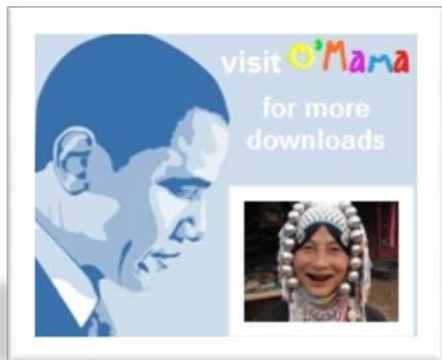


English Idioms

by Sally Jennings

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Idioms, Slang, Phrasal Verbs, Colloquialisms, Clichés, and Proverbs, with Context Examples (about 100)

Expressions are alphabetized according to the first word in the expression. Spelling is American.

Pronouns have been used instead of names in almost all cases to avoid obvious ethnicity in the examples. The English language has no room to maneuver around using either "he" or "she;" because of this, please consider that any use of "he" could just as well be "she," and vice versa.

The language in the context examples is not intentionally aimed at any job class or occupation. Many situations described had to be stated negatively since the particular idiom is used that way. Some idioms are used almost exclusively to refer to one occupation.

Warning to students: many of these expressions are far too informal for formal writing. If you are not familiar with an expression you see here, and need to know if you may use it in formal written work, ask your teacher. Decisions about the use of idioms in formal writing are often decided on a case-by-case basis, one at a time. I have not had time to make these decisions and mark acceptability partly because there would be 700 decisions to be made! Besides, how can I judge what you or your teacher will find acceptable in your situation?

However, there was one type of marking I could not resist doing. Parenthesized idioms (shown like this), are worn-out expressions. You might hear them or read them somewhere, but if you avoid using them, you just might make the world a better place.

Square brackets [] enclose an expression similar in meaning to the expression before the brackets.

Suggestions for student use:

Replace some of the non-idiom words with blanks, use the structure and the idiom as it stands, and form different sentences. This is a type of pattern practice.

How much can you guess about who might be speaking the idiom from the clues in the context? Can you make up a story about this situation?

Can you define the idioms from the context? Do you know an equivalent expression in another language?

Some of the context is in "direct speech" form, but without quotation marks, or speaker identification. Some of the context is in "reported speech" form. Can you identify which is which, and change the "reported speech" forms into "direct speech" and add quotations wherever they are necessary?

Do some research into the background of some of the more interesting idioms (using the Internet or a good dictionary).

Can you spice up the idioms by using names of people, trade names, brand names, and company names where possible?

Can you group some of these idioms into patterns within a metaphor structure (for example "finances" and "war," we "fight inflation.")

Compose a short story using several idioms together, perhaps part of a group using one word. For an examples of this, see my stories "[The Night Out](#)" (with optional mp3 audio) and "[Up to Something](#)" (with optional mp3 audio) on other pages of this web site.

This is a work in progress. After you have used it, I welcome your response at the email link above. I have a baccalaureate degree in Arts, with a major in English (language emphasis), and extra Linguistics courses from the University of British Columbia. English is my first language. Nevertheless, I still have a lot to learn about English, and I would appreciate your suggestions.

100 more idioms, clichés, slang, phrasal verbs and Proverbs

a firebug

The firefighters suspect that the fire wasn't started by lightning, but by a firebug. They think a young person who was seen running away just as the blaze started set the place on fire.

a free trial

We received an offer in the mail today for a six-month free trial subscription for my husband's favorite magazine.

a lame excuse

She really didn't want to go to the party, but when she told her boyfriend why, he didn't believe the reason she gave. He said she was just giving him a lame excuse.

a life line

The life line for the aid supplies to the disaster area cut right across their land. The aid vehicles passed by every day on the road out front.

a lifesaver

That loan from the bank has proven to be a real lifesaver for our young business. It was there when we needed it the most.

a lightning rod

They put up a high metal pole with a ground wire on the house roof to attract the lightning so it wouldn't hit the other buildings on the hilltop.

a line of sight

The men approaching over the fields were directly in the observer's line of site as he watched them through his binoculars.

a litterbug

As the girl dropped the candy wrapper on the ground, her brother reached down and picked it up. "Don't be such a litterbug," he said.

a live-in

They aren't legally married, just living together, so she is his live-in girlfriend.

a live wire

She is awake early and very active all day --- a real live wire.

a livelihood

She made her livelihood working in the office of the local oil company. The job paid well, and had fairly good benefits.

a living death

He remembered how gaunt she looked after the accident. She had complained that without her health, she was experiencing a living death.

a living room

Take that cake into the front room and set it on the coffee table for the guests. That's right, into the living room where we do our entertaining.

a living wage

The boy knew he couldn't make the same pay his father did, but the job offer promised enough money to live on, a living wage.

a loan shark

The man came at midnight to bully his father and demand that he pay the debt immediately. The boy hadn't realized his father went to a loan shark for money.

a lodestar

The guiding principle behind our way of life could be called a lodestar. Like the star over the pole, it shows us where we are and which way to go.

a log boom

First the trees were cut down, limbed, and sawn into logs. Then some logs were chained into a circle, enclosing other logs. This log boom was then taken down river to the mill.

a ragamuffin

That youngest one in the family frequently comes to school in torn clothes. He looks like a real ragamuffin.

a rule of thumb

The rule of thumb for writing parallel sentences is to use the same grammatical structure in each clause.

a skiff of snow

Since she had grown up in snow country, she didn't mind when then got a few centimeters of snow the other day. To her, that was just a skiff of snow, nothing major.

a slow poke

The oldest girl in the group dragged behind the rest, reading as she was walking. "Come on, slow poke," one of her sisters yelled.

a treasure trove

The young boy looked at the huge library with joy in his eyes. He thought he had found a real treasure trove of stories, enough to last him for years.

a trial size

When she got the mail out of the box, she found a small bottle of shampoo. The manufacturer had sent her a trial size and a coupon for more shampoo.

a welcoming committee

You would wonder why they sent out their ferocious dog to greet the strangers in the dark. What an awful welcoming committee that must have been.

a white lie

He didn't want to hurt her by refusing to come to the party, so he told her a little white lie. He said he had a previous commitment for the same time as the dance.

at loggerheads

Those two groups argued their way through the town meeting. They are always at loggerheads about something or other.

foot traffic

There was a lot of foot traffic by her door on the weekends when the beach was full. She didn't mind. She just sat on her front porch and watched people as they passed.

happy-go-lucky

You would think she didn't have a care in the world. She seemed to be such a happy-go-lucky girl, always singing and smiling.

in lieu of

You will have to accept another color because the supplier is out of stock. Will you take a gold one in lieu of the blue one you ordered?

in light of

In light of the fact that you did so much homework last night, you can take the next night off. But remember, you can't take two nights off, only one.

in recent memory

Most townspeople could not remember how long it had been since the family had lived at the old homestead. As far as anyone knew, no one had been there in many decades, and certainly not in recent memory.

like a bolt out of the blue

His offer of marriage came on the third date, before they knew each other well, just like a bolt out of the blue.

lily-livered

"Fraidy cat, fraidy cat, you're just chicken," the small boy hooted. "And who are you to call me a lily-livered coward, when you won't do it yourself?" his older sister demanded.

loco

They said he was funny, off-the-wall, a little off his rocker, out of his head, crazy, and just plain loco.

not on your life

Do you think I would go out there in the freezing cold when it is thirty degrees below zero without wearing a warm coat and mittens? Not on your life I wouldn't.

part and parcel of

She works full time. He doesn't like it, but that is just part and parcel of who she is as a professional.

slapdash

Shoddy work, poor quality, done too quickly, the whole project was just slapdash, throw it together.

slaphappy

The graduation party ended at the restaurant, and the group left noisily. The other diners watched them carefully as they drove away, remarking to each other about how silly and slaphappy they were.

the boob tube

In the early days of television, the nickname for the TV was the boob tube, because people watched stupidly like boobs, without thinking.

the livelong day

"Sakes alive," said the grandmother, "I have never seen so much mess in all my born days. It'll probably take you young ones the rest of the livelong day to clean it up."

to be a skinflint

He is so tight with money. He won't even buy his daughter a new pair of good shoes. He is a real skinflint.

to be at liberty

She has been sworn to secrecy. She is not at liberty to discuss the settlement before it is made public.

to be letter perfect

The five-year-old was frustrated when she tried to write her full name. "It's okay, dear," her mother said, "it doesn't have to be letter perfect."

to be level-headed

When he saw the kids push the dog into the creek, he did what any level-headed person would; he waded into the frigid water and pulled the tiny dog out.

to be liable

I don't trust him. He is liable to lie to me if I ask him directly what he did with my money. Remember, he lied the last time I asked.

to be light-fingered

The toddler grabbed the candy bar and ran out of the store. When her mother caught her and returned the candy to the store, she said "Please forgive her. She isn't light-fingered. She is too young to steal. She doesn't know that we have to pay money for what we take home."

to be lightheaded

The young woman had an allergy to chocolate, and felt light-headed, quite dizzy and faint, after she ate the cake. She asked the cook, and found out the cake was iced with white chocolate.

to be off limits

The construction zone is off limits to anyone who is not wearing a hard hat.

to be on the level

He says he didn't swipe his brother's allowance, but I don't think his story is on the level. I think he took it.

to be smack dab in the middle of

He secretly hoped there would be a false fire alarm when they were smack dab in the middle of the exam, but he was disappointed.

to be not someone's business

It's not my business how much you make, what your religion is, or who you vote for. That's your own business, it is private.

to bone up on

Tomorrow is the final exam, so he is at home boning up on the major and minor parts of the course.

to dawn on

Someday it will dawn on the family how fortunate they are to have that little girl, and they will really understand their good fortune.

to do one's level best

The small girl was doing her level best to draw a perfect circle, but she fretted and tore up the paper after each try.

to feel it in one's bones

She just knew something had happened to her cat when it didn't come home that night. She said she felt it in her bones.

to get a load of

"Can you believe she turned him down when he asked her for a date?" "Whoa, get a load of that kind of snobby attitude," the two women whispered to each other.

to get in a passle of trouble

If he doesn't find another backer for his scheme soon, he'll get in a passle of trouble with his bank.

to get skunked

They went fishing early this morning and caught zip. There is nothing like getting skunked, but hey, there's always next time.

to hang on for dear life

Once the horse started really running, the wagon came around the corner too fast, and he grabbed the side and hung on for dear life.

to have a bone to pick

He came in the room and looked at her like he had a bone to pick. Sure enough, with the first words out of his mouth, he started a fight.

to keep a stiff upper lip

That family is quite reserved. Their grandmother died recently, but nearly all of them kept a stiff upper lip at the funeral, and didn't break down and cry.

to lift someone's spirits

The cake she made for him really lifted his spirits, and he no longer felt depressed.

to lie in wait for

The cat was lying in wait for the mouse as it came out of its mouse hole.

to lie low

He thinks he flunked the exam, so he is lying low until his Dad leaves for work tonight, hoping he won't ask about it.

to lie through one's teeth

The young boy said he had not seen his brother's new toy airplane, but everyone in the family knew he was lying through his teeth.

to light into

The mother found her daughter's closet full of new clothes, and really lit into her about spending so much money.

to light out

Those crooks didn't stick around when their fraud was discovered, but lit out for another town far away.

to lighten up

Do you think he can stop being so serious around her, and just lighten up a bit?

to limber up

The exercise class was doing well after several weeks. Many members reported they had been limbering up nicely, gaining flexibility each week.

to lip read

She can't hear you over the motor, so she will have to lip read.

to lip sync

The vocal group says they don't sing to taped backup and just lip sync, but few people believe them.

to liquidate

They will probably quit business and liquidate their stock soon. If they do, some big sales are on the way.

to live and let live

Those two couples won't quit their disagreements at family gatherings, even though the rest of the family tells them to back off and live and let live.

to live down

Now that he has become a juvenile delinquent, it will be hard for him to live down what he has done. Everyone in his hometown knows about it.

to live it up

Now that the course is over, we can really live it up a little, and celebrate.

to live out

If you expect good things, and you live out your life the way you expect, you will be a happy person.

to live through

That family has lived through so many things, one more thing gone wrong probably won't affect them too much.

to live together

They aren't living together anymore. They went their separate ways last spring. Their baby is two years old now.

to live up to

He wants to live up to their expectations, but they expect so much that is nearly impossible for him to do. One thing I can say, is that he is living up to his reputation as a flirt.

to loaf

The two boys were sitting on the back porch, playing cards, sipping cold drinks, and just loafing.

to loiter

If you hang around the train station, they will tell you to leave. They don't like people loitering.

to make light of

She tried to make light of her troubles, but her mother asked some hard questions. Finally, she broke down and told her the truth.

to make no bones about

He doesn't like his mother-in-law, and she knows. He doesn't hide it all. He makes no bones about it.

to make off with

The two thieves made off with many art works from the museum's collection.

to mean business

The boy's father sat down on the boy's bed and told him he wanted him to stop fighting with his sister. The boy could tell his father was very serious, and really meant business.

to pay lip service to

She isn't really being sincere, she is just paying lip service to get a promotion at the company.

to pull a boner

He really made a mistake that time, pulled a real boner.

to raise a ruckus

"You don't have to raise a ruckus to get fed, now settle down," the mother told her screaming toddler.

to see the light

He will eventually come around to our point of view and see the light about the whole affair.

to sit bolt upright

The girl had a nightmare, and crying, suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, fully awake.

to skim off profits

One of the clerks has been dishonest with the financial records of the company, skimming off the profits without the owners knowing.

to skip town

The man who impersonated a physician closed up shop suddenly and skipped town, disappearing during the night.

to skip trace

The credit department of the company will find the people who owe them money, skip tracing them to where they are now.

to smack of

That idea is so self-serving, it smacks of self-interest.

to suck the life out of

The foreign company sucked the life out of the failing mill. They sold the stockpiled lumber, bled the profits, and then closed the mill.

to take liberties

Be very careful with the essay on that exam. Don't take any liberties with the essay structure, grammar, or word choice.

to the letter

They want you to follow their instructions exactly, right to the letter.

to tide someone over

There is enough money in the bank to tide the family over until the strike at the plant is over.

to try out for

He wants to try out for the team. If he is good enough, they will let him join.

to use one's leverage

He promised to use his leverage at the store to get a special deal for his brother-in-law. He knows the owner personally, and his brother does not.

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