

# **Idioms in practice**

**Jennifer Seidl**

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# Introduction

*Idioms in Practice* has been written for adolescent and adult learners who wish to widen their knowledge of idiomatic English. The book aims to encourage and enliven the use of idiomatic expression, as well as to teach and test this highly important aspect of the language.

The book contains a variety of exercises, with the emphasis on achieving understanding and familiarity through the student's producing or explaining the appropriate idiom from his own resources, as a response to or comment on a contextualized situation. There are exercises on idioms using verbs, idioms using adjectives and nouns, idioms using prepositions and adverbs, comparisons and proverbs. Particular attention has been paid to phrasal verbs and idioms from special situations and categories. The language of the exercises is neutral or informal. A large proportion of business English is also included.

The organization of the book is based on the chapter-arrangement of Seidl & McMordie: *English Idioms and how to use them* (OUP 1978), and all the idioms dealt with are to be found in that volume. However, *Idioms in Practice* can be used equally well as a classwork or self-study companion to *English Idioms*, or as a teaching/learning tool in its own right. An answer key is provided.

71	Adjectives	21-30
77	Nouns	30-38
83	Pairs of adjectives	42-43
84	Pairs of nouns	43-45
88	Adjective + noun	46-52
88	Noun + noun	52-55
92	Idioms using prepositions and adverbs	92-100
93	Comparisons	103-110
98	Proverbs	111-117
99	Answer Key	

# Contents

See English Idioms		Page
	<b>1</b> Idioms using verbs	1
168-194	Major verbs	1
195-201	Minor verbs	22
113-167	<b>2</b> Idioms using phrasal verbs	27
201-216	<b>3</b> Idioms, phrases and words from special areas of life	52
	<b>4</b> Idioms using words for animals, colours, parts of the body, time	61
216-218	Animals	61
218-221	Colours	64
221-228	Parts of the body	67
228-232	Time	68
	<b>5</b> Idioms using adjectives and nouns	71
21-30	Adjectives	71
30-38	Nouns	77
42-43	Pairs of adjectives	83
43-45	Pairs of nouns	84
46-62	Adjective + noun	85
62-65	Noun + noun	88
95-100	<b>6</b> Idioms using prepositions and adverbs	90
233-240	<b>7</b> Comparisons	93
241-247	<b>8</b> Proverbs	96
	Answer Key	99

## Idioms using verbs

### Exercise 1 be

Complete the sentences by choosing the correct idiom.

#### Example

I'm used to Fred doing crazy things, but this last escapade beats the lot!  
He must be absolutely \_\_\_\_\_!

*in a flutter   off one's head   off the beam  
off his head*

- 1 It's \_\_\_\_\_ that we'll win the French Ministry contract, so we'd better not send all the stock to Japan.  
*on the cards   in the air   out of the question*
- 2 'What's wrong with Mike these days? He's so nervous and irritable – always \_\_\_\_\_.'  
*on edge   in deep water   on the rocks*
- 3 'Dorothy didn't tell me that she and Nigel were engaged.' – 'No, I didn't know about it either. I was just as much \_\_\_\_\_ as you were.'  
*in the swim   in the dark   under a cloud*
- 4 I've never seen Marjorie looking so happy. She loves her new job in the nursery school. She's really \_\_\_\_\_ when she's working with children.  
*in the clouds   in good hands   in her element*
- 5 'Are you sure that Bob's really telling you the truth? I've never been able to believe that he's \_\_\_\_\_.'  
*on the level   on the dot   on the shelf*

## Exercise 2 be

Complete the sentences by adding the correct preposition, chosen from the list, to the idiom in *italics*.

on off in at

### Example

'Why's Jane so disorganized, always running around \_\_\_\_\_ a flat spin, never knowing what to do?'  
in

- 1 Sid's \_\_\_\_\_ the doghouse again. His wife discovered that he lost £100 in racing bets in the last month.
- 2 I feel sorry for Mrs Leech. There's been so much illness in her family for so long that she's now \_\_\_\_\_ her wits' end.
- 3 'What on earth's wrong with Stewart?' – 'He's expecting a telephone call from the Director – he applied for that management job and has been \_\_\_\_\_ tenterhooks all morning.'
- 4 'All right, I'll tell you, but remember it's still unofficial – strictly \_\_\_\_\_ the record!'
- 5 It's \_\_\_\_\_ the cards that the Liberals will win the election. The polls say that the voters think that the Conservatives are only interested in serving Big Business.



## Exercise 3 be

Complete the conversation by choosing the correct idiom from the list.

*on the dole*

*on tour*

*at someone's beck and call*

*in one's line*

*out of the question*

*up to the mark*

*off the map*

*on the beat*

*on call*

'What are you going to do when you leave school? Do you still want to become a doctor?'

'No, that has its disadvantages – you're \_\_\_\_\_ at weekends and sometimes at night. And I don't think I'd get a place to study medicine, anyway. My teacher says I'm not \_\_\_\_\_ in chemistry.'

'How about journalism? I can imagine you as a top reporter.'

'Oh, no. I'd hate rushing from one place to another, always looking for news or scandal. That's completely \_\_\_\_\_.'

'What about the Civil Service?'

'No, too boring, and too much hierarchy. You're always \_\_\_\_\_, doing what you're told to do.'

'Why not join the police force?'

'Well, it may be interesting work as a detective, but I don't fancy being a constable \_\_\_\_\_ for the first few years. That's not \_\_\_\_\_ at all.'

'It would be a comfortable quiet life, if you lived in a tiny country village, somewhere \_\_\_\_\_.'

'Too quiet for me! I had thought of studying music and then joining an orchestra – I play the violin in my spare time. But then you're hardly ever at home, continually \_\_\_\_\_ giving concerts.'

'Well, whatever you do, you'll have to start applying for jobs soon, otherwise you'll finish up \_\_\_\_\_!'



## Exercise 4 break

Complete the sentences by choosing the correct idiom from the list.

<i>break the back of something</i>	<i>break the ice</i>
<i>break someone's fall</i>	<i>break fresh ground</i>
<i>break the bank</i>	<i>break the news</i>

### Example

Jimmy fell down the apple tree yesterday. Luckily, the hedge \_\_\_\_\_, otherwise he might have been hurt badly.  
*broke his fall*

- 1 'Old Mrs Johnson's dog has been knocked down by a lorry. She doesn't know about it yet. Her neighbour's going to \_\_\_\_\_.'
- 2 'That's the last time I'll go to a casino! I didn't expect to \_\_\_\_\_ but I did expect to win a pound or two!'
- 3 'How was Sarah's party?' – 'Oh, boring at the beginning, until Mark managed to \_\_\_\_\_ by talking about a film that most people had seen.'
- 4 Professor Hartmann's a prominent bio-chemist. Apparently he's working on a project which is expected to \_\_\_\_\_ in genetics, but it's being kept secret at the moment.
- 5 'How are you getting on with learning Spanish?' – 'Oh, I've \_\_\_\_\_ the grammar, but it's the vocabulary that's the problem now.'

## Exercise 5 bring

Explain the meanings of the idioms in *italics*.

### Example

All our plans will collapse if Ray now decides not to work with us. We must think of a way of *bringing him into line*.  
*persuading him to agree with us*

- 1 'How was the variety concert?' – 'Not bad at all. Jimmy Star – the comedian – was incredibly funny. He *brought the house down!*'

- 2 The police have *brought some new facts to light* in the Lord Beacon case. Apparently on the night of the murder his wife made a phone-call to Panama.
- 3 I wish Julia would take her career more seriously. I've tried to persuade her to work harder, but I just can't *bring* the importance of it *home to her*.
- 4 'Don't you remember visiting Porlock, that pretty little village in Devon? Surely you do!' – 'No, I'm afraid I can't *bring it to mind* at the moment.'
- 5 'Here come the runners at last! I can just see them – Shirley's in front, and there's poor Maggie, *bringing up the rear*, as usual.'

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## Exercise 6 come

---

Complete the sentences by choosing the correct idiom from the list.

- |                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>come to light</i>      | <i>come to a head</i>    |
| <i>come into fashion</i>  | <i>come into force</i>   |
| <i>come down to earth</i> | <i>come in handy for</i> |

### Example

Don't throw these old trousers away. They'll \_\_\_\_\_ doing the gardening in.'

*come in handy for*

- 1 When do the new traffic laws \_\_\_\_\_ ?
- 2 'Since hard rock music \_\_\_\_\_ my house is so noisy that the cat has left home. I think I'll join him in the greenhouse!'
- 3 The police haven't solved the murder yet, but they're convinced that the really important facts of the case will soon \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4 The tense situation \_\_\_\_\_ when Fantasian troops crossed the Utopian border.
- 5 'Celia's still dreaming of becoming a famous actress. She says she's waiting to be 'discovered'. It's about time she \_\_\_\_\_ and started thinking realistically about her prospects as a bank clerk.'

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## Exercise 7 do

---

Explain the meanings of the idioms in *italics*.

### Example

Come to Oxford for a weekend and we'll *do the sights* together.  
*visit all the interesting places*

- 1 'Joe sold Mac his car, knowing quite well that the engine was in a bad state and would soon break down completely.' – 'What a mean trick of him to *do the dirty on* Mac like that!'
- 2 'How's my steak coming along? I'm so hungry!' – 'You'll enjoy it. Look, it's *done to a turn*.'
- 3 'How's your cough?' – 'Much better, thanks. My doctor gave me some pills, and they're *doing wonders*.'
- 4 My typewriter was making strange noises, so I cleaned it and oiled it – and that *did the trick*. Now it's working perfectly again.
- 5 'Picnics are good fun, aren't they? Who's going to *do the honours* and open the wine?'

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## Exercise 8 fall

---

Explain the meanings of the idioms in *italics*.

### Example

'Everyone except Derek voted to give support to the Ruritarian refugees.' – 'Typical of him! When will he learn to *fall in line with* the opinion of the majority?'  
*agree with*

- 1 The noun 'poke' *has fallen out of use* except in the phrase 'to buy a pig in a poke.'
- 2 Diane really *fell on her feet* when she took a job with Barnes & Co. Only three weeks after she started working there, the chief secretary suddenly left, and Diane stepped into her place.

- 3 When Paul made a speech at Sylvia's leaving party, he expected his jokes to raise hilarious laughter, but every one of them *fell flat*, and he made a great fool of himself.
- 4 I'd been looking forward to the new production of King Lear, but it *fell short of my expectations*. The theatrical company turned out to be too young and inexperienced.
- 5 'When Stan hears that I've won two free tickets for the football final, he'll *fall over himself* to be nice to me, hoping that I'll give him one of them.'

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## Exercise 9 get

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Substitute for each of the phrases in *italics* an idiom, chosen from the list, with the same meaning.

*get on one's nerves*

*get hold of the wrong end of the stick*

*get the sack*

*get out of bed on the wrong side*

*get a move on*

*get down to brass tacks*

### Example

Why doesn't Rita blow her nose? That sniff of hers really *irritates me*.'

*gets on my nerves*

- 1 'Your grandfather tells me that you've found a job in Hong Kong. When do you leave?' – 'No. I told him that a friend of mine who lives in Hong Kong is coming to visit me! It's typical of Grandad to *misunderstand things thoroughly*.'
- 2 'Come on Jack, *hurry up*! I can't wait here all day!'
- 3 Since Jim *was dismissed* from the furniture factory, he hasn't bothered to look for a new job.
- 4 'We haven't much time for our meeting today, so I suggest that we *start discussing the essential matters* immediately.'
- 5 'Donald shouted at me for no reason at all when I spoke to him just now. He must *be in a bad mood* again this morning.'

## Exercise 10 give

Explain the meanings of the idioms in *italics*.

### Example

I found her opinions so unreasonable and unpleasant that I just had to *give vent* to my anger and disgust.  
*show*

- 1 When the staff heard that some of them were to get their wage-rises before Christmas and others after Christmas, it *gave rise* to a lot of ill-feeling.
- 2 The police managed to follow the suspect as far as the end of the motorway, but then he managed to *give them the slip* by turning sharply into a narrow lane and disappearing into the woods.
- 3 I saw Betty at the post-office this morning, but for some reason she *gave me the cold shoulder*. I can't understand why, because I'm sure I haven't said or done anything to offend her.
- 4 'We wanted to give you the book as a complete surprise on your birthday, but I suppose Ben *gave the game away* when he asked you if you'd already read it.'
- 5 'Why is Kevin always criticizing you in front of other people? If I were you, I'd *give him a piece of your mind* next time he does it.'



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**Exercise 11 go**


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Substitute for each of the phrases in *italics* an idiom, chosen from the list, with the same meaning.

*go the whole hog*

*go up the wall*

*go behind someone's back*

*go to one's head*

*go to rack and ruin*

*go to town*

**Example**

When my father sees what I've done to his car, he'll *get extremely annoyed!*

*go up the wall*

- 1 The Bartons *spent a lot of money* decorating their daughter's room – then suddenly she decided to rent a bed-sitter in town!
- 2 The Jacksons have a country cottage in Kent. It's at least two hundred years old. But they're hardly ever there to look after it, so it's slowly *reaching a very bad state of repair*.
- 3 'You'd better tell the Sales Manager the truth about what you're planning to do. I wouldn't advise *doing it without his knowledge*.'
- 4 When we moved into our new house we didn't intend to rebuild the kitchen and buy new furniture as well. But Brian said we may as well *make a thorough job of it*, so we did – and plunged ourselves deep into debt!
- 5 'Chris's promotion has really *made him proud and conceited* – he doesn't even say "Good Morning" to me any more.'

## Exercise 12 have

Complete the conversation by choosing the correct idiom from the list.

*have a brush with someone*

*have had it*

*have it out with someone*

*have one's sleep out*

*have other fish to fry*

*have too many irons in the fire*

*have the cheek to do something*

'I'm afraid I've just \_\_\_\_\_ with Maggie. She thinks it was me who scraped her car in the car park, because the scratch marks were red. But I didn't use my car on the day it happened.'

'You mean that Maggie \_\_\_\_\_ to accuse you of damaging her car, just because your car happens to be red? That's no proof!'

'I wouldn't take it too seriously if I were you, Peter. The trouble with Maggie is that she \_\_\_\_\_ – always trying to do too many things at the same time. That's why she's so irritable. She was working very late again last night and was back here by eight this morning. She probably didn't \_\_\_\_\_ last night.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right. If I thought she meant the accusation seriously, I'd go and \_\_\_\_\_, but as it is, it's a waste of time trying to reason with her. And besides, I \_\_\_\_\_. I can't waste my time on stupid arguments.'

'I'll talk to her and try to make her realize that you aren't the guilty party.'

'OK, Janet, that's nice of you. But if she goes on thinking that it was my fault, then she \_\_\_\_\_ as far as I'm concerned.'

## Exercise 13 hold lay

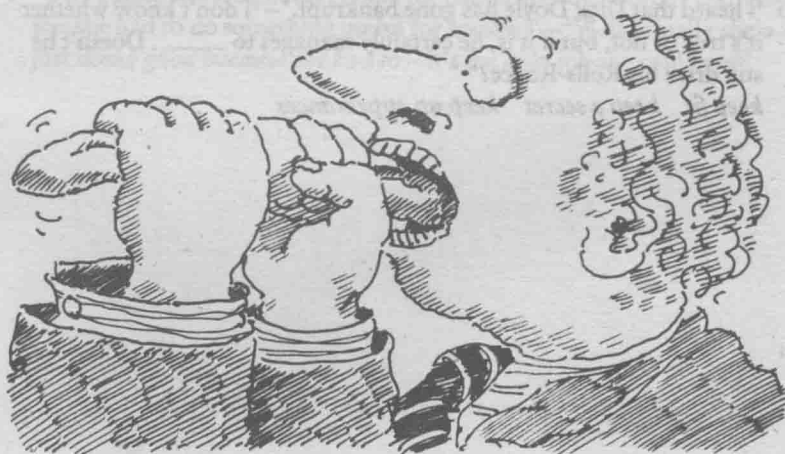
Explain the meanings of the idioms in *italics*.

### Example

'I hope you understand that the tennis committee has *laid a serious charge against you*, John. They will not tolerate swearing during a match.

*accused you of a serious offence*

- 1 I wanted to tell my parents the truth about my sister, but then I thought it best to *hold my tongue*, as it might have created even more trouble.
- 2 'Tom's lost his job again.' – 'But it's the third time this year that he's been sacked! He doesn't seem able to *hold a job down* at all.'
- 3 'Sheila's worried about her interview with the Manager tomorrow. She's afraid he'll reject all her proposals.' – 'Oh, I wouldn't worry about Sheila. She can *hold her own* in any argument.'
- 4 Don't let Keith upset you. He loves *laying down the law* – but nobody takes him very seriously.
- 5 I thought Horton's speech about the Principal was too flattering. I agree that the college will be sorry to lose him, but Horton did *lay it on thick*, didn't he?





## Exercise 14 keep

Complete the sentences by choosing the correct idiom.

### Example

Apparently Bill Barker didn't resign, as he told us – he was sacked! He didn't want anyone to know, so he tried to \_\_\_\_\_, but the truth had to come out some time.

*keep it up   keep it dark   keep a diary  
keep it dark*

- 1 'I'm taking my exam tomorrow. Wish me luck, and don't forget to \_\_\_\_\_ for me!'  
*keep at it   keep one's fingers crossed   keep going*
- 2 The Wilsons have just bought a new car, so I expect the Fosters will soon buy a bigger and better one! In our neighbourhood it's important to \_\_\_\_\_.  
*keep the change   keep in with someone   keep up with the Joneses*
- 3 'Who lives in the old house on the hill?' – 'A famous poet – all by himself. But I hardly ever see him. He \_\_\_\_\_.'  
*keep oneself to oneself   keep it to oneself   keep house*
- 4 'I'm moving to London next month, but I'll \_\_\_\_\_, I promise. Here's my new address, so that you can contact me.'  
*keep in touch   keep tabs on   keep someone on*
- 5 'I heard that Dick Doyle has gone bankrupt.' – 'I don't know whether it's true or not, but if it is, he certainly manages to \_\_\_\_\_. Doesn't he still drive his Rolls-Royce?'  
*keep fit   keep a secret   keep up appearances*