

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: *feeling sick*

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

Meaning: *To watch something.*

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

Meaning: *To take unnecessary and unwise shortcuts, usually to save time or money.*

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

Meaning: *When someone says something optimistic, only to be proven wrong*

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

Meaning: *Please listen to my logic or evidence before you decide.*

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


Meaning: *A rough estimate of a number.*

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

Meaning: *You can always see things more clearly looking back than you can in the moment.*

 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.

To do something unpleasant or painful because it is necessary, even though you would prefer not to do it.



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."

Definitely, without question.

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."

You were almost successful, not quite, so you do not get a reward.



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.

Let's say we are finished with what we are doing and stop.

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.

You are talking about a person, and then they arrive.



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.

An impossible situation in which you cannot do one thing until you do another thing, but you cannot do that thing until you do the first, creating an unescapable loop.

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.



Something that is very easy.



5. Listen to the conversation and answer the questions.

- a) Why does Claudia think Trent might be sick? *Because he looks sick, because he is stressed.*
- b) Why is Trent not happy with his job? *They have introduced a lot of red tape which is very time consuming, and they have introduced a new system for entering client info which is poorly designed*
- c) Why did Trent think finding a new job would be easy? *Because he has qualifications.*
- d) In your own words, what is the catch 22 Trent expresses about looking for a job? *He cannot find a job because he does not have enough experience, and he cannot get experience because he cannot get a job.*
- e) Why does Trent need to find a new job quickly? *He handed in his notice, and his current job will end next week.*
- f) Does Trent know exactly how much his kid's braces will cost? *No, he doesn't. He thinks approximately 6000.*



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: *Same old, same old.*
- b) Definition: I find this thing very frustrating.
Idiom: *Driving me nuts.*
- c) Definition: Unnecessary and frustrating bureaucracy and rules.
Idiom: *Red tape.*
- d) Definition: A good general guideline, but not an exact rule.
Idiom: *Rule of Thumb*
- e) Definition: Please don't misunderstand me.
Idiom: *Don't get me wrong.*
- f) Definition: All the bad things in life seem to come at the same time.
Idiom: *When it rains, it pours.*



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)

Audio Transcript

Claudia: Hey Trent, how's it going?

Trent: ah not bad, same old same old. You?

Claudia: I'm ok. Are you sure you're ok? You look a bit under the weather.

Trent: No I'm fine, I'm just tired because I've been searching for a new job and it's been driving me nuts.

Claudia: Oh I hate looking for jobs, but I thought you liked your job.

Trent: Yeah, I mean don't get me wrong, I like my job, but they introduced some new rules last year and now the amount of red tape I have to deal with is just insane. Every time we get a new client I have to spend a whole day filling out forms, and most of it is just writing the same info over and over. On top of that we have a new system to enter customer info on, and it's a mess! When they first introduced it they said it would make our lives easier, but I've been using it for 6 months now and I can confidently say it is hands down the worst system I've ever worked with.

Claudia: Ok yeah, that does sound pretty frustrating. But I'm guessing the job hunt isn't going great either?

Trent: Nope. I thought with my qualifications that finding a job would be a piece of cake.

Claudia: Ha, famous last words.

Trent: Yeah. Turns out it's not so easy.

Claudia: Why not?

Trent: Well I only have 2 years experience in my industry, and every employer wants more experience than I have. It's this horrible catch 22 where you need experience to get a job, but you can't get a job cause you don't have experience.

Claudia: Yeah I've experienced that before. How long have you been searching for?

Trent: Only about 2 weeks now.

Claudia: Two weeks? That's nothing! I'd say as a rule of thumb you need to look for at least 2 months before you really know what the job market is like. Give it some time and be patient.

Trent: Well that's the thing... I really don't have time. I handed in my notice at work a month ago. Next week is my last week.

Claudia: What? Trent, you really should have waited till you had a new job before you quit your old one!

Trent: Yeah I know that now, but hindsight's 20/20 I guess. On top of that I have to pay for my kid to go to the dentist and get braces next month.

Claudia: How much is that going to cost?

Trent: Ballpark figure about 6000 dollars I guess

Claudia: Ouch.

Trent: Yep. When it rains, it pours.