


Collins
COBUILD

Idioms Workbook



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM



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Note

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Introduction

The **Collins COBUILD Idioms Workbook** can be used on its own or in conjunction with the new second edition of the **Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms**. This new second edition of the workbook practises 100 of the most important idioms in both British and American English. The examples and exercises have been thoroughly updated for this new edition, using information from the *Bank of English*.

Why use idioms?

Idioms exist in all languages. They form an important part of everyone's vocabulary and are used in both formal and informal language, but are much more common in informal, spoken English. They should not, however, be confused with slang, which is very often inappropriate in certain social situations.

We use idioms:

- to be amusing or witty
- to play with words
- to be different
- to put other people at ease, even in the most formal situations
- to express something which other words do not quite express
- to communicate more clearly and more visually

Understanding idioms

Many idioms are easy to understand. Look at the idiom '*to sweep something under the carpet*', for example. If you understand the words 'sweep', 'under' and 'carpet', there's a very good chance that you'll understand the figurative meaning of the idiom. Other idioms, such as '*at loggerheads*' or '*in the doldrums*' may be more difficult to understand because of their low frequency vocabulary.

Many English idioms can be translated into other languages almost word for word; many others can be easily understood because the meaning is translatable, but not the words. Other idioms can be impossible to translate: these are often idioms which express cultural concepts.

Origins of idioms

A word of warning. Phrases become idioms when they are not used with their original literal meaning. Native speakers will often play with the double meanings, literal and figurative, to make an amusing comment. Consider this example:

Eurotunnel, understandably, is much happier than the ferry companies, given projections which suggest it will leave them high and dry.

If someone *leaves you high and dry*, they leave you in a difficult situation and you are unable to do anything about it.



This idiom originally applied to ships, which were literally left high and dry when the tide went out. The writer of the above example knows the origin of the idiom and probably used it here deliberately to talk about ferry companies. Some common origins which form the basis of idioms are: the sea and navy; the army; domestic life; farming and animals; sports and games; and parts of the body.

Understanding the origin of an idiom can help you to understand how it is used figuratively. You can find out more about the origins of idioms in the new second edition of the **Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms**.

Idioms Workbook

There are 15 units in this workbook. The Introductory Unit introduces some of the most common difficulties with idioms. The following 14 Units organize idioms by theme, for example starting and stopping, money, honesty and fairness etc. Contrasting idioms are presented in the same Unit. This allows you to build up a greater understanding of the exact meaning of each idiom.

The idioms practised in Units 1–14 are common to all parts of the English-speaking world. Regional variations are noted in the Language Comment sections in each unit. For example, *the icing on the cake*, which is used in British English, is practised in Unit 2, with its American form, *the frosting on the cake* noted in the Language Comment section in the same unit.

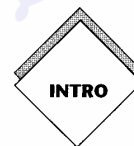
Unit exercises

There are between five and eleven idioms in each Unit. Each Unit starts with a list of the idioms you will be studying, followed by an example sentence using each idiom. All of the examples are real English, taken from our vast database of written and spoken English, the *Bank of English*. The exercises also contain real examples from the *Bank of English*, so you can be sure that you are studying English idioms as they are really used. The Language Comment section highlights any similar or related idioms, explains difficult vocabulary, and draws your attention to any grammatical or usage restrictions.

The first exercise in each Unit asks you to complete the definitions of the idioms in the Unit. In this way, you can build up a record of these important idioms and their meanings. The next exercises involve choosing the idiom that best fits in the sentence. The final exercise in each Unit asks you to write a paragraph on one of three given topics, including some of the idioms you have studied in the unit. Many learners are able to understand idioms in reading, but find it difficult to use them properly in their own written and spoken English. These exercises will help you to practise this by using the idioms in context. It is a good idea, if possible, to check the paragraphs with a teacher or a native speaker of English.

Answer key

This section provides the answers to all the exercises in the workbook.



We hope that you will enjoy using this workbook. We always welcome feedback from learners and teachers, so if you have any comments, you can contact us on our website at:

<http://www.cobuild.collins.co.uk>

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INTRODUCTORY UNIT

A Meanings and idioms

The idioms in this book are organized into Units according to meaning. To familiarize yourself with this system, match the following categories of meaning with the idioms.

- | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| A Disagreement | B Honesty and fairness | C Decisions |
| D Starting and stopping | E Deception, hiding, and revealing | |

1 sit on the fence _____

'We're going to sit on the fence and wait until next week before making a decision,' said trainer Luca Cumani.

2 set the ball rolling _____

On February 25th he set the ball rolling when he presented to EU ministers a new report on the consequences of reform by NERA, an economic consultancy.

3 sweep something under the carpet _____

People often assume if you sweep something under the carpet the problem will go away, but that is not the case.

4 not see eye to eye with someone _____

The Prime Minister did not see eye to eye with him on this issue.

5 stab someone in the back _____

She seemed to be incredibly disloyal. She would be your friend to your face, and then stab you in the back.

B Grammar and idioms

The most common grammatical patterns in idioms are the following:

- 1 Verb + noun
e.g. **bite the bullet** (Unit 9)
- 2 Adjective + noun
e.g. **red tape** (Unit 9)
- 3 Prepositional idioms
e.g. **at loggerheads** (Unit 10)
- 4 Combinations of the above
e.g. **put something on the back burner** (Unit 2)



Put each of the following idioms in the correct place in the table according to their grammatical pattern.

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| in the doldrums | rock the boat | the pecking order |
| a vicious circle | turn a blind eye to sth | from scratch |
| turn over a new leaf | break the ice | |

verb + noun	
adjective + noun	
prepositional idiom	
combination of types	

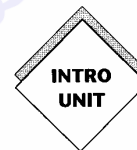
C Variations in idioms

Many idioms are fixed and the words which make them up cannot be changed. Sometimes, however, you have a choice of words. For example:

He decided to throw/chuck/toss in the towel/sponge.

There are several possible combinations with this idiom. For example, you can use the verbs 'throw', 'chuck' or 'toss', and you can use the nouns 'towel' or 'sponge'. This information is often given in the Language Comment sections or shown in the exercises and examples. You should use a good dictionary to help you with difficult idioms. Possible ways in which idioms can vary are:

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| A | verb change | | |
| | <i>e.g.</i> throw in the towel | → | chuck in the towel |
| B | noun change | | |
| | <i>e.g.</i> throw in the towel | → | throw in the sponge |
| C | preposition change | | |
| | <i>e.g.</i> under par | → | below par |
| D | used as an adjective | | |
| | <i>e.g.</i> break the ice | → | ice-breaking |



E	used as a noun e.g. sit on the fence	→	fence-sitting
F	word(s) removed e.g. Every cloud has a silver lining	→	a silver lining
G	word(s) added e.g. toe the line	→	toe the party line

Match the following examples for the idiom *jump on the bandwagon* with the variations listed above. Some examples may have more than one of the variations mentioned. The first example has been done for you.

If you say that someone, especially a politician, has *jumped on the bandwagon*, you disapprove of their involvement in an activity or movement, because you think that they are not strictly interested in it but are involved in it because it is likely to succeed or it is fashionable.

Examples

- 1 *It seems that every few months there's a new nutritional bandwagon you can climb on.*
- 2 *They came on the bandwagon after three other important computer retail groups agreed to become Apple dealers.*
- 3 *Bandwagon-jumping is not always bad.*
- 4 *Thorn EMI and hotels group Forte joined the bandwagon.*
- 5 *In saying that, Clinton is climbing aboard a bandwagon which already has considerable momentum in the US.*
- 6 *I see that Jane Gordon has hurled herself upon that already overloaded bandwagon by criticizing the money paid to our members of Parliament.*

Answers

A, G

Don't worry – not all idioms allow this much variation!

D Restrictions

Some idioms have grammatical restrictions. Others have usage restrictions, which means that they are most commonly used in a particular grammatical form. The three areas which may cause difficulty for learners are:

negative and positive singular and plural active and passive

1 Negative and positive

Most idioms can be used in both a positive and a negative way, but some are only or more commonly used in one of the two ways. For example, the idiom *make headway* is more commonly used in a positive way.

If you *make headway*, you make progress in the thing you are trying to achieve.