

CAMBRIDGE

ENGLISH IDIOMS IN USE

62 units of vocabulary
reference and practice

Self-study and
classroom use

Second Edition

Intermediate

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Experience

Better

Learning

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Using this book

Why was this book written?

It was written to help you improve your knowledge of idioms in English. Idioms are fixed expressions whose meaning is not immediately obvious from looking at the individual words in the idiom. You will come across a great many idioms when you listen to and read English. So it is important that you learn about the meanings of idioms and about how they are used. You can use this book either with a teacher or for self-study.

We wanted to encourage language learners to have a balanced approach to idioms in English. Sometimes in the past, teachers used to argue that it was a waste of time for learners to study idioms as they might start using them in an inaccurate or unsuitable way. But idioms are in such widespread use that it is inappropriate to ignore them. This book focuses just on those idioms which the modern student needs to know and it aims to provide the information and practice which will help you understand and use them correctly.

How were the idioms in the book selected?

There are a great many idioms in English, but some of them sound rather old-fashioned or are not very widely used. The idioms which are worked on in this book were mainly selected from those identified as significant based on computer searches of huge language databases: 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 International Corpus). These databases show us how the idioms have actually been used by native speakers of English in conversations, newspapers, novels, and many other contexts. The idioms selected are all also to be found in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4th Edition* where additional examples and usage notes will also be found. You can search this dictionary online by going to the following website:
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

How is the book organised?

The book has 62 two-page units. The left-hand page presents the idioms that are worked on in the unit. You will usually find an explanation of the meaning of each idiom, an example of it in use and, where appropriate, any special notes about its usage. The right-hand page checks that you have understood the information on the left-hand page by giving you a series of exercises that practise the material just presented. The exercises pay particular attention to checking your understanding of the idioms and how they are used because this is more important for most learners than being able to actively use the idioms.

The units are organised in three sections:

Idioms to talk about ... which groups idioms according to the topic area that they are used to talk about. Thus, **be snowed under** [have an enormous amount of work to do] is included in Unit 25, Work.

Idioms from the topic area of ... which groups idioms according to the image they are based on. Thus, **hit the roof** [react in a very angry way] is included in Unit 42, Houses and household objects.

Idioms using these keywords which groups idioms according to keywords in them. For example, Unit 50 deals with a set of idioms based on the word **head**.

The book also has a key to all the exercises and an index which lists the 1,000 idioms we deal with and indicates the units where they can each be found.

A Trying to solve a problem

Rafael needed a bookcase. He had been **making do**¹ with planks of wood on bricks, but he wanted something nicer now. His sister, Ana, suggested buying a self-assembly bookcase where the pieces came in a flat pack for him to put together himself. Rafael knew he wasn't much good at that sort of thing, but he decided to **give it a shot/whirl**².

When he opened the pack, it all looked very confusing, but he was determined to **get to grips with**³ it.



After a couple of hours, he had something that looked a bit like a bookcase but was rather wobbly. **To be on the safe side**⁴, he asked Ana to check it for him. 'There's something not quite right about this,' she said. 'I think we'd better **get to the bottom of**⁵ it before you put your books on it.'

- ¹ managing with something that isn't as good as you would like
- ² give something a try (informal)
- ³ make an effort to understand or to deal with a problem or situation
- ⁴ to protect himself even though it might not be necessary
- ⁵ try to discover the truth about something



B Light and understanding

The recent release of fifty-year-old documents has **shed a great deal of light** on the political crises of the 1950s. Some unexpected information about the government of the day has been **brought to light** and some surprising facts about the politicians of the time have also **come to light**.

The concept of *light* is often used to represent mental illumination or understanding. The idiom **bring something to light** (usually used in the passive – see above) means to discover facts that were previously unknown. Often, though **not** always, these facts are about something bad or illegal. **Come to light** gives a similar idea of unknown facts becoming known. **Shed/Throw light on something** means to help people understand a situation.

It's been a very difficult year, but at last I feel I can see the **light at the end of the tunnel**.
[something makes you believe that a difficult and unpleasant situation is coming to an end]



C The problem's over

The Democratic Party is behaving as if victory was already **in the bag**. [certain to be achieved (informal)]

I was in despair until Chris turned up – **the answer to my prayers**. [something or someone that you have needed for a long time]

I want to **wave a magic wand** and make things better. [find an easy way to solve a problem]

I've got to **tie up a few loose ends** before I go on holiday. [deal with the last few things that need to be done before something is completed]

Once Sara explains why she acted as she did, everything will **fall into place**. [be understood or go well]

After the flood, it took us some time to **pick up the pieces**. [try to return to normal]

26.1 Put the idioms in the box into two groups: those focusing on time and those focusing on place. You can use one idiom for both.

all over the place by leaps and bounds drag your feet fast and furious
 get a move on left, right and centre on the spot step by step the word spread

26.2 Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Juan is making progress by | <input type="checkbox"/> | a a joke. |
| 2 Excitement is at | <input type="checkbox"/> | b step. |
| 3 Within minutes the fire brigade was on | <input type="checkbox"/> | c the run. |
| 4 The situation has gone beyond | <input type="checkbox"/> | d the place. |
| 5 The holiday got off to | <input type="checkbox"/> | e fever pitch. |
| 6 I looked for you all over | <input type="checkbox"/> | f the spot. |
| 7 The film is about two men on | <input type="checkbox"/> | g a flying start. |
| 8 I'll take you through it step by | <input type="checkbox"/> | h leaps and bounds. |

26.3 Choose the correct answer.

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Grandma is recovering | a) left, right and centre | b) step by step | c) all over the place |
| 2 My first day at work | a) was at fever pitch | b) kept track | c) got off to a flying start |
| 3 Why are you ... ? | a) dragging your heels | b) getting a move on | c) going beyond a joke |
| 4 When I arrived at Freya's house, preparations for the party were | a) in full swing | b) getting a move on | c) dragging their heels |
| 5 The football match was | a) fast and furious | b) on the spot | c) in leaps and bounds |

26.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Would you be pleased if your English teacher said you were making progress by leaps and bounds?
- 2 Would you be pleased if you were told that your behaviour at work had gone beyond a joke?
- 3 What would you be expected to do if you were told to get a move on?
- 4 Is it athletes who spend life on the run?
- 5 Do you drag your feet when you are ill?
- 6 What kind of films tend to be fast and furious?
- 7 Would you be pleased if a party of yours got off to a flying start?
- 8 What can you do to help yourself keep track of all your appointments and other commitments?
- 9 If things are all over the place in a room, what does the room look like?
- 10 If feelings reach fever pitch, how are people probably feeling?

Exercises

36.1 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



36.2 Match the beginning of each sentence on the left with its ending on the right.

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|
| 1 If you play your cards right, | <input type="checkbox"/> | a off their own bat. |
| 2 When the chips are down, | <input type="checkbox"/> | b would be your best bet. |
| 3 The ball is in their court, | <input type="checkbox"/> | c others will soon follow suit. |
| 4 If you sign the contract, | <input type="checkbox"/> | d we decided to go away for the weekend. |
| 5 On the spur of the moment | <input type="checkbox"/> | e so we'll have to wait and see what they do. |
| 6 The children picked me some flowers | <input type="checkbox"/> | f you learn who your real friends are. |
| 7 Going by train rather than bus or car | <input type="checkbox"/> | g you should get an invitation to her party. |

36.3 Complete each sentence with an idiom from the box.

a level playing field put his cards on the table follow suit call his bluff off his own bat
on the ball on the cards pass the buck start the ball rolling threw us a curveball

- Let's ask Pete for advice – he's usually
- The government always tries to when there are economic problems, saying the previous regime is to blame.
- I'd like you each to tell us why you have decided to do a creative writing course; Marie, would you, please?
- Applicants all have to agree to the same conditions for the interview in order to ensure
- No one asked him to help – he did it
- If you keep your things tidy, the others may
- It is still that I'll get a contract for the job.
- He's been very frank and has; now we'll have to do the same.
- He claims he can speak fluent Japanese; let's and invite him to dinner with our Japanese guests.
- The manager when he told us that our budget would be cut next year.

Over to you

Can you find any idioms related to your favourite sport or game? You might be able to find some by looking up keywords relating to that sport or game in a good English-English dictionary or a dictionary of idioms. For example, if you are interested in horse-riding, you might look up *horse*, *saddle*, *reins*.

- 32.3**
- 1 **from scratch**
 - 2 once **in a lifetime**
 - 3 once and **for all**
 - 4 **from time to time**
 - 5 work **against the clock**
 - 6 nine times **out of ten**

32.4 Possible answers:

Check your answers with your teacher or another good speaker of English if you are not sure whether they are correct or not.

- 1 I'd lost the notes for my essay, so I had to start **from scratch**.
- 2 When I was offered the chance to study in the USA, I knew such an opportunity would come along only **once in a lifetime**.
- 3 The government should do something to solve the problem of illegal drugs **once and for all**.
- 4 I see my cousins **from time to time**, but not regularly.
- 5 Rescue teams are working **against the clock** to search for survivors of the earthquake.
- 6 **Nine times out of ten** if I buy something one day, I'll see the same thing cheaper in another shop the very next day.

- 32.5**
- 1 B: Well, **off and on**. (Or, slightly more formally, **from time to time**.)
 - 2 B: No, I think we should do it now, **once and for all**.
 - 3 B: Well, we can try, but **nine times out of ten** he's too busy to meet anyone.
 - 4 B: Well, we'll just have to work **against the clock** to get it finished by then.
 - 5 B: No, I've had enough. Let's **call it a day**.

Unit 33

- 33.1**
- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 1 f | 5 b |
| 2 h | 6 g |
| 3 a | 7 c |
| 4 e | 8 d |

- 33.2**
- 1 You'll be fine working for someone like that – he's **the salt of the earth**.
 - 2 Unfortunately, **my advice fell on stony ground**.
 - 3 Unfortunately, her angry words have only **added fuel to the fire/flames**.
 - 4 I think Rosie must be in **hot water** – the boss has asked to see her at once.
 - 5 Noah is really **out of his depth** in his new job.
 - 6 Spreading rumours like that is **playing with fire**.
 - 7 **Pluck a number out of the air** and multiply it by 3.
 - 8 The police were unable to **run the escaped convicts to ground**.

- 33.3**
- 1 The news of their divorce spread like wildfire.
 - 2 I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea.
 - 3 There is no smoke without fire.
 - 4 Don't say anything in the heat of the moment.
 - 5 I hate the way he blows hot and cold.
 - 6 I was thrown in at the deep end when I started university.

- 33.4**
- 1 play with fire
 - 2 pluck a number out of the air
 - 3 a drop in the ocean

- 33.5** You may give slightly different answers here, but basically earth seems to represent being practical and natural, air seems to represent vagueness and uncertainty, water seems to represent difficulty and fire seems to represent anger or passion.