

IDIOMS IN ACTION

A key to fluency in English

George Reeves

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IDIOMS IN ACTION

A key to fluency
in English

WITH 10 COMMON IDIOM ERRORS (101)
A STUDENT'S LOG OF IDIOMATIC ENGLISH (102)

George Reeves
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Preface

This is a book born of embarrassment, boredom and skepticism.

EMBARRASSMENT: As a young American teacher of English at the Ecole Polytechnique of Paris, France, I was constantly asked by students "What does this word mean?" To them I was a walking dictionary. Sometimes, however, my definition didn't satisfy them and they tried to improve on it. I became embarrassed. One day I fought back.

"Now use the word in a sentence," I demanded.

They could not.

"Then what good is it being able to define words you can't use?" I said triumphantly. For in my embarrassment I had rediscovered that words must be contextualized to have meaning and to become a living part of one's knowledge.

BOREDOM: The boredom was that of my English-second-language students at Cuyahoga Community College, where I now teach. Language learning bored them—particularly idiom lists, definitions and drills. Yet idioms made up an important part of our program, and we needed material to encourage students to learn to speak and write idiomatic English.

SKEPTICISM: My wife is French, therefore skeptical. Glancing through an idiom book being used in my class, she asked: "Why don't you teach frequent idioms?"

"Can't you read?" I snapped. "The author says his idioms are frequent."

"I've never heard them."

If after four years in the United States she hadn't heard them, well, my students probably hadn't either. So why teach them idioms they would seldom hear? Or use?

They agreed with her. They had rarely heard native speakers using these idioms. Not only was I boring them; worse, I was teaching them a lot of useless English.

But how could I make everyday idioms amusing? To find an answer, I began creating contexts and experimenting with dialogues. In so doing, I got a great deal of advice and good-natured criticism from my colleagues who tried out these exercises in their classes. I especially wish to thank Phyllis Melnick and Ray Ackley for their insightful suggestions and Rose Gaynor for her excellent typing.

George Reeves
Cleveland, Ohio
January, 1975

To the Teacher of English

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THE GOAL

Getting your students to understand, speak and write everyday idioms in everyday English.

THE APPROACH

Idioms in Action deals with 150 of the most frequent idioms in English. It provides practice in speaking and writing these idioms—practice which is repeated, extensive and carefully planned.

THE LEVEL OF USE

When are students ready to write English? We teachers don't agree. The first half of this book assumes only that they can recognize approximately 2,000 words,* understand the syntax of plain conversation and manipulate the simple past, the simple and progressive (continuous) present, and the simple future tense. Therefore, either advanced beginners or intermediate students can use this book, depending on the language curriculum and the teacher's decision.

THE RATIONALE

Why is it that students can memorize lists of idioms, parrot definitions, but fail to speak and write idiomatic English? A major reason seems to be lack of experience with idioms in contexts.

To be mastered, idioms must be used over and over in context. By experiencing and using them in related social and linguistic contexts, students learn them much more efficiently than by rote memory.** And although definitions and synonyms are helpful, something more is needed. Like the idioms they define, these words also need to be embedded in appropriate contexts—contexts which cue, correct and reinforce understanding, contexts which inform, amuse and relate to students' interests.

*Accounting for 95 percent of the words in exercises one to fifteen (based on *The New Horizon Ladder Dictionary of the English Language* by John Robert Shaw with Janet Shaw).

**See Kenneth L. Pike, *The Modern Language Journal*, 44.293-294 (November, 1960). Dr. Pike discusses language as a "structural part of a larger whole—part of life's total behavioral action and structure, intimately linked to social interaction." Commenting on the value of context in language exercises, he continues: "In the sentence *The big boy came home* there is a slot where the boy may be replaced by girl, man, etc. New vocabulary is learned most easily not through rote memory alone, but through the hearing or speaking of new words in such grammatical positions. The 'substitution' tables of British scholars or the 'pattern practice' of the English Language Institute, University of Michigan, etc., take advantage of this fact. Here the successfulness of such drills is not exclusively the result of sheer repetition, but to a very significant degree due to the psychological ties between the substituted words and their contexts."

SPECIFIC METHODS

1 Each part of an exercise emphasizes a particular problem; every part requires that the idiom agree in tense and person with its sentence. For example, Part A, although requiring such agreement, emphasizes spelling in that the student must write each idiom letter separately.

Example: Yesterday Anne ^[person] did her best to win.
_[tense]

Part B, by requiring the student to substitute the idiom for its bold-face equivalent, cues, channels and corrects his understanding.

Example: Mimi tries ^[tense and person] **really hard** to pass the test. Mimi ~~tries~~ ^[person] does her best to pass the test

Parts C and D require the student to use the idiom in context. Part C, with its five blanks for five idioms, asks for a simple contextual choice. Part D, with its six blanks for ten idioms (five of which "carry over" from the preceding exercise), demands a more difficult contextual choice.

Example: We wanted to swim well, so we ^[person] did our best to practice every day.
_[tense]

Part E, by asking the student to substitute an idiom for its bold-face equivalent (as in B above) but to use his own words to complete the sentence, prepares him for the free idiomatic writing of Part F.

Example: I tried **really hard** to learn English when
I did my best to learn English when I visited New York.

Part F requires the student to write a paragraph using the five idioms on a familiar subject.

- 2 Testing: Ten tests help the student review the spelling, meaning and use of the idioms.
- 3 Memory aids: The idioms reappear in subsequent dialogues and exercises.
- 4 Use of spoken American English: The syntax, contractions and rhythms of spoken American English are used throughout in order that the student can form his prose on everyday language.

SUGGESTIONS TO THE TEACHER FOR CLASS USE

1 Ask your students to complete the *Sample Exercise*. If you explain the exercise to them and correct their mistakes in class, they will make fewer "careless" mistakes. Then, if they complete the *Student Checklist*, the number of such mistakes will go even lower.

2 Read aloud the dialogue between Mimi and Sam. Then read it again. However, this time ask your students to repeat each sentence after you.

3 Now your students are ready to complete the exercises. When they have completed them, read Parts A, B, C, and D with them so that they may correct their own mistakes.

4 After your students have completed Parts E and F, you may ask some of them to write Parts E and F on the blackboard. This will allow you to make corrections in grammar. It will also give each person in class an opportunity to say something about the exercises and to compare his or her answers. Encourage class discussion. (Weak students should omit Part F.)

5 You may collect the exercises from each student. You can correct them and return them to the student. After you collect the exercises, you may want your students to speak the idioms. You can do this by first reading the dialogue aloud. Stop reading when you come to the place where an idiom is to be put in. Ask your students to say which idiom belongs there. You may also ask a student to repeat the entire sentence from memory. Then read another sentence in the same way.

6 Use the same procedure as above (in paragraph 5) on the "question" parts (the fill-ins, sentence completions, etc.) and ask your students to speak their answers after they have written them.

7 After every third exercise, there is a three part *Test*. Out of 100 points, Part A counts 15 points. Part B counts 25 points. Part C counts 60 points. Ask your students to write Parts A and B as homework. These parts also serve to prepare them for their in-class oral (or written) test on Part C.

8 One student "plays" Sam. Another student "plays" Mimi. They act out the dialogue in front of the class. (Simple props—a chair or table—can make the situation more realistic.)

9 Have your students write an imitation of a dialogue—their own idiomatic commentary on American life—and take turns acting it.

10 The *Idiom Review Game*: After your class finishes a few exercises, divide it into opposing sides. Call alternately on each side: A player must supply an appropriate sentence for the idiom given. If he cannot, he must stop playing. The side with the most players at the end wins the game.

11 Diagnostic notes for teachers on *10 Common Idiom Errors*—See page 101.

12 On page 102 *A Student's Log of Idiomatic English* helps students to note and define their problems in using idiomatic English.

To the Student of English

WHAT IS AN IDIOM?

An idiom says something in a special way. It is a group of words which can't be clearly understood from the ordinary meanings of its words. *In time* is an idiom. So is *on time*.

WHY STUDY IDIOMS THAT YOU ALREADY KNOW?

Because you don't really know them, You only recognize them. For example, you probably recognize *in time* and *on time*. But can you use them correctly in sentences?

No? Then it's like having a car in the garage but not knowing how to drive it.

In short, useless knowledge cannot help you. That is why *Idioms in Action* makes you *use, use, use* your everyday idioms. So do its exercises carefully. Soon you will—

- 1 Speak and write dozens of the most frequent (and useful!) idioms in the English language;
- 2 Sound less like a book and more like a human being;
- 3 Use your English better and better.

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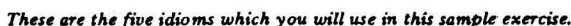
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Part 1

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE TENSES (SIMPLE AND PROGRESSIVE)



1. ahead of time
2. at first
3. do (my, your, her, his, our, their, etc.) best
4. get mixed up
5. of course

MIMI: And I'll have grey hairs ahead of time.

This is the dialog which shows how the five idioms are used.

PART A USING ALL FIVE IDIOMS, FILL IN THE BLANKS, ONE LETTER FOR EACH BLANK. MAKE EACH IDIOM AGREE IN TENSE AND PERSON WITH ITS SENTENCE.

EXAMPLE: Yesterday Anne did her best to win. (Idiom 3)

Maria and Helena study hard. They to learn English. (Idiom 3)
That's why they like to finish their reading early and prepare their lessons
 . , they are doing well in English. (Idioms 1,5)

But sometimes Maria and Helena become nervous during a test and _____.
_____ They write all the wrong answers _____. Afterwards they correct their mistakes. (*Idioms 4,2*)

*Contractions are on page 90. (A contraction is a shortened form. *Don't* is a contraction of *do not*.)

MY NAME _____ TEACHER'S NAME _____ DATE _____

PART B SOME WORDS BELOW ARE BOLD FACE. * SUBSTITUTE THE ABOVE IDIOMS WHICH MEAN THE SAME THING. THEN COPY THE COMPLETE SENTENCE IN THE SAME TENSE AND PERSON.

EXAMPLE: Mimi ^[tense and person] tries really hard to pass the test. Mimi does her best to pass the test.

- 1 Bill **tries really hard** to please his wife. _____ (Idiom 3)
- 2 **In the beginning**, I didn't understand math. _____ (Idiom 2)
- 3 My English class began ten minutes **early** today. _____ (Idiom 1)
- 4 **Naturally**, I like to eat ice cream. _____ (Idiom 5)
- 5 Sam **becomes confused** when he doesn't read directions. _____ (Idiom 4)

PART C WRITE THE APPROPRIATE IDIOM. MAKE IT AGREE IN TENSE AND PERSON WITH THE REST OF THE SENTENCE.

EXAMPLE: Sam didn't read directions and ^[tense] got mixed up.

Unlike Maria and Helena, John didn't study hard. He didn't _____ to learn English. He even hated to finish his homework early, so he never prepared his lessons _____. _____, he was failing English. (Idioms 3,1,5)

In class John seldom knew the answers to his teacher's questions. He almost always _____. She accepted his excuses _____, but now she no longer believes him. (Idioms 4,2)

PART D FILL IN THE BLANKS, USING ALL FIVE IDIOMS.

EXAMPLE: We wanted to swim well, so we ^[person] did our best _[tense] to practice every day

I wanted to arrive at the movies _____ or, at the latest, for the start of the film. But my boyfriend _____ in his directions and we took the wrong road. Later, he admitted it was his own fault, but _____ he blamed me. I _____ to remain calm. _____, we arrived late. (Idioms 1,4,2,3,5)

PART E SUBSTITUTE THE CORRECT IDIOMS FOR THE BOLD FACE WORDS. THEN COPY THE SENTENCE AND FINISH IT IN YOUR OWN WORDS. ANSWERS TO SENTENCE 1 COULD BE:

EXAMPLES: I did my best to learn English when I visited New York.
I did my best to learn English when I was at an American school.

Bold face means heavy type like **this** or like **this**. Throughout this book, the idioms and the words which define them will appear in bold face.

1. I tried really hard to learn English when _____
(Idiom 3)
2. Naturally, American children like to _____
(Idiom 5)
3. John became confused on his test because _____
(Idiom 4)
4. If you finish your work early, you can _____
(Idiom 1)
5. In the beginning, did he believe . . . ? _____
(Idiom 2)

PART F WRITE A PARAGRAPH ABOUT THE DAY YOU CAME TO CLASS WITHOUT YOUR BOOKS (OR PEN, OR HOMEWORK). USE ALL FIVE IDIOMS AND PUT A LINE UNDER THEM.

ANSWERS TO THE SAMPLE EXERCISE

PART A: . . . do their best . . . ahead of time . . . of course . . . got mixed up . . . at first

- PART B:**
1. Bill does his best to please his wife.
 2. At first, I didn't understand math.
 3. My English class began ten minutes ahead of time today.
 4. Of course, I like to eat ice cream.
 5. Sam gets mixed up when he doesn't read directions.

PART C: . . . do his best . . . ahead of time . . . of course . . . got mixed up . . . at first

PART D: . . . ahead of time . . . got mixed up . . . at first . . . did my best . . . of course

- PART E:**
1. I did my best to learn English when I visited New York.
I did my best to learn English when I was at an American school.
I did my best to learn English when I was a student in the U. S.
I did my best to learn English when I had an American girlfriend.
I did my best to learn English when I liked my teacher. Etc.
 2. Of course, American children like to play baseball.
Of course, American children like to read funny stories.
Of course, American children like to eat ice cream.
Of course, American children like to go to the movies. Etc.
 3. John got mixed up on his test because he didn't study enough.
John got mixed up on his test because he didn't read the directions.
John got mixed up on his test because he didn't remain calm.
John got mixed up on his test because he didn't follow his teacher's advice. Etc.
 4. If you finish your work ahead of time, you can watch TV.
If you finish your work ahead of time, you can listen to jazz.
If you finish your work ahead of time, you can go to a play.
If you finish your work ahead of time, you can help me with mine. Etc.
 5. At first, did he believe that John was right?
At first, did he believe Mary?
At first, did he believe what you told him?
At first, did he believe that we were friends? Etc.

- PART F:**
1. I do my best to be in class ahead of time, but yesterday I got mixed up because my watch stopped and, of course, I was late for class.² I even forgot my books. At first,³ my teacher was angry, but he smiled after I told him what happened.⁴

¹When you begin to write a paragraph, leave an inch or an inch and a half of white space before you begin your first sentence. This is called "indenting." (One inch = about three centimeters.)

²Leave enough space between sentences to let your reader know that you are beginning a new sentence. A period (.) clearly made at the end of each sentence also helps. Capital letters (A,B,C,D,E, etc.) at the beginning of sentences help, too.

³Put a line under all five idioms.

⁴Every sentence except the last one must be written all the way to the right margin unless it stops before it reaches there. If it stops, you must begin a new sentence. You cannot leave unused space in the middle of your paragraph.

⁵Keep the margins of your paragraph even.

1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

[illegible][illegible]

repeat the idioms aloud, and make a connection between the pronunciation and the spelling.

[illegible][illegible]

check the pronouns and tenses of the idioms

[illegible][illegible]

check pronouns and tenses
complete the sentences in your own words
copy and punctuate correctly

[illegible]

use related sentences (a paragraph)
include all five idioms

exercise 1

In the Language Lab: Sam Meets Mimi

from now on
little by little
take care of
that's all
What's the matter?

SAM: What's the matter, Miss? You look unhappy.

MIMI: It's my tape recorder. Little by little the sound becomes weaker.

SAM: Perhaps I can take care of it. I work for the company which makes them. It's Japanese like I am.

MIMI: Why are you in America?

SAM: I'm here to study engineering and improve my English. And you?

MIMI: I want to become a translator. But please—why doesn't my machine work?

SAM: A wire is loose, that's all.

MIMI: Excuse me. Don't you sit behind me in English class?

SAM: Yes. May I introduce myself? I'm Hideki Samuhama, but my friends call me Sam.

MIMI: I'm Aline-Marie Bouvier. Please call me Mimi from now on. And thanks for your help, Sam.

PART A USING ALL FIVE IDIOMS, FILL IN THE BLANKS, ONE LETTER FOR EACH BLANK. MAKE EACH IDIOM AGREE IN TENSE AND PERSON WITH ITS SENTENCE.

Jeff looks sad. His friends ask him, "_____" He answers, "I need a few dollars, _____." Of course, Jeff's friends _____ his problem. They give him the money. _____ he becomes happier. _____ Jeff knows that he has good friends.

PART B SOME WORDS BELOW ARE BOLD FACE. SUBSTITUTE THE ABOVE IDIOMS WHICH MEAN THE SAME THING. THEN COPY THE COMPLETE SENTENCE IN THE SAME TENSE AND PERSON.

- 1 We **gave attention to** our homework before class. _____
- 2 **Gradually** the two men became friends. _____
- 3 **What's wrong?** You look unhappy. _____
- 4 (I failed my test today.) **From the present into the future** I'm going to study harder. _____
- 5 Olga wants a glass of water, **nothing more**. _____

MY NAME _____ TEACHER'S NAME _____ DATE _____