THE PRACTICAL ENGLISH SERIES

FREE GUIDE

50 Idioms Native Speakers Actually Use

The fifty that do the heavy lifting, grouped by situation, with the meaning and one real example for each — plus the five that get people into trouble.

5 SITUATIONS | 50 IDIOMS | 6-QUESTION QUIZ

> ***Understanding the words is not the same as understanding the room.***
>
> From A Piece of Cake: Your Practical Guide to English Idioms

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Fifty phrases, five situations

An idiom is a phrase whose meaning you cannot work out from the words in it. "A piece of cake" has nothing to do with dessert. This is why a dictionary does not help, and why idioms are the last thing to click even for people whose English is otherwise excellent.

These fifty are grouped by the situation you will actually meet them in. Each one gives you the meaning in plain English and one natural example. Learn them by situation, not alphabetically — that is how they come at you in real life.

The fastest way to use this

Pick one section. Read the ten. Then choose the two you could honestly have used this week, and use them this week. Two idioms you actually say are worth more than fifty you recognise.

Recognition comes first

You do not need to produce all fifty. Understanding them when someone else says them is most of the value — it is the difference between following a meeting and following most of a meeting.

And the part nobody tells you

Native speakers get these wrong too. They mix them up, blend two into one, and argue about what they mean. Nobody is holding you to a standard they meet themselves.

What's inside

1. At work and in meetings — 10 idioms
2. Conversation and small talk — 10 idioms
3. How you're feeling — 10 idioms
4. Time, plans and luck — 10 idioms
5. Describing things and people — 10 idioms

⚠ Handle with care — five that get people into trouble — 5 idioms

SECTION 1 OF 5

At work and in meetings

The ten you will hear before Friday. Every one of these turns up in a normal working week.

touch base

To make brief contact with someone to check on progress.

"Let's touch base on Thursday before the client call."

on the same page

To be in agreement, or share the same understanding.

"Before we present this, let's make sure we're all on the same page."

get up to speed

To learn the latest information about something.

"Welcome back — let's get you up to speed on what you missed."

a ballpark figure

A rough estimate, not an exact number.

"I don't need the real cost yet. Just give me a ballpark figure."

the bottom line

The most important fact of a situation; also, the final profit.

"We can discuss details all day, but the bottom line is we don't have the budget."

keep someone in the loop

To keep someone informed as things develop.

"Please keep me in the loop on the supplier conversation."

back to the drawing board

To start again, because the first attempt failed.

"The client rejected the proposal, so it's back to the drawing board."

wrap up

To finish or conclude something.

"Let's wrap up — we're already five minutes over."

iron out

To resolve the small remaining problems or details.

"We agree in principle. We just need to iron out the timings."

give the green light

To give official permission to go ahead.

"Finance gave the green light this morning."

SECTION 2 OF 5

Conversation and small talk

These are the ones that carry a social signal. Using them well makes you sound relaxed, not rehearsed.

break the ice

To say or do something to relieve tension between people who don't know each other.

"*He told a joke to break the ice at the start of the meeting.*"

beat around the bush

To avoid saying what you really mean.

"*Stop beating around the bush and tell me what happened.*"

cut to the chase

To get straight to the important part.

"*We're short on time, so I'll cut to the chase.*"

get the ball rolling

To start something.

"*I'll send the first email to get the ball rolling.*"

speak your mind

To say honestly what you think.

"*She's not afraid to speak her mind in a meeting.*"

hear it on the grapevine

To hear news informally, through other people.

"*I heard on the grapevine that they're hiring again.*"

in a nutshell

In summary; in the fewest possible words.

"*In a nutshell, the plan works but it costs too much.*"

get the picture

To understand a situation without it being spelled out.

"*No, don't explain again — I get the picture.*"

my lips are sealed

A promise to keep a secret.

"*Don't worry, my lips are sealed.*"

out of the blue

Completely unexpectedly.

"*She called me out of the blue after eight years.*"

SECTION 3 OF 5

How you're feeling

Native speakers rarely say 'I am very happy' or 'I am ill'. They say these instead.

under the weather

Slightly unwell. The polite, gentle way to say it.

"I'm a bit under the weather today, so I'll join by video."

over the moon

Extremely happy.

"She was over the moon about the promotion."

on cloud nine

In a state of perfect happiness.

"They were on cloud nine for months after the baby arrived."

down in the dumps

Sad or low. A soft way to describe it.

"He's been down in the dumps since he lost his job."

get cold feet

To lose your nerve just before doing something planned.

"He was going to ask for a raise, but he got cold feet."

in hot water

In trouble.

"He's in hot water with his manager for missing the deadline."

snowed under

Overwhelmed with too much work.

"I'd love to help, but I'm completely snowed under this week."

in over your head

Involved in something too difficult for you to manage.

"I took on the project and quickly realised I was in over my head."

keep your chin up

Stay positive during a difficult time.

"I know it's been a hard month. Keep your chin up."

get a grip

To take control of your emotions and calm down.

"I was panicking before the exam and had to tell myself to get a grip."

SECTION 4 OF 5

Time, plans and luck

English is vague about time on purpose. These are the phrases that do the vagueness.

play it by ear

To decide as the situation develops, rather than planning ahead.

"We haven't booked anything — we'll play it by ear."

in the nick of time

At the very last possible moment.

"I caught the train in the nick of time."

once in a blue moon

Very rarely.

"I live abroad, so I only see my family once in a blue moon."

up in the air

Undecided; not yet settled.

"The date is still up in the air."

against the clock

Rushing to finish before a deadline.

"The team is working against the clock to finish by five."

take a rain check

To politely decline now, but suggest another time.

"I can't make dinner tonight — can I take a rain check?"

sleep on it

To take a night to think before deciding.

"It's a big offer. Sleep on it and tell me tomorrow."

call it a day

To stop working for the day.

"We've made good progress. Let's call it a day."

break a leg

Good luck — said before a performance or something nerve-racking.

"Big presentation today? Break a leg!"

time flies

Time passes surprisingly quickly.

"Your son is in high school already? How time flies."

SECTION 5 OF 5

Describing things and people

The shortcuts English uses instead of adjectives. All ten are neutral enough for work.

a piece of cake

Very easy.

"*The exam was a piece of cake.*"

cost an arm and a leg

To be extremely expensive.

"*Getting the roof repaired cost us an arm and a leg.*"

out of this world

Exceptionally good.

"*The food at that place is out of this world.*"

the elephant in the room

The obvious problem nobody is willing to mention.

"*Nobody mentioned the budget — it was the elephant in the room.*"

a breeze

Something very easy to do.

"*With the new software, the whole process is a breeze.*"

go the extra mile

To do more than is required.

"*She always goes the extra mile for her clients.*"

red tape

Excessive official rules and paperwork.

"*There's so much red tape involved in getting the permit.*"

drop the ball

To make a mistake by failing to do something you were responsible for.

"*I completely dropped the ball on the invoices last month.*"

throw in the towel

To give up; to admit defeat.

"*After three failed attempts, they threw in the towel.*"

a go-getter

An ambitious, energetic person who makes things happen.

"*We're looking to hire a real go-getter for the sales team.*"

HANDLE WITH CARE

Five that get people into trouble

These are all real, current English. The problem is not the phrase — it is who you say it to. Know them, and choose deliberately.

kick the bucket

To die.

⚠ **Slang, and it can sound callous. Never use it about someone's family.**

cook the books

To falsify financial records.

⚠ **This is an accusation of fraud. Only ever say it if you mean it.**

under the table

Paid secretly, usually to avoid tax.

⚠ **It implies something illegal. Not a neutral way to describe cash payment.**

teacher's pet

Someone who is clearly the favourite and gets special treatment.

⚠ **Almost always an insult. It suggests the person is currying favour.**

get someone's goat

To annoy or irritate someone.

⚠ **Correct, but old-fashioned. It can land oddly from a younger speaker.**

✎ Check your understanding

Fill each blank with an idiom from this guide. Answers overleaf.

1. I can't come tonight, but can I _____? How about next Friday?
2. Nobody wanted to mention the redundancies. It was _____.
3. Don't decide now. It's a big offer — _____.
4. I'd help, but I'm completely _____ this week.
5. Stop _____ and just tell me what happened.
6. Before we present, let's make sure we're all _____.

ANSWER KEY

How did you do?

1. **take a rain check**
2. **the elephant in the room**
3. **sleep on it**
4. **snowed under**
5. **beating around the bush**
6. **on the same page**

→ Try this tomorrow
Choose two idioms from Section 1 and use them in a real message at work. Not a practice sentence — a real one. The first time is the only hard time.

Where the other 110 are

A Piece of Cake

Your Practical Guide to English Idioms · Evangeline Smith

160 idioms across 26 chapters, organised by situation — each with a plain-English meaning, natural examples, usage notes, and a quiz for every chapter.
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