7 Ways to Make English Idioms and Phrases Easier to Understand:

1. Listen to context.

Idioms are unusual expressions. So ask yourself ‘Why is that person using an unusual expression?’ The reasons are likely to be connected with emphasis, exaggeration, or a high state of emotion! So check the context – and the facial expression!

2. Check to see if you understood.

Use expressions like; ‘so you’re pretty angry about that right?’ or ‘OK, you mean that you’re too busy at the moment.

3. Be honest when you don’t understand.

Try using; ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you mean.

4. Never translate idioms.

Idioms from your own language may use the same imagery or concepts (and it is always interesting to notice these similarities) but they are unlikely to translate word-for-word into English expressions.

5. Listen to how native speakers use idioms.

A native English speaker NEVER says ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’ – so why should an ESL student? Listen to what native speakers actually say in a given situation, and copy.

6. Take notes.

Keep a notebook of your favorite expressions in English and add anything new that you hear. Try to use new expressions soon after you learn them, this is called ‘use it or lose it.

7. Tolerate your mistakes.

You will definitely make mistakes and create confusion when you use idiomatic expressions, so be brave and allow yourself the space to try, fail, and try again.

metaphorically

Illuminating To make something more understandable

Right-wing A part of a political group that consists of people who support conservative or traditional ideas

Look down upon To view someone or something as unworthy

Behind you all the way To fully support someone’s actions

Point of view An opinion on something

Better perspective A clearer view of something, a more thorough understanding of a situation

Take someone’s side To support one person’s side of an argument

Where I stand My opinion, point of view

Look up to To respect someone as a role model

Moral high ground The status of being respected, a position of being ‘more’ moral than others

Sitting on the fence Undecided on a decision, avoid making a decision on something at that moment.

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A blessing in disguise

Meaning: A good thing that initially seemed bad

A dime a dozen

Meaning: Something that is very common, not unique

Adding insult to injury

Meaning: To make a bad situation even worse

Beat around the bush

Meaning: Avoid sharing your true viewpoint or feelings because it is uncomfortable

Beating a dead horse

Meaning: giving time or energy to something that is ended or over

Bite the bullet

Meaning: To get an unfavorable situation or chore over with now because it will need to get finished eventually

Best of both worlds

Meaning: The choice or solution has all of the advantages of two contrasting things at the same time

Biting off more than you can chew

Meaning: Not having the capacity to take on a new assignment or task that is just too taxing

By the skin of your teeth

Meaning: Just barely making it

Don’t judge a book by its cover

Meaning: Not judging something by its initial appearance

Doing something at the drop of a hat

Meaning: Doing something at the exact moment of being asked

Don’t count your chickens before they hatch

Meaning: Not to count on something happening until after it’s already happened

Caught between a rock and a hard place

Meaning: Making a choice between two unpleasant choices

Costs an arm and a leg

Meaning: Something that is overpriced or very expensive

Cutting corners

Meaning: Not performing a task or duty correctly in order to save time or money

Devil’s advocate

Meaning: To take the side of the counter-argument, or offer an alternative point of view

Feeling under the weather

Meaning: Not feeling well, or feeling sick

Fit as a fiddle

Meaning: Being in good health

Getting a taste of your own medicine

Meaning: Being treated the way that you have been treating others

Getting a second wind

Meaning: Having energy again after being tired

Giving the benefit of the doubt

Meaning: Believing someone’s story without proof even though it may seem unbelievable

Giving someone the cold shoulder

Meaning: ignoring someone

Going on a wild goose chase

Meaning: doing something that is pointless

Heard it on the grapevine

Meaning: Hearing rumors about someone or something

Hitting the nail on the head

Meaning: Performing a task with exactness

Killing two birds with one stone

Meaning: Accomplishing two different tasks in the same undertaking

Letting someone off the hook

Meaning: Not holding someone responsible for something

Letting the cat out of the bag

Meaning: Sharing information that was intended to be a secret

No pain, no gain

Meaning: You have to work hard in order to see results

On the ball

Meaning: Doing a good job, being prompt, or being responsible

Once in a blue moon

Meaning: Something that doesn’t happen very often

Piece of cake

Meaning: A task or job that is easy to complete

Pulling someone’s leg

Meaning: Joking with someone

Speak of the devil

Meaning: When the person you have just been talking about arrives

Stealing someone’s thunder

Meaning: Taking credit for someone else’s achievements

Straight from the horse’s mouth

Meaning: Reading or hearing something from the source

The last straw

Meaning: The last difficulty or annoyance that makes the entire situation unbearable

The elephant in the room

Meaning: An issue, person, or problem that someone is trying to avoid

Throwing caution to the wind

Meaning: Being reckless or taking a risk

Your guess is as good as mine

Meaning: To not know something

A snowball effect

Meaning: Something has momentum and builds on each other, much like rolling a snowball down a hill to make it bigger

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

Meaning: Apples are healthy and good for you

Burning bridges

Meaning: Damaging a relationship beyond repair

Every dog has his day

Meaning: Everyone gets their chance to do something big

Fit as a fiddle

Meaning: Excellent health

Go down in flames

Meaning: To fail in a spectacular manner

Getting a second wind

Meaning: Having energy again after being tired or worn out

Having your head in the clouds

Meaning: Day dreaming, not paying attention

He/She is off their rocker

Meaning: Someone who is acting crazy or not thinking rationally

It’s always darkest before the dawn

Meaning: Things always get worse before they get better

It takes two to tango

Meaning: One person usually isn’t the only responsible party

Like riding a bike

Meaning: Something that you never forget how to do

Like two peas in a pod

Meaning: Two people who are always together

Run like the wind

Meaning: To run really fast

Through thick and thin

Meaning: Everyone experiences hard and good times

Time is money

Meaning: Work faster or more efficiently

Weather the storm

Meaning: Enduring a trial or hardship

Can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs

Meaning: You can’t make everyone happy

You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink

Meaning: You can’t force someone to make what is seemingly the right decision

Clouds on the horizon

Meaning: Trouble is coming or is on its way

7:36 AM

AMERICAN SLANG WORDS AND PHRASES

(To) ace (v.): To pass a test, exam, etc. really easily. "Robert aced his physics exam."

A-Game: One’s best self, often in relation to a competition. “I’ll bring my A-game”

All-ears: When someone says "I'm all ears", they are telling you that they are listening to you, that they are giving you

their undivided attention.

All-nighter (n.): A period of work or study that lasts all night. Most often used with the verb "pull" (To pull an all-nighter)

- “We pulled an all-nighter in order to finish the project."

Are you kidding me? Phrase often used rhetorically to express frustration or excitement.

Around-the-clock: 24/7, all day and night, non-stop

ASAP: stands for ‘as soon as possible’

B-Ball: often used to abbreviate basketball

Blow or Bomb: to fail or to be unsuccessful

Blue or Have the Blues: to feel depressed or sad

Bro: a friend, often used for a masculine friend

Buck: one dollar

By the skin of your teeth: just barely

Cash (n.): money

Cashback: An option available to retail consumers when, during a debit card transaction, the customer can request to

add an extra amount to the purchase price and receive the added amount in cash. Cash back using debit provides

customers a convenient method of withdrawing cash when purchasing goods and services without having to make a

separate trip to an ATM or bank.

Cheesy (adj.): Cheap, tacky. "A cheesy pick-up line", "A cheesy song", etc.

Chill: relax.

Come on: used to express frustration.

Cool (adj.): nice, great, impressive, popular, interesting "a cool dress", "a cool guy", "a cool bar"

Cop (n.): Police officer.

Couch Potato: a lazy person, one who sits on a couch and watches TV.

Cram: to study feverishly before an exam.

Crash: to go to sleep; or to show up without invitation “Can I crash here tonight?"

DC: UMass term for the dining commons

Dead: Empty; quiet (said of bars, clubs, restaurants, etc.) "It's really dead in here tonight" (It's empty in here

tonight/there are very few people here tonight).

Drive up the wall: to irritate; “He is driving me up the wall.”

Dutch or go Dutch: each person pays for his/her own meal.

FYI: acronym “for your information”

Get under one’s skin: bother

Give the cold shoulder: ignore

Hang out: to gather in a casual; and social manner.

Hip: cool, popular.

Hit the books: study.

Hit the road: to leave.

Hold your horses: Wait a minute!

Hyped (adj.): Really excited. "We're all hyped about the concert next weekend."

I feel you: I understand/empathize with you

In no time: Very soon. "Don't worry - We'll be there in no time."

It is what it is: it’s a fact that cannot be changed.

Jacked: really strong/muscular, “He’s jacked”

Jonesing: to want something badly. “I’m jonesing for a coffee”

Lemon: a bad buy or purchase.

Lighten up (v.): To relax; to not take things too seriously. "You gotta learn to lighten up a bit!"

LOL: Text acronym for ‘laugh out loud’

My Bad: my fault or my mistake.

No problem: you’re welcome, not a big deal

OMG: Text acronym for ‘oh my god’. Used to express surprise or excitement.

On the hour: an idiom for at every hour exactly; one o’clock, two o’clock, and so on. An extension of this idiom is every

hour on the hour, meaning every time the clock's big hand reaches twelve, “The bus passes by the house every hour on

the hour.”

Once in a blue moon: infrequently

Pass the buck: transfer responsibility to someone else.

Piece of cake: easy or effortless.

Put up a front: trying to act/appear tough

R.S.V.P.: Stands for a French phrase, repondez, s’il vous plait. A formal reply to an invitation, by phone or mail.

Recap: to state something again

Ride shotgun (v.): To ride in the front passenger seat of a car. "I wanna ride shotgun!"

Rip-off: overcharge.

Score: to get something you want.

Screw up (v.): To make a mistake, do something badly/wrong “I really screwed up my audition."

See ya: goodbye

Shoot the breeze: casual conversation.

Snagged/Nabbed: to take something without asking or slyly

Spill the beans: reveal a secret.

Take a rain-check: do at another time.

Take for granted: to assume.

That hit the spot: (When talking about food/drinks) that was really good; that’s just what I needed.

The bomb: if something ‘is the bomb’, it is awesome

Trash (v.): To destroy. "The band trashed the hotel room."

Twenty four seven (24/7): Non-stop, around the clock. "That place is open 24/7. It never closes."

UCard: UMass term for the University student identification card

What’s up: How are you?

Wicked: (In New England) used as adjective (meaning “amazing”) or a modifier (meaning: “really).

Wrap up (v.): To finish; to bring something to a close. "OK, let's wrap things up for today."

You bet: of course or no problem.

You can say that again! Phrase meaning "I agree with you completely."

You're telling me! Phrase meaning "I know exactly what you mean"; Similar to "Don't I know it!"

* [**Under the weather**](https://7esl.com/under-the-weather/): *someone is sick, ill, or doesn’t feel well for some reason.*
* **It’s not rocket science**: *something is not complicated or to not make things more complicated than they need to be.*
* [**Hang in there**](https://7esl.com/hang-in-there/): *to keep going, keep moving forward, and to not give up with things get difficult.*
* **Cutting corners**: *used to describe an activity that someone is performing by taking shortcuts to get to the end result that could jeopardize the integrity of the final product in some way.*
* [**Bite the bullet**](https://7esl.com/bite-the-bullet/): *to accept that something inevitable is about to happen, usually something negative.*
* **Better late than never** : *doing something a day late, a week late, etc. is better than to never do it at all.*
* **Go back to the drawing board**: *to begin all over because something wasn’t done right the first time.*
* **Hit the sack**: *to retire for the evening and go to sleep.*
* **We’ll cross that bridge when it gets here**: *to address the problem when it arises and not worry about it beforehand.*
* **Speak of the devil**: *someone you were just talking about showed up unexpectedly.*
* **That’s the last straw**: *your patience is wearing thin or you are completely out of patience with something or someone.*
* **On the ball**: *you are doing what you are supposed to be doing and you are doing a good job.*
* **Make a long story short**: *you are taking a lengthy story and abbreviating it by leaving some details out to make it briefer.*
* **A blessing in disguise**: *something you thought would be problem actually turned out to be something beneficial*
* **Get out of hand**: *situation or someone is spinning out of control.*
* **The best of both worlds**: *an ideal situation or scenario.*
* **Wrap your head around it**: *you are taking the time to understand something or you have already taken the time to understand something.*
* **Pulling your leg**: *you are just joking or kidding around with someone.*
* **Time flies when you’re having fun**: *you are having such a good time that you don’t pay attention to the time and before you know it, it’s really late.*
* **Get your act together**: *straighten up and do what you are supposed to do instead of goofing off.*
* **Let you**[**off the hook**](https://7esl.com/off-the-hook/):  *you are not going to blame someone or something for which they rightfully have the blame.*
* **A dime a dozen**:*something or someone is common and not unique.*
* **Break a leg**: *is used to wish someone good luck, typically regarding a performance.*
* **Call it day**: *to retire for the day, stop working and relax.*
* **Give you the**[**benefit of the doubt**](https://7esl.com/benefit-of-the-doubt/): *to trust what someone is saying as the truth.*
* **No pain, no gain**:*if you don’t work hard to achieve something, you won’t ever achieve it.*
* **Don’t get bent out of shape**: *don’t get upset over something.*
* **So far, so good**: *the progress so far is a success.*
* **To make matters worse**: *you are doing something to cause an already existing problem an even worse problem.*
* **Your guess is as good as mine**:*you don’t have a clue and that your best guess would most likely be mine too.*
* **Absence makes the heart grow fonder**: *sometimes being away for a period of time can cause a person to care for you even more than they already did.*
* **Add insult to injury**: *compounding an already bad situation by doing something to make it even worse in some way.*
* **Act your age**: *to grow up because you are acting immaturely.*
* **Add fuel to the fire**: *making a bad situation, the “fire,” even worse by providing this hypothetical “fire” with the fuel is needs to burn even more.*
* **Ball-park figure**: *to give someone an approximate number or estimation, usually to do with money.*
* **Big fish in a little sea**: *someone is famous or well-known but are only so in their small town.*
* **Bite to eat**: *getting something to eat. generally more than just one bite.*
* **Don’t bite the hand that feeds you**: *don’t mistreat someone who is trying to help you out.*
* **Breaking ground**: *you are doing something new or something that has never been done before.*
* **Burst into tears**: *to begin crying all of a sudden.*
* **Cash in on it**: *to gain profit from doing something.*
* **Catch your eye**: *something or someone got your attention.*
* **Come out of the closet**: *to tell someone that you are gay.*
* **Come what may**: *what will be will be no matter what happens.*
* **The crack of dawn**: *right at dawn or right as the sun rises.*
* **Cut class**:*to not attend a class or classes that day.*
* **Cut loose**: *to not pay attention to the way you are acting, have fun, party.*
* **Dead ringer**: *someone or something looks exactly like someone or something else.*
* **Dirt cheap**: *something is extremely inexpensive.*
* **Drown your sorrows**: *to get drunk in order to forget all of your problems.*
* **Down in the dumps**: *you are upset, sad, or depressed because of something that happened.*
* **Easy as pie**: *something was very easy to do.*
* **Easy come, easy go**: *something was simple to obtain, but it was also very simple to lose.*
* **Everything but the kitchen sink**: *nearly everything a person owns.*
* **Elbow room**: *to have enough space for people so they won’t be bumping into one another.*
* **Eat your words**: *willing to admit that what you said was wrong.*
* [**Eat your heart out**](https://7esl.com/eat-your-heart-out/): to be jealous or envious of someone or something
* **Face the music**: *to stand up and admit that you did wrong and deal with the consequences.*
* **Fall short**: *not having enough of something that you need or to need more to make ends meet.*
* **Feel like a new person**: *to feel revived or refreshed.*
* **Follow your heart**: *to act based on your feelings for someone or something.*
* **Full plate**: *someone is extremely busy and does not have room in their schedule to do anything else.*
* **Get carried away**: *to blow something out of proportion or exaggerate it in some way.*
* **Get cold feet**: *to second guess something that you are doing and become frightened about actually going through with it.*
* **Get something off your chest**: *to admit something that you have not admitted before that is bothering you and causing you distress.*
* **Go Dutch**: *everyone pays for themselves when they are going out as a group.*
* **Go over with a fine-tooth comb**: *to look at something very closely to analyze every little detail.*
* **Golden opportunity**: *it is an opportune chance to do something that you may never get the chance to do again.*
* **Hand-me-down**: *something, typically clothing, that is passed down from an older child to a younger one in order to save money purchasing new things.*
* **Hands full**:*you have too much to do and have no room in your schedule to do anything else.*
* **Hit the spot**: *something was gratifying or fulfilling in some way.*
* **Hit a snag**: *you have encountered a problem or an issue along the way.*
* **Ill at ease**: *you are uneasy about something or uncomfortable.*
* **In mint condition**: *something has no flaws and is in perfect condition.*
* **In the same boat**: *someone is in a similar*[*predicament*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/predicament)*.*
* [**Jack of all trades**](https://7esl.com/jack-of-all-trades/): *someone that is able to fix a lot of different things but who seems to be an expert in none of them.*
* **Just what the doctor ordered**: *someone got exactly what they needed.*
* **Keeping a low profile**: *to not draw attention to yourself so no one will notice you.*
* **Kick back**: *to relax and take it easy*
* [**Knock on wood**](https://7esl.com/knock-on-wood/): *to hope that something will happen and the bad luck will not affect the outcome or success; essentially saying “I hope” or “God willing”*