

English idioms

Vocabulary spot

Idioms are used in both spoken and written English, and frequently appear in newspaper articles. Some are more popular than others and it is worth checking in a dictionary to find out which idioms are in current use.

Do not attempt to change any of the vocabulary in an English idiom. Similar idioms in your own language may use a different word – for example, in one Swedish idiom, you say you have a chicken in your throat, whereas in the English one, it's a frog!

Be careful when you use idioms in your own writing. They are effective if used sparingly, but the writing becomes unnatural if too many are included. See Writing folder 15 for more information.

Parts of the body

- 1 Many common idioms contain a part of the body, like the ones used in 29.1, for example *a change of heart*. It's usually quite easy to work out the meaning of these idioms. Start by thinking of the literal meaning of the words, even forming a picture in your head, like the ones above.

In this way, match idioms 1–20 to meanings a–t.

eye

- 1 see eye to eye with someone
- 2 raise eyebrows
- 3 cast your eye over something
- 4 turn a blind eye to something

head

- 5 turn something on its head
- 6 get your head round something
- 7 keep your head above water
- 8 lose your head

hand

- 9 have a hand in something
- 10 be given a free hand
- 11 have the upper hand
- 12 wash your hands of something

feet

- 13 find your feet
- 14 have your feet on the ground
- 15 get cold feet
- 16 vote with your feet

fingers

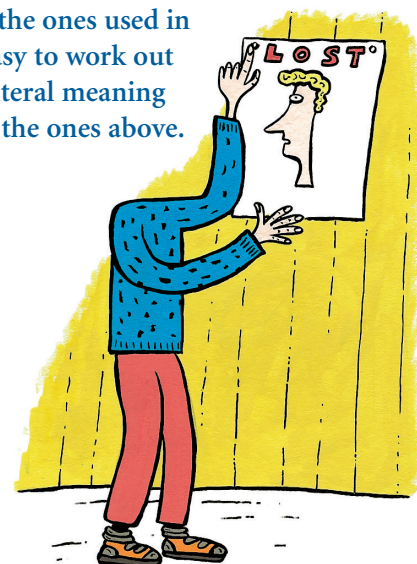
- 17 put your finger on something
- 18 get your fingers burned
- 19 keep your fingers crossed
- 20 point the finger at someone

- a ignore
- b agree
- c surprise
- d check
- e panic
- f survive
- g change
- h understand

- i be in control
- j refuse responsibility
- k make the decisions
- l help create

- m reject
- n become anxious
- o gain confidence
- p be sensible

- q be unsuccessful
- r accuse
- s identify
- t hope for good news



Common verbs in idioms

- 2 You know the meaning of the verbs used below, but can you work out the meaning of the idioms? Check in a dictionary if necessary.

break new ground	get your act together
make your mark	take somewhere by storm
get to grips with something	put your oar in
come out of your shell	catch someone off guard
tighten your belt	go out of the window
keep a low profile	put something on ice

- 3 Decide which idiom you would use for the situations a–k and include it in a suitable sentence, changing pronouns and tenses where necessary.

EXAMPLE: *Company executives were advised to make budget cuts because of a shortfall in profits.*
Company executives were advised to tighten their belts because of a shortfall in profits.



- a The paparazzi managed to surprise them unexpectedly in their hideaway cottage.
- b The government has delayed many of its proposals for new road development.
- c She forgot all her promises to her parents about studying hard when she met Danny.
- d The software uses an innovative technique that requires much less memory.
- e Some town councils have dealt seriously with traffic problems.
- f Kevin has done a lot in his new job in a short period of time.
- g The British film *The Full Monty* went down very well in America.
- h The argumentative politician could not resist adding his views.
- i John hid in the back row of the cinema, hoping he wouldn't be seen by his teacher.
- j On the first day at a new school, children are very nervous, but they soon begin to open up.
- k Caroline's always letting people down – she really needs to improve her behaviour.

Idioms and prepositions

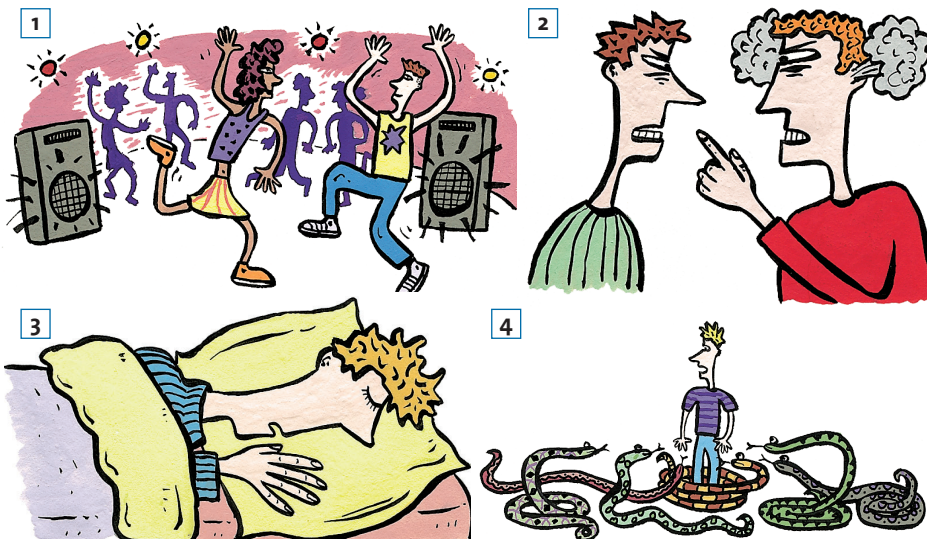
- 4 Many common idioms, including some of the ones above, feature a preposition. Choose the correct preposition from the ones below to fill in the spaces in a–m and suggest what these idioms mean.

at	for	in	off
on	out	to	with

- a the icing the cake
- b full swing
- c a nutshell
- d the count
- e shocked the core
- f a loose end
- g a tight corner
- h a limb
- i economical the truth
- j thin the ground
- k loggerheads someone
- l pie the sky
- m quick the mark

- 5 Select one of the idioms above to illustrate cartoons 1–4.
Now use the remaining idioms in a–h.

EXAMPLE: *I've had some lovely presents, but this one is truly the icing on the cake.*



- a Tickets for *Radiohead's* concert next month are very
- b I'm going to go and say that France will win the World Cup in 2002.
- c Faye's always having ridiculous ideas – they're all !
- d If you're , why not come round and see us this evening?
- e To put the problem , my boss wants to fire me.
- f The press was really and there was full coverage of the scandal the next day.
- g Politicians can be rather , preferring not to give any bad news.
- h I was by what Gerry said, as I had absolutely no idea of what had been going on.