



Idioms & Proverbs (Aminotes)

If you say, “The cat’s out of the bag” instead of “The secret is given away,” you’re using an idiom. The meaning of an **idiom** is different from the actual meaning of the words used.

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away” is a proverb. **Proverbs** are old but familiar sayings that usually give advice. Both idioms and proverbs are part of our daily speech. Many are very old and have interesting histories. See how many of these sayings you know.

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” This proverb comes from the ancient Romans, who believed the apple had magical powers to cure illness. In fact, apples are filled with vitamin C, protein, pectin, natural sugars, copper, and iron. They *do* promote health.

To “climb on the bandwagon.” Long ago, bands on the platforms of traveling wagons played music to announce a parade or political speech. To show their support, people would often jump onto the platform and join the band. Today, this idiom usually refers to someone who hopes to benefit from supporting another person’s idea.

“Bury the hatchet.” Native Americans used to bury weapons to show that fighting had ended and enemies were now at peace. Today, the idiom means to make up with a friend after an argument or fight.

To “have a chip on one’s shoulder.” In nineteenth-century America, a boy who thought he was pretty tough would put a wood chip on his shoulder and dare anyone to knock it off. Today the idiom refers to anyone who is “touchy” or takes offense easily.

“A close shave.” In the past, student barbers learned to shave on customers. If they shaved too close, their clients might be cut or even barely escape serious injury. Today, we use this idiom if a person narrowly escapes disaster.



“Dot the i’s and cross the t’s.” When only handwritten documents were used, it was very important for the clerk to write everything properly, especially letters like *i* and *t*, which could easily be confused. The idiom has since come to mean paying attention to every little detail.

“He who pays the piper calls the tune.” In medieval times, people were entertained by strolling musicians. Whoever paid the price could choose the music. This proverb means that whoever pays is in charge.

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” In seventeenth-century England, a free press was banned by the government. This meant that people who disagreed with the government and printed their views were punished. In spite of this, people published their ideas and opinions in illegal pamphlets that were distributed to the public. The proverb means that the written expression of ideas cannot be stopped by physical force.

“The pot calling the kettle black.” In the seventeenth century, both pots and kettles turned black because they were used over open fires. Today, this idiom means criticizing someone else for a fault of one's own.

“Raining cats and dogs.” In Norse mythology, the dog is associated with wind and the cat with storms. This expression means it's raining very heavily.

To “shed crocodile tears.” Crocodiles have a reflex that causes their eyes to tear when they open their mouths. This makes it look as though they are crying while devouring their prey. In fact, neither crocodiles nor people who shed “crocodile” tears feel sorry for their actions.

“Clean bill of health.” When a doctor gives you a “clean bill of health,” you know that you’re perfectly healthy. In the past, when a ship left a port, it was given a Bill of Health if there were no epidemics in the area from which it left.



“Close but no cigar.” Years ago, cigars were often given as prizes in contests at fairs and carnivals. When a player almost won, the person running the game would say, “Close but no cigar.”

“Cut from the same cloth.” This means that a person is very similar to another. When making suits, tailors use fabric from the same piece of cloth to make sure the pieces match perfectly.

“Strike while the iron’s hot.” When you do this, you’re taking advantage of a good opportunity. Blacksmiths must shape iron into objects during the brief time it’s red-hot.