Idioms

What are idioms?

- An idiom is a phrase whose meaning is difficult or sometimes impossible to guess by looking at the meanings of the individual words it contains. For example, the phrase **be in the same boat** has a literal meaning that is easy to understand, but it also has a common idiomatic meaning:
  - *I found the job difficult at first. But we were all in the same boat; we were all learning.*

  Here, **be in the same boat** means 'to be in the same difficult or unfortunate situation'.

- Some idioms are imaginative expressions such as proverbs and sayings:
  - *Too many cooks spoil the broth.*
    (= If too many people are involved in something, it will not be well done.)

  If the expression is well known, part of it may be left out:
  - *Well, I knew everything would go wrong—it's the usual story of too many cooks!*

- Other idioms are short expressions that are used for a particular purpose:
  - *Hang in there!* (used to encourage somebody in a difficult situation)
  - *Get lost!* (a rude way of saying 'go away')

- Many idioms, however, are not vivid in this way. They are considered as idioms because their form is fixed:
  - *for certain*
  - *in any case*

Idioms in the dictionary

- Idioms are defined at the entry for the first 'full' word (a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb) that they contain. This means ignoring any grammatical words such as articles and prepositions. Idioms follow the main senses of a word, in a section marked **IDM**:

> **IDM** **in the blink of an 'eye** very quickly; in a short time **on the 'blink** (*informal*) (of a machine) no longer working correctly

  The words **in**, **the** and **on** in these idioms do not count as 'full' words, and so the idioms are not listed at the entries for these words.

- Deciding where idioms start and stop is not always easy. If you hear the expression:
  - *They decided to bury the hatchet and try to be friends again.*

  you might think that **hatchet** is the only word you do not know and look that up.

In fact, **bury the hatchet** is an idiomatic expression and it is defined at **bury**. At **hatchet** you will find a cross reference directing you to **bury**:

> **hatchet** /ˈhætʃɪt/ *noun* a small AXE (= a tool with a heavy metal BLADE for cutting things up) with a short handle ➔ picture at AXE **IDM** see BURY

- Sometimes one 'full' word of an idiom can be replaced by another. For example, in the idiom **be a bag of nerves**, **bag** can be replaced by **bundle**. This is shown as **be a bag / bundle of nerves** and the idiom is defined at the first full fixed word, **nerve**. If you try to look the phrase up at either **bag** or **bundle** you will find a cross reference to **nerve** at the end of the idioms section.

> **IDM** **not go a bundle on sb**/**sth** (*BrE*, *informal*) to not like sb/sth very much ➔ MORE AT DROP *v.*, NERVE *n.*

- A few very common verbs and the adjectives **bad** and **good** have so many idioms that they cannot all be listed in the entry. Instead, there is a note telling you to look at the entry for the next noun, verb, adjective, etc. in the idiom:

> **IDM** **HELP** Most idioms containing **go** are at the entries for the nouns and adjectives in the idioms, for example **go it alone** is at **alone**.

- In some idioms, many alternatives are possible. In the expression **disappear into thin air**, you could replace **disappear** with **vanish**, **melt** or **evaporate**. In the dictionary this is shown as **disappear**, **vanish**, **etc. into thin air**, showing that you can use other words with a similar meaning to **disappear** in the idiom. Since the first 'full' word of the idiom is not fixed, the expression is defined at **thin** with a cross-reference only at **air**.

  If you cannot find an idiom in the dictionary, look it up at the entry for one of the other main words in the expression.

  Some idioms only contain grammatical words such as **one**, **it** or **in**. These idioms are defined at the first word that appears in them. For example, the idiom **one up on sb** is defined at the entry for **one**.

  Idioms are given in alphabetical order within the idioms sections. Grammatical words such as **a/an** or **the**, **sb/sth** and the possessive forms **your**, **sb's**, **his**, **her**, etc., as well as words in brackets **( )** or after a slash (/), are ignored.