

Idioms - Examples

An idiom is a phrase or expression that has a meaning that in most cases cannot be deduced directly from the individual words in that phrase or expression.

For example, the idiom 'bite off more than you can chew' doesn't mean you bite more than a mouthful of a cake or something else and then struggle to chew. It means you try to do something that is too difficult for you.

How are they different from proverbs? Proverbs are well-known sayings, stating a general truth or advice. For example, the proverb 'a picture is worth thousand words' is a general truth. The idiom 'bite off more than you can chew', however, is neither a general truth nor an advice.

1. Stir up a hornets' nest - (Provoke trouble)

Example: It's not that the management is not aware of few false bills here and there, but they don't call it because it would expose many and stir up a hornet's nest.

2. Back against the wall – (Be in a difficult situation from where escape is difficult)

Example: With banks baying for his blood over default in payments, he has his back against the wall.

3. Bite off more than you can chew – (To try to do something that is too difficult for you)

Example: He has taken more responsibilities as he couldn't say 'no' to his boss. I think he has bitten more than he can chew, and he'll struggle to handle them all.

4. Head over heels - (If you're head over heels, you're completely in love)

Example: Max fell head over heels in love with her colleague and wants to marry her.

5. Upset someone's applecart

If you upset someone's applecart, you do something that causes a plan to go wrong.

Example: The increase in customs duty by the government has upset the applecart of those car companies who were importing most of their car parts.

6. Spoil someone's plans – (To ruin someone's plans)

Example: The heavy overnight rain spoilt our plan to play cricket next morning.

7. Keep someone at arm's length

If you keep someone at arm's length, you avoid becoming friendly with them.

Example: I've more productive time in the day because I've developed this good habit of keeping video games at arm's length.

8. Up in arms

Angry about something

Example: Media has traditionally been up in arms with the government of the day.

9. Drive a hard bargain

If you drive a hard bargain, you argue hard to get a favorable deal.

Example: The author tried to drive a hard bargain with the publisher on signing amount, but couldn't because he didn't have best sellers in his name.

10. Barking up the wrong tree

To ask the wrong person or follow the wrong course

Example: The sales team blamed the engineers for the organization's failure to bag the mega deal, but they were barking up the wrong tree.

11. Scrape the barrel

When you're scraping the barrel, you're using something you do not want to but you've no option.

Example: I was scraping the barrel when I had to stay for six months with my parents after I lost my job.

12. Bend over backwards

To try please or accommodate someone to an unusual degree

Example: The hotel staff bent over backwards to make the visit of the dignitaries a memorable one.

13. A chip off the old block

If you're a chip off the old block, you're similar in some distinct way to your father or mother.

Example: He is as stingy as her mother – a real chip off the old block.

14. Blow your own trumpet

If you blow your own trumpet, you tell people how good or successful you are (used in negative way).

Example: That doctor can be so off-putting. He is always blowing his trumpet mentioning his awards and positions in various associations.

15. Once in a blue moon

If something happens once in a blue moon, it happens rarely.

Example: Many startups turn in a profit once in a blue moon.

16. Burn your boats/ bridges

If you burn your boats, you do something that makes it impossible to change your plans and go back to the earlier position or situation.

Example: I've burnt my boats with my previous supervisor by criticizing him publicly.

17. Make no bones about something

If you make no bones about something, you say clearly what you feel or think about it.

Example: Jack made no bones about getting a hike in his salary.

18. Break fresh/ new ground

If you break new ground, you do something that was not done before.

Example: Our scientists are breaking new ground in robotics and cancer research.

19. In the same breath

When you say two things in the same breath, you say two very different or contradictory things.

Example: How can the manager praise my colleague and talk of his average performance in the same breath?

20. Take away your breath

If someone or something takes your breath away, it astonishes you.

Example: His diving catch at the crunch moment in the match took my breath away.

21. Sell like hot cakes

If something sells like hot cakes, it sells very fast.

Example: More than five thousand cars sold so far. The new model is selling like hot cakes.

22. Burn the candle at both ends

If you burn the candle at both ends, you work excessively hard, say, by keeping two jobs or by leading a busy social life in the evening.

Example: Mitch is burning the candle at both ends. He is working two jobs, one in the evening.

23. Separate the wheat from the chaff

If you separate wheat from the chaff, you separate valuable from worthless.

Example: The new testing procedure to evaluate employees will separate the wheat from the chaff.

24. Change tune

If you change your tune, you change the way you behave with others from good to bad.

Example: After he came to know that I'm close to the power in the organization, he changed his tune.

25. Run around in circles

To be active without achieving any worthwhile result

Example: He ran around in circles trying to bring us on board for the new cause.

26. Turn the clock back

If you turn the clock back to an earlier period, you return to that time.

Example: Turning the clock back to our glory days is fruitless. We've to work harder and smarter in the present.

27. Against the clock

If you're working against the clock, you're working in great hurry.

Example: With only half the syllabus studied, I raced against the clock to be ready for the exam on Monday.

28. Close the door on someone

If you close the door on someone or something, you no longer deal with it.

Example: The country decided to close the door on talks till other outstanding issues are resolved.

29. Burn the midnight oil

To work late in the night

Example: I had to burn the midnight oil for nearly three months to write my first book.

30. Chicken and egg situation

If a situation is chicken and egg, it is impossible to decide which of the two came first and caused the other one.

Example: I need to have experience to get job, but without job, I can't have experience. It's a chicken and egg situation.

31. On cloud nine

If you're on cloud nine, you're very happy.

Example: I was on cloud nine after receiving the news of my promotion.

32. Under a cloud

If you're under a cloud, you're under suspicion or in trouble.

Example: The IP for our key technology has been leaked, and many in my team, including the manager, are under a cloud.

33. Head in the clouds

If your head is in the clouds, you're not in touch with the ground realities.

Example: Many academics have their heads in the clouds.

34. Small cog in a large wheel

Someone or something that has a small role in a large setup or organization.

Example: I work as a sales representative in a Fortune 500 company – just a small cog in a large wheel.

35. The other side of the coin
The other point of view

Example: We only see the glamor and money in showbiz. But the other side of the coin is that only one in hundreds reach there.

36. Pay someone back in his /her own coin
If you pay someone back in his/ her own coin, you treat him/ her in the same way he/ she treated you.

Example: By refusing to help her colleague, she paid him back in the same coin.

37. Left out in the cold
If you're left out in the cold, you're ignored.

Example: I was left out in the cold in the annual promotions in the company.

38. Pour cold water on
If you pour cold water on an idea or plan, you criticize it to the extent that people lose enthusiasm to pursue it.

Example: The investors poured cold water on the plan to build another factory.

39. Blow hot and cold
If you blow hot and cold, you vacillate.

Example: The editor blew hot and cold over the story for few days and then finally decided to publish it.

40. To come to a head
If something comes to a head, it reaches to the point of a crisis.

Example: The situation came to a head when he passed a derogatory comment purportedly toward me.

41. Cool your heels
Wait for something, especially when it's annoying

Example: I spent two hours cooling my heels in the waiting room while the CFO was busy in a meeting.

42. Cut corners

If you cut corners, you save money or effort by finding cheaper or easier ways to do things.

Example: If you cut corners on this product, it'll have a lesser lifespan.

43. Run its course

If something runs its course, it continues naturally until it finishes.

Example: There is no cure for this infection. You'll have to let it run its course.

44. Stay the course

If you stay the course, you persevere till the completion of a task, especially a difficult one.

Example: Despite an injury, he stayed the course to save the match for his team.

45. Cut someone down to size

If you cut someone down to size, you show them they're not as important or intelligent as they think.

Example: The boss cut that arrogant guy to size in no time.

46. Daylight robbery

Blatant overcharging

Example: \$5 for a can of juice! This is daylight robbery.

47. Boil the ocean

If you try to boil the ocean, you try to accomplish something too ambitious.

Example: You expect our plant to manufacture 40,000 parts in a week. You're trying to boil the ocean on this one.

48. Handle with kid gloves

If you handle someone with kid gloves, you treat them with extreme tact and care.

Example: The client is hyper sensitive. We need to handle him with kid gloves, or we risk losing the deal.

49. Clear the decks

If you clear the decks for something, you remove all hurdles to get started on that work.

Example: By sanctioning the budget and filling in the vacancies, the committee has cleared the decks for our new office.

50. Between the devil and the deep blue sea

If you're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, you're caught between two undesirable alternatives.

Example: If you support your son, your business partner will be hurt, and vice versa. You're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

As you get into the first quiz, here is a hint for this and subsequent three quizzes: some of the multiple choices may not even be idioms (revisit definition of the idiom at the beginning of the post to know why) and therefore should be ruled out right at the outset.

Click on the tabs below to open the quiz and its answers.

51. The luck of the devil

If you've the luck of the devil, you're extremely lucky.

Example: X: I'm alive today because I failed to board the plane that crashed yesterday. Y: You really have the luck of the devil.

52. Keep an ear to the ground

Be well informed of current trends, opinions, and happenings

Example: One of the main reasons for his success in business is that he keeps an ear to the ground to know what the customers want and why they're dissatisfied with competing products.

53. Turn a deaf ear

If you turn a deaf ear, you ignore what others are saying.

Example: I've made the request few times in the past, but it has always fallen on deaf ears.

54. Eat like a horse

If you eat like a horse, you eat a lot.

Example: He is lean, but he eats like a horse.

55. An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth

It means that if a person does something wrong, then they should be punished with the same thing done to them.

Example: I'll return damage to my car by damage to his car. An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth.

56. Face the music

If you face the music, you're at the receiving end of somebody's criticism or reprimand.

Example: You'll face the music for deliberately reporting inflated sales numbers.

57. A flash in the pan

If you call something flash in the pan, you say it has happened for only one time and it won't repeat.

Example: Considering their dismal past record, the win in the last match seems to be a flash in the pan.

58. Hold your horses
Be patient

Example: Hold your horses! I'm not yet done with my explanation.

59. Drag one's feet
To do something slowly deliberately

Example: The police is dragging its feet in investigating this case allegedly because influential people are involved in the crime.

60. Worth its weight in gold
If someone or something is worth its weight in gold, they're of high value.

Example: The new hire is worth her weight in gold. She has helped us land three big deals this quarter.

61. Go against the grain
If an idea or action goes against the grain, you don't do it or accept it because it is against your beliefs or principle.

Example: It goes against the grain these days to use polythene bags as carry bags.

62. Jump the gun
To do something too soon without proper thought

Example: I jumped the gun by sending the proposal to the client without first showing it to my manager.

63. Stick to your guns
If you stick to your guns in the face of opposition, you stand firm.

Example: Despite opposition from his family, he has stuck to his guns in picking his career path.

64. Let one's hair down
To be relaxed and behave informally

Example: Over tea on Sunday, he finally let his hair down and talked about his hobbies and family.

65. Hand in glove

If you work hand in glove with someone, you work closely with them often to accomplish something dishonest.

Example: Some of the bank employees have been allegedly working hand in glove with business owners to sanction loans without proper due diligence.

66. Look for needle in a haystack

Looking for something small in a pile of other things or a vast area

Example: The gem in my ring fell somewhere on my way to home. Finding it is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

67. Wear your heart on your sleeve

If you wear your heart on your sleeve, you express your sentiments too openly.

Example: Wearing your heart on your sleeve can backfire at workplace because you may be seen unprofessional.

68. Move heaven and earth

Make supreme effort

Example: I'll move heaven and earth to finish in top 10 percentile in the exam.

69. Hit the bottle

To drink alcohol to excess

Example: He doesn't hit the bottle often, but when he does, he can be nasty.

70. Hit the book

To study

Example: I need to hit the book today or else I'll fall behind in my exam prep.

71. Hit the sack

To go to bed

Example: I hit the sack around 11 PM.

72. Get someone off the hook

If you get someone off the hook, you help them get out of trouble.

Example: The government has intervened by infusing billions of dollars to get the banks off the hook.

73. Cut no ice

Fail to influence or make an effect

Example: His reason to get leave cut no ice with his manager.

74. On thin ice

If you're on thin ice, you're in precarious or delicate situation.

Example: You're falling short on class attendance and you failed to submit the last assignment. You're walking on thin ice in this semester.

75. Strike while the iron is hot

To act quickly when the opportunity comes by

Example: That's an amazing deal you're getting. Don't wait. Strike while the iron is hot, or else it'll be gone.

76. Hit the jackpot

If you hit the jackpot, you achieve big success, usually through luck.

Example: We've hit the jackpot with our new product – sales have doubled.

77. Have the last laugh

If you've the last laugh in an argument or disagreement, you ultimately succeed from a seemingly losing position.

Example: He was dropped from the team, but he had the last laugh when he was recruited by a rival club at a higher fee.

78. See the light of day

When something sees the light of day, it finally happens for the first time.

Example: After so many false starts, his book finally saw the light of the day.

79. Light at the end of tunnel

If you see light at the end of tunnel, you see signs of improvement in a situation that has been bad for a long time.

Example: The business has started to gain momentum after months of struggle. We finally see light at the end of tunnel.

80. Toe the line

If you toe the line, you behave according to an official rule, especially when you do not agree with it.

Example: In this organization, if you don't toe the line, you'll be fast eased out.

81. Live on borrowed time

If you live on borrowed time, you continue to exist longer than expected.

Example: This 15-year-old car is living on borrowed time.

82. Hold your tongue

To hold your tongue means to not speak

Example: "Hold your tongue, son. Be patient," the old man tried to restrain the agitated man.

83. Make a mountain of a molehill

If you make a mountain of a molehill, you make something unimportant to seem important.

Example: One bad interview doesn't mean you're struggling to get the job. Don't make a mountain of a molehill.

84. Cry for the moon

If you cry for the moon, you make a demand that can't be fulfilled.

Example: You want such an expensive gift on your birthday. Well, you're crying for the moon.

85. Hit the nail on the head

If you hit the nail on the head, you're exactly right about something.

Example: I think the CEO hit the nail on the head when he said that the organization was losing market share because of complacency and security.

86. Nail in someone's coffin

Nail in someone's coffin is something that hastens failure of a person or thing

Example: The scandal proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the mayor.

87. Pay through the nose

If you pay through the nose, you pay too much for something.

Example: We're paying through the nose for petrol and diesel.

88. Under someone's nose

If you do something under someone's nose, you do it openly, although unnoticed.

Example: The dog took away the biscuit right under my nose, but I realized it only later.

89. Cast pearls before swine

If you cast pearls before swine, you offer something valuable to someone who does not recognize its worth.

Example: To serve an elaborate multi-course dinner to them is like casting pearls before swine.

90. Put the cat among the pigeons

If you put the cat among the pigeons, you say or do something that makes a lot of people angry or uncomfortable.

Example: She put the cat among the pigeons by accusing others in the office of misusing organization's dinner allowance for working late hours.

91. Put someone in his/ her place

If you put people in their place, you let them know that they're less important than they think.

Example: When he exceeded his brief to take charge of the project, the boss put him in his place.

92. Point finger at

If you point finger at someone, you say that s/he should be blamed

Example: Why are you pointing finger at me? I'm not the only person responsible for the loss.

93. Pour out one's heart

If you pour out your heart, you reveal your thoughts or inner feelings.

Example: I poured my heart out to my colleague about the mismanagement in the Company.

94. Swallow your pride

If you swallow your pride, you do something even though it hurts your self-respect.

Example: I swallowed my pride to do menial tasks for six months till I found a better job.

95. When push comes to shove

When situation turns desperate

Example: If push comes to shove, I'll take loan to finance my education.

96. Raining cats and dogs

If it rains cats and dogs, it rains heavily.

Example: It has been raining cats and dogs for the last hour or so. Let's brace up for the traffic jam.

97. Read between the lines

If you read between the lines, you try to understand someone's real feelings or intentions from what they say or write.

Example: The government says that the economy is robust, but if you look at employment data and read further between the lines, you realize that the situation isn't that rosy.

98. Beat a retreat

If you beat a retreat, you withdraw from a dangerous or unpleasant situation.

Example: Seeing the cops, the arsonists beat a hasty retreat.

99. Take somebody for a ride

If you take somebody for a ride, you deceive them.

Example: The placement agency took hundreds of people for a ride by promising non-existent jobs.

100. Go through the roof

To increase beyond all expectations

Example: Petrol and diesel prices have gone through the roof.

01. On the ropes

If someone is on the ropes, they're close to defeat or giving up.

Example: High crude oil prices have put many airlines on the ropes.

102. Rub salt into someone's wounds

To make a bad thing worse

Example: I was upset at not getting promoted, but the management really rubbed salt into my wounds when they promoted my junior.

103. Give someone a run for their money

If you give someone a run for their money, you compete well with them.

Example: Despite being an underdog, Division B team gave the best team of the tournament run for their money.

104. Shut one's eyes to

Refuse to see or consider

Example: The government can no longer shut its eye to growing pollution arising from stubble burning.

105. In the red (In the black)

Operating at a loss or under debt (Operating at a profit or have surplus)

Example: Many airlines across the world are in the red because of increase in oil prices.

106. Allow the dust to settle

To allow a situation to become calm or normal again after a period of excitement or upheaval

Example: Farmers are angry because of the low prices at which government agencies are buying their produce. Let's wait for the dust to settle before we negotiate with them.

107. Take the word out of somebody's mouth

To say exactly what the other person was about to say

Example: X: Why don't we leave early today to watch the 5 PM show of the latest release? Y: You've taken the words out of my mouth. I was about to say the same.

108. Eat your words

If you eat your words, you retract your statement or words.

Example: Experts had to eat their words on the impending doom of abc.com when the fledgling ecommerce website turned in an unexpected profit.

109. A shot in the dark

A wild guess

Example: Chasing an offender, the policemen took a shot in the dark and turned left on reaching the square.

110. Call the shots

If you call the shots, you've the power and authority.

Example: In this ministry, the junior minister calls the shots.

111. Head and shoulders above

Greatly superior to

Example: In his prime, Usain Bolt was head and shoulders above his competitors.

112. Put to bed

To help a child sleep

Example: I'll be back in few minutes after putting my son to bed.

113. Put something to sleep

If an animal is put to sleep, it is killed by a veterinarian to relieve it of its pain and suffering.

Example: We put the dog to sleep as it was suffering from age-related ailments.

114. By the skin of your teeth

By extremely narrow margin

Example: He caught the train by the skin of his teeth.

115. Save your skin

If you save your skin, you save yourself from an unpleasant or dangerous situation without thinking of what happens to others.

Example: They lied and tampered with crucial evidence to save their skin.

116. Have a thick skin

To be less affected by criticisms and rebuffs

Example: You need to have a thick skin to survive in politics.

117. Start with a clean slate

Make a fresh beginning forgetting what happened, usually bad, in the past

Example: Relations have not been great between the two countries, but it's time to start from a clean slate.

118. No smoke without fire

A suspicion or rumor is not for nothing. It usually has some basis.

Example: I'm hearing that the investment company in which I put my money has been running a Ponzi scheme. I'm going to ask for my money back, because where there is smoke there is fire.

119. No strings attached

Free of conditions

Example: World Bank rarely gives loans with no strings attached.

120. Throw a spanner in the work

To disrupt or cause problems in an activity or project

Example: Last-minute withdrawal of the sponsor threw a spanner in our plans to organize the cultural festival.

121. Wear two/ several hats

To function in more than one capacity

Example: He wears two hats in the company – Chief Marketing Officer and Chief Information Officer.

122. Throw one's weight around

To act in a way that suggests you've got a lot of power or authority

Example: The politician tried to throw his weight around with the police, but the police ignored him.

123. Throw caution to the wind
Behave or speak in a rash manner

Example: Just to impress others, he threw caution to the wind and climbed the steep rock without any safety gear.

124. Spill the beans
To reveal a secret information unintentionally

Example: Someone for sure spilled the beans about the plan of jail inmates to smuggle in weapons. How else could jail authorities know about it?

125. Walk a tightrope
If you walk a tightrope, you do something that allows little room for error.

Example: Many educational institutions have to walk a tightrope between charging a high tuition fee and facing criticism, and not charging much and depending on grants.

126. Be in a tight spot
To be in a difficult situation

Example: If the government fails to get support from its key ally, it'll be in a tight spot during the voting tomorrow.

127. Spread yourself thin
To try to do too many things at the same time, implying inadequate time or attention to any of them

Example: College students, especially in first year, spread themselves thin by joining multiple elective courses and social activities.

128. Steal the show
If you steal the show, you get lot of attention or credit in an event or show.

Example: Chinese participants stole the show on the first day of 2018 Asian Games.

129. Let off steam
To do or say something that helps you release pent-up emotions such as anger or frustration

Example: When I get stressed at work, I go on a weekend trek to let off steam.

130. Blow someone's cover
To reveal someone's secret identity and what they're doing

Example: The police blew the cover on the plot by tapping kidnappers' phones.

131. Stick to your guns

To maintain one's position despite disagreement and opposition from others

Example: No matter how much police grills you, you've to stick to your guns and state the same story.

132. Leave no stone unturned

To do everything you can to achieve your goal

Example: I left no stone unturned to raise money for my company.

133. Set in stone

If something is set in stone, it's very difficult to change.

Example: The contract isn't set in stone. If the deal is compelling enough, we're open to change it.

134. Set the record straight

If you set the record straight, you quash misinformation about something by telling the truth.

Example: Let me set the record straight on all the talk in the media about my business relationship with the key accused in the scandal.

135. Go on record

If you go on record about something, you say it publically and officially. (You can't turn your back on such statement later.)

Example: The actors have gone on record describing exploitation of newcomers in the film industry.

136. The last straw (or the straw that broke the camel's back)

If an event is the last straw, it is the last in a series of unpleasant or undesirable events that exceeds your limit of tolerance.

Example: Recent hikes in fuel prices are the last straw for the lower middle class.

137. Bitter pill to swallow

Something such as failure or rejection that is difficult to accept, but has to be accepted

Example: Not getting admission to any of the colleges I applied to is a bitter pill to swallow.

138. Laugh all the way to the bank

To earn lot of money by doing something which others thought to be a foolish pursuit

Example: Investors dismissed his idea as immature, but he is now laughing all the way to the bank.

139. Show someone the door
To ask someone to leave

Example: During my worst period, I was promptly shown the door by very same people who once courted me.

140. Foot in the door
If you get your foot in the door, you succeed in achieving an initial step in an area that is difficult to succeed in.

Example: It's your relationships that help in getting your foot in the door in the initial phase of your business. Otherwise, it can be a grind.

141. In full swing
If something happens in full swing, it happens at the highest speed or level of activity.

Example: Our development team is working in full swing to meet the deadline.

142. Turn the tables on somebody
To completely reverse circumstances or gain upper hand on someone who was previously in a stronger position.

Example: He turned the tables on his political opponent by reeling off data on how poorly the economy has fared in the last one year.

143. The tail is wagging the dog
If you say that the tail is wagging the dog, you mean that a small or unimportant group is controlling the large group.

Example: The fringe group is small but vocal. I fear they'll control the direction of today's meeting. Talk about the tail wagging the dog.

144. Can't make head or tail of something
Can't understand someone or something at all

Example: I haven't been able to make head or tale of the bugs in the software so far.

145. Keep one's words
To do as promised

Example: He always keeps his words. If he has promised to put in a word for you, he will.

146. Lose your temper

If you lose temper, you become very angry.

Example: When he started giving excuse for not completing the assignment in time, the teacher lost her temper.

147. Test waters

If you test waters, you try to find how people will receive your idea or action before actually launching it or telling people.

Example: The Company is testing waters with few products before going full steam.

148. Through thick and thin

If you do something through thick and thin, you do it whether circumstances are good or not.

Example: He is one of those rare employees who has remained with the organization through thick and thin.

149. Thorn in your flesh

A person or thing that continually irritates or troubles you

Example: Demanding coalition partners have been a thorn in the flesh of the government.

150. Turn the tide

To reverse the course of events from one extreme to another

Example: With that goal right at the start of the second half, the home team seems to be turning the tide against their arch rivals.

151. On top of the world

Extremely happy

Example: I was on top of the world after landing the job I so badly wanted.

152. Try one's patience

To test the limit of one's patience

Example: The constant chatter at the back of the class tried the professor's patience.

153. Twist someone's arm

Make someone do something by pressurizing them

Example: The government brought the rebel leaders to the negotiating table by twisting their arms by launching investigation into their shady business deals.

154. Change hands

If something changes hands, it gets a new owner.

Example: This car has changed hands so many times since its first buy in 2009.

155. Wash dirty linen in public

If you wash your dirty linen in public, you discuss those matters in public which should have been kept private.

Example: The two brothers went public accusing each other of fraud, washing dirty linen in the public in the process.

156. Have one's hands full

To be extremely busy

Example: Working on two projects, I've my hands full.

157. Throw up one's hands

To express anger or frustration when a situation becomes unacceptably bad

Example: The manager threw up his hands in despair when nothing concrete emerged even after hours of negotiations.

158. Watch one's step

Be careful about how you behave or conduct yourself, lest you get into trouble

Example: Watch your steps at least in the first few months at your new job.

159. White elephant

Something that is white elephant costs a lot (on maintenance etc.) to keep, but does little useful

Example: The new Formula 1 race track is proving to be a white elephant for the owners. It is used for just few weeks in the year, but sucks a lot in maintenance.

160. Be off the mark

If something is off the mark, it is incorrect or inaccurate.

Example: The meteorology department was quite off the mark in predicting rainfall this week.

161. Wild-goose chase

A search that turns out to be time-wasting and unsuccessful because the thing being searched doesn't exist or you were given wrong information about its location

Example: The treasure hunt to find gold coins expectedly proved to be a wild-goose chase.

162. Know which way the wind is blowing

If you know which way the wind is blowing, you anticipate how certain situation is likely to develop.

Example: Politicians are good at knowing which way the wind is blowing, and they form alliances with other political parties accordingly.

163. Have your work cut out

If you've your work cut out to do something, you've a difficult task at hand.

Example: The government has its work cut out in controlling air pollution this winter.

164. Back the wrong horse

To support a person or action that later turns out to be unsuccessful

Example: The political party fielded a businessman from the prestigious seat in the national capital, but he lost. They clearly backed the wrong horse.

165. From the horse's mouth

If you hear from the horse's mouth, you hear from the original or trustworthy source.

Example: We've lost the deal we bid for last month. It's true, because I've heard it from the horse's mouth – my manager.

166. Eat like a bird

To eat little food

Example: You claim to be eating like a bird for the past three months, but you've hardly lost any weight.

167. Kill two birds with one stone

To achieve two goals with a single effort

Example: I can kill two birds with a stone by picking up the laundry while going to the college.

168. Eat humble pie

Be humiliated by admitting that you are wrong

Example: The e-commerce company claimed that they'll surpass the market leader in two years, but they had to eat humble pie after the latest sales numbers.

169. Have one's cake and eat it too

To have two good things at the same time that are incompatible and therefore not feasible

Example: You don't want to pay more taxes and still have better services. You can't have your cake and eat it too.

170. Shoot from the hip

To speak bluntly or rashly without thinking carefully

Example: If you want to be a spokesperson, you need to avoid your habit of shooting from the hip.

171. Shoot oneself in the foot

To harm one's own cause inadvertently

Example: He shot himself in the foot in the interview by disclosing too much personal information.

172. In cold blood

If you do something violent and cruel in cold blood, you do it deliberately and in an unemotional way.

Example: He was murdered in cold blood.

173. Draw first blood

If you draw first blood, you cause the first damage to an opponent in a conflict or contest.

Example: Federer drew the first blood by breaking Anderson's service in the fourth game of the first set.

174. Ace up one's sleeve

A secret or hidden advantage that you can use when you need it

Example: Murali, the mystery bowler whom the opposite team has never played, is an ace up the home team's sleeve.

175. Play your cards right

To behave or work in a way that gives you an advantage or improves your odds of success.

Example: You've to play your cards right to cross level 4 in this game.

176. Egg on your face

If you've egg on your face, you look stupid and face embarrassment because of something you've done.

Example: The case of the minister issuing statement in favor of a convicted person has left the government with egg on its face.

177. Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs

To destroy something that gives you lot of money to get immediate returns

Example: Thomas killed the goose that laid the golden eggs when he sold off his business before setting up another.

178. An arm and a leg

If something costs an arm and a leg, it costs a lot.

Example: Two days in the hospital for a minor ailment cost me an arm and a leg.

179. Behind one's back

If you do something behind someone's back, you do it secretly without their knowledge (used in negative way).

Example: I don't give a damn to people who say all sorts of things behind my back.

180. Stab someone in the back

Harm someone who trusts you.

Example: It's not uncommon for people to stab colleagues in the back to move ahead in the professional world.

181. Take a back seat

If you take a back seat, you choose not to be in a position of responsibility or power.

Example: After being in the leadership position for more than a decade, it'll be tough for him to take a back seat.

182. Back to the drawing board

If you go back to the drawing board, you make a fresh start or try another idea because the earlier one didn't succeed.

Example: After the new product failed to set the sales number rolling, the team went back to the drawing board.

183. Right off the bat

If you do something right off the bat, you do it immediately.

Example: I learnt right off the bat that I need to build good rapport with the marketing team to do well in the organization.

184. Heart misses (skips) a beat

If your heart misses a beat, you feel excited or nervous.

Example: My heart skipped few beats while scrolling down the exam result on the notice board.

185. Have your heart in your mouth

If you've your heart in mouth, you're feeling extremely nervous.

Example: My heart was in my mouth when he slipped and fell down on the floor.

186. Not the only fish in the sea
Not the only suitable thing or person one can find

Example: You shouldn't be so heartbroken at the rejection by her. Remember, she's not the only fish in the sea.

187. Not your cup of tea
If you say that someone or something is not your cup of tea, you mean that they're not the kind of person or thing you like.

Example: Sales is not my cup of tea.

188. A piece of cake
If something is a piece of cake, it's easy to do.

Example: Solving such math problems is a piece of cake for me.

189. Call it a day
If you call it a day, you stop what you're doing because you're tired of it or you've not been successful.

Example: Faced with increasing competition and thinning profits, the owner decided to call it a day after twenty years in the business.

190. The pot calling the kettle black
Accusing someone of faults that you yourself have

Example: He called me a cheat – that's pot calling the kettle black.

191. Call a spade a spade
To speak truth even if it's unpleasant

Example: He doesn't hold his words and calls a spade a spade.

192. A bolt from the blue
A sudden, unexpected event

Example: The resignation of the minister this morning came as a bolt from the blue.

193. In the same boat
If two or more persons are in the same boat, they're in the same difficult situation.

Example: Both of us are in the same boat – without jobs.

194. Miss the boat/ bus
To miss an opportunity

Example: He waited far too long to get a good deal. Most good ones are gone now. He missed the boat.

195. Over my dead body

If you say something will happen your dead body, you mean you dislike it and will do everything you can to prevent it.

Example: X: We're selling your old bike to remove the junk that's gathering in the house. Y: Over my dead body.

196. Make one's blood boil

To make someone extremely angry

Example: An excessive penalty for just one-day delay in payment of the bill made my blood boil.

197. Bounce something off someone

If you bounce something off someone, you discuss ideas or plan with someone to get their view on it.

Example: X: Can I see you after the office to bounce few ideas off you? Y: Sure. Let's meet at 6 PM.

198. Bell the cat

To undertake a risky or dangerous task

Example: Who's going to bell the cat and tell the teacher that no one else but her son has pulled off the mischief?

199. Like a cat on hot tin roof

In an uneasy or nervous state

Example: Waiting for the result of my medical tests, I was like a cat on hot tin roof.

200. Like a fish out of water

If you're like a fish out of water in certain situation, you feel awkward because you haven't experienced that situation before.

Example: I was like fish out of water when I moved to the capital from my hometown.