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NTC's AMERICAN IDIOMS Dictionary

Second Edition

Richard A. Spears, Ph.D.

The Most Practical Reference

for the Everyday Expressions

of Contemporary American English



NTC Publishing Group

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TO THE USER

All languages have phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know all the words in a phrase and understand all the grammar of the phrase completely, the meaning may still be confusing. A phrase or sentence of this type is said to be idiomatic. Many proverbs, informal phrases, and common sayings offer this kind of problem. This dictionary is a collection of the idiomatic phrases and sentences that occur frequently in American English. The second edition contains over 1,000 idiomatic expressions not listed in the first edition and a number of new features that provide additional convenience and simplicity.

How to Use This Dictionary

1. First, try looking up the complete phrase that you are seeking in the dictionary. Each expression is alphabetized under the first word of the phrase. For example, **in so many words** will be found in the section dealing with the letter “i.” Entry phrases are never inverted or reordered like **so many words, in; words, in so many;** or **many words, in so.** Initial articles — *a, an, the* — are not part of the entry except in the case of proverbs or other complete sentences, where the choice of article is invariant. In the entry heads, the words *someone* or *one* stand for persons, and *something* stands for things.
2. If you do not find the phrase you want or if you cannot decide exactly what the phrase is, look up any major word in the phrase in the ***Phrase-Finder Index***, which begins on page 402. There you will find all the phrases that contain the key word you have looked up. Pick out the phrase you want and find it in the dictionary. Instructions on how to use the ***Phrase-Finder Index*** can be found on page 401.
3. An entry head may have one or more alternate forms. The entry head and its alternates are printed in **boldface type**, and the alternate forms are preceded by “AND.” Two or more alternate forms are separated by a semicolon. For example:

bear a grudge (against someone)
AND have a grudge against someone; hold a grudge (against someone) to have an old resentment for someone; to have continual anger for someone. □ *She bears a grudge against the judge who sentenced her.* □ *I have a grudge against my landlord for overcharging me.* □ *How long can a person hold a grudge? Let's be friends.*

4. Many of the entry phrases have more than one major sense or meaning. These senses or meanings are numbered with boldface numerals. For example:

stand for something **1.** to endure something. □ *The teacher won't stand for any whispering in class.* □ *We just can't stand for that kind of behavior.* **2.** to signify something. □ *In a traffic signal, the red light stands for "stop."* □ *The abbreviation Dr. stands for "doctor."* **3.** to endorse or support an ideal. □ *The mayor claims to stand for honesty in government and jobs for everyone.* □ *Every candidate for public office stands for all the good things in life.*

5. Individual numbered senses may have additional forms that appear in boldface type, in which case the AND and the additional form(s) follow the numeral. For example:

balance the accounts **1.** **AND balance the books** to determine through accounting that accounts are in balance, that all money is accounted for. □ *Jane was up all night balancing the accounts.* □ *The cashier was not allowed to leave the bank until the manager balanced the books.* **2.** to get even [with someone]. □ *Tom hit Bob.*

Bob balanced the accounts by breaking Tom's toy car. □ Once we have balanced the accounts, we can shake hands and be friends again.

6. The boldface entry head (together with any alternate forms) is usually followed by a definition or an explanation. Alternate definitions are separated by a semicolon (;). These additional definitions are usually given to show slight differences in meaning or interpretation. Sometimes an alternate definition is given when the vocabulary of the first definition is difficult. For example:

dead on one's or its feet exhausted; worn out; no longer effective or successful. □ *Ann is so tired. She's really dead on her feet.* □ *He can't teach effectively anymore. He's dead on his feet.* □ *This inefficient company is dead on its feet.*

7. Some entries are followed by instructions to look up some other phrase. For example:

scarcer than hen's teeth See (as)
scarce as hen's teeth.

8. A definition may be followed by comments in parentheses. These comments tell about some of the variations of the phrase, explain what the phrase alludes to, give other useful information, or indicate cross-referencing. For example:

desert a sinking ship AND **leave a sinking ship** to leave a place, a person, or a situation when things become difficult or unpleasant. (Rats are said to be the first to leave a ship that is sinking.) □ *I hate to be the one to desert a sinking ship, but I can't stand it around here anymore.* □ *There goes Tom. Wouldn't you know he'd leave a sinking ship rather than stay around and try to help?*

9. When the comments apply to all the numbered senses of an entry, the comments are found before the first numbered sense. For example:

slow on the draw (Slang. Compare with *quick on the draw*.) 1. slow in drawing a gun. (Cowboy and gangster talk.) □ *Bill got shot because he's so slow on the draw.* □ *The gunslinger said, "I have to be fast. If I'm slow on the draw, I'm dead."* 2. AND **slow on the uptake** slow to figure something out; slow-thinking. □ *Sally didn't get the joke because she's sort of slow on the draw.* □ *Bill—who's slow on the uptake—didn't get the joke until it was explained to him.*

10. Some definitions are preceded by additional information in square brackets. This information makes the definition clearer by supplying information about the typical grammatical context in which the phrase is found. For example:

serve someone right [for an act or event] to punish someone fairly. [for doing something] □ *John copied off my test paper. It would serve him right if he fails the test.* □ *It'd serve John right if he got arrested.*

11. Some entries are cross-referenced to similar idiomatic phrases that are related in form or meaning. For example:

in the black not in debt; in a financially profitable condition. (Compare with *in the red*. *In* can be replaced with *into*. See the explanation at *in a bind* and the examples.) □ *I wish my accounts were in the black.* □ *Sally moved the company into the black.*

12. Sometimes the numbered senses refer only to people or things, but not both, even though the entry head indicates both *someone or something*. In

such cases, the numeral is followed by “[with *someone*]” or “[with *something*].” For example:

blow someone or something away 1.

to kill or destroy someone or something. (Slang. Also literal.) □

He drew his gun and blew the thief away. [T] *His bad attitude blew*

away the whole deal. 2. [with *some-*

one] to overcome someone emotionally. □

The bad news really blew me away. □

Your news just blew me away! How exciting!

13. Examples are introduced by a □ or a [T] and are in *italic type*. The [T] introduces an example containing two elements that have been transposed, such as a particle and the object of a verb. This is typically found with phrasal verbs. For example:

gloss something over to cover up or

conceal an error; to make something appear right by minimizing or concealing the flaws. □

When I asked him not to gloss the flaws over, he got angry. [T] *When Mr.*

Brown was selling me the car, he tried to gloss over its defects.

14. An entry head appears in *slanted type* whenever the phrase is referred to in a definition or cross-reference.

15. Some entry heads stand for two or more idiomatic expressions. Parentheses are used to show which parts of the phrase may or may not be there. For example: (all) **set to do something** stands for **all set to do something** and **set to do something**.

TERMS AND SYMBOLS

- (a box) marks the beginning of an example.
- ▢ (a box containing a “T”) marks the beginning of an example in which two elements of the phrase, usually a particle and an object, are transposed.
- AND indicates that an entry head has variant forms that are the same or similar in meaning as the entry head. One or more variant forms are preceded by AND.
- Also literal.** indicates that the idiomatic expression also has a common, literal interpretation.
- entry block** is the body of an entry starting with a bold face word or phrase and running to the next bold face word or phrase. *Entry blocks* are separated by white space.
- entry head** is the first phrase or word, in boldface type, of an *entry block*; the phrase or word that the definition explains.
- Fixed order.** indicates that a group of two or more words always appears in the same order, such as “fast and furious,” but not “furious and fast.”
- formal** indicates an expression that is literary in origin or usually reserved for writing.
- informal** refers to a very casual expression that is most likely to be spoken and not written.
- jocular** describes an expression that is intended to be humorous.
- see** means to turn to the *entry head* indicated.
- see also** means to consult the *entry head* indicated for additional information or to find expressions similar in form or meaning to the *entry head* containing the *see also* instruction.
- see under** means to turn to the *entry head* indicated and look for the phrase you are seeking *within* the entry indicated, usually after AND.

ABOUT THIS DICTIONARY

NTC's American Idioms Dictionary is designed for easy use by life-long speakers of English, as well as the new-to-English speaker or learner. The dictionary uses over 12,000 examples to illustrate the meanings of approximately 8,500 idiomatic forms in over 6,000 entry blocks. An appendix includes 500 irreversible binomial and trinomial phrases. The dictionary contains a unique Phrase-Finder Index that allows the user to identify and look up any expression in the dictionary from a single key word.

This is a dictionary of form and meaning. It focuses on the user's need to know the meaning, usage, and appropriate contexts for each idiomatic phrase. The definitions and examples provide sufficient information to allow a person trained in English grammar to parse the idiomatic expressions. Persons who do not understand English grammar or English grammar terminology and who cannot themselves parse the idiomatic expressions or example sentences do not derive much benefit from grammatical explanations. The dictionary relies on clarity, simplicity, and carefully written examples to lead the user to the meaning and appropriate usage of each idiomatic expression.

The special features that make this book useful for learners do not detract from or interfere with its usefulness for the life-long English speaker, and should, in fact, add to its usefulness. Specialized knowledge of English lexical and sentential semantics and English grammar is not used in indexing, defining, or explaining the idiomatic expressions.

Idioms or idiomatic expressions are often defined as "set phrases" or "fixed phrases." The number of idiomatic expressions that are totally invariant is really quite small, however, even when the English proverbs are included in this category. Most such phrases can vary the choice of noun or pronoun and most select from a wide variety of verb tense and aspect patterns. Adjectives and some adverbs can be added at will to idiomatic phrases. Furthermore, the new-to-English user is faced with the difficulty of isolating an idiomatic expression from the rest of the sentence and determining where to find it in a dictionary of idioms. If the user fails to extract the essential idiomatic expression, the likelihood of finding it in *any* dictionary is reduced considerably.

In dictionaries that list each idiomatic expression under a “key word,” there may be some difficulty in deciding what the “key word” is. In phrases such as **on the button** or **in the cards**, the key word, the only noun in the phrase, is easy to determine if one has correctly isolated the phrase from the sentence in which it was found. In phrases that have more than one noun, such as **all hours of the day and night** or **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush**, deciding on a “key word” may be more difficult. It is even more difficult when the only noun in the phrase is one of the variable words, such as with **go around with** her old friends, **go around with** Jim, **go around with** no one at all, which are examples of **go around with someone**.

This dictionary uses the *Phrase-Finder Index* to get around the problems users face with trying to isolate the complete idiom and trying to predict its location in the dictionary. Simply look up *any* major word — noun, verb, adjective, or adverb — in the Phrase-Finder Index, and you will find the form of the entry head that contains the definition you seek.

For instance, in trying to unravel the sentence “This one is head and shoulders above the others,” the idiomatic expression **head and shoulders above someone or something** will be listed in the index under *HEAD*, *SHOULDERS*, and *ABOVE*. The *Phrase-Finder Index* allows the user to determine which portion of the sentence is the idiom as well as the form of the idiom chosen to be an entry head.

Another important feature for the learner is the use of object placeholders indicating human and nonhuman. Typical dictionary entries for idiomatic phrases — especially for phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, and phrasal prepositional verbs — omit direct objects, as in **put on hold**, **bail out**, or **see through**. This dictionary uses the stand-in pronouns *someone* and *something* to indicate whether the verb in the phrase calls for an object, where the object should go in the sentence, whether the object can be human or nonhuman, and if there are different meanings dependent on whether the object is human or nonhuman. All of that information is vital to learners of English, although it seems to come perfectly naturally to life-long English speakers. For example, there is a big difference between **put someone on hold** and **put something on hold**, or between **bail someone out** and **bail something out**. There is also a great difference between **see something through** and **see through something**. These differences may never be revealed if the entry heads are just **put on hold**, **bail out**, and **see through**, with no object indicated.

Many idioms have optional parts. In fact, a phrase may seem opaque simply because it is really just an ellipsis of a longer, less opaque phrase. This dictionary shows as full a form of an idiom as possible with the frequently omitted parts in parentheses. For example: **back down (from someone or something)** and **be all eyes (and ears)**.

The dictionary includes numerous irreversible binomials and trinomials — sequences of two or three words that are in a fixed order, such as *fast and furious*, but not *furious and fast*. These sequences are listed in the Appendix, beginning on page 525, and those that require explanation are cross-referenced to entries in the dictionary.

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A

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. a proverb meaning that something you already have is better than something you might get. □ *Bill has offered to buy my car for \$4,000. Someone else might pay more, but a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.* □ *I might be able to find a better price, but a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

A fool and his money are soon parted. a proverb meaning that a person who acts unwisely with money soon loses it. (Often said about a person who has just lost a sum of money because of poor judgment.) □ *When Bill lost a \$400 bet on a horse race, Mary said, "A fool and his money are soon parted."* □ *When John bought a cheap used car that fell apart the next day, he said, "Oh, well, a fool and his money are soon parted."*

A friend in need is a friend indeed. a proverb meaning that a true friend is a person who will help you when you really need someone. (Compare with *fair-weather friend*.) □ *When Bill helped me with geometry, I really learned the meaning of "A friend in need is a friend indeed."* □ *"A friend in need is a friend indeed" sounds silly until you need someone very badly.*

A little bird told me. learned from a mysterious or secret source. (Often given as an evasive answer to someone who asks how you learned something. Rude in some circumstances.) □ *"All right," said Mary, "where did you get that information?" John replied, "A little bird told me."* □ *A little bird told me where I might find you.*

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. a proverb meaning that incomplete knowledge can embarrass or harm someone or something. □ *The doctor said, "Just because you've had a course in first aid, you shouldn't have treated your own illness. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."* □ *John thought he knew how to take care of the garden, but he killed all the flowers. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.*

A penny saved is a penny earned. a proverb meaning that money saved through thrift is the same as money earned by employment. (Sometimes used to explain stinginess.) □ *"I didn't want to pay that much for the book," said Mary. "After all, a penny saved is a penny earned."* □ *Bob put his money in a new bank that pays more interest than his old bank, saying, "A penny saved is a penny earned."*

A rolling stone gathers no moss. a proverb that describes a person who keeps changing jobs or residences and, therefore, accumulates no possessions or responsibilities. □ *"John just can't seem to stay in one place," said Sally. "Oh, well, a rolling stone gathers no moss."* □ *Bill has no furniture to bother with because he keeps on the move. He keeps saying that a rolling stone gathers no moss.*

abide by something to follow the rules of something; to obey someone's orders. □ *John felt that he had to abide by his father's wishes.* □ *All drivers are expected to abide by the rules of the road.*

able to breathe (easily) again AND **able to breathe (freely) again** able to relax

able to breathe (freely) again

and recover from a busy or stressful time; able to catch one's breath. (*Able to* can be replaced with *can.*) ☐ *Now that the lion has been caught, we'll be able to breathe freely again.* ☐ *Now that the annual sale is over, the sales staff will be able to breathe again.* ☐ *Final exams are over, so I can breathe easily again.*

able to breathe (freely) again See the previous entry.

able to do something blindfolded AND **able to do something standing on one's head** able to do something easily and quickly, possibly without even looking. (Informal. Rarely literal. *Able to* can be replaced with *can.*) ☐ *Bill boasted that he could pass his driver's test blindfolded.* ☐ *Mary is very good with computers. She can program blindfolded.* ☐ *Dr. Jones is a great surgeon. He can take out an appendix standing on his head.*

able to do something standing on one's head See the previous entry.

able to make something able to attend an event. (Informal. Also literal. *Able to* can be replaced with *can.*) ☐ *I don't think I'll be able to make your party, but thanks for asking me.* ☐ *We are having another one next month. We hope you can make it then.*

able to take a joke to be able to accept ridicule good-naturedly; to be the object or butt of a joke willingly. (*Able to* can be replaced with *can.*) ☐ *Let's play a trick on Bill and see if he's able to take a joke.* ☐ *Better not tease Ann. She can't take a joke.*

able to take just so much able to endure only a limited amount of discomfort. (*Able to* can be replaced with *can.*) ☐ *Please stop hurting my feelings. I'm able to take just so much.* ☐ *I can take just so much.*

able to take something able to endure something; able to endure abuse. (Often in the negative. *Able to* can be replaced with *can.* See also the previous entry.) ☐ *Stop yelling like that.*

I'm not able to take it anymore. ☐ *Go ahead, hit me again. I can take it.*

above and beyond (something) more than is required. (Fixed order.) ☐ *Her efforts were above and beyond. We appreciate her time.* ☐ *All this extra time is above and beyond her regular hours.*

(above and) beyond the call of duty in addition to what is required; more than is required in one's job. ☐ *We didn't expect the police officer to drive us home. That was above and beyond the call of duty.* ☐ *The English teacher helped students after school every day, even though it was beyond the call of duty.*

above suspicion to be honest enough that no one would suspect you; to be in a position where you could not be suspected. ☐ *The general is a fine old man, completely above suspicion.* ☐ *Mary was at work at the time of the accident, so she's above suspicion.*

aboveboard AND **honest and aboveboard** AND **open and aboveboard** in the open; visible to the public; honest. (Especially with *keep*, as in the examples. Fixed order.) ☐ *Don't keep it a secret. Let's make sure that everything is aboveboard.* ☐ *You can do whatever you wish, as long as you keep it honest and aboveboard.* ☐ *The inspector had to make sure that everything was open and aboveboard.*

absent without leave AND **AWOL** absent from a military unit without permission; absent from anything without permission. (**AWOL** is an abbreviation. This is a serious offense in the military.) ☐ *The soldier was taken away by the military police because he was absent without leave.* ☐ *John was AWOL from school and got into a lot of trouble with his parents.*

according to all accounts AND **by all accounts** from all the reports; everyone is saying. ☐ *According to all accounts, the police were on the scene immediately.* ☐ *According to all accounts, the meeting broke up over a very*

minor matter. □ By all accounts, it was a very poor performance.

according to Hoyle according to the rules; in keeping with the way it is normally done. (Refers to the rules for playing games. Edmond Hoyle wrote a book about games. This expression is usually used for something other than games.) □ *That's wrong. According to Hoyle, this is the way to do it. □ The carpenter said, "This is the way to drive a nail, according to Hoyle."*

according to one's own lights according to the way one believes; according to the way one's conscience or inclinations lead one. (Rarely used informally.) □ *People must act on this matter according to their own lights. □ John may have been wrong, but he did what he did according to his own lights.*

according to someone or something as said or indicated by someone or something. □ *According to the weather forecast, this should be a beautiful day. □ According to my father, this is a very good car to buy. □ It's too cold to go for a walk, according to the thermometer.*

accustomed to someone or something to be used to or comfortable with someone or something; to accept someone or something as common and usual. □ *We are accustomed to wearing shoes. □ They aren't accustomed to paying a visit without bringing a gift. □ I'll never become accustomed to you.*

ace in the hole something or someone held (secretly) in reserve; anything that can help in an emergency. (Slang. Refers to an ace dealt facedown in poker.) □ *The hostages served as the terrorists' ace in the hole for getting what they wanted. □ The twenty-dollar bill in my shoe is my ace in the hole.*

acid test a test whose findings are beyond doubt or dispute. □ *Her new husband seems generous, but the acid test will be if he lets her mother stay with them. □ The senator isn't very popular just now, but the acid test will be if he gets reelected.*

acknowledge receipt (of something) to inform the sender that what was sent was received. (Commonly used in business correspondence.) □ *In a letter to a shoe company, Mary wrote, "I'm happy to acknowledge receipt of four dozen pairs of shoes." □ John acknowledged receipt of the bill. □ The package hasn't arrived, so I'm unable to acknowledge receipt.*

acknowledge someone to be right to admit or state that someone is correct about something. □ *Mary acknowledged Bill to be right about the name of the store. □ Bill said that the car was useless, and the mechanic acknowledged him to be right.*

acquire a taste for something to develop a liking for food, drink, or something else; to learn to like something. □ *One acquires a taste for fine wines. □ Many people are not able to acquire a taste for foreign food. □ Mary acquired a taste for art when she was very young.*

across the board equally for everyone or everything. □ *The school board raised the pay of all the teachers across the board. □ Congress cut the budget by reducing the money for each department ten percent across the board.*

act as someone to perform in the capacity of someone, temporarily or permanently. □ *I'll act as your supervisor until Mrs. Brown returns from vacation. □ This is Mr. Smith. He'll act as manager from now on.*

act high-and-mighty to act proud and powerful. (Informal. Fixed order.) □ *Why does the doctor always have to act so high-and-mighty? □ If Sally wouldn't act so high-and-mighty, she'd have more friends.*

act of faith an act or deed demonstrating religious faith; an act or deed showing trust in someone or something. □ *He lit candles in church as an act of faith. □ For him to trust you with his safety was a real act of faith.*

act of God an occurrence (usually an accident) for which no human is

responsible; an act of nature such as a storm, an earthquake, or a windstorm.

□ *My insurance company wouldn't pay for the damage because it was an act of God.* □ *The thief tried to convince the judge that the diamonds were in his pocket due to an act of God.*

act of war an international act of violence for which war is considered a suitable response; (figuratively) any hostile act between two people. □ *To bomb a ship is an act of war.* □ *Can spying be considered an act of war?* □ *"You just broke my stereo," yelled John. "That's an act of war!"*

act one's age to behave more maturely; to act as grown-up as one really is. (This is frequently said to a child.) □ *Come on, John, act your age. Stop throwing rocks.* □ *Mary! Stop picking on your little brother. Act your age!*

act something out to perform an imaginary event as if one were in a play. □ *Bill always acted his anger out by shouting and pounding his fists.* □ *The psychiatrist asked Bill to act out the way he felt about getting fired.*

act up to misbehave; to run or act badly. □ *John, why do you always have to act up when your father and I take you out to eat?* □ *My arthritis is acting up. It really hurts.* □ *My car is acting up. I could hardly get it started this morning.*

Actions speak louder than words. a proverb meaning that it is better to do something about a problem than just talk about it. □ *Mary kept promising to get a job. John finally looked her in the eye and said, "Actions speak louder than words!"* □ *After listening to the senator promising to cut federal spending, Ann wrote a simple note saying, "Actions speak louder than words."*

add fuel to the fire AND **add fuel to the flame** to make a problem worse; to say or do something that makes a bad situation worse; to make an angry person get even more angry. □ *To spank a crying child just adds fuel to the fire.* □ *Bill was shouting angrily, and Bob tried to get him to stop by laughing at*

him. Of course, that was just adding fuel to the flame.

add fuel to the flame See the previous entry.

add insult to injury to make a bad situation worse; to hurt the feelings of a person who has already been hurt. □ *First, the basement flooded, and then, to add insult to injury, a pipe burst in the kitchen.* □ *My car barely started this morning, and to add insult to injury, I got a flat tire in the driveway.*

add up (to something) 1. to total up to a particular amount. □ *The bill added up to \$200.* □ *These groceries will add up to almost sixty dollars.* □ *These numbers just won't add up.* 2. to mean something; to signify or represent something; to result in something. □ *All this adds up to trouble!* □ *I don't understand. What does all this add up to?* □ *If you think about it carefully, these facts add up perfectly.*

address someone as something 1. to talk to or write to a person, using a particular title. □ *They addressed Abraham Lincoln as "Mr. President."* □ *A physician is usually addressed as "Doctor."* 2. to treat a person you are talking with in a particular manner. □ *You should address him as your equal.* □ *Do not address me as your superior.*

advanced in years See *up in years*.

afraid of one's own shadow easily frightened; always frightened, timid, or suspicious. (Never used literally.) □ *After Tom was robbed, he was even afraid of his own shadow.* □ *Jane has always been a shy child. She has been afraid of her own shadow since she was three.*

after a fashion in a manner that is just barely adequate; poorly. □ *He thanked me—after a fashion—for my help.* □ *Oh, yes, I can swim, after a fashion.*

after all 1. anyway; in spite of what had been decided. (Often refers to a change in plans or a reversal of plans.) □ *Mary had planned to go to the bank first, but she came here after all.* □ *It*