

English idioms

English idioms, proverbs, and expressions are an important part of everyday English. They come up all the time in both written and spoken English. Because idioms don't always make sense literally, you'll need to familiarize yourself with the meaning and usage of each idiom. That may seem like a lot of work, but learning idioms is fun, especially when you compare English idioms to the idioms in your own language.

Learning to use common idioms and expressions will make your English sound more native, so it's a good idea to master some of these expressions. The tables below are organized by how common the idioms are in Australian English. You can start by learning the very common English idioms, since these are the ones you'll encounter regularly. When you've mastered those, move on to the rest. None of the idioms on this page are unusual or old fashioned, so you can be confident using any of them with native English speakers from all English-speaking countries.

The most common English idioms

These English idioms are extremely common in everyday conversation in the United States. You will hear them in movies and TV shows and can use them to make your English sound more like that of a native speaker.

Idiom	Meaning	Usage
A blessing in disguise	a good thing that seemed bad at first	as part of a sentence
A dime a dozen	Something common	as part of a sentence
Beat around the bush	Avoid saying what you mean, usually because it is uncomfortable	as part of a sentence
Better late than never	Better to arrive late than not to come at all	by itself
Bite the bullet	To get something over with because it is inevitable	as part of a sentence
Break a leg	Good luck	by itself
Call it a day	Stop working on something	as part of a sentence
Cut somebody some slack	Don't be so critical	as part of a sentence
Cutting corners	Doing something poorly in order to save time or money	as part of a sentence
Easy does it	Slow down	by itself
Get out of hand	Get out of control	as part of a sentence

Get something out of your system	Do the thing you've been wanting to do so you can move on	as part of a sentence
Get your act together	Work better or leave	by itself
Give someone the benefit of the doubt	Trust what someone says	as part of a sentence
Go back to the drawing board	Start over	as part of a sentence
Hang in there	Don't give up	by itself
Hit the sack	Go to sleep	as part of a sentence
It's not rocket science	It's not complicated	by itself
Let someone off the hook	To not hold someone responsible for something	as part of a sentence
Make a long story short	Tell something briefly	as part of a sentence
Miss the boat	It's too late	as part of a sentence
No pain, no gain	You have to work for what you want	by itself
On the ball	Doing a good job	as part of a sentence
Pull someone's leg	To joke with someone	as part of a sentence
Pull yourself together	Calm down	by itself
So far so good	Things are going well so far	by itself
Speak of the devil	The person we were just talking about showed up!	by itself
That's the last straw	My patience has run out	by itself
The best of both worlds	An ideal situation	as part of a sentence
Time flies when you're having fun	You don't notice how long something lasts when it's fun	by itself
To get bent out of shape	To get upset	as part of a sentence
To make matters worse	Make a problem worse	as part of a sentence
Under the weather	Sick	as part of a sentence
We'll cross that bridge when we come to it	Let's not talk about that problem right now	by itself
Wrap your head around something	Understand something complicated	as part of a sentence
You can say that again	That's true, I agree	by itself

Your guess is as good as mine	I have no idea	by itself
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Common English idioms & expressions

These English idioms are used quite regularly in the United States. You may not hear them every day, but they will be very familiar to any native English speaker. You can be confident using any of them when the context is appropriate.

Idiom	Meaning	Usage
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush	What you have is worth more than what you might have later	by itself
A penny for your thoughts	Tell me what you're thinking	by itself
A penny saved is a penny earned	Money you save today you can spend later	by itself
A perfect storm	the worst possible situation	as part of a sentence
A picture is worth 1000 words	Better to show than tell	by itself
Actions speak louder than words	Believe what people do and not what they say	by itself
Add insult to injury	To make a bad situation worse	as part of a sentence
Barking up the wrong tree	To be mistaken, to be looking for solutions in the wrong place	as part of a sentence
Birds of a feather flock together	People who are alike are often friends (usually used negatively)	by itself
Bite off more than you can chew	Take on a project that you cannot finish	as part of a sentence
Break the ice	Make people feel more comfortable	as part of a sentence
By the skin of your teeth	Just barely	as part of a sentence
Comparing apples to oranges	Comparing two things that cannot be compared	as part of a sentence
Costs an arm and a leg	Very expensive	as part of a sentence
Do something at the drop of a hat	Do something without having planned beforehand	as part of a sentence

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you	Treat people fairly. Also known as "The Golden Rule"	by itself
Don't count your chickens before they hatch	Don't count on something good happening until it's happened.	by itself
Don't cry over spilt milk	There's no reason to complain about something that can't be fixed	by itself
Don't give up your day job	You're not very good at this	by itself
Don't put all your eggs in one basket	What you're doing is too risky	by itself
Every cloud has a silver lining	Good things come after bad things	by itself
Get a taste of your own medicine	Get treated the way you've been treating others (negative)	as part of a sentence
Give someone the cold shoulder	Ignore someone	as part of a sentence
Go on a wild goose chase	To do something pointless	as part of a sentence
Good things come to those who wait	Be patient	by itself
He has bigger fish to fry	He has bigger things to take care of than what we are talking about now	by itself
He's a chip off the old block	The son is like the father	by itself
Hit the nail on the head	Get something exactly right	by itself
Ignorance is bliss	You're better off not knowing	by itself
It ain't over till the fat lady sings	This isn't over yet	by itself
It takes one to know one	You're just as bad as I am	by itself
It's a piece of cake	It's easy	by itself
It's raining cats and dogs	It's raining hard	by itself
Kill two birds with one stone	Get two things done with a single action	by itself
Let the cat out of the bag	Give away a secret	as part of a sentence

Live and learn	I made a mistake	by itself
Look before you leap	Take only calculated risks	by itself
On thin ice	On probation. If you make another mistake, there will be trouble.	as part of a sentence
Once in a blue moon	Rarely	as part of a sentence
Play devil's advocate	To argue the opposite, just for the sake of argument	as part of a sentence
Put something on ice	Put a projet on hold	as part of a sentence
Rain on someone's parade	To spoil something	as part of a sentence
Saving for a rainy day	Saving money for later	as part of a sentence
Slow and steady wins the race	Reliability is more important than speed	by itself
Spill the beans	Give away a secret	as part of a sentence
Take a rain check	Postpone a plan	as part of a sentence
Take it with a grain of salt	Don't take it too seriously	as part of a sentence
The ball is in your court	It's your decision	by itself
The best thing since sliced bread	A really good invention	as part of a sentence
The devil is in the details	It looks good from a distance, but when you look closer, there are problems	by itself
The early bird gets the worm	The first people who arrive will get the best stuff	by itself
The elephant in the room	The big issue, the problem people are avoiding	as part of a sentence
The whole nine yards	Everything, all the way.	as part of a sentence
There are other fish in the sea	It's ok to miss this opportunity. Others will arise.	by itself
There's a method to his madness	He seems crazy but actually he's clever	by itself
There's no such thing as a free lunch	Nothing is entirely free	by itself
Throw caution to the wind	Take a risk	as part of a sentence
You can't have your cake and eat it too	You can't have everything	by itself

You can't judge a book by its cover	This person or thing may look bad, but it's good inside	by itself
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Familiar English idioms & proverbs

These English idioms and proverbs are familiar and easily understood by native English speakers, but they are not usually used in everyday conversation. If you haven't mastered the more frequent idioms yet, they are a better place to start, but if you're already familiar with those expressions, the idioms below will further spice up your English.

Idiom	Meaning	Usage
A little learning is a dangerous thing	People who don't understand something fully are dangerous	by itself
A snowball effect	Events have momentum and build upon each other	as part of a sentence
A snowball's chance in hell	No chance at all	as part of a sentence
A stitch in time saves nine	Fix the problem now because it will get worse later	by itself
A storm in a teacup	A big fuss about a small problem	as part of a sentence
An apple a day keeps the doctor away	Apples are good for you	by itself
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure	You can prevent a problem with little effort. Fixing it later is harder.	by itself
As right as rain	Perfect	as part of a sentence
Bolt from the blue	Something that happened without warning	as part of a sentence
Burn bridges	Destroy relationships	as part of a sentence
Calm before the storm	Something bad is coming, but right now it's calm	as part of a sentence
Come rain or shine	No matter what	as part of a sentence
Curiosity killed the cat	Stop asking questions	by itself
Cut the mustard	Do a good job	as part of a sentence
Don't beat a dead horse	Move on, this subject is over	by itself

Every dog has his day	Everyone gets a chance at least once	by itself
Familiarity breeds contempt	The better you know someone the less you like him	by itself
Fit as a fiddle	In good health	as part of a sentence
Fortune favours the bold	Take risks	by itself
Get a second wind	Have more energy after having been tired	as part of a sentence
Get wind of something	Hear news of something secret	as part of a sentence
Go down in flames	Fail spectacularly	as part of a sentence
Haste makes waste	You'll make mistakes if you rush through something	by itself
Have your head in the clouds	Not be concentrating	as part of a sentence
He who laughs last laughs loudest	I'll get you back for what you did	by itself
Hear something straight from the horse's mouth	Hear something from the person involved	as part of a sentence
He's not playing with a full deck	He's dumb	by itself
He's off his rocker	He's crazy	by itself
He's sitting on the fence	He can't make up his mind	by itself
It is a poor workman who blames his tools	If you can't do the job, don't blame it on others	by itself
It is always darkest before the dawn	Things are going to get better	by itself
It takes two to tango	One person alone isn't responsible. Both people are involved.	by itself
Jump on the bandwagon	Follow a trend, do what everyone else is doing	as part of a sentence
Know which way the wind is blowing	Understand the situation (usually negative)	as part of a sentence
Leave no stone unturned	Look everywhere	as part of a sentence
Let sleeping dogs lie	Stop discussing an issue	as part of a sentence

Like riding a bicycle	Something you never forget how to do	as part of a sentence
Like two peas in a pod	They're always together	as part of a sentence
Make hay while the sun shines	Take advantage of a good situation	as part of a sentence
On cloud nine	Very happy	as part of a sentence
Once bitten, twice shy	You're more cautious when you've been hurt before	by itself
Out of the frying pan and into the fire	Things are going from bad to worse	by itself
Run like the wind	Run fast	as part of a sentence
Shape up or ship out	Work better or leave	by itself
Snowed under	Busy	as part of a sentence
That ship has sailed	It's too late	by itself
The pot calling the kettle black	Someone criticizing someone else he is just as bad	as part of a sentence
There are clouds on the horizon	Trouble is coming	by itself
Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones	People who are morally questionable shouldn't criticize others	by itself
Through thick and thin	In good times and in bad times	as part of a sentence
Time is money	Work quickly	by itself
Waste not, want not	Don't waste things and you'll always have enough	by itself
We see eye to eye	We agree	by itself
Weather the storm	Go through something difficult	as part of a sentence
Well begun is half done	Getting a good start is important	by itself
When it rains it pours	Everything is going wrong at once	by itself
You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar	You'll get what you want by being nice	by itself

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink	You can't force someone to make the right decision	by itself
You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs	There's always a cost to doing something	by itself