

20 Essential English Idioms for ESL Students

Igor Karasev

May 26, 2018

To help you master English idioms, we've gathered together 20 of the most common American English idioms and expressions. They're useful for ESL students, or anyone learning English. Enjoy!

1. (To) Hit the books



Literally, **hit the books** means to physically hit, punch or slap your reading books. However, this is a common English idiom among students, especially American college students who have a lot of studying to do. It simply means “to study,” and is a way of telling your friends that you’re going to study. It could be for a final exam, a mid-term test or even an English exam.

*“Sorry but I can’t watch the game with you tonight, I have to **hit the books**. I have a huge exam next week!”*

2. (To) Hit the sack



Just like the first idiom, the literal meaning of this would be physically hitting or beating a sack (a large bag usually used for carrying things in bulk such as flour, rice or even soil). But actually **to hit the sack** means to go to bed, and you'd use this to tell your friends or family that you're really tired, so you're going to sleep. Instead of saying *hit the sack* you can also say *hit the hay*.

*"It's time for me to **hit the sack**, I'm so tired."*

3. (To) Twist someone's arm



To twist someone's arm literally means to take a person's arm and turn it around, which could be really painful if you take it exactly word for word. If your *arm has been twisted* it means that someone has done a great job of convincing you to do something you might not have wanted to do.

And if you manage to *twist someone else's arm* it means that you're great at convincing them, and they've finally agreed to do something after you've been begging them.

Tom: *Jake you should really come to the party tonight!*

Jake: *You know I can't, I have to hit the books (study).*

Tom: *C'mon, you have to come! It's going to be so much fun and there are going to be lots of girls there. Please come?*

Jake: *Pretty girls? Oh all right, you've **twisted my arm**, I'll come!*

4. (To be) Up in the air



When we literally think about something **up in the air**, we have the idea that something's floating or flying in the sky, perhaps an airplane or a balloon. But really if someone tells you that things **are up in the air** it means that these things are uncertain or unsure; definite plans have not been made yet.

“Jen have you set a date for the wedding yet?”

*“Not exactly, things are still **up in the air** and we're not sure if our families can make it on the day we wanted. Hopefully we'll know soon and we'll let you know as soon as possible.”*

5. (To) Stab someone in the back



If we take this idiom literally we could find ourselves in a whole lot of trouble with the police, as it would mean taking a knife or another sharp object and putting into a person's back.

However, as an idiom **to stab someone in the back** means to hurt someone who was close to us and trusted us by betraying them secretly and breaking their trust. We call the person who does this a **back stabber**.

*“Did you hear that Sarah **stabbed Kate in the back** last week?”*

“No! I thought they were best friends, what did she do?”

“She told their boss that Kate wasn't interested in a promotion at work and Sarah got it instead.”

“Wow, that's the ultimate betrayal! No wonder they're not friends anymore.”

6. (To) Lose your touch



Literally this means to no longer have the ability to touch or feel with your fingers or hands. But **to lose your touch** actually means that you lose your ability or talent you once had when dealing with things, people or situations.

We use this when you're usually good at a certain skill or talent, but then things start to go wrong.

"I don't understand why none of the girls here want to speak to me."

*"It looks like you've **lost your touch** with the ladies."*

"Oh no, they used to love me, what happened?"

7. (To) Sit tight



To sit tight is a strange English idiom and it literally means that you sit down squeezing your body in a tight way, which if you did it would be very uncomfortable, not to mention you'll look really strange.

But if a person tells you ***to sit tight*** they want you to wait patiently and take no action until you hear otherwise.

“Mrs. Carter, do you have any idea when the exam results are going to come out?”

*“Who knows Johnny, sometimes they come out quickly but it could take some time. You're just going to **have to sit tight** and wait.”*

8. (To) Pitch in



This English idiom actually makes no sense if you try to take it literally. However, figuratively speaking it means to contribute (give) to something or someone or to join in.

So if your dad tells the family that he wants everyone to **pitch in** this weekend and help clear the backyard, it means he wants everyone to join in on the efforts to clear the yard and get things done quicker.

“What are you going to buy Sally for her birthday?”

“I don’t know I don’t have much money.”

*“Maybe we can all **pitch in** and buy her something great.”*

The above conversation suggests that every one of Sally’s friends should contribute a little bit of money so they can afford to buy her a bigger and better present together.

9. (To) Go cold turkey



Sound weird? Well, you're right, it does, how can anyone literally go cold turkey? A person can't transform into the bird we all love to eat for celebrations such as Christmas and Thanksgiving.

The origins of this English idiom are strange and **to go cold turkey** means to suddenly quit or stop addictive or dangerous behavior such as smoking or drinking alcohol.

This English idiom is said to have originated in the late 20th century and suggests that a person who suddenly quits something addictive — such as drugs or alcohol — suffers from side effects that look like a cold, uncooked turkey. This includes pale (very white) skin and goosebumps (little small bumps on the skin when we're cold or sick).

“Shall I get your mom a glass of wine?”

“No, she's stopped drinking?”

“Really, why?”

“I don't know. A few months ago, she just announced one day she's quitting drinking.”

*“She just quit **cold turkey**?”*

“Yes, just like that!”

10. (To) Face the music



In literal terms **facing the music** means to turn your body to the direction of the music and stand in front of it. But if your friend or your parents tell you **to face the music**, there's a much harsher meaning.

It means to “face reality” or to deal with the reality of the situation and accept all the consequences good or bad (but mostly bad). Perhaps you've been avoiding something because you feel unsure or scared of the outcome. Maybe you lied to your teacher and she discovered the truth and now you have **to face the music** and accept the punishment.

“I can't understand why I failed math.”

*“You know you didn't study hard, so you're going to have to **face the music** and take the class again next semester if you really want to graduate when you do.”*

11. (To be) On the ball



If you look at this English idiom literally, it means to be either standing or sitting on a ball — but who would do that?

If ***you're on the ball*** it means that you're very quick to understand certain things, very prepared for something or react quickly (and correctly) to a situation.

For example, if you're planning your wedding that is still one year away from now and you've almost finished with *all* the planning already, you're definitely ***on the ball*** because not many people are that prepared!

*“Wow, you've already finished your assignments? They are not due until next week, you're really **on the ball**. I wish I could be more organized.”*

12. (To) Ring a bell



If we look at the literal meaning of **ring a bell**, it's just that: You could be ringing the school bell to tell students it's time to go to class or ringing someone's doorbell.

But the idiom means that somebody has mentioned something that sounds familiar to you, perhaps you've heard it before. In other words, when someone says something that you believe you've heard in the past, alarm bells start ringing and you try to remember how or why that name or place sounds familiar.

"You've met my friend Amy Adams, right?"

*"Hmmm, I'm not sure, but that name **rings a bell**. Was she the one who went to Paris last year?"*

13. Rule of thumb



Can thumbs rule or can you literally rule a thumb? If you think about it logically, it means absolutely nothing and makes no sense. However, if you hear someone say **as a rule of thumb**, they mean that it's a general unwritten rule for whatever they're talking about.

These **rules of thumb** are not based on science or research, and are instead just a general principle. For example, there's no written scientific rule that you must add oil to boiling water when cooking pasta, but it's a **rule of thumb** and is practiced by most people so the pasta won't stick to the bottom of the pan.

*“As a **rule of thumb** you should always pay for your date's dinner.”*

“Why? There's no rule stating that!”

“Yes, but it's what all gentlemen do.”

14. (To be) Under the weather



Can you be under the weather literally? Probably yes, if you think about standing under the clouds, rain and sun, but it makes no sense. If you're feeling ***under the weather***, you're not your usual self and could be feeling a little sick. The sick feeling is nothing serious; perhaps it's just extreme tiredness from studying too much, or having a bad headache because you're starting to get the flu.

“What’s wrong with Katy, mom?”

*“She’s feeling a little **under the weather** so be quiet and let her rest.”*

15. (To) Blow off steam



In reality a person cannot blow off steam (the hot rising air from boiling water) — only electrical equipment can, such as the electric jug (appliance for boiling water for coffee). So what does it mean when a person **blows off steam**?

If you're feeling angry, stressed or are experiencing some strong feelings and you want to get rid of them so you feel better again, you will **blow off steam** by doing something such as exercise to get rid of the stress.

“Why is Nick so angry and where did he go?”

*“He had a fight with his brother, so he went for a run to **blow off his steam**.”*

16. (To) Look like a million dollars/bucks



Wouldn't it be great if we really could **look like a million dollars**? We'd be rich, but that's not the case. If someone tells you that you **look like a million bucks**, you should take it as a huge compliment because it means you look absolutely fabulous and really attractive.

While sometimes we use this English idiom for guys, it's more commonly used to compliment females. And while some of your female friends may look beautiful every day, you should save this English idiom for when they've really made an effort and it's a special occasion, like prom or a wedding.

*“Wow, Mary, you **look like a million dollars/bucks** this evening. I love your dress!”*

17. (To) Cut to the chase



When somebody tells you to **cut to the chase** it means that you've been talking too long and haven't gotten to the point. When a person uses this idiom, they are telling you to hurry up and get the important part, without all the details. Be careful how you use this idiom, because if used while talking to someone like a college professor or your boss, it's rude and disrespectful.

If you're speaking to a group of people, like your employees, and say ***I'm going to cut to the chase***, it means that there are a few things that need to be said but there's very little time, so you'll skip to the important parts so everyone understands.

*"Hi guys, as we don't have much time here, so I'm going to **cut to the chase**. We've been having some major problems in the office lately."*

18. (To) Find your feet



Is it possible to lose your feet? No way, they're attached to your body! So what does it mean when somebody says they're trying to **find their feet**? If you find yourself in a new situation, for example living in a new country and having to get used to a new college, you could say **I'm still finding my feet**. It means that you're still adjusting and getting used to the new environment.

"Lee, how's your son doing in America?"

*"He's doing okay. He's learned where the college is but is still **finding his feet** with everything else. I guess it'll take time for him to get used to it all."*

19. (To) Get over something



If you think about it, it's possible to literally **get over something**, for example get over a fence — but this is not how the phrase is generally used in the English language.

Imagine having a really difficult time, like breaking up with your girlfriend or boyfriend — it's hard. But eventually once time passes and you no longer think about your ex, it means that you've **gotten over him/her**, you no longer worry about it and it no longer affects you in a negative way. It's also possible to **get over an illness** too, which would mean that you've fully recovered.

*“How’s Paula? Has she **gotten over** the death of her dog yet?”*

“I think so. She’s already talking about getting a new one.”

20. (To) Keep your chin up



Did you just have a massive fight with your friend? Did you fail your English finals? Did your team lose the final match? Did you lose your job? If you answered “yes” to any of the questions, then you’re probably feeling sad and a little depressed, right?

In this situation, a supportive friend might tell you to **keep your chin up**. When they tell you this, they’re showing their support for you, and it’s a way of saying “stay strong,” you’ll get through this. Don’t let these things affect you too badly.

“Hey, Keiren, have you had any luck finding work yet?”

“No, nothing, it’s really depressing, there’s nothing out there!”

*“Don’t worry, you’ll find something soon, **keep your chin up** buddy and don’t stress.”*

If you’re really serious about learning English well and *finding your feet* with the language abroad, make sure you spend some time focusing on English idioms to make your transition and easier one. Good Luck and *keep your chin up!*