

Useful Idioms

Warm up:

- What English idioms do you know? Do you find them funny or confusing?
- Can you think of an idiom in your language that is hard to translate into English?
- Is there any idiom or phrase you try to live your life by?
- Do you know the origin of any idioms in English or in your own language?



"I'm feeling a bit under the weather today."

1. Read the sentences and try to guess what the underlined idioms mean with a partner.

a) "I'm sorry I can't come to work, I'm a bit under the weather today."

Meaning:

b) "Could you keep an eye on my bag? I'm going to the bathroom"

Meaning:

c) "When it comes to construction, never cut corners. That's how disasters happen."

Meaning:

d) "I thought "What could go wrong? This should be easy!" Famous last words."

Meaning:

e) "I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out, I can explain."

Meaning:

f) "How much will it cost? No one can say for sure, but ballpark figure, 50 million dollars."

Meaning:

g) "I can see now that I should've broken up with her years ago, but hindsight is 20/20."

Meaning:

 2. Read the definitions of the idioms from exercise 1. How many did you correctly guess?

- a) To feel a little sick or unwell.
- b) To watch something.
- c) To take unnecessary and unwise shortcuts, usually to save time or money.
- d) When someone says something optimistic, only to be proven wrong
- e) Please listen to my logic or evidence before you decide.
- f) A rough estimate of a number.
- g) You can always see things more clearly looking back than you can in the moment.

 3. Read the idioms and their origins. Then write a description of what you think each idiom means based on its' origin.

To bite the bullet: Before anaesthesia was widely available, soldiers were sometimes given a bullet to bite on during surgery to distract from the pain and prevent biting on their own tongues.



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Hands Down

This phrase comes from horse racing. If a jockey is winning by a large margin, they could loosen the reins and lower their hands because victory was already assured, hence "hands down."

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Close, but no cigar: This phrase originated at fairs in the early 20th century, where cigars were given as prizes for games. If a contestant nearly won but fell short, they would be told, "Close, but no cigar."

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Let's call it a day

This phrase originated in the 19th century and initially referred to the end of a workday. Workers or colleagues would use the expression to indicate it was time to stop working.

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Speak of the devil

There was an old superstition in medieval Europe that speaking the devil's name could summon him. Originally this was a serious and cautionary phrase, but today it's used in a more playful and light-hearted way.



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Catch 22

The phrase "catch 22" originates from the novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. In the book a pilot in World War 2 finds out he can stop flying missions if the camp doctor decides he is insane. In order to be diagnosed as insane, the pilot must visit the doctor, however if he visits the doctor this means he must care about his own safety and therefore must be sane, and must continue to fly missions.

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Piece of cake

This seemingly light-hearted phrase actually has quite a dark background. In the 19th century slaves in America used to perform "cake walks" in secret gatherings. Cake walks were performances in which the slaves made fun of the pretentious mannerisms and easy lifestyles of slave owners, usually in the form of dance. The prize for the best "cake walk" was often a literal piece of cake.



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5. Listen to the conversation and answer the questions.

- a) Why does Claudia think Trent might be sick?
- b) Why is Trent not happy with his job?
- c) Why did Trent think finding a new job would be easy?
- d) In your own words, what is the catch 22 Trent expresses about looking for a job?
- e) Why does Trent need to find a new job quickly?
- f) Does Trent know exactly how much his kid's braces will cost?



6. Listen to the conversation again and identify idioms not listed earlier. Match them to the definitions provided below.

a) Definition: I have no news to tell you, but I'm doing ok.

Idiom:

b) Definition: I find this thing very frustrating.

Idiom:

c) Definition: Unnecessary and frustrating bureaucracy and rules.

Idiom:

d) Definition: A good general guideline, but not an exact rule.

Idiom:

e) Definition: Please don't misunderstand me.

Idiom:

f) Definition: All the bad things in life seem to come at the same time.

Idiom:



7. Ask and answer the questions with your partner, and try to use one of the idioms in brackets in your answer (you may want to take a minute to prepare your answer).

- a) How much do you think your apartment / car is worth? (*Ball park figure*)
- b) What is a decision you made that you regret? (*Hindsight is 20/20*)
- c) What is advice would you give to someone who wants to start working in your industry? (*Rule of thumb*)
- d) Can you tell me about a day where many things went wrong for you? (*When it rains it pours*)
- e) What is something that really irritates you? (*Drive me nuts*)
- f) What is something that you think is very easy? (*A piece of cake*)
- g) What do you do if you have a cold or the flu? (*Under the weather*)
- h) Is there a restaurant near where you live that is easily the best restaurant in the area? (*Hands down*)
- i) If you think this class should finish now, what would you say? (*Let's call it a day*)