

IDIOMS AND THEIR PROPER USE IN IELTS SPEAKING/WRITING TASKS

Idiom - A group of words (or a single word) which have a meaning that is not understood by combining the standard definitions of the individual words (though that meaning may sometimes be inferred).

Idioms are a style or form of (often artistic) expression, characteristic of a particular language, group, subculture, school of thought, generation, or medium (for example, movies and television).

Idioms can convey that the current situation being described has a resemblance with past history, and in that sense they may be similar to analogies or metaphors. Learning some key idioms and their usages can help your score in IELTS writing and speaking tasks. It is suggested you not use about 2 idioms in an essay with 250 words. However, this is a very difficult statement to make with authority, as some idioms are used so frequently that we do not recognize them as idioms, so they are not likely counted as such by an examiner. You probably already know many of these most common idioms yourself, and also not realize they are idioms. An idiom may be so commonly used that it just seems like a second definition to you and the native speaker.

Do not try to use an idiom in an IELTS task unless you understand it and can use it properly. This is easier when writing and idiom than when speaking it. If using it in a speaking task, you should be able to use it with the proper inflection (pitch, tone, modulation, emphasis). It is important to think of the context of to whom or what the idiom is directed towards.

As an example, consider the idiom, (to be) fed up (with): ***I am fed up with (tired of, angered with) you kids making noise!*** In that example, we would display annoyance or anger towards the listener(s), as we are speaking to the noisy kids. Annoyance or slight anger may be part of the message, or maybe even great anger. Depending on the level of anger, the words are made more emphatic, and can even be accompanied by unhappy facial expressions and other body language (pounding of a desk or table could be included in extreme cases). Obviously, to say ***“I am fed up with you”*** with a smile and a pleasant voice would then contradict the meaning of the idiom. Often “I” am the one who is fed up and “you” (and perhaps **you** as a group) is the one this idiom is directed towards.

Now look at this next use of the same idiom used a different way: ***I was fed up with the kids making noise.*** Here, we are reporting on an event, so the verbal intonation would display how we were annoyed with the kids, **but not with the listener.** Or consider this one: ***He is fed up with your lateness. Again, we are reporting something rather than admonishing the listener (showing anger towards the listener).*** You are conveying your understanding of what someone else feels, so then the body language and most of the emotion would likely be dropped, the way the idiom would be spoken would be less

emphatic, as **you the speaker are not the one who has the emotion** of the person who is fed up, **you are instead reporting about someone else being fed up.**

When speaking (as opposed to writing) idioms, the manner in which the idiom is spoken is quite important. You have to learn the voice patterns for the idiom, or it seems unnatural. So in this example lesson we show how idioms need to be used properly or they do not make sense. The target of the idiom needs to be appropriate for the way the words are spoken, and perhaps even the body language of the speaker. In a writing task, this extra nonverbal message is implicitly understood, as if the reader was hearing the emphasis and understood the body language and facial expressions. To master idioms really requires to understand them intellectually (perhaps by first reading) and also to hear them used properly by native speakers (or near native speakers) of English.

So always consider if the idiom is directed at the listener or is used to describe an event for the listener, WHICH OF COURSE WOULD USUALLY BE THE CASE IN AN IELTS EXAM, but not usually the case in normal life. Know how to use your idioms. Incorrect usage can result in a negative effect on your marks, so learn the proper use of idioms during your IELTS exam preparation, and do not force their use unless you can use them properly.

What we are trying to do in this lesson is to teach idioms specifically for using on your IELTS tests, without great focus on trying to teach you how to use idioms properly in daily life. While the meaning of the idiom would not change, we would rarely direct an idiom **towards** an IELTS examiner, instead we would use the idiom in more of a declarative manner, adding just a hint of the requisite (proper) emotion to add realism. The full level of emotion is more often used when the idiom is directed **towards** a listener. **ALSO REALIZE WE ARE TRYING TO FOCUS ON IDIOMS THAT ARE MORE COMMONLY USED IN BUSINESS OR ACADEMIC CONTEXTS, and would therefore be more appropriate for an IELTS task.** When we list an idiom with a **W**, it means we feel it is formal enough to use in your writing tasks. All the idioms in our list can be used on the speaking tasks, but if they do not have the **W**, we consider them a bit less formal and do not necessarily recommend them for your writing task. **While all of this lesson is relevant to idioms in general, it is tailored specifically to the needs to the IELTS test taker and is only a small window into the world of English language idioms.**

Here are some of the emotions or ways of speaking various idioms:

Boastful
Declarative
Descriptive
Inquisitive
Negative
Humorous
Admonishment
Informative

Exasperated
Exclamatory
Theatrical
Emotional
Sad
Friendliness
Fondness
Upset
Perplexed
Embarrassed
Persuasive
Disrespectful
Encouraging
Scolding
Surprise

Listen to the companion file: **IDIOMS FOR IELTS.wav** for hearing the idiom properly spoken. Notice the **stress is usually placed on the idiom itself**, or if the idiom has a modifier, **you may hear equal or primary stress on the modifier: He REALLY aced the test.**

ace – to do well. Usually used relating to a test, competition, something with a score, or a clear winner or loser. This is a good idiom to use in an academic context. Boastful. *He aced the history test. He is an ace pitcher/batter/tennis player.*

and then some – in addition to. Declarative. *I want a lot of money and then some.*

antsy – getting restless. Declarative, sometimes humorous also. *The guys are getting antsy, we need to go somewhere else before they get too noisy.*

bad-mouth (verb) – speak badly of. Declarative, can also be negative. *Quit bad mouthing my friends, they're good guys.*

before long W – a rather short amount of time. Informative. *I will be gone before long, but I hope you learn a lot*

bent out of shape – often used to admonish others not to be too upset. – Admonishment, usually slightly negative, can also be informative. *Don't get all bent out of shape about the way they drive over here!*

(the) bottom line [ESPECIALLY RECOMMEND THIS IDIOM FOR IELTS] W – most important number or information. Inquisitive, declarative, boastful, depending on context. *My bottom line to do this job is freedom from meddling! Don't give me the details of what the client said about the bid, just tell me his bottom line.*

broke W – usually financial related, have no money, can also generally reference a state

of affairs but with the financial component assumed. Declarative, exasperated. *God, I am broke after paying for that taxi, he cheated us!*

burn the midnight oil – stay up late, esp work late. Declarative/exclamatory. *We're gonna have to burn the midnight oil to get this job done by tomorrow.*

bushed – tired. Declarative/exclamatory. *I am totally bushed after staying up so late.*

call it a day – end the job (or task) for the day, (or night). Declarative. *Well, it was nice chatting with you, but it's time for me to call it a day.*

cram – to try to accomplish a lot quickly, also can mean to try to put a lot of items in a tight fit, which is probably not idiomatic with that meaning. Declarative. *The students are all cramming to get ready for the exams.*

change your/my/his mind W – to change a decision or opinion. Declarative, sometimes boastful or authoritative. *Nothing you have told me motivates me to change my mind.*

crash course W – a quick lesson – Declarative. *We need a crash course in idioms for this IELTS program.*

catch your/my/his eye W – something or someone that has a visual attraction for you, can be a written description as well. **Really** is often used to introduce this idiom. Declarative/exclamatory/inquisitive. *That pretty girl really caught my eye. Do any of these watches catch your eye? The price on that advertised special really caught my eye.*

(on the) cutting edge W – the most modern, up to date process or product/equipment. Declarative, often boastful. *His teaching process is on the cutting edge. This new computer is cutting edge technology.*

dicey W – meaning the situation is not a certain thing, it is a gamble. Declarative. *I am not sure about that far fetched decision he made, it seems like the chances of it working are dicey at best.*

far-fetched W – usually refers to an idea, choice, decision, plan that may be unusual, probably not a good choice. Declarative. *The government's choice for the new Defense Secretary seemed pretty far fetched to the opposition party.*

(to be) **fed up with** – tired of, disgusted with – Negative, unless used about third party, then informative. *I am fed up with your behavior! (Negative). Be careful, I think the boss is fed up with us today. (Declarative).*

feel blue – to feel sad, melancholy, sadness. Emotional, sad. *I was feeling blue over my recent breakup with my 4th wife, so I went to a movie to cheer myself up.*

fire - (someone) W – (British use **sack**), means lose your job, usually implies

wrongdoing on the part of the employee. Anger, perplexed, upset, embarrassment, surprise. *I was fired for being drunk on the job, how embarrassing! Late again? YOU'RE FIRED! Be careful, they can fire you for sleeping on the job!*

for ages/it's been ages - W – a long period of time. Declarative, usually spoken with friendliness or fondness. Often we “drag out” or extend the word a sound in the word *ages* in this idiom, *aaaages*. *Lovely to see you, it's been ages. I have not seen you for ages. It's been ages since we had lunch together.*

from time to time - W – on an occasional basis. Declarative. *From time to time we have to wash the motorbikes.*

get a kick out of (something) – to get excitement or pleasure from an event or thought. Exclamatory, descriptive. *I really get a kick out of seeing the crazy things carried on motorbikes sometimes.*

get going (goin) – (very common, we do not even consider it idiomatic). Get started, or going to a location. Declarative. *Well, Mark is not going to (gonna) buy us any beer tonight, so might as well get goin.* The *g* would rarely be heard on this when spoken.

get it - W – understand something, information does not click into place for you. Declarative, perhaps with exasperation or exclamation. *I don't get it, why do WE always have to pay for the beer?*

get out of hand - W -(similar to get carried away with) – situation is about to get out of control. Admonishing, declarative. *Don't let those students get out of hand, they are getting carried away with their talking and the class is about to get out of control.*

get up and go – slang way of talking about personal energy - Exclamatory. *I'm getting old, I've lost my get up and go.*

give me/us/him(someone) a hand (2) – Def 1 W – (also: lend a hand), to give some form of assistance with a task. Declarative, persuasive. *Could you give these guys a hand with this shipment?*

Def 2 – To give applause – Exclamatory, sometimes theatrical. *Let's give a hand for this next speaker who comes to us all the way from China!*

hard feelings - W - the emotion of being upset or offended. Often used with the word **no** in front, with the subject of you understood. *G* is usually silent. Declarative. *I am sorry I have to fire you. No hard feelin[g]s, okay?*

hit the books - W – to study, usually intensively. Declarative. *We have exams next week, we better hit the books this weekend.*

How come? - W – meaning: how has it come to be the case that..? Almost the same as **What for?** *native speakers might not consider it an idiom as it is so common.* Asks what is the reason for doing something, often used as a question following someone else stating an action or plan of action. Can be a two word sentence often questioning the reason. Inquisitive, sometimes questioning the quality of the decision of the other speaker. *How come we have to eat noodles every day? John: We leave early today! Bill: How come?*

(to be) **in and out - W** - refers to going and coming somewhere, usually quickly – Declarative, perhaps with a touch of humor or boastfulness. – *That job looks so easy, we'll be in and out in no time.*

in over your/my/his/her/their head(s) - W – to be in a situation that you/he/etc are not prepared for. Declarative, perhaps admonishing or disrespectful. *You are really in over your head on this project, you are not at all ready for a job like this.*

in stock - W – to have available, usually a physical product in its expected location. Declarative. *We do not have any Heineken beer in stock, but we have plenty of Bia Hanoi on the shelves.*

in the black -W - (especially recommended as a good IELTS idiom) – refers to being in a profitable position. Declarative, perhaps boastful. *Our new business ended its first year in the black.*

in the red – W - (especially recommended as a good IELTS idiom) – opposite of in the black. Declarative, perhaps with sadness. *Our business is struggling, right now we are in the red.*

in time - W - (for something) *also in time to* do something before it is too late. Declarative. *I'm glad you made it in time. He planned to arrive in time to have dinner with his sister.* Usage notes: often used in the form *just in time (almost too late): He was just in time for his flight.*

jump to conclusion - W – make a quick decision, often not a good one. Declarative, often admonishing. *Why did you jump to a conclusion? You had plenty of time to think about the decision.*

keep an eye on - W – to monitor a situation, not forget about it. Declarative. *Keep an eye on the noodles, there almost done.*

keep (stay) in touch - W – maintain regular contact – Declarative, often friendly. *Nice to see you again, let's keep in touch!*

keep your nose to the grindstone – continue to put forward a good effort – Declarative. *If you keep your nose to the grindstone, you will finish this job tonight.*

kind of – to some extent, a type or degree of – Declarative, very commonly used in the U.S. (often spoken as: kinda) – *I am kind of [kinda] tired. This class is kind of [kinda] boring.*

know something [it, this] backwards and forward – to be totally familiar with – Declarative, often boastful. *He knows that subject backwards and forwards.*

know something [it, this] inside out – same as backwards and forwards. to be totally familiar with – Declarative, often boastful. *I know my motorbike inside out.*

let down - W - to disappoint (often me is the object, often you understood is subject) Declarative, often admonishing. *Don't let me down. He really let us down with those small bonuses at Tet.*

leave well enough alone - W – to not try to change something that is good enough – Declarative, instructive. *This repair is not perfect, but let's leave well enough alone.*

lend a hand - W – to give help – Declarative, often encouraging. *Can you guys lend a hand over here?*

lose (lost) track of - W – to not be in touch with, or to have forgotten something/someone. Declarative – *After I left that school, I eventually lost track of my former students there.*

[a] low blow - W– an unfair attack, not always physical – Declarative, often admonishing. Usually but now always preceded with the word *a*. *Her rude comments about my lecture in front of the group was a low blow.*

lousy – very low quality – Negative – *I got a lousy grade on my test. That is a lousy meal.*

make up your/my/his mind - W – Make a decision, usually implies a previous delay. – Declarative, often perplexed. *I still cannot make up my mind what to study in college.*

No way! – not possible – Demonstrative, often exclamatory. When used, it is often placed at the beginning of the sentence – *No way am I going to buy that motorbike.*

now and then - W – on an occasional basis, often *every* is used as the first word of this idiomatic phrase. Declarative. *Every now and then I have a good idea.*

nuts (2) – Def 1 [NOT RECOMMENDED FOR IELTS]- exclamation (often one word sentence) stating contempt or exasperation. Often used in place of a profanity. *Nuts! I am tired of this place!*

nuts - Def 2 [WOULD BE FINE IN IELTS SPEAKING, IN AN INFORMAL MOMENT] – Crazy – Declarative, often exasperated. *These people are nuts if they think I am going to put up with their behavior.*

OK (okay) - (very common, we do not even consider it idiomatic) can be used in many situations as a replacement for *yes, I agree, things are functioning normally, or other positive statements*. Declarative, sometimes emphatic, can be used in various ways, questioning, in a scolding manner or humorous. *It is okay if you want to stop reading now.*

on the dot - **W** - happens at a particular time, precise time, exactly time. Declarative, often emphatic. *The class will start at 8:00 a.m. on the dot, so don't be late!*

(to be) **on the go** - **W** – refers to being in movement a lot, usually including the idea of travel. Declarative, perhaps with a touch of humor or boastfulness. *My brother Clark has so much work he is always on the go.*

(to be) **on the road** - **W** - refers to traveling, usually including some type of automobile. Can also be extended to any points on the trip itself. Declarative, perhaps with a touch of humor or boastfulness. *Yes, we are already on the road, and have just stopped for petrol.*

on time – **W** - [very common, not necessarily recognized as idiomatic by native speakers] – refers to doing something on a timely basis, at the agreed upon time. Demonstrative. *You should always be on time for this class.*

once in a while - **W** – a time reference, means occasionally, but not often. Declarative. *Once in a while I find someone who speaks English at IELTS level 7.*

over his/your/my head – this refers to an idea being too difficult for someone to understand, usually the speaker, but not always. Declarative, sometimes mildly insulting. *This conversation seems to be going over your head.*

quite a few – numerical reference, uncertain amount, probably more than can be quickly counted – Informative – *We have quite a few students who do not like this book we are using.*

(come) **rain or shine** - **W** – means something will happen regardless of weather or other difficulties. *I will be on time for the class, rain or shine. Come rain or shine, she is always smiling.*

read my/your/his mind - **W** – refers to the idea that thoughts are known by another. Declarative, sometimes perplexed, sometimes boastful. *I was surprised he knew what I was planning, like he could read my mind.*

run down – W - poorly maintained. Disrespectful. *That business is really run down, they should close it.*

rundown - W – status report. Often inquisitive, businesslike. *Can you give us a rundown on how the new project is going?*

sleep on it - W – to spend some time thinking about a decision before making the decision. Declarative, often positive. *They offered me that new job, but I better sleep on it before I agree to take it.*

sooner or later - W – means something will happen, the only real uncertainty is when. Often used at the beginning of the sentence. Demonstrative. *Sooner or later I am going to get rich.* Less formal: *Sooner or later I'm gonna get rich.*

sort of (sorta) – informal. *very similar use as kind of.* Means a sort of, a type of, a degree of, but probably not a complete amount of. Declarative, perhaps judgmental. *Is she beautiful? Sort of.* Meaning she has some features that might be considered beautiful, but perhaps not a complete beauty. *I'm sorta hungry.* Not famished, but could eat.

state of the art - W – very similar to cutting edge. Often used with the word “technology”. Means that whatever is the subject being discussed is so modern that it represents the latest state of the art (or science or technology) that creates it, the most modern process known for it. Not just modern, but the most modern possible at this time. Declarative, often boastful. *Young people always hope to own cellphones that represent state of the art technology. His motorbike is state of the art.*

take it easy – to exhibit less concern or motivation, implies currently too much concern. Declarative, sometimes slightly admonishing. *We need to take it easy, this is going to be a long day, no need to push ourselves too hard.*

tight fisted - W – describes person who tries to avoid spending much money – Declarative, mildly insulting. *John is really tight fisted, he never buys the drinks.*

tightwad - W – is a person who tries to avoid spending much money – Declarative, mildly insulting. *John is a real tightwad.*

tough – W – describes a situation or a thing as difficult, or difficult to deal with. Declarative, sometimes remonstrative. *Our new teacher is tough, he never gives a good score to anyone.*

two-faced - W – references the idea of acting nice in person and displaying a different attitude when not dealing directly with the person. Negative. *That two faced salesman lied to me about the total cost of the car.*

under the weather - W – feeling sick, but not implying a major health problem. Declarative. *She is not joining us for lunch, she says she is feeling under the weather.*

(to be) **up and running** - **W** – usually refers to a process or machine. Declarative, perhaps with a touch of humor or boastfulness. *My new process for killing mosquitoes is up and running.*

up to date - **W** - modern, has been updated Declarative. *My motorbike is old, but the brake system and the engine are modified and up to date. Facebook is the up to date way to connect with friends.*

upside down - **W** - owes more money on a car, truck, house, etc., than its resale value. Declarative. *I am upside down on my house, so I may just declare bankruptcy.*

used to (pronounced with st ending, yoost) - **W** - *native speakers might not consider it an idiom as it is so common.* Have a familiarity so that something can be accepted/done without problem. Declarative. *I may never get used to the traffic here, but I am used to the food, which can be quite good.*

What for? - **W** – *native speakers might not consider it an idiom as it is so common.* Asks what is the reason for doing something, almost always used as a question following someone else stating an action or plan of action. Not always asking about something specific, can also refer to questioning the reason. Inquisitive, sometimes questioning the quality of the decision of the other speaker. *John - Let's leave early. Bill - What for?*

would just as soon - **W** – used in comparing more than one course of action, the action that is pointed out as “just as soon” is the preference. Declarative. *I would just as soon go home early as go to your mother's house.* (He would rather go home early if he has a choice between that and your mother's house).

white elephant - **W** - an unprofitable investment, something that is large and unwieldy and is a nuisance and/or expensive to maintain. Declarative, perhaps humorous. *That new motorbike I bought is really a white elephant, it is expensive and too big for these streets.*

You don't say! – exclamation noting the appropriateness of the previous speakers comment, sometimes pointing out the obvious nature of what was stated. Exclamatory. *John – Wow, it is really raining hard. Bill – You don't say!*