



e-ADVANCED DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH IDIOMS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

First Edition 2018

© Singapore Asia Publishers Pte Ltd

Published and Distributed by:

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ISBN-13 978-981-32-1645-7

ISBN-10 981-32-1645-X

Printed in Singapore

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PREFACE

An idiom can be defined as a group of words strung together to assume a specific meaning different from the meaning of each individual word. Such an idiomatic meaning can normally be expressed through other means, but it is usually not done so with equal force and vividness.

English idioms take different forms and are unclear in meaning on the surface structure. Generally speaking, they consist of the following six types:

- **Phrasal verbs**, such as ‘call on, put off, do away with’;
- **Prepositional phrases**, such as ‘in a nutshell, from time to time, with a view to’;
- **Idioms with verbs as key words**, such as ‘come in handy, fight shy of, leave much to be desired’;
- **Idioms with nouns as key words**, such as ‘blessing in disguise, child’s play, food for thought’;
- **Idioms with adjectives as key words**, such as ‘cold comfort, wishful thinking, plain sailing’;
- **Idiomatic pairs**, such as ‘safe and sound, aches and pains, sink or swim’.

Of the six categories, (1) – (3) are larger in number; (6) is somewhat limited.

It is highly recommended that great effort be made to master as many of the first three categories as possible. Other categories are not to be sneezed at, either. However, as far as learning and understanding are concerned, the latter types of idioms seem to be less abstract and not as difficult to grasp.

Many idioms cannot be altered in any component part. As a rule, no other synonymous word can replace any word in an idiom; nor can the arrangement of words be wilfully modified, added or deleted. Any attempted change in wording or word arrangement will destroy the idiom concerned and render the expression meaningless or turn it into another idiom with a vastly different meaning.

For example, ‘on the air’ is ‘speaking on the radio or on TV’. On the other hand, ‘in the air’ either means ‘an action is uncertain’ or ‘rumours, stories,

etc. spreading about'. Nothing should be added, deleted or modified in idioms. They are so fixed that they have to be used as they are.

In view of the importance of idioms for day-to-day English communication, this book has incorporated a large number of essential idioms and proverbs with explanations and illustrations. In fact, readers from all walks of life will find it easy to make use of these practical idioms in all spheres of their life.

It is therefore certain that those using this book with tenacity will find it meaningful, purposeful, stimulating, rewarding, thus reaping the handsome reward of their great endeavours.

Dr Tan Cheng Lim



Practise using selected idioms covered in this book to enhance learning.
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Explanatory Diagram

Shows the first entry on even-numbered page

Shows the last entry on odd-numbered page

can't hear oneself think

You know the ways and means; you just can't go wrong.

can't hear oneself think one is irritated by too much surrounding noise
Everyone kept talking louder and louder till I couldn't hear myself think.

can't help but do something to be unable to choose any other course of action
He can't get a taxi, so he can't help but walk home.

can't help doing something find it natural to do something
I can't help laughing at his funny way of speaking.

can't/couldn't help it/that to be unable to control things or change events
I'm sorry to be coughing like this, but I've got a cold and I can't help it.

cap in hand humbly
I hope you won't go cap in hand to ask for help.

capable of doing something able to do something
Is your company capable of handling such a large order?/Mr Lin is capable of playing tricks.

capitalise on something to take advantage of (a situation, etc.)
She capitalised on her opponent's obvious weakness and won the game in the end.

capture one's imagination to make one imagine
The pantomime really captured the children's imagination, as they had been talking about it for days.

care about something to think that something is important
Some people don't care about saving money for future use.

care for someone/something
1 to look after someone/something
Who will care for you when you are old?
2 to like (in negative sentences or questions)
I don't really care for coffee./Would you care for some beer?

care of someone at the house or address of someone

Send the letter to me care of Mr Peter Lin, 15 Hill Street.

careful/careless with something cautious/unconcerned about something
You should be more careful with your money next time. She seems very careless with money.

carp/cavil at someone/something to find fault with small errors
She is always carping at unimportant details./It's no good carping at the boy about his behaviour./The teacher is cavilling at my handwriting.

carried away to be controlled by one's feelings.

She was much carried away when she argued with her husband over a misunderstanding.

carrot-and-stick the hope of reward and the threat of punishment
To a large extent, a student benefits from the carrot-and-stick approach to teaching.

carry all/everything before someone to be completely successful
At college, Peter carried all before him./Our soldiers carried everything before them and gained control of all the important towns.

carry conviction to be convincing
You don't have to shout truths at people in order to carry conviction.

carry forward (of accounts) to move to the next page for further addition
He forgot to carry the total figure forward, so there was a mistake in the calculation.

carry on (with something) to continue (with something)
It's difficult to carry on a conversation in a crowded place./Please carry on with your work.

carry one's point to succeed in making others agree with what one suggests
Now that you've carried your point, there is no need to be thinking up fresh arguments any more.

C

Idioms arranged in alphabetical order

Meaning of the idiom

Shows the multiple meanings of the idiom

Useful examples

Aa

a bit much too much

His playfulness is a bit much.

a fool and his money are soon parted

if one is not careful with his money, the money will be gone

He spent all his money on worthless fake gems. A fool and his money are soon parted.

a fresh pair of eyes

someone who is newly brought into an event or activity

Dr Peters was brought in as a fresh pair of eyes to shed light on the investigation.

a lot on my plate very busy

I've a lot on my plate lately.

abandon oneself to something to give

oneself up completely to something, especially passions or impulses

Tom failed many times and finally abandoned himself to despair.

about average

no better or no worse than others

Tom's work is just about average. He has never done any better.

about time the appropriate time

It's about time you had a new car.

about to ready to

We were about to go out when it rained.

above all most importantly

A successful person must be learned, healthy, and, above all, diligent.

above and beyond the call of duty

greater than the usual courage and effort

The police officer went above and beyond the call of duty to help the elderly lady.

above average above the ordinary standard

Susan's school work is above average. She is better than most of her peers.

above-board honest

The deal is fair and above-board. No one has raised any objection.

above criticism/suspicion

Someone or something that cannot be criticised/suspected

No ruler should believe he is above criticism./Judges ought to be above suspicion.

above/over one's head too difficult for someone to understand

What he had said was well above our heads; he should have made his speech much simpler.

above oneself self-satisfied

He was above himself after he was elected captain of the team.

above/below par at a price higher/lower than the original value

Most of the shares are above par now./When the market is bad, it is possible to purchase the stock at a price below par.

above someone too difficult for someone to understand

The speaker's lecture on astronomy was above me.

absence of mind inattention

Absence of mind during driving may lead to serious accidents.

accident waiting to happen

a dangerous situation or a situation that could go wrong

Drivers like to speed along this road. It is an accident waiting to happen.

ace up your sleeve to have something to your advantage

Although she seems to be losing the debate, I'm sure she has an ace up her sleeve.

aches and pains

considerable fatigue, especially in the muscles or joints all over one's body

Henry is still young but has become like an old man, continually complaining about aches and pains.

achilles' heel

the weakest point in a person's character
Dishonesty is the Achilles' heel of some entrepreneurs.

acid test

a way of proving whether something is true or not.

The joint military exercise is seen as an acid test of the countries' relations.

acquired taste something which people don't like at first but which they like after they have tried it

Travelling by air is often an acquired taste for elderly people.

acquit oneself well

to perform one's task well

Our school's debating team has acquitted itself well in the interschool debate.

acquit someone of a charge to declare someone to be innocent

For lack of evidence against the woman, the judge acquitted her of murdering her husband.

across the board/across-the-board

applying in all cases; affecting everybody or everything

The civil servants were awarded wage increases across the board./The U.S. government has announced an across-the-board cut in national spending.

act as a brake on/upon someone's activities

to make someone act with more caution; to play the roles of deterring someone or something

The rise in interest rate acted as a brake on people's unnecessary expenditure.

act high and mighty to act proudly and powerfully

If Sally hadn't acted high and mighty, she would have had more friends.

act in bad faith to act dishonestly

We don't like Joshua, who often acts in bad faith.

act of God natural event that is not caused by man

This disaster was an act of God.

act on/upon someone/something

1 to do something according to someone's advice, instructions, etc.

Have you acted on Mr Lin's instructions?

2 to have an effect on someone/something.

This medicine doesn't act on him at all./Certain acids act on metals.

act out

1 to show an idea, etc. by your looks, speech, etc.

The teacher asked the children to act out a story they had read.

2 to put something into action

Betty used to be an idealist who tried to act out her ideals somehow or other.

act out of duty to do what one ought to do, not because what one wants to

As the head of the department, Dr Wee generally acted out of duty.

act up to something to act according to one's principles, etc.

Mr Yong professes to have high principles, but he doesn't always act up to his proclaimed ethics.

add fuel to fire/flames to cause someone to be angrier

To add fuel to fire, the underpaid workers were told to work longer hours.

add insult to injury

to make matters even worse

Asking the wounded man to pay for the damage of the car was simply adding insult to injury./To add insult to injury, the penalty was awarded to the fouling side.

address oneself to something to give one's attention to something

Whenever I do something, I address myself to it with enthusiasm.

advanced in years old

The Prime Minister is quite advanced in years.

after a fashion in a way, but not very well

I can speak Malay after a fashion.

after all in spite of everything

It looked cloudy, but it turned out to be fine after all.

after all one's efforts

in spite of the trouble that one has taken
After all her efforts to prepare the food, nobody wanted to eat it.

after one's own heart of the type one likes

Mary married the man after her own heart.

again and again/time and again/over and over again very often; repeatedly

I have told them again and again not to quarrel over trifling matters./Some students visited me time and again./The teacher referred to the student's common mistakes over and over again.

against a background of something judging from the existing conditions

The riots took place against a background of widespread unemployment.

against all (the) odds

despite strong opposition, etc.
They fought on against all the odds and finally broke through the encircling forces.

against one's better judgement despite one's opinion of what would be a better course of action; it would be better not to do something

I know it was against his better judgement to allow his daughter to get married at so young an age./It would be against my better judgement if I let that fool pass the examination.

against one's grain in a way that is forced or contrary to one's inclinations

Are you happy to work against your grain?

against one's wishes in opposition to one's desires

Helen married the man against her wishes.

against the law illegal

Don't do anything against the law.

against time/the clock

as fast as possible so as to finish something before a certain time; with all speed
I'm working against time to get this book published./They were behind time and were working against the clock.

agree to differ to stop trying to persuade each other

Tom and I agreed to differ on certain matters of principles.

ahead of one's time further advanced in knowledge, outlook, etc.

Some students' technological ingenuity is well ahead of their time.

aid and abet someone

to provide help and encouragement for a bad or illegal activity

Ali's wife aided and abetted him in his misdeeds.

air/parade one's knowledge to show the amount of knowledge one has on a certain subject

Mr Lin seldom misses the opportunity to air his knowledge./Tony liked to parade his knowledge in front of acquaintances.

airs and graces affected manners

The upstart is conceited and full of airs and graces.

air your dirty laundry in public to reveal your personal life during a quarrel or when telling a secret

You've embarrassed yourself by airing your dirty laundry in public.

alarm and despondency acute fear and hopelessness felt for something that is happening, or is expected to happen

Nothing special happens. I don't know what his purpose of spreading alarm and despondency is.

alien to different in nature and character

Some western ideas are quite alien to our oriental ways of thinking.

alive and kicking healthy and active

His grandfather was ill but is now alive and kicking.

alive to aware of

We must be alive to the dangers of the present situation.

alive with covered or infested with

The park was alive with people./The dead dog was alive with maggots.

all alone completely by oneself

He has been all alone since the death of his wife.