

Idiom



DEFINITION

What is an idiom? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An idiom is a phrase that conveys a [figurative](#) meaning that is difficult or impossible to understand based solely on a literal interpretation of the words in the phrase. For example, saying that something is "beyond the pale" is an idiomatic way of saying that it is improper or "over the line," but you would only know that if someone had explained it to you, or if you had been able to infer its meaning based on context.

Some additional key details about idioms:

- Idioms are usually specific to a particular region, culture, language, or dialect, and they are often difficult to translate from one language or culture to another.
- Although many idioms are widely understood by people within the region, culture, or language where they are used, some idioms are less commonly used than others, and therefore would not make sense to someone who hadn't heard the idiom used frequently, or who hadn't has the meaning explained to them.
- Idioms become popularized through everyday spoken language, but they are widely used in writing and literature, too. Writers often use idioms in dialogue in order to create realistic voices for their characters, and using idioms can also more generally make writing seem down-to-earth and accessible.

How to Pronounce Idiom

Here's how to pronounce idiom: **ih-dee-um**

Understanding Idioms

Idioms are groups of words that only make sense when they are interpreted [figuratively](#) rather than literally. For example, if you were waiting in line at the DMV to renew your driver's license and suddenly realized you'd forgotten to bring all the right documents, you might complain about all the "red tape" preventing people from renewing your license. But if the person standing in line next to you had never heard this idiom and interpreted your words literally, they would probably be confused, because they wouldn't see any red tape anywhere. However, someone who knows the idiom would understand that by "red tape" you simply mean "unnecessary bureaucratic regulations." Similarly, if someone were to say, "I can't believe I have to jump through all of these hoops to get my license," they wouldn't literally mean that the DMV requires them to jump through hoops—they're simply complaining that they need to fulfill so many different requirements in order to get their license.

Where Idioms Come From

The majority of idioms originated as phrases with literal meanings, and only later came to have a figurative and more widely-known meaning. "Red tape" is one such idiom: in England, the government used to use red ribbon to bind packets of legal documents together, so red tape came to be associated with bureaucracy and legal regulations. But the phrase continued to be used long after legal documents ceased to be tied with red ribbon, and today "red tape" is an idiom that is used exclusively as a figurative expression.

Idioms Are Set Phrases

Idioms are said to be "set phrases," meaning that they only make sense if you use them exactly. For instance, if instead of using the term "red tape" when complaining about all the bureaucracy at the DMV you instead complained about all of the "crimson ribbon," no one would have any idea what you're talking about. Idioms are almost set phrases, in that they only make sense when they aren't modified.

Idioms, Colloquialisms, and Euphemisms

Idioms are related to and sometimes confused with two other literary terms: [colloquialisms](#) and euphemisms.

Colloquialisms vs. Idioms

Colloquialisms are informal words or phrases in writing or speech that only make sense to people of a particular community. Such communities are usually defined in geographical terms, meaning that colloquialisms are often delineated by their use within a dialect, a regionally-defined variant of a larger language. Colloquialisms differ from idioms in two ways:

- **Figurative vs non-figurative:** Colloquialisms can be either figurative or literal, while idioms must be figurative.
- **Length:** A colloquialism can be one or more words, while an idiom is always a set phrase of two or more words.

Idioms are a subset of colloquialisms: all idioms are colloquialisms, but not all colloquialisms are idioms. Colloquialisms can be idioms, but they can also be [aphorisms](#), terminology, or even profanity. For instance, the terms "pop," "coke," and "soda," are all different colloquialisms used in different parts of the United States to mean "bubbly sugar water." These colloquialisms are *not* idioms, though, because they aren't figurative and they're single words.

Euphemisms vs. Idioms

Euphemisms are mild, indirect, or gentle words or phrases substituted for other words or phrases that are considered to be too embarrassing, unpleasant, offensive, or harsh to use in formal

settings or in polite conversation. When we say that someone "passed away" instead of saying that they died, we are using a phrase that is both an idiom and a euphemism: the phrase is a figurative way of saying in an unoffensive way that someone died.

However, not *all* idioms are euphemisms, because not all idioms are designed to avoid having to state something uncomfortable directly. Similarly, not all euphemisms are idioms, because not all euphemisms are "set phrases," as an idiom must be. For example, when it was discovered in 2013 that former director of national intelligence, James Clapper, had lied to the US Senate, Clapper explained that he had responded in "the least untruthful manner" possible. Because it is not a widely used set phrase with a figurative meaning, "the least untruthful manner" is not an idiom, but it *is* a euphemism because it is meant to soften the uncomfortable reality of Clapper's lie.



EXAMPLES

Examples of Idioms in Everyday Speech

Idioms are such a central part of ordinary speech that people often use them without thinking about the fact that they're employing a form of figurative language.

Idioms and Death

- If you want to inoffensively state that a person has died, you might say that they **passed away**. This idiom is also a euphemism.
- You could also say that someone **bit the dust** or **kicked the bucket**—but these idioms are considered crude and insensitive, and therefore are *not* euphemisms.
- The idiom **bucket list** is related to the idiom **kicked the bucket**—it's not a list of buckets, but a list of things you want to do *before* you "kick the bucket."
- Again, if you're not worried about being polite, you might say that a person who is dead and buried is **pushing up daisies**.
- And if you say that someone is **sleeping with the fishes**, it means they've been killed and disposed of in some body of water. (This particular idiom originated in the film *The Godfather*.)

Idioms and Sleep

- If you're about to go to bed, you might announce that you're planning to **hit the hay** or **hit the sack**.
- If you want to get some sleep, you could say you want to **catch some shut-eye**.
- And if a person sleeps so soundly that it is difficult to wake them, you could say they **sleep like a log**.
- A **cat nap** is a particularly short nap, usually in the middle of the day.

Idioms and Body Parts

- A person who is very busy might say, "**I have my hands full**."
- Someone who is prepared to listen attentively might tell you, "**I'm all ears!**"
- If someone guesses what you are thinking, you could tell them, "**You read my mind!**"
- To wish an actor luck, people often tell them, "**Break a leg!**"
- If you plan to watch someone closely, you might say, "I'm going to **keep an eye on** them."

Examples of Idioms in Literature

Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare

In [Much Ado About Nothing](#), the character Antonio says of his brother Leonato:

If he could right himself with quarreling,
some of us would lie low.

In this scene, Antonio muses that, if his brother could fight, his enemies would do well to hide from him—implying that they'd surely be defeated. The idiom "to lie low," which means to hide oneself or to remain hidden in order to avoid notice, was already in common usage when Shakespeare wrote *Much Ado About Nothing* (though Shakespeare is known not only for using many idioms, but for coining (or inventing) original figurative expressions that over time have *become* widely used idioms.)

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain

In the opening chapter [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#), Tom, the novel's protagonist and title character, plays a trick on his Aunt Polly. Uncertain if she should laugh or reprimand him, she says:

Can't learn an old dog new tricks, as the saying is. But my goodness, he never plays them alike, two days, and how is a body to know what's coming? He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again and I can't hit him a lick.

This passage is full of idioms. To "get one's dander up" is an idiom meaning to arouse one's anger; and "to put someone off" is to delay, discourage, or dissuade them. Aunt Polly uses these two idioms together to express that Tom always teases her just enough to momentarily anger her before making her laugh and persuading her to forgive him. Twain is known for using idioms and colloquial language in his writing, and this passage is an excellent example of how writers can use idioms in dialogue to give their characters distinct, lifelike voices.

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

In [As I Lay Dying](#), Addie Bundren's husband, Anse, announces that after Addie dies, the family will have to take her body to be buried in Jefferson. Even though the trip will be a difficult one, he says they must go because:

Her mind is set on it.

The idiom "to have one's mind set on something" means to be determined to do something, or to be determined that something will happen. *As I Lay Dying* is narrated by 15 different characters, and Faulkner gives each of them their own distinctive voice. One of the ways he does this is by having characters speak using idioms and colloquial language.

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

In this passage in [Everything I Never Told You](#), the character Marilyn thinks about her mother, Doris Walker, who is a home economics teacher:

Newcomers to the school district assumed Mrs. Walker was a widow. Her mother herself never mentioned it. She still powdered her nose after cooking and before eating she still put on lipstick before coming downstairs to make breakfast. So they called it keeping house for a reason, Marilyn thought. Sometimes it did run away.

Here, Marilyn contemplates the idiom "keeping house," which means to take care of a household by cooking, cleaning, and so on. Marilyn's observation that "sometimes [houses] did run away" rests on her literal interpretation of the word "keep," which implies that one could lose a house if they don't "keep" it.

Examples of Idioms in Pop Music

Idiom in "We Are Never Getting Back Together" by Taylor Swift

In the song "We Are Never Getting Back Together," Taylor Swift uses two idioms to describe her decision to end a romantic relationship:

Ooh, we called it off again last night
But ooh, this time I'm telling you, I'm telling you
We are never ever ever getting back together

When Swift sings that she and her partner "called it off," she employs an idiom that means *to cancel something*—and in this case, the thing that they are canceling is their relationship. When she says, "We are never getting back together," she is using another idiom: to *get together* can either mean to begin dating, or alternatively it can be a euphemistic idiom for being physically intimate with someone.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use idioms for many of the same reasons people use idioms in everyday speech: these pithy, "set phrases" of figurative language convey ideas in a neat and easily recognizable way. Often, people use idioms without thinking much about it (for many, it's just as natural to say that they'll "give it a shot" as it is to say they'll try something, and simpler to say that they're "getting in the holiday spirit" than it is to say that they're in the mood to participate in seasonal festivities). Here are some of the other reasons a writer might choose to use an idiom rather than saying something without the use of figurative language:

- Writers often use idioms to create a distinctive voice for their narrators or other characters.
- It's particularly common to see idioms in dialogue because writers want their characters to sound like real people, and real people use idioms all the time. Writers can use idioms to convey a character's tone and emotions, too.
 - When, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Aunt Polly says that Tom knows how to *get her dander up*, readers can infer that Tom is annoying or angering her, but the silly-sounding idiom creates a more lighthearted and humorous tone than if she were to say that Tom knows how to torment and infuriate her.
- Writers may choose different idioms to express the same thing depending on the context, since different idioms carry different [connotations](#).
 - For instance, it creates a very different impression for a character to say that a deceased person "passed away" than if they were to say that the person "kicked the bucket."

Writers, of course, have linguistic habits just like everyone else, and they sometimes use an idiom simply because it feels like the best or most natural way to communicate an idea.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Idioms](#): A helpful but somewhat technical overview of the term.
- [42 Idiom Origins](#): In this short video, author and vlogger John Green discusses the origins of 42 idioms.
- [Idioms from Shakespeare](#): This Mental Floss article lists widely-used phrases that originated in Shakespeare's plays.
- [The Huge List of Idioms](#): If you're looking for even more examples of idioms, check out this resource!

HOW TO CITE

MLA

frisella, emily. "Idiom." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

frisella, emily. "Idiom." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/idiom>.