Idioms and phrases

Objectives

- Look up idioms and use them in appropriate contexts
- Find and learn phrases and spoken phrases
- Talk about the requirements of a job and describe the personal significance of an event

Idioms

An idiom is a group of two or more words that have a special meaning. This meaning is different from the usual meanings of the individual words (e.g. hit the roof means ‘to be very angry’). In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, idioms are listed at the entry for the first important word of the idiom. The idioms are listed in order of frequency along with the other meanings of the word. Note that idioms are hardly ever listed at a word such as ‘make’, ‘have’, ‘get’, etc., because these entries are already very long and they are not the first important word in the idiom.

Idioms are shown in bold in frequency order at the first important word of the idiom.

After the main senses, you will find cross references to idioms containing the same word but located in other entries.

Finding and understanding idioms

1. Match the idioms to their meanings.

   1. hit the ground running
   2. land on your feet
   3. not have a leg to stand on
   4. run a mile
   5. stand on your own two feet
   6. if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen

   a. to try very hard to avoid a particular situation or person because you do not want to deal with them
   b. to be in a situation where you cannot prove or legally support what you say
   c. used to tell someone that they should leave a job or situation, if they cannot deal with its difficulties
   d. to be able to do what you need to do, earn your own money, etc. without help from others
   e. to start doing something successfully without any delay
   f. to get into a good situation again, after having problems

2. Underline the first important word (noun or verb) of each idiom. Find the idioms in the dictionary and check your answers. Write down the entry and meaning number.

   1. hit the ground running
   2. land on your feet
   3. not have a leg to stand on
   4. run a mile
   5. stand on your own two feet
   6. if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen

   hit\(^4\), meaning 24
   hit\(^5\), meaning
   hit\(^6\), meaning
   hit\(^7\), meaning
   hit\(^8\), meaning
   hit\(^9\), meaning

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3 Which of the idioms from Exercise 2 would you use in the following situations?
1. You have too much work to do and you’re explaining to your boss that you need an experienced person to help you:
   ‘I need someone who can _______________’
2. You’re advising a friend about hiring someone to do some work for them:
   ‘You need to get a written quotation otherwise you won’t _______________ if it all goes wrong’
3. You’re telling your parents that you want to rely on them less and be more independent:
   ‘I just need to _______________.’
4. A friend is telling you to find another job if you can’t cope with the level of competitiveness in the company where you work:
   ‘Well, you know what to do – _______________, _______________!’

Phrases
As with idioms, you can find phrases in the entry of the first important word of the phrase, listed along with the other meanings of the word in frequency order (e.g. last but not least is in the entry last², meaning 3).
Phrases used only, or nearly always, in conversation have a spoken label. If an entry has a lot of spoken phrases, these are listed under a ‘Spoken phrases’ heading (e.g. think¹, meanings 9 to 25).

4 Complete each sentence with a fixed phrase.

by and large   in other words   not to mention   to say the least

1. What we need is a more sustainable transport system, _______________ more buses and trains, and fewer cars.
2. Pollution has a negative effect on the health of everyone living in the city, _______________ the damage to the environment.
3. The proposed CO₂ targets are rather optimistic, _______________.
4. _______________, measures to protect the rainforests have had only limited success.
Spoken phrases

5 Write the words in bold in the correct order to form spoken phrases.

1 same story the old It's – too much to do and too little time to do it in. __________________________

2 Well, story cut long to a short, we agreed a price and fixed the date to finalise the sale. __________________________

3 She was going to deny all knowledge of the incident but then of better it thought __________________________

4 would thought Who have that a simple trip to the dentist could go so horribly wrong? __________________________

5 ‘I get so frustrated when I can’t make myself understood.’ ‘feeling know the I.’ __________________________

6 He doesn’t like working with me and is the mutual feeling. __________________________

6 Check the meanings of the spoken phrases in Exercise 5 in your dictionary and make a note to remind yourself of the meanings that are new to you in the space below.

1 __________________________

2 __________________________

3 __________________________

4 __________________________

5 __________________________

6 __________________________

Idioms and phrases in context

7 Complete the text about finding a job. Use a verb from the box with the words in brackets and any other words necessary to make appropriate idioms and phrases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cut</th>
<th>hit</th>
<th>land</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>stand</th>
<th>take</th>
<th>test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The job advert said the company was looking for someone who could 1 _______ hit the ground running (GROUND) and use their initiative, so I applied. During the interview, the interviewer asked me to give her an example of when I had 2 _________________ (WATER) before implementing a plan.

To 3 _________________ (STORY) I eventually got an email telling me that I’d got the job. To finally be able to 4 _________________ (FOOT) and not have to rely on my parents 5 _________________ (WORLD, ME). My dad thinks I’ve really 6 _________________ (FOOT) with a responsible and varied job, not to mention a good salary.

What Next?

When learning new idioms, make sure you understand what they mean. Be careful to note whether idioms are labelled informal or slang, so that you can use them in appropriate situations. Learning idioms can be fun, and knowing what they mean can often help you to understand a speaker’s perspective and feelings, but don’t use too many idioms together as it can sound strange.

For more practice with idioms online, click on the Study Centre tab and choose Vocabulary, then Idioms with …
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Timing

Approximately 40–60 minutes, depending on your students' level and whether they are using the online or paper dictionary.

Procedure

Exercise 1

Timing: 5–10 minutes

Elicit from students what an idiom is and ask them to share any favourite idioms they may have. If you have done Worksheet 9 on Collocations with them, you may want to draw their attention to the difference between collocations and idioms: in collocations the meaning of the main word does not change (i.e. job as in land a job, or rain as in heavy rain), whereas in idioms the meaning is usually completely different from the combined meanings of the individual words (i.e. you cannot guess the meaning of hit the roof from the usual meanings of hit + the + roof).

Students try to match the idioms to their meanings without using their dictionaries. Do not check their answers, as students will check them as part of Exercise 2.

Exercise 2

Timing: 5–10 minutes

Make sure that students understand that idioms are usually located at the first important word of the idiom, such as a verb or noun, using the examples given in the sample entries for hit and stand. You can also look at the cross references at the bottom of the entry for stand to show how this works (i.e. make somebody's hair stand on end is at hair because make is a delexicalised verb, which has lost most of its meaning here). Note that when the first word in an idiom can vary, the idiom will be located at the next important word (i.e. stand/serve/hold somebody in good stead is in the entry for stead, not repeated in the entries for stand and serve and hold).

Students underline the word where they think each of the idioms repeated from Exercise 1 will be located and then look them up, writing down the entry and meaning number, and checking their answers to Exercise 1. If necessary, remind students that hit the ground running is in the verb entry hit, not the noun entry hit.

You can check the answers at this point or after they have completed Exercise 3.

1 hit the ground running (hit, meaning 24) 2 land on your feet (land, meaning 10) 3 not have a leg to stand on (leg, meaning 7) 4 run a mile (run, meaning 38) 5 stand on your own two feet (stand, meaning 31) 6 if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen (stand, meaning 16)
Exercise 3
Timing: 5 minutes

Students choose the appropriate idiom for each context. Note that there is no need to change the form of any of the idioms in these sentences.

1 hit the ground running  
2 have a leg to stand on  
3 stand on my own two feet  
4 if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen

Exercise 4
Timing: 5–10 minutes

Phrases are presented in a similar way to idioms. Look at the sample dictionary entry and have your students look up the phrases last but not least in the entry last (meaning 3) and think (meanings 9 to 25).

Students could try to complete the sentences without their dictionaries before looking up the phrases to check their answers.

1 in other words  
2 not to mention  
3 to say the least  
4 By and large

Exercise 5
Timing: 5 minutes

Students rearrange the words in bold to complete the spoken phrases. Using these sentences and the example sentences in the dictionary as a model, you could ask your students to create their own situations and sentences.

1 It’s the same old story  
2 to cut a long story short  
3 thought better of it  
4 Who would have thought  
5 I know the feeling  
6 the feeling is mutual

Exercise 6
Timing: 5 minutes

Students check their answers to Exercise 5 in their dictionaries, finding out any meanings they are unfamiliar with. Ask your students to note down any aspects of meaning, or the way the phrases are used, to help them remember them. Definitions are given below for your reference.

1 story (meaning 9) – It’s the same old story used to say that the present bad situation has often happened before  
2 cut1 (meaning 44) – to cut a long story short spoken used to say that you are only going to mention the main facts of something  
3 think1 (meaning 26) – think better of it to not do something that you had planned to do, because you realize that it is not a good idea  
4 think1 (meaning 23) – who would have thought? used to say that something is very surprising  
5 feeling1 (meaning 9) – I know the feeling spoken said when you understand how someone feels because you have had the same experience  
6 feeling1 (meaning 10) – the feeling is mutual spoken said when you have the same feeling about someone as they have towards you
Exercise 7

Timing: 10–15 minutes

This exercise recycles some idioms and phrases already practised and introduces some different ones. Students can try to make idioms and phrases from the verbs given in the box and the words in brackets, and then check them in the dictionary by looking up what they think is the most important word.

Alternatively, your students will be able to find all of the answers by looking up the nouns in brackets and these locations are given in the answer key for reference. Note that some of these locations show cross-references to the verb entries because in those cases the verb is the first important word.

Look at the example answer with your students and make sure they understand that they may need to change the form of the verb and personal pronouns, and add any additional words to fill the gaps correctly.

1. hit the ground running (ground1, cross reference to hit the ground running at HIT1 (meaning 24))
2. tested the water/waters (water1, cross reference to test the water at TEST2 (meaning 7))
3. cut a long story short (story, (meaning 11))
4. stand on my own two feet (foot1, cross reference to stand on your own (two) feet at STAND1 (meaning 31))
5. means the world to me (world1, (meaning 18))
6. landed on my feet (foot1, (meaning 19))

What Next?

Do Worksheet 15 with your students to focus on the benefits of using Collocations boxes to learn common adjective + noun collocations.