

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH IDIOMS

WHAT ARE IDIOMS?

Idioms are words, phrases, or expressions that are either grammatically **unusual**, as in, “Long time, no see!”, or their **meaning cannot be taken literally**, as in, “It’s raining cats and dogs!” This expression does not mean that cats and dogs are falling from the sky, but it is a metaphorical expression (word picture) that means that it is raining very heavily.

SOME EXAMPLES OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

- After John had broken the window, he decided to **face the music** and tell his mother.
Meaning: 'to accept the unpleasant consequences of one's actions'
- Mary had to **learn** a very long poem **by heart**.
Meaning: 'to rote-learn something'
- When John asked Mary out, she **showed him the cold shoulder**.

Meaning: 'to show deliberate coldness or disregard'


SOME EXAMPLES FROM OTHER LANGUAGES

- **Chinese:** 杯弓蛇影 (bēi gōng shé yǐng)
Literal translation: to see the reflection of a bow in a cup and think it's a snake
Meaning in English: to worry about things that aren't there
- **Korean:** (dang-geun i-ji)
Literal translation: It's a carrot!
Expression in English: That's obvious!
- **Russian:** Вешать лапшу на уши (Vešat' lapšu na ušy)
Literal translation: to hang noodles on one's ears
Meaning in English: to tell lies / talk nonsense
- **Spanish:** Me estoy comiendo el coco.
Literal translation: I'm eating the coconut.
Meaning in English: I'm trying to think.

WHY SHOULD YOU LEARN ENGLISH IDIOMS?

Idioms are an important part of **every** language. Therefore, as a language learner, knowing idioms is useful in at least two ways:

- 1) The more idioms you know, the more native-like your language will sound;
- 2) By learning idioms, you learn a lot about the culture of the community speaking the language you are learning.

 In order to find out what the idiom means, your regular dictionary may not be very helpful. Instead, you may want to consult special idiom dictionaries. Here are some helpful **online idiom dictionaries**:

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> and <http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/>.

MORE ABOUT IDIOMS IN VARIOUS LANGUAGES

- <http://users.openface.ca/~dstephen/chprov.htm> (lots of Chinese idioms!)
- <http://omniglot.com/language/phrases/idioms.htm> (similar idioms in various languages)
- <http://www.edict.com.kk/vlcl> (a virtual language center with fun exercises for language learners)
- <http://www.edumatic.qc.ca/English/activities/vocabularypower.htm> (many exercises for language learners concerning vocabulary, with a section on idioms)
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu> (the single best online writing lab online)

Practice With Idioms

Choose the correct meaning of each idiom in the following multiple choice questions. Check your answers at the bottom.

1. Wow! It's raining cats and dogs today! I wish I'd brought my umbrella to school!
 - a. I forgot my umbrella today.
 - b. It's raining heavily.
 - c. Cats and dogs are falling from the sky.
2. When I told my mom I would be home around 2 am, she had a cow!
 - a. My mom bought a baby cow.
 - b. My mom is really strange.
 - c. My mom was really upset.
3. Jean: How did you know it was my birthday today.
Susan: Oh, a little birdie told me!
 - a. Jean told Susan it was her birthday.
 - b. An unnamed person told Susan about Jean's birthday.
 - c. Susan told Jean it was her birthday.
4. I never learned how to use a computer, so I lost my job. It's a dog-eat-dog world.
 - a. Only the strong or the best survive.
 - b. Dogs are eating dogs at the office.
 - c. Dogs like to eat dogs for lunch.
5. The "cream of the crop" means it is ____.
 - a. the worst
 - b. the best
6. To "egg on" means to ____.
 - a. encourage
 - b. discourage
7. If it's "just your cup of tea", it is ____.
 - a. perfect
 - b. all wrong
8. If you are "cool as a cucumber", you are ____.
 - a. panicked
 - b. calm
9. If you "have a finger in the pie", you are ____ in something.
 - a. involved
 - b. disinterested
10. "Use your noodle" means ____.
 - a. act
 - b. think

Answers: 1) b, 2) c, 3) b, 4) a, 5) b, 6) a, 7) a, 8) b, 9) a, 10) b. These quiz questions courtesy of <http://a4esl.org>

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