

What is an Idiom?

What is an **idiom**? Idioms are a kind of figurative language used in literature and in daily speech. They are phrases that are not meant to be taken literally but that have a widely understood meaning in a given language or culture. This idiom definition in literature can lead to interesting and unusual uses of language. What is an example of an idiom that many English speakers would understand? Some common options include:

- It's a piece of cake! (It's very easy.)
- He's under the weather. (He's sick.)
- I'm just pulling your leg. (I'm only joking.)
- Pass the buck. (Pass one's responsibilities on to someone else.)

These phrases can be challenging for non-native speakers as they do not intuitively make sense and sometimes have obscure origins. Despite these difficulties, idioms are important: they add color to speech and writing and are one of the ways that culture is transmitted through language.

Idiom: Examples and Types

Idiom examples are so common in speech that many people may not even notice that they are saying them. There are also several different types of idioms. Indeed, there are tens of thousands of idioms in the English language and just as many in other languages; many people never learn all of them.

William Shakespeare himself is credited with inventing over 2,000 idioms that are now part of everyday speech. Some idioms might be examples of two or even more types of idioms, as the categories are fluid.

Pure Idioms

Pure idioms are idioms where the components of the phrase bear no literal resemblance to the meaning of the phrase. This is often what people think of when they think of idioms.

Examples of pure idioms include:

- Spill the beans. (Tell your secrets.)
- Kill two birds with one stone. (Accomplish several tasks at once.)
- Break a leg! (Good luck!)

Spilling beans objectively has nothing to do with revealing secrets, but the idiom is understood anyway. In some cases, as with "break a leg," this disconnect between the words in the idiom and their meaning is deliberate: the phrase "break a leg" likely comes from actors' superstitions about wishing one another good luck. They would wish each other bad luck (like breaking a leg) to counterintuitively circumvent misfortune.

Binomial Idioms

Binomial idioms, or binomial expressions, are phrases that include two words that may be opposites, usually joined by "and" or "or." Usually, binomial idioms are used to express a disconnect or opposition, or else to [reify](#) and restate a single idea. Examples include:

- Chalk and cheese (Two things that do not mix)
- Odds and ends (Pieces of junk)
- Wine and dine (Treat someone to dinner and drinks)

Some of these phrases, like "wine and dine," are easier to understand based on context than other idioms are because they are less figurative and are closer to the literal meaning of the phrase.

Partial Idioms

When idioms become particularly well-known and integrated into a culture, they sometimes get shortened to partial idioms. This makes them quicker to say, but it can also make them even more confusing for those who are not familiar with them. Examples of partial idioms include:

- When in Rome (do as the Romans do)
- If the shoe fits (wear it)
- Birds of a feather (flock together)

- **Break the ice** - This phrase was first used in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Tranio encourages Petruchio to "break the ice" with Katherine to get to know her, suggesting that he may like her better — and get her to like him. Today this phrase is used to refer to relieving tension or getting to know someone better, usually by making small talk, or a kind gesture to start a new relationship.
- **Wear my heart upon my sleeve** - This saying was first used in *Othello* when Iago describes how he would be vulnerable if he revealed his dislike of Othello. In the play, the phrase continues to state that the "daws," or crows, would be able to peck at his heart if he revealed it. Today, people use this phrase to mean that they are showing their real feelings about something.
- **Set my teeth on edge** - In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Hotspur complains about how much he hates poetry, saying, "And that would set my teeth nothing an edge, nothing so much as mincing poetry." Today the phrase is used to express distaste for something, particularly annoyance, and also discomfort, like the noise of nails dragging on a chalkboard.

- **There's method in my madness** - In *Hamlet*, Polonius observes Hamlet's antics and says, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." He suspects Hamlet isn't behaving as irrationally as he seems to be on the surface. The phrase has changed slightly, but the meaning is the same: Even though your action seems random, you have a purpose to them.
- **Dead as a doornail** - Though this phrase is perhaps better known as the opening description of Ebenezer Scrooge's partner Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, it was previously used by Shakespeare. In *Henry IV, Part 2* Jack Cade says, "I have eat no meat these five days; yet, come thou and thy five men, and if I do not leave you all as dead as a doornail, I pray God I may never eat grass more." The phrase is still used emphatically, implying that something is so dead it's as if it were never alive in the first place.

- **Pot calling the kettle black** - This phrase comes from the Spanish novel *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. It referred to the fact that pots and kettles of the time were made of cast iron and got blackened in the fire and is used to suggest that one shouldn't accuse or criticize another of something they're also guilty of.
- **Love is blind** - First seen in writing in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* - "For love is blind all day, and may not see" - this phrase means that true love is not superficial and also captures the idea that love can be unexpected or random.
- **Live off the fat of the land** - Though a version of this phrase exists in the Book of Genesis, it's perhaps most famously used in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*. George tells Lenny they'll live off the fat of the land and have rabbits when they make enough money to stop traveling around for work. The phrase means getting the best of everything without having to work hard for it.