
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Modern idioms



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Rob.

Sam

And I'm Sam. Can you wait a second, Rob? I have to spend a penny.

Rob

What! You're going shopping now, are you? We're just about to start the programme!

Sam

No, no, I have to... you know, '**spend a penny**'. Haven't you heard that expression before? Spend a penny means 'go to the toilet'. It's an old idiom from the days when it cost a penny to unlock the door of a public toilet.

Rob

OK, I see. Well, you're showing your age there, Sam – most young people today wouldn't know what that phrase meant, and there aren't many public toilets left nowadays anyway.

Sam

Language changes fast, and new words and phrases are being created all the time. In this programme, we'll be learning some modern idioms – new expressions that have been introduced to English through the internet, TV and social media. And of course, we'll be learning their meanings as well.

Rob

Great, I'm 'raring to go' – another idiom there. But first, as usual, I have a question for you, Sam. Many well-known idioms come from the world of sport, for example 'throw in the towel' which means 'give up', or 'surrender'. But which sport does the idiom 'throw in the towel' come from? Is it:

- a) football?
- b) tennis? or

c) boxing?

Sam

I think I know this one. It's c) boxing.

Rob

OK, Sam. I'll reveal the answer at the end of the programme, so just hold your horses for now!

Sam

Ah, another idiom there, Rob - hold your horses meaning 'stop and think for a moment'. That's an idiom that Gareth Carrol might teach his university students. Dr Carrol is the author of a new book, *'Dropping the Mic and Jumping the Shark: Where Do Modern Idioms Come From?'* He became interested in idioms when he realised that he didn't know many of the expressions his students used in their everyday speech, modern idioms like 'jump the shark'.

Rob

Here is Gareth Carrol telling BBC Radio 4 programme, Word of Mouth, about one source of many modern idioms – the movies.

Dr Gareth Carrol

So, **Groundhog Day** I think more or less has the meaning of 'déjà vu' now, and it's completely embedded in the language... actually, that's probably one of the first phrases that got me thinking about these modern idioms in the first place because it is so **ubiquitous**, it's used in a huge range of contexts, and one of the things that made me sit up and take notice is, I had a number of students who know the phrase, **Groundhog Day**, but had no idea it was a film.

Sam

In the film, Groundhog Day, the main character wakes up to live the same day over and over again. Gradually, the movie title itself became an idiom, **Groundhog Day**, meaning a situation in which events that have happened before, happen again in exactly the same way. It's similar in meaning to another expression – déjà vu.

Rob

When phrases the movies develop into idioms it's often because they are **ubiquitous** – they seem to appear everywhere.

Sam

And one of the ways they appear everywhere is, of course, the internet. Here's Gareth Carrol again, telling more to Michael Rosen, presenter of BBC Radio 4 programme, Word of Mouth:

Dr Gareth Carrol

The vocabulary of the internet, even the word 'internet', is relatively modern... the idea of **breaking the internet** is now a phrase I think people would use and recognise, so something that causes such a stir online that metaphorically so many people rush to a website that it threatens to bring it down, something like that...

Michael Rosen

In the early days we had 'go viral' which has stayed with us, hasn't it?

Dr Gareth Carrol

Yeah, so the idea of something going viral is certainly very much in the vocabulary now... But things like Twitter have leant sort of phrases, so the idea of **first-world problems**, meaning sort of ironically things that we complain about but actually, compared to other parts of the world, may well be relatively minor, that started life as Twitter hashtag, for example.

Rob

Another modern idiom is **breaking the internet** – causing so much excitement about something online that too many people visit the website at the same time, making it crash.

Sam

Social media outlets like Twitter have also created their own idioms, including **first-world problems** - a trivial problem that does not seem very important when compared to the serious problems faced by people in poorer parts of the world.

Rob

If you don't know some of these idioms, don't worry. Unlike general vocabulary, a native speaker's full knowledge of idioms takes longer to develop, usually at around the age of thirty to forty.

Sam

Meanwhile, you can still rely on classic English idioms, like 'pull my leg', 'kick the bucket', and 'throw in the towel' – which, I think, comes from the sport of boxing. Rob?

Rob

Yes, in my question I asked which sport gave birth to the phrase 'throw in the towel', and Sam's answer was correct! Well done! The idiom 'throw in the towel' comes from boxing where the coach of losing boxer would literally throw a towel into the ring to surrender.

Sam

OK, let's recap the rest of the idioms, old and new, that we've learnt today. To **spend a penny** is an old-fashioned way of saying 'go to the toilet'.

Rob

Groundhog Day describes a situation in which events that have happened before, happen again exactly the same way.

Sam

If something is **ubiquitous**, it seems to appear everywhere.

Rob

The modern idiom **break the internet**, means to cause so much excitement about something online that you make the website crash.

Sam

And finally, a **first-world problem** is a problem that does not seem very important when compared to the serious problems faced by people in poorer parts of the world. Unfortunately for us, our six minutes are up! Bye for now!

Rob

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

spend a penny

(old-fashioned idiom) go to the toilet

thrown in the towel

(idiom) give in; surrender; stop doing something because you realise you cannot succeed

Groundhog Day

(idiom) a situation in which events that have happened before, happen again in exactly the same way

ubiquitous

seeming to appear everywhere

break the internet

(idiom) cause so much excitement about something online that many people visit the website, making it crash

first-world problem

(idiom) a problem that does not seem very important when compared to the serious problems faced by people in poorer parts of the world