

CAMBRIDGE

# ENGLISH IDIOMS IN USE

60 units of vocabulary  
reference and practice

Self-study and  
classroom use

Second Edition

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**Advanced**

Felicity O'Dell  
Michael McCarthy

Experience  
Better  
Learning

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# Using this book

## Why was this book written?

It was written to help you take your knowledge of idioms to a more advanced level. The ability to use idioms accurately and appropriately is an indicator that you have a truly advanced level of English, and so this book pays attention to the productive use of idioms as well as to the comprehension of their meaning. Many of you will have already worked with *English Idioms in Use Intermediate*, and this book builds on the work done there. However, it does not matter if you have gained your knowledge of idioms in a different way. We do not assume that you have used *English Idioms in Use Intermediate*, although we do present and practise different idioms from those that were presented in the lower-level book.

## How were the idioms in this book selected?

The idioms which are presented in this book were mainly selected from those identified as significant by the CANCODE corpus of spoken English, developed at the University of Nottingham in association with Cambridge University Press, and the Cambridge International Corpus of written and spoken English (now known as the Cambridge English Corpus). The idioms selected are all also to be found in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, where you can find additional usage notes and examples. You can search this dictionary online by going to the following website:

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

## How is the book organised?

The book has 60 two-page units. The left-hand page explains the idioms that are presented in the unit. You will usually find an explanation of the meaning of the idiom, an example of it in use and, where appropriate, some comments on when and how it is used. The exercises on the right-hand page check that you have understood the information on the left-hand page and give you practice in using the material presented.

The units are organised into seven sections:

*Learning about idioms* (Units 1–8) gives important information relating to idioms in general, such as what they are and how to use them accurately.

*Types of idiom* (Units 9–13) looks at some different types of idiom, dealing with such areas as *Similes* and idioms from other languages.

*Idioms from the topic area of ...* (Units 14–24) focuses on idioms originating from different topic areas. For example, a great many idioms in English are based on sailing, a result of Britain's history as an island with a strong dependence on the sea. This section therefore opens with a unit dealing with idioms originating from the topic area of *Sailing*. Other units in this section deal with, for example, idioms based on *Parts of the body*, *Games and sport* and *Literature*. Many of us find it interesting to learn about the origins of idioms, and studying them in this way can also help to fix their meaning in your memory.

*Idioms to talk about ...* (Units 25–38) focuses on the topic areas where certain idioms are frequently used. For instance, there are units dealing with idioms used when talking about *Money*, about *Society* or about *Problems*.

*Idioms used in ...* (Units 39–41) looks at three types of writing where distinct types of idioms are used – *Journalism*, *Advertising* and *Formal writing*.

*Idioms used in conversation* (Units 42–47) presents idioms used in conversations from a functional point of view. For example, there are units dealing with *Telling stories*, *Agreeing and disagreeing* and *Emphasising*.

*Idioms using these keywords* (Units 48–60) groups idioms according to the keywords that they centre on. Unit 53, for instance, presents and practises idioms using the word *hand*, while Unit 59 focuses on idioms using the verb *fall*.

### A What are similes?

Similes are expressions which compare two things; they always include the words *as* or *like*. You can use similes to make your spoken and written English more colourful and your comparisons more powerful. For example:

My brother's **as thin as a rake**. [extremely thin]

The baby's skin is **as smooth as silk**. [extremely smooth]

Pilar is **as bright as a button**. [extremely clever]

I slept really well, so I feel **as fresh as a daisy** this morning. [extremely fresh and full of energy]

George **ran like the wind** to get the message to Paula before she left. [ran extremely fast]

I don't want to go in the car with Lottie. She **drives like a maniac**! [drives fast and badly]

My new sweater **fits like a glove**. I'm so pleased with it. [fits extremely well]

The two men were in the next room, but I could hear every word they said **as clear as crystal**. [very clearly]

Ben claimed to be **as poor as a church mouse**, but we knew he was rich. [very poor]

As Beth walked in, the house was **as silent as the grave**. [totally silent]

You should learn similes as whole phrases, because it is usually not possible to change the individual words (e.g. we do not say *as thin as a stick* or *as thin as a pole*). Where it is possible to change the individual words, the meaning of the simile often changes, for example:

I needed a drink of water. My mouth was **as dry as a bone**. [extremely dry / thirsty]

His lecture was **as dry as dust**, and everyone was bored. [extremely boring]



### B Everyday similes

The similes in these emails are often used in everyday conversation and informal writing.

Hi Jacek,

It's so obvious you like Anna! You went **as red as a beetroot** when Stefan was talking about her, so it must be true! And you **were all over her like a rash** at the party last week too. Ask her out!

Hiroshi

Hi Freya,

Have you noticed how Chiara and Rita are **as thick as thieves** lately? Rita said she needed some help and **as quick as a flash** Chiara volunteered – you know, **as keen as mustard**. And just think, they used to hate each other and were always **fighting like cat and dog** over the most stupid things. Any idea what's happened? Anyway, speak later.

Fatima

Hello Manami,

I'll be late for the restaurant tonight – having a bad day at work. I've been **working like a dog**, but the boss just came in with **a face like thunder** and said I'd made a mess of some sales figures. I've tried to argue with him, but he's **as stubborn as a mule**, and you can never convince him that he's wrong. Time to change my job! Mariusz

### Language help

Be careful how you use similes. They have strong meanings and are often used in a humorous or sarcastic way, e.g. *My teacher's explanations are **as clear as mud*** [not clear at all].

# Exercises

## 26.1 Look at A opposite. Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.

- |                                     |                          |   |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 They invited their nearest        | <input type="checkbox"/> | a father's eye three years ago!                 |
| 2 We don't live in each other's     | <input type="checkbox"/> | b the old block – he's just like his uncle Rex. |
| 3 He has deserted his own flesh     | <input type="checkbox"/> | c the nest and went to live in Australia.       |
| 4 Young Sam is the spitting         | <input type="checkbox"/> | d and dearest to the wedding.                   |
| 5 She was just a twinkle in her     | <input type="checkbox"/> | e run in the family.                            |
| 6 When he turned 18, he flew        | <input type="checkbox"/> | f pockets, but we're a happy family.            |
| 7 Harry is a real chip off          | <input type="checkbox"/> | g and blood and gone to join the army.          |
| 8 Both girls are pretty. Good looks | <input type="checkbox"/> | h image of his grandfather.                     |

## 26.2 Complete each sentence with an idiom from 26.1.

- Ana is the ..... her mother – she looks just like her.
- How could you harm your brother? He's your own ..... and .....
- She was born in 1986. In 1983, she was just a ..... in .....
- All her ..... and ..... gathered round her for a family photo on her 90th birthday.
- I'd hate the sort of family where everybody lives .....
- He's 42 and still living with his parents. Most people ..... a lot earlier.
- All of her sisters are really musical too. It must .....
- Max is as generous as his dad. He's a .....

## 26.3 Read these statements and answer the questions.

**Lidia:**

My so-called friend Lucy doesn't even give me the time of day any more.

**Connor:**

My friend Tessa has been with me through thick and thin.

**Ashley:**

I've got friends in high places, you know.

**Chelsea:**

My best friend and I go back a long way.

**Zenab:**

I've come to the conclusion that Ben is just a fair-weather friend.

- Who has known someone for many years?
- Whose friend is only there when things are going well?
- Who has a friend who won't speak to her?
- Whose friend has given support in difficult times?
- Who knows powerful and influential people?

## 26.4 Rewrite each sentence using an idiom from the opposite page.

- If the boss listens to him and respects his ideas, we should let him represent us.
- Joanna was incredibly supportive when I was going through a bad time.
- Amina has invited a former boyfriend of hers to the party on Saturday.
- My friend Ali has stood by me through good times and bad times.
- He was independent and had no responsibilities until he was 25; then he got married.
- I've known Raisa a very long time.



### 36.1 Correct the mistakes in these idioms from A opposite.

- 1 Dad almost split a blood vessel when I told him I'd driven into his car.
- 2 Lucy felt all warm and bothered after having to push her way onto the train.
- 3 Dave saw black when he heard the boy speak so rudely to Maddie.
- 4 You're in a bad temper today. What's rattled your box?
- 5 What Lily said to her mother really made my water boil.
- 6 It really gets my dog when you say such stupid things!

### 36.2 Complete the idioms. What idiom would you use if you felt ...

- 1 very nervous? 'I'm a .....?'
- 2 unhappy? 'I feel ..... today.'
- 3 apprehensive? 'I ..... about this exam.'
- 4 impatient? 'I'm ..... with that incompetent company.'
- 5 upset? 'The argument I had with my best friend has .....?'
- 6 unwilling to do something? '..... apologise to Nick.'

### 36.3 Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.

- |   |                          |               |
|---|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1 Going to the opera isn't my             | <input type="checkbox"/> | a six.        |
| 2 I wouldn't give that artist's work      | <input type="checkbox"/> | b boil.       |
| 3 On rainy days I often feel down in the  | <input type="checkbox"/> | c feeling.    |
| 4 People dropping litter makes my blood   | <input type="checkbox"/> | d bothered.   |
| 5 Oliver's rudeness made me see           | <input type="checkbox"/> | e bag.        |
| 6 Not getting the job has knocked Ben for | <input type="checkbox"/> | f house room. |
| 7 Losing his keys made Tom all hot and    | <input type="checkbox"/> | g dumps.      |
| 8 When the phone rang, I had a sinking    | <input type="checkbox"/> | h red.        |

### 36.4 Rewrite the underlined part of each sentence using the word in brackets.

- 1 Selfish behaviour makes me very angry. [BOIL]
- 2 The film's sad ending made Jess cry. [TEARS]
- 3 Cruelty to animals makes me very angry. [RED]
- 4 I am going to get angry soon with James. [PATIENCE]
- 5 My brother's laziness makes me very angry. [GOAT]
- 6 I was angry with myself for missing the train. [KICKED]
- 7 What's made Paul so annoyed? [CAGE]
- 8 I shouldn't let him make me so angry. [BOTHERED]
- 9 Long walks in the countryside are not the sort of thing that appeals to me. [BAG]
- 10 Your father will be furious if you say you're dropping out of university. [BURST]

### 36.5 Complete these sentences so that they are true for you.

- 1 ..... reduced me to tears.
- 2 I wouldn't give ..... house room.
- 3 ..... gets my goat.
- 4 I was a bundle of nerves when .....
- 5 I could have kicked myself when I .....
- 6 ..... is not my bag.
- 7 Wild horses couldn't make me .....
- 8 ..... knocked me for six.

## Unit 40

- 40.1** 1 world of, between 4 wildest dreams  
2 of its time 5 packs, punch  
3 hands down 6 the mark
- 40.2** 1 Yes, there was a world **of difference between** them.  
2 Yes, it did us **the world of good**.  
3 Yes, he certainly lives **life to the full**.  
4 Yes, it certainly packs **a punch**.  
5 Yes, it must be hard to stand out **from the crowd** these days.  
6 Yes, it's taken **years off her**. I think I might have one done myself!
- 40.3** 1 b) in chess, the players make moves  
2 a) you use a watch to tell the time  
3 c) washing powder makes clothes clean
- 40.4** 1 b  
2 c  
3 d  
4 e  
5 a

## Unit 41

- 41.1** 1 least 3 foremost 5 on  
2 on 4 by 6 analysis
- 41.2** *Possible answers:*  
1 **On no account** should we forget the history behind this conflict.  
2 **In the final analysis**, doctors must trust their own judgement.  
3 I can see both arguments, but **on balance** I am in favour of extending the school-leaving age.  
4 **First and foremost**, we must give a definition of family law before we can apply it to the case in question.  
5 **Last but not least**, let us consider the role of the media in this debate.  
6 **By and large**, the writer uses traditional poetic style.
- 41.3** 1 Liberal right-wing policies sound like **a contradiction in terms**.  
2 **In the main**, I approve of the government's approach.  
3 The reform **opens the door** to an eventual solution of the problem.  
4 Once the papers are signed, this legal process is **set in motion**.  
5 **As a matter of course**, large companies outperform smaller companies. This is only to be expected.  
6 People who fail at school often succeed in later life. Einstein is **a case in point**.  
7 The research **points the way** to a future cure for the disease.  
8 Saying that boys achieve less at school does not give **the whole picture**.  
9 Advocating equal opportunity for all **begs the question of** how this can be achieved.  
10 **On the one hand**, international law exists to protect people from the power of states. **On the other hand**, it can also restrict states from exercising their power to protect the interests of their own people.
- 41.4** 1 The new building **stands out like a sore thumb**.  
2 An interesting painting **caught my eye**.  
3 It's hard to keep up with government policy, as it seems to **chop and change** all the time.  
4 Business success often goes **hand in hand with** good working conditions.