

Times/Chambers

Dictionary
of
Idioms

Edited by E.M. Kirkpatrick

~~UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS~~

and C.M. Schwarz

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Preface

Times-Chambers Dictionary of Idioms will be of immense value to all users of English whether they are learners of English as a foreign language or whether English is their mother tongue. The language is rich in idioms and figurative expressions, and many of these are explained here.

People tend to be bored by page after page of dull, uninteresting language and so it is important to be able to write and speak in a lively fashion. The use of idioms will greatly enliven one's style of writing and make it more interesting and more entertaining.

This book not only gives the meanings of idiomatic expressions — in language which is simple and easy to understand — but includes example sentences or phrases showing the idioms in actual use. These will be helpful to all users of the book as they capture the "flavour" of the expressions and indicate the context in which they are usually found.

The examples will be particularly helpful to learners of English, as they provide a pattern for them to follow. Mastering idiomatic expressions and reproducing them correctly is one of the most difficult aspects of learning a foreign language.

Trying to find idioms in a dictionary is often not easy. Sometimes they are listed under the first word and sometimes under what is considered to be the most important word in the idiomatic phrase. It is difficult for the user to decide where to look. In this book we have made the task easier by including many cross-references.

The system of cross-referencing not only makes the idioms easier to find but helps to jog the memory of those who can remember only one part of an idiom and not the rest. It will also be helpful to people who are simply browsing through the book looking for inspiration to add colour to their prose.

Many of the idioms have a label to indicate the situation in which they are usually used. For example formal, informal

and slang expressions have been labelled (*formal*), (*inf*) and (*sl*) respectively. The labels will not only help people to use the idioms correctly but will prevent them from using them in an inappropriate context which can cause embarrassment.

Several of the idiomatic and figurative expressions in English have interesting origins. Sometimes knowing the origin of a phrase adds to one's understanding of the expression itself. Even when this is not the case, the origins are of interest in themselves. People who are interested in language generally are fascinated by etymologies, and family arguments have been known to start over the origin of an expression. This dictionary will be of help in such disputes.

Times-Chambers Dictionary of Idioms is not only informative but entertaining. It will help all users to improve their English effortlessly and painlessly. With this dictionary English will be all plain sailing.

Abbreviations used in this book

<i>arch</i>	archaic	<i>ie</i>	that is
<i>Brit</i>	British	<i>inf</i>	informal
<i>c</i>	<i>circa</i> , about	<i>interj</i>	interjection
<i>C</i>	century	<i>liter</i>	literary
<i>derog</i>	derogatory	<i>neg</i>	negative
<i>eg</i>	for example	<i>NY</i>	New York
<i>esp</i>	especially	<i>RAF</i>	Royal Air Force
<i>etc</i>	<i>et cetera</i> , and so on	<i>sl</i>	slang
<i>euph</i>	euphemistic	<i>US</i>	United States
<i>facet</i>	facetious	<i>usu</i>	usually
<i>fig</i>	figurative	<i>vulg</i>	vulgar

A

A to Z

from A to Z very thoroughly and completely: *He has studied the subject from A to Z.*

A1

A1 (*inf*) of the highest quality; very good: *This material is A1.*
[A1 is the highest grading in the scale on which the condition of a ship and its cargo is rated for Lloyd's Register.]

ABC

ABC the simplest and most basic knowledge: *This book gives you the ABC of engineering.*

about

month, week etc about every alternate month, week: *I go to Manchester and Birmingham week about* (= One week I go to Manchester and one week I go to Birmingham).

above

above (someone's) head *see* **head**.

be, get (a bit) above oneself to have or acquire too high an opinion of oneself; to be or become very conceited: *She's got a bit above herself since she went to live in that district.*

be above suspicion *see* **suspicion**.

absence

leave of absence *see* **leave**.

accident

a chapter of accidents *see* **chapter**.

accord

of one's own accord of one's own free will: *He did it of his own accord, without being forced to.*

with one accord (*formal*) (everybody) in agreement: *With one accord they stood up to cheer him.*

account

bring (someone) to account (*formal*) to make sure that (a criminal *etc*) pays for what he has done: *This murderer must be brought to account.*

by all accounts in the opinion of most people: *By all accounts, he's an excellent golfer.*

call (someone) to account (*formal*) to demand that (someone) explains what he has done and why, *esp* if this was apparently wrong: *He was called to account for his ridiculous behaviour.*

give a good account of oneself (*rather formal*) to do well: *He*

gave a good account of himself (during the match).

on my etc account because of me or for my sake: *You don't have to leave early on my account.*

on no account not for any reason: *On no account must you open that door.*

take (something) into account/take account of (something) to consider (something which is part of the problem etc): *We must take his illness into account when assessing his work.*

turn (something) to (good) account to use (a situation etc) to one's advantage: *I'm sure I'll be able to turn this information to good account.*

ace

within an ace of very near to: *He was within an ace of success.*
[An idiom from the game of dice.]

Achilles

an Achilles' heel *see* heel.

acid

the acid test a test which will prove or disprove something beyond doubt: *His leg appears to be completely well again, but the acid test will be the tennis tournament tomorrow.* [From a method of testing for gold by using acid.]

across

across the board *see* board.

get (something) across (*inf*) to be or make (something) understood: *The plan seems quite clear to me, but I just can't get it across to anyone else.*

put one across on (someone) (*sl*) to deceive or play a trick on (someone): *He thought he would put one across on his friends by pretending he was going to get married.*

act

an act of God a totally unexpected natural happening which could not have been foreseen or prevented: *His house was not insured against acts of God such as flooding and earthquakes.* [Strictly a legal term, identifying events for which one can expect no legal compensation.]

act the goat *see* goat.

act up (*inf*) to behave or act badly or wrongly: *My car always acts up on a long journey.*

catch (someone) in the act to discover (someone) doing something wrong: *The burglars were caught in the act of climbing in through a window.*

get one's act together (*inf*) to get oneself organized: *If you're ever going to find a job you'll have to start getting your act together.*

get in on the act (*inf*) to join or copy someone in doing something successful or fashionable, *esp* in order to share in his or her success: *Now that it is obvious that the computer industry is very profitable, a lot of companies are anxious to get in on the act.*

put on an act to pretend: *I thought she had hurt herself, but she was only putting on an act.*

action

action stations a state of readiness for activity: *Action stations! The concert is about to begin!* [Literally, positions taken up by soldiers in readiness for a battle etc.]

Adam

Adam's ale (*facet*) water: *We have no wine — you'll just have to have Adam's ale.*

not to know (someone) from Adam not to recognize (someone); not to have any idea who (someone) is: *Jonathan Wright may have been at the party, but I wouldn't know him from Adam.* [Presumably because Adam, the first man according to the Bible, is both the ultimate person one would not know and the archetype of all men.]

add

add up (*inf*) to seem sensible or logical: *I don't understand his behaviour — it just doesn't add up.*

Adonis

an Adonis a beautiful young man: *a bronzed Adonis on the beach.* [In Greek myth, Adonis was the beautiful youth loved by Aphrodite and killed by a boar while hunting.]

advantage

have the advantage of (someone) (*formal*) to recognize (someone) without being recognized oneself: *She stared blankly at the young man who had addressed her and said 'You have the advantage of me'.*

take advantage of (someone or something) to make use of (someone or something) in such a way as to benefit oneself: *She was so kind and generous that people tended to take advantage of her.*

to advantage (*formal*) so that the good points are easily seen: *The evening suit showed off his tall elegant figure to advantage.*

aegis

under the aegis of (someone) (*formal*) with the (moral or financial) support of (someone): *under the aegis of the British*

government. [*Aegis* is a Greek word for the shield or armour of Zeus or Athena.]

after

the aftermath the situation *etc* resulting from an important, *esp* unpleasant, event: *The country is still recovering from the aftermath of the war.* [This term means literally 'second mowing' and was applied to the new grass that grows in summer after the hay has been cut.]

be after (*inf*) to be looking for or hoping to be given something: *The police are after him; What are you after?*

against

be up against it (*inf*) to be in a position where one has to deal with very severe, often apparently impossible difficulties: *We have only just enough money to live on now, and if my husband loses his job we'll really be up against it.*

age

the age of consent the age which a girl must be before a boy or man may legally have sexual intercourse with her: *If you have sexual intercourse with a girl before she reaches the age of consent you can be prosecuted.*

come of age to become old enough to be considered legally an adult (in Britain aged eighteen or over): *My uncle will look after my inheritance until I come of age.*

a/the golden age *see* **gold.**

of a certain age *see* **certain.**

a ripe old age *see* **ripe.**

under age too young, *esp* legally: *She can't come into the nightclub with us — she's under age.*

agony

the agony column (*inf*) the part of a magazine *etc* where letters setting out readers' problems are printed along with advice from a member of the magazine's staff.

agree

strike an agreement *see* **strike.**

ahead

ahead of one's time *see* **time.**

be streets ahead of *see* **street.**

aid

aid and abet to provide help and encouragement in some bad or illegal activity: *His wife aids and abets him in his dishonest deeds.* [Originally a legal term.]

what is (something) in aid of? (*Brit inf*) for what reason or purpose is (something) being done etc: *What is all this fuss in aid of?*

air

airs and graces (*derog*) behaviour in which a person acts as if he is better or more important than others: *In spite of all her airs and graces she had very few talents.*

clear the air to make a situation simpler and less tense: *The quarrel had not solved any problems, but at least it had cleared the air.*

hot air *see* **hot**.

in the air (*inf*) in existence; current: *suspicion in the air.*

in the open air *see* **open**.

make the air turn blue *see* **blue**.

on the air broadcasting (regularly) on radio or television: *He is on the air almost every week.*

put on airs/give oneself airs to behave as if one is better or more important than others: *She gives herself such airs.*

take the air (*old or facet*) to go for a walk.

thin air *see* **thin**.

up in the air uncertain; undecided: *Our holiday plans are still rather up in the air.*

walk on air *see* **walk**.

alarm

alar(u)ms and excursions confused activity, esp disorganized arguments etc: *He came back from holiday straight into the alarms and excursions of a major crisis in the office.* [From a stage direction in Shakespeare's history plays calling for a vague representation of the edge of a battle.]

a false alarm *see* **false**.

ale

Adam's ale *see* **Adam**.

alert

on red alert *see* **red**.

on the alert on the watch (for): *We were all on the alert for any sound that might tell us where he was.*

all

all and sundry *see* **sundry**.

all in 1 (*inf*) exhausted: *He was all in after the game.* **2** with everything included: *Is that the price all in?*

all in all considering everything: *We haven't done badly, all in all.*

all my eye *see* **eye**.

all out using the greatest effort possible: *He went all out in his attempt to break the world record.*

all there (inf) completely sane; having an alert, intelligent mind and good ideas: *Sometimes I wonder if he's all there; She's all there when it comes to looking after her own interests.*

all told see **tell**.

be all ears see **ear**.

be all over (someone) (derog) to treat with great friendliness and affection: *When she found out he was quite famous, she was all over him.*

be all things to all men see **thing**.

it is all up with (someone) (inf) there is no hope left for (someone): *I'm afraid it's all up with the men who were inside — no-one could have survived the explosion.*

when all is said and done considering all the facts: *When all is said and done I suppose she's lucky to be offered a job at all.*

allowance

make allowances for (someone) to judge (someone) less severely, or require (them) to do less well, than other people: *We must make allowances for Mary — she is not well.*

also

an also-ran see **run**.

Amazon

an Amazon (sometimes derog) a woman who is strong, energetic or warlike: *He had always pictured her as small and feminine and was surprised when she turned out to be a tall, blonde Amazon.* [From a legendary race of warrior women believed by the Greeks to live in Southern Russia and said to have had their right breasts removed to enable them to draw their bows better.]

amends

make amends to do something to improve the situation after doing something wrong, stupid etc: *He gave her a present to make amends for his rudeness.* [From the Old French word for a monetary fine.]

amiss

take (something) amiss (formal) to be upset or offended (by something): *He took it amiss that I had not consulted him before acting; I was anxious that you should not take my words amiss.* [The original meaning of this phrase was 'to be in error about' — literally 'to miss-take'.]

amount

any amount of *see any.*

analysis

in the final/last analysis (*rather formal*) when the problem or situation has been simplified so that only the essentials are left to be considered: *The political situation in his country is extremely complex, but in the final analysis it appears to be a struggle between progressives and conservatives.*

anchor

an anchor-man a person on whom the success of an activity depends, *esp.* on television, the person responsible for the smooth running of a discussion between other people *etc.* *He was the anchor-man for several television current affairs programmes before being given a show of his own.* [Literally, the man at the back of a team competing in a tug-of-war.]

ancient

the Ancient of Days God. [A Biblical epithet for God — Daniel 7:9 — first used in English in the Geneva Bible of 1560.]

the ancients people who lived in ancient times: *the wisdom of the ancients.*

angel

an angel of mercy a person who appears when they are particularly needed, bringing help, comfort *etc.* *Just when we were beginning to feel really thirsty, Mrs Jackson appeared, an angel of mercy, with a pot of tea.*

on the side of the angels basically agreeing with accepted ideas of what is good and bad: *For most of the book Wilkinson appears to be a criminal, but in the last few chapters he proves to be on the side of the angels after all.*

angry

an angry young man a young man who disapproves of the way his parents' generation have run the country *etc.* and makes his feelings known. [A term which became popular after being applied to John Osborne, whose play *Look Back in Anger* was first performed in 1956.]

answer

answer back to give a (*usu* impertinent) answer to someone who expects one to do what one is told without argument: *The teacher was angry when the child she was scolding answered her back.*

know all the answers (*usu slightly derog*) to be in complete command of a situation and perfectly able to deal with any

developments, *esp* if too proud of this ability: *He is the perfect person to organize the group — he knows all the answers; You can't tell her anything — she knows all the answers.*

any

any amount of (*inf*) a great deal of: *You'll have no difficulty in buying green velvet — there's any amount of it on sale in the shops.*

anybody's guess *see* **guess**.

any day in any circumstances: *I would rather employ you than Muriel any day!*

any old how (*inf*) without any special care: *Her desk is always terribly untidy — she just throws papers and letters into it any old how.*

like anything (*inf*) very strongly or energetically; very much: *As soon as we were out of sight we took to our heels and ran like anything.*

not to get anywhere (*inf*) to make no progress: *We don't seem to be getting anywhere in this discussion.*

apart

be poles apart *see* **pole**.

take (someone or something) apart (*sl*) to deal with or criticize (someone, a plan *etc*) severely: *If you hand in work like that, the teacher will take you apart!*

tell apart (*usu with can, cannot etc*) to recognize the difference between; to distinguish: *I cannot tell the twins apart.*

apology

an apology for (something) (*inf*) an example of poor quality of (something): *That's rather an apology for an essay — do it again!*

appearance

keep up appearances to behave in such a way as to hide the truth (*esp* something bad or unpleasant) from other people: *They haven't much money but they buy expensive clothes in order to keep up appearances.*

put in/make an appearance to attend (a meeting, party *etc*) *usu* only for a short time: *I don't want to stay for the whole meeting, but I'll put in an appearance at the beginning.*

to/by all appearances (*rather formal*) judging by, or basing one's opinion on, what can be seen *etc*: *He is to all appearances a happy man.*

appetite

whet (someone's) appetite *see* **whet**.

apple

an apple of discord (*formal or liter*) something which causes jealousy and fighting: *Aunt Mary's emerald ring proved to be an apple*

of discord — *within a week of her death the whole family was fighting over who should have it.* [From the golden apple inscribed 'for the fairest' which according to Greek mythology was thrown among the gods by Eris, goddess of discord, and was claimed by Aphrodite, Athene and Hera.]

the apple of (someone's) eye a person or thing which is greatly loved (by someone): *She is the apple of her father's eye.* [Originally a term for the pupil of the eye.]

an apple-pie bed a bed made up (as a joke) in such a way as to be impossible to get into because the top sheet is doubled: *The children made their aunt an apple-pie bed.*

in apple-pie order (*inf*) neat and tidy, with everything in its correct place: *Her desk is always in apple-pie order.* [Origin unknown.]

upset the applecart (*inf*) to spoil plans, obstruct progress *etc*: *The football team were doing very well when their best player upset the applecart by breaking his leg.* [From selling fruit from carts in street markets.]

apron

tied to (someone's) apron-strings (*derog*) ruled by and dependent on (a woman, *esp* one's wife or mother): *He is still tied to his mother's apron-strings and unable to think for himself.*

argue

argue the toss *see* **toss**.

arm

armed to the teeth *see* **teeth**.

the (long) arm of the law (*inf*) the power or authority of the police force: *Although the criminal moved to another town, the long arm of the law soon caught up with him.*

be up in arms to be very angry and make a great protest (about something): *He is up in arms about the decision to close the road.*

chance one's arm *see* **chance**.

keep at arm's length to avoid becoming too friendly with (someone): *She keeps her new neighbours at arm's length.*

lay down one's arms to surrender; to stop fighting or opposing other people: *It will be difficult to persuade the opponents of our plans for the new oil refinery to lay down their arms.*

(someone's) right arm (someone's) main help and support: *In this school the prefects are the headmaster's right arm.*

a shot in the arm *see* **shot**.

take up arms to become actively involved in a dispute, argument

etc. The people of the village took up arms to force the local council to build a by-pass, and held rallies and demonstrations which attracted a lot of attention to their campaign.

twist (someone's) arm (*inf*) to make (someone) do something: 'Do you want a drink?' 'Well, if you're twisting my arm, I'll have a whisky.'

with open arms *see* open.

armour

a chink . in (someone's) armour *see* chink.

around

have been around (*inf*) to have a great deal of experience of life: *I've been around — I know what people are like.*

ash

the Ashes the trophy, originally imaginary, for which Test matches between Australia and England at cricket are played: *Having won the first two Tests, Australia is now almost certain to retain the Ashes.* [In 1882 the Australian cricket team had a very successful visit to England, and the *Sporting Times* published a mock 'In Memoriam' notice announcing the cremation of the body of English cricket and the taking of the ashes to Australia. Thereafter, English teams were anxious to 'bring back the ashes' by defeating the Australians.]

ask

ask after to make inquiries about the state, *esp* the health, of: *She asked after his father.*

be asking for it/trouble (*inf*) to be behaving as if inviting (something unpleasant): *Going out in cold weather without a coat is just asking for trouble.*

someone's for the asking someone may have something simply by asking: *This table is yours for the asking.*

asleep

be asleep (*inf*) (of arms and legs *etc*) to be numb, *usu* because of pressure on a nerve: *My foot's asleep.*

assure

rest assured *see* rest.

attendance

dance attendance on (someone) *see* dance.

Attic

Attic salt dry, delicate and refined wit. [A term coined by the Roman writer Pliny.]

attitude

strike an attitude *see* **strike**.

auction

a Dutch auction *see* **Dutch**.

avail

of no avail/to no avail (*formal*) of no use or effect: *He tried to revive her but to no avail; His efforts were of no avail.*

awake

be awake to to be aware of: *Do you think they're fully awake to the problems involved?*

away

do away with *see* **do**.

axe

have an axe to grind to have a personal, often selfish, reason for being involved in something: *I have no axe to grind — I just want to help you.* [Originally US, stemming from a story told by Benjamin Franklin of how a man had once asked him to demonstrate how his father's grindstone worked — and had then produced an axe which he wanted to sharpen.]

B

baby

be left holding the baby to be the person who has to deal with a problem, organize something *etc* because everyone else has abandoned it: *No sooner had he said that we would do the job than he went abroad, leaving me holding the baby.*

throw out the baby with the bathwater to be so enthusiastic about changing or reorganizing things and getting rid of old ideas *etc* that one destroys or disposes of things that are essential: *In abolishing the police force because it was corrupt, the revolutionaries had thrown out the baby with the bathwater.*

back

answer back *see* **answer**.

backbiting criticizing and speaking evil of a person when he or she is not present: *Constant backbiting by her colleagues led to her resignation.*

a backhanded compliment *see* **compliment**.

a backhander (*inf*) a bribe: *He won the contract for his firm by giving a backhander to the official.*

the back of beyond (*inf derog*) a very remote place: *They live at the back of beyond, somewhere in the Australian bush.* [Originally Scottish and Northern English.]

backpedal to reverse one's opinion or course of action *etc*: *He was forced to backpedal and say the opposite of what he had said originally.* [Literally, to turn the pedals of a bicycle backwards, which on many early models operated the brake.]

backscratching (*derog*) doing favours for other people in return for favours which they do for you: *There is a great deal of backscratching involved in international politics.*

a back-seat driver a passenger in a car who gives unwanted advice on how to drive it: *Very often back-seat drivers cannot drive.*

a backwater (*usu derog*) a place not affected by what is happening in the world outside, *usu* because of its isolation: *The village where he lives now is rather a backwater.* [Literally, a stretch of water connected to a river but not now in the line of the main flow.]

behind (someone's) back (*inf*) without (someone's) knowledge or permission: *He sometimes bullies his sister behind his mother's back.*

bend over backwards *see* **bend**.

break the back of (something) to complete the heaviest or most difficult part of (a task *etc*): *Now that you've broken the back of the job, have a rest.*

fed to the back teeth *see* **fed**.

get off (someone's) back (*inf*) to stop annoying (someone): *Get off my back! I can't work if you keep on criticizing me.*

get one's own back *see* **own**.

go back on *see* **go**.

have one's back to the wall to be in a very difficult or desperate situation: *He certainly has his back to the wall as he has lost his job and cannot find another one.* [From someone involved in a fight who can retreat no further and is forced to turn and fight from a good defensive position.]

know backwards *see* **know**.

lean over backwards *see* **bend**.

make a rod for one's (own) back *see* **rod**.

put one's back into (something) (*inf*) to do (something) with all one's strength: *He really put his back into making the business profitable.*

put (someone's) back up (*inf*) to anger (someone): *He put my*