

CAMBRIDGE

# ENGLISH IDIOMS IN USE

60 units of vocabulary  
reference and practice

Self-study and  
classroom use

Second Edition

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**Advanced**

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Experience

**Better**

**Learning**

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# Using this book

## Why was this book written?

It was written to help you take your knowledge of idioms to a more advanced level. The ability to use idioms accurately and appropriately is an indicator that you have a truly advanced level of English, and so this book pays attention to the productive use of idioms as well as to the comprehension of their meaning. Many of you will have already worked with *English Idioms in Use Intermediate*, and this book builds on the work done there. However, it does not matter if you have gained your knowledge of idioms in a different way. We do not assume that you have used *English Idioms in Use Intermediate*, although we do present and practise different idioms from those that were presented in the lower-level book.

## How were the idioms in this book selected?

The idioms which are presented in this book were mainly selected from those identified as significant by the CANCODE corpus of spoken English, developed at the University of Nottingham in association with Cambridge University Press, and the Cambridge International Corpus of written and spoken English (now known as the Cambridge English Corpus). The idioms selected are all also to be found in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, where you can find additional usage notes and examples. You can search this dictionary online by going to the following website:

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

## How is the book organised?

The book has 60 two-page units. The left-hand page explains the idioms that are presented in the unit. You will usually find an explanation of the meaning of the idiom, an example of it in use and, where appropriate, some comments on when and how it is used. The exercises on the right-hand page check that you have understood the information on the left-hand page and give you practice in using the material presented.

The units are organised into seven sections:

*Learning about idioms* (Units 1–8) gives important information relating to idioms in general, such as what they are and how to use them accurately.

*Types of idiom* (Units 9–13) looks at some different types of idiom, dealing with such areas as *Similes* and idioms from other languages.

*Idioms from the topic area of ...* (Units 14–24) focuses on idioms originating from different topic areas. For example, a great many idioms in English are based on sailing, a result of Britain's history as an island with a strong dependence on the sea. This section therefore opens with a unit dealing with idioms originating from the topic area of *Sailing*. Other units in this section deal with, for example, idioms based on *Parts of the body*, *Games and sport* and *Literature*. Many of us find it interesting to learn about the origins of idioms, and studying them in this way can also help to fix their meaning in your memory.

*Idioms to talk about ...* (Units 25–38) focuses on the topic areas where certain idioms are frequently used. For instance, there are units dealing with idioms used when talking about *Money*, about *Society* or about *Problems*.

*Idioms used in ...* (Units 39–41) looks at three types of writing where distinct types of idioms are used – *Journalism*, *Advertising* and *Formal writing*.

*Idioms used in conversation* (Units 42–47) presents idioms used in conversations from a functional point of view. For example, there are units dealing with *Telling stories*, *Agreeing and disagreeing* and *Emphasising*.

*Idioms using these keywords* (Units 48–60) groups idioms according to the keywords that they centre on. Unit 53, for instance, presents and practises idioms using the word *hand*, while Unit 59 focuses on idioms using the verb *fall*.

The book also contains a key and an index, listing the idioms we deal with and indicating the units where they can be found.

### **How should I use this book?**

We strongly recommend that you do the first two units in the book first – *What are idioms?* and *When and how are idioms used?* – as these give you basic information that underpins all the other units. After that, you may work on the units in any order that you prefer.

### **What else do I need in order to work with this book?**

You need a notebook or file so that you can write down the idioms that you study in the book as well as any others that you come across elsewhere.

You also need to have access to a good dictionary. We strongly recommend the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, as this gives you exactly the kind of information that you need to have about idioms. Your teacher, however, may also be able to recommend other dictionaries that you may find useful.

So all that remains is to say if you want to *stand out from the crowd* (Unit 40), start studying the idioms in this book. *There's no time like the present!* (Unit 40). We hope you'll find this an enjoyable and useful way to keep up and extend your knowledge of English idioms in use.

### A Formulaic language

Idioms are a type of formulaic language. Formulaic language consists of fixed expressions which you learn and understand as units rather than as individual words, for example:

type of formulaic language	examples
greetings and good wishes	Hi there! See you soon! Happy birthday!
prepositional phrases	at the moment, in a hurry, from time to time
sayings, proverbs and quotations	It's a small world! Don't put all your eggs in one basket. To be or not to be – that is the question.
compounds	car park, bus stop, home-made
phrasal verbs	take off, look after, turn down
collocations	blonde hair, deeply disappointed

### B Idioms

Idioms are fixed combinations of words whose meaning is often difficult to guess from the meaning of each individual word.

For example, if I say 'I **put my foot in it** the other day at Linda's house – I asked her if she was going to marry Simon', what does it mean? If you do not know that **put your foot in it** means *say something accidentally which upsets or embarrasses someone*, it is difficult to know exactly what the sentence means. It has a non-literal or idiomatic meaning.

Idioms are constructed in different ways, and this book gives you practice in a wide variety of types of idiom. Here are some examples:

Tim **took a shine to** [immediately liked] his teacher. (verb + object + preposition)

The band's number one hit was just **a flash in the pan** [something that happens only once] (idiomatic noun phrase)

Little Jimmy has been **as quiet as a mouse** [extremely quiet] all day. (simile. **See Unit 9 for more similes.**)

We arrived **safe and sound** [safely]. (binomial. **See Unit 10 for more binomials.**)

Idioms are often based on everyday things and ideas, for example, the human body:

Mark and Alistair **don't see eye to eye**. [don't agree with each other]

### C How can I use idioms?

Many idioms are quite informal, so use them carefully. You will need to be able to understand a lot of idioms if you want to read English fiction, newspapers or magazines, or understand TV shows, films and songs. People also often use idioms for humour or to comment on themselves, other people and situations.

You will sound more natural and fluent if you can use idioms in everyday conversation or informal writing. Be careful not to use too many, though!

#### Language help

The words and word order of idioms are usually fixed, and we cannot change them in any way. For example, we cannot say *gave a shine to* or *sound and safe*.

## Exercises

- 1.1** Read the beginning of this story and label the type of formulaic language used in the words in bold. Use the information in A opposite to help you.

In 2009, I **set off** on a long journey. As I left my house, my neighbour shouted, 'Good luck!' I didn't know **at that moment** that I would not see him again for three years. I **boarded the plane** at Heathrow, and soon it **took off** for Malaysia. When we **touched down** in Kuala Lumpur, I couldn't wait to **get off** the plane. I **took a bus** to the city centre and **spent the night** at a youth hostel. The first person I met was someone I had been at school with years ago. 'It's a small world!' he said when he saw me.



- 1.2** Underline the seven idioms in the rest of the story you read in 1.1.

My friend suggested that we join forces. 'There's safety in numbers,' he said. 'Let's hit the road together.' I was in two minds whether to go with him but finally decided to say yes. We travelled together for six months and had a whale of a time. We spent money like there was no tomorrow. I had to twist my dad's arm and persuade him to send me some more money so I could travel further.

- 1.3** Choose the correct answer.

- His first novel was just a) a flash in the pan b) a flash of the pan c) a flash in the pan.
- I think Philip has a) given a shine to b) taken a shine to c) got a shine to his new babysitter.
- I hope you have a good trip and come home a) safely and soundly b) sound and safe c) safe and sound.
- Oh dear! I think I've a) had a foot in it b) put my foot in it c) got my foot in it!
- Kate is really noisy, but her best friend is a) as quiet as a cat b) as quiet as a mouse c) as quiet like a mouse.

- 1.4** Look at these newspaper headlines. Each one has an idiom based on a part of the human body. What do you think they mean? Choose the correct answer.

1 University **goes cap in hand** to finance minister

3 Rita Soraz is **the apple of** Hollywood's eye

2 Airline **foots the bill** for delays and cancellations

4 Government is **burying its head in the sand**, says Opposition leader

- A university a) apologises to the minister b) asks the minister for financial help c) awards the minister a great honour.
- An airline a) has refused to pay the costs b) sends the bill to someone else c) will pay the costs.
- Rita Soraz is a) loved by everyone in Hollywood b) hated by everyone in Hollywood c) missed by everyone in Hollywood.
- The government is a) refusing to face a difficult situation b) about to resign c) making unpopular plans.

## A

**Idioms and change**

Idioms frequently change in English. Although many idioms last for a long time, some disappear very quickly. Therefore, some idioms that were popular 50 years ago may sound very old-fashioned and odd today. For example, the idiom **as stiff / straight as a ramrod** [sitting or standing with a very straight and stiff back] is not frequently used nowadays. It is therefore important to be careful if you learn an idiom from, say, an older novel, as it may sound unnatural if you use it in your own speech or writing. In this book we focus only on up-to-date idioms which are still commonly used.

## B

**What are idioms used for?**

- For emphasis, e.g. 'The singer's second album **sank like a stone**.' [failed completely]
- To agree with a previous speaker, e.g.  
A: Did you notice how Lisa started listening when you said her name?  
B: Yes, that certainly made her **prick her ears up**. [start listening carefully]
- To comment on people, e.g. 'Did you hear Tom has been invited for dinner with the prime minister? He's certainly **gone up in the world!**' [gained a better social position – or more money – than before]
- To comment on a situation, e.g. 'The new finance minister wants to **knock** the economy **into shape**.' [take action to get something into a good condition]
- To make an anecdote more interesting, e.g. 'It was just one disaster after another today, a sort of **domino effect**.' [when something, usually bad, happens and causes a series of other things to happen]
- To catch the reader's eye. Idioms – particularly those with strong images – are often used in headlines, advertising slogans and the names of small businesses. The writer may play with the idiom or make a pun (a joke involving a play on words) in order to create a special effect, e.g. *a debt of dishonour* instead of the usual **debt of honour**, [a debt that you owe someone for moral rather than financial reasons]
- To indicate membership of a particular group, e.g. surfers **drop in on** someone, meaning to get on a wave another surfer is already on. This kind of group-specific idiom is outside the focus of this book.

## C

**Where will you see or hear idioms?**

You will see and hear idioms in all sorts of speaking and writing. They are particularly common in everyday conversation and in popular journalism. For example, they are often found in magazine horoscopes, e.g. You'll spend much of this week **licking your wounds** [trying to recover from a bad experience], or in problem pages, e.g. 'Do you think that my relationship has **run its course?**' [come to a natural end] However, idioms are also used in more formal contexts, such as lectures, academic essays and business reports, e.g. 'It is hoped the regulations will **open the door to** better management.' [let something new start]

**See Unit 41 for more idioms used in formal writing.**

**Language help**

Look out for idioms being used in headlines and advertisements. Make a note of any interesting examples that you find.



## Exercises

### 2.1 Are these sentences true or false? If the answer is false, say why.

- 1 Few idioms stay in frequent usage for a long time.
- 2 Your English may sound unnatural if you use certain idioms.
- 3 Idioms can be used for dramatic effect.
- 4 Idioms are frequently used to comment on people and situations.
- 5 Headline writers always use idioms in their correct form.
- 6 Idioms are only used in some types of speaking and writing.
- 7 Newspapers and magazines are a good place to find idioms in use.
- 8 Idioms are not used in academic writing.

### 2.2 Complete each idiom.

- 1 My essay is really not very good. Could you please help me knock it into .....
- 2 It's time you stopped ..... your wounds and got back to your normal life.
- 3 Although the film cost a lot of money to make, it enjoyed no success at all; in fact, it sank like a .....
- 4 There was a kind of domino ..... when Jill left the company. Others in her team decided to follow her example, and that then gave the idea to other employees too.
- 5 Ben and Sarah went out together for a long time, but the relationship eventually ran its ..... – they're both happily married to other people now.
- 6 The children ..... up their ears when they heard the word 'chocolate'.

### 2.3 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



### 2.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Would *Going up in the world* be a better name for a mountain-climbing organisation or a furniture business?
- 2 Would *Knock yourself into shape* be a better slogan for dance classes or a boxing club?
- 3 Would *Let things run their course* be advising someone to act quickly or to be patient?
- 4 If a headline mentioned a *debt of honour*, would it be suggesting that the law or the person's conscience should be encouraging them to pay something back?
- 5 Would *This'll make you prick your ears up* be a better slogan for a hi-fi company or an earring business?

### Over to you

Do an Internet search for 'company names with puns'. Find three puns that you can explain.

At advanced level, your aim will be not only to understand idioms, but also to use them accurately and appropriately. This book will help you achieve these aims. There are other resources which you should use too.

## A

**Dictionaries**

To help you study idioms, you need a good learner's dictionary, ideally one which focuses on idioms. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* gives you examples of how idioms are used and also gives information on their use, e.g. whether they are used humorously, or informally, or in a more literary context. It also highlights the most important idioms to learn. You can access this dictionary online at [www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org). The best learner's dictionaries are corpus-based, i.e. they focus on idioms that people actually use and give authentic examples of their use. *English Idioms in Use Advanced* is based on the Cambridge International Corpus, which is a collection of over one billion words of real spoken and written English. Here is an example of how idioms are presented in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*:

**like it or lump it** *informal*

if you tell someone to like it or lump it, you mean they must accept a situation they do not like, because they cannot change it • *The fact remains, that's all we're going to pay him and he can like it or lump it.* • *Like it or lump it, romantic fiction is read regularly by thousands.*

## B

**The Internet**

You can use the Internet to find out more about the meanings and origins of idioms, and to see more examples of their use.

- The website <http://www.phrases.org.uk> lists the meanings and origins of many idioms, and the site provides examples of how the idioms are used. There is also a link to a Phrase Finder Facebook page, where you can ask questions about the meaning and origin of idioms.
- Use a search engine such as Google to find further examples of idioms in use. You could specify the context in which you want to find examples, for example by typing 'like it or lump it news', to find examples of the idiom used in newspaper headlines or articles.

## C

**Vocabulary notebooks**

Always make good, detailed notes about idioms in your vocabulary notebook. Include an example of the idiom in context, as well as its meaning. Add any notes about its usage, e.g. *informal* or *literary*. Doing a quick drawing of an idiom may help you to learn it.

Each time they asked him a question, he was like a rabbit caught in the headlights.  
The speaker unfortunately looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights during most of the discussion.  
= looked very frightened, unable to move or think  
(also 'deer' instead of 'rabbit')



## Exercises

### 3.1 Answer these questions. Use the information in A opposite to help you.

- 1 What two things does a good learner's dictionary do, as well as explain the meaning of idioms?
- 2 How much language and what kind of language is in the Cambridge International Corpus?
- 3 What does the dictionary say about the usage of *like it or lump it*?

### 3.2 Use the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (book or online) to match each idiom on the left with the label used in the dictionary on the right. Can you explain the meaning of the idioms?

- |                                 |               |
|---------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 get off your backside         | informal      |
| 2 have occasion to do something | formal        |
| 3 the shit hits the fan         | slang         |
| 4 know something inside out     | old-fashioned |
| 5 not soil your hands           | offensive     |
| 6 send someone to Coventry      | humorous      |
| 7 pigs might fly                | literary      |

### 3.3 Complete each sentence with an idiom from 3.2. You may need to change the form of the verb.

- 1 Henry will help you deal with these forms. He ..... the system .....
- 2 They think he's the boss of the criminal gang, but he never ..... by committing crimes personally.
- 3 Joey can be so lazy. I wish he'd .....
- 4 'I won't be late to work ever again.' 'Oh yes, and .....
- 5 If Greg finds out what you've done, .....
- 6 I live very close to the hospital, but luckily I've never ..... go there.
- 7 She had lied to them, and so they .....

### 3.4 Search for "like it or lump it" in the two ways described in B on the opposite page. What information did you get?

### 3.5 Underline the eight idioms in this newspaper article. What do you think each idiom means? Use a dictionary to help you.

#### SPORTS MINISTER HOPPING MAD

John Hamilton has made a name for himself by running a tight ship at the Ministry of Sport. So it was no surprise to his staff that he reportedly 'went spare' when he learnt what had been going on behind his back. Two of his leading advisors had been

feathering their own nests with government money intended for young people's sports organisations. 'Such behaviour is quite beyond the pale,' said Hamilton, 'and the two people concerned have already been given the sack'.



A

**What is a metaphor?**

Metaphors describe a person, object or situation by comparing it to something else with similar characteristics. They are often used in poetry and literature. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Romeo says 'Juliet is my sun,' suggesting that she is the most important force in his life, bringing him light and warmth.

Many idioms are based on metaphors. However, idioms are expressions that are used so frequently and are so fixed in the language that people often do not think about the metaphors behind them. The metaphors used in idioms are therefore much less original and thought-provoking than those used in literary contexts. People say, for example, 'The new president **was / took centre stage** at the meeting' [was the most important or noticeable thing or person], without thinking of the original image of a theatre.

B

**Work = war**

The language of idioms seems to suggest that English speakers see work and business life as a kind of war, with many work and business idioms based on images connected with war and fighting. For example, companies **launch** marketing **campaigns**, and they may **join forces with** one another. Business people might say that a situation **is a minefield** [is potentially dangerous] or that a company **is a casualty** of a difficult economic situation [was badly affected by it]. A manager may **pull rank** on his employees [use the power his position gives him to make them do something], and he may have to **get / take the flak** for a problem [receive strong criticism]. An employee may **be given** or **get his marching orders** [lose his job]. **See Unit 15 for more idioms based on war and conflict.**

C

**Understanding = seeing**

Idioms often equate seeing with understanding. For example, we talk about **seeing sense** or **seeing reason** [becoming sensible / reasonable] or **seeing the point** [understanding the importance of something]. Similarly, if someone **sees the joke**, they understand it. To **see the light** can mean to suddenly understand something.

D

**Some other metaphors****Emotion = colour**

Red can suggest anger, e.g. 'My brother **saw red** when I broke his phone.' Black is often associated with unpleasant feelings: if you get a **black mark** for something, it means people think you have done something bad, and they will remember it in future.

**Life = a journey**

If someone **is at a crossroads**, they are at a stage in life when they have to make an important decision. If you say that you **are going / getting nowhere**, you mean you are making no progress. If you say something is taking you into **uncharted territory / waters**, you mean it is taking you into unknown areas of experience.

**Life = a gamble**

If you **have something up your sleeve**, you have a secret plan or idea (someone playing cards for money may hide a card up their sleeve). If you **bluff your way** into or out of a situation, you get yourself there by deception in the same way that a gambler may bluff (pretend to be in a weaker or stronger position than is really the case).

**Language help**

Noticing the metaphors underlying many idioms will help you understand and learn them. Look out for other common concepts such as time = money.

## Exercises

### 4.1 Answer these questions. Use the information in A opposite to help you.

- 1 How do metaphors describe people, objects and situations?
- 2 In what kind of writing are metaphors frequently used?
- 3 How are the metaphors used in literary contexts different from those used in idioms?
- 4 Why do you think it can sometimes be useful for you to be aware of the origins of idioms?

### 4.2 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



### 4.3 Complete each idiom.

- 1 Tax legislation can be a ..... for new businesses; there are so many rules to follow.
- 2 Our company is planning to ..... a new marketing campaign in April.
- 3 Shouting at his manager got Tom a black ..... at work.
- 4 I'm sure your boss will ..... sense eventually and agree to your plan.
- 5 At first I didn't see the ..... of going to university or college, but then I saw the ..... and realised studying would give me more choices for the future.
- 6 If she doesn't offer to write the report, I'll ..... rank on her and tell her to do it.
- 7 Noor is ..... a crossroads in her life now that she has finished her medical degree. She has to decide what she is going to specialise in.
- 8 George doesn't know much about the job, but I'm sure he'll be able to ..... his way through the interview.

### 4.4 Replace the underlined part of each sentence with an idiom.

- 1 Everyone else was laughing, but Katie couldn't understand what was funny.
- 2 Eva is making no progress with her research.
- 3 BritTel is going to work together with SatCom to lobby the government.
- 4 The teacher was furious when Matt refused to do his homework.
- 5 The errors in the report really weren't Sam's fault, but he was blamed for them.
- 6 Tina is hoping her father will eventually become more reasonable and let her drive the family car.
- 7 Unfortunately, my brother's transport business was very seriously affected by the rise in fuel prices.
- 8 As the president of a major company, Ross is used to being the focus of attention.

All the examples in this unit come from the Cambridge Learner Corpus. This is a collection of over 95,000 exam scripts by students from over 190 countries taking Cambridge ESOL exams. The errors in this unit were actually made by learners in advanced-level exams, including CAE, Proficiency and IELTS (level 6+).

A major difficulty with idioms is that they are fixed expressions which cannot be changed – except when you are deliberately playing with the language. It is therefore very important to use idioms accurately. **See Unit 6 for more information on playing with idioms.**

## A

**Getting the keywords right**

You say that rising unemployment figures are just **the tip of the iceberg** [a small part of a much bigger problem], NOT the ~~top~~ of the iceberg.

You say that the state is responsible for its citizens' welfare **from the cradle to the grave** [from birth to death], NOT from the cradle to the ~~ceffin~~.

If you want to talk about people that you do not know or that you do not think are important, you can say **every Tom, Dick and / or Harry** could do that job, NOT every ~~Tom and Jerry~~!

If you pay for something yourself, you pay for it **out of your own pocket**, NOT out of your own ~~wallet~~.

If someone is in a bad mood, you can say they are **like a bear with a sore head**, NOT like a bear with a sore ~~throat~~.

When you remember the past nostalgically, you talk about **the good old days**, NOT the good old ~~time~~.

To say that someone or something will not exist for much longer, you can say their **days are numbered**, NOT their days are ~~counted~~.

To talk about limiting someone's freedom, you can use the idiom **to clip someone's wings**, NOT to ~~cut~~ someone's wings.

## B

**Getting the details right**

Using idioms accurately also means getting even the little words exactly right.

You must not add articles where they are not needed: someone has a **spirit of adventure** [enthusiasm for adventurous activities], NOT spirit of ~~an~~ adventure. You must not leave out articles either: fashion can be described as **up-to-the-minute** [new], NOT ~~up to~~ minute.

Take care with prepositions too: someone can **be at a loss for words** [not know what to say], NOT at a loss ~~of~~ words.

Make sure that you also use singular and plural forms correctly: you talk about a couple **tying the knot** [getting married (informal)], NOT ~~tying the knots~~.

Word order is very important too: you can be **sick and tired of** something [angry and bored], NOT ~~tired and~~ sick of it.

**Language help**

Translating idioms word for word can cause problems. For example, we **make a mountain out of a molehill** [make a small difficulty seem like a serious problem], NOT ~~make an elephant out of a mouse~~. Always check in a good dictionary before translating an idiom from your own language.

## Exercises

### 5.1 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?

1



3



2



4



### 5.2 Are the idioms in these sentences used correctly? If not, correct them.

- 1 My sister is always buying up-to-minute gadgets.
- 2 I'm sick and tired of listening to him complaining all the time.
- 3 My grandad's always talking about good old days.
- 4 They've been engaged for six months but haven't made any plans about when they're going to tie the knots.
- 5 Magda was at a loss for words when her son told her he had quit his new job.
- 6 Engineering isn't the kind of job that every Tom, Dick or Henry could do.

### 5.3 Complete each idiom.

- 1 Don't make such a ..... out of a molehill.
- 2 Everyone uses mobile phones now, so the days of the landline are .....
- 3 My son's got a real ..... of adventure. He's going travelling around the world for a year.
- 4 We won free train tickets to Paris in the competition, but we had to pay for the hotel out of our own .....
- 5 Freddie keeps shouting at everyone today. I don't know why he's behaving like a ..... with a sore head.

### 5.4 Here are some errors made with idioms by candidates in advanced-level exams. Can you correct them? Looking up the word in brackets in a good idioms dictionary should help you find the correct idiom.

- 1 You'll pass your driving test if you really want to – where there's a will, there's a power. [WILL]
- 2 I get bored if I always do the same things at the weekend – change is a spice of life. [VARIETY]
- 3 Sh! Be quiet! There's no need to talk at the top of your head. [TOP]
- 4 He never saves any money. He spends whatever he has. Easy coming easy going is his motto. [EASY]
- 5 I was so upset when I failed the exam. I wept my eyes out of my head. [CRY]
- 6 She's a total optimist – she always manages to look the good part. [LOOK]

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