



# Dallas Baptist University Writing Center

## 101 Common Idioms

**An idiom is a word or a phrase with a meaning that is not the same as the literal meaning implied. Idioms can make both speech and writing more interesting; however, they are generally avoided in academic writing.**

The English language is filled with idioms. The following are just a few of the many possible idioms you might *come across* (discover). In fact, idioms are so common, Americans often do not even realize they are using them *to color* (to make more interesting) their writing or conversation.

Idiom & Definition	Example
<b>A big shot:</b> a person who is important	I had lunch with <i>a big shot</i> executive. He offered me a job during dessert.
<b>A bone to pick:</b> complaint, dispute, or misunderstanding to be settled	I have <i>a bone to pick</i> with Jennifer. She didn't water my plants while I was away.
<b>A pain in the neck/rear:</b> an annoying person, thing, or situation	My brother is <i>a pain in the neck</i> . He's always bothering me!
<b>A snap:</b> very easy	Making cookies from a mix is <i>a snap</i> . Even my little brother can do it.
<b>Across the board:</b> relating to every person and/or situation	The attendance policy is applied <i>across the board</i> . No one is exempt.
<b>All ears:</b> eager to listen to someone or willing to listen carefully	Tell me your story, Debra. <i>I'm all ears!</i>
<b>All in the same boat:</b> in similar situations, experiencing the same thing	None of us have finished our papers, so we <i>are all in the same boat</i> . We will all be up late tonight.
<b>As easy as pie:</b> very simple or easy	Susan told me this class was <i>easy as pie</i> , but I think it is really hard.
<b>Back to the drawing board:</b> return to the planning stage of a project	My plan did not work, so it is <i>back to the drawing board</i> .
<b>Bad-mouth:</b> to say mean and embarrassing things about someone	Kelly is always <i>bad-mouthing</i> people, and that is why no one wants to be her friend.
<b>Bark up the wrong tree:</b> attempting to gain information from the wrong source.	When she told me she wasn't from Texas, I realized I had <i>barked up the wrong tree</i> by asking her questions about growing up there.
<b>Beat around the bush:</b> speaking in an indirect manner or	Get to the point; stop <i>beating around the bush!</i>

avoiding the subject	
<b>Beat:</b> extremely tired	I'm <i>beat</i> ! Let's go to bed!
<b>Beats me:</b> not to know (usually the answer to a question)	A: When did Mom leave? B: <i>Beats me</i> !
<b>Bent out of shape:</b> to be very upset about something	Mark really <i>got bent out of shape</i> about the "D" on his history report.
<b>Bite the bullet:</b> accepting punishment or blame for something, or accepting an unpleasant circumstance	I'm going to <i>bite the bullet</i> and go talk to Dad about my bad grade.
<b>Bottom line:</b> the real issue or the most important facts	The <i>bottom line</i> is that Cathy just does not want to do it.
<b>Break a leg:</b> wish good luck	Does the play start tonight? Well, <i>break a leg</i> !
<b>Break someone's heart:</b> to disappoint or emotionally hurt someone	Her dad really <i>broke her heart</i> when he did not come to her graduation.
<b>Break the ice:</b> to do something, usually humorous that helps stop the nervousness people feel when they meet for the first time	Jim <i>broke the ice</i> at the party by starting a really stupid, but funny, game.
<b>Brush up on something:</b> to relearn the basics or improve a skill	I need to <i>brush up on</i> my geography skills because I don't remember the capitals of several countries.
<b>Bug:</b> to annoy or pester	My little brother really <i>bugs</i> me sometimes!
<b>Burn the midnight oil:</b> stay up very late or all night working or studying	I have a paper due tomorrow, so I will be <i>burning the midnight oil</i> tonight.
<b>Call it a day:</b> stop working and go home	Well, I returned all the calls and filed everything, so I think I will <i>call it a day</i> .
<b>Catch some Z's:</b> go to sleep	This has been a really tiring day; I want to go <i>catch some Z's</i> now.
<b>Caught red-handed:</b> caught in the middle of doing something wrong	Jack was <i>caught red-handed</i> cheating on his final exam.
<b>Clean as a whistle:</b> very clean	My husband likes to have everything <i>clean as a whistle</i> , so I mop once a day.
<b>Clean slate:</b> fresh start	Laura's boss gave her a <i>clean slate</i> after she apologized for being late every day.
<b>Cold feet:</b> nervousness or anxiousness concerning major events	Chris got <i>cold feet</i> the night before his wedding.
<b>Cold turkey:</b> to immediately give up a bad habit	Jessica wanted to give up eating junk food <i>cold turkey</i> .
<b>Cost an arm and a leg:</b> very expensive	Ginger's fancy new car must have <i>cost her an arm and a leg</i> .
<b>Crunch time:</b> a time when many deadlines are approaching	For many college students, <i>crunch time</i> is right before midterms and finals.
<b>Days are numbered:</b> time is limited, about to finish or no longer exist	Hank's <i>days</i> on the baseball team <i>are numbered</i> if he doesn't pass his algebra test.
<b>Down in the dumps:</b> sad or depressed	Sarah has really been <i>down in the dumps</i> recently; I wonder what is wrong with her.
<b>Drag one's feet:</b> to be slow and	If Mario keeps <i>dragging his feet</i> , he won't finish

unmotivated about completing something	his English paper on time.
<b>Drive me crazy:</b> to annoy	It just <i>drives me crazy</i> that this little icon won't move over!
<b>Drive me up the wall:</b> to annoy	My mom really <i>drives me up the wall</i> when she plays her classical music while I'm trying to study.
<b>Drop in the bucket:</b> small addition or contribution in comparison to what is needed.	The children's gifts to the society were just <i>drops in the bucket</i> , but the children learned that giving is important.
<b>Drop someone a line:</b> to write to someone	I have not heard from Maria in awhile, so I think that I will <i>drop her a line</i> this week.
<b>Easier said than done:</b> easier to talk about something than to do it	Losing weight by starting an exercise program is <i>easier said than done</i> .
<b>Easy does it!:</b> to be careful by going slowly and gently	Hey! <i>Easy does it!</i> Bill, if you pull too hard it will fall off completely!
<b>Eating someone up:</b> something is really bothering or disturbing someone	A: What is <i>eating her up</i> ? B: Oh, she is mad at her brother right now because he keeps borrowing the car without asking.
<b>Face-to-face:</b> in person	I really want to see my dad <i>face to face</i> before he goes on his business trip.
<b>Fair-weather friend:</b> only a friend when it is convenient	Some people are only <i>fair-weather friends</i> , but Jessica has been a wonderful friend even when things were horrible.
<b>False alarm:</b> to panic over a situation, only to realize afterwards that it was not an emergency	I thought my paper was due today, but it was only a <i>false alarm</i> ! I was so mad when I discovered we only had to turn in an outline.
<b>Fell for it:</b> to be tricked	Javier <i>fell for it</i> when Rosa played a practical joke on him.
<b>Fly off the handle:</b> to get upset or angry	My professor was so angry with the students' careless work that he <i>flew off the handle</i> during class.
<b>Follow in the footsteps of:</b> doing the same things as someone you admire when it comes to making important choices	When he took that job, he was <i>following in the footsteps</i> of his father, who is one of the best doctors in town.
<b>Food for thought:</b> something to think about	I really like this column in the newspaper; it gives me some <i>food for thought</i> .
<b>From scratch:</b> to start at the beginning; to make a food without using a mix or begin a task anew	They got rid of the old system and began <i>from scratch</i> . When my grandmother makes muffins <i>from scratch</i> , they are the best in the world!
<b>Get a kick out of something:</b> find enjoyment or pleasure out of something	Maggie really <i>gets a kick out of</i> seeing her friends have fun.
<b>Get with the program:</b> to be aware of something or to be actively working on what is important	I really need to <i>get with the program</i> and finish all my reports for biology lab.
<b>Give my right arm:</b> give	My grandfather would <i>give his right arm</i> to help

everything or give a great deal	people in trouble.
<b>Give someone a hand:</b> (a) to help someone or (b) to clap in approval	(a) Rachael, can you <i>give me a hand</i> ? This is too heavy for me. (b) Let's all <i>give Jake a hand</i> for doing so well on the project.
<b>Go against the grain:</b> to be different than what is considered normal or standard	When Mr. Malady decided to protest, he really <i>went against the grain</i> .
<b>Go bananas/Go crazy:</b> extremely excited	When Ellen heard about her "A" on the sociology paper, she <i>went bananas!</i>
<b>Grab a bite to eat:</b> to get something to eat	I'm hungry. Do you want to <i>go grab a bite to eat</i> with me?
<b>Green with envy:</b> very envious of someone	Allison is <i>green with envy</i> because Sarah got the job promotion.
<b>Have your hands full:</b> to be very busy with many responsibilities	Calvin <i>has his hands full</i> this week; he is caring for his sister's two children while she's gone.
<b>Hit the books:</b> to study hard	Megan went to the library to <i>hit the books</i> because she has a statistics test tomorrow.
<b>Hit the nail on the head:</b> to be exactly right	John <i>hit the nail on the head</i> when he suggested Cathy has been so tired because she's been overworked.
<b>Hit the spot:</b> to satisfy a craving or intense hunger	That piece of pumpkin pie <i>hit the spot</i> ; I've been craving it for weeks.
<b>Hold your horses:</b> have patience	<i>Hold your horses!</i> We don't have to go that fast.
<b>In ages:</b> for a very long time	I haven't seen a movie <i>in ages</i> . Do you want to go see one with me?
<b>In over your head:</b> to take on too many responsibilities; to take on something too difficult	Jack really got <i>in over his head</i> when he agreed to work two jobs while taking 18 credits.
<b>In the nick of time:</b> barely on time, nearly late	Wow! Those books came in the <i>nick of time</i> because one more day and they would have been late.
<b>It's a piece of cake:</b> very easy	I thought that the test was going to be difficult, but <i>it was a piece of cake!</i>
<b>John Hancock:</b> a signature	If you just put your <i>John Hancock</i> here, the deal will be complete.
<b>Jump the gun:</b> to do something too soon and too quickly	You always <i>jump the gun</i> , and I never get to tell the story.
<b>Know by heart:</b> to know something by memory	Since I have had to call the electric company so many times, I know their phone number <i>by heart</i> .
<b>Know the ropes:</b> to be familiar with a procedure or the details of a job	It takes new students a little while to get to <i>know the ropes</i> , but then they seem to do just fine.
<b>Make ends meet:</b> make just enough money to survive	I barely <i>made ends meet</i> this month. I get paid next Friday and all I have left is five dollars.
<b>Making a mountain out of a molehill:</b> making a large issue out of something insignificant	George is <i>really making a mountain out of a molehill</i> . Why can't he just see how unimportant the whole thing is?
<b>Ninety (90) to nothing:</b> to be working very hard on something	With everything I have to finish before graduation, I feel like I have been going <i>ninety</i>

usually in a fast manner	<i>(90) to nothing.</i>
<b>Not worth a hill of beans:</b> not worth very much	My car is <i>not worth a hill of beans</i> ; the engine is about to die!
<b>Off the top of my head:</b> to think and do something spontaneously	Sue loves to do things <i>off the top of her head</i> ; when I am with her, I never know what is going to happen next.
<b>On edge:</b> nervous or tense	Karen has really been <i>on edge</i> recently. I wonder what is bothering her.
<b>On the ball:</b> motivated to action	Kevin has really been <i>on the ball</i> recently; he finished all his assignments several weeks early.
<b>On the road:</b> to travel	I hate being <i>on the road</i> because I never get to see my family.
<b>On the tip of my tongue:</b> to almost remember	His name is <i>on the tip of my tongue</i> . It begins with a K, but I just can't recall.
<b>Once in a blue moon:</b> very rarely	<i>Once in a blue moon</i> , the washer machine makes a funny noise.
<b>Pretty penny:</b> a lot of money (usually with the idea of costing or paying a lot of money)	Julie's new car must have cost her a <i>pretty penny</i> .
<b>Rain check:</b> a promise to make an offer available at another time	A: Do you want to go to lunch with me tomorrow? B: I'd love to but I can't. Could I take a <i>rain check</i> ?
<b>Rain or shine:</b> no matter what	My mom said she would be at graduation <i>rain or shine</i> .
<b>Scare the living daylights out of :</b> to frighten someone	When he jumped into the hallway, he <i>scared the living daylights out of me!</i>
<b>Skeleton in the closet:</b> a personal or family secret	Every family has at least one <i>skeleton in the closet</i> that they don't want anyone else to know about.
<b>Sleeping like a baby:</b> sleeping peacefully and soundly	Oh! I hate to wake her up; she is <i>sleeping like a baby!</i>
<b>Sleeping like a log:</b> sleeping well—so much so that a person would not be easily awakened	Grandpa always <i>sleeps like a log</i> ; once he goes to sleep there is no waking him until the next morning!
<b>Spick and span:</b> very clean	It took me two hours to make this room <i>spick and span</i> .
<b>Stab in the back:</b> to deceive or hurt someone who trusts you	Jan <i>stabbed her best friend in the back</i> when she began to date her best friend's ex-boyfriend.
<b>State of the art:</b> the very newest, latest technological devices	Everything Jeff has is <i>state of the art</i> ; he thinks he has to have whatever is newest on the market.
<b>Stick one's neck out:</b> to do something risky (usually for someone else)	Alan really <i>stuck his neck out</i> when he supported the mayor's proposal.
<b>Sweet tooth:</b> desire to eat something sweet	James has a huge <i>sweet tooth</i> ; he is always eating candy.
<b>Talking in circles:</b> to speak in an unclear, illogical manner, often saying the same thing again	When Mrs. Black is tired, she just <i>talks in circles</i> and never really makes a clear point.
<b>That doesn't hold water:</b> reasoning does not make sense;	The theory of evolution just <i>doesn't hold water</i> .

argument does not have enough supporting evidence	
<b>That's a bunch of baloney:</b> a lie or a fake; nonsense	A: Did you know that Jill is getting kicked out of school? B: <i>That's a bunch of baloney!</i> I talked to her this morning, and she said it was just a rumor.
<b>That's no skin off my nose:</b> does not effect or harm	It is <i>no skin off my nose</i> that David did not ask me to the party!
<b>The cutting edge:</b> the best and most advanced	Dr. Robins is on <i>the cutting edge</i> of research; he is the most respected scientist at Mayer Hospital.
<b>Through thick and thin:</b> through all circumstances, both difficult and easy, good and bad	It is not easy to find friends that will stay with you <i>through thick and thin</i> .
<b>To know something or someone like the back of your hand:</b> to know something or someone very well	I know that mountain <i>like the back of my hand</i> because I have climbed it many times.
<b>Under the weather:</b> not feeling well	I have been <i>under the weather</i> for the last two weeks. Do you think I should go to the doctor?

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