



Common Idioms

An **idiom** is a word or a phrase with a meaning that does not match the literal meaning implied. Idioms can make writing more interesting; however, they should generally be avoided in academic writing.

Idiom & Definition	Example
A big shot: a person who is important	She had lunch with <i>a big shot</i> executive. He offered her a job during dessert.
A bone to pick: a complaint, dispute, or misunderstanding to be settled	They have <i>a bone to pick</i> with Jennifer. She did not water their plants while they were away.
A pain in the neck/rear: an annoying person, thing, or situation	Thomas is <i>a pain in the neck</i> . He is always bothering Kristy!
A snap: very easy	Making cookies from a mix is <i>a snap</i> .
Across the board: relating to every person and/or situation	The attendance policy is applied <i>across the board</i> . No one is exempt.
All ears: eager to listen to someone or willing to listen carefully	When Bill was talking, Debra was <i>all ears</i> .
All in the same boat: in similar situations, experiencing the same thing	None of them have finished their papers, so they are <i>all in the same boat</i> .
As easy as pie: very simple or easy	Susan told Tom this class would be <i>as easy as pie</i> , but he thinks it is really hard.
Back to the drawing board: return to the planning stage of a project	Joe's plans do not work, so he has to go <i>back to the drawing board</i> .
Bad-mouth: to say mean and embarrassing things about someone	Kelly is always <i>bad-mouthing</i> people, and that is why no one wants to be her friend.
Barking up the wrong tree: mistakenly pursuing the wrong course.	When she told him she was from Texas, he realized he had <i>barked up the wrong tree</i> by making jokes about people from the South.
Beat around the bush: speaking in an indirect manner or avoiding the subject	Politicians are known for <i>beating around the bush</i> !
Beat: extremely tired	The kids are <i>beat</i> ! Let them go to sleep!
Beats me: not to know (usually the answer to a question)	A: When did Mom leave? B: <i>Beats me</i> !
Bent out of shape: to be very upset about something	Mark really got <i>bent out of shape</i> about the D on his history report.
Bite the bullet: accepting punishment or blame for something, or accepting an unpleasant circumstance	Mark is going to <i>bite the bullet</i> and go talk to his Dad about his bad grade.
Bottom line: the real issue or the most important facts	The <i>bottom line</i> is that Cathy just does not want to do it.
Break a leg: wish good luck	Does the play start tonight? Well, <i>break a leg</i> !
Break someone's heart: to disappoint or emotionally hurt someone	Cindy's dad really <i>broke her heart</i> when he did not come to her graduation.
Break the ice: to do something, usually humorous, that helps stop the nervousness people feel when they meet for the first time	Jim <i>broke the ice</i> at the party by starting a really stupid, but funny, game.
Brush up on something: to relearn the basics or improve a skill	The students need to <i>brush up on</i> their geography skills before the next exam.

Bug: to annoy or pester	Her little brother really <i>bugs</i> her sometimes!
Burn the midnight oil: stay up very late or all night working or studying	They have a paper due tomorrow, so they will be <i>burning the midnight oil</i> tonight.
Call it a day: stop working and go home	Kate returned all the calls and filed everything, so she thinks she will <i>call it a day</i> .
Catch some Z's: go to sleep	This has been a really tiring day; Dan wants to go <i>catch some Z's</i> now.
Caught red-handed: caught in the middle of doing something wrong	Jack was <i>caught red-handed</i> while cheating on his final exam.
Clean as a whistle: very clean	John likes to have everything <i>clean as a whistle</i> , so he mops once a day.
Clean slate: fresh start	Laura's boss gave her a <i>clean slate</i> after she apologized for being late.
Cold feet: nervousness or anxiousness concerning major events	Chris got <i>cold feet</i> the night before his wedding.
Cold turkey: to immediately give up a bad habit	Jessica wants to give up eating junk food <i>cold turkey</i> .
Cost an arm and a leg: very expensive	Ginger's fancy new car must have <i>cost her an arm and a leg</i> .
Crunch time: a time when many deadlines are approaching	For many college students, <i>crunch time</i> is right before midterms and finals.
Days are numbered: time is limited, about to finish, or time no longer exist	Hank's <i>days</i> on the baseball team <i>are numbered</i> if he does not pass his algebra test.
Down in the dumps: sad or depressed	Sarah has really been <i>down in the dumps</i> since her dog died.
Drag one's feet: to be slow and unmotivated about completing something	If Mario keeps <i>dragging his feet</i> , he will not finish his English paper on time.
Drive one crazy: to annoy	It just <i>drives Tina crazy</i> when her neighbor mows his lawn at 7:00 AM.
Drive one up the wall: to annoy	His mom really <i>drives him up the wall</i> when she plays her classical music while he is trying to study.
Drop in the bucket: small addition or contribution in comparison to what is needed.	The children's gifts to the society were just <i>drops in the bucket</i> , but the children learned that giving is important.
Drop someone a line: to write to someone	They have not heard from Maria in a while, so they think that they will <i>drop her a line</i> this week.
Easier said than done: easier to talk about something than to do it	Losing weight by starting an exercise program is <i>easier said than done</i> .
Easy does it!: to be careful	Bill, that lamp is fragile. <i>Easy does it!</i>
Eating at someone: something is really bothering or disturbing someone	A: What is <i>eating at her</i> ? B: Oh, she is mad at her brother right now because he keeps borrowing the car without asking.
Face-to-face: in person	She really wants to see her dad <i>face-to-face</i> before she goes on her business trip.
Fair-weather friend: only a friend when it is convenient	Some people are only <i>fair-weather friends</i> , but Jessica has been a wonderful friend even when things were horrible.
False alarm: to panic over a situation, only to realize afterwards that it was not an emergency	He thought his paper was due today, but it was only a <i>false alarm!</i>
Fall for it: to be tricked	Javier <i>fell for it</i> when Rosa played a practical joke on him.
Fly off the handle: to get upset or angry	The professor was so angry with the students' careless work that he <i>flew off the handle</i> during class.

Follow in the footsteps of: doing the same things as someone you admire when it comes to making important choices	When Phil took that job, he <i>was following in the footsteps</i> of his father, who is one of the best salesmen in town.
Food for thought: something to think about	They really like this column in the newspaper; it gives them some <i>food for thought</i> .
From scratch: to start at the beginning; to make a food without using a mix or begin a task anew	When Bob's grandmother makes muffins <i>from scratch</i> , they are the best in the world!
Get a kick out of something: find enjoyment or pleasure out of something	Maggie really <i>gets a kick out of</i> seeing her friends have fun.
Get with the program: to be aware of something or to be actively working on what is important	Pocahontas really needs to <i>get with the program</i> and finish all her reports for biology lab.
Give one's right arm: give everything or give a great deal	Tarzan would <i>give his right arm</i> to help people in trouble.
Give someone a hand: (a) to help someone or (b) to clap in approval	(a) Rachael, <i>give Linda a hand</i> with the dishes; she has a lot to do tonight. (b) They all <i>gave Jake a hand</i> for doing so well on the project.
Go against the grain: to be different than what is considered normal or standard	When Mel Gibson decided to protest, he really <i>went against the grain</i> .
Go bananas/Go crazy: extremely excited	When Ellen heard that she made an "A" on her sociology paper, she <i>went bananas!</i>
Grab a bite to eat: to get something to eat	Joseph Smith was hungry, so he <i>grabbed a bite to eat</i> .
Green with envy: very envious of someone	Allison is <i>green with envy</i> because Sarah got the job promotion.
Have one's hands full: to be very busy with many responsibilities	Calvin <i>has his hands full</i> this week; he is caring for his sister's two children while she is gone.
Hit the books: to study hard	Megan went to the library to <i>hit the books</i> because she has a statistics test tomorrow.
Hit the nail on the head: to be exactly right	John <i>hit the nail on the head</i> when he suggested that Cathy has been so tired because she's been overworked.
Hit the spot: to satisfy a craving or intense hunger	That piece of pumpkin pie <i>hit the spot</i> ; Batman had been craving it for weeks.
Hold your horses: have patience	<i>Hold your horses!</i> The pizza is almost ready.
In ages: for a very long time	Mr. Freeze has not seen a movie <i>in ages</i> .
In over one's head: to take on too many responsibilities; to take on something too difficult	Jack really got <i>in over his head</i> when he agreed to work two jobs while taking six classes.
In the nick of time: barely on time, nearly late	Wow! Dave finished that assignment <i>in the nick of time</i> ; he submitted minutes before the deadline.
It's a piece of cake: very easy	Rapunzel thought that the test was going to be difficult, but <i>it was a piece of cake!</i>
John Hancock: a signature	If you just put your <i>John Hancock</i> here, the deal will be complete.
Jump the gun: to do something too soon and too quickly	Mr. Stark always <i>jumps the gun</i> , and Hulk never gets to tell the story.
Know by heart: to know something by memory	Since Dorothy has to call the electric company so often, she knows their phone number <i>by heart</i> .
Know the ropes: to be familiar with a procedure or the details of a job	It takes new students a little while to get to <i>know the ropes</i> , but then they seem to do just fine.
Make ends meet: make just enough money to survive	Marry Poppins barely <i>made ends meet</i> this month. She gets paid next Friday and all she has left is five dollars.
Making a mountain out of a molehill: making a large issue out of something insignificant	George of the Jungle is really <i>making a mountain out of a molehill</i> .
Ninety (90) to nothing: to be working very hard	With everything Tim has to finish before May, he

on something usually in a fast manner	feels like he has been going <i>ninety (90) to nothing</i> .
Not worth a hill of beans: not worth very much	Anakin's car is <i>not worth a hill of beans</i> ; the engine is about to die!
Off the top of my head: to think and do something spontaneously	Storm loves to do things <i>off the top of her head</i> ; when Wolverine is with her, he never knows what is going to happen next.
On edge: nervous or tense	Black Widow has really been <i>on edge</i> recently.
On the ball: motivated to action	Kevin has really been <i>on the ball</i> recently; he finished all his assignments several weeks early.
On the road: traveling	Prince Charming hates being <i>on the road</i> because he never gets to see his family.
On the tip of my tongue: to almost remember	His name is <i>on the tip of her tongue</i> . It begins with a K, but she just cannot recall.
Once in a blue moon: very rarely	<i>Once in a blue moon</i> , the washer machine makes a funny noise.
Pretty penny: a lot of money	Julie's new car must have cost her a <i>pretty penny</i> .
Rain check: a promise to make an offer available at another time	A: Does Anna want to go to lunch with Olaf tomorrow? B: She would love to but she cannot. Could she take a <i>rain check</i> ?
Rain or shine: no matter what	Robin's mom said she would be at graduation <i>rain or shine</i> .
Scare the living daylights out of : to frighten someone	When he jumped into the hallway, he <i>scared the living daylights out of</i> Megatron!
Skeleton in the closet: a personal or family secret	Every family has at least one <i>skeleton in the closet</i> that they do not want anyone else to know about.
Sleeping like a baby: sleeping peacefully and soundly	He hates to wake her up; she is <i>sleeping like a baby</i> !
Sleeping like a log: sleeping well—so much so that a person would not be easily awakened	Grandpa always <i>sleeps like a log</i> ; once he goes to sleep there is no waking him until the next morning!
Spick and span: very clean	It took Simba two hours to make this room <i>spick and span</i> .
Stab in the back: to deceive or hurt someone	Jan <i>stabbed her best friend in the back</i> when she began to date her best friend's ex-boyfriend.
State of the art: the very newest, latest technological devices	Everything Jeff has is <i>state of the art</i> ; he thinks he has to have whatever is newest on the market.
Stick one's neck out: to do something risky (usually for someone else)	Alan really <i>stuck his neck out</i> when he supported the mayor's proposal.
Sweet tooth: desire to eat something sweet	James has a huge <i>sweet tooth</i> ; he is always eating candy.
Talking in circles: to speak in an unclear, illogical manner, often saying the same thing again	When Mrs. Black is tired, she just <i>talks in circles</i> and never really makes a clear point.
That does not hold water: the reasoning does not make sense; argument does not have enough supporting evidence	The theory of evolution just <i>does not hold water</i> .
That is a bunch of baloney: a lie or a fake; nonsense	A: Did you know that Velma is getting kicked out of school? B: <i>That is a bunch of baloney!</i> Shaggy talked to her this morning, and she said it was just a rumor.
That is no skin off my nose: does not affect or harm	It is <i>no skin off my nose</i> that David did not ask Daphne to the party!
The cutting edge: the best and most advanced	Dr. Robins is on <i>the cutting edge</i> of research; he is the most respected scientist at Mayer Hospital.
Through thick and thin: through all circumstances, both difficult and easy, good and bad	It is not easy to find friends that will stay around <i>through thick and thin</i> .
To know something or someone like the back	Tom knows that mountain <i>like the back of his hand</i>

of one's hand: to know very well	because he has climbed it many times.
Under the weather: not feeling well	Linda has been <i>under the weather</i> for two weeks. Her mother thinks she should see a doctor.