

ESL 065 idioms summary

Meeting New People

1. **Baby Boomer:** someone born between 1945-1960 after World War II when many returning soldiers had many children creating a large population of children, or boom.

Example: My dad was born in 1948 after WWII. He's a **baby boomer**.

2. **Beating a dead Horse:** If someone is trying to convince people to do or feel something without any hope of succeeding, they're beating a dead horse. This is used when someone is trying to raise interest in an issue that no-one supports anymore; beating a dead horse will not make any difference.

Example: You've told me that story about your bad experience many times. I still think it's your fault. Stop **beating a dead horse**.

3. **Bet your bottom dollar:** If you can bet your bottom dollar on something, you can be absolutely sure about it.

Example:

Bob: Do you really think the Golden State Warriors will win the championship?

Joe: You bet your bottom dollar they will!

4. **Horse of a different color:** If something is a horse of a different color, it's a different matter or separate issue altogether.

Example:

Tim: So how is your girlfriend doing?

John: She's fine. By the way, did you ever ask your brother about that business deal?

Tim: Not yet. But that's a **horse of a different color**.

5. **It's been a slice:** When someone leaves and you have said your goodbyes it is usually the last thing you may say.....It's been a slice. I use it after a visit where we have had a good time.

Example:

Sarah: It was great seeing you again. **It's been a slice**. I have to go. See you later.

6. **My dogs are barking:** When someone says this, they mean that their feet are hurting.

Example: I worked for 10 hours today. I'm so tired! **My dogs are barking**.

7. **Nickel Tour:** If someone gives you a nickel tour, they show you around a place. ('Fifty-cent tour' is also used.)

Example: I wish I had more time to show you San Francisco, but I have work today. I'll just have to give you **the nickel tour**.

8. **Paint yourself into a corner:** If someone paints themselves into a corner, they get themselves into a mess/difficult situation/embarrassing situation.

Example:

Kelly: Hi Carla. Aren't you supposed to be at work today? The boss said you have a meeting today.

Carla: Oh no! I completely forgot about that. I was at the salon getting my hair done.

Kelly: I think you've **painted yourself into a corner**.

9. **Run around the bush:** If you run around the bush, it means that you're taking a long time to get to the point and should focus on talking about the main idea.

Example: Ok you've been telling me this story for 20 minutes. Can you please get to the point and **stop running around the bush**?

10. **Talk a blue streak:** If someone talks a blue streak, they speak quickly and at length. ('Talk up a blue streak' is also used.)

Example: My friend Sally loves to talk. She can **talk a blue streak**.

11. **Wallflower:** A shy person who is not asked to dance is a wallflower. This expression is also used in general to describe a shy person.

Example: Tina is so shy, she's such a **wallflower**.

12. **Whistling Dixie:** If someone is whistling Dixie, they talk about things in a more positive way than the reality.

Example:

Mark: Don't listen to Tim. He tries to make every situation sound overly positive. He's always **whistling Dixie**.

1. **Clear the air:** To get rid of doubts and bad feelings by being honest.

Example:

Dan: I know you haven't talked to me in weeks. I know something is wrong. Let's please **clear the air**.

John: ok.

2. **Fair weather friend:** A fair weather friend is someone who is only your friend when everything is good, but no longer are your friend when the situation becomes difficult.

Example:

Carla: I don't think you should meet with Sally.

Tina: Why not?

Carla: Because she only likes you when everything is good. She's never there to support you when things are bad. She's a **fair weather friend**.

3. **In the dark:** You don't know anything.

Example: I know the math teacher wants to give us a test, but I have missed 2 weeks of class, so I am **in the dark** about how to study for it.

4. **It's raining cats and dogs:** When there is heavy rain, people say it's raining cats and dogs.

Example: Oh look outside. Look at all that rain. I can't see anything but rain. It's **raining cats and dogs**.

5. **On cloud nine:** A person on cloud nine is said to be very happy, usually over something wonderful happening in life.

Example: I just won the lottery today. I'm **on cloud nine**.

6. **Set someone or something straight:** To advise someone very strongly that what they are doing is wrong, and try to convince them to do something else.

Example: My sister wants to marry a bad man. I need to stop her. I need to **set her straight**.

7. **Under the weather:** this expression is used to describe when someone is feeling sick/ill.

Example:

Tom: Hey Jim. You don't look so good.

Jim: I don't feel so good. I think I may be sick. I'm **under the weather**.

8. **Any port in the storm:** This means that in an emergency, any solution will do, even one that would normally be unacceptable.

Example: When my company was drowning in debt, I had to make very difficult choices. **Any port in the storm would do**.

9. **As the crow flies:** This idiom is used to describe the shortest possible distance between two places.

Example: That store is very close to here **as far as the crow flies**.

10. **(Something) is going/gone south:** This idiom describes when a situation becomes worse for someone or something.

Example: When many stores closed, the economy **went south**.

11. **Blue Skies:** An overly enthusiastic outlook or disposition. The sales team had blue skies projections for their deals, although not many of those deals were signed.

Example: My sister is a big optimist. She always thinks the best of every situation. She has a **blue skies** outlook on life.

12. **Bolt from the blue:** If something happens unexpectedly and suddenly, it is a bolt from the blue. This is used from weather where you get lightning in a clear blue sky.

Example: I haven't seen my brother in five months, but yesterday he came to my house unannounced like a **bolt from the blue**.

13. **Burning daylight:** if someone says, you're burning daylight; they mean you are wasting time.

Example:

Mom: Stop playing video games! You have a report due tomorrow in school. You're **burning daylight**.

14. **The calm before the storm:** A calm time immediately before a period of violent activity or argument is the calm before the storm.

Example: When my mom got my report card before dinner. I knew it was **the calm before the storm**.

1. **The Bee's Knees:** Something that is the bee's knees is excellent.

Example: This bread is the best bread I've ever tasted. It's **the bee's knees**.

2. **The cat's pajamas:** Something that is the cat's pajamas is excellent.

Example: This bread is the best bread I've ever tasted. It's **the cat's pajamas**.

3. **Duck soup:** If something is duck soup, it is very easy.

Example: I'm very good at reading. Reading a long book is **duck soup**.

4. **Eat crow:** If you eat crow, you have to admit that you were wrong about something.

Example: Ok Joe. You said your sports team would win, but they lost. Now, **eat crow**.

5. **Being carded/Getting carded:** Being checked for identification.

Example: My friend Fred looks very young. When he goes to a bar, he's always **getting carded**.

6. **Breaking bread:** Sharing food or eating together.

Example: It's good to see everyone is here. Let's eat. Let's **break bread**.

7. **Chopped liver:** Ignored or unimportant.

Example: My mom prefers my brother. What about me, am I **chopped liver**?

8. **Comfort food:** Food that gives a sense of well-being. The kind of food easily prepared for informal gatherings and good times.

Example: My mom's famous pot roast is my favorite **comfort food**. She makes it for me when I'm sad.

9. **Dead meat:** In serious trouble.

Example: Watch out Dan. You broke mom's favorite vase. Now, you're **dead meat**.

10. **Eating out:** Eating at a restaurant, or somewhere else, instead of at home.

Example: I'm too tired to cook today. Let's **eat out**.

11. **Food for thought:** Something to think about.

Example: When my friend told me I need to be more considerate of other people, it gave me some **food for thought**.

12. **Free range:** A chicken or other farm animal that's raised on a farm, not in a cage, and is free to roam around.

Example: Most people in California prefer to eat **free range** food because free range animals are treated more humanely.

13. **Have one's cake and eat it, too:** When you say: You can't have your cake and eat it, too, you mean something like: You can't do both; It's either this or that; You can't have it both ways; You can't always have everything.

Example: My brother wants to be a famous musician and wants to live alone in the mountains. I told him that's not possible to have both. He can't **have his cake and eat it too**.

14. **Having a lot on one's plate:** Having a lot to do. Having a lot of things to deal with.

Example: I'm so busy this week. I **have a lot on my plate**.

15. **Hot potato:** Too hot to handle a controversial issue.

Example: Don't talk to Steve about his relationship with his girlfriend. It's a **hot potato**. They may break up soon.

History Idioms

1. **Achilles' Heel (adj. phrase):** A person's weak spot is their Achilles' heel.

Example: I'm a horrible cook. That's my **Achilles heel**.

2. **Actions speak louder than words (expression):** This idiom means that what people actually do is more important than what they say. People can promise things but then fail to deliver.

Example: You can promise to clean your room, or you can actually clean your room. I think **actions speak louder than words**.

3. **Ahead of time (prepositional phrase):** If something happens ahead of time, it happens early or before the set time.

Example: I'm so happy I finished my homework very early. I'm finished **ahead of time**.

4. **All roads lead to Rome (expression):** This means that there can be many different ways of doing something.

Example: There are many ways to read. In the end, what matters most is that you understand what you read. **All roads lead to Rome**.

5. **As you sow, so shall you reap (expression):** This means that if you do bad things to people, bad things will happen to you or good things if you do good things.

Example: (1) I'm so happy you helped that man find a job. **As you sow, so shall you reap**. I think good things will happen for you.

Example: (2) You should not have stolen money from your mother. **As you sow, so shall you reap**. You be careful. Bad things may happen to you.

6. **Bad Blood (adj. phrase):** If people feel hate because of things that happened in the past, there is bad blood between them.

Example: There is **bad blood** between me and my friend Carla. She stole my boyfriend a few years ago. Now, I hate her.

7. **A clean slate (adj. phrase):** If you start something with a clean slate, then nothing bad from your past is taken into account.

Example: I used to be a bad student. Now in college, I hope to start with **a clean slate**. I'm going to try to be the best student I can be.

8. **A day in the sun (expression):** If you have your day in the sun, you get attention and are appreciated.

Example: When I work, I don't feel very appreciated. I hope one day, I'll have **my day in the sun** too.

9. **Dwell on the past (phrasal verb):** Thinking too much about the past, so that it becomes a problem is to dwell on the past. Usually we tell people not to dwell on the past. It will not help you solve your problems.

Example: I keep telling my sister that she shouldn't **dwell on the past**. She is no longer a teenager who made many mistakes. She is now an adult and should think about her adult life.

10. **Eleventh hour (adj. phrase):** If something happens at the eleventh hour, it happens right at the last minute. This idiom is used especially when you must finish something by a specific time, and you are late or just finish on time.

Example: My boss wanted me to finish my report by 11pm tonight. I was afraid I wouldn't finish in time, but I finally finished it at the **eleventh hour**.

Sports and Health Idioms

1. **To take 40 winks (phrasal verb):** If you take 40 winks, you have a short sleep.

Example: I didn't get enough sleep last night. I think I should **take 40 winks**.

2. **To take a cat nap (phrasal verb):** Many people know cats like to sleep often during the day and often take short naps, so when people take short naps, we often call them "Cat naps".

Example: I got back from the party really late last night. Now I need to **take a cat nap**.

3. **(to get/have/give) A taste of your own medicine (phrasal verb):** If you give someone a taste of their own medicine, you do something bad to someone that they have done to you to teach them a lesson.

Example: I hate when my friend is always late to everything. This week I **gave** her **a taste of her own medicine**. Instead of coming on time to the movies, I showed up 20 minutes late to teach her a lesson. I hope she knows how horrible it is to have to wait for someone that long every time!

4. **A tight rein (noun phrase):** If things or people are kept on a tight rein, they are given very little freedom or controlled carefully. This idiom comes from horseback riding. Most often it is used in horse racing to keep the horse from going too fast at the beginning, save the horses energy, before letting the horse run more later. The reins are what control the horse's head.

Example: After my kids last kitchen disaster trying to cook dinner, I'm keeping **a tight rein** on their cooking activities. Now, I watch everything they do.

5. **Touch and go (phrasal verb):** If something is touch-and-go, it is very uncertain; if someone is ill and may well die, then it is touch-and-go. Usually used when someone is very sick in the hospital or very injured.

Example: After my grandfather suffered a heart attack and landed in the hospital, the whole situation has been **touch and go**. My family isn't sure if he will live very long.

6. **To turn back the clock (phrasal verb):** If you turn back the clock, you try to recreate something from the past. Generally, this idiom is used for people who are trying to get plastic surgery to look younger.

Example: My aunt recently had a face-lift to try to look 20 years younger and **turn back the clock**.

7. **To have seen better days (phrasal verb):** If something's seen better days, it has aged badly and visibly compared to when it was new. The phrase can also be used to describe people. We use this idiom when we refer to people looking sick, old or not healthy.

Example: I recently met my high school teacher at a café. The poor woman **has seen better days**. I think she has some health problems.

8. **Having a senior moment (phrasal verb):** A memory lapse or a momentary confusion in someone who is no longer young is a senior moment. Recently, this idiom is used more generally about whenever you forget something and can't remember it. It can happen to anyone, but usually is something that people think of often in older people, seniors.

Example: I was talking to my friend Joe today about my new car today when he asked me about how much I paid for it. I couldn't remember and laughed and told him I was **having a senior moment**.

9. **To be sick as a dog (phrasal verb):** If somebody's as sick as a dog, they throw up (=vomit) violently. This may be because of a true sickness like the flu or a cold or it could be caused by drinking too much alcohol.

Example: Jennifer was **sick as a dog** last night after she drank too many beers at the party.

10. **Skin and bones (noun phrase):** If someone is skin and bones, they are very underweight and look bad. Usually this means the person doesn't look healthy, like they aren't eating enough food.

Example: What are they feeding you at school? You're so skinny; you look like **skin and bones**.

11. **Right as rain (adj. phrase):** If things are right as rain, then everything is going well in your life. Also used to describe feeling happy or being happy.

Example: I had a full night's sleep, a great breakfast, and my entire day has been great. I'm feeling **right as rain**.

12. **To play hardball (phrasal verb):** If someone plays hardball, they are very aggressive in trying to achieve their aim. This idiom is taken from baseball where the pitcher tries to throw the ball hard enough to strike the batter out.

Example: Let's **play hardball!** I want to start my company, and I'm going to do everything I need to to make that happen.

13. **A poker face (noun phrase):** Someone with a poker face doesn't show any emotion or reaction so that people don't know what they are feeling.

Example: I always show my emotions easily to other people, but my friend Carla always has **a poker face**. No one knows what she is thinking or feeling.

14. **Out of my league (prepositional phrase):** If someone or something is out of your league, you aren't good enough or rich enough, etc, for it or them. This term comes from sports usually baseball.

Example: Sure I'd love to buy a new car, but something as expensive as a Ferrari is **out of my league**.

15. **To hit the bullseye (phrasal verb):** If someone hits the bull's-eye, they are exactly right about something or achieve the best result possible. "Bulls-eye" and "bullseye" are alternative spellings. This idiom comes from archery where the bullseye is the middle of the target.

Example: When my friend Tom told my other friend Tim about Tim's bad habits, he really **hit the bullseye**. I don't think Tim appreciated the criticism as much though.

16. **An armchair quarterback (noun phrase):** An armchair quarterback is someone who offers advice, especially about football, but never shows that they could actually do any better.

Example: For all the times my brother says he can cook better than me, he's just **an armchair quarterback**. I have never seen him actually cooking in the kitchen.

Lifestyle Idioms

1. **Hand to mouth (existence)(noun phrase):** Someone who's living from hand to mouth, is very poor and needs the little money they have coming in to cover their expenses.

Example: When my husband lost his job, we began to live **hand to mouth**. Every paycheck I bring home only covers our expenses from month to month.

2. **The Haves (noun phrase):** A have is a person who is wealth/rich.

Example: I used to have a childhood friend who was part of **the haves**. Her parents were both doctors and always had fancy parties.

3. **The have nots (noun phrase):** A have not is a person without wealth or power.

Example: I remember as a child, many people referred to my family as **the have nots**. We were very poor and could barely afford to pay for all our expenses.

4. **Here today, gone tomorrow (expression):** Money, happiness and other desirable things are often here today, gone tomorrow, which means that they don't last for very long. This phrase is often used to remind people that we should appreciate what we have in life because you never know when those things will be gone.

Example: Sarah: I hate my big sister. She's always bossing me around! **Jane:** Hey, you should be happy. I don't even have a sister. And just wait. Your sister will be going to college soon. You'll miss her then. **Here today, gone tomorrow** you know.

5. **Different strokes for different folks (adj. phrase):** This idiom means that different people do things in different ways that suit them.

Example: I like to jog in the park in the evening. My brother likes to jog in the park in the morning. I guess there are **different strokes for different folks**.

6. **Live and let live (phrasal verb):** If you live and let live, you accept other people as they are, although they may have a different way of life.

Example: I don't understand how my neighbor can go and hunt live animals. I love animals and could never go hunt them. I guess I should just **live and let live**.

7. **Make ends meet (phrasal verb):** To make enough money to pay for your expenses.

Example: I used to have a difficult time **making ends meet**, but now with a better job, I can easily pay for all my bills and still have extra money for things I want to buy.

8. **To march to the beat of your own drum (phrasal verb):** If people march to the beat of their own drum, they do things the way they want without taking other people into consideration.

Example: I know some people tell me I should think about how my actions have consequences for my family, but I don't really care. I **march to the beat of my own drum**.

9. **To meet someone halfway (phrasal verb):** If you meet someone halfway, you accept some of their ideas and make concessions.

Example: I agree with you about getting rid of school loans, but I don't agree with you about how to get rid of school loans. How about if I **meet you halfway**? I'll accept the idea at least that school loans should be eliminated.

Environment Idioms

1. **A disaster waiting to happen (noun phrase):** If something is an accident/disaster waiting to happen, there's definitely going to be an accident or it's bound to go wrong. This idiom is used to encourage people to do something about a bad situation, so it doesn't lead to a disaster.

Example: I knew that the hanging power lines were **a disaster waiting to happen**, so I called PG&E to fix them.

2. **An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure (expression):** This expression means that it is better to try to avoid problems in the first place, rather than trying to fix them once they arise.

Example: When my mother started having a hard time breathing, I told her to go to the doctor. She told me it was nothing, but I told her, **an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure**.

3. **To be barking up the wrong tree (phrasal verb):** If you are barking up the wrong tree, it means that you have completely misunderstood something or are totally wrong. This was a term taking from hunting when the dogs found the wrong animal.

Example: **Rosa:** You said you didn't like "her" anymore. I didn't know you hated me that much. **Tina:** When did I say that? Oh, you must have heard me talking to Daniel. I think you're **barking up the wrong tree**, Rosa. I was talking about my boss, Kelly, not you.

4. **Busy as a bee/busy as a beaver (adjective phrase):** If you're as busy as a beaver or bee, you're very busy indeed.

Example: I work very long days, often more than one job. I'm always **busy as a beaver/bee**.

5. **Can't see the forest for its trees (phrasal verb):** If someone can't see the forest for its trees, they are too focused on specific details to see the whole bigger situation.

Example: When my brother lost his job, all he could think about was what his next job was going to be, but he forgot to look for more work in the meantime. He **couldn't see the forest for its trees**.

6. **A cloud of suspicion (noun phrase):** If a cloud of suspicion hangs over an individual, it means that they are not believed or are distrusted.

Example: After the very strange things that happened at the last local elections, many people thought that the politician had **a cloud of suspicion** over him.

7. **A cloud on the horizon (noun phrase):** If you can see a problem ahead, you can call it a cloud on the horizon.

Example: When my boss called me about the latest business report, I could tell there was **a cloud on the horizon**.

8. **To come with the territory (phrasal verb):** If something comes with the territory, it is part of a job or responsibility and just has to be accepted, even if unpleasant.

Example: You knew that when you joined a dairy farm, you would have to clean up a lot of cow manure. It **comes with the territory**.

9. **The cream of the crop (noun phrase):** The cream of the crop is the best quality of something there is.

Example: I like very high quality ingredients when I cook dinner. I only buy **the cream of the crop**. Nothing else will do.

10. **A deer in the headlights (noun phrase):** When one is caught off-guard and needs to make a decision, but cannot react quickly. This idiom comes from the reaction deer often have when it's dark and a car shines it's headlights on it. The deer will stop in the middle of the road and not move when it should be running.

Example: When my boss asked me to make a very quick decision about the company finances, I felt like **a deer in the headlights**. I wasn't sure how to decide on the situation.

Job Idioms

1. **A penny saved is a penny earned (expression):** Saving money is just as important as earning money- we shouldn't spend it foolishly.

Example: I'm worried about my sister's spending habits. Whatever money she earns, she spends it all. I think she should save some of that money. **A penny saved is a penny earned.** That's my belief.

2. **All in a day's work (noun phrase):** If something is all in a day's work, it is nothing special.

Example:

Tina: You are so busy Carla! It's amazing how much work you accomplish all day.

Carla: Oh that's nothing. I do this every day. It's **all in a day's work**.

3. **At the bottom of the totem pole (prepositional phrase):** If someone is at the bottom of the totem pole, they are unimportant. Opposite is at the top of the totem pole.

Example: I don't like my current position at work. I'm currently **at the bottom of the totem pole** as a clerk.

4. **At the top of the totem pole (prepositional phrase):** Someone at the top of the totem pole is in a high position of power, a very important person.

Example: The CEO of the company is **at the top of the totem pole**. I hope one day I will have his position.

5. **back to the drawing board (prepositional phrase):** If you have to go back to the drawing board, you have to go back to the beginning and start something again. Usually, this idiom is used when you try to do something in an experimental way, and it doesn't work. You go back to the drawing board to rethink a different way to accomplish your goal.

Example: I tried making new pasta with thicker noodles, but that didn't work, so I went **back to the drawing board**. This time, I'm going to make my pasta with thinner noodles.

6. **Bad workers always blame their tools (expression):** If somebody does a job badly or loses in a game and claims that they were let down by their equipment, you can use this to imply that this was not the case. What the person means is, you are not good at this. Your tools are only as good as you are.

Example: When my brother messed up building the patio, he claimed it was because he didn't have the proper tools. I told him that **bad workers always blame their tools**. He was very upset that I would say that too him.

7. **To beat someone to the draw (phrasal verb):** If you beat someone to the draw, you do something before they do. This expression comes from the old west when gunfighters would challenge each other to a duel. The first one to pull out his gun and shoot would usually be the successful one. Currently, this idiom means to compete with someone, the person who shows his/her idea to someone like their boss, usually wins.

Example: I have a very competitive co-worker. He's always trying to share his ideas with the boss before me. One day, I want **to beat him to the draw**. Maybe then, my boss will take me more seriously.

8. **To breathe down someone's neck (phrasal verb):** If someone follows you or examines what you're doing very closely, they are breathing down your neck.

Example: My boss didn't like my report last month. Now, he follows me around the office all day. He's **breathing down my neck**. I just hope he doesn't fire me if something else goes wrong.

9. **To bring something to the table (phrasal verb):** If you bring something to the table, you make a contribution or an offer in a discussion or negotiation.

Example: The meeting last week was great because I remembered that I'm a carpenter, and my office needs a carpenter for the next job, so I talked to my boss and told him I had my carpentry skills **to bring to the table**.