

American English Idioms

Understanding and Speaking
English Like an American

Harry Collis

Illustrated by Mario Risso



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Foreword

Nonnative speakers of English can reach a point in their knowledge of the language where they feel comfortable with standard literary speech; however, they're liable to find themselves in hot water when confronted with idiomatic expressions. When hearing an idiom or colloquialism they may feel frustrated and confused, since the true meaning of the idiom generally cannot be determined by a knowledge of its component parts. In many cases an attempt on the part of the learner to tie down a definition of an idiom that would work in all instances is a futile undertaking.

When used by native speakers, idioms sound natural and fit the occasion, since Americans instinctively feel the imagery and impact of what they are saying. A nonnative speaker of English, on the other hand, may know the basic meaning of such expressions as "I gave it my best shot" or "dressed to kill," but still not be able to use them appropriately. For example, if at a formal gathering an American says to the wife of a foreign diplomat that her gown is elegant, or that she looks lovely, and in appreciation for the compliment her answer is, "Thank you, I gave it my best shot!" or "Thanks, I dressed to kill!", the chances are that the American would be trying his hardest to hold back peals of laughter. Even with a fairly accurate idea of the meaning of an idiomatic expression, the nonnative lacks the intuitive feel for its impact or for the "picture" it creates.

American English Idioms is designed to help bridge the gap between "meaning" and "thrust" of American colloquialisms by providing a situation and a graphic illustration of that situation, so that the imagery created by the expression can be felt, rather than simply learned as a stock definition.

The book is divided into nine sections. The title of each section reflects a notion or a manifestation of the physical world, the world of behavior, or the world of the senses with which the reader may easily identify.

It is hoped that the natural tone of the language of the situations in which the idiom is presented will help to convey the *feeling* of the idiom and the circumstances under which it may be used. The illustrations graphically depicting the meaning of the components of the expressions not only add an element of humor, but also serve to highlight the contrast between the literal and actual meaning of the idioms as presented in the text.

An index is included to facilitate recall and location of the expressions.

American English Idioms is intended primarily for all students of English. Nevertheless, because of the graphic humor of the idioms in caricature, native speakers of English will also find the book refreshingly entertaining.

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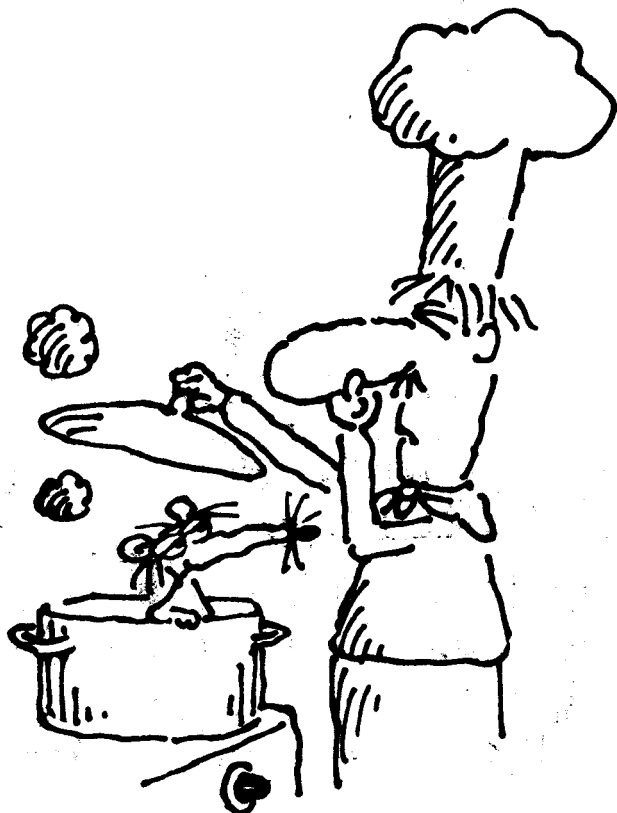
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Section One

It's a Zoo Out There

Smell a Rat



(feel that something is wrong)

How come the front door is open? Didn't you close it before we went shopping?

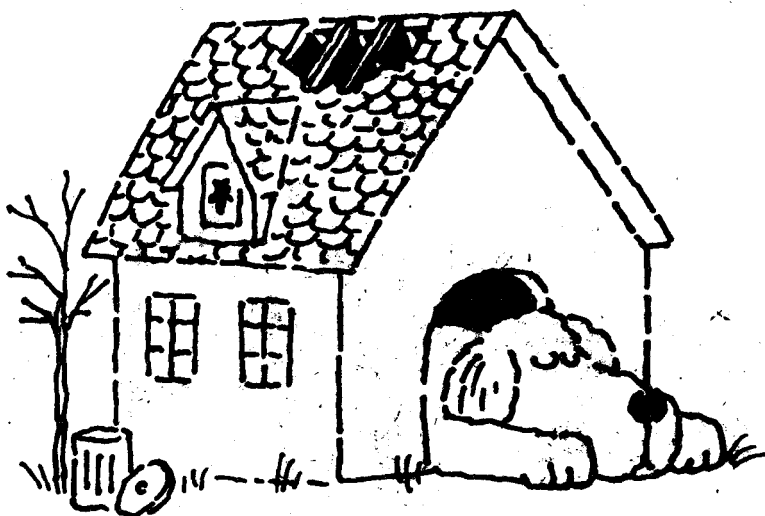
I'm sure I did. I can't understand it.

Frankly, I **smell a rat**.

Me, too. I'm **convinced that something is definitely wrong** here.

We'd better call the police.

Go to the Dogs



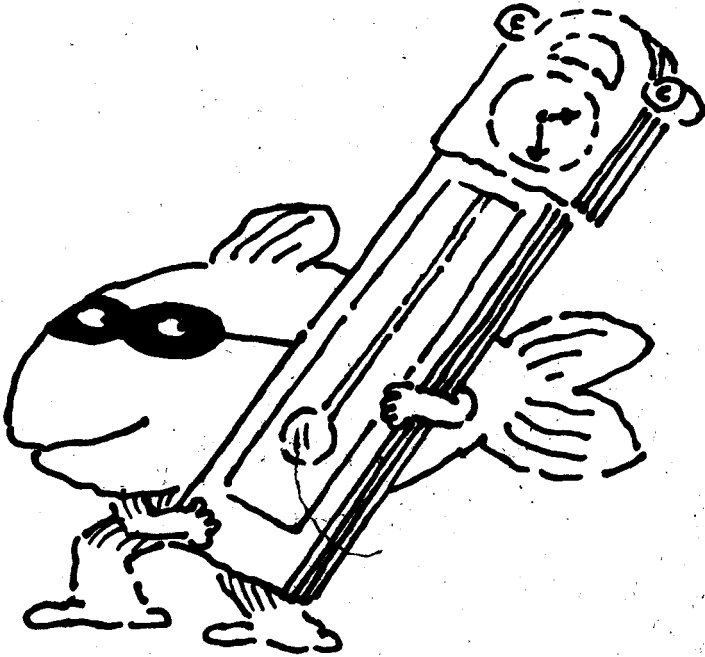
(become run-down)

Have you seen their house lately? It's really **gone to the dogs**.

It's true that it has **become run-down and in serious need of repair**, but I'm sure that it can be fixed up to look like new.

I guess with a little carpentry work and some paint it could look pretty decent.

Fishy



(strange and suspicious)

When the security guard saw a light in the store after closing hours, it seemed to him that there was something **fishy** going on. He called the central office and explained to his superior that he thought something **strange and suspicious** was occurring.

Take It on the Lamb



(flee in a hurry)

Poor Rich has always had his problems with the police. When he found out that they were after him again, he had to **take it on the lamb**. In order to avoid being caught and thrown in jail, he was forced to **flee in a great hurry**.

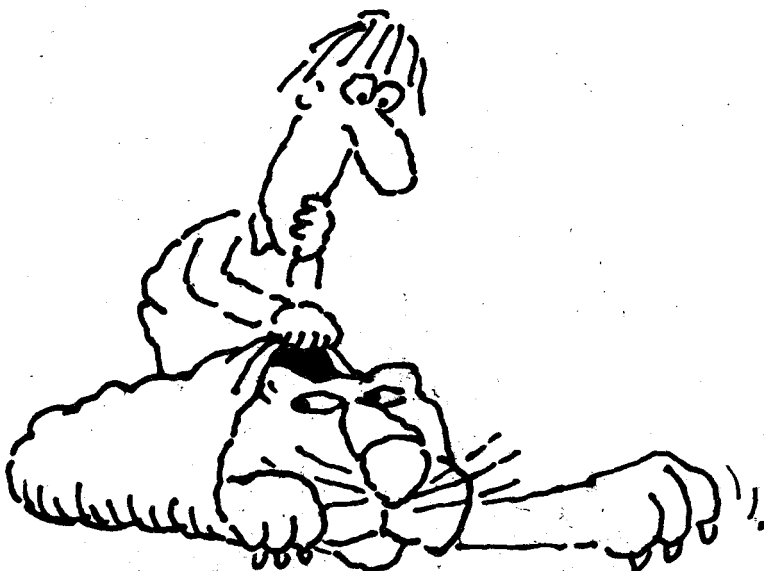
Horse of a Different Color



(quite a different matter)

Eric likes to play jokes on his friends, but he makes sure that nobody is hurt by any of his pranks. A prank that hurts someone is a **horse of a different color**! Being playful is one thing, but hurting someone by one's prank is **quite a different matter**.

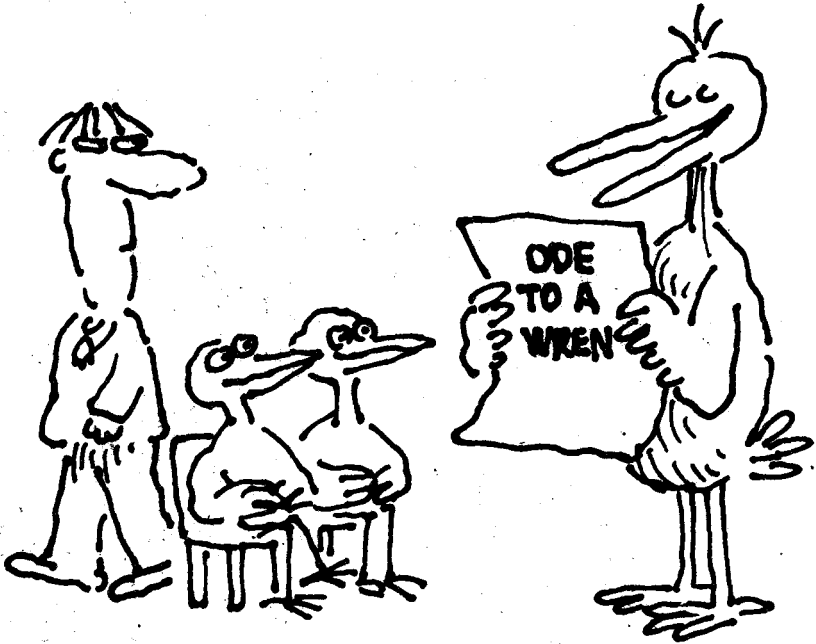
Let the Cat Out of the Bag



(inform beforehand)

Bob was going to retire from teaching in June, and the foreign language department was planning on presenting him with some luggage at his retirement dinner. He wasn't supposed to know about it, but someone **let the cat out of the bag**. At the dinner Bob acted surprised, even though someone had told him what he was getting before the official presentation.

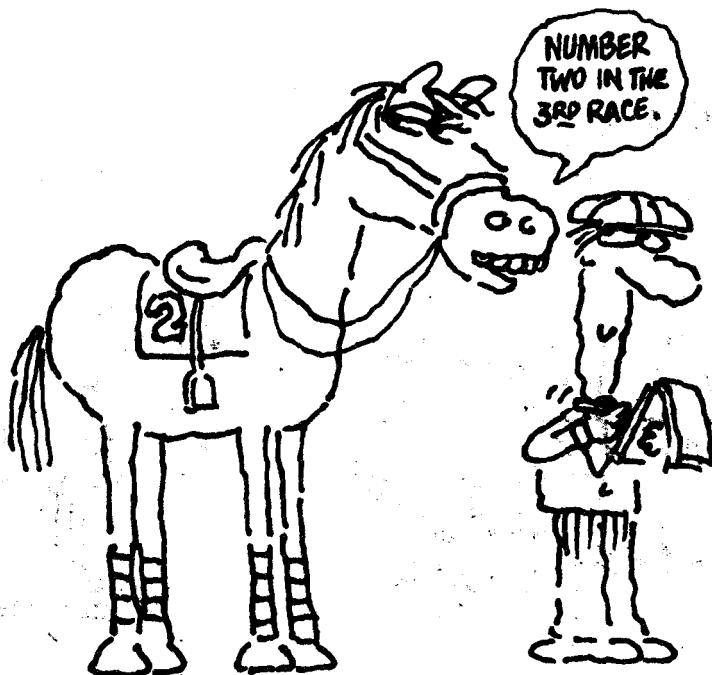
For the Birds



(uninteresting and meaningless)

They went to a poetry reading, but they got bored and restless. As far as they were concerned, it was for **the birds!** They left during an intermission because they found the reading **totally uninteresting and meaningless.**

Straight From the Horse's Mouth



(from a reliable source)

How did you find out that Jill was engaged?
I got the information from a **very reliable source**.
You mean Jill told you so herself?
That's right. I got it **straight from the horse's mouth!**