



TOP TIPS

*Mastering the Current
English*

THE EF ENGLISH LIVE GUIDE TO:

English Idioms



English Live





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THIS GUIDE IS INTERACTIVE

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A collage of diverse young adults in a library setting, smiling and holding books.

INTRODUCTION



Idioms, also known as idiomatic expressions, are funny. They can be confusing for non-native English speakers because, if taken literally, they simply don't make sense.

Think about it, have you ever literally fought for something with your “teeth and nails”? Or, have you really “pulled out your hair” in frustration? And when you “open your heart,” do you use anesthesia or a scalpel? The answer is probably “No.” Nevertheless, these expressions are still commonly used in everyday English. In case you can’t make “head nor tails” of these strange sayings, we’ve created this helpful guide to teach you some common English idioms. You’ll soon find them a “piece of cake” (very simple) to understand. See, you’ve already learned your first idiom!



PART 1

IDIOMS REFERRING TO THE NATURAL WORLD

IDIOMS REFERRING TO THE NATURAL WORLD

There are many idioms that refer to parts of the natural world, such as the weather or animals. Because these things are already common in English vocabulary, it's only natural that they end up being part of idiomatic expressions.

Here are just a few of the most common:

⊕ **Raining cats and dogs**

When you hear someone say “it’s raining cats and dogs” you can bet that there is a downpour of heavy, torrential rain. Don’t forget your umbrella!

⊕ **Hold your horses**

Calm down when you hear this expression. It doesn’t mean you literally have horses, instead it means that someone is asking you to take it slow, and reconsider before acting.

⊕ **Make hay while the sun shines**

The expression above is an order: don’t waste time; work hard whenever you have the opportunity. Here, “hay” means “money”, so, this expression probably arose from the fact that farmers have to take advantage of the good weather if they want to grow profitable crops.

⊕ **Under the weather**

If one day you don’t feel very well, you can show off your English and say “I am feeling under the weather,” which means that you are feeling ill.



⊕ When pigs fly

If someone says “I’ll do it when pigs fly”, it really means that they will never do it.

⊕ Over the moon

Have you ever felt like jumping for joy? You feel that way when you’re “over the moon.” This means you’re extremely happy.

⊕ Till the cows come home

Cows are known for wandering very slowly. If someone wants to say in English that someone is slow or takes too long, they could use this expression. For example: “He loves reading. He could stay at the library till the cows come home.” (He loves to read, so he could be in the library until wee hours of the night.)

⊕ It is like herding frogs

Imagine how difficult it would be to gather hundreds of frogs in the same space. Can you picture the chaos? This expression means that an action is complicated, chaotic or nearly impossible.

⊕ A sitting duck

If you hear someone say, “Her silly comments made her a sitting duck for jokes,” it means that the silly comments she made left her as an easy target for jokes. So, a sitting duck means an easy target to attack.

⊕ Every rose has its thorn

Roses are beautiful and elegant, but they all have thorns. Like roses, all good things have a negative side, and that is exactly what this phrase means.





PART 2

IDIOMS REFERRING TO PARTS OF THE BODY

IDIOMS REFERRING TO PARTS OF THE BODY

The use of body parts to form idioms is also very common. Now, we will take a look at everyday English expressions that refer to body parts:

- ⊕ **To have butterflies in one's stomach**

You can use this phrase when you are excited or even in love. It may also represent a sense of fear or anguish. To get “butterflies in the stomach” is a very common expression to describe for nervous excitement.

- ⊕ **Feel it in your bones**

Do you trust your intuition? Then you are “feeling it in your bones.” You can use this expression for a good or a bad feeling.

- ⊕ **Hands down**

When someone or something is an undisputed winner, we say that it is the winner “hands down.”

- ⊕ **This cost an arm and a leg**

You will use this expression when a product or service is pretty expensive: “Do you want a Montblanc pen? They cost an arm and a leg!” (Do you want a Montblanc pen? They are very expensive!)

- ⊕ **Slap on the wrist**

A “slap on the wrist” is a small, but non-physical punishment. For example: “He stole from the Company and just got a warning. It was a slap on the wrist!” (He stole from the Company and just got a warning. It was a minimal punishment!)

⊕ **Get cold feet**

The expression “cold feet” means that a person has become nervous or afraid of doing something that was already planned. For example: “He was planning to ask her out on a date, but got cold feet at the very last minute.”

⊕ **Have your mind set on something**

Is George Harrison your favorite Beatle? Then you will probably have already heard the expression “I’ve got my mind set on you.” If you say that you’ve “got your mind set” on something, it means that you have already decided on accomplishing something.

⊕ **Born with a silver spoon in your mouth**

Is synonymous with wealth, It means born into an aristocratic or very rich family: “James doesn’t know anything about working for a living; he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth”.

⊕ **Skin-deep**

Something with a depth measured as only “skin-deep” is easy to imagine: it’s superficial, without much importance or significance. You can use this expression as in the following example: “Her interest for politics is only skin-deep.” This means her interest in politics is only superficial.





PART 3

IDIOMS TO TALK ABOUT FEELINGS OR EMOTIONS

IDIOMS TO TALK ABOUT FEELINGS OR EMOTIONS

Although the heart is a part of the body and we could have included it in the previous category, the heart is so special that we feel it needs a category of idioms to itself.

There are so many expressions referring to emotions using the heart that it's difficult to learn all of them "by heart."

⊕ **To wear your heart on your sleeve**

If you “wear your heart on your sleeve,” you are showing your emotions and making your feelings clear.

⊕ **Get at the heart of the matter**

This is an expression that means to reach the main point or get to the point. In a meeting, if you want to go straight to the main problem, you can say: “I’d like to get right to the heart of the matter.”

⊕ **Cross your heart and hope to die**

This is a strong expression to use when you want to swear that you’re telling the truth. For example: “I cross my heart and hope to die, if I’m lying!”.

⊕ **Close to your heart**

By saying that something is “close to your heart,” you’re saying that it is an important issue for you and that you are very interested in it. It can be used, for example, about a cause that you stand for: “Animal rights are very close to my heart.”

⊕ **Have a change of heart**

Don’t worry, no one is going to give you a heart transplant. Having a “change of heart” simply means that you’ve changed your mind about something.



⊕ Eat your heart out

Don't take it literally! This expression is usually an exclamation that tells people they should be envious. For example: "I'm going to New York this weekend! Eat your heart out!" (I'm going to New York this weekend! Be jealous!)

⊕ Have your heart in the right place

Has anyone ever told you that your "heart is in the right place?" This phrase recognizes that your intentions are good, even if you've made a mistake. For example: "The dinner she cooked was terrible, but she had her heart in the right place." (The dinner she cooked was terrible, but she did it with the best intention.)

⊕ Cry your heart out

This means to mourn inconsolably and cry till you drop, or until you no longer have any tears left. You can see this common expression in the title of a song by Oasis: "Stop crying your heart out."

⊕ Heart skips/misses a beat

When you face something unexpected, meet someone you like, or when your heart seems to have stopped when you are taken by surprise, these are all feelings that make your "heart skip a beat."

⊕ Pour your heart out

This expression means to open your heart by sharing a deep secret or emotionally describing everything you feel.



PART 4

IDIOMS TO DESCRIBE A BAD MOOD

IDIOMS TO DESCRIBE A BAD MOOD

Life isn't always easy and sometimes people find themselves in a bad mood or angry.

Let's see some expressions you can use in these situations:

⊕ **Blow a fuse**

A “fuse” or a wick is used to light an explosive. This expression means losing control or being too angry. For example: “He spilled coffee on me and I blew a fuse,” meaning: “He spilled coffee on me and I got very angry.”

⊕ **Get on your nerves**

This happens when someone or something really irritates you. For instance, “All this noise gets on my nerves!” (All this noise irritates me!)

⊕ **Get Lost!**

You might say this when a person has upset you want him or her to go away and leave you alone.

⊕ **Cut it out!**

Alternatively, you might say to a person who is irritating you: “Cut it out!” That is, to stop.

⊕ **Come down like a ton of bricks**

Now, if you want a person to stop (cut it out), then ask him or her to leave (get lost). If that doesn't work, a possible approach is to tell that person what you really think and “come down on them like a ton of bricks.” You might say: “He got on my nerves, so I came down on him like a ton of bricks.” (He got on my nerves, so I criticized him.)

- ⊕ **Give someone a piece of your mind**

There are times when you just have to say what you think. In those situations, you must “give someone a piece of your mind”. For example: “She parked on my spot for the sixth time this week, so I had to give her a piece of my mind.” (She parked in my spot for the sixth consecutive time, and I had to tell her the truth of how I really felt about it.)

- ⊕ **Rub someone up the wrong way**

Imagine petting a cat against their fur: that’s “rubbing it the wrong way.” Occasionally you might meet someone who makes you feel like that cat. Some people just “rub you the wrong way.” and annoy or irritate without a reason.

- ⊕ **Get off my back!**

If someone is annoying you so much that you want him or her to leave you alone, you can tell them to: “Get off my back!” This is a strong request not to be disturbed.

- ⊕ **For crying out loud!**

This is a common English phrase used to express exasperation. It’s like saying “Oh for goodness sake!” It can be followed by an order: “For crying out loud, turn that videogame off!” (Oh for goodness sake, turn that video game off!)

- ⊕ **At your wits’ end**

This when your patience is running out and you don’t know what to do with the situation. “I’m almost at my wit’s end trying to deal with this chaos!” (I’m tired of trying to deal with this chaos!)



PART 5

**IDIOMS TO
EXPRESS
UNDERSTANDING**

IDIOMS TO EXPRESS UNDERSTANDING

After some angry expressions, we will try to help you express understanding with the idioms of this section.

In English, there are several ways to say you understand something:

⊕ **Shed light**

When you “shed light” on a topic, it is clearer to understand. For example: “The teacher explained again and shed light on the process.” (The teacher explained again and made the process clearer.)

⊕ **Get someone’s drift**

Did you understand what a friend said? Then you could say that you “got his drift.”

⊕ **Get it**

This expression is very similar to “get someone’s drift,” while being even more direct. It can be used as a complete sentence, with an object, or as a phrase: “I get it, you need to rest.” (I understand that you need to rest.) “Get it?” (Did you understand?)

⊕ **Get the message / picture**

This is another way of saying that you understand. For example: “Did you get the message?” (Did you understand?)



⊕ **Hammer home**

If you want to be really sure someone understands what you're saying, then you need to "hammer your point home." For instance, "She repeated her point three times to really hammer it home."

⊕ **Wrap your brain around**

To understand something that is going to require more concentration and effort, you'll need to "wrap your brain around it."

⊕ **Get wise to**

When you discover that someone is trying to trick or deceive you, you could say that you "got wise to" their intentions. For example: "I thought she was paying me a compliment, but I soon got wise to the fact she was really teasing me."

⊕ **Take a hint**

This means to understand an indirect suggestion. "Take a hint!" can also be used as a command or an exclamation.

⊕ **Figure someone/something out**

This expression means to make sense of something. When you "figure something out," you finally understand it. This expression can also be used for people: "I can't figure him out, he is confusing!" (I can't understand him, he confuses me!)



PART 6

IDIOMS ABOUT HAVING FUN

IDIOMS ABOUT HAVING FUN

In this last section, we will talk about expressions that are used when you want to enjoy life or tell someone to relax.

So let's finish the right way, and talk about having some fun:

⊕ **Let your hair down**

This expression is more often used as advice to tell someone to rest or relax. For instance: “It’s Saturday night, you can let your hair down!” (It’s Saturday night, you can relax!)

⊕ **Have the time of your life**

Literally, this phrase means “the moment of your life”. The idiomatic meaning is similar: to have a lot of fun, or to have the best day of your life. For example: “My son had the time of his life at Disney World.” (My son had the best day at Disney World.)

⊕ **With bells on**

Are you going to a party? Go “with bells on.” In other words, go with enthusiasm, ready to have fun. “Is it your birthday party? I’ll be there with bells on!” (Is it your birthday party? You can count on me to be there and have fun!)

⊕ **Take it easy**

This expression is commonly used as a suggestion or request, to ask someone to relax or calm down. For example: “Hey, take it easy, you can’t work 12 hours a day, every day.” (Hey, relax, you can’t work 12 hours a day every day.)

- ⊕ **The world is your oyster**

This is another funny phrase if taken literally. After all, if the world were an oyster, you would be stuck in a shell. As an idiomatic expression however, this phrase means that you are free to enjoy the pleasures of life and the opportunities it offers; the sky is the limit.

- ⊕ **To get along like a house on fire**

This expression can be misleading, as a “house on fire” certainly doesn’t sound positive. However, if two people “get along like a house on fire,” they actually like each other and get along really well.

- ⊕ **More fun than a barrel of monkeys**

If you imagine a big group of monkeys, you’d probably think of them as energetic, excitable and probably quite entertaining. Something that is “more fun than a barrel of monkeys” is very entertaining.

- ⊕ **Chill out**

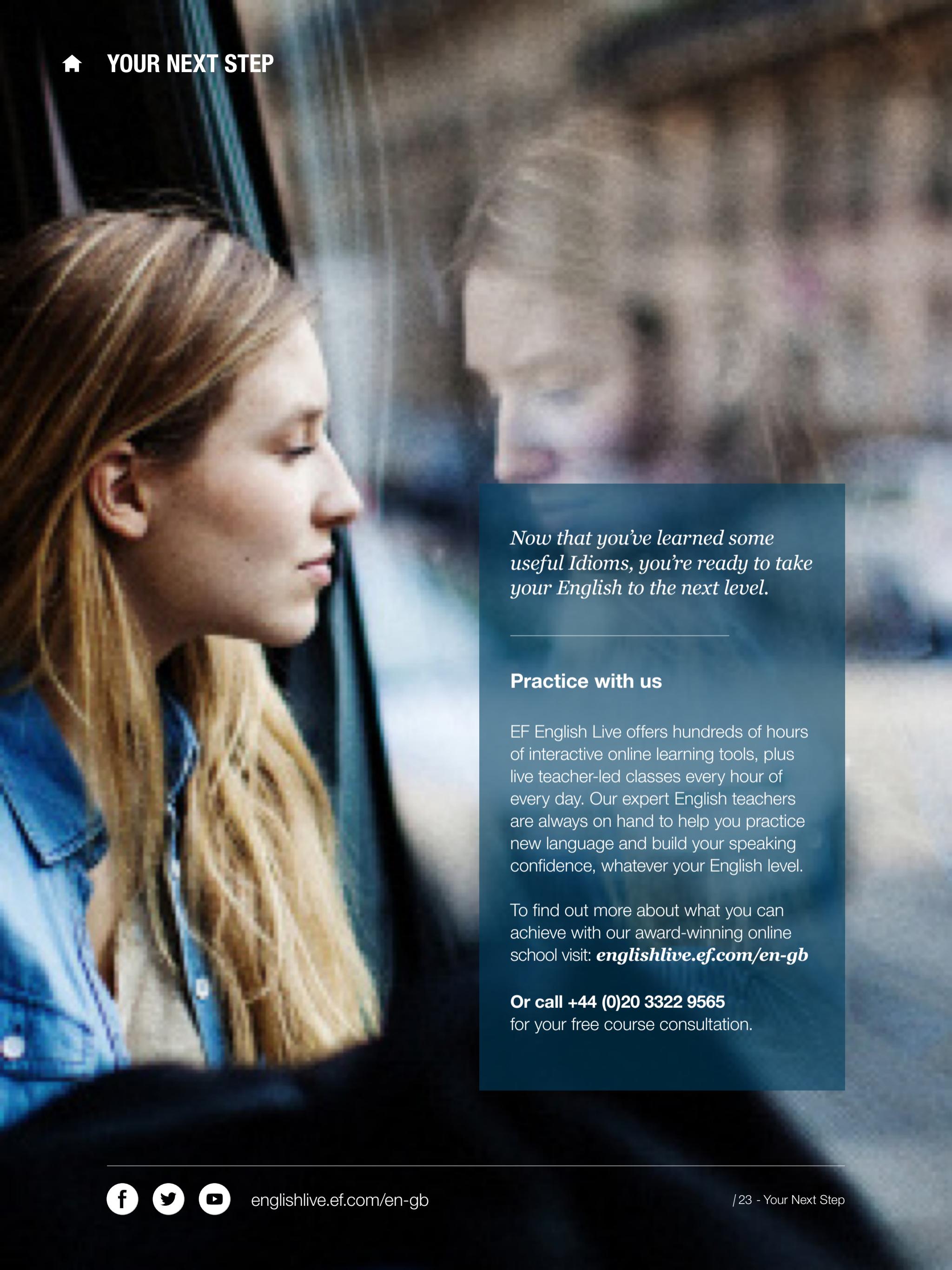
If someone says “I’m going to chill out,” it means they’re going to relax and enjoy life. For example: “After working late, at the end of the day, I go home where I can chill out.” (After working late, at the end of the day, I go home where I can relax.)

- ⊕ **Have a ball / have a blast**

These two expressions have the same meaning: to really enjoy something and have fun. “The party was great, I had a blast!” (The party was great, I really enjoyed it!)

- ⊕ **Paint the town (red)**

Would you like to go out and have fun, or do something exciting? You can invite someone to join you by saying: “Let’s go out and paint the town red!” (Let’s go out and have fun!) The “red” in the phrase is optional. Today, the term is more common without it.



Now that you've learned some useful Idioms, you're ready to take your English to the next level.

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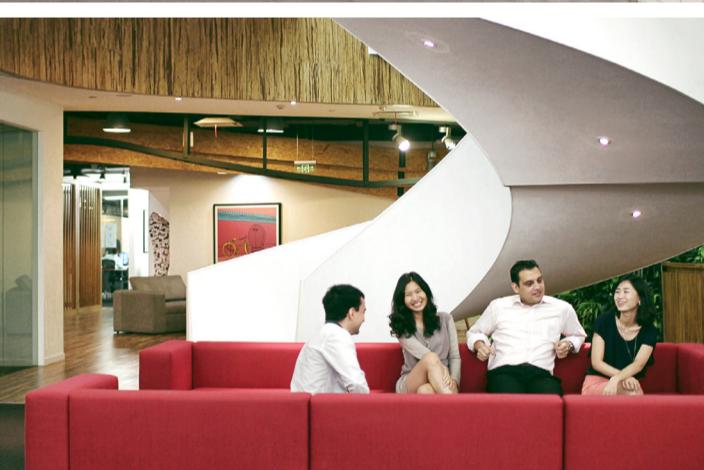
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