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NTC's AMERICAN IDIOMS Dictionary

Richard A. Spears

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to the Everyday Expressions

of Contemporary American English



NTC NATIONAL TEXTBOOK COMPANY

NTC's AMERICAN IDIOMS Dictionary

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Dictionary**

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TO THE USER

Every language has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know the meanings of all the words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing. Many clichés, proverbs, slang phrases, phrasal verbs, and common sayings offer this kind of problem. A phrase or sentence of this type is usually said to be *idiomatic*. This Dictionary is a collection of the idiomatic phrases and sentences that occur frequently in American English.

HOW TO USE THIS DICTIONARY

1. First, try looking up the phrase in the Dictionary. Each expression is alphabetized by 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**. Remember that in the entry phrase, the words “someone” or “one” are used to stand for persons and “something” stands for things.
2. If you do not find the phrase 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 361. There you will find all of the phrases that contain the key word you have looked up. Pick out the phrase you want and look it up. The Index has its own instructions for use.
3. A main entry may have one or more alternate forms. The main entry 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:

save someone's skin* **AND** **save someone's neck*** to save someone from injury, embarrassment, or punishment. (Informal.) □ *I saved my skin by getting the job done on time.* □ *Thanks for saving my neck! I would have fallen down the stairs if you hadn't held my arm.*

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

settle down **1.** to calm down. □ *Now, children, it's time to settle down and start class.* □ *If you don't settle down, I'll send you all home.*
2. to settle into a stable way of life; to get married and settle into a stable way of life. □ *Tom, don't you think it's about time you settled down and stopped all of this running around?* □ *Bill and Ann decided to settle down and raise some children.*

5. Numbered senses may have additional forms which are shown in boldface type, in which case the **AND** and the additional form(s) follow the numeral. For example:

make a point of something **1.** **AND** **make a point** to state an item of importance. □ *You made a point which we all should remember.* □ *He spoke for an hour without making a point.* **2.** **AND** **make a point of doing something** to make an effort to do something. □ *Please make a point of mailing this letter. It's very important.* □ *The hostess made a point of thanking me for bringing flowers.* **3.** **AND** **make an issue of someone or something** to turn someone or something into an important matter. □ *Please don't make a point of John's comment. It wasn't that important.* □ *I hope you make an issue of Tom's success and*

the reasons for it. □ Tom has a lot of problems. Please don't make an issue of him.

6. Some entries have additional related forms within the entry. These are introduced by “ALSO:” and are in boldface type. For example:

make sense out of someone or something to understand or interpret someone or something. (Also with *some*, as in the examples.) □ *I can hardly make sense out of John.* □ *I'm trying to make some sense out of what John is saying.*
ALSO: make sense to be understandable. □ *John doesn't make sense.* □ *What John says makes sense.*

7. Some entry phrases are followed by an asterisk (*) which suggests caution in their use. The comments in parentheses after the definition will tell what special kind of phrase the entry is. Clichés, slang expressions, folksy expressions, and some other phrases are marked with this caution. You may not want to use these expressions in formal writing. For example:

cut class* to skip going to class.
(Informal.) □ *If Mary keeps cutting classes, she'll fail the course.* □ *I can't cut that class. I've missed too many already.*

8. Where there are numbered senses in an entry and only some of the senses need caution, the asterisk is placed after the number of the sense that requires caution. The explanation for the caution follows the definition. For example:

in the groove **1.** in a notch or a long slit. (*In* can be replaced with *into*. See *in a bind* and the examples below.) □ *The record won't play unless the needle is in the groove.* □ *Put this part into this groove, and then screw down the other part.* **2.* AND groovy** good and satisfying; exactly what is needed; attractive.
(Slang.) □ *This music is really in the groove.* □ *What a groovy hat!*

9. The boldface entry is usually followed by a definition. Alternate forms of the definition 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 useful. □ *Ann is so tired. She's really dead on her feet.* □ *He can't teach well anymore. He's dead on his feet.* □ *This inefficient company is dead on its feet.*

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

in someone's behalf See *in behalf of someone.*

11. A definition may be followed by comments in parentheses. These comments tell about some of the variations of a phrase, give other useful information, and indicate cross-referencing. For example:

in advance of someone or something AND **in advance** before someone or something. (Refers to both time and space.) □ *They reached the station in advance of the 7:00 train.* □ *It's good to be there in advance.* □ *I boarded the train in advance of Mr. Jones.*

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

in the money* (Informal. See also **on the money.**) 1. wealthy. □ *John is really in the money. He's worth millions.* □ *If I am ever in the money, I'll be generous.* 2. in the winning position in a race or contest. (As if one had won the prize money.) □ *I knew when Jane came around the final turn that she was in the money.* □ *The horses coming in first, second, and third are said to be in the money.*

13. Comments that apply to only one numbered sense are found within the numbered sense, after the definition. For example:

in the money* (Informal. See also *on the money*.) **1.** wealthy. □ *John is really in the money. He's worth millions.* □ *If I am ever in the money, I'll be generous.* **2.** in the winning position in a race or contest. (As if one had won the prize money.) □ *I knew when Jane came around the final turn that she was in the money.* □ *The horses coming in first, second, and third are said to be in the money.*

14. Some definitions contain additional comments in parentheses which help make the definition more clear. These comments provide part of the context in which the entry phrase is usually used. 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.*

15. Many entries are cross-referenced to additional idiomatic phrases that are related in form or meaning. For example:

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

16. Sometimes the numbered senses refer to only people or things, but not both. In such cases the numeral is followed by “[with something]” or “[with someone]”. For example:

nailed someone or something down
AND **nailed down someone or something** **1.*** [with someone] to get a firm and final decision from some-

one (on something). (Informal.) □ *I want you to find Bob and get an answer from him. Nail him down one way or the other.* □ *Please nail down John on the question of signing the contract.* **2.*** **[with something]** to get a firm and final decision (from someone) on something. (Informal.) □ *Find Bob and nail down an answer.* □ *Let's get in touch with John and nail down this contract.* **3.** **[with something]** to nail (with a hammer) something which is loose. □ *Nail down this loose floor board.* □ *Please nail this thing down.*

17. Each main entry has at least two examples. Examples are in *italic* type, and each example begins with a □ symbol. The examples show how the idiomatic phrases are used and the types of contexts in which they are found.

18. Entry phrases and their variants appear in **boldface type**. Examples and emphasized words appear in *italic type*. An entry phrase appears in *italic sans serif type* whenever the phrase is referred to in a definition or cross reference.

TERMS AND SYMBOLS

□ (a box) marks the beginning of an example.

ALSO: introduces additional forms within an entry that are related to the main entry, but have different meanings.

AND indicates that an entry has variant forms that are the same or almost the same in meaning. One or more variant forms are preceded by **AND**.

cliché indicates an expression that is used too frequently and too casually. You may not want to use clichés in writing.

folksy refers to expressions that are rural, old-fashioned, or quaint. You may not want to use folksy expressions in writing.

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.

proverb refers to a fixed saying that is often quoted.

see means to look up the entry indicated.

see also means to go to the entry indicated for additional information or to find similar expressions.

slang refers to expressions that are recognized as casual or playful. You may not want to use slang expressions in writing.

ABOUT THIS DICTIONARY

Some idiomatic phrases—especially proverbs and clichés—do not usually vary in form. People will say “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” but never “A bird in the hand is worth two in the tree” or “Two birds in the hand are worth four in the bush.” Most phrases show some kind of variation, however, and many are highly variable. Phrasal verbs may occur in two different orders. For instance, **ask someone out** or **ask out someone**. Some idiomatic phrases can take a variety of modifiers. For instance, “The audience gave the performer a hand” and “The audience gave the performer a very nice hand.” And, of course, verbs in idiomatic phrases can occur in a variety of tenses and aspects. The Dictionary unites the variant forms of an idiomatic phrase at one entry and calls attention to the major types of variation the user is likely to encounter.

In English it is important to know whether an idiomatic phrase includes an object as part of the phrase and it is just as important to know whether the object is a person or a thing. You can say “send someone packing” (with a human object), but not “send something packing” (with a non-human object). Many idioms are like **bail someone or something out**, where the basic *form* of the idiom is the same whether the object is a person or a thing, but the meaning is different for persons and things. **Bail someone out** means to “pay money to get someone out of jail” and **bail something out** means to “remove water from something, such as a boat or canoe.” These are really two different idioms that look similar. The Dictionary uses *form* (rather than meaning) for indexing the idioms so that you can more easily locate them to find out what they mean.

Typically an idiomatic phrase will be listed in a dictionary or a word list in its simplest or shortest form, such as **try out**. If you have spoken English all your life, you probably know that this simple entry, **try out**, really stands for **try someone out**, **try out someone**, **try something out**, **try out something**, **try out for something**, and just **try out**. The phrase **try out** is the common element in all these forms, but

knowing only the common element is not adequate for most people. This Dictionary lists the fullest form as the entry phrase, with the variant and shortened forms listed afterward. When one is seeking only the short form, one looks up the phrase that *includes* the short form.

It is often difficult to decide what the basic form of an idiom is. Textbooks, idiom dictionaries, and lists of useful phrases show little agreement on the basic forms of idiomatic phrases. If it has not been decided what the basic form of an idiom is, how will anyone know what to look up in a dictionary? This Dictionary uses a Phrase-Finder Index to allow the user to determine how an idiomatic phrase is listed in the Dictionary simply by looking up any major word in the Phrase-Finder Index. If you know that the idiom you want has the word **cloud** in it, just look up **cloud** in the Phrase-Finder Index and you will find **cloud up; Every cloud has a silver lining; have one's head in the clouds; on cloud nine; under a cloud of suspicion**. The user does not have to guess at the form of the idiom.

There is an important distinction made between *one* and *someone* in the entry phrases. *Someone* is used to refer to someone other than the subject of the sentence, as with **acknowledge someone to be right**. For example, "I acknowledged her to be right" or "She acknowledged me to be right." One does not acknowledge oneself to be right. *One* is used where the *one* is the same person as the subject of the sentence (or the conversation), as with **act one's age** and **know one's ABCs**. For example, "You should learn to act your age." or "He doesn't know his ABCs." One is not said to act someone else's age or know someone else's ABCs. Where there are two *ones* in a phrase they both must refer to the same person, as with **set one back on one's heels**. For example, "The scolding set him back on his heels." or "That bill really set John back on his heels." You cannot set one person back on another person's heels.

Each entry is accompanied by two or more examples. The examples illustrate the types of variation one might encounter and the typical ways in which the phrase is used, including passives and reflexives. The Dictionary indicates special types of phrases—slang, folksy, informal—and suggests caution with their use. It is difficult to instruct people on the proper or appropriate use of slang and folksy material because in some situations, especially in writing, they are often most effectively used when they are not quite appropriate. Perceptions of appropriateness are culturally bound and are tied to personality traits such as sense of humor, risk-taking, position or rank, and many other factors. No book can advise people—in any culture—how to act in all situations. For this reason, slang, folksy,

and informal expressions, as well as clichés, are marked with an * which indicates caution. If in doubt or in a situation where the wrong word may cause difficulty, do not use expressions marked with an *.

In general, there is no attempt to instruct the user in English grammar or explain the grammatical structure of the expressions in the Dictionary. Usually, when an idiomatic expression is of the type that can be included in a sentence, it follows regular grammatical rules. Exceptions to this are noted in the Dictionary, as with **Them's fighting words!** If the dictionary user is moderately competent in the construction of English sentences, the grammatical use of the phrases in the Dictionary should cause no special difficulty. If the dictionary user lacks competence with the construction of English sentences, the Dictionary should be used to help in the *comprehension* of phrases until more competence in the use of the language is achieved.

Very few symbols and special terms are used in the Dictionary. Variation is indicated simply by listing the whole variant form. For instance, just after **get something off** you will find AND **get off something**. This provides immediate visual verification that this phrasal verb allows third-person singular objects to occur both before and after the preposition. This makes the information in the Dictionary available to those who may not yet have mastered the grammatical explanations of English structure well enough to understand the syntactic explanations of idiomatic expressions. The Dictionary assumes no grammatical skills other than the ability to identify a few parts of speech such as nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and to recognize the similarity between the phrases listed in the Dictionary and those found in everyday language use.

The phrases in the Dictionary come from many sources. Many have been collected from current newspapers and magazines. Others have come from existing dictionaries and reference books. Dictionary users have helped collect idioms for this Dictionary, also. Students in English as a foreign language classes at Northwestern University kept lists of expressions they could not understand and submitted them to their instructor. These phrases became the basis of classroom instruction and also became a part of this book.

The Dictionary should prove useful for people who are learning how to understand idiomatic English, the hearing impaired, and for all speakers of English who want to know more about the language.

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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 \$3,000. 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 offer, but a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

a chip off the old block* a person (usually a male) who behaves in the same way as his father or resembles his father. (Usually informal.) □ *John looks like his father—a real chip off the old block.* □ *Bill Jones Jr. is a chip off the old block. He's a banker just like his father.*

a cut above someone or something a measure or degree better than someone or something else. (Especially with *average*, as in the examples.) □ *Your shirt is beautiful, but mine is a cut above yours.* □ *John isn't the best mechanic in town, but he's a cut above average.*

a drop in the bucket See the following entry.

a drop in the ocean **AND a drop in the bucket** just a little bit; not enough of something to make a difference. □ *But one dollar isn't enough! That's just a drop in the ocean.* □ *At this point your help is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. I need far more help than twenty people could give.* □ *I won't accept your offer. It's just a drop in the bucket.*

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 judgement.) □ *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 to *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,"*