

Idioms & Phrases

~ English Vocabulary · Competitive Exams ~



An idiom's meaning is **not the literal words**.

to break the ice ≠ break real ice — it means **to start a conversation!** Learn each idiom as one unit.

① Set 1 – Everyday Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A blessing in disguise	a hidden good in a bad event	Losing that job was a blessing in disguise.
Break the ice	start a conversation	He cracked a joke to break the ice.
Once in a blue moon	very rarely	He visits us once in a blue moon.
A piece of cake	a very easy task	The maths test was a piece of cake.
Bury the hatchet	make peace / end a quarrel	The two friends buried the hatchet.
At the eleventh hour	at the last moment	He reached the station at the eleventh hour.
Hit the nail on the head	say exactly the right thing	Your answer hit the nail on the head.
Under the weather	feeling unwell	She is a little under the weather today.
In a nutshell	in brief / in short	In a nutshell, the plan failed.
Call it a day	stop work for the day	It's late; let's call it a day.



Never translate word-by-word! **A piece of cake** has nothing to do with cake — it simply means 'very easy'. Store the whole phrase with its **figurative** meaning.

② Set 2 – Idioms with Body Parts 💡

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Pull someone's leg	to joke with / tease	Relax, I'm only pulling your leg.
Turn a deaf ear	refuse to listen / ignore	He turned a deaf ear to my advice.
Keep an eye on	watch carefully	Please keep an eye on my bag.
Get cold feet	lose courage / hesitate	He got cold feet before the interview.
Pull one's socks up	make a greater effort	Pull your socks up before the exam.
Poke one's nose in	interfere / meddle	Don't poke your nose in my affairs.
Wash one's hands of	refuse responsibility for	He washed his hands of the whole deal.
Give the cold shoulder	ignore / be unfriendly	She gave the new boy the cold shoulder.
Hold one's tongue	keep quiet / stay silent	Hold your tongue during the lecture.
Cost an arm and a leg	be very expensive	The wedding cost an arm and a leg.

One body part, many idioms

All ears = listening eagerly

A safe pair of hands = reliable person

Lend a hand = help someone

Split hairs = argue over trifles

See eye to eye = agree fully

Rack one's brain = think very hard

Win by a nose = win very narrowly

A slip of the tongue = small speaking mistake

✓ Body-part idioms are exam favourites. Tie each one to a mental picture – **cold feet** = nervous, **deaf ear** = ignoring – and the meaning sticks.

③ Set 3 – Colour Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A white elephant	costly, useless possession	The old stadium is a white elephant.
A white lie	a harmless, small lie	She told a white lie to spare his feelings.
A red-letter day	an important, memorable day	Result day was a red-letter day for her.
Caught red-handed	caught in the act	The thief was caught red-handed.
Green with envy	extremely jealous	He was green with envy at her success.
The black sheep	a disgrace to the family	He is the black sheep of the family.
In the pink (of health)	in very good health	Grandpa is still in the pink.
Once in a blue moon	very rarely	He calls his cousin once in a blue moon.
Show the white feather	act like a coward	He showed the white feather in the fight.

④ Set 4 – Animal Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A wild goose chase	a futile, useless search	The hunt for the file was a wild goose chase.
Let the cat out of the bag	reveal a secret	She let the cat out of the bag about the party.
A fish out of water	uneasy in new surroundings	At the gala he felt like a fish out of water.
Take the bull by the horns	face a difficulty boldly	She took the bull by the horns and complained.
Crocodile tears	insincere, false grief	He shed crocodile tears at the news.
Rain cats and dogs	rain very heavily	It rained cats and dogs all night.
A dog in the manger	a selfish, grudging person	Don't be a dog in the manger with the tools.
Kill two birds with one stone	achieve two aims at once	Cycling to work kills two birds with one stone.
A wolf in sheep's clothing	an enemy posing as a friend	Beware — he is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

⑤ Set 5 – High-Frequency Exam Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example
Under a cloud	under suspicion / in disgrace	Since the scandal he is under a cloud.
Flog a dead horse	waste effort on a lost cause	Arguing now is flogging a dead horse.
Face the music	face the consequences	After cheating, he had to face the music.
By fits and starts	irregularly / in bursts	He studies only by fits and starts.
All at sea	confused / puzzled	She was all at sea in her new job.
On the cards	likely to happen	His promotion is on the cards.
Not hold water	be unconvincing / illogical	His alibi did not hold water.
In a tight corner	in a difficult situation	The debts put him in a tight corner.
Get the sack	be dismissed from a job	He got the sack for being late daily.
A Herculean task	a very difficult task	Building it in a month was a Herculean task.
Rub the wrong way	irritate / annoy	His rude tone rubbed everyone the wrong way.



*Tip: These eleven idioms appear again and again in SSC papers. In a fill-the-blank or synonym question, first read the whole sentence – the **context** points you straight to the right meaning.*

Handy one-liners

Burn the midnight oil = work late

A narrow escape = a lucky escape

Read between the lines = find hidden sense

Make both ends meet = manage on little

Blow one's own trumpet = boast

Leave no stone unturned = try every way

⑥ Set 6 – Advanced Idioms

Idiom	Meaning	Example
A feather in one's cap	a proud achievement	The award is a feather in her cap.
Turn over a new leaf	reform / start afresh	He turned over a new leaf after the warning.
Add fuel to the fire	make matters worse	His joke added fuel to the fire.
Born with a silver spoon	born into a rich family	He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.
Throw dust in one's eyes	deceive / mislead	The trickster threw dust in their eyes.
Call a spade a spade	speak frankly / plainly	She calls a spade a spade, always.
End in smoke	come to nothing / fail	All his plans ended in smoke.
A bolt from the blue	a sudden shock	The news came as a bolt from the blue.
Make a clean breast of	confess fully	He made a clean breast of his mistake.
Smell a rat	suspect something wrong	I smell a rat in this deal.
Steal a march on	gain an advantage over	The firm stole a march on its rivals.

Don't confuse these look-alikes!

A white elephant = costly & useless

In the pink = healthy

Hold water = sound / believable

Blow hot and cold = keep changing mind

A white lie = harmless lie

In the blues = sad / gloomy

In hot water = in trouble

Bury the hatchet = make peace

✓ A one-word change can flip the meaning – *in the pink* (healthy) vs *in the blues* (sad).
Learn the exact wording, not just the gist.

Exercise A – Choose the Correct Meaning

Pick the option that best gives the meaning of the idiom in **bold**.

1. He is **under a cloud** after the theft was reported.
(A) very busy (B) under suspicion (C) feeling low (D) in danger
2. Arguing with him now is just **flogging a dead horse**.
(A) being cruel (B) wasting effort uselessly (C) taking revenge (D) beating an animal
3. After bunking class, he had to **face the music**.
(A) attend a concert (B) sing a song (C) face the consequences (D) feel sorry
4. Those who work **by fits and starts** rarely succeed.
(A) regularly (B) quickly (C) irregularly (D) lazily
5. She was **all at sea** on her first day at work.
(A) delighted (B) confused (C) tired (D) sea-sick
6. The costly project became a **white elephant**.
(A) a rare animal (B) a proud symbol (C) a costly, useless thing (D) a big success
7. If you **rub him the wrong way**, he will react.
(A) flatter him (B) help him (C) annoy him (D) ignore him
8. He was progressing **by leaps and bounds**.
(A) slowly (B) rapidly (C) unevenly (D) with luck
9. Building the college was a **Herculean task**.
(A) an easy job (B) a worthless job (C) a task needing great effort (D) a pleasant job
10. His story simply does **not hold water**.
(A) is not honest (B) cannot be believed (C) is very sad (D) is incomplete

Answer Key – A

1→ (B) under suspicion 2→ (B) wasting effort 3→ (C) face the consequences 4→ (C) irregularly 5→ (B) confused 6→ (C) costly, useless thing 7→ (C) annoy him
8→ (B) rapidly 9→ (C) task needing great effort 10→ (B) cannot be believed

Exercise B – Choose the Correct Meaning ☆

Pick the option that best gives the meaning of the idiom in **bold**.

1. The result day was a **red-letter day** for her.
(A) an unlucky day (B) a very important day (C) a holiday (D) a rainy day
2. The thief was caught **red-handed**.
(A) with bloody hands (B) in the act (C) after a chase (D) by mistake
3. She **let the cat out of the bag** at dinner.
(A) freed a pet (B) told a lie (C) revealed a secret (D) made a joke
4. At the grand party he felt like **a fish out of water**.
(A) very thirsty (B) ill (C) uneasy in new surroundings (D) overjoyed
5. The manager **took the bull by the horns**.
(A) ran away (B) faced the difficulty boldly (C) grew angry (D) blamed others
6. He shed **crocodile tears** at the funeral.
(A) genuine grief (B) false, insincere grief (C) tears of joy (D) tears of pain
7. Winning the medal is **a feather in his cap**.
(A) a heavy burden (B) a proud achievement (C) a lucky chance (D) a small reward
8. After the warning he **turned over a new leaf**.
(A) changed his job (B) reformed himself (C) moved house (D) gave up hope
9. The bad news came as **a bolt from the blue**.
(A) slowly (B) as a sudden shock (C) as good luck (D) as expected
10. I **smell a rat** in this whole plan.
(A) find a bad odour (B) suspect something wrong (C) feel afraid (D) dislike it

Answer Key – B

- 1→ (B) very important day 2→ (B) in the act 3→ (C) revealed a secret 4→ (C) uneasy in new surroundings
5→ (B) faced difficulty boldly 6→ (B) false, insincere grief
7→ (B) a proud achievement 8→ (B) reformed himself 9→ (B) a sudden shock
10→ (B) suspect something wrong

Idioms at a Glance – Quick Recap

Idiom	Meaning
<i>A blessing in disguise</i>	<i>a hidden good in a bad event</i>
<i>Break the ice</i>	<i>start a conversation</i>
<i>Turn a deaf ear</i>	<i>refuse to listen</i>
<i>Get cold feet</i>	<i>lose courage</i>
<i>The black sheep</i>	<i>a disgrace to the family</i>
<i>Caught red-handed</i>	<i>caught in the act</i>
<i>A wild goose chase</i>	<i>a futile search</i>
<i>Let the cat out of the bag</i>	<i>reveal a secret</i>
<i>Face the music</i>	<i>face the consequences</i>
<i>A bolt from the blue</i>	<i>a sudden shock</i>
<i>Turn over a new leaf</i>	<i>reform / start afresh</i>
<i>Smell a rat</i>	<i>suspect something wrong</i>

- ✓ Learn each idiom as **one unit** — never split its words.
- ✓ Read the **whole sentence**; context reveals the right meaning.
- ✓ Mind the exact wording — **in the pink** ≠ **in the blues**.

✓ Revise ten idioms a day with one example each. In a month you'll own a bank of 300+ — enough to crack any idiom question in the exam.

☆ Learn the idiom — not the literal words! ☆