

59 I can use idioms and set phrases (1)

A Discussing problems

- A I'm having a hard time with this German course. New words seem to **go in one ear and out the other**. And when I want to say something, **my mind goes a complete blank**.
- B Well, it takes time to learn a language, but you'll **get there** in the end.
- A Yeah, **it's no good** moaning about it. Maybe I **could do with** some extra lessons.
- B That's a possibility. Do you **have anyone in mind**?
- A Not **off the top of my head**, no.
- B Well, **your best bet is to** talk to your teacher. She may know someone who could do it.

Glossary

go in one ear and out (of) the other
my mind goes (a complete) blank
get there

If sth **goes in one ear and out of the other**, you forget it very quickly.
 = suddenly I cannot remember sth.

be successful (**get somewhere** = make progress; **get nowhere** = make no progress).

it's no good + -ing

used to say that it is not useful doing sth. **SYNS** **there's no point in + -ing**, **it's no use + -ing**.

I (you/he, etc.) could do with sth

I (/you/he, etc.) need sth.

have sb/sth in mind

be thinking of sb/sth for a particular purpose.

off the top of my head

without thinking about sth carefully.

your best bet (is to ...)

used when advising sb what to do. **SYN** **the best thing (to do is ...)**.

spotlight *idioms and set phrases*

An **idiom** is a group of words whose overall meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words, e.g. **under the weather** (= slightly ill). Idioms are commonly used in informal English.

A **set phrase** is a group of words which function as a complete unit, e.g. **sorry to keep you waiting**. The meaning may be easy to understand, but the same idea might be expressed differently in your own language.

1 One word is missing. Where does it go? Write it at the end.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1 It's no worrying about it. _____ | 4 Marty could with some help. _____ |
| 2 That's just off the of my head. _____ | 5 My went a complete blank. _____ |
| 3 It goes in one and out the other. _____ | 6 I think he's feeling under weather. _____ |

2 Complete the idiom or set phrase in each dialogue.

- We need someone for the extra work. ~ True. Do you have anyone in _____?
- What shall I do? ~ Off the top of my _____, I'm not sure.
- Did she ask you a question? ~ Yes, my mind went a complete _____.
- What shall we do? ~ Your best _____ is to ring the station.
- They're making very slow progress. ~ Yes, but they'll get _____ eventually.
- Has Marc gone to bed? ~ Yes, he was feeling a bit under the _____.
- Didn't we say we'd meet at 4 o'clock? ~ Yes. I'm sorry to _____.
- Can you remember the instructions? ~ No. They went in one ear _____.

3 ABOUT YOUR LANGUAGE How would you translate these idioms and set phrases into your own language? Write a translation, or talk to someone who speaks your language.



B Idiomatic responses

Idiom or set phrase	Meaning
A Bob's coming, isn't he? B Don't hold your breath.	used to say you don't expect sth to happen even though sb said it would.
A Are they sure to win the election? B Yeah. It's a foregone conclusion.	used to say that sth is a result that is certain to happen.
A Are you going to the party? B You bet.	used to emphasize that you are keen to do sth.
A It's very cold today. B You can say that again.	used to agree completely with what sb has just said.
A Have you got Saturday off? B No such luck. I'm afraid.	used to express your disappointment that sth is not going to happen.
A Sal said she's too busy to help us. B A likely story.	used ironically to say you don't believe what sb has told you.
A Where's Patsy? B I haven't the faintest idea.	used to say you don't know sth. SYNS Don't ask me. Your guess is as good as mine.
A You look very stressed. B Yes, it's been one of those days.	used to say you have had a hard day.
A Shall I apply for that job? B You've got nothing to lose.	used to say there is no reason for sb not to do sth.
A Rani's going out with a film star. B You're kidding.	used to say that you think sth cannot be true and must be a joke. SYNS You're joking. You can't be serious.
A I hurt my toe, then I burnt my hand. B Oh dear. It's not your day, is it?	used when several unpleasant or unfortunate things happen on the same day.
A Can we go in if we're not members? B No way.	used to say that sth is not at all possible or not allowed. SYN no chance.

4 Circle the correct word/phrase.

- A likely story** is one that you think is probably true / false.
- If you reply **Don't ask me**, it means you don't know the answer / don't want to answer.
- If you say **You're kidding**, you think the other person is being / not being serious.
- No way** means it's not practical / possible.
- I haven't the faintest idea** means I don't care / I don't know.
- Don't hold your breath** means you expect / don't expect something to happen.

5 Complete a suitable idiom in response to these statements or questions.

- I've just won the lottery! ~ You _____.
- Could I borrow your Dad's car? ~ No _____.
- Why did they leave so early? ~ No idea. Your guess _____.
- Has it been busy in the office today? ~ Yes, it's been _____.
- Are you going to the wedding? ~ Yes, you _____.
- Do you think they'll win? ~ Definitely. It's a _____.
- I won some money. Did you? ~ No such _____.
- Shall we enter for the competition? ~ Why not? We've got nothing _____.
- It's hot in here, isn't it? ~ Yes, you can _____.
- My car broke down this morning, and a tooth fell out this afternoon. ~ It's not _____.



A Commenting on a situation

Some idioms and set phrases are commonly used to express an opinion about a situation.

We can borrow money if need be, but it's **a last resort**.

I've got a new computer, and frankly **it's more trouble than it's worth**.

He's got his own flat, but his mum still cooks for him – he's got **the best of both worlds**.

She wouldn't admit her mistake because she didn't want to **lose face**.

I think my nephew will do well as long as he **keeps his feet on the ground**.

She's always terribly serious. I think she needs to **let her hair down** a bit.

She's trying her best, but I think she's **fighting a losing battle**.

You can eat what you like and drinks are free. Sounds **too good to be true**, doesn't it?

The trouble with Rolf is that – most of the time – he **lives in a world of his own**.

Glossary

a last/final resort

an action you will take if there is no other option (as **a last resort** SYN if all else fails).

it's more trouble than it's worth
the best of both worlds

used to say the disadvantages of sth are greater than the advantages.
a situation in which you have the advantages of two things without any disadvantages.

lose face

look stupid or be less respected because of sth you have done.

keep your feet on the ground

remain sensible and realistic about life.

let your hair down

relax and enjoy yourself.

fight a losing battle

try to do sth that will almost certainly fail.

too good to be true

used to express doubts about a surprisingly good situation.

live/be in a world of your own

spend your time imagining things, and not be aware of things around you.

1 Cover the text and glossary, then complete these set phrases and idioms.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 let your hair _____ | 5 too good to be _____ |
| 2 if all else _____ | 6 live in a world _____ |
| 3 fight a losing _____ | 7 the best of both _____ |
| 4 it's more trouble than it's _____ | 8 keep your feet on the _____ |

2 Complete each dialogue with a suitable set phrase or idiom.

- Is Karen a bit of a dreamer? ~ Yes, she lives in _____.
- You don't want to use your savings? ~ No, that's a last _____.
- He thinks he can achieve anything. ~ Yes, he needs to _____.
- So you may have to sell your car. ~ Yes, if all _____.
- Did he try to cover up his mistake? ~ Yes, he didn't want to _____.
- You mean everything is free? ~ Yes, it sounds too _____.
- She looks as if she's enjoying herself ~ Yes, she's really _____.
- It's near the sea but close to the city. ~ Great, so you've got _____.

3 ABOUT YOUR LANGUAGE How would you translate these idioms into your own language? Write your answers, or talk to someone who speaks your language.

B Adding tone and emphasis

Some idioms and set phrases add extra politeness or emphasis, or prepare the listener for what you are going to say, or give a more personal interpretation of the message.

Idiom or set phrase	Meaning
<i>Do you know if they're married, by any chance?</i>	used to add politeness to a question (also: <i>Do you happen to know if they're married?</i>).
<i>If you don't mind my/me asking, how much did it cost?</i>	used before a question which you think may be sensitive.
<i>We'd like to see you, but the thing is, we don't know what time we'll get there.</i>	used to introduce an explanation, and often one that suggests there is a problem.
<i>I think the film is every bit as good as his last one.</i>	used to emphasize the comparative; equally good, bad, interesting, etc.
<i>I may get the job – you never know.</i>	used to say that you can never be certain about future events, so anything is possible.
<i>Guess what! Ed and Sue are getting married.</i>	used before giving sb surprising or exciting news.
<i>He doesn't look rich, but believe it or not, he owns a castle in Bavaria.</i>	used to introduce information which is true but surprising.
<i>He's been working since 7 o'clock this morning, so no wonder he's tired.</i>	used to emphasize the fact that sth is not surprising.
<i>Where on earth did you get those boots?</i>	used after <i>wh-</i> questions to indicate surprise, and sometimes annoyance, about sth.
<i>I would say, all things being equal, that women are better communicators than men.</i>	used to say that sth is true if there are no other factors affecting it.
<i>The room is empty but, for some reason, we're not allowed to use it.</i>	used to say, often with slight annoyance, that you don't know the reason or don't understand it.
<i>I have to admit, he's very good at his job.</i>	used to agree reluctantly that sth is true.

4 Complete the idiom or set phrase in each sentence.

- _____ what! I've got a new job.
- I don't think he has the ability to do it, but you never _____.
- What on _____ are you doing here?
- I made a special trip to the post office, but for _____ reason, they closed early.
- I have to _____, France are a good team – even though I'm English!
- He won all his matches, so no _____ he's delighted.
- All things being _____, I think we'll lose.
- We went trekking in the desert and, _____ it or not, it started raining!

5 Add a suitable idiom or set phrase to these sentences. Put an arrow to show where it goes.

- Do you know if it's open? _____
- How old are you? _____
- She looks about 20, but she's only 13. _____
- He's been very ill, so he looks thin. _____
- I'm hoping to go, but I've got a meeting on the same day. _____
- There are many exceptions, but I think men are better cooks than women. _____
- The book is as violent as all his others. _____
- It was a beautiful day, but the beach was deserted; I can't think why. _____

