

— CAMBRIDGE —  
INTERNATIONAL  
DICTIONARY  
*of*  
IDIOMS

剑桥国际英语成语词典



上海外语教育出版社

CAMBRIDGE

— CAMBRIDGE —

# INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY

*of*

# IDIOMS

# 剑桥国际英语成语词典



外教社

上海外语教育出版社

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

剑桥国际英语成语词典= Cambridge International  
Dictionary of Idioms / (英) 马克斯维尔 (Maxwell,  
K.) 等编. —上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 1999. 12  
原书由英国剑桥大学出版社出版  
ISBN 7-81046-753-0

I. 剑… II. 马… III. 英语-成语词典 IV. H313.3-61

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(1999)第52920号

出版发行: **上海外语教育出版社**  
(上海外国语大学内)

责任编辑: 张 宏

---

印 刷: 上海古籍印刷厂  
经 销: 新华书店上海发行所  
开 本: 850×1168 1/32 印张 19 字数 1014 千字  
版 次: 1999年12月第1版 2000年4月第2次印刷  
印 数: 5 000 册

---

书 号: ISBN 7-81046-753-0/H·645  
定 价: 36.00 元  
图 字: 09-1999-106 号

本版图书如有印装质量问题, 可向本社调换

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1998

The pages in this book marked **PHOTOCOPIABLE** © Cambridge University Press 1997  
may be photocopied free of charge by the purchasing individual or institution.  
This permission to copy does not extend to branches or additional schools of an  
institution. All other copying is subject to permission from the publisher.

First published 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Adobe Frutiger and Monotype Nimrod

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data applied for*

ISBN 0 521 62364 2 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 62567 X paperback

## Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms

### Academic Consultant

Professor Michael McCarthy

### Commissioning Editor

Elizabeth Walter

### Project Manager

Glennis Pye

### Lexicographers

Kerry Maxwell

Clea McEnery

Elaine McGregor

Susannah Wintersgill

Kate Woodford

Stephen Curtis

Alice Grandison

Sandra Pyne

### American English Consultants

Carol-June Cassidy

Sabina Sahni

### Australian English Consultants

Barbara Gassmann

Sue Bremner

### Design and Production

Samantha Dumiak

Andrew Robinson

### Software Development

Robert Fleischman

### Editorial contributions have been made by

Annetta Butterworth

Dominic Gurney

Emma Malfroy

Geraldine Mark

# Introduction

---

Idioms are a colourful and fascinating aspect of English. They are commonly used in all types of language, informal and formal, spoken and written. Your language skills will increase rapidly if you can understand idioms and use them confidently and correctly. One of the main problems students have with idioms is that it is often impossible to guess the meaning of an idiom from the words it contains. In addition, idioms often have a stronger meaning than non-idiomatic phrases. For example, *look daggers at someone* has more emphasis than *look angrily at someone*, but they mean the same thing. Idioms may also suggest a particular attitude of the person using them, for example disapproval, humour, exasperation or admiration, so you must use them carefully.

The *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* explains the meaning and use of around 7,000 idioms in a clear and helpful way. It is a truly international dictionary: it covers current British, American and Australian idioms.

It includes:

- traditional idioms (e.g. turn a blind eye to sth, throw the baby out with the bathwater)
- idiomatic compounds (e.g. fall guy, turkey shoot)
- similes and comparisons (e.g. as dull as ditchwater, swear like a trooper)
- exclamations and sayings (e.g. Bully for you!, Over my dead body!)
- clichés (e.g. all part of life's rich tapestry, There's many a true word spoken in jest.)

The definitions are clear and precise. They have been written using a carefully controlled defining vocabulary of under 2,000 words. Every idiom is illustrated with examples based on sentences from the Cambridge International Corpus. This means that all of the examples reflect natural written and spoken English. Information about grammar is shown clearly, without complicated grammar codes. The origins of idioms are explained, where appropriate, to help understanding.

In addition, there are theme panels showing idioms grouped according to their meaning or function. There are also photocopiable exercises at the back of the dictionary. This dictionary aims to help you not only as a comprehensive reference book but also as a valuable learning aid.

# How to use this dictionary

## Finding an idiom

### Where do you look?

The best way to search for an idiom is to look in the index at the back of the dictionary. You can look under any important word in the idiom to find out where the entry for that idiom is. The keyword (the word where you will find the entry) is shown in dark type:

take **pot** luck

give someone a taste of their own **medicine**

(**pot** is the keyword, so the entry is at 'pot')

(**medicine** is the keyword, so the entry is at 'medicine')

Each entry is listed under a keyword. The keyword is shown in dark type in the index.

#### **acid**

##### **an acid test**

a test which will really prove the value, quality, or truth of something • *The new show was well received but viewing figures for the next episode will be the real acid test.*

Idioms are not usually listed in the index under words like 'a', 'the', 'all', 'these', 'where' or 'no', except when the whole idiom is made of such words, e.g. be **all** in, be **out** of it.

Words are listed in the index in the same form as they appear in the idiom. For instance, look up 'pushing up the daisies' at 'pushing' or 'daisies', not 'push' or 'daisy'.

When there are several idioms listed under one keyword, the entries are ordered as follows:

- entries beginning with the keyword
- entries beginning with 'a' + keyword
- entries beginning with 'the' + keyword
- all other entries in alphabetical order of the words they begin with

For example, the entries under the keyword 'tongue' are ordered like this:

tongue in cheek  
 tongue-in-cheek  
 a tongue-lashing  
 bite your tongue  
 find your tongue  
 get your tongue round/around sth  
 hold your tongue  
 loosen your tongue  
 trip off the tongue

Where British and American idioms have different spellings, e.g. take centre stage (*British*)/take center stage (*American*), the idiom is at the British keyword, but you can look up the American spelling in the index to find out where it is.



This is the basic form of the idiom.

**paint the town red** *informal*

to go out and enjoy yourself in the evening, often drinking a lot of alcohol and dancing • *Jack finished his exams today so he's gone off to paint the town red with his friends.*

Many idioms have different possible forms. When that difference is just in one word, it is shown like this.

**put/stick the knife in** *British & Australian, informal*

to do or say something unpleasant to someone in an unkind way • *'No one in the office likes you, you know, Tim,' she said, putting the knife in.* • *The reviewer from The Times really stuck the knife in, calling it the worst play he'd seen in years.*

When the difference is more than one word, the alternative forms are shown on different lines.

**raise (sb's) hackles**  
**make (sb's) hackles rise**

to annoy someone ➤ Hackles are the hairs on the back of a dog's neck which stand up when it is angry. • *The politician's frank interview may have raised hackles in his party.* • *The movie's pro-war message made many people's hackles rise.*

Words in brackets can be omitted, and the meaning will be the same.

**have had it (up to here)** *informal*

to be so angry about something that you do not want to continue with it or even think about it any more • *I've had it! From now on they can clear up their own mess.* • (often + with) *I've had it up to here with lawyers!*

Idioms with different forms in British, American or Australian are shown on separate lines. There is a list of regional labels on page xv.

**blow a raspberry** *British & Australian, informal*

**give a raspberry** *American, informal*

to make a rude noise by putting your tongue between your lips and blowing • (often + at) *A boy of no more than six appeared, blew a raspberry at me and then ran away.*

If an idiom is formal, informal, old-fashioned, etc., this is shown with a label. There is a list of register labels on page xv.

**be/go (out) on the razzle** *British, informal, old-fashioned*

to enjoy yourself by doing things like going to parties or dances • *We're going out on the razzle on New Year's Eve – do you fancy coming?*

'sb' means 'somebody'. It can be replaced by a person's name or by 'him/her/you/them/me/us'.

**give sb the push**

1 *British & Australian, informal* to end someone's employment • *After twenty years' loyal service, they gave her the push.*

'sth' means 'something'. It can be replaced by a non-human object.

**let sth ride**

to not take action to change something wrong or unpleasant • *Don't panic about low sales. Let it ride for a while till we see if business picks up.*

'your' can be replaced by 'his/her/their/our/my'.

**blow your stack/top informal**

to suddenly become very angry • *My mother blew her top when she saw the mess we'd made in the kitchen.*

'swh' means 'somewhere'. It can be replaced by the name of a place.

**be fresh from [swh] British**  
**be fresh out of [swh] American & Australian**

to have just finished education or training in a particular school or college and not have much experience • *Our course is taught by a young professor fresh out of law school.*

Some idioms have more than one possible meaning. In such cases, the different meanings are numbered.

**without fail**

- 1 if something happens without fail, it always happens • *Every Tuesday afternoon, without fail, Helga went to visit her father.*
- 2 something that you say in order to emphasize that something will be done or will happen • *'You will meet me at the airport, won't you?' 'Don't worry, I'll be there without fail.'*

## Sub-entries

Sometimes idioms have a basic form but are often found in slightly different constructions. If they are common, these different constructions are shown in sub-entries.

**have your head in the clouds**

to not know what is really happening around you because you are paying too much attention to your own ideas • *He's an academic. They've all got their heads in the clouds.*

**with your head in the clouds** • *He was walking along with his head in the clouds as usual when he tripped over a paving stone.*

Sometimes different parts of speech can be formed from the basic idiom. In this case, the main form is a verb phrase and the sub-entry is an adjective.

### catch sb's eye

- 1 to be noticed by someone because you are looking at them • *She lit a cigarette while he tried to catch the waiter's eye.*
- 2 to be attractive or different enough to be noticed by people • *There were lots of dresses to choose from, but none of them really caught my eye.*

**eye-catching** • *There is an eye-catching mural in the hall.*

Opposites are shown as sub-entries.

### strike a blow for sth/sb

to do something to support an idea or to change a situation to something which you believe is good • *He claims to be striking a blow for gender equality by employing an equal number of men and women.* • *This latest agreement will strike a blow for free trade within the EU.*

**OPPOSITE strike a blow against** sth/sb  
• *The court's decision strikes a blow against minority rights.*

## The definitions

All definitions use simple words to make them easy to understand.

### at the top of your voice

if someone says something at the top of their voice, they say it as loudly as they can • *'Stop it Nathan!' she shouted at the top of her voice.*

Definitions show the most typical range of objects for an idiom.

### on top of sth

if you are on top of a situation, you are dealing with it successfully • *We had a lot of work to do, but I think we're on top of it now.*

Definitions show the typical range of subjects for an idiom.

### see eye to eye

if two people see eye to eye, they agree with each other • (often negative; often + **with**) *He's asked for a transfer because he doesn't see eye to eye with the new manager.*

For adjectival idioms, the definition explains what the idiom usually describes.

### day-to-day

a day-to-day activity is one of the things you have to do every day, usually as part of your work • (always before noun) *It's Sheila who's responsible for the day-to-day running of the school.*

The emotions or attitude of the person using the idiom are explained in the definition.

**On yer bike!** *British & Australian, very informal*

an impolite way of telling someone to go away • 'Can you lend me some money?' 'On yer bike, mate!'

Individual words in the idioms are explained when this helps to understand the meaning of the idiom.

**an eager beaver**

someone who works very hard and is eager to do things ➤ A beaver is a small animal which people traditionally believe to be hard-working. • 'Who's the eager beaver who came in at the weekend to finish this work off?'

The history of idioms is explained when this helps to understand the meaning of the idiom.

**be in the doldrums**

1 if a business, an economy or a person's job is in the doldrums, it is not very successful and nothing new is happening in it ➤ The doldrums was the name for an area of sea where ships were not able to move because there was no wind.

## Examples

Examples show how idioms are used in natural speech and writing.

**put a bomb under sth/sb** *British & Australian*

if you want to put a bomb under a person or an organization, you want to make them do things faster • 'I'd like to put a bomb under those solicitors.'

Very common collocations are shown in dark type.

**blow-by-blow**

a blow-by-blow description of an event gives every detail of how it happened • 'She gave me a **blow-by-blow account** of her car crash.'

## Grammar

The basic grammatical structure of an idiom is shown in its entry:

This idiom is followed by an infinitive.

**be man enough** to do sth

to be brave enough to do something • 'He was man enough to admit he had made a mistake.'

This idiom is followed by an -ing form.

**be on the brink of** doing sth

to be likely to do something very soon • 'The club's manager dismissed reports that he was on the brink of buying Peter Beardsley.'

This idiom is always reflexive.

**tie yourself (up) in knots**

to become very confused or worried when you are trying to make a decision or solve a problem

This idiom is always used in continuous tenses.

**pushing**

**be pushing up (the) daisies** *humorous*

to be dead • *It won't affect me anyway. I'll be pushing up the daisies long before it happens.*

Idioms which are whole sentences start with a capital letter and end with a full stop or other punctuation.

**Act your age!**

something that you say to someone who is being silly to tell them to behave in a more serious way • *Oh, act your age, Chris! You can't expect to have your own way all the time.*

This idiom is always used in negative sentences.

**not look a gift horse in the mouth**

if someone tells you not to look a gift horse in the mouth, they mean that you should not criticize or feel doubt about something good that has been offered to you • *Okay, it's not the job of your dreams but it pays good money. I'd be inclined not to look a gift horse in the mouth if I were you.*

Common grammatical features are labelled at examples which demonstrate them:

This idiom is often followed by the preposition 'of'.

**a rich seam** *formal*

a subject which provides a lot of opportunities for people to discuss, write about or make jokes about • **(often + of)** *Both wars have provided a rich seam of drama for playwrights and novelists alike.*

This idiom is often followed by a question word.

**not have the faintest (idea)**

to have no knowledge of or no information about something • *'Do you know where Anna is?' 'I haven't the faintest.'* • **(often + question word)** *I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.*

This idiom is often an order.

**get a move on** *informal*

to hurry • **(often an order)** *Get a move on, man! We don't have all day.*

This idiom is usually used in a passive construction.

**bring sb to book** *British & Australian*  
to punish someone • (usually passive) *A crime has been committed and whoever is responsible must be brought to book.*

This adjectival idiom is always used before the noun it describes.

**up-and-coming**  
becoming more and more successful in a job • (always before noun) *She founded a summer school for up-and-coming musicians.*

## Figurative meanings

Some keywords have groups of idioms which all use the same figurative meaning of the keyword. In such cases, a note explains the figurative meaning and all the idioms which follow it have that meaning.

Knife is used in the following phrases connected with unpleasant behaviour.

**have your knife into sb** *British & Australian, informal*  
to try to cause problems for someone because you do not like them • *Mike's had his knife into me ever since he found out I was seeing his ex-girlfriend.*

**put/stick the knife in** *British & Australian, informal*  
to do or say something unpleasant to someone in an unkind way • *'No one in the office likes you, you know, Tim,' she said, putting the knife in.* • *The reviewer from The Times really stuck the knife in, calling it the worst play he'd seen in years.*

**turn/twist the knife**  
to do or say something unpleasant which makes someone who is already upset feel worse • *Having made the poor girl cry, he twisted the knife by saying she was weak and unable to cope with pressure.*

**a turn/twist of the knife** • *'I never loved you,' she said, with a final twist of the knife.*

## Common idioms

Idioms which are highlighted are very common and useful for learners of English to learn.

**not have a clue** *informal*  
to have no knowledge of or no information about something • *'How much do houses cost in Yorkshire?' 'I haven't got a clue.'*  
• (often + about) *Internet researchers in the 1980s didn't have a clue about the exciting online landscapes of the future.*

## Regional labels

<i>British</i>	this idiom is only used in British English
<i>American</i>	this idiom is only used in American English
<i>Australian</i>	this idiom is only used in Australian English
<i>mainly British</i>	this idiom is mainly used in British English
<i>mainly American</i>	this idiom is mainly used in American English

## Register labels

<i>informal</i>	idioms which are used with friends and family or people you know in relaxed situations
<i>formal</i>	idioms which are used in a serious or polite way, for example in business documents, serious newspapers and books, lectures, news broadcasts, etc.
<i>very informal</i>	idioms which are used in a very informal or not very polite way, often between members of a particular social group
<i>old-fashioned</i>	idioms which are still used but sound old-fashioned
<i>taboo</i>	idioms which are likely to offend people and are not used in formal situations
<i>humorous</i>	idioms which are intended to make people laugh
<i>literary</i>	idioms which are mainly used in literature

This edition of Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms is published by permission of the Syndicate of the Press of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England.

Licensed for sale in the People's Republic of China only, not for sale elsewhere.

本《剑桥国际英语成语词典》（重印本）由剑桥大学出版社授权出版，仅供在中华人民共和国境内销售。



# Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>How to use this dictionary</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Idioms A-Z</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Theme panels</b>	<b>439</b>
<b>Anger</b>	<b>440</b>
<b>Business</b>	<b>441</b>
<b>Dishonesty</b>	<b>442</b>
<b>Happiness &amp; Sadness</b>	<b>443</b>
<b>Health</b>	<b>444</b>
<b>Helping</b>	<b>445</b>
<b>Intelligence &amp; Stupidity</b>	<b>446</b>
<b>Interest &amp; Boredom</b>	<b>447</b>
<b>Liking &amp; not Liking</b>	<b>448</b>
<b>Money</b>	<b>449</b>
<b>Power &amp; Authority</b>	<b>450</b>
<b>Remembering &amp; Forgetting</b>	<b>451</b>
<b>Speaking &amp; Conversation</b>	<b>452</b>
<b>Success &amp; Failure</b>	<b>453</b>
<b>Understanding</b>	<b>454</b>
<b>Exercises</b>	<b>455</b>
<b>Answer Key</b>	<b>467</b>