

500 MOST POPULAR ENGLISH IDIOMS

MEANINGS, EXAMPLES, ORIGINS

FREE PREVIEW

LEARZING

A

ACHILLES' HEEL

Meaning: A weakness in a person or system which might cause them to fail.

Example 1: They have a team with great stars but a weak defense is their Achilles' heel.

Example 2: I'm a good student, but I know I won't score high enough on the scholarship test because math is my Achilles' heel.

Origin: The phrase has its origins in the legend of the Greek hero Achilles. According to the legend, Achilles was dipped into the river Styx by his mother Thetis to make him invulnerable. The only portion of his body not immersed into the water was his heels, by which his mother held him. As a result, the heels were the only vulnerable part of his body.

(THE) ACID TEST

Meaning: Something that shows the true worth or value of someone or something.

Example 1: The new party is doing better and better in the polls, but the acid test will be the next election.

Example 2: They've always been good friends, but the acid test will come when they have to share a flat.

Origin: From the testing of gold with nitric acid. The figurative use started around the mid 19th century, with the earliest print reference being in the Wisconsin paper "The Columbia Reporter" in November 1845.

ADD INSULT TO INJURY

Meaning: To hurt the feelings of a person who is already upset.

Example 1: He said my clothes didn't suit me, and then to add insult to injury he said I needed to lose some weight!

Example 2: I was already late for work and, to add insult to injury, I spilled coffee all over myself.

Origin: The phrase is an ancient one, it goes back to the Ancient Greek Aesop's fables (around 620-560 B.C.), but was recorded in English in the mid 1700s. The most often cited use is in the Roman writer Phaedrus' fable of a bald man and a fly.

AFRAID OF YOUR OWN SHADOW

Meaning: Easily frightened.

Example 1: After Tom was robbed on the street, he was afraid of his own shadow.

Example 2: Everyone was surprised that Jane led the meeting with confidence, as she normally seems afraid of her own shadow.

Origin: An exaggeration, this idiom has been used since the early 1500's, and may originally be of Greek origin. It is found in a fragment of a play from the Greek playwright Aristophanes, who worked from 427 to 397 B.C.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Meaning: Even though something seems completely impossible.

Example 1: Against all odds, Canada defeated Brazil in the football final.

Example 2: Against the odds, he was able to survive being stranded in the wilderness for a week with no food.

Origin: Odds, in this idiom, comes from betting and has been used figuratively in this idiom since around 1900.

ALIVE AND KICKING

Meaning: To be in good health and active.

Example 1: I thought for sure that old dog wouldn't survive the winter, but it's still alive and kicking!

Example 2: John's completely recovered after surgery, he's alive and kicking.

Origin: Sometimes shortened to "live and kicking", originally was used by fishmongers hawking their wares to convince customers of their freshness and has been considered a cliché since about 1850. The variant originated in the 1960s as a denial of someone's reported death.

ALL GREEK TO ME

Meaning: I can't understand it at all.

Example 1: I've tried reading the manual but it's all Greek to me.

Example 2: He tried to explain the rules of the game to me, but it was all Greek to me.

Origin: The earliest references to this phrase is from medieval Latin. In the Middle Ages, use of Greek was dwindling and scribes who had difficulty translating Greek text would write "Graecum est, non legitur" or "Graecum est, non potest legi" (It is Greek; it cannot be read). The phrase entered modern English when Shakespeare used it in his play "Julius Caesar" in 1599. Initially it was used in the literal sense, where a person who did not know Greek would say it, but later it came to be used for anything unintelligible.

ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE

Meaning: A situation suddenly becomes crazy and violent.

Example 1: If my wife finds out about my girlfriend, all hell will break loose.

Example 2: One guy pushed another at the bar and then all hell broke loose - that's why we left!

Origin: The English author and poet John Milton is responsible for the origin of this idiom. In his epic poem, "Paradise Lost", this expression appears as, "Wherefore with thee came not all hell broke loose?" Milton's poem is a biblical story about Satan, an angel who rebelled against God and was forced out of heaven into hell.

(THE) APPLE OF YOUR EYE

Meaning: The person who you love most.

Example 1: Harry was his first child and the apple of his eye.

Example 2: He said that Kelly was the apple of his eye. He could not imagine living without her.

Origin: This term, which rests on the ancients' idea that the eye's pupil is apple-shaped and that eyes are particularly precious, appears in the Bible. Shakespeare used the phrase in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", 1600. The phrase became more widely used in the general population when Sir Walter Scott included it in the popular novel "Old Mortality", 1816.

(AN) ARMCHAIR CRITIC

Meaning: Someone that shows the true worth or value of someone or something.

Example 1: He is such an armchair critic - he's ready to give a lot of advice about driving, but he's never driven in his life.

Example 2: My uncle is such an armchair critic about the classes I'm taking - the fact that he never went to college doesn't stop him from weighing in!

Origin: The term is first recorded in 1896, but the concept was around at least a decade earlier: in 1886 Joseph Chamberlain sneered at opponents as 'armchair politicians'.

ARMED TO THE TEETH

Meaning: Heavily armed, having many weapons.

Example 1: The criminals were armed to the teeth when they robbed the bank.

Example 2: There are too many guns around. The entire country is armed to the teeth.

Origin: The phrase originated in the 14th century and referred to knights who wore head to foot armor. However, it became popular in the mid 1800s, and was used for weapons only at first. Now it is also used figuratively.

AS A DUCK TAKES TO WATER

Meaning: Easily and naturally.

Example 1: The baby adapted to the bottle as a duck takes to water.

Example 2: I wasn't sure if he'd like playing the piano, but he's taken to it as a duck takes to water.

Origin: The word "duck" comes from the Old English "duncan," which did not, interestingly, mean any sort of bird. "Duncan" was a verb meaning "to plunge underwater suddenly, to dive or dip." The name "duck" for the fowl came from its habit of feeding by "ducking," plunging its head into the water.

(AS) BLACK AS A STACK OF BLACK CATS

Meaning: Completely black.

Example 1: Her hair was black as a stack of black cats.

Example 2: After playing in the mud all morning, the little boy was as black as a stack of black cats.

Origin: The phrase is heard in Vermont (the U.S.) for a very dark night.

(AS) BLIND AS A BAT

Meaning 1: Unable to see at all, completely blind.

Example 1: I'm as blind as a bat without my glasses.

Meaning 2: Unwilling to recognize problems or bad things.

Example 2: Connie is blind as a bat when it comes to her daughter's disgraceful behavior.

Origin: This simile, based on the erroneous idea that the bat's erratic flight means it cannot see properly, has survived even though it is now known that bats have a sophisticated built-in sonar system. [Late 1500s]

(AS) COOL AS A CUCUMBER

Meaning: Very calm and confident.

Example 1: She was as cool as a cucumber before her presentation because she was well-prepared.

Example 2: The politician was cool as a cucumber throughout the interview with the aggressive journalist.

Origin: This phrase may have originated from the fact that even in hot weather, the inside of cucumbers are approximately 20 degrees cooler than the outside air. Therefore, a person who stays cool, calm and relaxed in a difficult situation can be compared to a cucumber staying cool inside, even in hot weather.

(AS) DRUNK AS A SKUNK

Meaning: Very drunk.

Example 1: Do you remember last night at all? You were as drunk as a skunk!

Example 2: After his fifth cocktail, Michael was as drunk as a skunk.

Origin: It's simply a good example of our love of comparisons and rhyming, made especially popular by the fact that "skunk" happens to be one of the few words that rhymes with "drunk. Used since 1940s.

(AS) SICK AS A DOG

Meaning: Very sick.

Example 1: I had to go to the doctor on Monday because I was as sick as a dog all weekend.

Example 2: The last time I ate shellfish I was sick as a dog for 48 hours afterwards.

Origin: There are several expressions of the form sick as a ..., that date from the 18th and 19th centuries. Sick as a dog is actually the oldest of them, recorded from 1705; it is probably no more than an attempt to give force to a strongly worded statement of physical unhappiness. It was attached to a dog, because dogs often seem to have been linked to things considered unpleasant or undesirable (big dictionaries have long entries about all the ways that dog has been used in a negative sense). The explanation for this isn't that people didn't like dogs, it is that diseases such as the plague were often spread via animals like rats, birds, and unfortunately, dogs.

AS THE CROW FLIES

Meaning: By the most direct way, along a straight line between two places.

Example 1: As the crow flies, it is about six kilometers between my house and downtown.

Example 2: From here to the village it's five miles as the crow flies, but it's a lot further by road.

Origin: The phrase has been in use since the 1700s. It refers to the fact that the crow is a very intelligent creature and would not take a long route if a short one was available. It is unhindered by obstacles and can fly in a straight line.