



My Drift

Title: Idioms

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This article explores the significance of idioms, explains the role that idioms play in shaping communication in America, and outlines the most common American English idioms revolving around the themes of sports, food, animals, nature, and the body.

What is an Idiom?



An idiom is a group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions of the individual words. Instead, idioms carry a figurative meaning that is culturally understood by native speakers. These expressions often add color, depth, and cultural context to communication, making them an integral part of language use.

The Importance of Idioms in American Culture

Idioms are deeply ingrained in American culture and society. They have the power to evoke emotions, convey complex ideas, and provide a sense of belonging among speakers. Understanding and using idioms is a key aspect of language proficiency. It enhances fluency by making language use more natural and dynamic, allowing speakers to express themselves in a way that goes beyond literal translations.

Sports-Based Idioms

1. Hit below the belt

Meaning: When you hit below the belt, you are performing an action that showcases unfair or unsportsmanlike conduct.

Example: His comments about her personal life really hit below the belt.



Origin: The term originated from the sport of boxing in the mid-1800s. For some fairly obvious reasons, hitting an opponent “below the belt (waist)” (in a particularly sensitive area), is against the rules of boxing.

2. Ball is in your court

Meaning: When the ball is in your court, it is your responsibility to make a decision or take action.

Example: I've done everything I can; now the ball is in your court.

Origin: Idiom originated from tennis, likely in England, and has been around since the middle of the twentieth century. It means you've done your part of the work and now it is somebody else's turn.

3. Jump on the bandwagon

Meaning: When you jump on the bandwagon, you join others in supporting a popular activity or trend.

Example: Everyone is buying the latest smartphone; I might as well jump on the bandwagon and get one too.

Origin: The phrase was first seen in 1848, when a famous clown named Dan Rice would use his circus bandwagon to transport politicians around town to attract the public to an area where campaign speeches were being given.

4. The whole nine yards

Meaning: The whole nine yards refers to everything – the complete extent.

Example: When planning the wedding, they went the whole nine yards with decorations, catering, and entertainment.



Origin: The bullets for the machine guns used in American combat planes of WW2 were in chains twenty-seven feet in length. Thus, if a pilot was able to fire all his bullets off at one target, he was said to have given his adversary 'the whole nine yards'.

5. Knock it out of the park

Meaning: This means that you have achieved great success or accomplished something exceptionally well.

Example: She really knocked it out of the park with her presentation; everyone was impressed.

Origin: The idiom comes from baseball referring to hitting a baseball so far that it goes beyond the boundaries of the baseball field, resulting in a home run.

6. On the ball

Meaning: To be on the ball is to be alert, competent, and well-prepared.

Example: The team is always on the ball during important matches, and that's why they consistently perform well and win trophies.

Origin: Some authorities have suggested that 'on the ball' originated in the sporting arena and alludes to runners being on the balls of their feet, eagerly ready to run a race.

7. Throw in the towel

Meaning: To throw in the towel is to give up or surrender.

Example: After hours of trying to fix the issue on his computer, he decided to throw in the towel and call for technical support.



Origin: The phrase comes from boxing, in which a fighter indicates surrender by throwing a white towel into the ring.

8. Drop the ball

Meaning: To drop the ball is to make a mistake or fail to do something.

Example: I really dropped the ball on that project; I forgot to include some crucial information in the report.

Origin: This expression comes from sports where a player who fails to catch a ball is charged with an error. Its use for more general kinds of mistakes dates back from about 1950.

9. Full-court press

Meaning: A full-court press is to put maximum effort into something, often in a determined or aggressive manner.

Example: With the deadline approaching, the team decided to launch a full-court press to finish the project ahead of schedule.

Origin: This phrase originated from the sport of basketball, where it describes an aggressive defensive strategy against the other team. Basketball coach John

McLendon invented the tactic in the 1950s, and the term became an idiom in the 1970s.

10. Keep your eye on the ball

Meaning: This means to stay focused on the task at hand and not get distracted.

Example: In order to succeed in your career, it's important to keep your eye on the ball and not get sidetracked by unnecessary distractions.

Origin: This idiom originated from the early days of baseball. People would tell the batter to keep their eye on the ball if they wanted to hit it.

11. Behind the eight ball

Meaning: To be behind the eight ball is to be in a difficult or unfavorable position.

Example: After missing several project deadlines, he found himself behind the eight ball with a lot of catching up to do.



Origin: Most say that this phrase was derived from the Eight Ball version of the game of pool. The balls are numbered and must be potted in order. A turn is forfeited if a player's cue ball hits the (black) eight ball first and the game is forfeited if the eight ball is pocketed by mistake.

12. Throw a curveball

Meaning: To throw a curveball is to unexpectedly present something surprising or unexpected.

Example: The sudden change in the market conditions threw a curveball at the company's expansion plans.

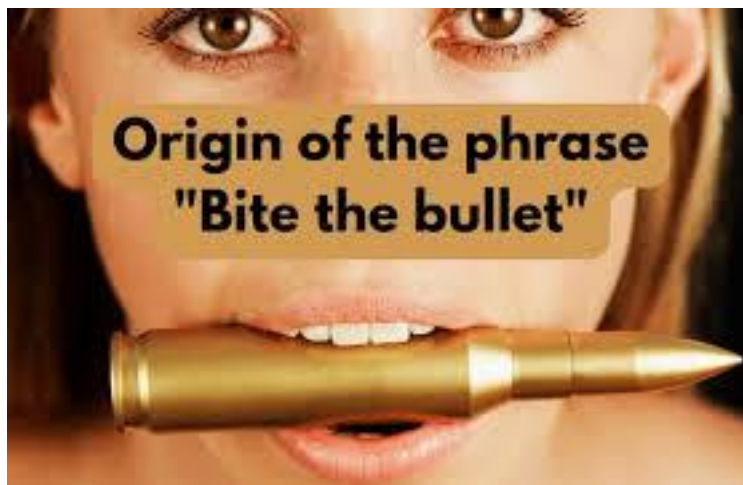
Origin: This expression comes from baseball, where a player throws a ball that moves in a very strange, unpredictable way, and is hard to hit.

Food-Based Idioms

13. Bite the bullet

Meaning: To bite the bullet is to endure a painful or difficult situation with courage.

Example: I have to bite the bullet and tell my boss I'm resigning.



Origin: It is derived historically from the practice of having a patient clench a bullet in their teeth as a way to cope with the pain of a surgical procedure without anesthetic.

14. Spill the beans

Meaning: To spill the beans is to disclose a secret or confidential information.

Example: Don't spill the beans about the surprise party!



Origin: This idiom originated from an ancient Greek voting method where beans were used to cast votes. Spilling the beans prematurely could inadvertently reveal the election's outcome.

15. Piece of cake

Meaning: Something that is a piece of cake is very easy to do.

Example: The exam was a piece of cake; I finished it in 20 minutes.

Origin: The idiom piece of cake originated from the cakewalk, a competitive dance performed by enslaved Black people that mocked the over-refined manners that plantation owners employed at their formal balls. The winner of the cakewalk received a cake.

16. Break the ice

Meaning: When you break the ice, you initiate a conversation or social interaction in a friendly manner.

Example: The joke he told really helped break the ice at the company holiday party and got everyone chatting with each other.

Origin: 'Break the ice' is one of the most used idioms in the English language. Interestingly, it has not changed from its two first known uses in written English – first by Shakespeare, and then, a few years later by poet and novelist, Samuel Butler.

17. Don't cry over spilled milk

Meaning: Don't cry over spilled milk is said to encourage a person to avoid wasting time worrying about things that have already happened and cannot be changed.



Example: Yes, you made a mistake, but don't cry over spilled milk; focus on finding a solution.

Origin: This expression goes back at least 360 years. English historian and writer James Howell used the phrase in a book called “Proverbs in 1659” — “No weeping for shed milk.” Then it morphed a bit over the years to “No use fretting over shed milk,” then “There's no use crying over spilled milk.”

18. In hot water

Meaning: Someone in hot water is in trouble or facing difficulties.

Example: He found himself in hot water after missing the important deadline at work.

Origin: It originated in the early 1500s. It may refer to when you're cooking, and you spill hot water or hot food. You would be in trouble.

19. A piece of the pie

Meaning: To get a piece of the pie is to get a share or portion of something, usually referring to profits or benefits.

Example: Everyone in the company deserves a piece of the pie for their hard work.

Origin: Its origin is thought to be related to the division of land or resources, where a pie was seen as a metaphorical representation of a limited resource that needed to be divided among multiple parties.

20. Cut the mustard

Meaning: When you cut the mustard, you meet expectations and are performing adequately.

Example: The new employee didn't cut the mustard, and the company decided not to extend his contract.

Origin: When mustard was one of the main crops in East Anglia, it was cut by hand with scythes, in the same way as corn. The crop could grow up to six feet high and this was very arduous work, requiring extremely sharp tools. When blunt they "would not cut the mustard".

21. Bite off more than you can chew

Meaning: To bite off more than you can chew is to take on more responsibilities or challenges than you can handle.

Example: After accepting two major projects simultaneously, Sarah felt overwhelmed and realized she had bitten off more than she could chew.



Origin: The phrase ‘bite off more than you can chew’ is an allusion to taking a mouthful of food that is too large to handle comfortably. While cautions against taking on more than you can handle appear in medieval sources, the metaphor itself dates to about 1870.

22. Grasping at straws

Meaning: Grasping at straws is trying to find a solution or hope in a desperate situation.

Example: With no leads, the detective felt like he was grasping at straws to solve the case.

Origin: It comes from a proverb in Thomas More's “Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation” (1534) which says, “A drowning man will clutch at straws.” It is said that the “straw” in this case refers to the sort of thin reeds that grow by the side of a river.

23. Bring home the bacon

Meaning: To bring home the bacon is to earn a living or provide financial support for a family.

Example: As the sole breadwinner, she works hard to bring home the bacon and support her family.

Origin: The mother of American boxer Joe Gans, in a 1906 telegram in which she urged her son to win a difficult match, made the first recorded use of bring home the bacon, encouraging him to do just that.

24. Two peas in a pod

Meaning: When something is like two peas in a pod, it involves two things that are very similar.

Example: My best friend and I like all the same things - we're two peas in a pod!

Origin: This idiom derives, of course, from the fact that two peas from the same pod are virtually indistinguishable. The phrase, sometimes given as 'like as two peas', is quite old and versions of it date from the 16th century.

25. The apple of my eye

Meaning: Someone who is cherished or adored by someone else is the apple of their eye.

Example: I'm so enamored with my wife; she's the apple of my eye.

Origin: The phrase "apple of my eye" occurs in several places in the King James Bible translation from 1611: Deuteronomy 32:10: "He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye".

26. In a nutshell

Meaning: This expression is used to sum up or express something in a concise manner.

Example: In a nutshell, the new policy aims to streamline our workflow and improve efficiency.



Origin: The figurative use of ‘in a nutshell’ to mean specifically ‘in few concise words’ didn’t emerge until the 19th century. Thackeray used it in print in *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, 1841: “Here, then, in a nutshell, you have the whole matter.”

27. Spice things up

Meaning: To spice things up is to add excitement or variety to a situation.

Example: Let's spice things up at the party by introducing some fun games and activities.

Origin: The origin is unknown, but it is likely that it came from the literal meaning of the word “spice.” Spices have long been used to add flavor and excitement to food, and it is natural that the word would come to be used figuratively to describe the addition of excitement or interest to other things.

28. Cool as a cucumber

Meaning: Someone who is cool as a cucumber is able to remain calm and composed, especially in stressful situations.

Example: Even though the deadline was approaching, she remained cool as a cucumber and completed the project flawlessly.

Origin: The phrase was first recorded in a poem by the British poet John Gay 'New Song on New Similies' in 1732: "Cool as a cucumber could see the rest of womankind".

29. Go bananas

Meaning: To go bananas is to become extremely excited, agitated, or crazy.

Example: The crowd went bananas when their favorite band took the stage, clapping and cheering nonstop for over 10 minutes.

Origin: The origin dates back to various student groups at colleges in the 60s. This was a time of intense social movements and protests in America. It began with people saying that others were “going ape” over one idea or another, which eventually evolved into “going bananas.”



30. The whole enchilada

Meaning: This idiom is used to refer to the entirety of something, down to the last detail.

Example: I want to know the whole enchilada about the new project before committing to it.

Origin: The origin of this phrase is not definitively known, but it is believed to have its roots in Mexican cuisine, specifically referring to the dish of enchiladas. Enchiladas are a traditional Mexican dish made by rolling a tortilla around a filling, often of meat, cheese, beans, or vegetables, and then covering it with a chili pepper sauce. The phrase "the whole enchilada" likely evolved as a way to emphasize the completeness or entirety of something, drawing on the idea that when you order an enchilada, you expect to receive the full dish, not just a portion of it.

Animal-Based Idioms

31. Let the cat out of the bag

Meaning: If you let the cat out of the bag, it means you revealed a secret or disclosed information that was supposed to be kept confidential.

Example: I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to let the cat out of the bag about the surprise birthday party.

'Let the cat out of the bag'



Origin: The phrase originates from livestock fraud at markets where animals were sold in sacks, usually piglets. Merchants would sell customers live piglets and, after putting a pig in a sack for easier transport, would sometimes swap the pig for a cat when the customer looked away. The buyer wouldn't discover they'd been cheated until they got home and literally let the cat out of the bag. The phrase has been around since the 15th century.

32. Straight from the horse's mouth

Meaning: Anything that is straight from the horse's mouth is information from a reliable source.

Example: I talked to our boss and heard straight from the horse's mouth that the project is due next week.

Origin: This idiom comes from British horse-racing circles, likely because the presumed ideal source for racing tips would be the horse rather than spectators or riders.

33. Elephant in the room

Meaning: The elephant in the room is an obvious problem or issue that people are avoiding.

Example: We need to address the elephant in the room and discuss the budget cuts.



Origin: The likely origin is from Ivan Andreyevich Krylov's 1814 fable, The Inquisitive Man, which tells of a man going to a museum and noticing all sorts of things apart from an elephant.

34. Raining cats and dogs

Meaning: Raining cats and dogs is a way of saying there is heavy rain or a heavy downpour.

Example: The streets are flooded; it's raining cats and dogs.

Origin: The idiom "it is raining cats and dogs" originated in England. Historically, cats and dogs were common pets, and during heavy rainfall, people would exclaim, "It is raining; get the cats and dogs inside." Over time, this phrase was abbreviated to "it is raining cats and dogs."



35. Kill two birds with one stone

Meaning: To kill two birds with one stone is to accomplish two tasks with a single action.

Example: When I study with my friends, we kill two birds with one stone because we help each other understand the material better and get to spend quality time together.

Origin: "Kill two birds with one stone" was first found in writing in 1656. It appeared in *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* written by Thomas Hobbes. The quote reads: T. H. thinks to kill two birds with one stone, and satisfy two Arguments with one answer, whereas in truth he satisfied neither.

36. Don't count your chickens before they hatch

Meaning: This means that you shouldn't assume success or victory before it happens.

Example: We still have a lot of classes to pass before we graduate college; don't count your chickens before they hatch.

Origin: This saying is often attributed to one of Aesop's fables written some 2500 years ago.

The fable goes something like this: A milkmaid has a pail of milk that she plans to sell. She imagines selling the milk for a good price and using the money to buy some eggs, which will then hatch, then she'll raise the chickens and sell them for a good price and buy herself a nice new hat. Unfortunately, she spills the milk and thus all her plans are for naught. Thus, the moral of the story is don't count your chickens before they are hatched

Nature-Based Idioms

37. Bite the dust

Meaning: To bite the dust is to fail or suffer a defeat or be killed.

Example: After weeks of intense competition, the other team won and ours bit the dust.



Origin: This expression comes from the American Old West. When a gunfighter is shot and falls to the ground, he is in a position of "biting the dust". It is another way of saying that he was killed.

38. Weather the storm

Meaning: To weather the storm is to endure a difficult situation.

Example: The business went through tough times, but we managed to weather the storm and keep operating.

Origin: The idiom "weather the storm" originates from the nautical world, where ships and sailors often encounter turbulent seas and storms during their journeys.

39. A breath of fresh air

Meaning: A breath of fresh air is something that is new and refreshing.

Example: The new employee is like a breath of fresh air; he brings new ideas and enthusiasm to the team.

Origin: This idiom originated in the 18th century. It was taken from the industrial revolutionists who fought hard to eliminate the causes of air pollution. Many workers started moving from the well-ventilated and pollution free zones to dark black working zones. Coming out of such a trapped and polluted environment was a breath of fresh air for the workers. This term became popular with the workers and was later used in a broad sense.

40. Hit the hay

Meaning: Hit the hay means to go to bed and get some sleep.

Example: It's been a long day at work, I'm ready to hit the hay.



Origin: The idiom hit the hay originates from the practice of sleeping on hay-stuffed mattresses, which was prevalent in the 19th century.

41. Caught between a rock and a hard place

Meaning: To be caught between a rock and a hard place means you are facing a difficult decision with no easy solution.

Example: I can't please both my mom and my sister; I'm caught between a rock and a hard place.

Origin: This phrase originated in the USA in the early part of the 20th century. It is the American manifestation of a phrase that exists in several forms in other cultures. The dilemma of being in a position where one is faced with two equally

unwelcome options appears to lie deep in the human psyche. Language always reflects people's preoccupations and there are several phrases that express this predicament. Some examples include 'on the horns of a dilemma', 'the lesser of two evils', 'between the devil and the deep blue sea', and 'an offer you can't refuse'.

42. Under the weather

When someone is under the weather, they are feeling unwell or sick.

Example: I won't be able to come to work today; I'm feeling a bit under the weather.



Origin: The term under the weather is a nautical term from the days of old sailing ships. Any sailor who was feeling ill would be sent below deck to protect him from the weather. (Being below deck, the sailor would literally be under the weather.)

43. Once in a blue moon

Meaning: Something that happens once in a blue moon happens very rarely.

Example: We only see each other once in a blue moon because she lives in China while I live in America.

Origin: The term Blue Moon is believed to have originated in 1883 after the eruption of Krakatoa in Indonesia. The volcano put so much dust in the atmosphere that the Moon actually looked blue in color. This was so unusual that the term "once in a Blue Moon" was coined.



44. Throw caution to the wind

Meaning: To throw caution to the wind is to act recklessly or without concern for the consequences.

Example: She decided to throw caution to the wind and quit her job, despite not having enough savings or another job lined up.

Origin: To the winds has been used since the 1600's to mean 'to be utterly lost. Later, during the mid-1800s, throw to the winds was used to mean 'cast away completely' or 'utterly disregard.' The full idiom, throw caution to the winds has been used since the early 1900's

Body-Based Idioms

45. Cost an arm and a leg

Meaning: Something that costs an arm and a leg is very expensive.

Example: Getting my damaged car repaired is going to cost an arm and a leg - I don't even want to look at the bill!

Origin: The expression 'an arm and a leg' is from 1940's America. The earliest written example comes from a December 1949 edition of The Long Beach Independent: "Food Editor Beulah Karney has more than 10 ideas for the homemaker who wants to say, "Merry Christmas" and not have it cost her an arm and a leg."



46. Turn a blind eye

Meaning: To turn a blind eye is to ignore or pretend not to see something.

Example: The manager decided to turn a blind eye to the minor rule violation and not report it.

Origin: This expression is believed to come from the siege of Copenhagen (1801), in which Lord Horatio Nelson, second in command of the English fleet, was ordered to withdraw but pretended not to see the flagship's signals to do so by putting his glass to the eye that had been blinded in an earlier battle.

47. Keep your eyes peeled

Meaning: To keep your eyes peeled means to be watchful and alert.

Example: Keep your eyes peeled for any suspicious activity.

Origin: The phrase is said to have originated in reference to Robert Peel who started the British Police Force. The police were nicknamed "Peelers" referring to keeping a watch out for lawbreakers. Keep your eyes peeled : look out for something with particular attention.

48. Give someone a hand

Meaning: To give someone a hand is to help or assist them.

Example: My friend is moving to a new apartment this weekend; I'm happy to give her a hand with packing and lifting heavy furniture.

Origin: The origin of the idiomatic expression "lend a hand" can be traced back to the literal act of physically assisting someone by extending a hand to offer support. It has likely emerged from the universal understanding of reaching out and offering help to those in need.



49. Get your foot in the door

Meaning: To get your foot in the door is to establish an initial connection or opportunity that will benefit you in the future.

Example: Getting an internship is a great way to get your foot in the door for a potential future job in the industry.

Origin: This handy phrase originates from a description of someone literally sticking their foot past the threshold of a home or property, impeding the door from closing so the conversation can continue. Fortunately, this is now used in a figurative sense.

50. Get cold feet

Meaning: To get cold feet is to feel nervous or hesitant about a decision or action.

Example: On the day of the wedding, it's very common for the groom or bride to get cold feet and have second thoughts.

Origin: Some claim that it originates from the battlefield when soldiers who had frozen feet couldn't rush into battle. Others point to a particular scene in a 19th century German novel, of all things. In the scene, a poker player bows out of a game before losing, claiming to have cold feet and being unable to concentrate.

And last, but not least, one of my favorites...

51. Kick the bucket

Meaning: If you say that someone has kicked the bucket, you mean that they have died.

Example: I told my kids that I intend to spend all my money before I kick the bucket.



Origin: We all know what a bucket is – and so this phrase appears rather odd. Why should kicking one be associated with dying? The link between buckets and death was made by at least 1785, when the phrase was defined in Grose’s Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue:

“To kick the bucket, to die.”

One theory is that the phrase originates from the notion that people who hanged themselves by standing on a bucket with a noose around their neck and then kicking the bucket away.

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