

IDIOMS AND PHRASES

IDIOMS

An idiom is a phrase or a fixed expression that has a figurative, or sometimes literal, meaning. An idiom's figurative meaning is different from the literal meaning. There are thousands of idioms and they occur frequently in all languages. It is estimated that there are at least twenty-five thousand idiomatic expressions in the English language.

Examples:

- Why are you *pulling my leg*?
To pull someone's leg means to tease them by telling them something untrue.
- Please don't forget to *drop him a line*?
To drop someone a line means to send a note to or call someone.
- Yesterday it rained *cats and dogs*.
To rain cats and dogs means to rain very heavily.

It should be noted that such expressions can appear as words, combinations of words, phrases, entire clauses, and entire sentences. When one says "The devil is in the details", one is not expressing a belief in demons, but rather one means that things may look good on the surface, but upon scrutiny, undesirable aspects are revealed. Similarly, when one says "The early bird catches the worm", one is not suggesting that there is only one worm, but for the sake of the idiom one plays along, and imagines that there is only one worm. Alternatively, the figurative translation of this phrase is that the most attentive and astute individual, or the first one gets the desired outcome to a situation or the better product, depending on the context.

DERIVATIONS

Many idiomatic expressions, in their original use were not figurative but had literal meaning. For example, "*Spill the beans*" meaning to let out a secret, originates from an ancient method of democratic voting, wherein a voter would put a bean into one of several cups to indicate which candidate he wanted to cast his vote for. If the jars were spilled before the counting of votes was complete, anyone would be able to see which jar had more beans. Over the years, the practice was discontinued and the idiom became figurative.

Another expression "*Let the cat out of the bag*" has a similar meaning, but the secret revealed in this case will likely cause some problems. A cat was sometimes put in a bag to keep it under control. So, to let the cat out of the bag suggests either that the secret is revealed or that the situation is out of control. Or alternatively, it may be that the way a cat, once set free, will wander off, was a good description of a secret that is revealed.

A popular expression, "*Break a leg*" meaning good luck in a performance/presentation, etc. The term '*break a leg*' appears to come from the belief that one ought not to utter the words 'good luck' to an actor. By wishing someone bad luck, it is supposed that the opposite will occur.

SOME COMMONLY USED IDIOMS

- *To beat back* (to compel to retire) : The firemen were *beaten back* by angry flames and the building was reduced to ashes.
- *To boil down to* (to amount to) : His entire argument *boiled down to* this that he would not join the movement unless he saw some monetary gain in it.
- *To cast aside* (to reject, to throw aside) : Men will *cast aside* truth and honesty for immediate gains.
- *To cry down* (to deprecate) : Some of the Western powers did their best to *cry down* India's success in the war.
- *To cut off with a shilling* (to give someone a mere trifle in the will) : The father was so angry with the son over his marriage that he *cut him off with a shilling*.
- *To egg on* (to urge on) : Who *egged you on* to fight a professional boxer and get your nose knocked off?
- *To gloss over* (explain away) : Even if you are an important person, your faults cannot be *glossed over*.
- *To laugh in one's sleeves* (to be secretly amused) : While I was solemnly reading my research paper to the audience, my friends were *laughing in their sleeves* for they knew what it was worth.
- *To play off* (to set one party against another for one's own advantage) : It best serves the interests of the super powers to *play off* one poor nation against another.
- *To pull one through* (to recover, to help one recover) : Armed with the latest medicines, the doctor *will pull him through*.
- *To cast a slur upon* (by word or act to cast a slight reproach on someone) : Many a man *casts a slur* on his own good name with some mean act.
- *To catch a tartar* (to encounter a strong adversary) : When Hitler marched into Russia, little did he know that he would *catch a tartar* in the tough people of that country.
- *To come off with flying colours* (to come out of a conflict with brilliant success) : The 1971 election outcome was uncertain but finally the Congress *came off with flying colours*.
- *To come off second best* (to be defeated in every contest): Be it an election or a tambola, I have always *come off the second best*.
- *To cut the Gordian knot* (to remove a difficulty by bold or unusual measures) : The Parliament threw out the Bill for Abolition of Privy Purses. The Government *cut the Gordian knot* by abolishing the privy purses through an ordinance.

- *To fall to one's lot* (to become one's fate): It *fell to the lot of* Mujib and his colleagues to reconstruct the shattered economy of their nation.
- *To get into hot water* (to get into difficulty): The businessman *got into hot water* with the income tax authorities for concealing his income from ancestral property.
- *To give someone the slip* (to dodge someone who is looking for you): The police had nearly got the dacoits when the latter *gave them the slip* in the Chambal ravines.
- *To go on a fool's errand* (to go on an expedition which leads to a foolish end): Many people earlier believed that going to the moon was like *going on a fool's errand*.
- *To go to the wall* (to get the worst in a competition): In the struggle of life, the weakest *goes to the wall*.
- *To go to rack and ruin, to go to the dogs* (to be ruined): If a big war comes, our economy will *go to the dogs*.
- *To have one's hands full* (to be very busy): Pakistan could hardly expect active help from the U.S.A. *as her hands were already full* with the problems of Vietnam, Laos and West Asia.
- *To have a bone to pick with someone* (to have a difference with a person which has not yet been fully expressed). The extreme leftists *have a bone to pick* with the police and if ever they come to power, there may be unpleasantness between the two.
- *To have the whip hand* (to have mastery over): After the split, *the moderates have the whip hand* in the party.
- *To have too many irons in the fire* (to have so much work in hand that some part of it is left undone or is done very badly): Let the Government not go in for nationalisation so fast. If they *have too many irons in the fire*, they are bound to fare badly.
- *To have the tree or right ring* (To be genuine): Nixon's pronouncements on world peace do not *have the right ring*.
- *To have two strings to one's bow* (to have an alternative means of achieving one's purpose): A wife always has *two strings to her bow*, if coaxing fails to achieve the desired end; tears succeed.
- *To have an axe to grind* (have personal interests to serve): Bigger nations supply arms to the smaller ones primarily because they (the bigger nations) *have their own axe to grind*.
- *To keep the wolf from the door* (to keep away extreme poverty and hunger): Lakhs in India have to struggle everyday to *keep the wolf from the door*.
- *To make short work of* (to bring to sudden end): The locusts *made short work of* the ripe standing corn.
- *To make amends for* (to compensate for damage): By his kindness today, he has *made amends for* his past insolence.
- *To make common cause with* (to unite, to cooperate with): During the last elections, the princes *made a common cause with* the rightist parties. Both went down.
- *To make a virtue of necessity* (to do a very disagreeable thing as though from duty but really because you must do it): When a minister knows that he is going to be booted out of the cabinet, he *makes a virtue of necessity* and resigns on health grounds.
- *To make much ado about nothing* (make a great fuss about a trifle): Demonstrations and protests over the change in the timing of news bulletins over AIR was *making much ado about nothing*.
- *To make a cat's paw or a tool of someone* (to use someone as a means of attaining your object): The super-powers have *made a cat's paw* of the smaller nations of Asia in their game of power politics.
- *To play into the hands of someone* (to act as to be of advantage to another) : By opposing the bill, the opposition *played into the hands of* ruling party in the state which won the elections hands down (easily).
- *To play second fiddle* (to take a subordinate part) : With Mr. Sharma as the undisputed leader of the tribunal, everyone else is content to *play second fiddle to him*.
- *To put the cart before the horse* (to begin at the wrong end to do a thing): Preparing the blue print of a project, without the provision of funds is like *putting the cart before the horse*.
- *To put one's shoulder to the wheel* (to make great efforts ourselves): No amount of foreign aid will pull us out of the economic morass; we have to *put our own shoulders to the wheel*.
- *To set store by* (to value highly): India, *surely sets store by* the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship.
- *To set the Thames on fire* (to do something extraordinary): He is a steady worker but never likely to *set the Thames on fire*.
- *To set one's house in order* (to arrange one's affairs): First you *set your own house in order* before talking of the welfare of others.
- *To take into one's head* (to occur to someone): The Manager *took it into his head* that by shutting off the electricity for a few hours daily, he could save on refrigeration costs.
- *To take the bull by the horns* (to grapple with a problem courageously, instead of avoiding it): There is no short cut to prosperity. We have to *take the bull by the horns* and make people work.
- *To take a leap in the dark* (to do a hazardous thing without any idea of what it may result in): You *took a leap in the dark* in going into partnership with that man.
- *To throw cold water upon* (to discourage something): The doctor *threw cold water upon* my plans for a world tour by declaring that I could never stand the strain of it.
- *To throw up the sponge* (to give up a contest): Faced with stiff competition from big companies, many small companies will *throw up the sponge*.
- *To turn over a new leaf* (to change one's course of action completely): After a long career of crime, the convict suddenly *turned over a new leaf* and became a model citizen.
- *To turn tail* (to retreat ignominiously): The enemy *turned tail* in the face of heavy onslaughts on its key positions.
- *To turn the tables* (to reverse someone's success or superiority): Pakistan started war with a blitz on our positions but the superior tactics of our Armed Forces soon *turned the tables* on them.

- *To cook or doctor an account* (to tamper with or falsify the account): From the balance sheet presented to the shareholders, the company seemed to be flourishing, but it afterwards turned out that the Secretary had *cooked the accounts*.
- *To bear the brunt of* (to endure the main force or shock of): The infantry has *to bear the brunt of* a battle.
- *To beard the lion in his den* (to oppose someone in his stronghold): The Indian Army broke through strong Pakistani fortifications, and in the Shakargarh area *bearded the lion in his den*.
- *To bid fair to* (to give fair prospect of): His health is so good that he *bids fair to* live till he is sixty.
- *To blow one's own trumpet* (to parade one's own good deeds): Modesty does not pay. Only if you *blow your own trumpet*, you can succeed.
- *To blunt the edge of* (to make something less effective): Time *blunts the edge of* grief.
- *To build castles in the air* (to indulge in reveries or visionary schemes): There is nothing wrong if you *build castles in the air*; now put foundations under them.
- *To burn the candle at both ends* (to use too much energy): Our resources are limited. Let us use them judiciously and not *burn the candle at both ends*.
- *To buy a pig in a poke* (to purchase a thing without previously examining it): Buying shares in a new company started by unknown entrepreneurs, is like buying a *pig in a poke*.
- *To cross or pass the Rubicon* (to take a decisive step forward): The Government will have to think of many things before nationalising the textile industry, for once they *cross the Rubicon* there will be no going back.
- *To cry over spilt milk* (to nurse unnecessary regrets): We have failed to build up a sizeable total against England's meagre first innings total. It is no use *crying over spilt milk* now.
- *To err on the safe side* (to choose a course which may in fact be inaccurate, but which will keep you safe from risk or harm): By going in for a mixed economy, rather than wholesale nationalisation, the Government were *erring on the safe side*.
- *To flog a dead horse* (waste one's energies): It's true that blogging can sometimes seem like *flogging a dead horse*.
- *To feather one's nest* (to provide for oneself through dishonest means): Many tax collectors make a point of *feathering their own nests* well while they have opportunity.
- *To eat one's heart out* (to brood over one's sorrows or disappointments): Don't *eat your heart out* over failure in this competition.
- *To eat humble pie* (to have to humiliate oneself): Since none came to his support, he had *to eat humble pie* and give in to their demands.
- *To eat one's words* (to retract one's assertions under compulsion): It is hard for a haughty man to have *to eat his own words*.
- *To throw down the gauntlet, to take up the gauntlet* (to offer or give a challenge, to accept a challenge): It is not for a small country *to throw down the gauntlet* to the right and the left.
- *To run the gauntlet* (to undergo severe criticism or ill treatment): Most trend-setting books have *to run the gauntlet* of the literary critics.
- *To burn one's fingers* (to get oneself into unexpected trouble): They were happily placed in the woollen industry. But they went in for cosmetics industry and *burnt their fingers*.
- *To force one's hands* (to compel one to do something unwillingly or earlier than he wished to do it): The Government wanted to do all that they could to meet the workers' demands. But the violence by the workers on strike, *forced their hands* to declare a lockout.
- *To haul over the coals* (to scold a man, reprove him): If your bad habits become known, you will get *hauled over the coals* and richly deserve it.
- *To let the grass grow under your feet* (to be inert and passive to things around): The authorities should listen to students' grievances. By being indifferent, they would only *let the grass grow under their feet* till it will be too late to turn these young people away from the path of violence.
- *To put in a nutshell* (this is said of a thing which is capable, of, or presented in, brief expression): His conduct is weird. *To put in a nutshell*, he is insane. The explanation of his conduct can be *put in a nutshell* - he is insane.
- *To let loose the dogs of war* (to set in motion the destructive forces of war): Pakistan has *let loose the dogs of war* in Kashmir, through organized terrorism.
- *To lord it over someone* (to domineer over someone, to act as a lord): The love of power is so strong in human nature that when a man becomes popular, he seeks *to lord it over* his fellows.
- *To mind one's Ps and Qs* (to be punctilious): The manager suspects his chief clerk of dishonesty, and if the clerk does not *mind his Ps and Qs*, he will soon find himself without a job.
- *To muster in force* (to assemble in large numbers): The citizens *mustered in force* to welcome their beloved leader.
- *To pay one back in one's own coin* (to give tit for tat, to retaliate): Howsoever revengeful you may be, unless you are strong enough, you cannot *pay him back in his own coin*.
- *To plough a lonely furrow* (to work without help or support): In the organised society of today, no individual or nation can *plough a lonely furrow*.
- *To poison the ears or mind* (to prejudice another person): A judge must not allow anyone to *poison his ears or mind* against either the plaintiff or the defendant.
- *To rest on one's laurels* (to rest satisfied with honours already won, and to make no attempt to gain further distinction): Even if he wins the biggest award, a film star will never *rest on his laurels*. He will try to rise higher and higher.
- *To rest on one's oars* (to suspend efforts after something has been attained): The agitators have been vigorously at work during the winter, but at present they seem to be *resting on their oars*.
- *To harp on the same string* (to keep repeating the same sentiment over and again): This gentleman keeps *harping on the same string*: he is from Oxford and deserves this and deserves that, etc.

- *To rise like a phoenix from its ashes* (the phoenix was a fabulous Arabian bird. It had no mate but when about to die, made a funeral pile of wood and aromatic gums and on it burned itself to ashes. From the ashes, a young phoenix was believed to rise): Germany was completely decimated in the second world war. But she has *risen like a phoenix from its ashes*.
- *To rule the roost or roost* (to lord it over others in a party or group): In almost every party, there is some overbearing person who tries *to rule the roost*.
- *To run in the same groove* (to move forward on the same path, to advance in harmony): It is clear that the ideas of both reformers *run in the same groove*.
- *To run in the blood* (a peculiarity which clings to certain families): Snobbery *runs in the blood* of the Englishmen.
- *To scatter to the winds* (to waste, to scatter abroad): We have *scattered to the winds* what we had gained by our independence.
- *To be on the right scent* (to be on the right track): The customs have decided to patrol the Kerala seas to nab smugglers from Dubai. They are *on the right scent*. (Its opposite is to be on the wrong scent or wrong track)
- *To see how the wind blows* (to observe what influence, favourable or adverse, is likely to affect the existing state of things): In party-politics, people sitting on the fence keep on *watching how the wind is blowing* before deciding on their options.
- *To see a thing through coloured glasses* (to regard something favourably because of one's prejudice): Pakistan has for long *looked at India through coloured glasses* and never trusted even the most genuine gestures for peace.
- *To show the white feather* (to show signs of cowardice): The agitators shouted and gesticulated but the moment the police appeared on the scene, they seemed *to show the white feather*.
- *To split hairs* (to make subtle and useless distinctions): As the drought played havoc in Bihar, the authorities were busy *splitting hairs*, trying to decide whether it was a 'scarcity condition' or famine.
- *To steal a march* (to gain an advantage over another, stealthily): While we were still debating the desirability of joint ventures with foreign concerns, Singapore and Malaysia *stole a march* over us and opened their gates to foreign investment in a big way.
- *To steer clear of* (to avoid): India decided on non-alignment *to steer clear of* the hazards of alignment with one block or the other.
- *To stick at nothing* (the phrase implies readiness to stoop to baseness or deception to reach one's end): An ambitious politician will *stick at nothing*, if he can only serve himself.
- *To strain every nerve* (to use one's utmost efforts): We have *to strain every nerve* to get over the poverty line.
- *To strike while the iron is hot* (to take advantage of the opportunity when it arises): If you want to succeed in life, you must *strike the iron while it is hot*.
- *To swallow the bait* (to catch others by guile, by offering them large promises): The candidate offered the people everything on earth and in the heavens, if selected. The people *swallowed the bait* and elected him.
- *To talk shop* (to use the phrases peculiar to one's circumstances): Except for the undertakers, people of the same professions always *talk shop* at parties.
- *To tie one's hands* (to restrain one from action): The *Government's hands are already tied* with problem plants. It would not like to go in for nationalisation in a big way.
- *To tread on the heels of* (follow close behind): Famine *treads on the heels of* drought.
- *To fish in troubled waters* (to make personal profit out of a disturbance): The super powers are there in West Asia *to fish in troubled waters*.
- *To pour oil on troubled waters* (to say or do anything which soothes and calms angry passions): The government *poured oil on troubled waters* by announcing a judicial enquiry into the firing.
- *To win or gain laurels or to bear away palm* (to achieve success in a contest): The Indian Cricket Team *won laurels* on two successive occasions-once in West Indies and then in England.
- *To worship the rising sun* (to pay respect to the man who is rising in power and influence): The newly appointed manager has taken over and his clerks *worship the rising sun*.
- *Argus-eyed* (jealously watchful): The husband of a pretty wife has got to be *Argus-eyed*.
- *Aegean stables, to clean Aegean stables* (To correct a great abuse, from the stables of king Agues of Greece, whose stables had not been cleaned for thirty years). The law against prostitution has cleaned no *Aegean stables*; it has merely pushed it underground.
- *Backstairs influence* (influence exerted secretly and in a fashion not legitimate): The rich people do exercise *backstairs influence* on Parliament.
- *Bad blood* (active enmity): There has been a *bad blood* between India and Pakistan since 1947.
- *A bone of contention* (subject of dispute): Kashmir continues to be a *bone of contention* between India and Pakistan since 1947.
- *A bosom friend* (a very intimate and trusted friend): *Bosom friends* never betray one another.
- *A bull in a China shop*: (someone who destroys everything at the same time he happens to be in): The plainsmen proved to be a *bull in a China shop* in the hills, ruining the hill people in all ways.
- *A close shave* (a narrow escape from collision or accident): The bus had a *close shave* as its driver swerved to the right, a split second before the on-coming truck could run into it.
- *A cold comfort* (something calculated to cause pain or irritation): The promise of a better future is only a *cold comfort* to the frustrated youth of today.
- *A dog in the manger policy* (said of a person who cannot himself use what another wants, and yet will not let that other have it): The affluent nations are a *dog-in-the manger*, destroying what they can't use themselves rather than giving it to the poor nations.

- *Elbow room* (opportunity for freedom of action): Only give him *elbow room* and he will succeed.
- *A fair-weather friend* (one who deserts you in difficulties): *A fair-weather friend* disappears the moment your money disappears.
- *French leave* (absence without permission): He went on a *French leave* and was summoned by the director, the next day he went to office.
- *Good offices* (recommendation): One can get a good job only through the *good offices* of someone in power.
- *A good Samaritan* (one who befriends a stranger or a friendless person): Centuries ago, India played *a good Samaritan* to the hapless Parsees fleeing their native land.
- *The green-eyed monster* (jealousy): *The green-eyed monster* strikes a woman, the moment she sees her husband talking to a pretty woman.
- *A Herculean task* (a job requiring great efforts): Eradication of poverty is *a Herculean task*, requiring the collective efforts of the entire country.
- *Lynch Law* (the practice of punishing people where the punishment is inflicted by unauthorised persons and without judicial trial. Mob law denotes the same thing when carried out by a mob). The people in African countries, often resort to *lynch laws*.
- *A maiden speech* (the first speech of a new member in a public body as in Town Hall or in a Parliament): Amitabh's *maiden speech* was very impressive.
- *A nine day's wonder* (a fascinating but temporary phenomenon): Beauty is, proverbially, *a nine day's wonder*.
- *An open question* (a matter for discussion and not yet decided): As far as India is concerned, Kashmir is no longer *an open question*.
- *A red-letter day* (an auspicious, fortunate or important day): 26th January, 1950 is *a red-letter day* in India's history.
- *Scot-free* (exempt from payment, unhurt, safe): Because he had influential connections, the culprit went *scot-free*.
- *A sheet anchor* (the chief safety, the last refuge for safety): One's faith in God is one's *sheet anchor* in times of stress and strain.
- *Tall Talk* (boastful language): If we have no real accomplishments, we indulge in *tall talk* to delude ourselves and others too.
- *A white elephant* (an unprofitable possession): The upper Houses are *white elephants* and should be abolished.
- *A white lie* (an evasion, a harmless and non-malicious untruth): Professional members often indulge in *white lies*.
- *A wild goose chase* (a foolish, wild, unprofitable adventure): Attempts towards stabilisation of prices in a developing economy, is *a wild goose chase*.
- *An apple of discord* (a subject of envy and strife): Kashmir continues to be the *apple of discord* between India and Pakistan.
- *Cock and bull story* (a silly improbable story): That India wanted to break up West Pakistan was a *cock and bull story* published by the U.S.A.
- *A fish out of water* (a person in uncomfortable surroundings): An Indian may earn tons of money in the Western countries, but he will always feel like *a fish out of water* there.
- *The gift of the gab* (fluency of speech): *The gift of the gab* combined with a slight cunningness makes for a successful politician.
- *Lion's share* (an unfairly large share): The big nations continue to have the *lion's share* of world trade.
- *A mare's nest* (a discovery that turns out to be false or worthless): There was much fanfare about the solar cooker. Later it turned out to be *a mare's nest*.
- *The milk of human kindness* (kindly feelings; a phrase used by Shakespeare.): With all their poverty, Indians do not lack *the milk of human kindness*.
- *Penelope's web* (a work which seems to be going on and yet never comes to an end.): A housewife's chores are *a penelope's web*.
- *The pros and cons of something* (arguments for and against a thing) : They discussed the *pros and cons* of the matter before taking a decision.
- *The skin of one's teeth* (a phrase used when one escapes losing everything except life): The storm broke up the ship but the sailors escaped by *the skin of their teeth*.
- *A snake in the grass* (a secret foe): China has certainly been *a snake in the grass* for India. Even in the heyday of *Hindi Chini bhai-bhai*, she was quietly devouring bits of our territory.
- *A stone's throw* (very near.): The Taj Hotel is at *a stone's throw* from the Gateway of India.
- *All moonshine* (foolish, idle, untrue statement): The talk about welfare of the poor is *all moonshine*.
- *Behind the scenes* (of a person having secret or private information and influence): The dismissed Secretary, having been *behind the scenes*, has made some strange revelations as to the way in which the business is managed.
- *Between two fires* (assailed or shot at from two sides): A man, arbitrating between the mother and wife, is *between the two fires*, for his decisions can rarely please both.
- *In a body* (together): The striking workers went *in a body* to the Manager to present their demands.
- *Cheek by jowl* (in the same position): There was a lawyer who never had a client *cheek by jowl* with a doctor who never had a patient.
- *Out at elbows* (destitute): The rising prices and the new taxes may soon see most of us *out at elbows*.
- *Part and Parcel* (integral part of a society, community etc.): Some customs and traditions are *a part and parcel* of Indian culture.
- *A storm in a tea cup* (a great fuss about a trifle): The crackers fired by Diwali revellers caused *a storm in the tea cup* when minority communities thought it to be a bomb attack by the other community.
- *A fly in the ointment* (a trifling circumstance which mars enjoyment): It was a wonderful picnic, the only *fly in the ointment* being the absence of shady trees at the picnic spot.
- *Not worth his salt* (good for nothing): A soldier who shivers at the boom of guns is *not worth his salt*.

- *With a pinch of salt* (to take a statement with a grain of salt is to feel some doubt whether it is altogether true): Shaw's claim of having remained a celibate even after marriage has to be taken *with a pinch of salt*.
- *Null and void* (Invalid, valueless, no longer in force): The court declared the appointment to be *null and void*.
- *To be posted up* (well acquainted with): I want *to be posted up* in Indian History.
- *To be worth its weight in gold* (extremely valuable): In the desert, a bottle of water is often *worth its weight in gold*.
- *To be Greek or double Dutch to one* (unintelligible): He spoke so fast that all he said was *double Dutch* to the audience.
- *To be within an ace of* (to be very nearly): He was *within an ace of* being shot.
- *To be at the beck and call* (to be always ready to serve): You must not expect me *to be at your beck and call*, I have my own business to attend to.
- *To be at daggers drawn* (in bitter enmity): With every passing year, the hostility between the Arabs and the Israelis has grown more bitter. They have always been *at daggers drawn*.
- *To be at sea* (confused, uncertain of mind): I am quite *at sea* in Mathematics.
- *To be at one's wits end* (perplexed): With the master shouting from the bathroom and the mistress from the kitchen, the servant was at his *wits end* as to whom to attend first.
- *To be in one's element* (to be in agreeable company or work): Shaw is *in his element* when he is writing about the social ills of his time.
- *To be on wane* (to be on the decline): After the second World War, the British Empire was *on the wane*.
- *To be on the carpet* (to be summoned to one's employer's room for reprimand): The unpunctual clerk was repeatedly *on the carpet*.
- *To be on the last legs* (about to collapse): With science dominating life more and more, *religion seems to be on its last legs*.
- *Chip of the old block* (a son who is very like his father): The younger Nawab of Pataudi has proved to be *a chip of the old block*. He is as good a batsman as his father.
- *To bring under the hammer* (to sell it by auction): If a person goes insolvent, his creditors will *bring everything that he owns* under the hammer to recover their money.
- *To pay one's way* (not get into debt): While at college, he *paid his way* by working as a newspaper vendor.
- *To weather the storm* (to come out of a crisis successfully): In a crisis, it is unity which helps a nation *to weather the storm*.
- *To sail before the wind* (to go in the direction towards in which the wind is blowing): An opportunist is he who *sails before the wind*. (Its opposite is *to sail close to the wind* i.e. to break a law or principle)
- *To be in the same boat* (To be equally exposed with a person to risk or misfortune): In a nuclear war, the rich and the poor nations will *be in the same boat*. None will be able to protect themselves.
- *To sail under false colours* (To pretend to be what one is not, to try to deceive): In our blessed country, a smuggler *sailing under the false colours* of a socialist will never be exposed.
- *Game is not worth the candle* (The advantage or enjoyment to be gained is not worth the time spent in gaining it): Journey to the moon is an elaborate and costly affair and some people with a pragmatic approach feel the *game is not worth the candle*.
- *Not fit to hold a candle to* (One is inferior): For all his pious platitudes and political stunts, Mr. Nixon is *not fit to hold a candle to* Lincoln or Roosevelt.
- *Hope springs eternal in the human breast*: (one never loses hope.)
- *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread* : said of reckless persons.
- *He who pays the piper calls the tune*: the person who provides the money for something has the right to determine how it's spent.
- *You cannot make a silk purse out of sow's ear* : Said of something impossible.
- *A bird in hand is worth two in the bush*: Right use of the present opportunity.
- *One man's meat is another man's poison* : What is good for one may be harmful for another person.
- *Out of the frying pan into the fire* : From one trouble to another.
- *The last straw breaks the camel's back*: The smallest addition to an already heavy task makes it intolerable.
- *Distance lends enchantment to the old* : Things look nice and beautiful when they are not within reach.
- *Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's*: To be wise.
- *Look before you leap*: Don't be reckless and impulsive.
- *Make hay while the Sun shines*: Make good use of an opportunity while it lasts.
- *Never look a gift horse in the mouth*: There can be no choice about things given in charity.
- *Beggars can't be choosers*: No choice in scarcity.
- *Nearer the Church, farther from heaven*: The more opportunity you have, the less you benefit from it.
- *Every cock fights best on his own dunghill*: One is very brave and confident in one's own place.
- *A rolling stone gathers no moss* : An aimless person cannot succeed.
- *Rome was not built in a day* : Things take time to complete and to mature.
- *One swallow does not make a summer*: One person can't do everything
- *Apparel proclaims the man*: You judge a man's worth by his clothes.
- *To run with the hare, to hunt with the hound* : To be insincere to someone.
- *Sweet are the uses of adversity* : Sufferings are to be welcomed.
- *Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown*: With power and authority come worries and responsibilities.

PHRASES

A phrase is a small group of words that forms a meaningful unit within a clause. There are several different types as follows:

Noun Phrase

A noun phrase is built around a single noun.

Examples :

A **vase of roses** stood on the table.

She was reading a book **about the emancipation of women**.

Verb Phrase

A verb phrase is the verbal part of a clause.

Examples :

She **had been living** in London.

I **will be going** to college next year.

Adjective Phrase

An adjective phrase is built around an adjective.

Examples :

He's led a **very interesting** life.

A lot of the kids are **really keen on football**.

Adverbial Phrase

An adverbial phrase is built round an adverb by adding words *before and/or after* it.

Examples :

The economy recovered **very slowly**.

They wanted to leave the country **as fast as possible**.

Prepositional Phrase

In a prepositional phrase, the preposition always comes at the beginning.

I longed to live **near the sea**.

The dog was hiding **under the kitchen table**.

We also use the word phrase to refer to a short group of words that have a particular meaning when they are used together, such as *rain cats and dogs*, *play for time*, or *a square meal*. This type of phrase is often referred to as an *idiom* that is discussed earlier in this chapter.

SOME COMMONLY USED PHRASES

- As easy as pie means "very easy" (same as "a piece of cake")
Example: He said it is a difficult problem, but I don't agree. It seems as easy as pie to me!
- Be sick and tired of means "I hate" (also "can't stand")
Example: I'm sick and tired of doing nothing but work. Let's go out tonight and have fun.
- Bend over backwards means "try very hard" (maybe too much!)
Example: He bent over backwards to please his new wife, but she never seemed satisfied.
- Bite off more than one can chew means "take responsibility for more than one can manage"
Example: John is so far behind in his studies. Besides classes, he plays sports and works at a part-time job. It seems he has bitten off more than he can chew.

- Broke means "to have no money"
Example: I have to borrow some money from my Dad. Right now, I'm broke.
- Change one's mind means "decide to do something different from what had been decided earlier"
Example: I was planning to work late tonight, but I changed my mind. I'll do extra work on the weekend instead.
- Cut it out means "stop doing something bad"
Example: That noise is really annoying. Cut it out!
- Drop someone a line means "send a letter or email to someone"
Example: It was good to meet you and I hope we can see each other again. Drop me a line when you have time.
- Figure something out means "come to understand a problem"
Example: I don't understand how to do this problem. Take a look at it. Maybe you can figure it out.
- Fill in for someone means "do their work while they are away"
Example: While I was away from the store, my brother filled in for me.
- In ages means "for a very long time"
Example: Have you seen Joe recently? I haven't seen him in ages.
- Give someone a hand means "help"
Example: I want to move this desk to the next room. Can you give me a hand?
- Hit the hay means "go to bed" (also "hit the sack")
Example: It's past 12 o'clock. I think it's time to hit the hay.
- In the black means "the business is making money, it is profitable"
Example: Our business is really improving. We've been in the black all year.
- In the red means "the business is losing money, it is unprofitable"
Example: Business is really going poorly these days. We've been in the red for the past three months.
- In the nick of time means "not too late, but very close!"
Example: I got to the drugstore just in the nick of time. It's a good thing, because I really need this medicine!
- Keep one's chin up means "remain brave and keep on trying"
Example: I know things have been difficult for you recently, but keep your chin up. It will get better soon.
- Know something like the back of your hand means "know something very, very well"
Example: If you get lost, just ask me for directions. I know this part of town like the back of my hand
- Once in a while means "sometimes, not very often"
Example: Have you been to the new movie theatre? No, only see movies once in a while. I usually stay home and watch TV.
- Sharp means "exactly at a that time"
Example: I'll meet you at 9 o'clock sharp. If you're late, we'll be in trouble!

EXERCISE

DIRECTIONS (Qs 1-5) : You are given four alternative meanings to each of the following idioms/phrases. Choose the most appropriate one.

1. BLOW BY BLOW

- (a) Eruptions in quick succession from a great volcano.
- (b) Continuously raining with thunders.
- (c) Describe an event as it occurred in every detail
- (d) A rapid decline of business leading to its closure

2. BY HOOK OR BY CROOK

- (a) In a completely insane manner
- (b) In whatever way one can
- (c) Being very evil and destructive
- (d) To be very tenacious

3. CHOCK-A-BLOCK

- (a) Filled to capacity.
- (b) Not being able to fulfil one's desires.
- (c) Blocking somebody's path to progress.
- (d) Suffocation caused due to living in a congested area.

4. A FEATHER IN ONE'S CAP

- (a) Accumulating more money or property
- (b) Taking more burden on oneself
- (c) Being felicitated for one's artistic merits
- (d) Something achieved that constitutes a victory

5. FOR GOOD

- (a) For a good cause
- (b) Temporarily
- (c) Permanently
- (d) Seriously

6. To smell a rat

- (a) Signs of plague epidemic
- (b) Bad smell
- (c) Suspect foul dealings
- (d) To be in a bad mood

7. To be above board

- (a) To have a good height
- (b) To be honest in any deal
- (c) To have no debts
- (d) To be able to swim

8. To have the gift of the gab

- (a) A talent for speaking
- (b) To do exactly the right thing
- (c) To be cheerful
- (d) To get lots of gifts

9. To fall flat

- (a) Retreat
- (b) To meet accidentally
- (c) Quarrel
- (d) To be met with a cold reception

10. Right-hand man

- (a) An honest person
- (b) Most efficient assistant
- (c) One who cannot use his left hand
- (d) A foolish person

11. In the blues

- (a) Being colourful
- (b) Melancholy and low spirited
- (c) Behave like a lord
- (d) Cheerful and happy

12. See eye to eye

- (a) State at each other
- (b) Agree
- (c) Depend on
- (d) Make an effort

13. Talk shop

- (a) Talk about one's profession
- (b) Talk about shopping
- (c) Ridicule
- (d) Treat lightly

14. Bad blood

- (a) Infected blood
- (b) Ill-feeling
- (c) Unfaithful
- (d) Suspicion

15. Wear one's heart on one's sleeve

- (a) Lure passionately
- (b) Do the right thing
- (c) Show one's feelings
- (d) Be intimate

16. Dog in the manger

- (a) A person who is not liked by others
- (b) A person who is hounders
- (c) A person who puts himself in a difficulty on account of other people
- (d) A person who prevents others from enjoying something useless to himself

17. Stick to one's guns

- (a) Maintain one's stand under attack
- (b) Suspect something
- (c) Make something fail
- (d) Be satisfied

18. To cut the crackle

- (a) to stop talking and start
- (b) to dig a well
- (c) to annoy others
- (d) to act in a friendly way

19. To miss the boat

- (a) to miss an opportunity
- (b) to feel lonely
- (c) to act like a coward
- (d) to swim in a river

20. Blue blood

- (a) something impossible
- (b) an aristocrat
- (c) something costly
- (d) a funny object

21. *At one's wit's end*
 (a) to be very witty
 (b) to confuse others
 (c) to be completely confused
 (d) to minimise expenses
22. *To eat an humble pie*
 (a) to eat cheap food
 (b) to eat slowly
 (c) to swallow one's pride and apologise for doing something wrong
 (d) to defy authority
23. *A snake in the grass*
 (a) a very poisonous snake
 (b) a secret agent
 (c) an unrecognisable enemy or danger
 (d) not a reliable person
24. *To turn over a new leaf*
 (a) to change one's behaviour for the better
 (b) to read something attentively
 (c) to remain vigilant
 (d) to be careful
25. *Black sheep*
 (a) a costly item
 (b) a dark shiny object
 (c) an unworthy person in a family or group
 (d) a funny man
26. *Oily tongue*
 (a) flattery
 (b) hungry person
 (c) strong critic
 (d) rich food
27. *Lion's share*
 (a) no share at all
 (b) greater share of a thing
 (c) miserly
 (d) very small item
28. *To bury the hatchet*
 (a) to dispute over small things
 (b) to destroy
 (c) to make up a quarrel
 (d) to repair a costly furniture
29. *Heart and soul*
 (a) very seriously and sincerely
 (b) honestly
 (c) wearily
 (d) very casually
30. *To clear the air*
 (a) to work hard
 (b) to wash properly
 (c) to remove tension
 (d) to create confusion
31. *To chew the cud*
 (a) to be very annoyed
 (b) to think deeply
 (c) to eat humble food
 (d) to start doing something new
32. *No axe to grind*
 (a) a bad situation
 (b) to rebuke
 (c) to act selflessly
 (d) to confuse others
33. *A good samaritan*
 (a) a genuinely helpful person
 (b) an honest politician
 (c) a clever person
 (d) a priest
34. *To steal a march*
 (a) to outshine
 (b) to start early
 (c) to command an army
 (d) to overtake
35. *Pillar to post*
 (a) driven from one place to another
 (b) very tiresome journey
 (c) main supports of a building
 (d) clumsy looking objects
36. *To wrangle over an ass's shadow :*
 (a) To act in a foolish way
 (b) To quarrel over trifles
 (c) To waste time on petty things
 (d) To do something funny
37. *To take with a grain of salt :*
 (a) To take with some reservation
 (b) To take with total disbelief
 (c) To take whole heartedly
 (d) To take seriously
38. *Hobson's choice :*
 (a) Feeling of insecurity
 (b) Accept or leave the other
 (c) Feeling of strength
 (d) Excellent choice
39. *To talk through one's hat :*
 (a) To speak fluently
 (b) To talk nonsense
 (c) To talk wisdom
 (d) To speak at random
40. *To snap one's fingers :*
 (a) To speak abruptly
 (b) To accept immediately
 (c) To grasp eagerly
 (d) To become contemptuous of
41. *To take the bull by the horns :*
 (a) To punish a person severely for his arrogance
 (b) To grapple courageously with difficulty that lies in our way
 (c) To handle it by fierce attack
 (d) To bypass the legal process and take action according to one's own whims
42. *To be in abeyance :*
 (a) To be in trouble
 (b) Dual minded
 (c) In a fighting mood
 (d) In suspension

43. *To cast pearls before a swine :*
 (a) To spend recklessly
 (b) To spend a lot of money on the upkeep of domestic hogs
 (c) To waste money over trifles
 (d) To offer to a person a thing which he cannot appreciate
44. *To take people by storm :*
 (a) To put people in utter surprise
 (b) To captivate them unexpectedly
 (c) To exploit people's agitation
 (d) To bring out something sensational attracting people's attention
45. *Harp on :*
 (a) To comment
 (b) To criticise
 (c) To keep on talking
 (d) To keep on insulting
46. *To bring one's eggs to a bad market :*
 (a) To face on humiliating situation
 (b) To bring one's commodities to a market where there is no demand for them
 (c) To show one's talents before audience which is incapable of appreciating them
 (d) To fail in one's plans because one goes to the wrong people for help
47. *To give/get the bird :*
 (a) To get the awaited
 (b) To have good luck
 (c) To send away
 (d) To get the impossible
48. *To save one's face :*
 (a) To hide oneself
 (b) To oppose
 (c) To evade disgrace
 (d) To say plainly
49. *To split hairs :*
 (a) To sidetrack the issue
 (b) To quarrel over trifles
 (c) To indulge in over-refined arguments
 (d) To find faults with other
50. *To read between the lines :*
 (a) To concentrate
 (b) To read carefully
 (c) To suspect
 (d) To grasp the hidden meaning
51. *To flog a dead horse :*
 (a) To act in a foolish way
 (b) To waste one's efforts
 (c) To revive interest in an old subject
 (d) To revive old memories
52. *A tall order :*
 (a) A task difficult to perform
 (b) A big problem
 (c) A royal summon
 (d) A big demand
53. *To turn the tables :*
 (a) To defeat
 (b) To oppose
 (c) To create chaos
 (d) To change the sorry scheme
 (e) To change completely the position of disadvantage
54. *To keep the ball rolling :*
 (a) To earn more and more
 (b) To work constantly
 (c) To keep the conversation going
 (d) To make the best use of
55. *All and sundry :*
 (a) Greater share
 (b) All of a sudden
 (c) Completion of work
 (d) Everyone without distinction
56. *To worship the rising sun :*
 (a) To honour a man who is coming into office
 (b) To honour to promising people
 (c) To indulge in flattery
 (d) To welcome the coming events
57. *To have brush with :*
 (a) To start painting
 (b) To have good and pleasing terms
 (c) To be impressed
 (d) To have a slight encounter
58. *To pull one's socks up :*
 (a) To prepare
 (b) To try hard
 (c) To get ready
 (d) To depart
59. *To set the people by ears :*
 (a) To box the people
 (b) To insult and disgrace the people
 (c) To punish heavily
 (d) To excite people to a quarrel
60. *To give chapter and verse for a thing :*
 (a) To produce the proof of something
 (b) To eulogize the qualities of a thing
 (c) To make publicity of a thing
 (d) To attach artificial value to a thing
61. *To drink like a fish :*
 (a) To drink little
 (b) To drink alone
 (c) To be a drunkard
 (d) To drink in the company of others
62. *To fight to the bitter end :*
 (a) To fight with poison-tipped arrows
 (b) To fight to the last point of enemy position
 (c) To die fighting
 (d) To carry on a contest regardless of consequences
63. *To give a false colouring :*
 (a) To misrepresent
 (b) To submit the false report
 (c) To be dishonest
 (d) To conceal the facts

64. *Spick and span* :
(a) Neat and clean
(b) Outspoken
(c) A ready-made thing
(d) Garrulous
65. *To carry the coal to newcastle* :
(a) To work hard
(b) To finish a job
(c) To do unnecessary things
(d) To do menial jobs
66. *The pros and cons* :
(a) For and against a thing
(b) Foul and fair
(c) Good and evil
(d) Former and latter
67. *A baker's dozen* :
(a) Twelve
(b) Charity
(c) Thirteen
(d) Allowance
68. *Hard-pressed* :
(a) Bewildered
(b) Insulted
(c) Hard discipline
(d) In difficulties
69. *To be at one's finger's end* :
(a) To be hopeless
(b) To be highly perplexed
(c) To be completely conversant with
(d) To count things
70. *To pull strings* :
(a) To exert hidden influence
(b) To tease someone
(c) To speed up
(d) To start something
71. *A green horn* :
(a) An envious lady
(b) A trainee
(c) An inexperienced man
(d) A soft-hearted man
72. *To pour oil in troubled water* :
(a) To forment trouble
(b) To add to the trouble
(c) To instigate
(d) To calm a quarrel with soothing words
73. *To break the ice* :
(a) To start quarreling
(b) To end the hostility
(c) To start to conversation
(d) To end up partnership
74. *A fool's errand* :
(a) A blunder
(b) An impossible task
(c) A useless undertaking
(d) None of these
75. *By the rule of thumb* :
(a) By the use of force
(b) By the use of trickery
(c) By cheating and deception
(d) By practical experience which is rather rough
76. *To hit the jackpot* :
(a) To gamble
(b) To get an unexpected victory
(c) To be wealthy
(d) To make money unexpectedly
77. *To pay off old scores* :
(a) To have one's revenge
(b) To settle a dispute
(c) To repay the old loan
(d) None of these
78. *To change colour* :
(a) To change appearance
(b) To shift allegations to
(c) To favour the wrong person
(d) None of these
79. *To cut the gordian knot* :
(a) To solve a difficult problem
(b) To be victorious
(c) To break ties with someone
(d) To defeat to powerful person
80. *To speak daggers* :
(a) To abuse someone
(b) To indulge in varacious talks
(c) To speak to a person with hostility
(d) None of these

HINTS & SOLUTIONS

1. (c) The phrase 'Blow by Blow' means (of a description of an event) giving all the details in the order in which they occurred.
2. (b) The phrase 'By Hook or by Crook' means by any possible way.
3. (a) The phrase 'chock-a-block' means crammed full of people or things.
4. (d) The phrase 'A Feather in One's Cap' means an achievement to be proud of.
5. (c) The phrase 'for good' means forever; definitely.
6. (c) It means to get suspicious about some dealings.
7. (b) It means to always be upright and honest.
8. (a) Gab means to chatter, gift of the gab means ability to talk or talent for speaking.
9. (d) To fall flat means failing miserably or not being able to create the effect or achieve the result one wanted to and, thus, meet cold reception.
10. (b) This means the most important and efficient person working for you.
11. (b) 'Blues' refer to bad moods, melancholy, low spirit, ill temper.
12. (b) Seeing eye to eye means approving of each other or agreeing with each other.
13. (a) This means to talk about one's profession in a dry, boring way.
14. (b) Bad-blood refers to the element of animosity in a person and, thus, ill-feeling.
15. (c) This means to express openly one's desires or emotions.
16. (d) Dog in the manger means someone who prevents you from enjoying something that they themselves have no need for.
17. (a) This means to stay consistent about one's beliefs, opinions, decisions or cause or in other words remain faithful to one's cause.
18. (a) It mean earing unnecessary convocation to focus on worth.
19. (a) It nears to miss a choice.
20. (b) Blue blood refers to an aristocrat.
21. (c) Where wits end, confusion starts.
22. (c) Eating a humble pie is to apologize and face humiliation.
23. (c) Snake in the grass is the person who pretends to be your friend while secretly doing things to harm you.
24. (a) It suggest making a new beginning.
25. (c) Black sleep is fonetys disgrace.
26. (a) Oily tongue can flatter well.
27. (b) Lion's share is the largest portion of something.
28. (c) To bury the hatchet is to close a debate
29. (a) Heart and soul is complete dedication
30. (c) Clearing the air is to remove tension.
31. (b) To chew the cord is to think/comprehend.
32. (c) This suggest a selfless act.
33. (a) A good Samaritan is a philanthropist
34. (a) To steal march is to steel attention
35. (a) Pillar to post mean driven from one pt. to another.
36. (b) Ass's shadow is trivial; quarreling over trifles
37. (a) Grain of salt here means reservation.
38. (b) Hobson's choice is to accept or leave the other.
39. (b) Talking through the hat indicates irrelevant conversation.
40. (a) Snapping one's fingers is to get contemptous.
41. (b) fighting the ball itself is inviting trouble. Fighting by the horns is to face trouble with resolution.
42. (d) Abeyance is suspension or apprehension.
43. (d) Swine is a pig which will never value precious things as pearls. So it is a wrong offer to an undeserving person.
44. (b) Taking people by storm is to captivate then.
45. (c) Harp on is to talk continuously.
46. (d) It indicates a flopped plan.
47. (c) To give/get bird is to send away.
48. (c) To save one's face is to protect one's reputation.
49. (c) To split hairs is to participate in over-refining arguments.
50. (d) To read between the lines is to comprehend the contest.
51. (b) This means to waste one's efforts.
52. (a) A tall order is a daunting task.
53. (d) To turn the tables is to change the sorry state of things.
54. (c) To keep the ball rolling is to keep the conversation going.
55. (d) All and sundry is to include everyone without distinction.
56. (a) Rising sun is a new employee and to worship the same is to welcome him/her on board.
57. (d) Having brush with is to have a slight encounter.
58. (a) To make as earnest effort.
59. (d) This means to instigate people into a brawl.
60. (a) Give chapter and verse means to give exact information about something.
61. (c) To drink like a fish is to cross all limits and drink to the heart's content.
62. (d) This means to compete regardless of consequences.
63. (a) It stands for misrepresentation.
64. (a) Spick and spar is extremely neat and tidy.
65. (c) This means to do unnecessary things.
66. (a) Two sides of a coin.
67. (c) A baker's dozen = $12 + 1 = 13$.
68. (d) Hard-pressed is to be amidst challenges.
69. (c) To be completely versed with.
70. (a) To exert hidden influence.
71. (c) A green hom shows inexperience.
72. (d) to pacify a quarrel verbally.
73. (c) Break the ice is to start conversing.
74. (c) Useless undertaking.
75. (d) Rule of the thumb is to utilize practical experiences.
76. (b) Hitting the jackpot is unexpected reward
77. (a) Setting old scores is to take revenge
78. (b) To blame someone else.
79. (a) Gordian knot is a problem cutting is to solving.
80. (c) Hostile conversation.