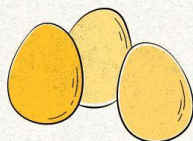


BIG BLACK BOOK ON IDIOMS AND PHRASES



ILLUSTRATIONS
TRIVIA
EXAMPLES

ABHISHEK LEELA PANDEY

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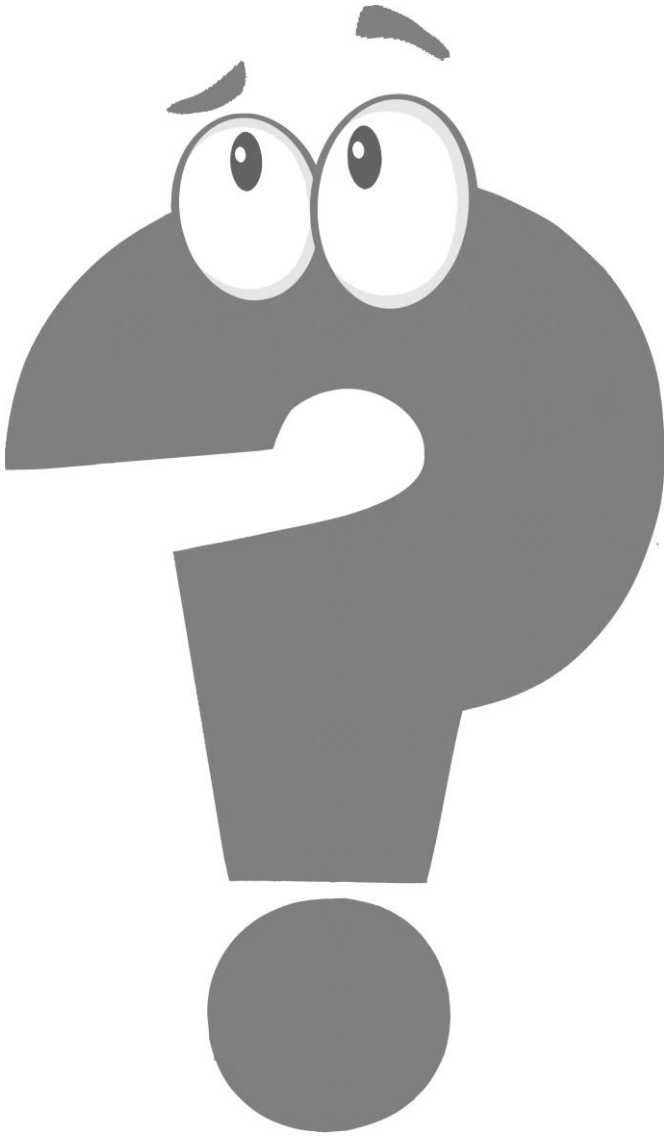
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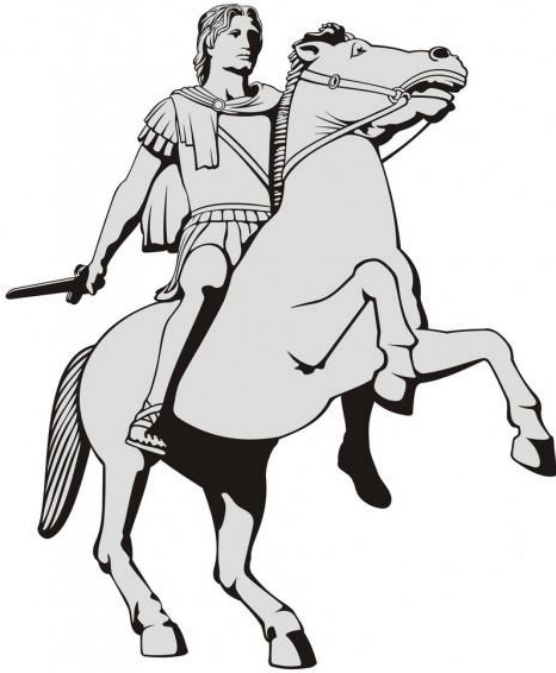
Have you ever wondered why some people speak so beautifully? Why they sound almost correct every time?

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The English Language boasts of the most diverse Literature, and like all other widespread languages, it also encompasses the sociocultural aspects. These aspects form the beauty of the language in both written and oral form. The Idioms and Phrases form the aesthetics of any language.

Idioms and Phrases is the first book in the series of Big Black Books.

Let's start a journey towards better linguistics...



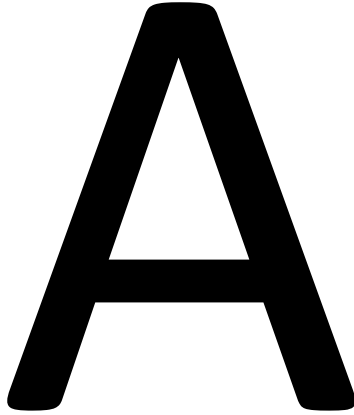
The following speech was given by Alexander the Great after his soldiers were discouraged while fighting the valiant Indian King Porus. The speech is considered to be one of the greatest speeches in the world and it is full of the linguistic ornaments like Idioms and Phrases among others.

Enjoy the speech...

“

I could not have blamed you for being the first to lose heart if I, your commander, had not shared in your exhausting marches and your perilous campaigns; it would have been natural enough if you had done all the work merely for others to reap the reward. But it is not so. You and I, gentlemen, have shared the labor and shared the danger, and the rewards are for us all. The conquered territory belongs to you; from your ranks the governors of it are chosen; already the greater part of its treasure passes into your hands, and when all Asia is overrun, then indeed I will go further than the mere satisfaction of our ambitions: the utmost hopes of riches or power which each one of you cherishes will be far surpassed, and whoever wishes to return home will be allowed to go, either with me or without me. I will make those who stay the envy of those who return.

”



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet A...

Add insult to injury

Meaning

Make a situation, which is already bad, even worse.

Explanation

If a friend of your falls in the hallway of the school, he is hurt. To add to this physical injury everybody starts laughing on him and in that way, insult him. Thus, a situation which was already bad for him, has been made worse by adding insult to injury. This instance is a connect between the literary and actual meaning of the idiom.

Example

A fake corruption charge on the already suspended government official added insult to his injury.

A dime a dozen

Meaning

Common, and therefore not much expensive

Explanation

As dimes are available in abundance in USA, we can say dimes are available in dozens. That is why this idiom is used for something which is easily and abundantly available and therefore is not much costly.

Example

The tomatoes costed a dime a dozen after they overgrew owing to better weather conditions in the last decade.

Apple pie order

Meaning

In perfect order

Explanation

Along with being delectable, an apple pie is also an example of aesthetic appeal. The beautifully appealing layers show impeccability of the maker. Thus, the apple pie order is a perfect and error free order.

Example

“What beautiful painting have Italian artists have made!” she gasped.

“A perfect apple pie order, madame,” the curator smiled.

Arm chair critic

Meaning

Someone who criticizes other people, but does not have much knowledge about reality himself.

Explanation

Imagine a late fifties man, who is not aware of the current technology and procedures. He sits on this rolling chair with a tea and a newspaper in hands and reads some deadlines about a postponed space mission. Without dwelling into the details of the news, he criticizes everyone from government, to education system to ISRO. Well, someone is criticizing on the basis of incomplete information here. This idiom is used for a person who criticizes on the basis of incomplete information because we will always assume such a person like this man sitting on his armrest chair.

Example

The pseudo intellectuals on social media are behaving like arm chair critics, thanks to the freedom of digital expression.

As genuine as a three-dollar bill

Meaning

something which is fake

Explanation

The most ignorant person making counterfeit notes will make a three-dollar bill, because three-dollar bill simply doesn't exist. A three-dollar bill is bound to be fake. If you come across a thing which is clearly fake, you say it is as genuine as a three-dollar bill, which will mean that it is totally fake.

Example

The new investment scheme by the Mexican company looks more like a three-dollar bill. Who can provide five times ROI in a year?

At the drop of a hat

Meaning

Immediately

Explanation

A hat drops in a blink of an eye. If you say something happens at the drop of a hat, it happened very fast, i.e. immediately.

Example

The education system shifted from offline to online during corona crisis at the drop of a hat.

B

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet B...

Back to square one

Meaning

back to the starting point, i.e. when you have to start from scratch again

Explanation

Though the origin of this idiom goes back to olden days of football commentary, I will explain with the example of a game which is more relatable. If you are playing a game of snakes and ladders, and get bit by a snake hissing at 99 which took you directly to number 1 square, you are back to square one now. So, when someone fails in an effort and has to start from the beginning again, it is said that he/she is back to square one.

Example

The last five years of the brilliant scientist got wasted as all investors withdrew support. Now he is back to square one!

Ball is in your court

Meaning

when a situation is in your hands

Explanation

In the game of tennis, when the ball is in your court, you are the one who will make the next move and that move will decide the flow of the game. This meaning is transferred through this idiom to refer someone who has the power of making the next move and change the game, be it sports or the game of politics.

Example

You have impressed the angels. Hire some people now as the ball is in your court.

Barking up the wrong tree

Meaning

have wrong expectations from a path of action to be productive

Explanation

A prey who is chased by a dog and is able to fly or move from one branch of tree to another tree creates a very interesting illusion for the dog chasing it. The prey would climb up a tree in front of the dog and will jump on to another tree and then another and so on but the dog did not notice it. The prey will reach its home and sleep soundly, while the dog will be left to bark at the 'wrong' tree for the whole night. When someone is making attempts unaware of the fact that those attempts will not give him/her the expected outcomes, his/her condition is quite like the dog left barking.

Example

The fundamentals of his case study were scientifically wrong. He was definitely barking up the wrong tree.

Beating a dead horse

Meaning

making futile attempts by doing something

Explanation

In older times, the act of beating horses was used to make it run/ walk faster. If the horse is dead, no amount of beating will make it move, let alone run. Thus, if someone is making some futile efforts which will fetch him/ her nothing, we say he/ she is beating a dead horse.

Example

Training the hygiene in the countryside is like beating a dead horse, still that NGO is doing it. Courageous people they are!

Beat around the bush

Meaning

avoid talking about an important thing by wasting time taking about useless things

Explanation

In 15th century, hunters used to hire men who would help them in hunting by beating the bushes with sticks, so that the prey hiding in the bushes would come out and the hunter would shoot them. Now, the real task still was hunting only. Thus, if in a conversation a person is avoiding giving some main piece of information and is instead talking about other irrelevant and less important stuffs, he is said to be beating around the bush.

Example

His grades were low this year because all he wrote in the exams was beating around the bush.

Be glad to see the back of

Meaning

be happy to see someone/something leaving

Explanation

The guest who comes uninvited to your house, eats a lot and demands a lot, and stays over a week at your house is surely a pain in the neck of your mother, who is bound to serve him out of formality. Now when this guest finally leaves after two weeks, your mother almost cries at seeing him stepping out of the door of your house. She is happy to see his back, because he is leaving. The same idiom applies to problems which are going out of your life.

Example

Don't worry anymore. Finally, the boss is resigning. Be glad to see his back.

Best thing since sliced bread

Meaning

a great innovation

Explanation

Slicing a loaf of bread was surely a breakthrough discovery in the baking industry. Any invention which is bound to bring substantial positive effects with it, is compared with the discovery of sliced bread and hence this idiom is used.

Example

The way SpaceX program has been perceived looks like the best thing since sliced bread.

Between a rock and a hard place

Meaning

when you have to choose from two options, but both are unpleasant

Explanation

If you are falling from a great height (we don't intend any injury to you, let us say you are falling in a dream), what would you like to fall on a rock or a hard place? As you must have realized, both of them are going to be disastrous for you. So, you are going to have to choose between two unpleasant events. This idiom is used for such situations only, when someone has to choose the less unpleasant thing out of two choices.

Example

The politician had to either resign from his office or from his affiliations. He was of course between a rock and a hard place.

Bird's eye view

Meaning

An overall look at something

Explanation

A bird flying hundreds of meters above a stadium is surely able to have a full view of the cricket match going inside the stadium. Though, he won't have the clearest view. This idiom of bird's eye view refers to a general outline of the whole picture, which is not much detailed but is almost comprehensive and is good for a start before understanding the precise aspects of something.

Example

Just a bird's eye view on his biodata is enough for his recruitment. That man is a genius!

Bite off more than you can chew

Meaning

Try doing something which is difficult for you

Explanation

Remember the day when your mother made your favorite burger and you took an elephant sized bite out of it. You almost choked! Biting more than you can chew at once is a stupid thing to do. Not only would you lose the opportunity to actually enjoy the food, but you also face the risk of choking. If someone takes up such a task that he is not capable of doing, he is surely biting off more than he can chew.

Example

He took a lot of assignments before he finished the last ones. He has a habit of biting more than he can chew. Hope he improves!

Bite the bullet

Meaning

Decision to do a difficult task which you have been hesitating to do and/or trying to delay

Explanation

This idiom is believed to have been derived from a practice followed by doctors. In this, they used to make the patient bite a bullet when doing some operation which would help them cope up with the excruciating pain of the operation. Thus, biting a bullet is used when someone is finally doing or have decided to do a task (like operation as explained above) he has been dreading and trying to avoid.

Example

The covert operation was successful because the agent from the Intelligence Bureau was always ready to bite the bullet.

Blessing in disguise

Meaning

Something which appears to be bad, but is actually good

Explanation

Self-explanatory from the words of the idiom, it is used to refer to anything which is good as a blessing but is disguised to look like something which is neutral, or bad. It also strengthens the believe that everything has some good effects.

Example

Their arguments were nothing less than a blessing in disguise. They overcame their faults and became stronger partners.

Bread and butter

Meaning

Main source of income

Explanation

Bread and butter being the most basic meal of any family, this idiom represents the source through which a person or family earns money to buy bread and butter i.e. the sustenance. Therefore, bread and butter refer to the source of income on which a family depends.

Example

Teaching was his bread and butter. Writing was just a hobby.

Bring home the bacon

Meaning

Achieve something, mostly a source of income

Explanation

As there are many theories on the origin of this idiom and none of them is certain how this idiom originated, we would go with the explanation of the idiom here. One thing common in all the theories was that bacon represented honor and/or income to support family. Both of which came through being good at your profession or being successful at something. So, if a person achieves success or a good source of income and bring honor by doing so, he has brought home the bacon.

Example

He wrote a book without expectations and launched it among film personalities. Unknowingly he brought home the bacon. He went on to sign a multimillion deal.

Bring owls to Athens

Meaning

Do some futile actions

Explanation

This is of the time of ancient Greece, when owls and silver coins with the picture of owl were abundant in Athens. Thus, by bringing owls to Athens one would be increasing an already large population of owls. This act would not be adding much value. Thus, this idiom is used for any act which is futile and is not adding any value to anything.

Example

The free resources of exam preparation confuse people what to choose. Moreover, things which are free don't get the respect, even if they deserve. Adding more and more free resources on world wide web is like bringing owls to Athens.

Bury your head in the sand

Meaning

Ignore unpleasant things or problems

Explanation

When a destructive wave is approaching near you, what would you do? Run for shelter or bury your head in the sand and pretend you did not see the wave so it did not exist? Ignoring the problem won't make a problem go actually! This is what the above idiom wants to communicate and is used in situations when anyone is ignoring an unpleasant reality rather than doing something to solve it.

Example

The world is not as bad as they say. Some people need not bury in their heads in the sand.

By the skin of your teeth

Meaning

Succeed by a very small margin

Explanation

Being an idiom from bible, this one surely involves use of excellent rhetoric. If you are saved from being hit by a car because you were standing just as away from it as it the thickness of the skin of teeth (which is close to zero because teeth have no skin), what image would you imagine? That you were just saved. Thus, if someone is just saved from something, this idiom is employed in that situation.

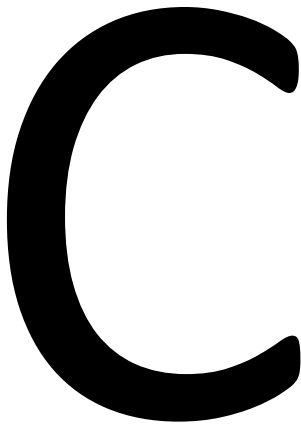
Example

The bullet passed just an inch away from him. He was saved by the skin of teeth.



Shashi Tharoor is an Indian politician known for his flowery language. He once commented on Gandhi.

"Don't ever forget, that we were not led by a saint with his head in clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground."



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet C...

Calm before the storm

Meaning

The calm state that happens just before an unpleasant event

Explanation

One of the most common idioms in daily language, you must have heard a mom looking at her sleeping baby and saying, “don’t be fooled by this innocence, this is just the calm before the storm. Once she wakes up, she is a nuisance.” Any peaceful situation which occurs before an unpleasant or chaotic event is said to be the calm before the storm.

Example

His anger comes after a prolonged phase of silence, like the calm before the storm.

Can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs

Meaning

Achieving something will always have some negative effects

Explanation

Just like every output has a cost and every omelet requires breaking of some eggs, every achievement will have some negative effects and/or opportunity costs. Thus, if a sports friend of yours is sad about his above average grades, you can tell him that it is the opportunity cost for the trophy of basketball championship that he brought to the college this semester by saying, "you can't make omelet without breaking some eggs."

Example

Have some patience man! You got to lose something in order to attain something else. You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

Can't see the forest for the trees

Meaning

Focus on details while ignoring the bigger picture

Explanation

Here forest has a neutral meaning, it can be good or bad. If someone is busy looking at trees and while doing that forgets to take a look at the humongous forest, he is being involved in details and forgetting the importance of larger and maybe more impactful things. If it is used for a problem, then the person is involved in petty issues and forgets to pay attention to the bigger problems. And if forest is representing a good thing, then maybe he is missing out the opportunity to celebrate a larger and happier thing because he is too focused on some petty issue.

Example

The details in an emerging economy would not be easy to analyze. Let's focus on the major problems. You can't see the forests for the trees.

Caught between two stools

Meaning

Fail because you didn't choose between two alternatives

Explanation

If someone is standing with both feet on different stools and he is unable to decide which one to choose, he won't survive for long and is bound to fall in some time. Thus, if someone is not able to decide between two things, you can warn him that he will fall if he does not decide soon as he is caught between two stools.

Example

Doing more than one thing which require major attention can be efficiently done only by a few. Most of the people would find themselves caught between two stools.

Clouds on the horizon

Meaning

An upcoming problem

Explanation

If the clouds are on the horizon, this means they are about to reach you. This expression is used to compare the clouds to any problem which is on its way. You better be ready with your umbrellas!

Example

Entering a new job or culture isn't easy. There are always clouds on the horizon.

Cross the bridge when you come to it

Meaning

Not worry about a problem before it has actually occurred

Explanation

If you are on a journey in which you know you will have to cross a risky bridge. Now that no doubt is going to be tough, but thinking about the bridge during whole of the journey and getting frightened will fetch you nothing. So, it is better if you think of it when you come to it and enjoy the beautiful journey before that. The same concept applies to problems of life. If an indispensable problem is on your way and you could do nothing but face it when it comes, do not ruin your mental equilibrium before the problem comes and think of it when it actually comes.

Example

Anxiety can be suppressed by following one golden rule:

Being ready to cross the bridge when you come to it.

Cry over spilt milk

Meaning

Feel bad over something which has happened and can't be changed now

Explanation

Another common idiom of all times. Once split on the table, milk can't be gathered. So, this idiom is used to console anyone who is lamenting over a loss which can't be undone now. He should forget and move on, and maybe fetch another packet of milk from the market!

Example

You quit the job after fighting with your boss. Now be ready to join a new one. There is no use crying over spilt milk.

Curiosity killed the cat

Meaning

A warning which reminds that curiosity can have negative consequences

Explanation

Originated from 'care killed the cat', this idiom is used to war anyone who is being a little too curious and going beyond his capabilities and limits to quench that curiosity.

Example

The most creative people can sometimes suffer with unwelcome repercussions. They tend to know more and more, and in the process the main work gets suffered. Curiosity kills the cat!

Another Speech to pay attention to...

“

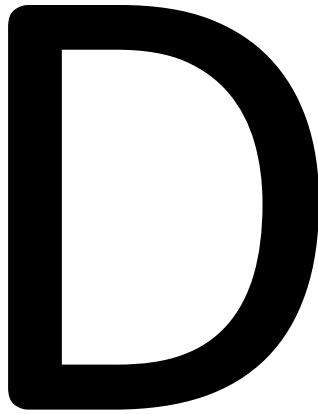
But has the last word been said? Must hope disappear? Is defeat final? No!

Believe me, I who am speaking to you with full knowledge of the facts, and who tell you that nothing is lost for France. The same means that overcame us can bring us victory one day. For France is not alone! She is not alone! She is not alone! She has a vast Empire behind her. She can align with the British Empire that holds the sea and continues the fight. She can, like England, use without limit the immense industry of the United States.

This war is not limited to the unfortunate territory of our country. This war is not over as a result of the Battle of France. This war is a worldwide war. All the mistakes, all the delays, all the suffering, do not alter the fact that there are, in the world, all the means necessary to crush our enemies one day. Vanquished today by mechanical force, in the future we will be able to overcome by a superior mechanical force. The fate of the world depends on it.

”

by General Charles De Gaull on BBC in order to ask the French not to give away hope and fight the German occupation.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet D...

Devil's advocate

Meaning

Pretend to oppose something only to strengthen it more

Explanation

If someone who actually is in favor of a concept and tries to bring it into the discussion of others by pretending to give arguments against it. His actual motive is to induce others to speak in favor of it and the subsequent strengthening of the concept. This practice is not evil always. It is also used like a classroom practice by students to understand concepts by getting involved in discussions with each other.

Example

The film critic was a Devil's Advocate. He never praised any film with full heart. I think he wants film scripts to improve.

Don't give up the day job

Meaning

A way to someone he/she is not good at something, and should not pursue it full time.

Explanation

A friend of yours who is doing good with a job in a bank comes to you and sings a song. You praise it and then he tells you a secret that he is planning to pursue music. Then, being his true friend, you give him your honest opinion and say, "No doubt you are good at music, but don't give up the day job." What you mean here is he is good in singing, but not as good to become a professional singer.

Example

What's in trend is not always the norm? one should never give up his day job in order to become someone or something he is not capable of.

Don't throw the baby out with the bath water

Meaning

Lose something good when trying to get rid of some negative aspects of it.

Explanation

After a mother is done bathing her child, imagine that along with throwing the waste water out of the window, she throws the baby too. She is throwing something good in her efforts to throw something bad or useless. Thus, this idiom is used for situation when something good is thrown out in the effort of throwing something bad.

Example

While quitting the evening routine of drinking alcohol, don't quit the food you eat with it. Do not throw the baby out with the bath water.

Drastic times call for drastic measures

Meaning

It is necessary to take extreme actions in extreme situations

Explanation

As is explanatory from the wording of the idioms, difficult times need difficult measures to control it. This is used in times when one is a little hesitant to take drastic steps. We can make him realize that the drastic problem he is in won't be solved without taking drastic steps.

Example

When the child goes out of the way, the parent must be ready to scold him. Drastic times call for drastic measures.

E

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet E...

Easy does it

Meaning

A way of saying someone to be careful while doing something

Explanation

This idiom is used to remind someone to be careful while doing a task. The task can be anything from cutting a slice of onion to launching a space rocket.

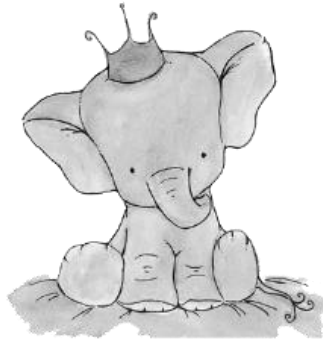
Example

Don't injure your muscles in an attempt to get a toned muscular physique. Go slow and steady. Easy does it!

Elephant in the room

Meaning

The apparent problem which people avoid to talk about



Explanation

The elephant in the room is symbolic of the problem that is too large and apparent to be ignored. But still people are avoiding to talk about it, or to take steps to get the elephant out of the room. The elephant is going to stay in the room until people discuss about it and then take the requisite steps to take it out. The same applies to problems. They will be solved only if the stakeholders involved discuss about it and then solve it.

Example

Everyone can see he talks illogical but they ignore owing to his powerful position. He is the elephant in the room. Prepare for the worst before it actually happens.



Illustration of Elvis Presley performing on stage

Elvis has left the building

Meaning

The Event has ended

Explanation

The idiom belongs to the time Elvis Presley used to perform. To tell the audiences that an event is over, the organized used to say, “Elvis has left”. Only then the over enthusiastic crowd would agree to leave the performing area. Originated from there, it is still used to communicate that an event has ended. The event need not be a musical performance, it can be anything from a rugby match to a geopolitical event.

Example

There is no use of waiting for that kind of leadership. The phase is over. Elvis has left.

Every cloud has a silver lining

Meaning

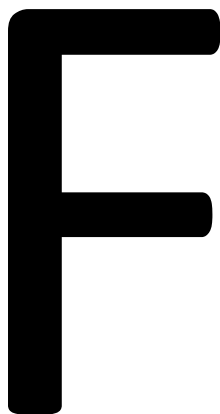
Everything has a positive aspect to it

Explanation

No matter a cloud is blocking the view of the sun, but it grants us with its silver lining. Thus, this idiom is used to tell that everything has some positive externality attached to it.

Example

Don't worry brother! You will get over these tough times soon. Every cloud has a silver lining.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet F...

Face the music

Meaning

Face the consequences of one's actions

Explanation

If an instrumentalist is playing his instrument and avoids listening to its sound, he is making futile efforts. Just like he will have to hear the instrument played by him, every one of us will have to bear the consequences of the acts done by us. The idiom tells the same message.

Example

"You murdered him. Now, face the music," the attorney said.

Far cry from

Meaning

Different from

Explanation

The literal meaning of the idiom is being far physically. But in application it is used to talk about two different things, persons, emotions etc.

Example

You can't work under him. He is a far cry.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet G...

Gain ground

Meaning

Gain popularity and/or success

Explanation

If somebody gains ground, he has earned a foundation in a particular area by being successful or being popular. This area can be a profession or a locality or anything.

Example

Took him ten years to gain ground in a writing career.



**Get the taste of your own
medicine**

Meaning

When the same treatment is meted out to you what did with others

Explanation

You might have wanted your doctor to realize how bitter his medicines are by tasting them on his own. When these words are used as an idiom, they refer to a situation when the person inflicting a negative treatment on others is being treated the same way. In that way, he will realize how bitter the medicines he had been giving are.

Example

You have treated everyone with disrespect. Now be ready to get the taste of your own medicine.

Go back to drawing board

Meaning

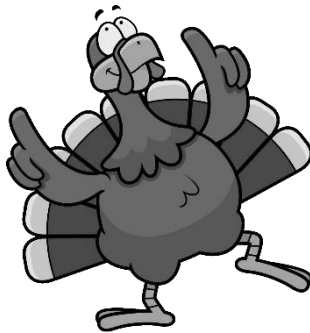
Fail and begin from start

Explanation

In order to accomplish something, the first task you do is to chart out all the steps on a board and then carry on with the implementation. If the plan of yours fails at any step and you have to start from the first step of drawing it from the basic theory, it is said that you are going back to the drawing board.

Example

The processes involving several steps are cumbersome. You always have to go back to the drawing board if any step doesn't work.



Go cold turkey

Meaning

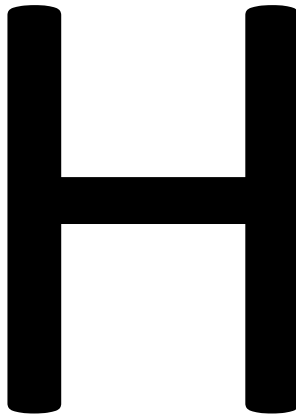
Stop something abruptly

Explanation

Though now used to represent ceasing of any activity, this idiom was earlier used for drug addicts who quit drugs all of a sudden and their bodies were compared to that of a cold turkey. This is where the origin of this idiom lies. Today, it is used for the act of stopping anything abruptly.

Example

All his ambitions dried, his motives disoriented and his dreams shattered. He is a cold turkey now, just waiting for life to get over.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet H...

Hand in glove

Meaning

In close association

Explanation

Your hand and the glove you wear on it do all the movements together. Don't they? Therefore, this is what the idiom is used for entities who are doing some tasks so close as is done by the hand and its glove.

Example

The Prime Minister and the Home Minister plan everything together. They are hand in gloves for deciding anything.

Hard nut to crack

Meaning

A difficult problem or person to deal with

Explanation

It takes a little more effort to crack a hard nut than it does to crack a normal. This idiom can be used for people or a problem. When used for a problem, it signifies that the problem is harder than a normal problem. When used for a person, it implies the person is hard to convince or manipulate or be defeated, unlike a normal person.

Example

The new boss is very strict, a hard nut to crack!

Have your head in the clouds

Meaning

Ignore the problems and/or current situation

Explanation

This idiom can be taken literally only for Sofia, the humanoid. For us, we will have to go with the figurative meaning. If a person has his head in the cloud, he is choosing to ignore the problems he is in. This is quite same the idiom 'burying your head in the sand.'

Example

You're broke, financially and personally, still your head is in the clouds. Rethink and revisit your opportunities. That's the only way you can have a better life.

Hear it on the grapevine

Meaning

Get to know about a rumor

Explanation

Grapevine here refers to the flow of rumors from one place to another. Both of have flow in random patterns. If you hear something on grapevine, you have heard that piece of information in rumors only.

Example

They got separated? I am not sure. Heard it on the grapevine only.

Hit the nail on the head

Meaning

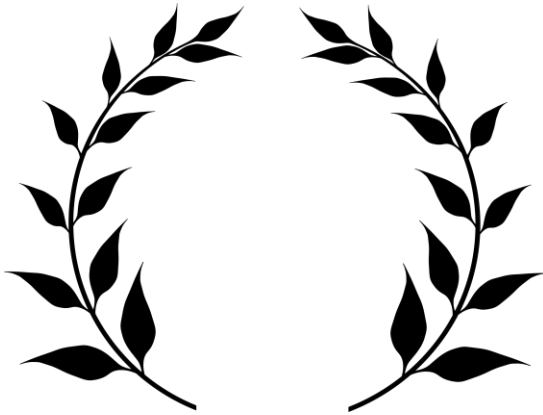
Find the answer/ solution

Explanation

Having its origin in carpentry, this idiom defines the situation when the problem has to be solved with the precise answer, once and for all. Hitting it wrong place will damage the wood. Thus, trying out imperfect solutions will make the situation even worse. You need the exact answer and when you have it, you need to hit the hammer exactly in the head of the nail!

Example

It took me ten years to finish my research on relation between emotions and biology. Finally, I have hit the nail on head.



Hold out an olive branch

Meaning

Offer for peace

Explanation

As olive is symbolic of peace, this idiom is used for the offer of peace. The party offering peace is said to have been holding an olive branch. This idiom can be used when conflicts or wars are being solved by the offer for negotiations by one of the parties.

Example

After a prolonged history of wars both the kingdoms are holding out an olive branch.

Hot potato

Meaning

Controversial issue

Explanation

Boiled potato is one edible item which takes a lot of time to get cold, as it contains a lot of water. Thus, this term is used for a 'hot' topic which is in controversy and will take time to get off our news and social media feeds.

Example

The nuclear deal between the two countries is a hot potato. The leaders have to be very careful.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet I...

In hot water

Meaning

In trouble

Explanation

Hot water here is symbolic of problems and of awkward situations with anyone. Being in hot water simply means being in a difficult and unpleasant situation.

Example

This is the first time he found solace. His entire life has been in hot water.

In the red/ black

Meaning

Be in deficit, i.e. spend more than what you have

Explanation

When someone withdraws more than what he has deposited in his account, the bank marks his account in red/black color. Thus, being in red/black implies that you are in deficit and hence you owe to people, probably because you have spent more than what you owned.

Example

The millennials are always in the red/black, thanks to credit facilities being offered by the banks.

It's always darkest before the dawn

Meaning

There is a worst just before the good phase

Explanation

This idiom is used to console someone who is going through the hardest of times. You tell him that his situation is like the time it is just before the dawn. It is as dark as it can be, because the light is just about to arrive. His situation is problematic only because it is about to get better.

Example

He was angry when he said he doesn't respect his life. Now onwards he will respect it more. It is always the darkest before the dawn.



“The limits of my language are the limits of my world. ”
–Ludwig Wittgenstein



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet J...



Jump on the bandwagon

Meaning

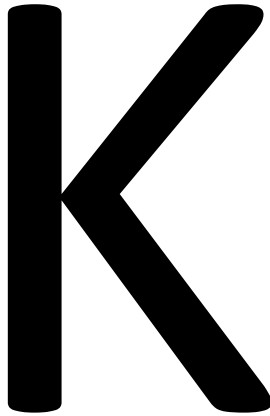
Follow something which is trending

Explanation

If all the people of your town are going somewhere and you also hop on their bandwagon without even asking where they are headed to, you are following the herd without considering where you actually want to go. This idiom is used to represent the times when people blindly follow what is in trend, without thinking whether it suits their personalities and choices or not.

Example

The new Bollywood actor wears all sorts of weird clothes to get attention, but teenagers are following him without any thought. They just jump on the bandwagon.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet K...

Kick the can down the road

Meaning

Avoid and/or delay dealing with a problem or a tough decision

Explanation

The long-term solution to get rid of an empty can lying in the road is picking it up and throwing it in the dustbin. But instead of doing that, if someone just kicks it down the road, then that won't solve the problem. Likewise, if instead facing some situation a person just avoids it then this idiom will be applicable on him.

Example

Kicking the can down the road doesn't help anyone. One has to be courageous enough for facing their problems and solving them.

Kill two birds with one stone

Meaning

One act which has two positive outcomes

Explanation

It is applied when one action can fulfil two motives. Being one of the most common idioms used in everyday life, this needs not much explanation.

Example

He just played a diplomatic trick to save his job. Unknowingly he killed two birds with one stone. He got a promotion as well.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet L...

Last straw

Meaning

That stage of a difficult task where one gives up

Explanation

Suppose a load carrying animal is made to carry a heap of hay on its back. No matter how strong the animal is, he will have his limits. When those limits are reached, his back will break. Now the limit will be crossed by one single straw, no matter how light it would be. The straw that broke the animal's back is symbolic of that part of a task where one gives up.

Example

You would feel all your life that you have reached the last straw, and that's where you need to be the strongest and get your goal.



Let the cat out of the bag

Meaning

Reveal a secret accidentally

Explanation

The cat is the secret and the bag hides it. When a person lets out the cat, he is letting out the secret to be known by the people, though accidentally.

Example

He was so low emotionally that he let the cat out of the bag.
It can happen with everyone.

Let the dust settle

Meaning

Let the situation become normal before taking some steps

Explanation

Just after a dusty wind, you don't get out of the house if it is avoidable. You wait for the dust to settle and then step out. The same applies to any problematic situation. The person being affected by a situation will wait for it to get over and the matters to solve, before planning his moves.

Example

You have told him your reasons. He is shocked, but he would try to improve now. Let the dust settle.

Let sleeping dogs lie

Meaning

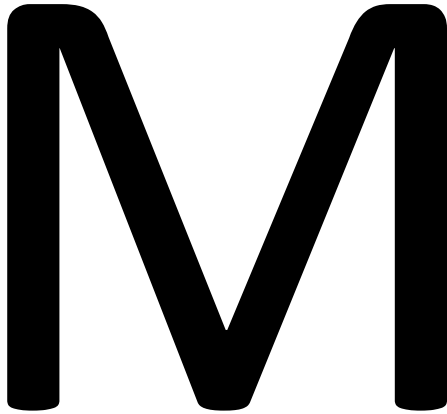
Not to disturb someone situation, as it may cause havoc

Explanation

No person of sane mind would want to wake up a sleeping dog. Everybody knows that the dog will come after him only. Thus, disturbing the dog is equivalent to creating problems yourself. In real life scenario too, sometimes it is better to let things be as they are. Disturbing the situation will do nothing but deteriorate it. This idiom is used for such situations.

Example

He just came out of his guilt. Do not tell him what wrong he did for a while. Let the sleeping dogs die.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet M...

Make a mountain out of a molehill

Meaning

Exaggerate a minor issue

Explanation

Describing a molehill as a mountain is a typical example of exaggeration. When someone describe a miniscule problem as if it is larger than what it actually is, this idiom is used for his acts.

Example

What he did looks problematic but it is totally normal. Let's not make a mountain out of a molehill.

Make ends meet

Meaning

Earn just enough for sustenance

Explanation

The origin of this idiom carries some ambiguity. But it's simple and universally accepted meaning is to earn just enough to survive. So, if a person who is earning barely enough to fill the stomach of his family, we say that he is barely making his ends meet.

Example

During recession lot of people in the company lost their jobs. It became increasingly difficult for their families to make ends meet.

Make light of something

Meaning

Understate something, mostly a problem

Explanation

This idiom is used when someone understates something. The thing being understated about can be anything from an idea to a problem, to a person.

Example

Make light of your suggestions. He is not in the right frame of mind as of now.

Midas touch

Meaning

Capability to make every monetary venture profitable

Explanation

Midas was the name of the king who had the ability to turn everything into gold by touching it. This idiom is thus used for a person who possess the modern Midas touch, i.e. who can turn any economic venture or business profitable.

Example

Shahrukh Khan is a great marketing force. He has Midas Touch. Everything he endorses, sells.

Miss the boat

Meaning

Miss an opportunity

Explanation

Suppose there is a boat representative of opportunities leaving from your village. You woke up late the day it was supposed to leave and you missed it. Though it is quite a hypothetical situation, the idiom is used in many realistic situations whenever someone misses an opportunity.

Example

You missed the boat by denying the job offer from that new company. It has grown fourfold in a year.

Mull over

Meaning

Take a lot of time in making a decision

Explanation

The literal meaning of 'mull' is to think at length about something. If someone is mulling over some decision, he is taking a lot of time to think and take decision.

Example

Stand up and act! Do not mull over petty issues.

N

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet N...

Nip something in the bud

Meaning

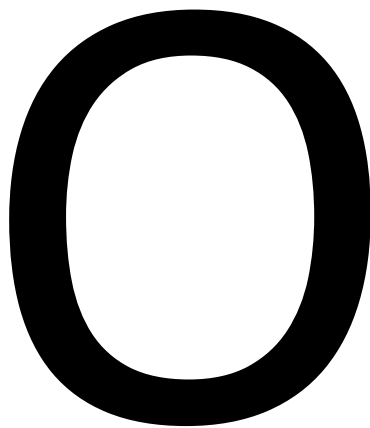
Stop someone/ something at its early stage

Explanation

If you nip a bud at its early stage, it will die then and there and will not even have an opportunity to grow into a complete flower. The idiom hence is applied when some problem is solved at its very early stage or if someone's chance to grow is seized even before they start growing properly.

Example

He could have grown into a better man if you were free of your own biases. You nipped him in the bud. Now the efforts required have to be huge.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet O...

Once in a blue moon

Meaning

Rarely

Explanation

Though moon is never actually blue, this idiom is used for events that rarely occur or occur after long intervals.

Example

You reap profits in the stock market once in a blue moon. Majorly you are in loss. It is the right time to stop investing and learning more.

On the horizon

Meaning

Something which is going to happen soon

Explanation

If you can see something coming towards you at the horizon, that means it is quite near you and will approach soon. Thus, this idiom is used to refer to something which is just about to happen.

Example

The arguments are on the horizon. Behave sensibly if you want to avoid them.

Out of the woods

Meaning

Out of trouble

Explanation

Imagine you have lost your way in some woods and it is dusk time. All you want is to come out of the maze and when you are out of the woods, that will be the greatest relief for you in that moment. Coming out of woods is used as an idiom coming of the instance when someone or something is out of the trouble and in safe zone now.

Example

Chill and relax now. Go for a trip. Enjoy the good time. You are out of the woods now.

P

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet P...

Packed like sardines

Meaning

Very close, mostly used for a crowd

Explanation

If you look at a can of sardines and notice how tightly they are packed, you will know the picture this idiom paints. When some things or people are in a place lying very close to each other (as if packed tightly), then this idiom is used.

Example

Bangladesh is a dense country. In every local market you will find people packed in sardines.



Picture paints a thousand words

Meaning

Used to emphasize the effect of pictures

Explanation

Needless to explain, a picture speaks much more than words can ever do. So, this idiom is used to remind the exquisite effect a picture has.

Example

Da Vinci chose painting over writing to convey a message.
It is true that a picture paints a thousand words.

Pipe dream

Meaning

Almost impossible idea or dream

Explanation

Originally, pipe dream used to refer to a dream seen by a person while taking in opium from pipe. Now as an idiom, it is used to refer to any dream or idea which is almost impossible to become a reality.

Example

“Your ambitions are pipe dreams,” they said.

“That’s what keeps me going,” he shrugged.

Pour oil on troubled waters

Meaning

Try to solve an argument

Explanation

Pouring oil on troubled water is representative of the act of reducing the turmoil in the water. Thus, if someone is trying to solve some argument of two or more people, he is trying to pour oil on troubled waters.

Example

The wise men never carry an argument forward. They try to pour oil on troubled waters.

Abhishek Leela Pandey



Putting all your eggs in one basket

Meaning

To put all efforts or time at stake for just one thing

Explanation

An old but classic and commonly applicable idiom of 'putting all your eggs in one basket' refers to the situation when someone has put all his hopes or stakes on one single event of success or failure. The instance can range from betting all your money on one gamble to spending all your savings for one risky medical operation of your loved one.

Example

Everyone told him not to put all his eggs in one basket because life may give different directions, but his determination was immovable. That was sheer greatness.

R

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet R...

Ride high

Meaning

Be successful

Explanation

Explanatory form its wording, this idiom is used when someone or something is on the road to success.

Example

Being successful is very difficult and to maintain it is even more. Once you ride high, be ready to take up responsibilities.



Rising tide lifts all boats

Meaning

An improving economy benefits all its participants

Explanation

Used to represent economic situations, this idiom reminds the fact that when an economy prospers all the people concerned with that economy prosper. Just the way a tide comes and lifts all boats, developments in an economy lift everyone from a local seller on a street to a business tycoon.

Example

India is on its way to become an economic powerhouse. The manufacturing, outsourcing, agriculture, banking and the small-scale industries seem to flourish in future. A rising tide lifts up all boats.

S

Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet S...

Salt of the earth

Meaning

A person or a group of persons who are so good in a particular aspect that they represent all the people of a particular kind

Explanation

This is another idiom taken from the bible. It refers to the person or group of persons who are used to represent a larger group of people, typically because they are at the zenith in the aspect which is common in the group. Thus, the salt of earth of a group of singers will be the best singer and the salt of earth of a political party will be the leader who is most loved by the population of the state.

Example

Owing to his oratory and leadership skills, Gandhi was the salt of the earth.

See eye to eye

Meaning

Be in agreement with someone

Explanation

If you are seeing something eye to eye with someone that means both of you seeing it from the same perspective, and have same opinion about it. Thus, if you and your boss are seeing an idea eye to eye then the both of you have reached on a consensus regarding the idea.

Example

The best teams are formed between people who can see eye to eye, be it personal or professional; and the best part is it is achievable.

Silver lining

Meaning

Positive aspect of something which is considered negative by most of the people

Explanation

Silver lining here refers to the silver lining that is visible on a cloud. This expression as a whole refers to the positive side of something which apparently is negative, according to the majority.

Example

The worst outcomes of a heated argument are actually the silver lining. They improve people overall.

Sit on the fence

Meaning

Not able to decide or simply avoid deciding

Explanation

Suppose there is a fence in between two gardens growing fruits, one of apple and one of oranges (just for imagination). And someone is not able to choose which fruit to go for and is rather sitting on the fence to decide. That is what the idiom is used to represent a dilemma!

Example

He sat on the fence ruminating about past, while what he required was thinking about the present actions and consequences.

Snowball effect

Meaning

When a problem which started as small, becomes serious and dangerous

Explanation

If someone rolls a small snow ball from above a mountain covered in snow, what he will get at the foot of the mountain is a human size snow figure which is almost sphere. This is what the snowball effect is. When a problem initiates, it is like a tiny snow ball, but if it is not combatted then it becomes the size of a human.

Example

Listening is a great way to achieve peace. Only speaking about the problems would have a snowball effect.

Square peg in a round hole

Meaning

Someone or something that does not fit

Explanation

A square peg will never fit in a round hole. This expression is used to denote to someone or something that is out of place somewhere and will never fit

Example

The most intelligent people are not always successful. All they have to do is to move out of their own beliefs. A square peg can never fit in a round hole, until great measures are taken.

Storm is brewing

Meaning

Upcoming problem

Explanation

A brewing storm refers to the fact that the storm is getting ready to take place and to destroy anything and everything that will come its way. Putting a problem in the place of storm, it will mean that the specific problem is about to befall on someone or something.

Example

When in doubt, one should try to shift focus otherwise a storm is on the way to brew up.

Straight from the horse's mouth

Meaning

Get information directly from the source

Explanation

The mouth of the horse is the source of the information. Having heard about some event from the person who has actually lived it gives you substantial credibility. That is what this idiom is about. If you have received some information directly from the source, you may say you have heard it directly from the horse's mouth.

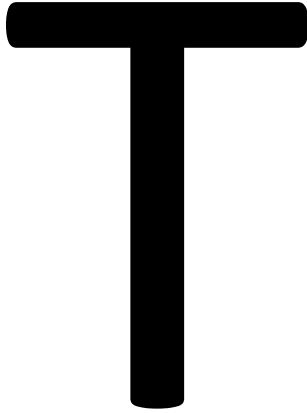
Example

The reporter who covered the corruption news of a politician has authentic sources, directly from the horse's mouth.



“Prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.”

- George Orwell on the importance of language.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet T...

Take with a grain of salt

Meaning

Not believe something immediately, rather see it with suspicion

Explanation

To take with a grain of salt means to see something with suspicion and not believe it immediately. It may also refer to the act of not believing something literally and reading between the lines. Someone who takes an idea with a grain of salt does not believe it immediately but is rather planning to do his investigation before reaching any conclusion.

Example

Taking things with a grain of salt is a great idea but not always. Sometimes we need to believe in what others say.



Takes two to tango

Meaning

Used when two people were responsible for an outcome, and now both should take the responsibility for it

Explanation

A performance of tango requires two people to perform and is not the work of one. So, it makes total sense that both of the performers should take responsibility and/or credit for the performance. The same logic is applied when any action is done by two people and now both of them should take responsibility for the outcomes.

Example

Who says you can succeed alone? It always takes two to tango.

The best of both worlds

Meaning

Avail benefit of two very different situations

Explanation

In a dream of yours, if one world is offering oranges and another is offering apples and you have to choose one, which one would you choose? You will obviously choose the fruit you like more, but if you can devise a way to take benefit of both the worlds then this idiom is apt on you. If someone is able to take benefit of two very different situation simultaneously, then we say that he is able to take benefit of both the worlds.

Example

“I will bring the best of both the worlds for you,” he offered.

“I believe you,” she affirmed.

Throw caution to the wind

Meaning

Not to be careful

Explanation

Throwing caution to the wind is symbolic to the fact that someone has left all the carefulness and is now entering into some venture or doing some actions being totally reckless.

Example

Throwing caution to the wind is nothing but escapism. One should avoid doing it otherwise the repercussions would not be so pretty.

Tip of the iceberg

Meaning

A small visible part of a larger unknown problem

Explanation

The visible portion of an iceberg which is above the level of water is just a small percentage of the total size of that iceberg. The same corollary is established to a problem when only a small part of it is visible and a larger part is yet to be revealed and come to the fore.

Example

The minor shakes on Richter Scale in the last month were just the tip of the iceberg. There is a great chance that a big earthquake is approaching.

To give a run for one's money

Meaning

Be as good as a professional in something

Explanation

If you are not a professional doctor but you are as good as one then you are giving all the professional doctors out there a run for their money. Therefore, if someone is as good in something as a professional person, he is said to give them a run for their money.

Example

The actor chose simple scripts with low cost, but worked with full dedication. He is sure to give a run for money to the high-profile film companies.

Twist someone's arm

Meaning

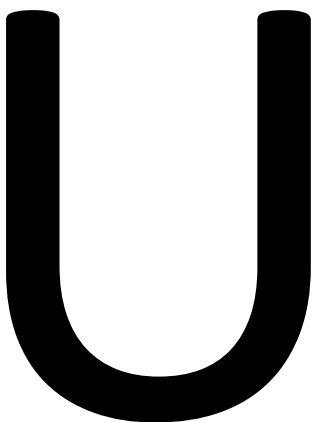
Convince someone to do something

Explanation

Ever twisted the arm of your younger sibling and forced him to agree to do something? Well that is violent when used literally. If used as an idiom when someone is successful in convincing someone in doing something.

Example

It will take you twisting your manager's arm to get a salary hike.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet U...

Up in the air

Meaning

Something which is still to be solved or decided

In the air is representative of something which is hanging in between and is yet to be settled. By this logic, this idiom refers to a decision or a condition which is to meet its fate.

Example

Even after making all efforts, analyzing every situation and using all permutations and combinations, the main problem is still up in the air.

Upset the applecart

Meaning

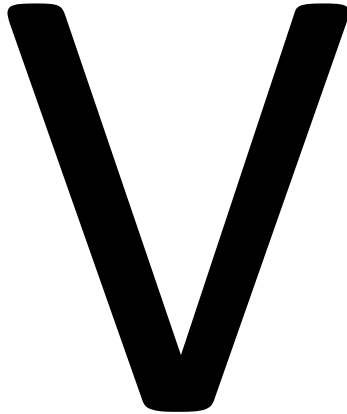
Ruin someone's plans

Explanation

A kid is standing with his mother who is buying apples from a vendor who spent two hours in the morning placing his apples in a perfect figure to allure his customers throughout the day. Now if the kid took out one apple from the base and the domino effect made the whole cart fall, the kid has ruined a perfectly laid plan of someone. This expression is used when someone ruins someone else's perfectly laid plans.

Example

The younger brother of King Ravana revealed his secrets to Lord Rama. He upset the applecart and became responsible for Ravana's defeat in the epic war of Ramayana.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet V...

Vim and vigor

Meaning

Enthusiasm and energy

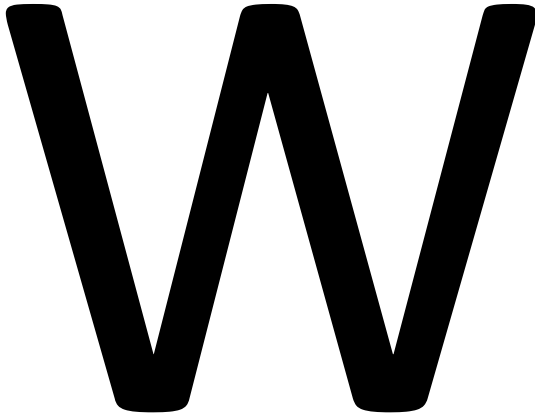
Explanation

Vim means strength and Vigor means energy. So, when you are doing some task in full vim and vigor, you are doing it in full energy, strength and enthusiasm.

Example

“I love thee with all vim and vigor, all heart and mind,” Orlando spoke.

“That helps me think about you when you are not here,” Jessica said.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet W...

When pigs fly

Meaning

Some event that is never going to happen

Explanation

It is known with one hundred percent certainty that pigs can't fly. So, saying that some event will happen when pigs fly, you mean to say that the event will never happen.

Example

Delivering a fabulous performance for him in this bad phase would be pigs flying. Let's see how he achieves that!

Whole nine yards

Meaning

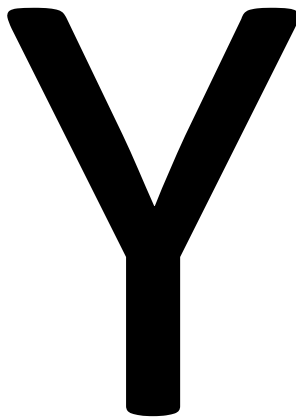
Whole of something

Explanation

If a field is of nine yards and the farmer is using the whole of it for the plantation of mangoes, then he can say with affirmation that he is using whole nine yards to grow mangoes. While this is not how the idiom originated, it is a good way to remember the idiom and its meaning. If you want to refer to something as a whole, you may use this idiom.

Example

King Ashoka wanted whole nine yards. That is the reason he annexed so many territories.



Idioms and Phrases starting with the alphabet Y...

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink

Meaning

You can suggest a good action to someone and/or make it easy for them, but can't force them to do it

Explanation

Being one of the longer type of idioms, this one is quite self-explanatory and is used to denote instances where you may guide someone what to do but he is not willing to do it, despite the fact that it is going to be very much beneficial for that person.

Example

Parents can tell their children about their negative experiences of life, but it is the children only who should take a lesson. One can only lead a horse to water, but can't make him drink!

About the author

Abhishek Leela Pandey

Abhishek Leela Pandey is an author, mathematician and motivational speaker. *The Man with Five Heads* is his first book.

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