

English Idioms And Expressions

- **Aboveboard** – an honest person or legitimate deal: *Card sharps or magicians keep their hands under the board or table in order to trick people. They can't cheat if their hands are visible.*
- **Against the grain** – contrary or opposed to one's natural inclination or preference: *When a carpenter tries to use his plane against the grain of the wood, instead of smoothing the board down, he roughs it up.*
- **Back seat** – to take or be given a back seat means to occupy a lesser position: *Refers to the back seats of a theatre or gaming table – a spot away from the action.*
- **Bark up the wrong tree** – to pursue the wrong line of reason – to follow the wrong course: *Hunting dogs are trained to hunt raccoons and ignore other animals, but they pick up the wrong scent. When the hunters catch up, they are barking up the wrong tree.*
- **Beating around the bush** – a person who is avoiding the issue: *In bird hunting, men were sent to beat the bush to flush the birds out. The hunters would then shoot them. A person "beating around the bush" ensures that the hunter does not profit from his work.*
- **Beside himself** – a person who is distraught – in a state of extreme agitation or excitement: *It was once believed that, under great emotional stress, the soul could leave the body. A person could be beside himself. It is the same reason we say "bless you" when somebody sneezes.*
- **Black sheep** – the ne'er do well of the family - the one who is a constant embarrassment: *A black sheep's wool cannot be dyed and is, therefore, of less value. He, nonetheless, eats as much and requires as much care as the others.*
- **Bone to pick** – a person who has a specific, serious topic to discuss with another: *Two dogs will fight over which one gets to pick the meat off a bone. The bone is the object of contention.*
- **Cat out of the bag** – a person who carelessly reveals a secret "lets the cat out of the bag": *Farmers once brought suckling pigs to market in a bag. A farmer who wanted to cheat the buyer would replace the pig with a cat. If someone opened the bag and the cat escaped, the scheme was ruined.*
- **Cold feet** – a person who shies away from a situation: *Until the end of the 19th century, frozen feet were common for soldiers. A man with frozen feet cannot rush into battle and, therefore, shies away.*
- **Cold shoulder** – a snub or disinterest expressed by one person toward another: *A guest who is no longer welcome would be served a cold piece of meat.*
- **Count your chickens** – don't "count your chickens" before they hatch – don't rely on predictions: *Refers to Aesop's fable, The Milkmaid. While daydreaming about how she would spend the money she made selling her milk, the maid accidentally tipped the pail.*
- **Exception proves the rule** – the assumption that a rule is strengthened by its exceptions: *The word "proves" once meant to test.*

- **Fast and loose** – a person who is treating something carelessly or dishonestly is playing “fast and loose”: *It descends from a game played at fairs in the Middle Ages, involving trickery.*
- **Flash in the pan** – something or someone who appears promising but quickly fades into nothing: *A musket that fails to fire produces a flash of gun powder but no bullet. Later, prospectors panning for gold would see a glint in the pan that turned out to be nothing.*
- **Fly off the handle** – to give rein to his/her bad temper: *A loose ax head can fly off the handle in a dangerous and uncontrollable way.*
- **Freelance** – an independent worker whose income comes from many sources and not just one: *The term was coined by Sir Walter Scott. A medieval soldier who owes no loyalty to one person is free to sell his labour (lance) where he pleases.*
- **Get one’s goat** – to get the better of someone through devious means: *Owners sometimes put a goat in the stall of a nervous racehorse to calm it down. If an opponent steals the goat, the horse will become even more nervous and blow the race.*
- **Gift horse** – don’t look a “gift horse” in the mouth – don’t find fault with a gift: *The age of a horse and, therefore, its value is determined by looking at his teeth.*
- **Hair of the dog** – to take a drink the morning after a night of drinking to ease a hangover: *Old belief that the best cure for rabies was to obtain a hair of the dog that bit you and place it in the wound. There was a Medieval belief that the source of an illness could also cure it.*
- **Know the ropes** – be familiar with all aspects of a job: *Experienced sailors know all the ropes found on sailing ships. An apprentice is “learning the ropes.”*
- **Lock, stock and barrel** – everything is included: *This refers to the three parts of a gun. If all three are named, the gun is complete.*
- **Lay an egg** – a joke that falls flat; any failure, especially done in public: *A hen laying an egg makes a great deal of fuss but the other hens pay no attention. A comedian telling a joke makes a great fuss. If no one laughs, he has laid an egg.*
- **Make no bones** – speak freely and clearly: *Originally meant to let things pass. A guest finding a bone in the fish soup or chowder, to be polite, would “make no” mention of the “bones”. The term began to be used ironically and gradually came to mean the opposite of remaining silent.*
- **Mud in your eye** – a common toast: *The toast is not to another, but to yourself. In horse racing, if the track is wet, the rider of the losing horse will get mud in his eyes sprayed up by the winning horse.*
- **Pig in a poke** – to buy something without having seen it: *Poke comes from the Irish poc meaning bag. Small pigs were carried to market in bags. A person who buys one without looking in the bag runs the risk of being cheated.*
- **Rack one’s brains** – a person struggling to work something out mentally: *From the Old English “reken” (to stretch), a rack was a punishment on which a person was stretched.*
- **Scapegoat** – someone who is blamed for the wrongdoing of another: *This refers to a Biblical story of a ritual in which the sins of the community were placed on a goat. The goat was, then, allowed to escape, taking the sins with it.*

Material adapted from: *Why do we say it: The stories behind the words.* (1985). Castle Books.

