living language, like those other languages we use today. Understanding the lexicon of English demands more than knowing the denotative meaning of words. It requires its speakers to have connotative word comprehension and more, an understanding of figurative language. Idioms fall into this final category.

Idioms are pervasive. They're used in formal and informal speech, conversation and writing and are part of standard speech in business, education and the media. L2 learners are expected to understand a variety of common idioms, which is advantageous for those planning to work in a world that increasingly uses English as the language of communication and commerce. Whether it is working in one's native country or in an English-speaking country, idioms are important as part of the shared knowledge among English speakers. I believe the phrase, subtleties of the language, best describes a general area into which idioms can be categorized. They transmit certain information about the speaker that might not be obvious. Students of English who effectively communicate with idioms show a certain understanding of the language. They understand and communicate on a deeper level of the language. People use the word "subtle" not as one of its definition where something is hard to grasp or difficult to define but in a more expansive way. The wider meaning consists of a definition where lexical usage shows a deeper understanding of the target language and culture.

Since vocabulary and culture are intertwined, L2 speakers can gain more vocabulary through idioms and conversely, can learn more about idioms from being exposed to the target culture. The more comprehensible input there is the more learners' listening, speaking, writing and reading skills will improve.

## Why teach idioms?

1) Students very often describe situations for which an idiom is the best way of expressing what they want to say. Giving them the idiom therefore expands their ability to communicate their meaning.

2) It's actually impossible to avoid idiomatic language altogether, and many expressions which seem natural to a native speaker have a metaphorical meaning which, once understood, clarifies the expression for learners. For example native speakers often use the expression 'fed up' to mean bored and frustrated because they have had enough of something. But how much easier is it to remember once you understand that this feeling has arisen because you have 'eaten' something until you are completely full of it?

3) Idioms abound in English for Specific Purposes, for example in Business English we often talk about 'thinking outside the box' to mean not being constrained by conventional thinking.

4) Learners don't necessarily have to use a lot of idioms but they will need to have the most common ones in their passive knowledge if they wish to maximize their understanding of the language. This is as true of written language as spoken. Newspaper headlines are a good example here.

5) Finally, idioms are an enjoyable way of using language and enjoyment helps us to learn more effectively.

I'd like to leave you with one final word about how to use idioms, which is that native speakers often just refer to them or use an abbreviated version rather than using the whole expression. Let's look again at «*The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence*». We can shorten it to «*The grass is always greener on the other side*», or even just «*The grass is always greener*». I think it's great to be able to express yourself so economically.