

Idioms in alphabetical order

a blank canvas	something that can be developed or changed in many different ways	The flat is a blank canvas . We could do exactly what we want to make it our own.
a breath of fresh air	someone or something that is new, interesting and exciting	After all the criticism, his positivity came as a breath of fresh air .
a likely story	used for telling someone that you do not believe what they have just said	What, she just found the watch on a park bench? A likely story .
a long shot	an attempt or guess that is not likely to be successful but that is worth trying	It's a long shot , but you could try calling her at work.
a sight for sore eyes	someone or something that you are very pleased to see	Hey Pippa, you're a sight for sore eyes!
a slow burner	a thing that slowly develops into something interesting or powerful	Be patient because the series is a slow burner . It gets far better in the second episode.
Achilles heel	a weak feature of someone or something that is otherwise strong, which makes them open to attack or failure	Spelling and punctuation has always been my Achilles heel .
agree to differ	to accept that someone else does not have the same opinion as you and agree not to argue about it any more	There are some issues on which my colleague and I have agreed to differ .
as dead as a doornail	completely dead or not working	I dropped my mobile phone in the bath and now it's as dead as a doornail .
as far as anyone can tell	used for saying what you think is true when you think that there may be facts that you or others do not know	There's been no damage to the property as far as anyone can tell .
at the leading edge	at the most modern and advanced point in the development of something	These scientists are at the leading edge of medical research.
be barking up the wrong tree	to be doing something that will not get the result that you want	If you think Hamish is going to help you, then I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree .
be caught red-handed	to be caught doing something wrong	They were caught red-handed trying to break into the van.
be full of yourself	to be always talking about yourself or your achievements in a way that annoys other people	I'd rather not ask Ivan to do the speech – he's a bit too full of himself .
be made of money	to have a lot of money	I can't give you as much as that – I'm not made of money , you know.
be on a roll	to be having a lot of success or good luck	We'd be crazy to stop when things are going so well – we're on a roll .
be out of the loop	to not belong to a group that has information and makes decisions about something	There's no point in asking Kanami about it – she's out of the loop .
be rolling in it	to have a lot of money	They sold their house in London and made a massive profit, so they're rolling in it .
be stuck between a rock and a hard place	to be in a position in which you have to choose between two things that are not good	Either Pablo is disappointed or we upset Anna. We're stuck between a rock and a hard place on this one.
be your bread and butter	to be something that provides your main income	Right now this kind of work is my bread and butter .
bear no resemblance to (someone/something)	to look completely different from someone or something	This is supposed to be a replacement but it bears no resemblance to the original.

beat around the bush	to spend a long time getting to the main point of what you are saying, often because it is embarrassing	I wish they'd stop beating around the bush and tell us what we need to know.
between you and me	used when you are telling someone something that you do not want anyone else to know about	Between you and me , I'm not sure that's the only problem.
bowl (someone) over	to surprise someone by being very beautiful, impressive, unexpected, etc	We were bowled over by the sheer beauty of the landscape.
break the mould	to change a situation completely, or to do something in a completely new way	A lot of those reality shows are very similar, but this one definitely breaks the mould .
by the book	correctly, following all the rules or systems for doing something in a strict way	I can't believe this is Sanjit's mistake, he always does everything by the book .
catch (someone's) drift	to understand the basic meaning that someone is trying to express	I couldn't hear everything Alex was saying but I think I caught her drift .
catch (someone's) eye	if something catches your eye, you suddenly notice it	As she flicked through the pages, an attractive design caught her eye .
Catch 22 situation	a set of problems that is impossible to escape from because each problem must be solved first before you can solve any of the others	You can't get a job without an address and you can't rent a flat without a job – it's a Catch 22 situation .
clear the air	to discuss a problem or difficult situation with someone in order to make it better	Karina and I have had a little chat and I'm hoping this has now cleared the air .
cliff-hanger	an exciting end to part of a book or television programme that makes you want to read or watch the next part	There's a real cliff-hanger in the last chapter of this novel, so I'm guessing there's going to be a sequel.
collector's item	a rare or valuable object that collectors want to own	We never use that old teapot because we've been told it's a collector's item .
come out of your shell	to stop being shy and begin to confidently show your real character and feelings	Once Laurence came out of his shell , he was pretty talkative.
creature of habit	someone who likes to do the same thing at the same time every day	I drink coffee in the morning and water after lunch. I'm definitely a creature of habit .
dead end	a situation in which no further progress is possible	Unfortunately, it looks as though this line of inquiry has come to a dead end .
don't get me wrong	used when you want to make sure that someone understands your comments correctly, especially when you are criticising something	Don't get me wrong , we love going to the theatre, but this just wasn't worth the money.
down the rabbit hole	used for referring to a situation in which you become so interested in something that you cannot stop trying to find out about it or doing it	Whenever I really enjoy a play I often end up down the rabbit hole , researching the cast.
draw the line at (something)	to say that you will definitely not allow or accept something	You can invite some of your friends, but I draw the line at more than ten.
feel the pinch	to have less money than you need	Are you feeling the pinch because of massive energy bills?
find common ground	to find something that people can agree about, especially when they disagree about other things	We don't agree on some things, but we've also found plenty of common ground .
for a split second	for an extremely small amount of time	Apologies, for a split second I'd forgotten your surname.

freelance	freelance work is done by a person who is not permanently employed by a particular company but who sells their services to more than one company	They commissioned a freelance artist to produce the drawings.
from scratch	from the beginning again, not using all the work that you have done before	Milo has rebuilt the entire car engine from scratch .
get (something) down to a fine art	to become very good at doing something, especially something difficult	After a whole year, I've got my commute to work down to a fine art .
get (something) off your chest	to talk to someone about something that has been worrying you, so that you feel better about it	You're looking worried. Is there anything you want to get off your chest , Ria?
get off on the wrong foot	to immediately establish a bad relationship with someone when you first meet them or first start working with them	I'm not sure why, but somehow Mike and I got off on the wrong foot when I joined the company.
get the wrong end of the stick	to understand something completely incorrectly	That's not what she means at all. You've got the wrong end of the stick .
get your wires crossed	if two people get their wires crossed, they become confused because they each think that the other one is talking about something else	Sorry, I thought we were going to Paola's house first. We must have got our wires crossed .
give (someone) the creeps	to make someone feel nervous or frightened	Having to walk through the forest at night gave me the creeps .
give (someone) the upper hand	to give someone control or an advantage over a person or situation	The break for rain seems to have given the Australian team the upper hand in the match.
go back to the drawing board	to try to think of a completely new idea because the one that you tried before was not successful	OK, we'll just have to go back to the drawing board and think of something else.
go down a storm	to be very popular	We've changed the recipe and the new version is going down a storm with customers.
go round in circles	to do something for a long time without achieving any results because you always return to the same problem that you cannot solve	There's no point in continuing this debate, we're just going round in circles .
go-getter	someone who is determined to succeed and who works hard to achieve this	They only want to recruit go-getters who will make sacrifices in order to succeed.
grey area	a situation in which the rules are not clear, or in which you are not sure what is right or wrong	I'm afraid I can't give a definite answer to that question as it's still something of a grey area .
hands down	without any doubt	It's hands down the best restaurant in town.
hard up	not having much money	I'm not sure Lance can afford to come – he's pretty hard up at the moment.
have a chip on your shoulder	to be likely to become angry or offended very easily, especially about something that other people think should not upset you	Wim is really jealous about it, but then he's always had a chip on his shoulder .
have a head start	to have an advantage over other people in the same situation as you, especially in a competition	Students who do the course will have a head start when applying for jobs.
in a tight spot	in a difficult situation	I'm in a bit of a tight spot – can I borrow some money for a couple of weeks?

in the clear	no longer believed to be guilty of something bad or illegal	It's been confirmed now that you weren't there at the time – you're in the clear .
in the pipeline	being planned or prepared in order to happen or be available soon	The band has a new album in the pipeline .
in the same ballpark	not calculated exactly, but within a similar general range	Tom's on a good salary and although I don't know what Sam earns, I'd guess it's in the same ballpark .
it's news to me	used for saying that you didn't know about something, especially when you are annoyed about this	'So Natalia is having a party when you're away.' 'Really? It's news to me! '
jump the gun	to do or say something too soon, before you know that it is suitable or correct	We'll ask them when the time is right; we mustn't jump the gun , or we'll regret it.
keep (something) under wraps	to keep something secret	Next year's design is being kept under wraps .
keep your head above water	to manage to live or keep a business running even though you are not earning much money	He's had some unexpected bills, but is still managing to keep his head above water .
learn the ropes	to learn how to do something, especially a job	It didn't take her new assistant long to learn the ropes .
leave your mark	to have a very strong and noticeable effect on someone or something, usually a bad one that lasts for a long time	Yulia's difficult childhood left its mark on her throughout her life.
let the cat out of the bag	to tell someone something that was intended to be secret	It was supposed to be a surprise, but Frederico let the cat out of the bag .
like talking to a brick wall	used for saying that someone does not listen or react to you when you talk to them	Don't bother explaining it to my mum; it's like talking to a brick wall .
live and breathe (something)	to be very enthusiastic about a particular activity and spend all the time you can doing it or talking about it	The whole family just lives and breathes music.
love is blind	used for saying that when you love someone, it is difficult to see their faults	She's so selfish. I can't really understand why they're together, but then love is blind .
make (someone's) blood run cold	to make someone feel suddenly very frightened or worried	A loud knock on the door made my blood run cold .
make waves	to cause problems by making suggestions or criticisms	I think your idea is great, but it's probably best to avoid making waves right now.
make your blood boil	to make you feel very angry	This should have been done weeks ago – it makes my blood boil .
meet (someone) halfway	to agree to do something that someone wants, if they do something that you want	If you're prepared to agree to these conditions then they'll meet you halfway on the price.
money for old rope	money that you earn very easily without much work or effort	We finished the job in half a day. It was money for old rope .
move the goalposts	to change the rules and make it difficult for people to achieve something or to know what to do	This issue is never going to be resolved if management keep moving the goalposts .
nail down the finer points	to definitely decide the details of something	A plan of action is almost agreed, we just need to nail down the finer points .
nasty piece of work	someone who is unkind or unpleasant	Erik is being horrible to everyone again – he's such a nasty piece of work .
no holds barred	without any limit on what you are allowed to do	Some viewers complained the show was offensive and there were certainly no holds barred .

not be out of the woods yet	used for saying that a situation is still difficult, although it has improved	Things are definitely getting better, but I'm afraid we're not out of the woods yet .
not for love nor money	used for emphasising that something is not available or possible, or that you will not do it	We want to make some alterations to the house but I can't find a builder for love nor money .
not say boo to a goose	to be very quiet and shy	Don't rely on Ciara to defend you – she wouldn't say boo to a goose .
on target	likely to get the result that you are trying to achieve	Are they on target to finish the work when we agreed?
on the right track	doing or thinking the right things	Thanks. This essay is looking great; you're definitely on the right track .
out of hand	not well controlled	You'd better say something before things get out of hand .
out of line	behaving in a way that other people do not approve of	Deb should apologise because what she said was way out of line .
people person	someone who enjoys being with other people and makes friends easily	The job mainly involves talking to customers so you definitely need to be a people person .
put your finger on (something)	to discover or understand exactly why a situation is the way it is, especially when something is wrong	Something isn't right here, can you put your finger on where the problem is?
put your money where your mouth is	used for saying that someone should do something, especially spend money, to show that they mean what they say instead of just talking about it	He says he's prepared to invest some of his savings, but he needs to put his money where his mouth is .
red herring	something that is not relevant that makes you confused or takes your attention away from what you should be concentrating on	At first it looked as if the doctor was involved, but that turned out to be a red herring .
reinvent the wheel	to waste time and effort trying to do something that someone else has already done well	We've already got a good solution for that, so don't waste time reinventing the wheel .
ring a bell	something that rings a bell sounds familiar to you, although you cannot remember the exact details	OK, yes, that rings a bell . I think I might have been there a few years ago.
rock the boat	to cause problems by changing a situation that is considered satisfactory	Everyone is happy with the arrangements now, so please don't rock the boat .
scare the wits out of (someone)	to make someone feel extremely frightened	Don't scream like that, you scared the wits out of me!
skeleton in the/your cupboard	an embarrassing secret about your past that you do not want anyone to know	If you want to succeed in politics then you can't have too many skeletons in the cupboard .
small talk	informal conversation about things that are not important	I didn't know anyone at my table and had to spend the entire meal making small talk .
smell a rat	to believe that something dishonest, illegal, or wrong has happened	When , he began to smell a rat .
spill the beans	to tell someone something, often something that should be kept secret	I think Jeff knows what's going on, but he wouldn't spill the beans when I asked him.
sticking point	something that people cannot agree on and that stops them from continuing with a discussion	Deciding who should deal with this is now one of the main sticking points .
stroke of luck	something that happens by chance and that helps you to achieve something	By a stroke of luck , Finn had an identical jacket that I could borrow for the wedding.

stumbling block	a difficulty that causes mistakes or prevents progress	This is a major stumbling block to negotiations that will be hard to overcome.
take (something) on the chin	to accept something unpleasant in a brave way without complaining	Pelagia took it all on the chin but the rest of the team were furious about the comments.
talk (someone's) ear off	to talk to someone for a long time, often in a loud or boring way	We stood there for nearly an hour while he talked my ear off .
talk shop	to talk about your work, especially in a way that is boring for other people	Can we change the subject and stop talking shop ?
talk the talk	to talk confidently about something in a way that makes people think you are good at it, know a lot about it, etc	Ed might not always get things right, but he can really talk the talk , can't he?
talk to the hand	used for saying in a slightly angry way that you do not want to listen to what someone is saying	'That's never going to work, Sian.' ' Talk to the hand . I don't need advice from you.'
teething problems	minor problems that a new company, project, product, etc may have in the beginning	This model has had one or two teething problems , but we've managed to sort them out.
tell (someone) a thing or two	to tell someone some useful or interesting information about someone or something	I'm sure Felix could tell us a thing or two about electric cars. Shall we ask him?
tell (someone) where to get off	to tell someone very rudely that you are not interested in them or in what they are saying	Achim can never be trusted – she should tell him where to get off .
tell it like it is	to give the real facts about something, even if they are unpleasant	OK, I'm ready to hear the worst, just tell it like it is .
tell me about it	used for saying that you already know about something unpleasant that someone has just described because you have experienced it yourself	'We've spent hours on the phone to the insurance company.' ' Tell me about it! '
tell me something I don't know	used for saying in a slightly angry way that you already know about something that a person is talking to you about, often because it is obvious	'But Jack hasn't finished this.' ' Tell me something I don't know , I've been trying to sort his mess out all morning!'
the bottom line	the most basic fact or issue in a situation	This won't get better if you don't change your lifestyle. That's the bottom line .
the pot calling the kettle black	used for saying that someone is criticising another person for a fault that they also have	He said she was stubborn? Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black . He can never admit he's wrong.
the world is (someone's) oyster	used for emphasising that you can go anywhere or do anything that you want to	With those skills she'll find work wherever she wants. The world is her oyster .
there's a lot to be said for (something)	used for saying that there are many advantages in doing something	There's a lot to be said for living with your parents and saving on rent.
there's more to (someone/ something) than meets the eye	used for saying that someone or something is more interesting, impressive, complicated, etc than they seem to be	Joshua might seem quiet and a little boring, but there's more to him than meets the eye .
think outside the box	to find new ways of doing things, especially of solving problems	We're looking for the ability to think outside the box and come up with innovative solutions.
throw in the towel	to stop trying to do something because you lack determination or because you think you cannot win	There are only three candidates now because two of them decided to throw in the towel .

time will tell	used for saying that you will know in the future whether something is true or right	It feels like it was the right thing to do, but time will tell .
to put it mildly	used for saying that the words you have chosen are not as extreme as they could have been	It was a rather awkward conversation, to put it mildly .
touch base with (someone)	to communicate with someone that you have not seen for some time in order to find out how they are, what is happening, etc	I'm planning to touch base with Becks when I'm in Manchester.
wet blanket	someone who spoils other people's fun by being negative and complaining	Don't be a wet blanket – it'll be fun!
wild goose chase	an attempt to find something that does not exist or that you are very unlikely to discover	There's no one with that name living there – I suspect you've been sent on a wild goose chase .