

HANDBOOK OF

American Idioms

AND

Idiomatic Usage

BY

HAROLD C. WHITFORD

and ROBERT J. DIXSON

Revised and Expanded

**Handbook  
of  
AMERICAN IDIOMS  
and  
Idiomatic Usage**

**NEW EDITION**

by

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This Handbook lists and defines more than 5000 idioms of the American language and illustrates their use in sentences.

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## PREFACE

Experienced teachers of English have long recognized the importance of the idiom in introducing color and adding grace and precision to speech and writing.

Students of English as a second language lack confidence in their ability to use idiomatic expressions. Even those fluent in English are often puzzled by the idiomatic structure of the language. And if they steer clear of idiomatic usage, their speech and writing tend to become formal and stilted.

To meet this situation the authors offer this handbook which covers idiomatic usage of American English. More than 5,000 of the most common idiomatic phrases and constructions of American English are included here. Each idiom is defined and its use illustrated in a sentence.

No effort has been spared to make the book as practical as possible. Thus, particular stress has been given to the basic idiomatic constructions deriving from such common verbs as *bring, take, go, come, get, do, let, leave, make, put, find*, etc. Specialized or esoteric phrases, which are often colorful but which are of low frequency, have not been included. Only those slang expressions have been listed which are firmly established in the language.

The intention at all times has been to make the book a working manual and a textbook for advanced students of American English.

As a work of reference, it is hoped that this handbook may serve all those, both here and in foreign countries, who need definition and explanation of the idiomatic phrases they come across in their reading or in daily conversation on the streets of American cities, in American motion pictures, or in current literature.

Students of language are no doubt aware of the different words used to describe similar things in Britain and the United States, such as British *petrol* for American gasoline, *cinema* for movie, *lift* for elevator, etc.

In the case of idiomatic usage, the difference is even greater and much more subtle. Thus, a phrase like *to put one's foot into it*, meaning to commit a social blunder, is expressed in Britain by the phrase *to drop a brick*, which would not be generally understood in the United States. This book therefore should prove useful to scholars and to the many Europeans accustomed to British terminology and who are, therefore, at a loss to understand strictly "American" English.

Particular attention is directed to the system of alphabetizing in this book. In a dictionary, where only one word is involved, the problem is simple. An idiom, however, consists of more than one word; the problem is where to place the idiom so that the reader can readily locate it.

The following logical system has been used: All idioms have been alphabetized according to the key or strong word in the idiom. Thus, *make out* is found under *make*; *up to par* is listed under *par*; *on the heels of* under *heels*. In addition, extensive groupings have been made under such basic verbs as *go*, *get*, *do*, *make*, *take*, etc. In this way, the fundamental importance of these verbs in the English language and their use in American idioms has been made obvious.

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## A

**about face** a sudden change of course, or to an opposite decision:—His choice of that house was an about face from his original intention.

**about, be about something** (1) engaged in, doing:—What is he about now? (2) consist of, subject-matter:—What is that novel about?

**about, be about to** ready, on the point of doing something:—We were just about to leave when you telephoned.

**about, going about** being circulated, told:—There is a story going about concerning the impending divorce of the President's daughter.

**about, what about** information requested concerning, regarding:—What about those books you were going to bring me?

**about** See also **bring about**, **come about**.

**above all** most importantly:—You must, above all, be loyal to your country.

**above board** straightforward, honest, open, sometimes expressed "open and above board":—All his business dealings were above board.

**abreast, keep abreast of** be informed as to the latest developments:—It is difficult to keep abreast of the international situation these days.

**absent-minded forgetful**:—He is the typical absent-minded professor, always leaving his umbrella and other possessions on the bus or streetcar.

**accident, by accident** accidentally, unexpectedly:—I met him quite by accident on Fifth Avenue.

**accord, of one accord** in agreement:—We were of one accord in placing the blame on Helen.

**accord, of one's own accord** of one's own wish, voluntarily:—He went to the police and confessed of his own accord.

**account, on account of** because of:—He was discharged from the army on account of poor health.

**account, on no account** under no circumstances, definitely not:—On no account are you to touch an electrical appliance with wet hands.

**account** See **call to account**, **no account**, **square accounts**, **take into account**, **turn to account**.

**ace, within an ace of** within a very short distance of:—The car came within an ace of hitting the child.

**acid test** a thorough, conclusive trial:—Misfortune is an acid test of friendship.

**act of God** something beyond human control:—Some insurance policies do not protect the insured against acts of God.

**act upon** follow, proceed in accordance with:—The committee acted upon the suggestions the experts made.

**act up** act badly, have tantrums, etc.:—Every time Susan takes her baby to the supermarket he acts up.

**ad lib** improvise, interpolate while speaking:—When the actor forgot his lines, he ad libbed convincingly.

**advance, in advance** beforehand:—It is necessary to pay in advance for the lessons.

**advanced in years** no longer young:—Parsons was well advanced in years when he started his new business.

**advantage, take advantage of** (1) impose upon, gain at the expense of another:—Taking advantage of John's ignorance, the dealer sold him a worthless car. (2) to utilize, make use of a particular opportunity:—Many veterans have taken advantage of the opportunity offered them to attend school at government expense.

**affair, have an affair** have extramarital relations with someone of the opposite sex:—It is rumored that he is having an affair with her.

**after all** despite earlier views, nevertheless:—It has turned out to be a nice day after all.

**after, be after someone** pursue, seek to obtain:—He is always after me to go into business with him.

**after, get after someone** scold, criticize:—When Jill failed in three courses, her father got after her.

**after, go after something** strive for, try to obtain:—Now that he has graduated from college he wants to go after a master's degree.

**after one's own heart** to like someone because of kindred interests:—With his love for the great outdoors he is a man after my own heart.

**again and again repeatedly**:—He makes the same mistakes again and again.

**again, as much again** twice as much, double:—These shoes cost me as much again as the last pair I bought.

**again, now and again occasionally**:—Now and again I see Chris walking along Broadway.

**against the grain** irritating, contrary to one's natural inclinations:—It goes against the grain to have to pay him for such poor work.

**age, of age** be 21 years old, or older:—When Harry becomes of age he will inherit a great deal of money.

**age, overage beyond a specified age**:—He was not eligible for the examination because he was overage.

**ager, underage** too young, under a certain age requirement:—John was rejected by the army because he was underage.

**age** See also **awkward age**; **teen age**.

**ahead of time** before an appointed or agreed time:—Whenever I have an appointment I always like to arrive a little ahead of time.

**ahead, go ahead** begin, proceed, move forward:—We are going ahead with our plans to move to Florida.

**air-minded** advocating travel by air:—America became air-minded after the end of World War II.

**air, by air** in an airplane:—When I travel, I prefer to travel by air.

**air, give someone the air** dismiss a person you are tired of:—Herb wanted to marry Janet, but she gave him the air.

**air, hot air** exaggerated talk, without substance or foundation:—Don't pay any attention to him; what he told us was a lot of hot air.

**air, in the air** rumored, suspected but not definitely known:—What changes they will make no one knows, but there is something in the air.

**air, on the air** on the radio or TV, engaging in some radio or TV program:—They say that the President will go on the air tonight at ten o'clock.

**air, up in the air** (1) confused, undecided:—Our plans for a vacation are still up in the air. (2) angry, excited:—He is all up in the air because he had to wait for her a few minutes.

**airs, give oneself airs** act in a superior or conceited manner:—Ever since her husband was elected mayor, Mrs. Allen's neighbors resent the way she gives herself airs. See also **put on airs**.

**air** See also **castles in the air**; **clear the air**; **take the air**; **walk on air**.

**alert, on the alert** watchful, cautious:—They must be constantly on the alert for enemy planes.

**alive with** full of, infested with:—When we opened our picnic basket, our lunch was alive with ants.

**all along** during the past interval, from the beginning:—Even though she had changed very much in those years, I knew all along that it was Joan.

**all at once** suddenly:—All at once it began to rain.

**all at sea** completely confused:—When I try to compute my income tax, I am all at sea.

**all ears** curious, attentive:—When John heard his name mentioned, he was all ears.

**all in** exhausted:—Bea was all in after her climb up the steep mountain.

**all in all** in general, considering all the facts:—He has his faults, but all in all he is a valuable employee.

**all of a sudden** suddenly:—We were sitting peacefully at dinner when all of a sudden the lights went out.

**all-out** thorough, complete:—The strike proved to be an all-out battle between management and labor.

**all over** (1) finished, completed:—By the time we arrived, the party was all over. (2) everywhere:—The news of the catastrophe was broadcast all over the world.

**all set** ready, prepared:—Our plans for the new corporation are all set.

**all the better even better**:—If we plant early, it will be all the better for our garden.

**all the same** (1) the same, equal, of complete indifference:—It's all the same to me whether we meet on Tuesday or on Thursday. (2) despite the fact, nevertheless:—All the same, I would enter the contest if I were you.

**all there sane, rational**:—Ever since he suffered that injury to his head, he has not been quite all there.

**all to the good** See good, to the good.

**all told, counting everything**:—He owns fifteen horses all told.

**all up with** said of a dying person:—It's all up with that hospital patient. They say she'll not live through the night.

**all** See also above all; after all; at all; once and for all; one and all; piece, all of a piece; rage, all the rage; time, all in good time.

**alley, up one's alley** something with which one is familiar or in which one is skilled:—With your knowledge of sports, that football question should be right up your alley.

**allow for** take into consideration, provide for:—In working with this cloth, be sure to allow for shrinkage.

**allowance, make allowance for** take into consideration:—In judging his work, we must make allowance for his lack of experience.

**American plan** referring to hotels which include meals as well as the room in the price quoted, as contrasted to the European plan, which is on the basis of charging for the room only, the guest paying separately for meals:—Most American hotels are on the European plan rather than on the American plan.

**amount to** add up, signify:—His total sales didn't amount to more than a few hundred dollars.

**and how!** an expression meaning "of course," "to a great degree":—You say that he is popular with the girls. And how!

**answer for** be liable for, responsible for:—If you don't tell the truth now, you may have to answer for it later.

**answer (serve) the purpose** suit or serve a particular need:—This room will answer the purpose until we can find something better.

**answer to be named, reply to**:—He answers to the name of Charles.

**answer, what's the answer?** what is the solution?:—One doctor tells me not to eat fats; the other wants me to go on a cream diet. What's the answer?

**ante up** to pay—usually unwillingly:—When his wife was awarded alimony by the court, Kerr had to ante up.

**any, in any case** nevertheless, come what may:—In any case, we must help all we can.

**appearances, keep up appearances** to maintain an outward show of prosperity despite financial reverses:—After Mr. Darrell failed in business, his family had great difficulty keeping up appearances.

**appearance, make an appearance** appear, arrive:—It was ten o'clock when he finally made an appearance.

**apple, be the apple of another's eye** to be greatly treasured, valued highly:—She is the apple of her mother's eye.

**applecart, upset the applecart** spoil through clumsiness, cause to fail:—When he referred to that incident of last summer, he upset the applecart and the whole deal fell through.

**apple-pie order** in neat and perfect condition:—Before her guests arrived, the hostess had put her house in apple-pie order.

**applesauce** pretense, not to be believed, hot air:—A lot of those campaign promises to lower taxes were just so much applesauce.

**approval, on approval** returnable, said of merchandise that can be returned within a short time:—We bought that picture on approval.

**arm, give one's right arm** to sacrifice, give something of great value:—During the long sermon I would have given my right arm for a cigarette.



**arm, put the arm on** (sl.) coerce, request, demand:—Jack's mother put the arm on him for a new fur coat.

**arm's length, keep at arm's length** keep at a distance, away from one:—She kept him at arm's length, thinking that he might try to kiss her.

**arms, bear arms** carry weapons:—Every able-bodied man was expected to bear arms against the enemy.

**arms, take up arms** prepare to fight:—When the Germans invaded Belgium, the Belgians immediately took up arms against them.

**arms, up in arms** angry, annoyed, ready to fight:—Everyone was up in arms about the new parking restrictions.

**arms, with open arms** with a hearty welcome:—He was received with open arms when he returned to his family.

**arms** See also **lay down one's arms**.

**around, to have been around** to be experienced, sophisticated, well-traveled, etc.:—The sex in that play didn't bother my uncle. He's been around.

**around** See also **stick around**.

**as a matter of fact** in fact, to speak the truth, actually:—As a matter of fact, there are as many oranges grown in California as in Florida.

**as far as** to the extent that:—As far as I am concerned, we can leave on either Saturday or Sunday.

**as is** in its present condition, said of a marked-down piece of merchandise:—That twenty-dollar dress is reduced to twelve dollars as is.

**as it were** in other words, so to speak:—He became, as it were, a kind of hero from a strange land.

**as long as** provided:—As long as they don't annoy us, we cannot take any legal action.

**as one united, in agreement**:—We were as one in our opinion of the way the matter had been handled.

**as to** with regard to, regarding:—As to his lack of education, there is nothing he can do about it now.

**as yet** up to the present:—As yet we have not heard a word from him.

**aside from** excepting, apart from, besides:—Aside from his meager savings, he has no resources to fall back on.

**ask for it** provoke it:—Why do you complain about being fired? You asked for it when you called the boss a crook.

**at all** in the least, to the smallest degree:—I doubt whether he knows any English at all.

**at best** at the maximum, under the most favorable circumstances:—At best, this car will go only fifty miles an hour.

**at large** (1) in general, not confined to a particular locality:—He has been elected as a delegate-at-large. (2) free, escaped:—The prisoner who escaped is still at large.

**at most** maximum:—They will give you, at most, four or five dollars for the watch.

**at once** immediately:—She told him to leave the room at once.

**at one** united, in agreement:—We were at one in our opinion of the way the matter had been handled.

**at that** nevertheless, despite the fact:—Helen's assertion that Tom and she are strangers is absurd; but at that, I doubt whether he has known her for more than a few weeks.

**at times** occasionally:—At times he prepares his lessons well; at other times he does very poor work.

**attached, to be attached to** have much affection for:—He seems more attached to his dog than to his wife.

**awkward age** physical and social immaturity of adolescence:—Although she is at the awkward age now, she will probably become a beautiful, graceful young woman.

**AWOL** absent without leave or permission—an army term:—Don was demoted from corporal to private because he had been AWOL.

**axe, get the axe** be discharged from one's job:—Henry got the axe when he arrived late for work three days in succession.

**axe, have an axe to grind** have an interested or selfish motive:—In suggesting the sale of the building he had an axe to grind, because it meant a big commission for him.

## B

**babes in the woods** innocent and inexperienced persons:—In that difficult and competitive business the Hunts are like two babes in the woods.

**baby, be one's baby** be one's preserve, belong to one, entrusted to one:—Your job is to answer complaints. Don't try to sell our product. That's Tom's baby.

**baby grand** a small grand piano:—If we can sell our old upright piano, we shall buy a new baby grand.

**back away** to draw back, move away from:—He backed away from the window as though it were the edge of a precipice.

**back down** to retreat, withdraw from one's previous position:—Don't back down on what you said to them.

**back number** something out of date, out of fashion:—Among so many young people on the dance floor he certainly felt like a back number.

**back off** retreat:—When Jim offered to fight, his detractor backed off.

**back out** desert a cause, fail to fulfill a promise or obligation:—Although he tried to back out of the agreement, the court finally made him fulfill all its terms.

**back-seat driver** a passenger in an automobile who is constantly telling the driver how to drive:—Mother is a back-seat driver and drives Father nuts.

**back talk** impertinence, an impudent reply:—She told the man that she would tolerate no back talk from him.

**back the wrong horse** support one who ultimately loses:—In voting for Smith for mayor, you certainly backed the wrong horse, since he lost by 10,000 votes.

**back up** (1) support:—The President backed up the statements made by his assistant. (2) go toward the rear, put a car in reverse:—She put the car in reverse instead of in drive and backed up over the curb.

**back, be back** return:—I'll be back in an hour.

**back, get one's back up** cause another person to become obstinate and resist or refuse to cooperate:—Unreasonable demands on that employee got his back up.

**back, have one's back to the wall** be hard-pressed, on the defensive:—Because of the enemy's superior numbers our troops found themselves with their backs to the wall.

**back, turn one's back on** ignore, refuse to help, desert:—Being a good Christian, she did not turn her back on her neighbors when they needed help.

**back** See also **behind** one's back; **get back**; **go back on**; **hang back**; **hold back**; **pay back**; **set back**; **take a back seat**; **take back**; **water off a duck's back**.

**backfire** to misfire, have a reverse effect from that intended:—The candidate's plan to discredit his opponent backfired, and his own reputation suffered greatly.

**backing and filling** indecision, state of being unable to decide:—After weeks of backing and filling, Henry accepted the offer of a job.

**bad blood** hostility, bad feeling:—The slavery issue stirred up bad blood between the North and the South.

**bad off** seriously ill:—Ames is in the hospital and is pretty bad off.

**bad, be too bad** be unfortunate, a pity:—It is too bad he doesn't know English better.

**bad, go bad** spoil:—The pudding went bad so we had no dessert with our dinner.

**bad, in bad** in disgrace, disfavor:—John is in bad with his boss for coming to work late every day.

**bad, too bad** unfortunate (a sympathetic remark):—So your wife's still in the hospital. That's too bad.

**bag, a mixed bag** a set of varied or oddly assorted components or parts, said of objects, qualities, etc.:—That new play was a mixed bag of wit and broad farce.

**bag and baggage** with all one's portable belongings:—They arrived at our house, bag and baggage, at one o'clock in the morning.

**bag, be one's bag** something one is interested in, possibly competent at:—Why did you suggest that I work in a restaurant? That's not my bag, I want to be a lawyer.

**bag, in the bag** successfully settled or arranged:—Judging by the enthusiastic reception given him everywhere, they felt that the election was in the bag.

**bag** See also cat, let the cat out of the bag; hold the bag.

**bail out** (1) to parachute from a plane:—When the plane's motor failed, the whole crew bailed out. (2) to remove water from a boat:—While John rowed, his wife bailed out the water from the leaky boat.

**bail, go bail** advance the necessary money as security in order to release an accused person until trial:—The driver who had been arrested had no trouble in finding someone to go bail for him.

**bail, put up bail** (same as go bail).

**baker's dozen** thirteen rather than twelve:—When we opened the package of doughnuts, we found that he had given us a baker's dozen.

**ball up** confuse:—We got balled up in our directions and drove miles out of the way.

**ball, have a ball** have a very good time, thoroughly enjoy oneself:—Last Saturday we went to a county fair and had a ball.

**ball, have a lot on the ball** capable, skilled—like a good baseball pitcher:—He will do well in that work because he has a lot on the ball.

**ball, keep the ball rolling** prevent a lull or cessation of activity:—Although we were strangers, the dinner was successful because our hostess, a good conversationalist, easily kept the ball rolling.

**ball, on the ball** alert, attentive:—If we want to finish this on time, we must keep on the ball.

**baloney** nonsense, worthless promises (sl.):—His talk about helping the working man is a lot of baloney.

**band together** form a group, unite:—The citizens banded together to protest the closing of the highway.

**bandwagon, get on the bandwagon** join up with the majority:—All the delegates to the convention began to desert Smith in order to get on Parker's bandwagon.

**bang, get a bang out of** enjoy, be thrilled by:—I always get a bang out of children at Christmas time.

**bang, with a bang** successfully, enthusiastically—literally with a loud noise:—The new movie went over with a bang.

**bank on something or someone** rely upon, depend upon:—You can always bank on Collins if you need help.

**bankroll** subsidize, support:—That new play has been bankrolled by a prominent publisher.

**bar, call to the bar** admit a law-school graduate to practice:—After he passed the bar exams, Frost was called to the bar.

**bargain for** expect, anticipate:—She got more than she bargained for when she undertook to care for the kittens.

**bargain on** expect:—When John bought a car, he hadn't bargained on the cost of gasoline and garage rent.

**bargain** See also drive a bargain; strike a bargain.

**barge in** enter, interfere—especially rudely or clumsily:—We were sitting there minding our own business when Evans barged in.

**bark up the wrong tree** be on the wrong trail or track:—If he expects to borrow money from me, he is barking up the wrong tree.

**barrel, have someone over a barrel** have someone in an embarrassing position, at one's mercy:—We had no other alternative but admit defeat; they had us over a barrel.

**base, get to first base** make a decent beginning or some progress:—I couldn't get to first base with that girl.

**basket case** a victim without arms or legs:—Some soldiers injured in the war became basket cases.

**bat, go to bat for** defend, sponsor, help:—In an emergency we can always depend upon Smith to go to bat for us.

**bat, not to bat an eye** remain unconcerned, calm:—When the jury pronounced him guilty of murder, he did not bat an eye.

**bat, right off the bat** immediately:—He told us, right off the bat, that he intended to leave her.

**batting average** degree of accomplishment—originally a baseball term:—With his long record of victories, that lawyer has a high batting average in that particular type of lawsuit.

**bawl out** scold, reprimand:—Ralph's boss bawled him out for being lazy.

**bay, at bay** cornered, trapped:—When held at bay, cowards will often fight.

**bay window** protruding stomach of a fat man:—That old banker has quite a bay window.

**beads, tell one's beads** said of a holy person who says a prayer for each bead in his necklace or rosary:—That nun is telling her beads.

**beam, off (on) the beam** in the wrong direction, functioning inaccurately (sl.):—Judging by his confused remarks, I would say that he is slightly off the beam.

**beans, full of beans** (1) active, alert, ambitious, energetic:—That new employee is full of beans and gets things done. (2) incorrect, misinformed:—John is full of beans and doesn't know what he's talking about.

**beans, not to know beans about** to know absolutely nothing about:—Don't ask Jim. He doesn't know beans about forestry.

**beans, spill the beans** disclose a secret:—The trip was supposed to be a secret, but Fred spilled the beans when he mentioned buying plane tickets.

**bear a grudge** continue or nurse ill feeling toward another:—Mary won't speak to John because she still bears a grudge against him for his rudeness last year.

**bear down upon** approach, draw constantly nearer—especially with speed or force:—From all sides, the crowd bore down upon the street from where the flames were coming.

**bear in mind** remember:—Bear in mind that I am not as young as I used to be.

**bear off** turn aside or away from gradually: At the river the road bears off toward the left.

**bear out** confirm, corroborate:—Those facts bear out what I told you yesterday.

**bear up** endure suffering:—Amy is bearing up well after the loss of her brother.

**bear with** tolerate, endure, be patient with:—If you will bear with me a little longer, I am sure I can locate those papers.

**bear, be a bear for** be enthusiastic, vigorous about doing something:—William is a bear for work.

**bearing, have bearing upon** related to, have connection with:—What he said has absolutely no bearing upon the subject under discussion.

**beat a hasty retreat**:—fly, run away from some uncomfortable or threatening situation:—When a passerby approached the thief who was robbing a girl, the thief beat a hasty retreat.

**beat about the bush** delay coming directly to the point, be indirect in manner:—Instead of answering my question about his marks, he began to beat about the bush and tell me all about the different courses he was taking.

**beat generation** term applied to those of our post-war youth who seem to be unable to relate to conventional mores:—Some members of the beat generation avoid work, neatness, cleanliness, and all self-control.

**beat it** leave, go away (sl.):—He kept bothering me so I told him to beat it.

**beat one to it** arrive or get ahead of another person:—Fred applied for the job, but someone else had heard about the vacancy and beat him to it.

**beat one to the draw** originally, pull out one's gun first; also win over another, snatch the victory:—Both Tom and Jerry wanted to marry Rosalie, but Tom beat his rival to the draw.

**beat one's brains out** think and work at energetically, desperately:—The poor author beat his brains out trying to find someone to publish his novel.

**beat one's head against a stone wall** struggle against insurmountable difficulties:—It is useless for him to seek work in that company; he is just beating his head against a stone wall.

**beat the band** tremendously:—That singer can sing to beat the band.

**beat the rap** escape the legal penalty, be acquitted (sl.):—Despite the strong evidence against him, the prisoner beat the rap and went free.

**beat time** mark or otherwise follow the rhythm of a piece of music:—He beat time with his foot.

**beat up** attack and assault bodily:—The thieves not only took his money but beat him up badly.

**beat, to beat one** puzzle:—It beats me how my uncle can still play tennis at the age of eighty.

**beat** See also deadbeat, pound a beat.

**beaten path** the usual route established by custom or convention:—He is a conservative person who can be counted upon to follow the beaten path.

**beaten track** Same as beaten path.

**become of** happen to:—What will become of the children now that both parents are dead?

**becoming, be becoming** to suit, look well on—said of clothes:—That hat is very becoming to you.

**bed of roses** a place of beauty, ease, and comfort:—Anyone who thinks that the job of being President of the United States is a bed of roses is quite mistaken.

**bed** See also take to one's bed; get up on the wrong side of the bed.

**bee, have a bee in one's bonnet** have some set, foolish or exaggerated notion:—He has a bee in his bonnet about reforming the world.

**beef about** complain (sl.):—He is always beefing about the amount of work he has to do.

**beef up** increase in size or amount or in strength, spend more money on:—That sales manager told his salesmen to beef up their sales.

**beeline, make a beeline for** take or follow the shortest possible route:—At exactly twelve o'clock everyone made a beeline for the dining room.

**before long** soon:—We'll be seeing you again before long.

**beg the question** to assume the validity of a point in dispute before it is proved:—To refer to the accused as a "thief" at the outset of the trial is to beg the question.

**begin with** in the first place, as a preliminary statement:—To begin with, John is too young for that kind of job.

**behind bars** in prison:—The judge will put him behind bars for at least five years.

**behind one's back** speak or act treacherously, outside the victim's hearing, or without his knowledge:—Jean seems very fond of her friend Ellen, but she loves to gossip about her behind her back.

**behind the eight ball** unlucky, in a very awkward or disadvantageous position (sl.):—Because of his handicap, it is very difficult for him to obtain work, so that if he loses his present job he will certainly be behind the eight ball.

**behind the scenes** at the rear, where the inner mechanism of something is revealed:—That documentary film took us behind the scenes and showed us how the Department of Justice really operates.

**behind the times** out of date:—Their courses in physics are very much behind the times.

**behind, get behind** support, help:—Let's all get behind his drive for a new hospital and contribute generously to the fund.

**believe in** have faith in the existence of:—Atheists do not believe in God.

**bellyache to complain** (sl.):—He's always bellyaching about the amount of traveling he has to do.

**below par** below standard:—His health has been below par recently.

**belt, below the belt** unfairly, in an unsportsmanlike manner, an unjustified remark, foul blow:—*When Sam's boss said to him: "You have not only made a mess of your job but also of your marriage," he was hitting below the belt.*

**belt, under one's belt** acquired, taken care of, provided for:—*With the necessary capital under my belt, I can open the bookstore I have always wanted.*

**bend over backwards** make a supreme or exaggerated effort:—*She bent over backwards to show that she had overlooked the incident.*

**bend** see ear, bend one's ear.

**beneath one** below one's dignity or ideals:—*He felt it would be beneath him to accept such a menial job.*

**benefit, give someone the benefit of the doubt** assume a person to be innocent rather than guilty:—*The money had been stolen and John was in the house at the time, but we gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed that some burglar had taken it.*

**bent on** determined, decided upon a certain act:—*He is bent on becoming a lawyer.*

**berth, give a wide berth to** avoid:—*He disliked his uncle and always gave him a wide berth.*

**beside oneself** angry, frantic:—*She was beside herself with grief at the news of her son's accident.*

**beside the point** not pertinent, away from the subject being discussed:—*We were discussing political parties, and his remarks about high prices were completely beside the point.*

**best man** the groom's aide at a wedding:—*Who will be your best man when you get married?*

**best-seller** a popular book, notable for the large number of copies sold:—*Gone with the Wind was a famous best-seller.*

**best, all for the best** for the ultimate good:—*He has decided to continue at the university, and I am sure that it is all for the best.*

**best, have the best of** win, gain supremacy:—*Although Carl put up a good fight, his opponent had the best of him.*

**best, make the best of something** do as well as one can in an undesirable situation:—*Since we can't find a bigger apartment, we'll have to make the best of what we have.*

**best** See also level best.

**bet, you bet!** an exclamation meaning "certainly," "surely"—something so sure that one can bet on it:—*You ask whether he is a good tennis player. You bet he is!*

**better half** one's wife (humorous):—*I'll go with you if my better half lets me.*

**better off** in a better condition, richer, happier:—*You will be better off living nearer to your job.*

**better, get the better of** get the advantage of, win over:—*He always gets the better of anyone he deals with.*

**better, had better** it would be wise or advisable for one:—*He had better go to a doctor at once before infection sets in.*

**better, so much the better** even more advantageous:—*If he sells more goods it will be so much the better for his company.*

**better, think better of** reconsider, decide prudently on a different course:—*He was going to leave school, but later he thought better of it.*

**bid fair** to looks as if, be likely to:—*With such strong voter-support, the political candidate bids fair to win the governorship.*

**big brother** an all-seeing dictator in a police state:—*In the novel 1984 Big Brother could watch the interior of everybody's home through a television receiver.*

**big shot** an important person (sl.):—*He is a big shot in the State Department.*

**big, in the big time** (sl.) in a position of importance, at the top of one's business or profession:—*Since the war he has always associated with a lot of big-time lawyers and politicians.*

**big, make it big** become very successful:—*Although he left his village a poor boy, Ellis made it big in New York.*

**big, talk big** exaggerate, give oneself importance:—He talks big, but don't pay any attention to what he says.

**bind, in a bind** circumscribed, imprisoned, unable to get loose:—We can't issue any more stock in our company because the government has us in a bind.

**bird in hand** something that one already has as opposed to something one may possibly obtain:—A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.

**birds of a feather** those belonging to the same group or class:—If he associates with criminals then he himself must be a criminal, because birds of a feather flock together.

**birds, for the birds** said of something not valued, or worthless:—Hot dogs? They're for the birds. Give me a steak.

**bird, give someone the bird** tease, annoy, jeer at (sl.):—Every time the speaker referred to all he had done for the organization they gave him the bird.

**bird** See also **early bird**; **kill two birds with one stone**.

**bit, do one's bit** do one's share or duty:—In wartime everyone should do his bit, either at the front or at home.

**bit, not a bit** not in the least:—When I asked whether he was afraid, he answered, "Not a bit!"

**bit, take the bit into one's mouth** assert oneself, revolt:—He took the bit into his mouth and warned us that henceforth we would be answerable to him only.

**bite off more than one can chew** undertake something which is beyond one's capacity or power:—In trying to swim across that river he bit off more than he could chew and had to be rescued when only halfway across.

**bite one's head off** answer someone angrily:—You don't have to bite my head off just because I asked you a simple question.

**bite, I'll bite** an expression suggesting that one agrees to serve as the victim or butt of a joke:—When I asked him whether he knew the difference between a woman and an umbrella, he said: "All right! I'll bite. What is the difference?"

**bite, put the bite on** solicit funds:—Jerry's church, his relatives, and his club all put the bite on him.

**bits, two bits** See **two**.

**black and blue** badly bruised:—Her ankle was black and blue from the fall.

**black eye** a bruised eye:—Enraged, he swung at his companion and gave him a black eye.

**black eye, give a black eye** discredit:—His subversive action will give a black eye to the whole liberal movement.

**black out** (1) make dark:—The city was blacked out during the air raid. (2) faint, lose consciousness temporarily The pilot blacked out for a moment upon reaching such a high altitude.

**blackout** darkening of a city during an air raid:—During the last war New York had many blackouts.

**black power** movement to increase the political and economic strength of black Americans:—Black power was one of the reasons responsible for the election of a black mayor.

**black sheep** a ne'er-do-well, a good-for-nothing member of a family:—All the brothers except James were honest men; James was always the black sheep of the family.

**black, in black and white** in writing, clearly and unequivocally expressed:—He wants everything put in black and white before he enters the business.

**blame, be to blame** have the responsibility, be at fault:—Who is to blame for all this damage?

**blank, draw a blank** get no results, get nothing:—Our English teacher tried to get the principal's job, but she drew a blank.

**blanket, wet blanket** someone who spoils an idea or situation by his pessimism or lack of cooperation:—Don't invite him again. Remember what a wet blanket he was on the last picnic.

**blast, full blast** at full capacity:—With all those government orders, that factory is running full blast.

**blast, give one a blast** telephone:—After you have decided which suit you want, just give me a blast and I'll proceed with the alterations.

**blind alley** an alley or a street closed at one end, a dead end, impasse:—Such a routine job would only lead him into a blind alley.

**blind date** an engagement or "date" arranged by mutual friends for a young man and woman who have not previously met:—Bill says he definitely refuses to go on any more blind dates.

**blind, have a blind spot** be unable or unwilling to see defects in another:—Though Elsa's mother can see faults in her daughter, Elsa's father has a blind spot where his daughter's shortcomings are concerned.

**blink, on the blink** not working, out of order:—Our refrigerator went on the blink and much of our food was spoiled.

**block, chip off the old block** a copy of or close resemblance to one's father:—His father was quite an athlete, and with his interest in sports Jack appears to be a chip off the old block.

**blockbuster** something tremendous in size and explosive impact, something that shocks:—The sudden failure of that large corporation was a blockbuster to investors.

**blood, in cold blood** mercilessly, ruthlessly:—They say he murdered her in cold blood.

**blot out** cover, obscure, obstruct:—The fog blots out the view of the river.

**blow away** carry away into the distance:—The wind blew away the clothes that were hanging on the line.

**blow down** throw or blow to the ground:—The strong wind blew down a number of trees on our block.

**blow hot and cold** vacillate, change completely from one point of view to another:—The administration has blown hot and cold on the question of certain import duties.

**blow in, come in, return:**—What time did Mark blow in last night?

**blow off steam** gain relief through venting one's anger:—Don't discuss that touchy matter with him now; after he blows off a little steam he will be more reasonable.

**blow one's lines** forget his part, said of an actor:—It was her first appearance on television, and the nervous actress blew her lines.

**blow one's own horn** boast, praise oneself:—He likes to blow his own horn about what he accomplished during the war years.

**blow one's stack** be furious, lose control of oneself, berate:—When Mr. Green found that his wife had crumpled two fenders of the car, he blew his stack.

**blow one's top** become very angry or excited, hysterical (sl.):—He got so upset over what she said that I thought he was going to blow his top.

**blow out** (1) fail, cease to function, explode—said particularly of tires and fuses:—The accident occurred when his front tire blew out. (2) to extinguish:—She blew out the candle and went to bed. (3) a big party:—At the end of the campaign we celebrated with a big blow-out at the Hotel Waldorf.

**blow over** subside, become less serious:—All this publicity about his accepting bribes will blow over in a few months.

**blow taps** sound the final bugle call of the evening:—After taps is blown, the young campers have to turn out their lights and go to sleep.

**blow-up** a greatly enlarged photograph or drawing:—That theater posted a blow-up of a favorable review of the play in front of its box office.

**blow up** (v.) (1) explode and destroy:—The retreating troops blew up the bridges behind them. (2) lose one's temper:—When his secretary asked for the day off, Mr. Smith, with so much work piled up in front of him, blew up. (3) inflate:—I have to get my front tires blown up.

**blue** depressed, melancholy:—She has been blue ever since her boy friend left for Europe.



**blue-collar worker** a manual worker in contrast to a white-collar or office worker:—Many blue-collar workers are effectively supported in their demands by powerful labor unions.

**blue moon, once in a blue moon** seldom, almost never:—He visits us once in a blue moon.

**blue-pencil** to edit:—The author complained that his manuscript had been heavily blue-penciled by the publishers.

**blue-ribbon jury** a special jury recruited to try a complex or particularly important case:—When the bank president was on trial for embezzlement, a blue-ribbon jury was chosen.

**blues, have the blues** be sad, gloomy in spirits:—I don't know why, but I have had the blues all day.

**board, across-the-board** for all employees in a company or union:—The union arranged an across-the-board raise of five percent.

**board, go by the board** be neglected or left unattended to, undone:—Those children have lots of spending money, but their clothes go by the board.

**board, on board** in or on a ship, train, etc.:—The ocean liner stopped in the harbor to take the pilot on board.

**board** See also above board.

**boat, in the same boat** sharing the same experience or destiny:—We wage earners are all in the same boat during these inflationary times.

**boat, miss the boat** fail at something:—That publicity agent could have had the mayor endorse his client's product, but he missed the boat.

**bob up** appear suddenly and unexpectedly:—She is always bobbing up at the most inopportune moment.

**bobby soxers** young girls in their teens, so called from their use of short socks instead of stockings:—The theater was full of bobby-soxers yelling and screaming for their favorite singer.

**body, in a body** in a group, collectively:—The whole committee of seventeen arrived in a body.

**body, keep body and soul together** keep alive, sustain oneself:—In these days of rising prices it is difficult for many poor people to keep body and soul together.

**bog down** slow down, be so entangled that further progress is impossible:—The truce negotiations have bogged down for the third time.

**boil away** disappear through the process of boiling:—When I finally remembered to look at the coffee, it had all boiled away.

**boil down** condense, reduce:—That 500-page manuscript must be boiled down to 200 pages.

**boil over** (1) rise through boiling, and overflow the sides of a pan or pot:—Take that milk off the stove before it boils over. (2) become enraged:—When Max learned that they had not included him in their plans, he boiled over.

**boil, make one's blood boil** make one very angry:—His unkind remarks about Helen made my blood boil.

**bold, make bold** have the temerity to, be rash enough to say:—May I make bold to suggest that our President spend a little less time on the golf links and more time in his office?

**bolt from the blue** a sudden surprise stroke or blow, a catastrophe:—The news of the attack on Pearl Harbor came like a bolt from the blue.

**bolt upright** in a rigid, upright position:—The doctor's warning made me sit bolt upright in my chair.

**bolt** See also shoot one's bolt.

**bone of contention** cause or matter in disagreement:—The real bone of contention between the owners and the strikers is not higher wages but better working conditions.

**bone up on** study, review:—Before taking his exams, John had to bone up on several subjects which he hadn't studied for years.

**bone, have a bone to pick with someone** have an unpleasant matter to settle or discuss with someone:—I have a bone to pick with you. Why didn't you return those reports to me as you promised to do?