



H A N D B O O K O F

**COMMONLY USED
AMERICAN IDIOMS**



EDITED BY:

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HANDBOOK OF --- **COMMONLY USED AMERICAN IDIOMS** ---

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by Maxine Tull Boatner, Ph.D., and John Edward Gates, Ph.D.

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Introduction

WHAT IS AN IDIOM?

If you understand every individual word in a text and still fail to grasp what the text is all about, chances are you are having trouble with idioms. For example, suppose you read (or hear) the following:

Sam is a real cool cat. He never blows his stack; he hardly ever flies off the handle. What's more, he knows how to get away with things . . . Well, of course, he is getting on, too. His hair is pepper and salt, but he knows how to make up for lost time by taking it easy. He gets up early, works out, and turns in early. He takes care of the hot dog stand like a breeze until he gets time off. Sam's got it made; this is it for him.

Needless to say, this is not great literary style, but many Americans, especially when they converse among themselves, use expressions of this sort. Now if you have learned the words *cool* to mean 'not very warm,' *cat*, 'the familiar domestic animal,' *blow*, 'exhale air with force,' *stack*, 'a pile of something, or material heaped up,' *fly*, 'propel oneself in the air by means of wings,' *handle*, 'the part of an object designed to hold by hand'—and so forth, you will still not understand the foregoing sample of conversational American English, because basic dictionary information alone will not give you the meaning of the forms involved. An idiom—as it follows from these observations—is the assigning of a new meaning to a group of words each of which already has its own meaning. Here is a "translation" of this highly idiomatic, informal American English text, into a more formal, and relatively idiom-free English:

Sam is really a calm person. He never loses control of himself; he hardly ever becomes very angry. Furthermore, he knows how to manage his business financially by using a few tricks

... Needless to say, he is also getting older. His hair is beginning to turn gray, but he knows how to compensate for wasted time by relaxing. He rises early, exercises, and goes to bed early. He manages his frankfurter stand without visible effort, until it is someone else's turn to work there. Sam is successful; he has reached his life's goal.

Now if you were to explain how the units are organized in this text, you would have to make a little idiom dictionary. It would look like this:

to be a (real) cool cat	to be a really calm person
to blow one's stack	to lose control over oneself, to become angry
to fly off the handle	to become excessively angry
what's more	furthermore, besides, additionally
to get away with something	to perpetrate an illegitimate or tricky act without repercussions or harm
of course	naturally
to be getting on	to age, to get older
pepper and salt	black or dark hair mixed with streaks of gray
to make up for something	to compensate for something
lost time	time wasted, time spent in fruitless labor
to take it easy	to relax, to rest, to avoid worry
to get up	to rise from bed in the morning or at other times
to work out	to exercise, to do gymnastics
to turn in	to go to bed at night
to take care of (a need)	to see the needs of, to manage something
like a breeze	without effort, easily
time off	period in one's job during which one is not performing one's services
to have got it made	to be successful, to have arrived
this is it	to be in a position or in a place, or to have possession of an object, beyond which more of the same is unnecessary

Many of the idioms in this sample list can be found in this handbook. An interesting fact about most of these idioms is that they can easily be identified with the familiar parts of speech. Thus some idioms are clearly verbal in nature, such as *get away with*, *get up*, *work out*, *turn in*, etc. An equally large number are nominal in nature. Thus *hot dog*, "frankfurter in

a bun" and *White House*, "official residence of the President of the United States" serve as nouns. Many serve as adjectives, as in our example *pepper and salt*, meaning "black hair mixed with gray." Many are adverbial, as the examples *like a breeze*, "easily, without effort"; *hammer and tongs*, "violently" (as in *they went at it hammer and tongs*). These idioms that correlate with the familiar parts of speech can be called *lexemic idioms*.

The other most important group comprises longer idioms. Often they are an entire phrase, as in our examples *to fly off the handle*, "lose control over oneself," and *to blow one's stack*, "to become very angry." There are many of these in American English. Some famous ones are: *to kick the bucket*, "die"; *to be up the creek*, "to be in a predicament or a dangerous position"; *to be caught between the devil and deep blue sea*, "to have to choose between two equally unpleasant alternatives"; *to seize the bull by the horns*, "to face a problem and deal with it squarely." Idioms of this sort have been called *tourneures* (from the French), meaning "turns of phrase," or simply *phraseological idioms*. What they have in common is that they do not readily correlate with a given grammatical part of speech and usually require a paraphrase longer than a word.

The form of these phrase-length idioms is set and only a limited number of them can be said in any other way without destroying the meaning. Consider the idiom *kick the bucket*, for example. In the passive voice you get an unacceptable form, such as *the bucket has been kicked by the cowboy*, which no longer means "the cowboy died." Rather it means that he struck a pail with his foot. Idioms of this type are regarded as *completely frozen forms*. Notice, however, that even this idiom can be inflected for tense; e.g., it is all right to say *the cowboy kicked the bucket*, *the cowboy will kick the bucket*, *he has kicked the bucket*, etc. Speakers disagree as much as do grammarians whether or not, for example, it is all right to use this idiom in the gerund form (a gerund being a noun derived from a verb by adding *-ing* to it, e.g., *singing* from *sing*, *eating* from *eat*), as in *his kicking the bucket surprised us all*. It is best to avoid this form.

The next largest class of idioms is that of well-established sayings and proverbs. These include the famous *don't count your chickens before they're hatched* (meaning "do not celebrate the outcome of an undertaking prematurely because it is possible that you will fail, in which case you will look ridiculous"); *don't wash your dirty linen in public* (meaning "do not complain of your domestic affairs before strangers, as it is none of their business"). Many of these originate from some well-known literary source

or come to us from the earliest English speakers of the North American Continent.

Unpredictable meaning is not the only criterion of idiomaticity. Set phrases or phraseological units may also be idiomatic, even though their meanings may be transparent. What is idiomatic (unpredictable) about them is their construction. Examples include *How about a drink?* *What do you say, Joe?* (as a greeting); *as a matter of fact*; *just in case*; *just to be on the safe side*, and many more.

Interestingly, there are also one-word idioms, which occur when a single word is used with a surprisingly different meaning from the original one. Examples include *lemon*, said of an unsuccessful item of manufacture, such as a watch or a car; and *dog*, as said of a disappointing date or a tough exam. (*My date was a dog*; *my math exam was a dog*.)

Why is English, and especially American English, so heavily idiomatic? The most probable reason is that as we develop new concepts, we need new expressions for them, but instead of creating a brand new word, we use already existent words and put them together in a new sense. This, to a degree, is true of all known languages. There are, in fact, no known languages that do not have some idioms. Consider the Chinese expression for "quickly," for example. It is *ma shang*; translated literally it means "horseback." Why should the concept of "quick" be associated with the back of a horse? The answer reveals itself upon a moment's speculation. In the old days, before the train, the automobile, and the airplane, the fastest way of getting from one place to the other was by riding a horse, i.e., on horseback. Thus Chinese *ma shang* is as if we said in English *hurry up! We must go "on horseback,"* i.e., "Hurry up! We must go quickly." Such a form would not be unintelligible in English, though the speaker would have to realize that it is an idiom, and the foreigner would have to learn it. However, in learning idioms a person may make an incorrect guess. Consider the English idiom, *Oh well, the die is cast!* What would you guess this means—if you didn't know it? Perhaps you might guess that the speaker is resigned to something because of the *Oh well* part. The expression means "An irreversible decision has been made and I must live with it." You can now try to reconstruct how this idiom came into being: The die cast in gambling cannot be thrown again; that would be illegal; whether you have a one, a three, or a six, you must face the consequences of your throw—win or lose, as the case may be. (Some people may know that the phrase was used by Caesar when he crossed the Rubicon, an event that led to war.)

How, then, having just learned it, will you use this idiom correctly? First of all, wait until you hear it from a native speaker in a natural context. Once you have heard the idiom used more than once, and fully understand its meaning, you can try using it yourself. Imagine that you have two job offers, one sure, but lower-paying, and one that pays more, but is only tentative. Because of fear of having no job at all, you accept the lower-paying job, at which moment the better offer comes through, and naturally you feel frustrated. You can then say *Oh well, the die is cast . . .* If you try this on a native speaker and he looks at you with sympathy and does not ask "What do you mean?" you have successfully placed a newly learned idiom in an appropriate context. This can be a rewarding experience. Native Americans often react to foreigners politely, but the natives can definitely tell how fluent you are. A person who uses a bookish, stilted expression and never uses an idiom in the right place might develop a reputation as a dry, unimaginative speaker, or as one who is too pompous. *The use of idioms is, therefore, extremely important. It can strike a chord of solidarity with the listener.* The more idioms you use IN THE RIGHT CONTEXT, the more at ease native Americans will feel with you and the more they will think to themselves, "Look how well this person communicates!" To achieve this evaluation you must scrupulously apply the guidance of the RESTRICTIVE USAGE LABELS. See the paragraph under this heading later in this Introduction.

We will now take a look at some practical considerations for the use of *Handbook of Commonly Used American Idioms*.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook can be used successfully by nonnative speakers of English, students, workers, immigrants—in short, anybody who wants to achieve fluency in idiomatic English. The handbook contains entries of the types mentioned—lexemic idioms, phrase idioms, and proverbial idioms. When a phrase has a special meaning that you cannot decode by looking up and understanding the individual words of which the phrase is composed, then you know you are dealing with an idiom. You may already know some of these idioms or may be able to imagine what they mean. Looking in the book for any of the following idioms that you may already know well will help you to understand how you should use this book: *boyfriend, cop out, wheel and deal, gung-ho, generation gap, idiot box, oddball*.

This handbook is like any other tool: You must familiarize yourself with it and learn how to use it before it begins to work well for you. Study the

directions carefully several times, and practice looking up idioms. That way, searching for an idiom and finding it will become second nature to you. If you hear an idiomatic expression that is not in the book, you are likely to develop the ability to track down its meaning after hearing it used for a while. Keep your own idiom list right beside your regular dictionary. If you read a technical text, a novel, or a newspaper article and do not understand an expression, look it up in your regular dictionary first; if you do not find the expression, try this handbook.

How do you find out if this handbook can help you understand a hard sentence? Sometimes you can easily find the idiom, as with *fun house*, *dog-eat-dog*, *bottom line*. If not, pick an important word from the most difficult part and look for that. If it is the first word in the idiom, you will find the whole phrase, followed by an explanation. Thus the expression *bats in one's belfry* is listed in this handbook under *b*, the word *bats*. You may, of course, find that the reason you do not understand a particular sentence is not because of any idioms in it; in that case your regular dictionary will be of help to you. Also, there are more idioms than listed in this book; only the most frequently occurring ones in American English are included. British English, for example, or the English spoken in Australia, certainly have many idiomatic expressions that are not a part of American English.

PART OF SPEECH LABELS

Those idioms that correlate with a well-defined grammatical major form class carry a part of speech label. Sometimes, as with many prepositional phrases, a double label had to be assigned because the given phrase has two grammatical uses, e.g., *in commission* can be either adverbial or adjectival. Many prepositional phrases are adverbial in their literal sense, but adjectival in their nonpredictable, idiomatic sense. The letter *v.* stands for verb; it was assigned to phrases containing a verb and an adverb; verb and preposition; or verb, preposition, and adverb.

The letters *v. phr.* stand for "verbal phrase"; these include verbs with an object, verbs with subject complement, and verbs with prepositional phrase.

RESTRICTIVE USAGE LABELS

You must pay particular attention to whether it is appropriate for you to use a certain idiom in a certain setting. Terms labeled *slang* are often picturesque but socially taboo language whose use should be restricted to

informal circumstances where unconventional vocabulary might be accepted. *Informal* indicates that the form is used in conversation but should be avoided in formal composition. *Formal* indicates the opposite; this is a form that people usually do not say, but they will use it in an essay or in a speech or lecture. *Literary* alerts you to the fact that the form is bookish or is a quotation; it would be inappropriate for you to use these often. *Vulgar* indicates that you should altogether avoid the form; recognizing it may, of course, be important, since one way to appraise a person is by the language he uses. *Substandard* labels a form as chiefly used by less educated people; *nonstandard* means that a phrase is awkward.

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PART OF SPEECH LABELS

These labels are confined with a well-defined grammatical role. They class carry a part of speech label. Sometimes, as with many prepositional phrases, a double label has to be assigned because the given phrase has two grammatical uses; e.g., in construction can be either adverbial or adjectival. Many prepositional phrases are adjectival in their literal sense, but adjectival in their nonliteral or figurative sense. The latter is usually for verbs it was assigned to prepositional phrases and adverbial verbs.

no preposition or verb preposition, and adverb.
The labels "pre" stand for "prepositional phrase." These include verbs with an object, verbs with subject complement, and verbs with prepositional phrase.

RESTRICTIVE USAGE LABELS

You must pay particular attention to whether it is appropriate for you to use a certain idiom in a certain setting. Terms labeled slang are often restricted to informal use. Slang is language whose use should be restricted to

Acknowledgments

This handbook is the result of the work of many hands. It is based on *A Dictionary of American Idioms*, first published by Barron's Educational Series in 1975, which, in turn, had its source in *A Dictionary of Idioms for the Deaf*, edited by Maxine Tull Boatner, project director, aided by chief linguistic advisor, J. Edward Gates, published in 1969 and copyrighted by the American School for the Deaf. The consulting committee consisted of Dr. Edmund E. Boatner, Dr. William J. McClure, Dr. Clarence D. O'Connor, Dr. George T. Pratt, Jack Brady, M.A., Richard K. Lane, and Professor H. A. Gleason, Jr., of the Hartford Seminary Foundation. Special editors for various subcategories, such as usage, sport terms, etc., were Elizabeth Meltzer, and E. Ward Gilman; Loy E. Golladay helped as language consultant with reviewing and editing. Definers were Edmund Casetti, Philip H. Cummings, Anne M. Driscoll, Harold J. Flavin, Dr. Frank Fletcher, E. Ward Gilman, Loy E. Golladay, Dr. Philip H. Goeppe, Dr. Beatrice Hart, Dr. Benjamin Keen, Kendall Litchfield, Harold E. Niergarth, Ruth Gill Price, Thomas H. B. Robertson, Jess Smith, Rhea Talley Stewart, Harriet Smith, Elizabeth D. Spellman, John F. Spellman, George M. Swanson, Barbara Ann Kipfer, and Justyn Moulds. The following have cooperated as simplifiers: Linda Braun, Dr. G. C. Farquhar, Carey S. Lane, Wesley Lauritsen, Nellie MacDonald, Ruth S. McQueen, and Donald Moores. In this new handbook by Barron's Educational Series, a well-known expert on idioms, Dr. Adam Makkai of the University of Illinois at Chicago, has added several hundred contemporary idiomatic phrases to the collection as well as editing the entire text for ease and convenience of reference. Many of these new entries are of the slang character, originating within recent cultural movements; others reflect the popular usage of space technology terms.

Guide to the Parts of an Entry

The following are complete entries as given in this book, for *throw out* or *toss out*, *out of this world*, *give up*, *hot water*, *get lost*, *feather in one's cap*, and *polish the apple—apple polishing*. A guide to the different parts of these entries is given at the left. The order in the outline shows how the different information about the words is presented in this handbook.

Guide

1. ENTRY FORM

The idiom in a basic dictionary form, with a, an, or the or a possessive cut off the beginning, and any words that change left out of the middle.

2. VARIANT

Additional wordings of the same idiom, differing in one or a few words.

3. PART-OF-SPEECH LABEL

Tells you how the phrase is used—like a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, interjection. Some idioms are not used like a single word, but like two or more different parts of speech, or like sentences; these have no part-of-speech label.

4. STYLE LABEL

Tells you whether the phrase is *slang* (used only in very informal situations), *informal* (used only in familiar speaking and writing, not in English compositions, except in dialogue), *formal* (used only in formal writing and speaking, not in friendly talk and letters to familiar friends and relatives), *literary* (used only in stories and poems, for special effects.)

5. SENSE NUMBER

Marks the beginning of one of two or more meanings of an idiom. Each different sense begins with a new number. Closely related senses have letters added to the numbers (e.g., 1a, 1b.).

6. DEFINITION

Tells you the meaning of the idiom. There may be two or more definitions, but they nearly always mean the same thing. They just say the same thing in different words.

Parts of an Entry

[*throw out*]¹ or [*toss out*]² [v.]³ [To force to leave; dismiss.]⁶ [*When the baseball manager complained too loudly, the umpires threw him out.*]⁸ [(The umpires ordered the manager to leave the game when he complained too loudly.)]⁹ [4]⁵ [To cause to be out in baseball by throwing the ball.]⁶ [*The shortstop tossed the runner out.*]⁸

[*give up*]¹ [v.]³ [1a]⁵ [To stop trying to keep; surrender; yield.]⁶ [*The dog had the ball in his mouth and wouldn't give it up.*]⁸ [(He wouldn't drop the ball from his mouth.)]⁹ [*Jimmy is giving up his job as a newsboy when he goes back to school.*]⁸ [(He won't keep the job when he goes back to school.)]⁹ [1b]⁵ [To allow, permit.]⁶ [*Ford gave up two walks in the first inning.*]⁸ [(Ford allowed two men to walk in the first inning.)]⁹ [2]⁵ [To stop doing or having; abandon; quit.]⁶ [*The doctor told Mr. Harris to give up smoking.*]⁸ [(He told him to stop smoking.)]⁹ [*Jane hated to give up her friends when she moved away.*]⁸ [(She didn't want to stop having them for friends.)]⁹ [3]⁵ [To stop hoping for, waiting for, or trying to do.]⁶ [*Johnny was given up by the doctors after the accident, but he lived just the same.*]⁸ [(He was hurt so badly that the doctors stopped believing he could live.)]⁹ [*When Mary didn't come by nine o'clock, we gave her up.*]⁸ [(We stopped waiting.)]⁹ [I couldn't do the puzzle so I gave it up.]⁸ [(I quit trying.)]⁹ [4]⁵ [To stop trying; quit; surrender.]⁶ [*The war will be over when one of the countries gives up.*]⁸ [(When one country stops fighting the war will be finished.)]⁹

A different meaning will be marked by a different sense number.

7. USAGE NOTE

Gives you additional information about the way the idiom is used.

8. ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

Shows one or more ways that the idiom is used in sentences.

9. PARAPHRASE

Gives the meaning of the sentence, or the part of the sentence in which the idiom is; explains the illustrative sentence.

[**hot water**]¹ [*n.*]³ [*informal*]⁴ [Trouble.]⁶—[Used with *in, into, out of*.]⁷ [John's thoughtless remark got him into a lot of hot water.]⁸ [(His remark got him into a lot of trouble.)]⁹ [It was the kind of trouble where it takes a friend to get you out of hot water.]⁸ [(It was the kind of jam in which a friend is the best means of getting out of trouble.)]⁹

[**get lost**]¹ [*v. phr.*]³ [*slang*]⁴—[Go away!]⁶ [Usually used as a command.]⁷ [Get lost! I want to study.]⁸ [(Go away; I want to study.)]⁹ [John told Bert to get lost.]⁸ [(John told Bert to go away.)]⁹

[**feather in one's cap**]¹ [*n. phr.*]³ [Something to be proud of; an honor.]⁶ [It was a feather in his cap to win first prize.]⁸ [(It was an honor for him to win first prize.)]⁹ From the medieval practice of placing a feather in the helmet of one who won honors in battle.

[**polish the apple**]¹ [*v. phr.*]³ [*slang*]⁴ [To try to make someone like one; to try to win favor by flattery.]⁶ [Mary polished the apple at work because she wanted a day off.]⁸ [(Mary tried to please her boss so he would give her a day off.)]⁹

Key to Abbreviations:

adj.—adjective
adv.—adverb
cl.—clause
conj.—conjunction

interj.—interjection
interrog.—interrogative
n.—noun
phr.—phrase

prep.—preposition
syn.—synonym
v.—verb

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A

about time *n. phr.* Finally, but later than it should have been; at last. *Mother said, "It's about time you got up, Mary."* (Mary got up late, and Mother told her she should have gotten up earlier.) *"The basketball team won last night. About time."* (It has been a long time since the team won a game.)

about to 1 Close to; ready to.—Used with an infinitive. *We were about to leave when the snow began.* (We were ready to leave when snow began to fall.) *I haven't gone yet, but I'm about to.* (I'm almost ready to go.) 2 *informal* Having a wish or plan to.—Used with an infinitive in negative sentences. *Freddy wasn't about to give me any of his ice-cream cone.* (He had no plan to give me any.) *"Will she come with us?" asked Bill. "She's not about to," answered Mary.* (She certainly won't come; she doesn't want to come with us.)

above all *adv. phr.* Of first or highest importance; most especially. *Children need many things, but above all they need love.* (They need love the most.)

according to Hoyle *adv. or adj. phr., informal* By the rules; in the usual and correct way; regular. *It's not according to Hoyle to hit a man when he's down.* (It's not fair to hit a man when he's down.) *In quitting without notice, he didn't act according to Hoyle.* (In quitting without first telling the boss, he didn't act by the rules.)

ace in the hole *n. phr.* 1 An ace given to a player face down so that other players in a card game cannot see it. *When the cowboy bet all his money in the poker game he did not know that the*

gambler had an ace in the hole and would win the money. (He did not know that the gambler had a hidden high card that would win the game and the money the cowboy bet.) 2 *informal* Someone or something important that is kept as a surprise until the right time so as to bring victory or success. *The football team has a new play that they are keeping as an ace in the hole for the big game.* (They are keeping the play as a surprise to win the game.) *The lawyer's ace in the hole was a secret witness who saw the accident.* (No one knew that the lawyer had a witness who had seen the accident.)

acid head *n. slang, drug culture* A regular user of LSD on whom the hallucinogenic drug has left a visible effect. *The reason John acts so funny is that he is a regular acid head.* (The reason he acts odd is that he is a regular user of LSD, which has had a detrimental effect on him.)

acid rock *n. slang, drug culture* A characteristic kind of popular music in which loudness and beat predominate over melody; especially such music as influenced by drug experiences. *John is a regular acid rock freak.* (John is unusually and excessively fond of hallucinogenic rock music in which beat predominates over melody.)

across the board *adv. phr.* 1 So that equal amounts of money are bet on the same horse to win a race, to place second, or third. *I bet \$6 on the white horse across the board.* (I bet \$2 that the white horse would win, \$2 that he would be second, and \$2 that he would be third in the race.)—Often used with hyphens as an adjective. *I made an across-the-board bet on*

2 ACT UP

the white horse. (Equal amounts were bet that the horse would either win or place second or third.) 2 *informal* Including everyone or all; so that all are included. *The President wanted taxes lowered across the board.* (He wanted the taxes of everyone, rich and poor, to be lowered.)—Often used with hyphens as an adjective. *The workers at the store got an across-the-board pay raise.* (Everyone got more pay.)

act up *v., informal* 1 To behave badly; act rudely or impolitely. *The dog acted up as the postman came to the door.* (The dog barked and jumped when the mailman came.) 2 To work or run poorly (as a machine); skip; miss. *The car acted up because the spark plugs were dirty.* (The car ran in a jerky way because the spark plugs needed cleaning.)

add fuel to the flame *v. phr.* To make a bad matter worse by adding to its cause; spread trouble; increase anger or other strong feelings by talk or action. *By criticizing Julia, the father added fuel to the flame of his son's love.* (The father made his son love Julia more when he criticized her.) *Bob was angry with Ted, and Ted added fuel to the flame by laughing at him.* (Ted laughed at Bob and Bob became angrier.)

add insult to injury *v. phr.* 1 To hurt someone's feelings after doing him harm. *He added insult to injury when he called the man a rat after he had already beaten him up.* (He fought the man and also called him bad names.) 2 To make bad trouble worse. *We started on a picnic, and first it rained; then, to add insult to injury, the car broke down.* (On the way to the picnic we were caught

in rain, and then, to make things worse, the car broke down.)

afraid of one's shadow *adj. phr., informal* Scared of small or imaginary things; very easily frightened; jumpy; nervous. *Mrs. London won't stay alone in her house at night; she is afraid of her own shadow.* (She is afraid of all sorts of little things.) *Johnny cries whenever he must say hello to an adult; he is afraid of his own shadow.* (He is so shy that he is afraid to say "hello.")

after all *adv. phr.* 1 As a change in plans; anyway.—Used with emphasis on *after*. *Bob thought he couldn't go to the party because he had too much homework, but he went after all.* (At first Bob thought he couldn't go to the party, but he changed his plan and went to it; he went anyhow.) 2 For a good reason that one should remember.—Used with emphasis on *all*. *Why shouldn't Betsy eat the cake? After all, she baked it.* (Betsy should eat some cake because she baked it. Don't say Betsy can't have any cake; remember, she baked it.)

after one's own heart *adj. phr., informal* Well-liked because of agreeing with one's own feelings, interests, and ideas; to one's liking; agreeable.—A cliché. Used after *man* or some similar word. *He likes baseball and good food; he is a man after my own heart.* (I like him because he likes the same things that I like.) *Thanks for agreeing with me about the class party; you're a girl after my own heart.* (You pleased me by agreeing with me about the party.)

against the grain *adv. phr.* So as to annoy or trouble, or to cause anger or dislike.—Usually follows *go*. *His coarse and rude ways went against the grain with me.*

(His rudeness irritated me.) *It went against the grain with her to have to listen to his gossip.* (She disliked hearing his mean talk.)

against time or against the clock

adv. phr. 1 As a test of speed or time; in order to beat a speed record or time limit. *John ran around the track against time, because there was no one else to race against.* (John timed himself with a watch to see how fast he could run around the track.) 2 As fast as possible; so as to do or finish something before a certain time. *It was a race against the clock whether the doctor would get to the scene of the accident soon enough to save the injured man.* (The doctor had to get there as quickly as possible or the injured man might die.) 3 So as to cause delay by using up time. *The outlaw talked against time with the sheriff, hoping that his gang would come and rescue him.* (The outlaw kept talking so his friends would have more time to come and save him before the sheriff could put him in jail.)

ahead of the game **adv. or adj. phr., informal** 1 In a position of advantage; winning (as in a game or contest); ahead (as by making money or profit); making it easier to win or succeed. *The time you spend studying when you are in school will put you ahead of the game in college.* (You will get along better in college than others who have studied less.) *After Tom sold his papers, he was \$5 ahead of the game.* (He made a \$5 profit.)

2 Early; too soon; beforehand. *John studies his lessons only one day early; if he gets too far ahead of the game, he forgets what he read.* (When John reads his lesson very early, he forgets what he read.)

a hell of a or one hell of a **adj. or adv. phr., informal** Extraordinary, very. *He made a hell of a shot in the basketball game.* (He made a fantastic shot...) *Tom said three hours was a hell of a long time to wait to buy a ticket.* (Tom thought three hours was much too long to wait.) *It left one hell of a bruise.* (It left a severe bruise.)

air one's dirty linen in public or wash one's dirty linen in public **v. phr.** To talk about one's private quarrels or disgraces where others can hear; make public something embarrassing that should be kept secret.—A cliché. *Everyone in the school knew that the superintendent and the principal were angry with each other because they aired their dirty linen in public.* (They quarreled where anyone could hear.) *No one knew that the boys' mother was a drug addict, because the family did not wash its dirty linen in public.* (The family did not talk to other people about its secrets.)

air shuttle **n., informal** Air service for regular commuters operating between geographically close major cities, e.g., between Boston and New York City; such flights do not require reservations and operate on a frequent schedule. *My dad takes the air shuttle from Boston to New York once a week.* (He uses the commuter air service between the two cities.)

a little knowledge is a dangerous thing **literary** A person who knows a little about something may think he knows it all and make bad mistakes. *John has read a book on driving a car and now he thinks he can drive. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.* (It would be dangerous for John