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COBUILD

柯林斯 COBUILD 袖珍英语习语词典

POCKET IDIOMS  
DICTIONARY

Helping learners with real English



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上海外语教育出版社

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THE UNIVERSITY  
OF BIRMINGHAM



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**图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据**

柯林斯 COBUILD 袖珍英语习语词典 / 英国 COBUILD  
小组编. —上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2000  
ISBN 7-81046-955-X

I. 柯… II. 英… III. 英语-词典 IV. H316

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2000) 第51144号

图字: 09-2000-229号

**出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社**

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机), 65422031 (发行部)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 刘华初

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印 刷: 上海古籍印刷厂  
经 销: 新华书店上海发行所  
开 本: 890×1240 1/64 印张 10.375 字数 726 千字  
版 次: 2000年10月第1版, 2000年10月第1次印刷  
印 数: 8 000 册

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书 号: ISBN 7-81046-955-X / H · 722

定 价: 14.50 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题, 可向本社调换

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HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollins Publishers  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road  
London W6 8JB

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© HarperCollins Publishers Ltd 1996  
First Published in Great Britain 1996  
Reprinted 1998, 1999

4 6 8 1 0 9 7 5 3

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ISBN 0 00 375095 7

Computer typeset by Jeremy Clear.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd, Glasgow, G64.

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## 出版前言

自 20 世纪 80 年代末起,世界各国的英语教学界就对以全新构想编写的“柯林斯 COBUILD 英语词典系列”表示出极大的兴趣,并一致认为,该系列词典开创了高科技时代词典编纂的先河。这一系列词典是在世界著名的哈珀-柯林斯出版社(HarperCollins Publishers Limited)的支持下,由英国伯明翰大学(Birmingham University)词典编纂组经过十余年的努力,精心编纂而成。参与编写工作的有数百名英语教学、词典编纂和电脑软件专家。从词典的研制到出版花费了巨额的资金。

“柯林斯 COBUILD 英语词典系列”之所以被称为“以全新的构想编写而成的新一代辞书”,是因为英国伯明翰大学词典编纂组首先意识到电脑时代的到来对于词典编纂的意义,并将大型电脑运用于词典的编纂工作。由于电脑的发展,利用电脑庞大的存储和检索功能对大量语言现象作具体详尽的分析成为可能。以往,词典编纂人员只能根据个别语言现象推断出词义和用法;现在,他们可以利用先进的电脑设备,输入和检索数以亿万字计的语料,根据大量而确切的语言数据来确定词义和用法。英国伯明翰大学词典编纂组就是根据上述原则,编纂了这一系列新颖独特的词典。

本系列词典中所有的例词和例句均取材于 COBUILD 英语语料库(The Bank of English)。该英语语料库的名称 COBUILD 系 COLLINS BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE DATABASE 的首字母缩略词,如果直译应该是“柯林斯-伯明翰大学国际语料库”。该语料库包含了小说和非小说类的多种语体材料,如广播和电视用语、日常自然会话、报刊杂志文章,也包含了英国英语、美国英语和澳大利亚英语等多种英语方言。

本社引进出版的《柯林斯 COBUILD 袖珍英语习语词典(新版)》根据《柯林斯 COBUILD 英语习语词典》改编而成。词典收录了当代美国英语和英国英语中常用的 3000 多条习语,并对其来源、意义、使用语境、变化形式及语用功能等都作了清楚的解释。所用的 3000 多个例句均选自 COBUILD 英语语料库,具有真实性和时代性。

《柯林斯 COBUILD 袖珍英语习语词典(新版)》的独特之处特别表现在它提供了部分习语的来源及意义变化。这既增添了阅读的趣味性,又有助于读者更好地理解习语。

为了提高我国的英语教学和科研水平,更好地为读者服务,上海外语教育出版社引进了“柯林斯 COBUILD 英语词典系列”,以让我国广大英语学习者和从事相关工作的人员能够获得更多更新颖的工具书。为此,上海外语教育出版社的编辑和哈珀-柯林斯出版社的编辑通力合作,对本系列词典中的部分例句进行了修订,使之更符合我国国情。毋庸置疑,如同其他词典一样,本系列词典在编校过程中难免仍有疏漏和失误,敬请广大读者批评指正。

需要说明的是,本系列词典的例证均选自 COBUILD 英语语料库,采用这些例句的目的是为了说明词目的语义和语法特征及用法,并不代表原出版者和本社的观点。

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Jenny Watson for her invaluable assistance during the final stages of this dictionary. We would also like to thank and acknowledge all those who worked on the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms, on which this dictionary is based: in particular, Jane Bradbury, Michael Lax, and John Todd.



## Introduction

The **COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms** is the second title in the new COBUILD series of small format dictionaries. It has been specially adapted from the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms.

An idiom is a special kind of phrase. It is a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually. For example, *bite someone's head off* means to speak to them in an unpleasant, angry way: it has nothing to do with causing them physical harm.

In the COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms, we deal with over 3000 idioms in current British and American English. We illustrate them with over 3000 examples, taken from *The Bank of English*. These examples show how idioms are used in real English.

The COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms pays special attention to the ways in which idioms vary. Our explanations of idioms, written in full sentences, give the meanings of idioms and the contexts in which they are typically used. They also show clearly the pragmatic functions of idioms: the ways in which they are used to express evaluations or show approval or disapproval. This is a very important part of idiom use in English. More detailed information about idiom variations, idiom frequencies, and pragmatics can be found in the bigger COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms.

A new feature in the COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms is that we have included accounts of the origins of idioms, to try to show how these expressions have developed their current idiomatic meanings. It is important to remember that there are only a few idioms whose histories and origins we can be certain about. In many cases, there is a lot of argument about their origins. Although scholars have suggested explanations which are possible or likely, nobody really knows for sure.

There is a workbook on idioms, the **COBUILD Idioms Workbook**, which can be used with the COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms. This workbook was written by Malcolm Goodale, and it concentrates on 250 of the idioms in the dictionary.

We hope that you find the COBUILD Pocket Dictionary of Idioms useful, easy to use, and interesting. If you have any comments or suggestions, we would be delighted to hear from you. You can e-mail us at [editors@cobuild.collins.co.uk](mailto:editors@cobuild.collins.co.uk).

Rosamund Moon, Editorial Manager

# Guide to the Dictionary Entries

## How to find the idiom you are looking for

In the main dictionary text, idioms are grouped under headwords, which are arranged alphabetically. Use the index, which is at the back of the dictionary, to find out which headword the idiom you are looking for is under. You will see that one of the words in each idiom is highlighted: this is the headword in the main text where you will find the idiom. Note that idioms are placed under a headword which corresponds exactly to one of the words in the idiom. For example, *spill the beans* is under **beans** rather than **bean**. However, if the idiom is a variant form, it may be dealt with under a headword which is not one of the words in the form of the idiom that you are looking for. In these cases, there is a cross-reference in the index to the right headword.

Generally, the word we choose as headword is a noun. If there are two nouns, then the headword is the first noun. If the idiom contains no nouns, then an adjective is chosen. If the idiom contains no nouns or adjectives, then the headword will be either a verb or an adverb.

There are four main exceptions to this general rule:

1. The word chosen as headword is normally a fixed word in the idiom: that is, it never varies. If there is only one noun in the idiom and it varies, we have chosen to put the idiom under another word which is fixed. For example, *beat your breast* has a common variation *beat your chest*, and so you will find the idiom under the verb **beat**.
2. Occasionally, our rule for choosing headwords would mean that two idioms which contain similar words would end up in very different parts of the dictionary. In this case, we put them under the same headword. For example, we put both a *fair crack of the whip* and *crack the whip* under the headword **whip**.
3. If an idiom contains two nouns, but the first noun is a very general word such as 'end' or 'top', then the idiom will be found at the second noun.
4. Finally, similes such as *white as a sheet* are always dealt with under their adjectives rather than under their nouns.

## Order of idioms

Under each headword, idioms are arranged in alphabetical order. Note, however, that if the first word in an idiom is 'a' or 'the', it is not taken into account in the alphabetical ordering. Major variant forms are given underneath the main form, but do not affect the alphabetical ordering of the main forms.

## Explanations of meanings, pragmatics, and usage

The explanations in this dictionary, as in other COBUILD dictionaries, are written in full sentences using language which is as simple as possible. Where idioms have two or more different meanings, these are dealt with in separate numbered paragraphs.

The dictionary explanations show where idioms have some special pragmatic function such as conveying an opinion, emphasizing, or criticizing. For example, the formula 'If you say that... you mean that...' shows that an idiom is used to convey an opinion or evaluation.

The explanations also give information about the likely contexts in which idioms are used, in particular where there are restrictions. If an idiom is used only or mainly in one geographical variety of English, we show this at the beginning of the explanation, for example by putting 'British' or 'mainly American'. Idioms that are considered dated are labelled 'old-fashioned'. If an idiom may cause offence, we say so at the end of the explanation.

## Extra information

Two symbols are used in this dictionary, □ and ♦. Both indicate that we have included extra information about the idiom. The paragraphs marked □ contain information about variations which need special comment. They are also used to give the full forms of proverbs and sayings which are used in shortened forms as other kinds of idiom.

The symbol ♦ indicates information about the origins of idioms. When it comes directly under the headword, the information that it gives applies to all the idioms under that headword. When it comes at the bottom of an idiom entry, the information that it gives applies only to the idiom in that entry. ♦ is also occasionally used to give information about variant spellings of one of the words in the idiom.

## Cross-references

There are three types of cross-reference. The first type comes at the end of the explanation and begins with the word 'Compare'. This refers you to another idiom which has a similar form to the one you are looking at, or which may be confused with it. The second type also comes at the end of the explanation and is used where idioms are restricted to British (or American) English and have close counterparts in American (or British) English. The third type of cross-reference comes in the explanations of idiom origins and tells you that there is another idiom whose origin is related in some way to the one you are looking at.

## A

## ace

- ◆ In many card games, the ace is the card with the highest score.

## the ace in your hand

*British* If you have **the ace in your hand**, you have something which you can use to gain an advantage when you need it. *You have to convince your opponent that you have the ace in your hand. Especially in politics. Everyone bluffs in politics.*

## have an ace in the hole

*American* If you **have an ace in the hole**, you have something which you can use to gain an advantage when you need it. *He doesn't usually risk that much unless he thinks he has an ace in the hole.*

- ◆ In 'stud' poker, you have an ace in the hole when you have an ace as your 'hole' card: see 'hole card' at **hole**.

## play your ace

If someone **plays their ace**, they do something clever and unexpected which gives them an advantage over other people. *She went on to say that he was also a very important criminal lawyer who had defended men on heavy charges. And then she played her ace. He also had a number of clients who were involved in the gold business.*

## within an ace of something

*Mainly British* If you say that someone comes **within an ace of** something, you mean that they very nearly succeed in doing it. *She had just watched her hero come within an ace of a place in the Wimbledon quarter finals, only to lose his grip on the game.*

- ◆ In this expression, 'ace' refers to a score of one on a dice, rather than a playing card.

## aces

- ◆ In many card games, the ace is the card with the highest score.

## hold all the aces

If you say that someone **holds all the aces**, you mean that they are in a very strong position because they have more advantages and more power than anyone else. *They hold all the aces and are not going to make changes voluntarily because it wouldn't be in their own interests.*

## acid

### the acid test

If you refer to something as **the acid test**, you mean that it will show or prove how effective or useful something is. *The acid test for the vaccine will be its performance in African countries where malaria is raging more fiercely than in Colombia.*

- ◆ Nitric acid can be used to test whether a metal is pure gold because it corrodes most metals but does not affect gold.

## act

- ◆ The metaphors in these expressions relate to performers entertaining audiences.

### a balancing act

If you say that someone is performing a **balancing act**, you mean that they are trying to please two or more people or groups or to follow two or more sets of ideals that are in opposition to each other. *Mr Alia is performing a delicate balancing act. He talks of reform, but clings to old certainties.*

### a class act

If you say that someone, for example a sports player or a performer, is a **class act**, you mean that they are very good at what they do. *Koeman is a class act. He's got great control and can hit passes from one side of the pitch to the other with amazing accuracy.*

### clean up your act

If a person or organization **cleans up** their act, they stop behaving badly or irresponsibly, and begin to act in a more socially acceptable way. *The Minister warned the press two years ago that privacy laws would be implemented unless newspapers cleaned up their act.*

### get in on the act

If you **get in on the act**, you start doing something which was first done by someone else, usually so that you can have the same success as them, or get some advantage for yourself. *It is rather like the Greens in Britain in the eighties: everyone wants to get in on the act.*

### get your act together

If you say that someone needs to **get their act together**, you mean that they need to take control of themselves and to organize their affairs more

effectively so that they can deal successfully with things and can avoid failure. *The State Opposition is beginning to get its act together after a long period of muddling through.*

### a hard act to follow

If you say that someone is a **hard act to follow**, you mean that they are so impressive or so effective that it will be difficult for anyone else to be as good or as successful. *He had a hard act to follow. His predecessor was a brilliant intellectual who also drew, as Chancellor, on long practical experience as an observer of the economic scene.*

## actions

### actions speak louder than words

If you say that **actions speak louder than words**, you mean that people show what they really think and feel by what they do, rather than by what they say. People sometimes use this expression when they want to criticize someone who says one thing but does something else. *Codes of Discipline should encompass procedure for dealing with harassment. However, actions speak louder than words. Elaborate policies and procedures in themselves would not achieve much without commitment to change from the top.*

## Adam

### not know someone from Adam

If you say that you **don't know someone from Adam**, you mean that you do not know them at all, and would not recognize them if you saw them. *We'll have one contact, who is simply a voice on the phone to us. I don't know him from Adam.*

- ◆ According to the Bible, Adam was the first human being.

## ado

### much ado about nothing

If you say that people are making **much ado about nothing**, you mean that they are making a lot of fuss about something which is not as important or significant as they think it is. *After one year, I dropped out of the course because it was much ado about nothing really. It was all about style, not about content.*

- ◆ 'Much Ado About Nothing' is the title of a play by Shakespeare.

**air****clear the air**

If you do something to **clear the air**, you deal openly with misunderstandings, problems, or jealousy, and try to get rid of them. *Some groups in our community seem to suffer from discrimination. An independent enquiry could clear the air and sort out the problem.*

**hot air**

If you describe what someone says or writes as **hot air**, you are criticizing it for being full of false claims and promises. *In a sense, all the rhetoric about heightened co-operation can be seen as just so much hot air. There are still endless disputes.*

**in the air**

If something such as a change, idea, or feeling is **in the air**, people are aware of it or think it is going to happen even though it is not talked about directly. *Great excitement was in the air that week in London and, as the newspapers reported, in Paris, Berlin and St Petersburg as well.*

**into thin air****out of thin air**

If someone or something vanishes **into thin air**, they disappear completely and nobody knows where they have gone. If something appears **out of thin air**, it appears suddenly and unexpectedly. *Her husband snatched their two children and disappeared into thin air for years... A crisis had materialised out of thin air.*

**up in the air**

If an important decision or plan is **up in the air**, it has not been decided or settled yet. *At the moment, the fate of the Hungarian people is still up in the air.*

**walk on air****float on air**

If you say that you are **walking on air** or **floating on air**, you mean that you feel very happy or excited because of something nice that has happened to you. *As soon as I know I'm in the team it's like walking on air... I can't believe that I've won. I'm floating on air.*

**airs****airs and graces****put on airs and graces****put on airs**

If you say that someone has **airs and graces**, you disapprove of them for

behaving in a way which shows that they think they are more important than other people. You can also say that someone **puts on airs and graces** or **puts on airs**. The form 'airs and graces' is used only in British English. *Ian is such a nice bloke. He has no airs and graces... He put on no airs, but his charisma was enormous.*

## aisles

### roll in the aisles

If you say that people in an audience or group are **rolling in the aisles**, you mean that they are laughing so much at something that they find it hard to stop. Verbs such as 'rock', 'reel', and 'laugh' are sometimes used instead of 'roll'. *It's all good knockabout stuff that has them rolling in the aisles... On the evidence so far, it's unlikely that the story-lines will have us reeling in the aisles.*

◆ The aisles in a theatre or cinema are the gaps between the blocks of seats.

## alec

### a smart alec

### a smart aleck

If you describe someone as a **smart alec**, you dislike the fact that they think they are very clever and they always have an answer for everything. The spelling a **smart aleck** is also used, especially in American English. *They've got some smart alec of a lawyer from London to oppose bail, and by God they're not going to get away with it... I hate smart-aleck kids who talk like dictionaries.*

## alley

### a blind alley

If you refer to a way of working or thinking as a **blind alley**, you mean that it is useless or is not leading to anything worthwhile. *Did she regard teaching as a blind alley?*

◆ A blind alley is a street which is closed at one end.

### right up your alley

If you say that something is **right up your alley**, you mean that it is the kind of thing you like or know about. *I thought this little problem would be right up your alley.*

□ You can also say that something is **right down your alley**. *I'll need*



*whatever information you can turn up within the week. I have other people looking into this from other angles. But this case seems right down your alley.*

## all-singing

### all-singing, all-dancing

If you describe something new as **all-singing, all-dancing**, you mean that it is very modern and advanced, with a lot of additional facilities. This expression is used more commonly in British English than American. *As long as you don't expect the latest all-singing, all-dancing Japanese marvel, the camera represents an excellent buy – and one that I can recommend.*

## altar

### sacrificed on the altar of something

You say that someone or something is **being sacrificed on the altar** of a particular ideology or activity when they suffer unfairly and are harmed because of it. *The European Community remains adamant that the interests of its twelve million farmers can't be sacrificed on the altar of free trade.*

## American

### American as apple pie

If you say that something or someone is as **American as apple pie**, you mean that they are typical of American culture or an American way of life. *Zurmo's family has been in the gun business for 60 years. To him, guns are as American as apple pie.*

- ◆ Apple pie is a traditional dessert that is thought of as typically American.

## ante

- ◆ In card games such as poker, the ante is the amount of money which each player must place on the table before the game begins.

### up the ante: 1

### raise the ante

In a dispute or contest, if you **up the ante** or **raise the ante**, you increase the demands that you are making or the risks that you are taking, which means that your eventual losses or gains will be greater. *Whenever they reached their goal, they upped the ante, setting increasingly*