

# Introduction

Idioms, such as *shake a leg*, *kick the bucket*, and *bend over backwards*, are figurative expressions that have fixed or conventional meanings. Idioms commonly occur in daily communicative situations, such as talking with friends; watching TV; listening to radio commentators; and reading books, magazines, and newspapers. The language of all cultures is peppered with idioms, many of which cause confusion for individuals who are learning a second language or are still in the process of acquiring their first language. Mastering a language requires the ability to interpret idioms that occur in spoken and written contexts.

Idioms can be opaque or transparent. With opaque expressions (e.g., *tickled pink*, *the world is her oyster*), there is little relationship between the literal and the figurative meanings. However, with transparent expressions (e.g., *hold your tongue*, *bring home the bacon*), the figurative meaning is actually an extension of the literal meaning. Research has shown that transparent idioms are generally easier for school-age children and adolescents to understand than opaque, that the presence of a supportive linguistic context can facilitate the understanding of both types of idioms, and that repeated exposure to idioms plays a key role in the learning process (Nippold, 1998).

The purpose of this text is to facilitate students' ability to learn idioms by abstracting the meaning from the linguistic context. Students are taught to draw inferences and to bring their own experiences to the learning process to promote personal ownership of the expressions. Repeated exposure to and use of the idioms is also encouraged.

## Teaching Suggestions

The exercises in this book are designed for use with middle school students, junior high school students, high school students, and adults in either a group or individualized setting. Using the ideas in the book as a springboard, the idioms may also be successfully taught to primary students through role-playing and play-acting settings. Each idiom is presented in the context of a short story accompanied by an illustration. This story is followed by five exercises:

- A. Definition of the idiom
- B. Application of the idiom to specific situations
- C. Vocabulary development
- D. Substitution of the idiom for a phrase found in a sentence
- E. Subjective exercise, asking students to apply the idiom to their own experiences

An answer key is provided for students to correct their own responses to Exercises A through D. Exercise E is subjective, with answers that vary and lend themselves to discussion in the group setting. Occasionally, Exercise B is also subjective with answers that will vary from student to student.

Students rarely learn new concepts or ideas with one exposure. Providing a variety of experiences with idioms is necessary to encourage appropriate spontaneous use and understanding. The following suggestions are offered as possible activities to supplement the workbook pages after they are presented. The list is by no means exhaustive, but offers suggestions for providing students with practice using these idioms in formats that are meaningful and fun. A teacher's own creativity will go far beyond this limited list of suggestions.

1. Select an "Idiom of the Week" (or day). Students are asked to find as many examples of that idiom as they can and describe them to the class. The teacher can pose questions, such as "Have you seen anyone who is *all thumbs*? Did someone *jump the gun* during the math quiz? Did your classroom teacher *hit the roof* when someone stood on the table?"
2. Divide the class into two teams after 10 or more idioms have been studied. One team acts out an idiom while the other team has to guess what it is.
3. Have each student select an idiom that he or she likes and use it at least once a day for a week.
4. Have the class give the teacher an idiom that he or she must use at least once a day for a week. Be sure someone keeps score.
5. Encourage students to listen for idioms that are not in the workbook. Encourage them to learn what these idioms mean and then teach them to the class.
6. Have students find an idiom that they do not like and explain why.
7. Have students explain an idiom to a friend who is unfamiliar with it.
8. Have students choose idioms they will use at home with their family. If the family members do not know the meaning of these idioms, the student will teach them to everyone.
9. Choosing their favorite sport, students will find an idiom connected with it. Bring in illustrations from the nightly sports news, a newspaper, or a sports magazine.
10. Have an "Idiom Category of the Week." See how many idioms you can collect for the category (e.g., food, animals, sports, body parts).
11. Make a book or a diorama of an idiom.
12. Write a puppet show or a play revolving around an idiom and perform it for another class.
13. Encourage students to illustrate an idiom differently from the way it is illustrated in this book.

14. Discuss how students think an idiom originated. For example, *lion's share* means the largest part of something. This idiom probably evolved from the observations of animals in the jungle after a kill. The lion, being the king of the jungle and most feared, would eat first and take as much as he wanted, leaving a little bit for the other predators. Encourage students to come up with many different interpretations and decide which is the most likely explanation.

## A Word About the Illustrations

Illustrations accompany each idiom for several reasons: (1) Pictures are fun, especially cartoons! (2) When a picture can be used to illustrate the exact words of the idiom (e.g., “It’s Raining Cats and Dogs” shows a picture of a person holding an umbrella with cats and dogs falling on top of it), there is an immediate response by students about the absurdity of the picture—they know cats and dogs don’t fall from the sky! They start thinking about how some ordinary words that mean one thing when they stand alone take on an entirely different meaning when strung together in another context. The picture becomes more comical as the students learn the real meaning of the idiom. (3) There is an opportunity to deal with double meanings. For example, “Can’t Get Over It” shows a dog standing in front of a fence contemplating the height. The illustration shows a very real situation—a task that looks impossible—but it really has nothing to do with the idiom. The fact that this phrase can be interpreted two ways also launches a discussion showing students that a phrase can often have several meanings, depending on the context. Teachers can encourage meaningful discussions that start with the analysis of the illustration accompanying the idiom. Students can then use this discussion as a tool to hone their analytical skills.

It’s time to start so *let’s get this show on the road* and *give it the old college try*. Some of the idioms presented may not appeal to you or your particular class. *Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater*. Just use the ones that work for you and give your students *food for thought*. They may hear a particular idiom only *once in a blue moon*, but they will be *flying high* when they realize the fun they can have with words. *The time is ripe*, so *let’s get down to brass tacks*!

## REFERENCE

Nippold, M. A. (1998). *Later language development: The school-age and adolescent years* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.