

COLLINS COBUILD

柯林斯 COBUILD 英语习语词典

DICTIONARY OF IDIOMS

Helping learners with real English



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上海外语教育出版社

NEW

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**THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM**



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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。

该系列所有词典中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 英语习语词典(新版)》在 1995 年第一版的基础上进行了全面修订。新版词典重点介绍了近 4400 条当代美国英语和英国英语中出现的习语。所选习语既包括传统的英语习语,也有一些可被称作“半习语”的表达形式,此外,还有隐喻式谚语、常见的明喻以及其他表达形式。用作例子的 8500 多条例句均选自英语语料库,具有真实性和时代性。

习语除了用来传达事实信息(factual information),还有重要的语用功能(pragmatic function),为了帮助读者更充分地理解习语、更确切地使用习语,《柯林斯 COBUILD 英语习语词典(新版)》在这方面给读者提供了详细的指导。此

外,习语的使用频率、习语的变化形式(词汇变化、语法变化)、习语的语体色彩以及源自不同地区的英语习语的关系,等等,该词典都有较详细的论述。

《柯林斯 COBUILD 英语习语词典(新版)》适合不同层次的英语学习者,以及从事与英语有关工作的读者,是一本不可多得的工具书。

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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Dr Julia Penelope and Robin Rosenberg read the dictionary text as our informants on American English, and, together with Lucille Glassman and Debbie Posner, helped us on many points. Professor Malcolm Coulthard and Malcolm Goodale commented on the text and suggested improvements. We gratefully acknowledge all their contributions and advice.

Finally, we thank other members of the COBUILD team for their support, comments, and suggestions throughout the project.

Introduction

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms, like other COBUILD dictionaries, is based on an extensive study of a large corpus of modern English texts, and so it is in a unique position to describe idioms in current English. Idioms are one of the most interesting and difficult parts of the English vocabulary. They are interesting because they are colourful and lively, and because they are linguistic curiosities. At the same time, they are difficult because they have unpredictable meanings or collocations and grammar, and often have special connotations. Idioms are frequently neglected in general dictionaries and in classroom teaching, because they are considered marginal items which are quaint but not significant. Yet research into idioms shows that they have important roles in spoken language and in writing, in particular in conveying evaluations and in developing or maintaining interactions. The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms sets out to give detailed coverage of these points.

About this dictionary

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms is primarily intended for teachers of English and intermediate-advanced learners, although we hope that many other people will find it interesting and useful. It deals with approximately 4400 English idioms, and illustrates them with a rich collection of examples which are drawn from The Bank of English and which show how idioms are used in real English. There is a workbook – the COBUILD Idioms Workbook – to accompany the dictionary, written by Malcolm Goodale. It is designed for both class work and self-study, and concentrates on 250 of the idioms explained in the dictionary.

What is an idiom?

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. If you do not know that the words have a special meaning together, you may well misinterpret what someone is saying, or be puzzled by why they are saying something that is untrue or irrelevant. For example, learners might not recognize the idioms *bite someone's head off* and *out in the cold*. They would then have problems understanding remarks such as 'Don't bite my head off just because you're bad tempered' and 'They were going to play together and that left me out in the cold, you know'. (These examples are taken from transcribed conversations in The Bank of English.)

Idioms are typically metaphorical: they are effectively metaphors which have become 'fixed' or 'fossilized'. In some cases, it is fairly easy to see how the idiomatic meaning relates to the literal meaning. For example, *kill two birds with one stone* means 'achieve two things at the same time', and the image in the metaphor supports this meaning. In other cases, the literal meanings may make no sense at all. For example, *move heaven and earth* literally describes an action which is physically impossible. In a few further cases, the metaphors in the idioms are peculiar, and their true origins are unknown, so it is very difficult to see how or why the idioms have come to have their current meanings. For example, there are several explanations of *kick the bucket* and *raining cats and dogs*, but none is very satisfactory. While we do not explain idiom histories in this dictionary, we occasionally make comments to explain words which might puzzle learners, or to explain common allusions which are often made in the context of an idiom.

The scope of the dictionary

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms covers a large number of the idioms which people are likely to find in everyday English. It includes traditional English

idioms such as *spill the beans* and *a red herring*. It also includes a number of expressions which can be considered 'semi-idioms': some very common multi-word metaphors such as *the acid test* and *brownie points*; metaphorical proverbs such as *every cloud has a silver lining* and *in for a penny, in for a pound*; common similes such as *white as a sheet* and *old as the hills*; and some other expressions which have a strong pragmatic meaning, such as *famous last words* and *that's the way the cookie crumbles*. We have deliberately avoided including other kinds of fixed expression such as *in fact* and *at least*, or greetings and other fixed formulae such as *how do you do* and *excuse me*. Many of these are very common, but they are dealt with in detail in our general dictionaries, such as the Collins COBUILD English Dictionary.

Some of the idioms in the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms also appear in other COBUILD dictionaries, but there they can only be given very brief entries, often without examples. Other idioms in the Dictionary of Idioms are too infrequent to be included in even the largest COBUILD dictionary.

Phrasal verbs – fixed combinations of verbs and particles, such as *give up*, *put off*, and *throw out* – are dealt with in the COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs. However, expressions which are combinations of verbs, particles, and fixed or semi-fixed noun phrases are considered to be idioms rather than phrasal verbs. This means that you will find expressions such as *give up the ghost*, *put someone off their stroke*, and *throw the baby out with the bath water* in the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms, rather than in the Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs.

Idioms and corpora

COBUILD has always been associated with the use of corpora in lexicography. All our dictionaries, grammars, and usage books are based on our examinations of the evidence in large computer-held corpora of English texts. Since 1991, we have been working with The Bank of English. This now contains 211 million words, and it is made up from substantial holdings of British and American English together with smaller holdings of other varieties of English. The texts in the corpus range from newspapers, magazines, fiction, and non-fiction to transcribed conversations and broadcasting.

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms represents what we have learned about idioms in The Bank of English. One of the first points to be made is that idioms are comparatively infrequent, and it is only by having a very large corpus that we have sufficient evidence to describe idioms accurately and with confidence. Nearly one third of the idioms in this dictionary occur less often than once per 10 million words of the corpus. The idioms in the highest frequency band occur in our data at least once per two million words of English. However, to set the matter in perspective, only a few of these occur as frequently as any of the words we have marked for frequency in the COBUILD English Dictionary. More detailed information about the frequency bands is given on page xvii.

Another point is that although idioms are often described as 'fixed', they are typically not fixed at all. Many idioms have two or more alternative forms, without any change in meaning: for example, *burn your bridges* and *burn your boats*, or *up the ante* and *raise the ante*. Sometimes, these different forms reflect differences between British and American English: for example, *burn your bridges* is used in both varieties, whereas the form *burn your boats* is used only in British English. In many cases, there are several different verbs which can be used in an idiom: for example, 'sit' is the verb most commonly found in the idiom *sit on the fence*, and so we have given this as the main form, but verbs such as 'stay' and 'be' can be used instead of 'sit'. There are slight changes in meaning, but these changes are predictable from the usual meanings of the verbs which have been substituted. Similarly, prepositions or syntax can

vary: for example, *have your back to the wall* and *have your back against the wall*, or *feel something in your bones* and *have a feeling in your bones*.

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms shows these kinds of variation, listing the major variations at the beginning of each entry, and indicating any differences in usage between variations. We also indicate cases where the form of the idiom is very unstable and we show the range of possible wordings. For example, there are no fixed words at all in the idiom *wash your dirty linen in public*. We deal with it at the headword **dirty**, and we discuss the range of alternative forms.

A third point is that idioms have often been associated with conversation and informal language. However, the evidence in The Bank of English suggests that they are also very common in journalism and magazines, where writers are seeking to make their articles and stories more vivid, interesting, and appealing to their readers. Idioms are often used by both journalists and politicians as shorthand ways of expressing opinions or conveying ready-made evaluations. While such use of idioms is often criticized and dismissed as 'cliché', suggesting that the speaker or writer has nothing interesting or original to say, it is also true that idioms help speakers and writers to be fluent and to get their opinions across effectively.

The examples in the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms are all authentic, and drawn from The Bank of English. Where necessary, we have edited them slightly to make them easier to read; however, most are cited in their original forms. Idioms are often used in fairly complex ways in context, and so the examples chosen are often much longer than in other COBUILD dictionaries, in order to demonstrate this fully. For instance,

The two sides went into these talks with positions that were not very far apart in terms of their political demands. Dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's may take some time, however.

The idiom appears in the second sentence of the example. On its own, this sentence would only give a partial insight into the meaning of the idiom: that the process is time-consuming. The first sentence adds context which reinforces the fact that 'dotting the i's and crossing the t's' involves dealing with details rather than the main part of a piece of work.

Idioms, pragmatics, and context

Pragmatics is the study of the way in which people use language to achieve different goals – for example in making suggestions or offers, in thanking, in expressing emotions and opinions, or in making commitments. Idioms have important pragmatic functions in language. Because they have fairly general meanings, they are less often used purely to convey factual information and more often to convey attitude. They typically convey evaluations: they are used as ways of expressing approval and admiration, or disapproval and criticism. An idiom may have connotations and pragmatic meanings which are not obvious to people who are unfamiliar with that idiom, and so the real meaning of a statement may be missed. Similarly, someone may use an idiom without realizing it will be interpreted as critical or disapproving, and therefore unintentionally cause the wrong reaction in the person they are talking to. The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms gives explicit guidance on this area, in order to help learners of English (and their teachers) understand idioms more fully and be able to use them more confidently.

In addition to conveying evaluations, idioms have other functions in texts and interactions. For example, idioms are used to give emphasis or to organize discourse, or in conveying thanks or refusals. Where these uses are shown in our data, we mention them explicitly in the dictionary explanations.

People often use idioms in order to create a sense of 'camaraderie' with the people they are speaking to or writing for: idioms make language seem more lively and interesting, more friendly and more informal. Because of this, idioms are generally considered informal and are often labelled as 'informal' or 'colloquial' in general dictionaries of English. In fact, idioms are often used in contexts which are not really informal at all. In this dictionary, we have only labelled as 'informal' those idioms which are very informal and which might cause offence if used in the wrong situations. As a general rule, learners should be careful how they use idioms in formal contexts and in formal writing.

British and American idioms

There are some distinctions between the idioms used in British English and the idioms used in American English, although the majority of idioms are common to both varieties. We have covered both British and American idioms in this dictionary, and we show where there are variations in form or usage. For example, speakers of British English say that people *take things in their stride*, whereas speakers of American English say they *take things in stride*.

The situation is complicated because idiom usage changes rapidly. Some idioms are not used in American English – *on a sticky wicket* and *chalk and cheese* – whereas others are rarely used in British English – *live high on the hog* and *spin your wheels*. However, many other idioms which were originally American have become fashionable in British English, in particular in journalism or the media. Other American idioms become known to British speakers because of the influence of American culture, for example films and music. In some cases, 'American' idioms are now so common in British English that it would be wrong to label them as only – or even mainly – used in American English. Even though some people may think of these idioms as American, they are now much more widely known and used.

The situation with Australian English is also complicated, since Australian English includes both 'British' and 'American' idioms. We have not attempted in this dictionary to give guidance on Australian English, and when we comment that an idiom is only used in British English or only used in American English, we are neither including nor excluding Australian English. We have, however, included a few Australian English idioms which our evidence suggests are used more widely now. We have taken a similar approach with other varieties of English.

Finally...

Since we published our first COBUILD dictionary, many people have written to us with comments and advice. This has proved invaluable, and we have benefited greatly from it. We are always pleased to hear from the users of our dictionaries, and we would be delighted to hear from you. You can e-mail us at editors@cobuild.collins.co.uk or write to us at the address below.

We hope that you find the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms useful, easy to use, and above all interesting. We look forward to hearing from you with your reactions and suggestions.

Rosamund Moon, Editorial Manager

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How to find an idiom

To find an idiom in the COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms, you should go straight to the index at the end of the dictionary. This contains entries for every lexical word in every idiom in the dictionary, and it shows you under which headword in the dictionary you will find the idiom that you are looking for. See page 433 of the dictionary for more information on how to use the index.

Although you can find idioms by looking at the main text first, you may find it harder to locate them. You may not know what form of the idiom is given in the text, and you may not realize that it has variations.

By using the index first, you will be able to see immediately if the idiom is covered in the dictionary, what form it is given in, and where to find it in the main text.

Headwords in the dictionary

The idiom entries in the main dictionary text are each attached to a headword, which is normally one of the lexical words in the idiom. Headwords are arranged alphabetically. This is to help you find idioms as easily as possible. For example, the index will tell you that *spill the beans* is under the headword **beans**. You then need to find the headword **beans** in the main dictionary: it is the headword between **bean** and **bear**.

battle
bay
bead
be-all
beam
bean
beans
bear
beast
beat
beaver
beck
bed

Note that if the word we choose as headword is a plural noun or a verb participle, then the headword will also be in that form, rather than in the base form of the noun or verb. This is why *spill the beans* is under **beans** rather than **bean**.

Generally, the word we choose as headword is a noun: for example, *rock the boat* is under the noun **boat** as headword, and *sit on the fence* is under **fence**. If there are two nouns, then the headword is the first noun: for example, *it's raining cats and dogs* is under the headword **cats** and *cost an arm and a leg* under **arm**. If the idiom contains no nouns, then an adjective is chosen: for example, *go easy on someone* is under the headword **easy** and *in black and white* is under **black**. 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. In some cases, the only noun in the idiom

varies, and so 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 *to 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. For example, *the thin end of the wedge* is under **wedge**.
4. Finally, similes such as *white as a sheet* and *old as the hills* are always dealt with under their adjectives – **white** and **old** in these cases – rather than under their nouns. This is because they generally reinforce or emphasize the meaning of the adjective.

The order of idiom entries

Idioms are arranged in alphabetical order under each dictionary headword. Note that if the first word in an idiom is 'a' or 'the', it is not taken into account in the idiom sequence. Here, for example, are the idioms appearing under the headword **wolf**:

keep the wolf from the door
a lone wolf
a wolf in sheep's clothing

Note also that only the principal forms of idioms are alphabetized. This means that any variant forms given at the beginning of an entry for an individual idiom may appear to be out of alphabetical order. Here, for example, are the idioms appearing under the dictionary headword **feet**.

dead on your feet
feet on the ground
find your feet
get cold feet
 have cold feet (variation)
get your feet on the ground
get your feet under the table
get your feet wet
 have your feet wet (variation)
have feet of clay
 clay feet (variation)
itchy feet
land on your feet
 fall on your feet (variation)
put your feet up
rushed off your feet
stand on your own two feet
 stand on your own feet (variation)
sweep someone off their feet: 1
sweep someone off their feet: 2
think on your feet
under someone's feet
vote with your feet

Guide to the Dictionary Entries

keel



dictionary headword

on an even keel

idiom

If someone or something is **on an even keel**, they are calm or are progressing steadily, especially during or after a period of troubles or difficulties.

explanation

She sees it as her role to keep the family on an even keel through its time of hardship.

example

fly the nest



idiom and common variation

leave the nest

When children **fly the nest** or **leave the nest**, they leave their parents' home to live on their own. Compare **fly the coop**; see **coop**.

cross-reference

One day the children are going to fly the nest and have their own lives.

When their children had flown the nest, he and his wife moved to a thatched cottage in Dorset.

pick holes in something



frequency indicator

If you **pick holes in** something such as an argument or theory, you find weak points in it which disprove it or show that it is wrong. Verbs such as 'poke' and 'shoot' can be used instead of 'pick'.

comment on minor variations of idiom

They say that the great science of the 21st century will be biology. Thus we do not need so many physicists as in the past. It is easy to pick holes in this argument.

For him, a winning start to the European Championship campaign was not enough and yesterday he picked holes in the team's performance against Poland.

The defense lawyers attempted to poke holes in the testimony of a prosecution witness.

get up someone's nose



comment on usage – for example level of formality or region of use

If you say that something or someone **gets up** your **nose**, you mean that they irritate you a great deal. This is an informal expression, which is used mainly in British English.

Imagine my surprise when I contacted the dealers and was told 'Sorry, it will not arrive until February 10.' What really gets up my nose is that all I want is a standard white car.

This producer looks as if he's going to get up everybody's nose. He has only been here for a few hours and already he has been babbling about 'discipline' to Annie.

neck and neck



In a race or contest, if two competitors are **neck and neck**, they are exactly level with each other, so that it is impossible to say who will win.

The latest opinion polls show both parties running neck and neck.

Leeds are currently neck-and-neck with Manchester United for the Championship.

☐ You can use **neck and neck** before a noun.

Philippe Jeantot of France and the South African John Martin are involved in a neck and neck race to finish second across the line.

follow-on paragraph, showing syntactic variation (also used for showing slight changes in meaning or use)

plain as the nose on your face

If you say that something is as **plain as the nose on your face**, you are emphasizing that it is very obvious or easy to understand.

It's plain as the nose on your face that this company is wildly undervalued.

His humour can be as plain as the nose on your face.

indication in explanation of pragmatic function – idiom is used to give emphasis

feather your nest



If you accuse someone of **feathering their nest**, you are accusing them of taking advantage of their position in order to get a lot of money, so that they can lead a comfortable life.

The politicians seem anxious to feather their nests at the expense of the people.

It wasn't done to feather his own nest, it was for his son.

indication in explanation of pragmatic function – idiom is used to criticize someone

under your own steam: 1

If you go somewhere **under your own steam**, you make your own arrangements for the journey, rather than letting someone else organize it for you.

Most hotels organise tours to inland beauty spots, but car hire is cheap enough to consider taking off into the hills under your own steam.

meaning numbers – to show idiom has two meanings

under your own steam: 2

If you do something **under your own steam**, you do it on your own and without help from anyone else.

He left the group convinced he could do better under his own steam.

Guide to the Dictionary Entries

Idiom headwords, forms, and variations

At the beginning of each idiom entry in the dictionary, we give a headword form for the idiom. Idioms are arranged in alphabetical order of these forms. We use 'someone', 'something', and 'somewhere' in idiom headwords to indicate that the idiom has to be completed with a word referring to respectively a person, a thing, or a place. Similarly, we use words such as 'you', 'your', 'yourself', and 'their' to indicate that an appropriate pronoun or possessive adjective should be supplied.

Where an idiom has variations, we give the commonest form as the idiom headword. If a variation is very common, or substantially different from the idiom headword, or reflects a British/American usage distinction, we give the variation as a second idiom headword. We also mention these variations in the explanations:

When children **fly the nest** or **leave the nest**, they leave their parents' home to live on their own.

If you say that it is possible to do something **at a pinch** or **in a pinch**, you mean it can just be done if it is absolutely necessary. 'At a pinch' is used in British English and 'in a pinch' is used in American English.

Where the variations are minor, we mention them in a sentence at the end of the explanation:

If you **pick holes in** something such as an argument or theory, you find weak points in it which disprove it or show that it is wrong. Verbs such as 'poke' and 'shoot' can be used instead of 'pick'.

Occasionally, variations are dealt with in a follow-on paragraph, if they need special comment. For example, the entry for the idiom *a wolf in sheep's clothing* has the follow-on paragraph

□ People sometimes describe someone as **a sheep in wolf's clothing** to mean that the person seems dangerous or powerful, but is really harmless or ordinary.

and the entry for *have feet of clay* has

□ You can also say that someone has **clay feet**. This form is used mainly in American English.

More information about variations can be found in the examples, which are chosen to reflect the range of forms occurring in The Bank of English.

Explanations and meanings

The explanations or definitions in this dictionary, as in other COBUILD dictionaries, are written in full sentences. This enables us to define idioms in a natural way, by explaining them in context with their most typical structures and collocations: see the following sections. The language of the explanations is kept as simple as possible, and just over 2000 different words are used.