

CAMBRIDGE

# ENGLISH IDIOMS IN USE

60 units of vocabulary  
reference and practice

Self-study and  
classroom use

Second Edition

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**Advanced**

Felicity O'Dell  
Michael McCarthy

Experience  
Better  
Learning

- 1 Idioms
- 2 Idioms and how to use them
- 3 Idioms and how to use them
- 4 Common non-metaphors in idioms
- 5 Using idioms accurately
- 6 Playing with idioms
- 7 Idioms from other varieties of English
- 8 Modern idioms

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- 20 Ancient myths and history
- 21 Shakespeare
- 22 Literature
- 23 Learning
- 24 Science and technology

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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.



## 1

## What are idioms?

## 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.

- 1 His first novel was just a) a flash in a pan b) a flash of the pan c) a flash in the pan.
- 2 I think Philip has a) given a shine to b) taken a shine to c) got a shine to his new babysitter.
- 3 I hope you have a good trip and come home a) safely and soundly b) sound and safe c) safe and sound.
- 4 Oh dear! I think I've a) had a foot in it b) put my foot in it c) got my foot in it!
- 5 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

- 1 A university a) apologises to the minister b) asks the minister for financial help c) awards the minister a great honour.
- 2 An airline a) has refused to pay the costs b) sends the bill to someone else c) will pay the costs.
- 3 Rita Soraz is a) loved by everyone in Hollywood b) hated by everyone in Hollywood c) missed by everyone in Hollywood.
- 4 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.

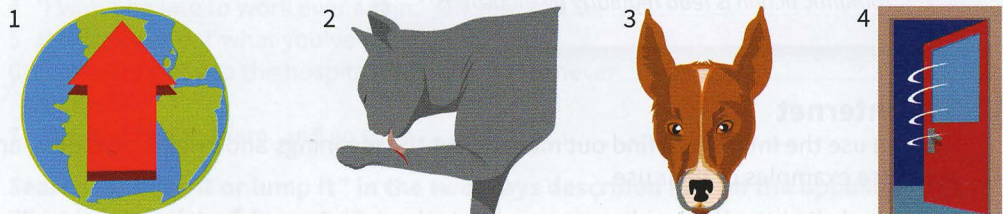
### 2.1 Are these sentences true or false? If the answer is false, say why.

- 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.

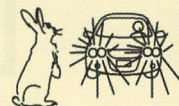
## C

### 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')



### 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'.



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

## 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.



## 5

## Using idioms accurately

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 ~~coffin~~.

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.

## 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]

People often play with idioms for humorous effect or to make something more memorable. This wordplay is particularly common in journalism and advertising. **See Unit 40 for more examples of idioms used in advertising.**

## A

### Memorable names for businesses

Here are some catchy names of hairdressers' salons.

name of salon	explanation
FRINGE BENEFITS	<b>Fringe benefits</b> are something extra you get because of your job in addition to your pay, e.g. a company car. A <i>fringe</i> is the hair that hangs down over your forehead.
BLOWN AWAY	If you <b>are blown away by</b> something (e.g. a performance or a piece of music), it amazes you because it is so good. A hairdresser <i>blows</i> hair dry with a hair dryer.
WAVELENGTHS	If two people are <b>on the same wavelength</b> , they think in the same way. People often have, or want, <i>waves</i> in their hair.

## B

### News headlines

News headlines often play with idioms in some way, to attract people to read the article.

headline	explanation
DELIVERY DELAYS <b>PART AND PARCEL</b> OF POST OFFICE PROBLEMS Recent delays in the postal service are symptoms of wider problems, a government report claims.	a necessary part of an event or experience which cannot be avoided. (The Post Office delivers letters and <i>parcels</i> .)
FIREWORKS FUND <b>BURNING A HOLE IN THE POCKET</b> OF CITY COUNCIL The city council today voted to spend £100,000 on a massive public fireworks display.	If you have money burning a hole in your pocket, you want to spend it as soon as possible. (Fireworks <i>burn</i> , and if one burnt in your pocket, it would make a <i>hole</i> !)
OPTICIANS FAIL TO <b>SEE EYE TO EYE</b> The National Association of British Opticians (NABO) today disagreed about a new set of standards for the industry.	If two people do not see eye to eye, they disagree with each other. (Opticians care for people's eyes and help them see better.)
THEATRE MANAGERS FINALLY <b>GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER</b> The managers of the Cleo Theatre have come up with a rescue package to save the theatre.	organise themselves so that they do things efficiently (informal). (Actors <i>act</i> in a theatre, and performers have an <i>act</i> which they perform.)
AGRICULTURAL REFORM POLICY – FARMERS <b>SIT ON THE FENCE</b> The Farmers' Union has stated that it remains neutral over the latest plans for reform.	delay making a decision when they have to choose between two different options in a dispute. (Farms often have <i>fences</i> which separate the fields.)
CHESS COMPUTER BEATEN BY HUMAN – DESIGNERS <b>ARE BACK TO SQUARE ONE</b> Software engineers now have to rethink the design of the <i>Redray</i> software that failed to work as planned.	have to work on a plan from the beginning again because a previous attempt failed and the progress made was wasted. (A chessboard has 64 <i>squares</i> on it.)

# Exercises

**6.1** Look at the salon names in A opposite. Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?

1



2



3



**6.2** These sentences all use idioms from the opposite page. Why are they humorous? Use a dictionary to find both the idiomatic and literal meanings of the expressions if necessary.

- I was offered a job at a hairdresser's salon but the fringe benefits weren't very good, so I turned it down.
- Both John and Emma work as newsreaders for the local radio station, so I'm not surprised they're always on the same wavelength.
- The audience were blown away by Tom's solo in the wind instrument competition.
- Walking a lot and carrying heavy bags is part and parcel of working as a postman.
- The two film stars have got their act together and resolved their marital problems.

**6.3** Complete each idiom.

- The money was burning ..... my pocket.
- Her two brothers don't see ..... and haven't spoken to each other for over a year.
- Learning how to manage your finances is part ..... of becoming an adult.
- It's time you got ..... and found a job!
- The president refused to make a decision and was accused of sitting .....
- My computer crashed, so I'm back to ..... with my assignment.

**6.4** Match the idioms on the left with the companies or organisations on the right.

- |                            |                          |                                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 BACK TO SQUARE ONE       | <input type="checkbox"/> | a a delivery firm                  |
| 2 GETTING OUR ACT TOGETHER | <input type="checkbox"/> | b a gardening company              |
| 3 PART AND PARCEL          | <input type="checkbox"/> | c a company that makes board games |
| 4 SITTING ON THE FENCE     | <input type="checkbox"/> | d a local drama club               |

Over to you

What products, organisations or services do you think these idioms from other units in this book could be used to advertise?

*it never rains but it pours* (Unit 11)

*fighting fit* (Unit 47)

*two left feet* (Unit 50)

## 7

## Idioms from other varieties of English

In this book we focus mainly on idioms which are widely understood throughout the English-speaking world. However, there are many other idioms which are typical of specific English-speaking countries, such as the US, Scotland, Australia and South Africa. There is not space in this book to include idioms from all these different countries, but a few idioms from the US are included here for interest.

## A

## Idioms from the US

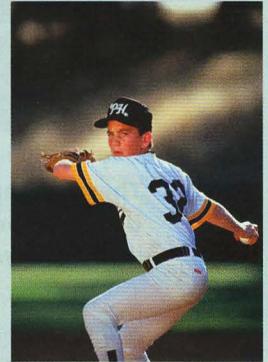
Many US idioms originate from baseball. For example, if you do something **right off the bat**, you do it immediately; if you **throw someone a curveball**, you surprise them with something difficult or unpleasant to deal with. If someone **is batting a thousand**, they are doing something extremely well, better than they had hoped. If someone **drops the ball**, they do something stupid or careless.

Other examples of US idioms:

He's trying to **catch some z's**/zɪ:s/. [sleep (informal)]

The store **is fresh out of** tomatoes. [has just finished or sold all its supply]

His advice **isn't worth a dime**. [has little or no value]



## B

## Variations between British and American English

There are sometimes slightly different forms of idioms in US and British English. Here are some examples:

British English idiom	US English idiom	meaning
<b>the icing on the cake</b>	<b>the frosting on the cake</b>	something that makes a good thing even better
<b>fight like cat and dog</b>	<b>fight like cats and dogs</b>	argue violently all the time
<b>donkey work</b>	<b>grunt work</b>	hard, boring work
<b>take the biscuit</b>	<b>take the cake</b>	used informally to describe something the speaker finds very annoying
<b>weep buckets</b>	<b>cry buckets</b>	cry a lot (informal)
<b>hard cash</b>	<b>cold cash</b>	money in the form of cash or notes, not a cheque or credit card
<b>like the cat that got the cream</b>	<b>like the cat that ate the canary</b>	very pleased with oneself (informal, usually collocates with 'look', 'grin' or 'smile')

## Language help

Idioms that are used mainly in one specific country will often not be easily understood by native English speakers from other parts of the world. You may not see or hear them outside the countries where they originate, so it's safer to use the idioms in this unit when you are in the appropriate country.

## 7.1 Complete each US idiom.

- 1 I'm exhausted after such a difficult day at work. I'm going to try to ..... some z's before I have to go out again this evening.
- 2 I'm afraid we're ..... out of milk. Try next door – maybe they have some.
- 3 Will was doing well at college until he had some problems with his girlfriend and ..... the ball.
- 4 Joe is very efficient – he always deals with jobs right off the .....
- 5 Her ring may look expensive, but it isn't ..... a dime.
- 6 Rachel's batting a ..... at the moment – she's making a great success of her new job.
- 7 The speaker found it hard to answer the questions. He clearly wasn't expecting the audience to ..... him so many curveballs.

## 7.2 Is each speaker more likely to be from the US or from Britain?

- 1 You have to pay the deposit for hiring the boat in cold cash.
- 2 Rhiannon and her sister have always fought like cat and dog.
- 3 It was such a sad film – I wept buckets.
- 4 There's a lot of grunt work to be done before we can open the new restaurant.
- 5 Having such perfect weather on holiday was the frosting on the cake.
- 6 Having to stay late at work on a holiday weekend really took the biscuit.
- 7 What's happened? You look like the cat that got the cream.

## 7.3 Rewrite the sentences in 7.2. If the speaker used US idioms, change them to the equivalent British idiom and vice versa.

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

1



2



3



### Over to you

Find out more about a variety of English that interests you by going to the website <http://www.world-english.org/accent.htm>. The site includes recordings so you can listen to the speech of people from different regions too.

## A

**Where do new idioms come from?**

As Units 15–24 show, many English idioms have very deep roots in history and culture. They have their origins in traditional skills, such as sailing (Unit 14), and in such areas as war (Unit 15), ancient myths (Unit 20) and literature (Unit 22).

However, new idioms evolve all the time from TV, advertising, politics and business. These idioms often quickly become expressions understood and used by many people in their everyday lives. Some of these idioms will be popular for a few years but then get forgotten; others may last. In this unit, we look at some examples of common, but relatively new, idioms.

## B

**Some modern idioms**

example	meaning
Is Madonna still <b>the first lady of pop</b> ?	the expert, or the best (by analogy with how the wife of a US president is referred to as <i>the First Lady</i> )
This programme looks at one couple's experience of living next to neighbours <b>from hell</b> .	People frequently refer to difficult people or unpopular things as being the ... from hell, e.g. the neighbours from hell or the airport from hell.
That young politician was in the news every day for weeks, but now he seems to have <b>fallen off the radar</b> .	been forgotten
Sofia is a wonderful nurse. She'll always <b>go the extra mile</b> for her patients.	make an extra big effort or do things that are more than is strictly necessary
The website <a href="http://www.cheapolidays.org">www.cheapolidays.org</a> <b>does exactly what it says on the tin</b> .	does exactly what it claims to do
Finding out what really happened is <b>like nailing jelly to a wall</b> .	difficult to understand or describe because it is not clear or focused enough
<b>I'm cool with</b> that.	I'm happy with a suggestion
It <b>doesn't float my boat!</b>	I don't agree with what you like or are interested in. (Also <b>Whatever floats your boat!</b> )
I'm fed up with him <b>big time</b> . / He's into judo <b>big time</b> .	extremely

## C

**Modern conversational fixed expressions**

If you do not want to discuss anything further, you can say 'That's it! **End of (story)!**'

If you think that someone is telling you about very personal things that you do not want to hear about, you can stop them by saying '**Too much information!**'

If a friend starts talking about a subject you do not want to discuss, you could respond '**Don't even go there!**'

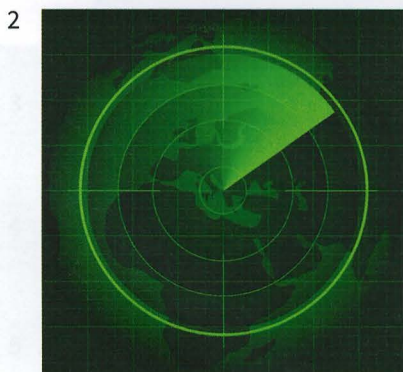
## 8.1 Look at B opposite. Are the idioms in these sentences used correctly? If not, correct them.

- 1 You have to be prepared to go the further mile if you want to get promoted.
- 2 Whatever happened to that pop star you used to like so much? He seems to have completely fallen off the radar now.
- 3 This shampoo is great – it does exactly what it writes on the tin.
- 4 I'd never share an apartment with her – she'd be the flatmate of hell.
- 5 Stella McCartney is often called the 'first lady of fashion'.

## 8.2 Complete the dialogue with idioms from B and C opposite. Use one word per space.

- Jo: Hi, Meg. Great to see you again. Where's Kate?  
 Meg: She just texted. She's not coming. Apparently she's really sick and has been throwing up all night.
- Jo: (1) ..... ! I don't want to know!  
 What shall we do then?
- Meg: I really want to go that new photography exhibition.  
 Jo: Mmm, (2) .....  
 ..... ! I know you're into art (3) .....  
 but I'm not. How about the cinema instead?
- Meg: Yeah, (4) .....  
 ..... Is Matt coming too?
- Jo: (5) ..... !  
 We broke up.
- Meg: Really? What happened?  
 Jo: I don't want to talk about it. We're finished. (6) ..... !

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



## 8.4 Do these sentences make sense? Explain why / why not.

- 1 It could be fun to live next door to the neighbours from hell.
- 2 Tilly's father was happy about her plans to marry, but her mother was cool with it.
- 3 Rani loves that painter's work, but it doesn't float my boat.
- 4 Getting him to say what he thinks is like nailing jelly to a wall – he's always honest and open.



## A What are similes?

Similes are expressions which compare two things; they always include the words *as* or *like*. You can use similes to make your spoken and written English more colourful and your comparisons more powerful. For example:

My brother's **as thin as a rake**. [extremely thin]

The baby's skin is **as smooth as silk**. [extremely smooth]

Pilar is **as bright as a button**. [extremely clever]

I slept really well, so I feel **as fresh as a daisy** this morning. [extremely fresh and full of energy]

George **ran like the wind** to get the message to Paula before she left. [ran extremely fast]

I don't want to go in the car with Lottie. She **drives like a maniac**! [drives fast and badly]

My new sweater **fits like a glove**. I'm so pleased with it. [fits extremely well]

The two men were in the next room, but I could hear every word they said **as clear as crystal**. [very clearly]

Ben claimed to be **as poor as a church mouse**, but we knew he was rich. [very poor]

As Beth walked in, the house was **as silent as the grave**. [totally silent]

You should learn similes as whole phrases, because it is usually not possible to change the individual words (e.g. we do not say *as thin as a stick* or *as thin as a pole*). Where it is possible to change the individual words, the meaning of the simile often changes, for example:

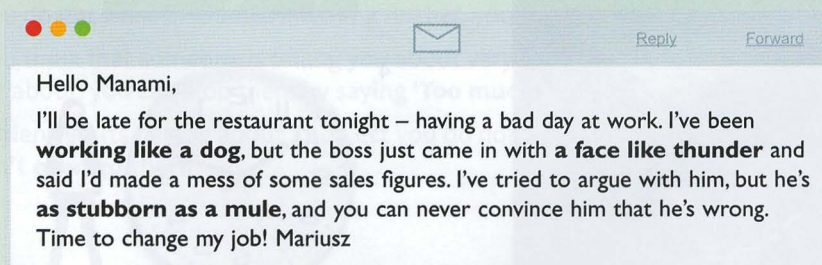
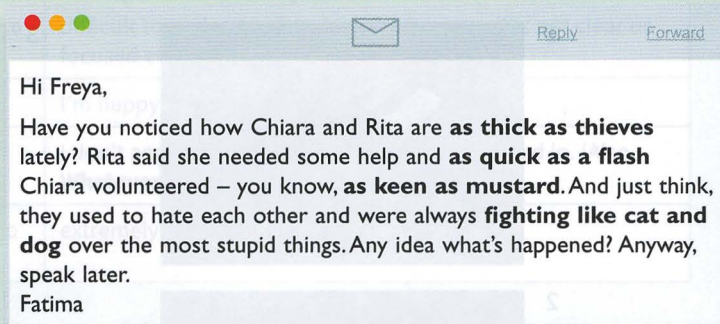
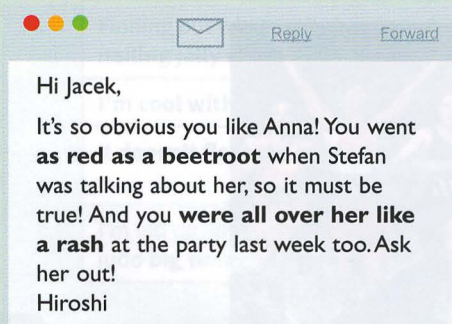
I needed a drink of water. My mouth was **as dry as a bone**. [extremely dry / thirsty]

His lecture was **as dry as dust**, and everyone was bored. [extremely boring]



## B Everyday similes

The similes in these emails are often used in everyday conversation and informal writing.



## Language help

Be careful how you use similes. They have strong meanings and are often used in a humorous or sarcastic way, e.g. *My teacher's explanations are **as clear as mud*** [not clear at all].

**9.1 Look at A opposite. Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending. Then complete the sentence with *as* or *like*.**

- |                                   |                              |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 My new dress fits .....         | a maniac.                    |
| 2 You'll need to run .....        | silk.                        |
| 3 She's as thin .....             | a button.                    |
| 4 Ana always looks as fresh ..... | a bone.                      |
| 5 He drove off .....              | a rake.                      |
| 6 Her mouth felt as dry .....     | a glove.                     |
| 7 Their son is as bright .....    | the wind to catch the train. |
| 8 Her hair felt as smooth .....   | a daisy.                     |

**9.2 Choose the correct word to complete each simile.**

- That book was so boring. It was as dry as [a bone / dust].
- You explained it so well – it's a difficult concept, but it's as clear as [crystal / mud] now.
- I wonder what they're plotting – they look as thick as [two short planks / thieves].
- After working in that airless room my mouth feels as dry as [a bone / dust].
- I can't understand what he's trying to say – it's as clear as [crystal / mud].

**9.3 Replace the underlined part of each sentence with a simile.**

- Tom and Rosa have been arguing all the time recently.
- Amy blushed and looked very embarrassed when Lasse commented on her new dress.
- When our teacher asks the class a difficult question, Hatsuki usually answers without a moment's hesitation.
- It was early Sunday morning, and the house was strangely silent.
- Emma was behaving towards Jakob in a very affectionate way at the barbecue last week.
- All her sisters are extremely poor.
- Caterina felt full of energy after her shower.
- The students in my class are great – hardworking, punctual and very enthusiastic.

**9.4 Agree with what A says. Complete each response with a simile.**

- |   |                              |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1 A: He looked really angry.                                      | B: Yes, he had .....         |
| 2 A: It's impossible to get him to change his mind.               | B: Yes, he's .....           |
| 3 A: He drove off very quickly, didn't he?                        | B: Yes, he was driving ..... |
| 4 A: You've been very busy at work, haven't you?                  | B: Yes, I've been .....      |
| 5 A: You can always rely on Suzie to organise the school concert. | B: Yes, she's .....          |

## A

## What are binomials?

Binomials are a type of idiom in which two words are joined by a conjunction (linking word), usually *and*. The order of the two words is fixed. For example, we always say **black and white**, NOT *white and black*: 'Managing climate change isn't a **black and white** issue.' [separate and clear]

The words can be

- synonyms (words which mean the same): Sara's work is always very **neat and tidy**.
- opposites: If you go for cheaper speakers, the sound quality may be a bit **hit and miss**. [sometimes good, sometimes bad (informal)]
- the same word: They finished the race **neck and neck**. [equal]
- rhyming: Tables in the canteen take a lot of **wear and tear**. [damage through everyday use]
- alliterative: After the match, the players' legs were **black and blue**. [very bruised]
- joined by words other than *and*: The traffic was **bumper to bumper** all the way to the coast. [very heavy] **Little by little**, Vera gained the horse's confidence. [gradually] The house must be worth a quarter of a million, **give or take** a few thousand. [plus or minus (informal)]

Trinomials are a similar type of idiom, in which three words are joined, e.g. 'I've looked **here, there and everywhere** for my glasses but can't find them.' [everywhere]

## B

## Other examples

example	meaning
Let's toss a coin to see who starts. You call: <b>heads or tails</b> ?	heads is the side of a British coin with the monarch's head on it; tails is the other side
We're <b>at sixes and sevens</b> at work this week.	in a state of confusion (informal)
Hannah had flu last week, but she's <b>out and about</b> again now.	active, doing her usual activities (informal)
Although the twins look the same, when you talk to them you realise they're like <b>chalk and cheese</b> .	totally different (informal)
It's great to leave the <b>hustle and bustle</b> of the city at the weekend.	crowds and noise
I can't do up these tiny buttons – I'm <b>all fingers and thumbs</b> today.	am awkward with my hands, unable to do what I want to do (informal)
The money for the charity appeal came in <b>in dribs and drabs</b> , but we reached our target in the end.	small amounts at a time (informal)
It took a lot of <b>blood, sweat and tears</b> to get the business going.	hard work
I've asked you <b>time after time</b> not to do that.	many times (usually suggests irritation)
Her interest in painting <b>waxed and waned</b> over the years.	fluctuated (The literal meaning of <i>wax</i> and <i>wane</i> relates to the moon's changes in shape.)
She really doesn't enjoy living in the countryside. She's a city person, <b>through and through</b> .	completely (typically used about people)
We had a great holiday and explored <b>every nook and cranny</b> of the island.	every small place

**10.1** Combine the words in the box to form ten binomials or trinomials from A opposite. For each, you will need to add *and* or another joining word.

black	neck	little	bumper	everywhere	give	cranny	here	hit	little	
bumper	miss	neat	blue	neck	nook	take	tear	there	tidy	wear

**10.2** Complete each dialogue with an idiom from the opposite page.

- A: Was the traffic bad on the way here?  
B: Yes, it was ..... the whole way.
- A: Did you get everything you needed today?  
B: Yes, but I had to go ..... to find it all.
- A: This sofa is only six months old, but it looks really old.  
B: Well, it gets a lot of .....
- A: We're making very slow progress with this project.  
B: But we're getting there .....
- A: Have you found your watch yet?  
B: No, I've searched in every ..... but I still can't find it!
- A: What's Galya's flat like?  
B: Well, you know how organised she is! It's very .....
- A: Which horse won the race?  
B: Two of them finished .....
- A: Were there a lot of people at the party?  
B: About a hundred, ..... a few.

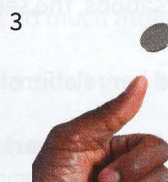
**10.3** Which binomials do these pictures make you think of? Complete the captions.



'The ..... of market day.'



'He's a United supporter .....



'.....?'



'Her two dogs are like .....

**10.4** Rewrite each sentence using the word in brackets.

- People started to gradually enter the room. [DRIBS]
- Jack's commitment to work went up and down throughout the year. [WAXED]
- Have a few days' rest, and you'll be fully recovered in no time. [ABOUT]
- I've often told him not to leave his car unlocked. [TIME]
- The work required a lot of effort, but it was worth it. [BLOOD]
- The whole team's been in a state of confusion since Kay resigned. [SEVENS]
- I keep dropping things today – I'm so clumsy. [THUMBS]
- My mum and I are completely different people, but we get on well. [CHALK]

Proverbs are short sentences which refer to something most people have experienced and which give advice or warnings. Like idioms, their form is fixed, and it is not always possible to guess the meaning from looking at the individual words.

## A

**Positive situations**

In these conversations, the second speaker uses a proverb to repeat and sum up what the first speaker says.

**A:** We all want to solve this problem, and I'm sure we'll find a solution.

**B:** Yes. **Where there's a will, there's a way.** [if we really want to achieve something, we can]

**A:** Well, we'll have to invest all of our savings and work really hard, and there's still a chance the project won't succeed.

**B:** I know, but **nothing ventured, nothing gained.** [you need to take risks to achieve something]

**A:** I was upset when I didn't get into university, but at least it leaves me free to go travelling.

**B:** Yeah. **Every cloud has a silver lining.** [there is something good in every bad situation]

**A:** My job is different every day. It's never boring.

**B:** Well, **variety is the spice of life,** isn't it? [change makes life interesting]

**A:** Josh found it impossible to get a new job, so he set up his own business instead.

**B:** Yes, well, **necessity is the mother of invention.** [if people really need to do something, they will find a way to do it]

## B

**Negative situations**

In these conversations, the second speaker uses a proverb to repeat and sum up what the first speaker says.

**A:** Marta ended her relationship with Jakob, and the next day her friend Ellie met Jakob for a drink.

**B:** **All's fair in love and war!** [all behaviour is acceptable in extreme situations, especially in romantic situations and competitions]

**A:** What a day! My car broke down and my wallet has been stolen.

**B:** **It never rains but it pours.** [problems always happen together]

**A:** I wonder why Sylvia and Ben have broken up.

**B:** Well, **it takes two to tango.** [two people are equally responsible]

## C

**Other popular proverbs**

I'm really impatient to finish decorating my flat, but **Rome wasn't built in a day!** [it takes a long time to do important things properly]

We should buy extra travel insurance for our skiing trip. **Better safe than sorry.** [it is better not to take risks, even if it seems boring or hard work]

I have to study hard and do a lot of exams to become an accountant, but **no pain no gain.** [there must be some suffering in order to succeed]

We don't have enough tickets for everybody, so it's a case of **first come, first served.** [the first to arrive will get something]

**11.1 Look at A opposite. Match the beginning of each sentence with its ending.**

A

- |                         |                          |                        |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Every cloud           | <input type="checkbox"/> | a mother of invention. |
| 2 Nothing ventured,     | <input type="checkbox"/> | b there's a way.       |
| 3 Necessity is the      | <input type="checkbox"/> | c spice of life.       |
| 4 Where there's a will, | <input type="checkbox"/> | d nothing gained.      |
| 5 Variety is the        | <input type="checkbox"/> | e has a silver lining. |

**11.2 Write a suitable response to each remark with a proverb from B opposite.**

- 1 A friend tells you that Max and Lydia are getting divorced because they've both been having affairs.
- 2 Someone tells you about three bad things that happened to them all on the same day.
- 3 Someone tells you about a small lie they told in order to meet somebody that they really like.
- 4 A friend tells you that they missed the train they wanted to get, but the next train was cheaper and faster.
- 5 A friend tells you that they are frustrated that it is taking a long time to set up their own business.
- 6 A friend tells you that they are determined to save up enough money to go travelling, but they don't know how to do this.

**11.3 Correct the mistakes in these proverbs.**

- 1 We had no tent, so we made a shelter out of branches and leaves to protect ourselves from the storm. It was a case of need is the mother of invention.
- 2 I'm doing three jobs at the moment to pay for my studies. Still, they say that change is the spice of life!
- 3 I went to the gym every day for three months and felt so much fitter. It was very hard work but nothing pained, nothing gained.
- 4 I decided that bungee jumping was too dangerous and didn't go with my friends – better to be safe than dead.
- 5 We've got ten laptops at half-price. But hurry – it's first come, first serve.
- 6 Three big bills at the same time? It never pours but it rains!

**11.4 Complete each proverb.**

- 1 When we got there, they had given away all the free tickets. It was a case of first ....., first .....
- 2 Take your time and don't be impatient. Rome wasn't ..... in .....
- 3 It's a shame you missed your flight, but at least we can spend more time together. They do say every ..... has ..... silver .....
- 4 All my problems seem to come at the same time. It's true what they say: it never ..... it pours!
- 5 It's going to be a lot of hard work, but nothing ....., nothing .....
- 6 They are both in the wrong. It takes ..... to .....