CAMBRIDGE
Idioms
Dictionary

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521677691

First published 1998
This edition published 2006

Printed in Italy by LegoPrint S.p.A

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cambridge idioms dictionary. – 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Rev. ed. of: English international dictionary of idioms. 1998.
ISBN 0-521-86037-7 – ISBN 0-521-67769-6
1. English language – Idioms – Dictionaries. 2. English language – Conversation and phrase books. I. Cambridge University Press. II. Cambridge international dictionary of idioms. III. Title: Idioms dictionary.

PE1460.C25 2006
423'.13–dc22
2006013124

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86037-6 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-86037-7 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-67769-1 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-67769-6 paperback

Cambridge Idioms Dictionary

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Introduction

Idioms are a colourful and fascinating aspect of English. They are commonly used in all types of language, informal and formal, spoken and written. Your language skills will increase rapidly if you can understand idioms and use them confidently and correctly. One of the main problems students have with idioms is that it is often impossible to guess the meaning of an idiom from the words it contains. In addition, idioms often have a stronger meaning than non-idiomatic phrases. For example, *look daggers at someone* has more emphasis than *look angrily at someone*, but they mean the same thing. Idioms may also suggest a particular attitude of the person using them, for example disapproval, humour, exasperation or admiration, so you must use them carefully.

The *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* explains the meaning and use of around 7,000 idioms in a clear and helpful way. It is a truly international dictionary: it covers current British, American and Australian idioms.

It includes:

- traditional idioms (e.g. turn a blind eye to sth, throw the baby out with the bathwater)
- idiomatic compounds (e.g. fall guy, turkey shoot)
- similes and comparisons (e.g. as dull as ditchwater, swear like a trooper)
- exclamations and sayings (e.g. Bully for you!, Over my dead body!)
- clichés (e.g. all part of life's rich tapestry, There's many a true word spoken in jest.)

The definitions are clear and precise. They have been written using a carefully controlled defining vocabulary of under 2,000 words. Every idiom is illustrated with examples based on sentences from the *Cambridge International Corpus*. This means that all of the examples reflect natural written and spoken English. Information about grammar is shown clearly, without complicated grammar codes. The origins of idioms are explained, where appropriate, to help understanding.

At the back of the book is a section with groups of idioms organised by topics such as 'agreeing and disagreeing' and 'explaining and understanding'. There are also photocopiable worksheets for use either in class or for studying alone.

We hope you enjoy using the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary*. You can contact us or look at our other dictionaries on our website at: dictionary.cambridge.org.

How to use this dictionary

Finding an idiom

In general, idioms are found at their first important word. This is usually a verb, noun or adjective.

E.g.: **a house of cards** is at **house**
eat sb **out of house and home** is at **eat**

If the first word has more than one alternative, the idiom is at the first fixed word.

E.g.: **ask/cry for the moon** is at **moon**

However, if you look this idiom up at **ask** or **cry**, you will find a cross reference that looks like this:

See also: ask/cry for the **moon**

Idioms are not listed at the following verbs because there are so many of them: **come, get, give, go, have, make, put, take**.

If there is no noun, verb, or adjective in an idiom, it is found at the first word (excluding 'be').

E.g.: **on and off** is at **on**
be all in is at **all**

The form of the idiom

This is the basic form of the idiom.

paint the town red *informal*
to go out and enjoy yourself in the evening, often drinking a lot of alcohol and dancing • *Jack finished his exams today so he's gone off to paint the town red with his friends.*

Many idioms have different possible forms. When the difference is just one word, it is shown like this.

put/stick the knife in *British & Australian, informal*
to do or say something unpleasant to someone in an unkind way • *'No one in the office likes you, you know, Tim,' she said, putting the knife in.* • *The reviewer from The Times really stuck the knife in, calling it the worst play he'd seen in years.*

When the difference is more than one word, the alternative forms are shown on different lines.

raise (sb's) **hackles**
make (sb's) **hackles rise**
to annoy someone ✍ Hackles are the hairs on the back of a dog's neck which stand up when it is angry. • *The politician's frank interview may have raised hackles in his party.* • *The movie's pro-war message made many people's hackles rise.*

Words in brackets can be omitted, and the meaning will be the same.

have had it (up to here) *informal*
to be so angry about something that you do not want to continue with it or even think about it any more • *I've had it! From now on they can clear up their own mess.* • (often + **with**) *I've had it up to here with lawyers!*

'sb' means 'somebody'. It can be replaced by a person's name or by 'him/her/you/them/me/us'.

give sb **the push**
1 *British & Australian, informal* to end someone's employment • *After twenty years' loyal service, they gave her the push.*

'sth' means 'something'. It can be replaced by a non-human object.

let sth **ride**
to not take action to change something wrong or unpleasant • *Don't panic about low sales. Let it ride for a while till we see if business picks up.*

'your' can be replaced by 'his/her/their/our/my'.

mind your **own business** *informal*
something that you say in order to tell someone not to ask questions or show too much interest in other people's lives • *'How much did that dress cost you?' 'Mind your own business!'* • *I wish he'd mind his own business and stop telling me how to do my job!*

'swh' means 'somewhere'. It can be replaced by the name of a place.

be fresh from swh *British*
be fresh out of swh *American & Australian*
to have just finished education or training in a particular school or college and not have much experience • *Our course is taught by a young professor fresh out of law school.*

Other forms of the idioms

Some idioms have a basic form but are often found in slightly different constructions. If they are common, these different constructions are shown in sub-entries.

have your **head in the clouds**
to not know what is really happening around you because you are paying too much attention to your own ideas • *He's an academic. They've all got their heads in the clouds.*
with your **head in the clouds** • *He was walking along with his head in the clouds as usual when he tripped over a paving stone.*

Sometimes different parts of speech can be formed from the basic idiom. In this case, the main form is a verb phrase and the sub-entry is an adjective.

catch sb's **eye**
1 to be noticed by someone because you are looking at them • *She lit a cigarette while he tried to catch the waiter's eye.*
2 to be attractive or different enough to be noticed by people • *There were lots of dresses to choose from, but none of them really caught my eye.*
eye-catching • *There is an eye-catching mural in the hall.*

Opposites are shown as sub-entries.

strike a blow for sth/sb
to do something to support an idea or to change a situation to something which you believe is good • *He claims to be striking a blow for gender equality by employing an equal number of men and women.* • *This latest agreement will strike a blow for free trade within the EU.*
OPPOSITE **strike a blow against/at** sth/sb • *The court's decision strikes a blow against minority rights.*

Grammar

The basic grammatical structure of an idiom is shown in its entry. This idiom is followed by an infinitive.

be man enough to do sth
to be brave enough to do something • *He was man enough to admit he had made a mistake.*

This idiom is followed by an –ing form.

be on the brink of doing sth
to be likely to do something very soon • *The club's manager dismissed reports that he was on the brink of buying Peter Beardsley.*

This idiom is always reflexive.

tie yourself **(up) in knots**
to become very confused or worried when you are trying to make a decision or solve a problem

Idioms which are whole sentences start with a capital letter and end with a full stop or other punctuation.

Act your **age!**
something that you say to someone who is being silly to tell them to behave in a more serious way • *Oh, act your age, Chris! You can't expect to have your own way all the time.*

This idiom is always used in negative sentences.

not **look a gift horse in the mouth**
if someone tells you not to look a gift horse in the mouth, they mean that you should not criticize or feel doubt about something good that has been offered to you • *Okay, it's not the job of your dreams but it pays good money. I'd be inclined not to look a gift horse in the mouth if I were you.*

Common grammatical features are labelled at examples which demonstrate them. This idiom is often followed by the preposition 'of'.

a rich seam *formal*
a subject which provides a lot of opportunities for people to discuss, write about or make jokes about • (often + **of**) *Both wars have provided a rich seam of drama for playwrights and novelists alike.*

Examples

Examples show how idioms are used in natural speech and writing.

put a bomb under sth/sb *British & Australian*
if you want to put a bomb under a person or an organization, you want to make them do things faster • *I'd like to put a bomb under those solicitors.*

Very common collocations are shown in dark type.

slip through your **fingers**
1 if something you hope to achieve slips through your fingers, you do not manage to achieve it • *He has seen the world championship slip through his fingers twice.* • *This is my big chance to make a career in journalism. I can't* ***let*** *it* ***slip through my fingers****.*
2 if someone slips through your fingers they manage to escape from you • *We've got men guarding all the exits and more men on the roof. He won't slip through our fingers this time.*

Other things you need to know about idioms

Idioms with different forms in British, American or Australian are shown on separate lines.

blow a raspberry *British & Australian, informal*
give a raspberry *American, informal*
to make a rude noise by putting your tongue between your lips and blowing • (often + **at**) *A boy of no more than six appeared, blew a raspberry at me and then ran away.*

If an idiom is formal, informal, old-fashioned, etc. this is shown with a label.

be/go (out) on the razzle *British, informal, old-fashioned*
to enjoy yourself by doing things like going to parties or dances • *We're going out on the razzle on New Year's Eve – do you fancy coming?*

The history of idioms is explained when this helps to understand the meaning of the idiom.

be in the doldrums
1 if a business, an economy or a person's job is in the doldrums, it is not very successful and nothing new is happening in it ✍ The doldrums was the name for an area of sea where ships were not able to move because there was no wind.

Idioms on blue boxes are very common and useful to learn.

not **have a clue** *informal*
to have no knowledge of or no information about something • *'How much do houses cost in Yorkshire?' 'I haven't got a clue.'* • *(often +* **about***) Internet researchers in the 1980s didn't have a clue about the exciting online landscapes of the future.*

Regional labels

British	this idiom is only used in British English
American	this idiom is only used in American English
Australian	this idiom is only used in Australian English
mainly British	this idiom is mainly used in British English
mainly American	this idiom is mainly used in American English

Register labels

informal	idioms which are used with friends and family or people you know in relaxed situations
formal	idioms which are used in a serious or polite way, for example in business documents, serious newspapers and books, lectures, news broadcasts, etc.
very informal	idioms which are used in a very informal or not very polite way, often between members of a particular social group
old-fashioned	idioms which are still used but sound old-fashioned
taboo	idioms which are likely to offend people and are not used in formal situations
humorous	idioms which are intended to make people laugh
literary	idioms which are mainly used in literature