

IDIOMS AND PHRASES

Idioms and Phrases form an important part of the English section of various competitive exams such as SSC exams, RRB exams, Bank exams and other Government exams. Candidates can easily fetch a good score in the English section if they are aware of important idioms and phrases, along with their meanings.

Idioms & Phrases	Meanings
Rank and File	Ordinary People
By fits and starts	In short periods, not regularly
A wee bit	A little
Out of the wood	Free from difficulties and dangers
Under his thumb	Under his control
At one's wits end	In a state where one does not know what to do
Between the devil and the deep sea	Between two dangers
Burn the midnight oil	Work or study hard
Call a spade a spade	Speak frankly and directly
Come off with flying colors	Be highly successful
Hoping against hope	Without hope
Hit the nail on the head	Do or say the exact thing
An axe to grind	A personal interest in the matter
To get rid of	Dispose of
At daggers drawn	Bitterly hostile

To play ducks and drakes	To act foolishly or inconsistently
To take the bull by the horns	To tackle a problem in a bold and direct fashion
Rain cats and dogs	Rain heavily
To move heaven and earth	To make a supreme effort
No avail	Without any result
Bark up the wrong tree	Accuse or denounce the wrong person
Keep one at bay	Keep one at a distance
Make a clean breast of it	Confess – especially when a person has done a wrong thing
Have a card up one's sleeve	Have a secret plan in reserve
Like a cat on hot bricks	Very nervous
Cat and dog life	Life full of quarrels
Cock and bull story	Made up story that one should not believe
Cry for the moon	Ask for the impossible
The pros and cons	The various aspects of a matter in detail
Be in a tight corner	In a very difficult situation
Cross one's t's and dot	Be precise, careful and one's i's exact
At arm's length	To keep at a distance
Out of the question	Impossible
Out of the way	Strange
Show a clean pair of heels	Run away
Keep one's fingers crossed	The anxiety in which you hope that nothing will upset your plans

In the nick of time	Just at the last moment
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Sitting on the fence	Hesitate between two decisions
Spread like wild fire	Spread quickly
The gift of the gab	Talent for speaking
By hook or by crook	By fair or foul means
Feather one's own nest	Make money unfairly
Throw out of gear	Disturb the work
Take to one's heels	Run away
Tooth and nail	With all one's power
Die in harness	Die while in service
Take a leaf out of one's book	Imitate one
Leave no stone unturned	Use all available means
A man of straw	A man of no substance
Read between the lines	Understand the hidden meaning
In cold blood	Deliberately and without emotion
A thorn in the flesh	A constant source of annoyance
Smell a rat	Suspect something foul
Harp on the same string	Dwell on the same subject
Bury the hatchet	End the quarrel and make peace
Leave one in the lurch	Desert one in difficulties; leave one in a helpless condition
Like a fish out of water	In a strange situation

At one's beck and call	Under his control
To make both ends meet	To live within one's income
In hot water	In trouble
Nip in the bud	Destroy in the early stage
Stick to one's guns	Remain faithful to the cause
To eat humble pie	To apologize humbly and to yield under humiliating circumstances
In high spirits	Very happy
Put the cart before the horse	Put or do things in the wrong order
To all names	To abuse
On tenterhooks	In a state of suspense and anxiety
Wash one's dirty linen	Discuss unpleasant in public-private matters before strangers
To bell the cat	To face the risk
A hard nut to crack	A difficult problem
Let the cat out of the bag	Reveal a secret
A big gun	An important person
Kill two birds with one stone	To achieve two results with one effort
Take one to task	Rebuke
Gain ground	Become Popular
To blow one's own	To praise one's own trumpet achievement
A bosom friend	A very close friend

A brown study	Dreaming
Turn a deaf ear	Disregard / ignore what one says
A close shave	Narrow escape
Turn over a new leaf	Change for the better
Make up one's mind	Decide
In the long run	Eventually; ultimately
Bring to light	Disclose
Pay off old scores	Take revenge
Hard and fast rules	Strict rules
At the eleventh hour	At the last moment
To cut a sorry figure	To make a poor show
With a high hand	Oppressively
Burn one's fingers	Get into trouble by interfering in other's affairs
Laugh one's head off	Laugh heartily
Chew the cud	Ponder over something
Play second fiddle	Take an unimportant part
Above board	Honest and open
Through thick and thin	Under all conditions
Put a spoke in one's wheel	To upset one's plans
At sixes and sevens	In a disordered/disorganized manner, chaotic

At home	Comfortable
Alpha and omega	The beginning and the end
At sea	Confused and lost
By leaps and bounds	Rapidly
To burn one's boats	Go back on a decision
To beat about the bush	Talk irrelevantly
To burn candle at both ends	To waste lavishly
A bone of contention	A source of quarrel
Add fuel to the fire	To aggravate the situation
An acid test	A critical test
At a snail's pace	Very slowly
A bolt from the blue	Something unexpected
To build castles in the air	Make imaginary schemes
Once in a blue moon	Something that happens very rarely
Beating around the bush	Avoiding the main topic
Cry over spilled milk	Complaining about a loss or failure from the past
Chip on your shoulder	When someone is upset about something that happened a while ago
Piece of cake	Something that is easy to understand or do
Golden handshake	A big sum of money given to a person when he/she leaves a company or retires
Spill the beans	To disclose a secret

Blessing in disguise	Something good and useful that did not initially seem that way
Mean business	Being Serious or Dedicated
Come hell or high water	Possible obstacles in your path
Apple of one's eye	Being cherished
Bite off more than you can chew	Not able to complete a task due to lack of ability
The best of both worlds	The benefits of widely differing situations, enjoyed at the same time
Feeling a bit under the weather	Feeling slightly ill
Icing on the cake	Something that turns good into great
Cost an arm and a leg	Be very expensive
Jump the bandwagon	To join a popular activity or trend
Ball is in your court	When it is up to you to make the next decision or step
To be in the doldrums	To be in low spirits
To sit on the fence	To remain neutral
Break the ice	To initiate a social conversation or interaction
Hear it on grapevine	To hear rumors about something or someone
Can't judge a book by its cover	Cannot judge something primarily on appearance
It takes two to tango	Actions or communications need more than one person
Black and blue	Full of Bruises
Be on cloud nine	Be very happy
Last straw	The final problem in a series of problems

A bird's eye view	A view from a very high place that allows you to see a very large area
A litmus Test	A method that helps to know if something is correct
At the drop of a hat	Willingness to do something instantly
Afraid of one's own shadow	To become easily frightened
A house of cards	A poor plan
Fool's paradise	False sense of happiness
Get a raw deal	To not be treated as well as other people
Give cold shoulder	To ignore
Hand to mouth	Live on only basic necessities
Make a face	To show dislike or disappointment through facial expressions
It's Greek to me	Something that is not understandable
To pour oil on troubled waters	To make peace
Don't put all your eggs in one basket	Do not put all your resources in one basket (in one place or thing)
To put in a nutshell	To say in a few words or to make something concise
Back out	To withdraw from a promise or contract
Blow up	To explode
Back Up	To support and sustain
Back Upon	To be relevant
Break Down	Failure in something
Break off	To end or discontinue

Break Up	To disperse / dissolve
Bring up	To rear
Call forth	To provoke
Call out	To shout
Call upon	To order
Carry on	To continue
Cast away	To throw aside
Catch up with	To overtake
Come off	To take place
Cry Down	To make little of
Cry out against	To complain loudly against
Cut out	Designed for
Drop in	To Visit Casually
Drop out	To fall
Fall back	To Recede; To Retreat
Fall down	From a higher position to a lower one
Fall off	To Withdraw; To Drop Off
Fall under	To come under
Get along	To Prosper; To Progress; To Proceed
Get on with	To Live Pleasantly Together; To Progress

Get into	To be involved in
Give in	To Surrender; To Yield
Give over	Not to do any longer
Go after	To Follow; To Pursue
Go Down	To be accepted
Go without	To remain without
Go by	To follow
Hang about	To Loiter near a place
Hang upon	To depend upon
Hold out	To Endure; To Refuse to yield; To continue; To offer
Hold to	Abide By
Keep off	To ward off
Keep up with	To keep pace with
Knock out	To win by hitting another one
Keep something at bay	Keep something away
Let sleeping dogs lie	Leave something alone if it might cause trouble
Open the floodgates	Release something that was previously under control
Out of the blue	Happen unexpectedly
Out on a limb	Do something risky
Over the Top	Totally excessive and not suitable for the occasion

Pen is mightier than the sword	Words and communication have a greater effect than war
Push one's luck	Trying to obtain more than what one has
Reap the harvest	Benefit or suffer as a direct result of past actions
Roll up sleeves	To get yourself prepared
See eye to eye	To be in agreement with
Shot in the dark	A complete guess
Sink your teeth into	Do something with a lot of energy and enthusiasm
Take with a grain/pinch of salt	To doubt the accuracy of information
Skating on thin ice	Do or say something risky
Tight spot	A difficult situation
Strike while the iron is hot	To act at the right time
Take the plunge	Venture into something of one's interest despite the risks involved
Take a nosedive	Rapid drop or decrease in value
Think the world of	Admire someone very much
Stand in a good stead	To be useful or be of good service to someone
Take a back seat	Choose to be less important in a role
Wave a dead chicken	Do something useless
Whale of a time	Enjoy a lot
Wrap one's brain around	Concentrate on something to understand
Zero in on something	Focus all attention on one thing
Above all	Chiefly, Mainly

On Account of	Due to
On no account	Not for Any Reason
A Fidus Achates	A faithful friend or a devoted follower
The Heel of Achilles	A Weak Point
An Adonis	A very handsome man
To assume airs	To affect superiority
To stand aloof	To keep to oneself and not mix with others
To lead to the altar	To marry
An Ananias	A Liar
An Apollo	A Man with Perfect Physique
To Upset the Apple Cart	To disturb the peace
Apple Pie Order	In perfect order
Arcadian Life	A blissful, happy, rural and simple life
To take up arms	To fight or go to the war
To Grind	To have some selfish objective in view
To break the back of anything	To perform the most difficult part
To backbite a person	To speak disguise about someone
He has no backbone	He has no will of his own
To cause bad blood	To Cause Enmity
Bag and Baggage	With all one's belongings
To keep the ball rolling	To keep things going
Barmecide feast	Imaginary Benefits

Bee-line	The shortest distance between two places
Behind one's back	Without one's Knowledge
Behind the scenes	In Private
To hit below the belt	To act unfairly in a contest
To bite the dust	To be Defeated in Battle
A Wet Blanket	A person who discourages enjoyment or enthusiasm
A blue Stocking	A learned/educated or intellectual woman
At First Blush	At first sight
One's bread and butter	One's means of livelihood
To breathe one's last	To Die
To make bricks without straw	To attempt to do something without proper materials
To kick the bucket	To die
Good wine needs no bush	There is no need to advertise something good
To burn the candle at both ends	To expend energy in two directions at the same time
If the cap fits, wear it	If you think the remarks refer to you, then accept the criticism
Care killed the cat	Don't fret and worry yourself to death
To Catch one's eye	To attract attention
To take the chair	To preside a meeting
She is no chicken	She is older than she says
To pick and choose	To make a careful selection
To square the circle	To attempt something impossible
Every cloud has a silver	Adverse conditions do not last forever

lining	
Close fistcd	Mean
Cut your cloth according to your cloth	Live within your income
A cock and bull story	A foolishly incredible story
To be cock sure	To be perfectly sure or certain
To throw cold water upon anything	To discourage efforts
Off color	Not in the usual form
To commit to memory	To learn by heart
Too many cooks spoil the broth	Where there are more workers than necessary
Crocodile tears	Hypocritical Tears
Cut and dried	Readymade
Up to date	Recent
Evil days	A period of misfortune
Halcyon Days	A time when there are peace and happiness in the land
To step into dead man's shoes	To come into an inheritance
Go to the devil	Be off
Devil's bones	Dice
Devil's Playthings	Playing Cards
Give a dog a bad name and hang him	Once a person loses his reputation
Every dog has his day	Sooner or later, everyone has his share of good fortune
To throw dust in one's eyes	To try to deceive someone or mislead someone
A white elephant	A useless possession which is extremely expensive to keep

To set the Thames on fire	To do something sensational or remarkable
A burnt child dreads the fire	One who has had a previous unpleasant experience is always scared of situations where such experiences are likely to be repeated
A fish out of water	Anyone in an awkward
Foul play	Cheating
To jump from a frying pan into fire	To come out of one trouble and get into a worse
All that glitters are not gold	Things are not always as attractive as they appear
To die in harness	To continue at one's occupation until death
Make hay while the sun shines	Take advantage of all opportunities
Lock, stock and barrel	The whole of everything
A miss is as good as a mile	Comes nowhere near it. If someone narrowly misses the target it still is treated as a missed one or failure.
One swallow does not make a summer	It is unreliable to base one's conclusions on only a single test or incident
If wishes were horses, beggars might ride	If wishing could make things happen, then even the most destitute people would have everything they wanted
A nine days' wonder	An event which relates a sensation for a time but is soon forgotten
Yellow press	Newspapers which publish sensational and unscrupulous stories and exaggerate the news to attract readers.
A ball park figure	A general financial figure
To balance the books	To make certain that the amount of money spent is not more than the amount of money received.
A cash cow	A product or service that makes a lot of money for a company
Devil's Advocate	To present a counter argument
Don't give up the day job	You are not very good at something. You could not do it professionally.
To cook the books	To modify financial statements
To get the sack	To be dismissed from your job

To be snowed under	To be very busy
To work your fingers to the bone / to sweat blood	To work really hard
Hear it on the grapevine	To hear rumors
In the heat of the moment	Overwhelmed by what is happening in the moment
Not a spark of decency	No Manners
Speak of the devil!	This expression is used when the person you have just been talking about arrives
Whole nine yards	Everything. All of it
Your guess is as good as mine	To have no idea about anything
Fishy	Doubtful, Suspicious
First and foremost	Extreme enthusiasm
Fire and fury	Fearful penalties
Fire and brimstone	A very tasty food or meal
Finding your feet/ Finger licking good	To become more comfortable in whatever you are doing
Fabian policy	Policy of delaying decisions
Excuse my French	Please forgive me for cussing
Everything but the kitchen sink	Almost everything and anything has been included
Break a leg	A superstitious way to say 'Good Luck' without saying 'Good Luck'
Barking up the wrong tree	A mistake made in something you are trying to achieve
Bated breath	In anxiety, expectancy
Beat a dead horse	To force an issue that has already ended
Between Scylla and Charybdis	Choice between two unpleasant alternatives

Fixed in your ways	Not willing or wanting to change from your normal way of doing something
A penny saved is a penny earned	By not spending money, you are saving money (little by little)
A picture paints a thousand words	A visual presentation is far more descriptive than words
A piece of cake	A task that can be accomplished very easily
To hold a brief for	Be retained as counsel for, to argue for
Shot in the arm	A boost or act of encouragement
To go at each other hammer and tongs	To do something or perform some task with tremendous fervor, determination
Step into someone's shoes	Take someone's place
Back to drawing board	Revising something from the beginning, typically after it has failed
Bring / Ring The Curtain Down	To bring something to an end; to declare something to be at an end
A slap on the wrist	A very mild punishment

Directions (1-10): In each of the following questions a statement has been given with highlighted text. You are required to replace the text with correct Idioms or phrases given in the options.

1. A video call from my favourite film star on my birthday was a **complete surprise**.

1. A damp squib
2. Bolt from the blue
3. A field day
4. A mare's nest

Answer: 2

2. The article on the world population published in today's journal is a **duplicate of** what was published the other day.

1. On tenterhooks
2. An Ananias
3. Dead Ringer

4. A wee bit

Answer: 3

3. Even though he is a learned person, he **talks nonsense** when it comes to morality and integrity.

1. Talks through one's hat
2. Bark up the wrong tree
3. Like a cat on hot bricks
4. Show a clean pair of heels

Answer: 3

4. The world today is **facing an unpleasant situation** because of the pandemic disease.

1. Thrown out of gear
2. Harps on the same string
3. Like a fish out of water
4. A bitter spill

Answer: 4

5. Students have **to face the risk** in order to attain success in the Civil Services exams.

1. To bell the cat
2. To nip in the bud
3. To take one to task
4. A hard nut to crack

Answer: 1

6. Due to lack of professional knowledge, the tricks used in the marketing and branding of the new product **yielded no result**.

1. Gained ground
2. No Avail
3. Throwing cold water on anything
4. Reaped the harvest

Answer: 2

7. Mary had a bad experience in relationship in the past, now, she is in **a state of confusion** whether she should marry someone or not.

1. All at Sea
2. Wrapped one's brain around
3. Playing ducks and drakes
4. At one's beck and call

Answer: 1

8. Being an atheist, he **differs strongly** with his parents teachings on principles and the idea of the almighty.

1. Call a spade a spade
2. Burn the midnight oil
3. At loggerheads
4. Keep one at bay

Answer: 3

9. She has **to begin gaining experience** if she wishes to join the media industry.

1. Cost an arm and a leg
2. Get one's feet wet
3. Cross one's T's and dots
4. To sit on the fence

Answer: 2

10. A large crowd was **anticipated** for the art exhibition by the organisers, but it did not happen.

1. Break down
2. A house of cards
3. On the cards
4. Keep up with

Answer: 3