

The Oxford Dictionary of

Idioms

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Preface

The word *idiom* entered English in the sixteenth century as part of the great surge of linguistic self-awareness that transformed the vernacular languages of Europe during the Renaissance. Both *idiom*, and the Latin equivalent *idioma*, derive from the Greek word *ἴδιος* meaning ‘private, peculiar to oneself’, and applied at first to one’s native tongue: ‘frame all sentences in their mother phrase, and proper *Idioma*,’ exhorted the critic George Gascoigne in his ‘Certain notes of Instruction concerning the making of verse or ryme in English’ (1575). The more restricted modern sense of ‘a particular usage or form of speech’ appears in the early seventeenth century, in John Donne’s *Sermons*. The wealth of idioms in English is a reflection of the many sources, cultural and linguistic, that have fed into the mainstream of the language. Military (*spike someone’s guns*), naval (*know the ropes*), sporting (*close but no cigar, saved by the bell*), musical (*run the gamut*), and other technical vocabularies have all contributed vivid forms of words to the rich mix.

An idiom, then, is a form of expression or a phrase peculiar to a language and approved by the usage of that language, and it often has a signification other than its grammatical or logical one. In practical terms this includes a wide range of expressions that have become in a sense fossilized within the language and are used in a fixed or semi-fixed way without reference to the literal meaning of their component words. Idioms are the elements in any language that are often the most recalcitrant to translation—and cause most difficulty to foreign learners.

Although some idioms degenerate into clichés and others are short-lived denizens of the twilight zones of slang or nonce usage, many others are lively contributors to a language’s unique character over the long term and have revealing or perplexing histories of their own. For instance, when and why did the graphic *bees in the head* give way to the modern *bees in the bonnet*, which has the charm of alliteration but neither sense nor current dress codes to recommend it? In the case of English, the cross-fertilization between American and British usage, especially via popular twentieth-century writers such as P. G. Wodehouse and Raymond Chandler, has further enriched the flavour.

The idiomatic expressions selected for this dictionary come from various origins and in a variety of guises. In many cases, evidence for current or at least mid- to late-twentieth-century use has been a deciding factor for inclusion; thus, Victorian slang that may well have survived into the twentieth century, such as *up to the knocker* (evidenced in 1896), is generally not included. Straight-forward rhyming slang is excluded (e.g. *dog and bone* ‘telephone’), but expressions that rely less obviously on rhyming slang are in (e.g. *do bird*, meaning ‘serve a prison sentence’, alluding to *do time*, rhyming with *birdlime*).

Phrasal verbs and other usages transparent to a native speaker are not included, nor are self-explanatory similes or metaphors. However, similes in which there is a fossilized, arcane, or other non-obvious element are: for instance, the pun on *thick* in *as thick as two planks* or the mid-eighteenth-century colloquial sense (now dated) of *thick* as ‘close in association, intimate’ in the mid-nineteenth-century phrase *as thick as thieves*. There are also a number of quotations so familiar that they are used with no conscious reference to the

original context, such as *caviar to the general*. Proverbial sayings that are used in truncated or otherwise allusive mode are also covered (*give a dog a bad name* is often heard without its savage former conclusion *and hang him*), as are numerous metaphorical phrases.

Entries are arranged in alphabetical order of keyword (shown in capital letters). The keyword is, as far as possible, the first conceptually significant unvarying word in the expression, usually a noun. Articles (*the, a*) and words such as *someone/thing* are disregarded in the alphabetization. Parts of speech are similarly ignored in the alphabetization, with no separate sequences observed for nouns and verbs.

Cross-references are provided only in cases where different readers might perceive a word other than the first noun as the most significant element or where the expression has established variants. Thus, there is no cross-reference at *tongs* to *hammer and tongs* since alphabetical placing of the idiom is obvious under the 'first noun' rule, the order of the nouns is immutable, and it is in any case unlikely that anyone would look first for the expression under the second element. *Wormwood and gall* however merits a cross-reference, as it can sometimes appear as *gall and wormwood*. Phrases on the pattern of *tower of strength*, which might equally well be looked up under *tower* or *strength*, have cross-references. Where the noun is variable but the sense identical, as in *throw in the towel* or *throw in the sponge*, the entry is at the less variable element, the verb. In some cases of adjective plus noun the entry is at the adjective, as being the more significant element as regards sense. In the few cases (e.g. *eat humble pie*), where verb, adjective, or noun might equally well be identified as the key element, comprehensive cross-references are provided.

The invariable components of the entry structure are the idiom itself with capitalized keyword and any common variants given in brackets, followed by the definition. In addition there may be a label or labels (in italics) indicating register and/or geographical area, a sentence or short paragraph covering etymological, historical and usage points of interest, and an illustrative quotation. The marking of a quotation with an asterisk indicates it is the earliest example of the use of this idiom yet traced. Dates in the history notes are given in the form E, M, or L plus the ordinal number of the century; thus, for example, E16 is the period 1500–1529, M16 is 1530–1569, L16 is 1570–1599.

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