

A LEARNER'S COMPANION



English Idioms & Phrasal Verbs

*The Complete Guide to Speaking Naturally —
500+ expressions explained, with examples, usage notes & practice*

From *break the ice* to *get away with it* — master the everyday English that textbooks leave out. Clear definitions, real example sentences, register guides, and exercises that make idiomatic English finally make sense.

FIRST EDITION

AN INTERMEDIATE-ADVANCED REFERENCE & PRACTICE
BOOK

English Idioms & Phrasal Verbs – The Complete Guide

First Edition.

This book is an educational reference compiled for learners of English as a second or foreign language at the intermediate to advanced level (CEFR B1–C2). The expressions, definitions, and example sentences within are intended for study and practice.

Pronunciations are given in a simplified scheme for guidance only. Where an expression has several meanings, the most common everyday senses are presented first. Register labels (*informal, neutral, formal, slang*) indicate typical usage and may vary by region and context.

Organised in four parts: foundations & grammar, phrasal verbs by particle, idioms by theme, and practice with a reference index.

Set in lowan Old Style. Designed for self-study and the classroom.

*“You can know every word in the dictionary and still not understand a single sentence — because the meaning lives **between** the words.”*

ON IDIOMATIC ENGLISH

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Welcome: How to Use This Book

Real English is full of colour, and most of that colour comes from idioms and phrasal verbs. This chapter shows you what is inside this book and how to get the most out of it.

Why This Book

You can study grammar for years, memorise thousands of words, and still feel lost the moment a native speaker opens their mouth. The reason is almost always the same: idioms and phrasal verbs. When a colleague says she needs to *catch up on* her emails, that a meeting got *called off*, or that a new hire is still *finding their feet*, no dictionary definition of the separate words will help you. These expressions are the missing piece between textbook English and the language people actually speak.

And native speakers use them constantly — not occasionally, but in almost every sentence. Studies of natural conversation suggest a phrasal verb appears every few sentences, and idioms pepper everything from news headlines to casual chat. Avoiding them does not make you sound careful or correct; it makes you sound oddly formal, like someone reading from a manual. Learning them is how you cross the line from “understandable” to “fluent.”

This book gathers the expressions that matter most — the ones you will genuinely hear and read — and explains them clearly, with the register, grammar, and natural examples you need to use them with confidence.

Who It’s For

This book is written for intermediate to advanced learners, roughly B1 to C2 on the Common European Framework. If you can already hold a conversation but keep tripping over expressions that “don’t add up” from the individual words, you are in exactly the right place.

It also works well for teachers, who will find ready-made examples, register labels, and grammar notes for the classroom, and for self-study learners who want a reference they can dip into or work through systematically. You do not need a teacher, a class, or any special materials — just curiosity and a little time each day.

How the Entries Work

Every idiom and phrasal verb is presented as a self-contained **entry**. Once you understand the parts, you can read any page in seconds. Here is what each piece means:

The **headword** is the expression itself, shown in bold. For phrasal verbs we use *sth* as shorthand for **something** and *sb* for **somebody** — so *put sth off* means you can postpone a thing, and *look after sb* means you care for a person.

Next to the headword you will often see a **register label**. Register is the level of formality, and getting it right matters as much as getting the meaning right — the perfect idiom in the wrong setting can sound

rude or comic. We use four labels:

Label	What it means
<i>informal</i>	Everyday, relaxed language for friends, family, and casual chat.
<i>neutral</i>	Safe almost anywhere — conversation, email, or writing.
<i>formal</i>	Suited to professional, academic, or official contexts.
<i>slang</i>	Very casual and often regional; fun with friends, risky elsewhere.

After the label comes the **definition** in plain English (with a second sense marked off when an expression has more than one meaning), then a natural **example** that shows the expression at work, and finally — on the more interesting entries — a short **note** with a grammar, usage, or origin tip. Here is a complete sample entry so you can see it all together:

break the ice **INFORMAL**

To do or say something that relieves tension and gets people talking, especially among strangers.

To *break the ice*, the host asked everyone to share one strange fact about themselves.

Note: Originally nautical — ships once had to break through harbour ice to clear a path. An *icebreaker* is the activity or remark that does this.

How to Study These Expressions

Knowing what an expression means is only half the job; the goal is to make it yours. A few proven habits will get you there far faster than rote memorisation:

- 1. Learn in chunks.** Don't store *make*, *up*, and *your mind* separately — learn *make up your mind* as a single block. Your brain recalls whole phrases more easily than assembled parts.
- 2. Learn in context.** Always attach an expression to a situation or sentence. A meaning floating alone is hard to retrieve; a meaning tied to a scene sticks.
- 3. Keep a notebook.** When you meet a new expression in the wild — a film, a song, an email — write it down with the sentence you found it in. Your own collection is the one you will remember.
- 4. Use them actively.** Try a new expression in your next message or conversation within a day or two. Using it once beats reading it ten times.
- 5. Mind the register.** Before you deploy an expression, ask whether it fits the moment. Slang with friends, neutral idioms with your boss.

LEARNER'S TIP

Little and often beats long and rare. Ten minutes a day, five days a week, will teach you more than a single three-hour session at the weekend. Spread your learning out, revisit old pages, and let repetition do the heavy lifting.

A 6-Week Learning Plan

If you would like a structured path through the book, here is a gentle six-week plan. Adjust the pace to suit your time — the goals matter more than the deadlines.

Week	Focus	Goal
1	How phrasal verbs and idioms work (Chapters 2–3)	Understand the grammar and the register labels.
2	High-frequency phrasal verbs	Learn 20 you will use every day; start your notebook.
3	Phrasal verbs by particle and theme	Notice patterns; use five new ones in conversation.
4	Everyday idioms	Learn 20 common idioms; spot them in a film or song.
5	Idioms by theme and origin	Group what you know; match each to a real situation.
6	Review and active use	Revisit your notebook; use ten expressions in writing.

Whichever way you choose to work through these pages, keep it enjoyable. Idioms are one of the most playful, human parts of any language — treat them as a pleasure, not a chore, and they will repay you many times over.

How Phrasal Verbs Work

Phrasal verbs frighten many learners, but they follow patterns. Once you see the patterns, the fear melts away and you can use hundreds of them with confidence.

What Is a Phrasal Verb?

A phrasal verb is a verb combined with one or more small words called **particles** — prepositions or adverbs such as *up*, *off*, *out*, or *on*. Together they behave as a single verb with its own meaning. The trick is that the meaning is often **non-literal**: you cannot reliably work it out from the verb plus the particle. *Give up* has nothing to do with giving and everything to do with quitting; *run into* someone means to meet them by chance, not to collide. That is why phrasal verbs must be learned as whole units.

give sth up NEUTRAL

To stop doing or having something, especially a habit. • To surrender or admit defeat.

| She finally decided to **give up** smoking after twenty years.

Note: separable — *give it up*, not *give up it*.

run into sb INFORMAL

To meet someone by chance.

| I **ran into** an old schoolfriend at the airport last week.

take off NEUTRAL

(Of a plane) to leave the ground. • To suddenly become successful or popular.

| Their little bakery really **took off** once the local paper reviewed it.

The Four Types

Almost every phrasal verb belongs to one of four grammatical types. Knowing which type you are dealing with tells you whether it can take an object and whether the verb and particle can be split apart.

Type	Example	Takes an object?	Can it separate?
1. Intransitive	<i>break down, show up</i>	No	— (no object to split)
2. Transitive separable	<i>turn the TV off</i>	Yes	Yes
3. Transitive inseparable	<i>look after the kids</i>	Yes	No
4. Three-word	<i>get on with, look forward to</i>	Yes	No

Here is one example entry for each type so you can see them in action:

break down **NEUTRAL**

(Of a machine or vehicle) to stop working. • To lose emotional control and start crying.

| Our car *broke down* on the motorway and we had to wait an hour for help.

Note: Type 1 — intransitive, so it never takes an object and never separates.

turn sth off **NEUTRAL**

To stop a device, light, or supply working by using a switch or control.

| Could you *turn off* the lights when you leave the office?

Note: Type 2 — separable. You can say *turn the TV off* or *turn off the TV*, but with a pronoun only *turn it off* works.

look after sb **NEUTRAL**

To take care of someone or something.

| My neighbour kindly *looks after* our cat whenever we travel.

Note: Type 3 — inseparable. Say *look after the kids*, never *look the kids after*.

look forward to sth **NEUTRAL**

To feel pleased and excited about something that is going to happen.

| We're really *looking forward to* seeing you both next month.

Note: Type 4 — three-word and inseparable. The *to* is a preposition, so a verb after it takes the *-ing* form: *look forward to meeting*, not *to meet*.

The Pronoun Rule

This is the single most useful rule for separable phrasal verbs, and once you know it you will avoid the most common mistake learners make.

GRAMMAR

With separable phrasal verbs, a pronoun object (*it, them, him, her, us*) **MUST** go in the middle, between the verb and the particle. So: “turn it off” ✓ but “turn off it” ✗. A noun object can go in either position (*turn off the radio* or *turn the radio off*), but a pronoun has only one home — the middle.

What the Particles Mean

Particles are not random. The same particle often adds the same flavour of meaning across many verbs, and once you sense the pattern you can guess at new phrasal verbs more often than not.

Particle	Typical added meaning	Examples
<i>up</i>	completion or increase	<i>finish up, speak up, eat up</i>
<i>down</i>	reducing or stopping	<i>turn down, calm down, shut down</i>
<i>out</i>	outward, finishing, or disappearing	<i>hand out, sort out, die out</i>
<i>off</i>	departure or separation	<i>set off, cut off, take off</i>
<i>on</i>	continuing	<i>carry on, go on, hold on</i>
<i>in</i>	entering or including	<i>move in, fill in, join in</i>
<i>over</i>	repeating or considering	<i>do over, think over, go over</i>
<i>back</i>	returning	<i>give back, call back, come back</i>

One Verb, Many Meanings

One of the trickier features of phrasal verbs is that a single combination can carry several quite different meanings. Context almost always makes the right sense clear, but it pays to know the range. Look at how far *make up* can travel:

make sth up NEUTRAL

To invent a story or excuse. • To form or constitute a whole. • To put on cosmetics.

| The children **made up** a wild story about why their homework was missing.

Note: Several senses: *women make up half the workforce* (constitute); *she made up her face* (cosmetics). Related: *make up with sb* means to reconcile after a quarrel.

pick sth up NEUTRAL

To lift something. • To collect someone or something. • To learn casually. • To improve.

| He **picked up** a little Italian while working in Rome for a year.

Note: Also: *I'll pick you up at eight* (collect); *business is picking up* (improving).

take sth on NEUTRAL

To accept work or responsibility. • To hire someone. • To compete against.

| She **took on** far too many projects and quickly felt overwhelmed.

Formality

Phrasal verbs and their single-word equivalents usually mean the same thing, but they do not feel the same. As a rule, the phrasal verb is the warmer, more conversational choice, while the single Latin-based word sounds more formal and is often preferred in academic or official writing.

Phrasal verb (informal)	Single word (formal)
<i>put off</i>	postpone
<i>find out</i>	discover
<i>go up</i>	increase
<i>set up</i>	establish
<i>leave out</i>	omit
<i>get rid of</i>	eliminate

Neither column is “better.” A relaxed email to a friend wants *find out*; a research report wants *discover*. Knowing both gives you the freedom to choose.

LEARNER'S TIP

Don't try to memorise every phrasal verb at once. Learn the high-frequency ones first, pay attention to the particle patterns, and always note whether a verb is separable. Master those three things and the rest will start to fall into place.

CHAPTER 3

How Idioms Work

Idioms are the poetry of everyday speech — vivid, strange, and impossible to translate word for word. This chapter explains where they come from and how to make them part of your English.

What Is an Idiom?

An idiom is a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be guessed from the individual words. If a friend tells you that their grandfather *kicked the bucket*, no amount of knowledge about buckets will help — the phrase simply means that he died. This is the heart of an idiom: it is **figurative**, not **literal**. The words paint a picture, but the meaning lives somewhere beyond them.

Contrast two sentences. “She spilled the milk” is literal — milk, on the floor. “She *spilled the beans*” is figurative — she revealed a secret, and there are no beans at all. Learning to feel the difference, and to recognise when an expression is doing figurative work, is the first step to mastering idioms.

kick the bucket **INFORMAL**

To die.

He always joked that he wanted to travel the world before he *kicked the bucket*.

Note: Light-hearted and a little irreverent — fine among friends, but avoid it when offering genuine condolences.

spill the beans **INFORMAL**

To reveal a secret, often accidentally.

Don't tell Marco about the surprise party — he's sure to *spill the beans*.

Why English Has So Many

English is unusually rich in idioms, and history explains why. The language is a mongrel: Anglo-Saxon roots layered with Old Norse from the Vikings, a thick coat of French after the Norman Conquest, and a steady borrowing of Latin and Greek through scholarship. Each layer left behind its own images and turns of phrase, so English often has several ways to say the same thing — one plain, one fancy, one colourful.

On top of that, English-speaking cultures have a deep fondness for metaphor and understatement. Trade, empire, and the global spread of English then carried in expressions from every corner of the world. The result is a language that reaches for a vivid picture whenever it can, and a treasury of idioms thousands deep.

Where Idioms Come From

Most idioms have a story behind them, and knowing the origin makes them far easier to remember. A surprising number come from a handful of sources: **the sea and sailing** (Britain was a maritime nation), **the Bible** and **Shakespeare** (the two great wells of English phrasing), and the everyday worlds of **sport, war, and farming**.

learn the ropes NEUTRAL

To learn how to do a job or task; to learn the basic procedures.

Give the new apprentice a few weeks to *learn the ropes* before judging her.

Note: From sailing — new sailors had to master the many ropes that controlled a ship's sails. *By and large* and *show someone the ropes* share the same seafaring roots.

the ball is in your court NEUTRAL

It is your turn or your responsibility to take the next action.

I've made my offer; now *the ball is in your court*.

Note: From tennis — a great many English idioms come from sport, including *a level playing field* and *move the goalposts*.

a wolf in sheep's clothing NEUTRAL

A person who hides hostile or dangerous intentions behind a harmless, friendly appearance.

Behind that charming smile he was *a wolf in sheep's clothing*.

Note: Biblical in origin (the Gospel of Matthew). The Bible gave English dozens of idioms, from *the writing on the wall* to *a labour of love*.

break the ice INFORMAL

To do or say something that eases tension and gets people talking.

A silly game helped *break the ice* on the first day of the course.

Note: Nautical again — ships once broke harbour ice to open a path for those behind them.

Register and Region

Like all language, idioms vary in formality. Some are slang you would only use with close friends; some are neutral enough for the workplace; a few are formal. Just as importantly, idioms vary by **region**. British and American English often have different expressions for the same idea — or the same expression with a small twist. Here are a few common pairs:

British English	American English	Meaning
<i>throw a spanner in the works</i>	<i>throw a wrench in the works</i>	to disrupt a plan
<i>a storm in a teacup</i>	<i>a tempest in a teapot</i>	a big fuss over a small thing
<i>touch wood</i>	<i>knock on wood</i>	said to avoid bad luck
<i>not my cup of tea</i>	<i>not my thing</i>	not something I enjoy
<i>flogging a dead horse</i>	<i>beating a dead horse</i>	wasting effort on a hopeless cause
<i>see the wood for the trees</i>	<i>see the forest for the trees</i>	to see the big picture

You do not have to choose one variety, but it helps to be consistent and to know which audience you are speaking to.

Fixed Forms

The word “idiom” comes from a Greek root meaning “one’s own,” and idioms guard their exact wording jealously.

GRAMMAR

Most idioms are **fixed**: you cannot swap a word for a synonym, even an obvious one. It is *kick the bucket*, never “kick the pail”; *spill the beans*, never “spill the peas.” A few idioms do allow small, accepted variations — you can *get* or *have cold feet*, and something can be *a piece of cake* or *as easy as pie* — but these are exceptions you learn one by one. When in doubt, keep the form exactly as you found it.

How to Learn Idioms

Idioms reward a slightly different approach from ordinary vocabulary. A handful of strategies will speed you up enormously:

1. **Learn by theme.** Group idioms by topic — money, emotions, time, the body — so related images reinforce one another.
2. **Notice them everywhere.** Films, songs, news headlines, and sports commentary are packed with idioms. Hunt for them and write down the ones you catch.
3. **Understand before you use.** Be sure of an idiom’s exact meaning and tone before you try it yourself. A near miss can sound very odd.
4. **Watch the register.** Match the idiom to the situation — slang with friends, neutral idioms at work, and care with anything informal in writing.
5. **Use the story.** Anchor each idiom to its origin or to a vivid mental picture; the image is what makes it stick.

LEARNER’S TIP

Aim for recognition first and production second. Being able to understand an idiom when you hear it is valuable on its own; once a few feel completely familiar, start working them into your own speech — gradually, and one at a time.

Common Pitfalls

A few predictable mistakes trip up almost every learner. Forewarned is forearmed:

Over-using them. A sentence crammed with idioms sounds forced, not fluent. Sprinkle, don’t pour.

Mixing two idioms. Blending expressions produces accidental comedy — “we’ll burn that bridge when we come to it” fuses two separate idioms into nonsense.

Getting the form slightly wrong. A single altered word breaks an idiom. “It’s raining cats and dogs” is right; “raining dogs and cats” sounds off to every native ear.

Misjudging the register. Dropping a slang idiom into a job application or formal report undercuts you. When the setting is serious, choose plain language over a colourful phrase.

Avoid these four traps, use idioms with a light and confident touch, and you will sound not just correct but genuinely natural.

PART TWO

II

Phrasal Verbs, Particle by Particle



The heart of spoken English. Here the most useful phrasal verbs are grouped by their particle — up, down, out, off, on, in and the rest — so you can feel the patterns of meaning that each little word carries.

Phrasal Verbs with “Up”

Few little words pull as much weight as “up.” Beyond simple direction, it quietly colours a verb with a sense of completion, increase, or doing something thoroughly — you don’t just eat, you eat up; you don’t just fill, you fill it up to the brim.

Everyday “Up” Verbs

back sb/sth up NEUTRAL

To support a person or claim. • To make a copy of computer files for safety. • To move a vehicle in reverse.

Thanks for *backing me up* in the meeting — I couldn’t have won that argument alone.

Note: separable — *back it up*, not *back up it*. The noun “backup” is written as one word.

beat sb up INFORMAL

To hit someone repeatedly and hurt them badly.

He was *beaten up* outside the stadium after the match and spent the night in hospital.

Note: “beat yourself up” means to criticise yourself harshly: *Don’t beat yourself up over one mistake.*

blow up NEUTRAL

To explode or destroy with explosives. • To inflate with air. • To suddenly become very angry.

The old factory was *blown up* to make room for the new apartments.

break up NEUTRAL

To end a romantic relationship. • To separate into pieces or disperse a crowd.

After seven years together, Mia and Tom decided to *break up* last spring.

Note: followed by “with” for the partner: *She broke up with him.*

bring sth up NEUTRAL

To mention or introduce a topic. • To raise a child. • To vomit (informal).

I hate to *bring this up*, but you still owe me for the concert tickets.

Note: separable — *bring it up*, not *bring up it*.

build up NEUTRAL

To increase or accumulate gradually. • To develop something over time.

Pressure had been *building up* for months before the workers finally went on strike.

call sb up INFORMAL

To telephone someone. • To select a player for a team or summon someone for military service.

Why don’t you *call* your grandmother *up* — she’d love to hear your voice.

catch up NEUTRAL

To reach the same level or position as others. • To exchange recent news with someone.

| She missed two weeks of class and had to work hard to **catch up** with the others.

Note: use “with” for people, “on” for work: *catch up on emails*.

cheer sb up INFORMAL

To make someone feel happier, or to become happier yourself.

| I brought you flowers to **cheer you up** after such a rough week.

Note: separable; often used as a command: *Cheer up — it’s not the end of the world!*

clean sth up NEUTRAL

To make a place tidy and free of dirt or mess.

| The kids promised to **clean up** the kitchen after baking, but of course they vanished.

clear up NEUTRAL

To explain or resolve a confusion or problem. • (Of weather) to become bright and sunny.

| Let me **clear up** the misunderstanding before it causes any more trouble.

Note: also used of skin or infections: *The rash cleared up after a week*.

come up NEUTRAL

To arise or be mentioned, often unexpectedly. • To approach.

| I’m sorry I missed dinner — something urgent **came up** at work.

come up with sth INFORMAL

To think of or produce an idea, plan, or solution.

| Our team **came up with** a brilliant slogan in the last five minutes of the meeting.

Note: three-part verb, always inseparable — the object follows “with.”

cover sth up NEUTRAL

To hide a mistake, crime, or unpleasant fact. • To put something over an object to conceal or protect it.

| The company tried to **cover up** the data breach for as long as it could.

Note: the noun “cover-up” is hyphenated.

dress up NEUTRAL

To put on smart or formal clothes. • To wear a costume.

| You don’t need to **dress up** — it’s just a casual barbecue in the garden.

end up INFORMAL

To reach a final state, place, or situation, often unintentionally.

| We meant to go to Rome but missed our train and **ended up** in Florence instead.

Note: commonly followed by “-ing”: *I ended up paying for everyone*.

give sth up NEUTRAL

To stop doing or having something, often a habit. • To surrender or abandon an attempt.

| My uncle finally **gave up** smoking after thirty years.

Note: separable, and often followed by “-ing”: *give up trying*.

grow up NEUTRAL

To develop from a child into an adult. • To behave more maturely.

| She *grew up* in a small fishing village on the coast of Portugal.

Note: as a command it means “stop being childish”: *Oh, grow up!*

hang up NEUTRAL

To end a telephone call by replacing the receiver. • To suspend clothing on a hook or hanger.

| Don't *hang up* — I still have one more thing to tell you!

Note: “hang up on someone” means to end a call rudely while they are still talking.

hold sb/sth up NEUTRAL

To delay or slow down. • To rob a place using threats or weapons. • To support physically.

| Sorry I'm late — an accident on the motorway *held me up* for an hour.

Note: the noun “hold-up” means both a delay and an armed robbery.

keep up NEUTRAL

To maintain the same pace or standard. • To continue something.

| She walks so fast that I can barely *keep up* with her.

Note: “keep up with” the news/the times means to stay informed or current.

look sth up NEUTRAL

To search for information in a reference source. • (Of a situation) to improve.

| If you don't know the word, just *look it up* in the dictionary.

Note: separable — *look it up*, never *look up it*.

look up to sb NEUTRAL

To admire and respect someone.

| As a boy he always *looked up to* his older brother, who taught him everything about football.

Note: three-part verb, inseparable; the opposite is “look down on.”

make up NEUTRAL

To invent a story or excuse. • To reconcile after a quarrel. • To form or constitute a whole.

| He *made up* a ridiculous excuse about a flat tyre to explain why he was late.

Note: the related noun “make-up” refers to cosmetics or the composition of something.

make up for sth NEUTRAL

To compensate for a loss, mistake, or shortcoming.

| He bought her dinner to *make up for* forgetting their anniversary.

Note: three-part verb; “make it up to someone” is a related idiom meaning to do something kind in return.

mess sth up INFORMAL

To do something badly or spoil it. • To make a place untidy.

| I completely *messed up* the interview by forgetting the company's name.

mix sth up NEUTRAL

To confuse one thing with another. • To combine ingredients or change the usual order.

| I always *mix up* the twins — they look absolutely identical.

Note: the noun “mix-up” means a confusing mistake: *There was a mix-up with the bookings.*

own up INFORMAL

To admit honestly that you did something wrong.

| Nobody would *own up* to breaking the window, so the whole class was punished.

Note: followed by “to”: *own up to a mistake.*

pick sb/sth up NEUTRAL

To lift from a surface. • To collect a person or thing. • To acquire a skill or habit casually.

| I'll *pick* you *up* from the airport at six, so wait by the main exit.

Note: can mean to learn informally: *She picked up Spanish while living in Madrid.*

put up with sb/sth NEUTRAL

To tolerate or endure something annoying without complaining.

| I don't know how she *puts up with* his constant complaining.

Note: three-part verb, inseparable — the object always follows “with.”

set sth up NEUTRAL

To arrange, establish, or prepare something. • To trick someone into appearing guilty.

| They *set up* a small charity to help refugees find housing.

Note: the noun “set-up” can mean an arrangement or a trap.

show up INFORMAL

To arrive or appear, especially when expected. • To embarrass someone by behaving badly.

| Half the guests didn't *show up*, so we had loads of cake left over.

sign up NEUTRAL

To register or enrol for a course, service, or membership.

| I've decided to *sign up* for an evening pottery class.

Note: followed by “for” (an activity) or “with” (an organisation).

speak up NEUTRAL

To talk more loudly. • To express an opinion openly, especially in protest.

| Could you *speak up* a little? We can't hear you at the back.

split up INFORMAL

To end a relationship or partnership. • To divide into smaller groups.

| The band *split up* in 1995 but reunited for a tour twenty years later.

stand up for sb/sth NEUTRAL

To defend or support a person, belief, or right.

| It takes courage to *stand up for* your colleagues when the boss is wrong.

Note: three-part verb, inseparable; compare “stand up to” (to resist someone powerful).

stay up INFORMAL

To remain awake instead of going to bed.

| We *stayed up* all night talking about old times.

sum sth up NEUTRAL

To summarise the main points. • To describe the essence of someone or something briefly.

| To *sum up*, we need more funding, more staff, and a lot more time.

Note: “to sum up” is a common discourse marker at the end of a talk or essay.

take sth up NEUTRAL

To start a new hobby or activity. • To occupy time or space. • To accept an offer.

| She *took up* the violin at the age of forty and now plays in a local orchestra.

Note: “take up on” means to accept: *I’ll take you up on that offer.*

turn up INFORMAL

To arrive or appear, often unexpectedly. • To increase volume or intensity. • To be found after being lost.

| My lost keys finally *turned up* under a pile of newspapers.

Note: when it means “increase,” it is separable: *Turn the heating up.*

wake up NEUTRAL

To stop sleeping, or to rouse someone from sleep. • To become aware of something.

| I *woke up* at dawn to the sound of birds outside my window.

Note: “wake up to” means to start to realise: *The country is waking up to the climate crisis.*

“Up” for Completion & Increase

fill sth up NEUTRAL

To make something completely full.

| We stopped at a petrol station to *fill up* the tank before the long drive.

Note: the “up” stresses completeness — full to the top, not just partly filled.

heat sth up NEUTRAL

To make food or a liquid warm or hot, often by reheating.

| There’s some soup in the fridge — just *heat it up* in the microwave.

use sth up NEUTRAL

To consume something completely until none is left.

| We’ve *used up* all the milk, so I’ll grab some on the way home.

Note: here “up” signals total completion — the supply is finished.

warm up NEUTRAL

To become or make warmer. • To do gentle exercise before activity. • To prepare an audience or engine.

| The runners *warmed up* with some light stretches before the race.

wrap sth up **INFORMAL**

To finish or conclude something. • To cover something in paper or material.

| Let's *wrap up* the meeting — we've covered everything on the agenda.

Note: in this sense, “up” conveys bringing something to a neat, complete close.

throw up **INFORMAL**

To vomit. • To produce or reveal something suddenly.

| The child ate too many sweets at the party and *threw up* on the way home.

Note: “be sick” is a more polite British alternative.

LEARNER'S TIP

When “up” attaches to verbs like *eat up*, *drink up*, and *finish up*, it rarely points anywhere — instead it signals doing the action *completely*. “Eat your dinner” is a request; “*Eat up!*” urges you to finish every bite. The same completive flavour explains *use up* (consume entirely) and *fill up* (fill to the very top).

Phrasal Verbs with “Down”

If “up” lifts and completes, “down” pulls in the opposite direction. It often suggests reducing, stopping, defeating — and, curiously, the act of recording something permanently on paper.

back down NEUTRAL

To withdraw from a position or demand in an argument or confrontation.

| The minister refused to **back down**, despite fierce criticism from the press.

Note: intransitive — it takes no object; you back down *from* a claim or *over* an issue.

break down NEUTRAL

(Of a machine or vehicle) to stop working. • To lose emotional control. • To separate into parts; to analyse.

| Our car **broke down** on the motorway and we waited two hours for the recovery truck.

Note: the noun “breakdown” covers mechanical failure, an emotional crisis, or a detailed analysis.

bring sb/sth down NEUTRAL

To cause to fall or be defeated. • To reduce a level or amount. • To make someone feel sad.

| The scandal eventually **brought down** the entire government.

Note: separable — *bring prices down* or *bring down prices*.

calm down NEUTRAL

To become or make less angry, anxious, or excited.

| Take a deep breath and **calm down** — shouting won’t solve anything.

Note: separable when transitive: *The nurse calmed the patient down*.

close sth down NEUTRAL

To shut a business or institution permanently.

| The factory was **closed down** after fifty years, leaving hundreds without work.

come down with sth INFORMAL

To become ill with a particular, usually minor, illness.

| I think I’m **coming down with** a cold — my throat has been sore all morning.

Note: three-part verb; used mainly for everyday illnesses like colds and the flu.

cut down NEUTRAL

To reduce the amount of something. • To fell a tree.

| My doctor told me to **cut down** on salt and sugar.

Note: followed by “on” when reducing consumption: *cut down on coffee*.

die down NEUTRAL

To become gradually less strong or intense before stopping.

| We waited for the storm to **die down** before heading outside.

Note: often used of noise, wind, excitement, or controversy.

get down to sth **INFORMAL**

To begin to focus seriously on a task.

| Enough chatting — let's *get down to* business.

Note: three-part verb; commonly followed by a noun or “-ing”: *get down to work*.

hand sth down **NEUTRAL**

To pass something to a younger person or later generation. • To deliver an official decision.

| This watch was *handed down* to me by my grandfather.

Note: “hand-me-downs” are used clothes passed from older to younger siblings.

hold sth down **NEUTRAL**

To keep at a low level. • To manage to keep a job. • To restrain physically.

| He struggled to *hold down* a steady job after leaving school.

knock sb/sth down **NEUTRAL**

To hit someone or something so it falls. • To demolish a building. • To reduce a price.

| She was *knocked down* by a cyclist while crossing the road.

Note: “knock down” (British) and “knock over” both describe being hit by a vehicle.

lay sth down **NEUTRAL**

To establish a rule or principle. • To put something down, especially weapons.

| The contract *lays down* exactly what each party must do.

Note: “lay down the law” means to state firmly what people must do.

let sb down **NEUTRAL**

To disappoint someone by failing to do what they expected.

| I promised I'd be there, and I won't *let you down*.

Note: separable; the noun “letdown” means a disappointment.

lie down **NEUTRAL**

To move into a flat, resting position, usually to relax or sleep.

| I have a terrible headache, so I'm going to *lie down* for a while.

Note: “take something lying down” means to accept bad treatment without protest.

look down on sb **NEUTRAL**

To regard someone as inferior; to feel superior to them.

| She always *looked down on* people who hadn't been to university.

Note: three-part verb, inseparable; the opposite of “look up to.”

narrow sth down **NEUTRAL**

To reduce the number of options or possibilities.

| We've *narrowed down* the candidates to a shortlist of three.

note sth down **NEUTRAL**

To write something quickly so as to remember it.

| She *noted down* the address before she could forget it.

Note: here “down” carries the sense of recording onto paper.

pin sth down **NEUTRAL**

To define or identify something exactly. • To force someone to give a definite answer.

| It's hard to **pin down** exactly when the trouble began.

Note: “pin someone down” means to make them commit to a decision.

play sth down **NEUTRAL**

To make something seem less important or serious than it is.

| The spokesperson tried to **play down** the seriousness of the leak.

Note: the opposite is “play up” (to exaggerate or emphasise).

put sb/sth down **NEUTRAL**

To place something on a surface. • To criticise someone and make them feel small. • To kill a sick animal humanely.

| He's always **putting** her **down** in front of their friends.

Note: the noun “put-down” is an insulting or belittling remark.

run sb/sth down **NEUTRAL**

To criticise unfairly. • To hit with a vehicle. • (Of a battery or device) to lose power gradually.

| Stop **running** yourself **down** — you did a great job.

settle down **NEUTRAL**

To become calm and quiet. • To start living a stable, routine life, often with a family.

| After years of travelling, they finally **settled down** in a quiet village.

shut sth down **NEUTRAL**

To stop a machine, computer, or operation from working. • To close a business or facility.

| Please **shut down** all the computers before you leave the office.

Note: the noun “shutdown” describes a temporary or permanent stoppage.

slow down **NEUTRAL**

To reduce speed or pace.

| You're working too hard — you really need to **slow down** and rest.

Note: separable when transitive: *The roadworks slowed traffic down.*

step down **NEUTRAL**

To resign from an important position or role.

| The chief executive announced she would **step down** at the end of the year.

Note: often followed by “as” (a role) or “from” (a position).

take sth down **NEUTRAL**

To write down information. • To remove something fixed in place; to dismantle.

| The officer **took down** my name, address, and a description of the thief.

Note: like “note down” and “write down,” this “down” means to record on paper.

tone sth down **NEUTRAL**

To make something less forceful, extreme, or offensive.

| The editor asked her to **tone down** the harsher language in the article.

track sb/sth down **NEUTRAL**

To find someone or something after a long or difficult search.

| It took the journalist months to **track down** the original witness.

Note: separable — *track them down*, not *track down them*.

turn sth down **NEUTRAL**

To reject an offer or request. • To reduce volume, heat, or intensity.

| She **turned down** the job because it meant relocating abroad.

Note: separable in both senses: *turn the music down*; *turn the offer down*.

wear sb/sth down **NEUTRAL**

To gradually exhaust or weaken someone's resistance or strength.

| Their constant nagging finally **wore** him **down**, and he agreed.

write sth down **NEUTRAL**

To record something on paper so it is not forgotten.

| Let me **write** that number **down** before I forget it.

Note: the clearest example of “down” meaning “onto paper” — compare *note down* and *take down*.

GRAMMAR

Most of these verbs are **separable** when they take an object: you can say *turn the music down* or *turn down the music*, and with a pronoun the object *must* sit in the middle — *turn it down*, never *turn down it*. The same holds for *write it down*, *take it down*, *let her down*, *bring them down*, and *track him down*. A handful, however, are **inseparable** three-part verbs whose object always follows the last particle: *come down with the flu*, *get down to work*, and *look down on others*. And a few are purely **intransitive** — *back down*, *break down*, *die down*, and *lie down* take no object at all.

Phrasal Verbs with “Out”

Few little words pull as much weight as “out.” It can mean moving outward into the world, using something up until nothing is left, leaving a thing aside, or suddenly discovering what was hidden. Once you feel those four flavours, dozens of verbs click into place.

Discovering & Solving

check sth out **INFORMAL**

To look at or investigate something to learn more about it. • To borrow an item from a library; to leave a hotel.

| You have to *check out* that new ramen place on Fifth Street.

Note: separable — *check it out*, not *check out it*.

figure sth out **INFORMAL**

To understand or solve something after thinking about it.

| It took the whole team a week to *figure out* why the server kept crashing.

find sth out **NEUTRAL**

To learn a fact or piece of information, often for the first time.

| She was furious when she *found out* the tickets had already sold.

Note: separable, but the object usually comes after — *find out the truth* or *find it out*.

iron sth out **NEUTRAL**

To resolve small problems or disagreements so that things run smoothly.

| We just need to *iron out* a few details before we sign the contract.

make sth out **NEUTRAL**

To manage to see, hear, or understand something with difficulty.

| Through the fog I could barely *make out* the shape of the lighthouse.

point sth out **NEUTRAL**

To draw someone’s attention to a fact or object.

| My editor kindly *pointed out* that I had spelled the author’s name wrong.

sort sth out **INFORMAL**

To organise something or deal with a problem successfully.

| Give me an hour to *sort out* this mess of receipts.

Note: very common in British English for “fix” or “arrange.”

spell sth out **NEUTRAL**

To explain something in a very clear, detailed way, leaving no doubt.

| The coach *spelled out* exactly what he expected from every player.

try sth out **NEUTRAL**

To test or experiment with something to see if it works or you like it.

Before buying, I want to **try out** the espresso machine in the shop.

work sth out **NEUTRAL**

To solve a problem or calculate an answer. • To exercise.

Let's **work out** how much each of us owes for the trip.

Leaving, Excluding & Departing

ask sb out **INFORMAL**

To invite someone on a date.

He spent a month working up the courage to **ask her out**.

back out **INFORMAL**

To withdraw from a plan or agreement you had committed to.

The investor **backed out** at the last minute, leaving us scrambling.

Note: often followed by *of* — *back out of the deal*.

chicken out **SLANG**

To decide not to do something because you suddenly lose your nerve.

I was going to bungee jump, but I **chickened out** at the edge.

cross sth out **NEUTRAL**

To draw a line through written words to remove or cancel them.

She **crossed out** his name and wrote her own instead.

cut sth out **INFORMAL**

To remove a part of something. • To stop doing something annoying.

The doctor told me to **cut out** sugar for a month.

Note: "Cut it out!" is a common way to tell someone to stop.

drop out **INFORMAL**

To leave a course, school, or activity before finishing.

She **dropped out** of university to start her own company.

eat out **NEUTRAL**

To have a meal in a restaurant rather than at home.

We're too tired to cook, so let's **eat out** tonight.

get out of sth **INFORMAL**

To avoid a duty or escape from an obligation.

He always finds an excuse to **get out of** doing the dishes.

hang out **INFORMAL**

To spend time relaxing somewhere, usually with friends.

The kids like to **hang out** at the skate park after school.

leave sb/sth out NEUTRAL

To not include someone or something.

| Be careful not to **leave out** any important names from the guest list.

Note: “feel left out” means to feel excluded.

miss out INFORMAL

To lose a chance to do or enjoy something.

| If you skip the festival, you’ll **miss out** on the best night of the year.

pull out NEUTRAL

To withdraw from something, or to drive a vehicle into traffic.

| Two sponsors **pulled out** just days before the launch.

reach out NEUTRAL

To contact someone, often to offer or ask for help.

| Please **reach out** if you have any questions about the booking.

rule sb/sth out NEUTRAL

To decide that something is impossible or that someone is not a candidate.

| Police have not **ruled out** arson as the cause of the fire.

set out NEUTRAL

To begin a journey. • To start doing something with a clear aim.

| They **set out** at dawn to reach the summit before noon.

stand out NEUTRAL

To be clearly noticeable or much better than others.

| Her bold red coat made her **stand out** in the grey crowd.

stick out INFORMAL

To project beyond a surface, or to be very noticeable.

| A single weed **stuck out** from the otherwise perfect lawn.

throw sth out INFORMAL

To get rid of something you no longer want. • To reject an idea or proposal.

| Don’t **throw out** those boxes — we might need them when we move.

turn out NEUTRAL

To happen or end in a particular way. • To attend an event in numbers.

| Everyone worried about the picnic, but it **turned out** beautifully.

Note: often followed by *that* — *it turned out that he was right*.

Producing, Distributing & Using Up

black out INFORMAL

To lose consciousness suddenly. • To lose all power or light.

| He **blacked out** from the heat and woke up in the shade.

break out NEUTRAL

To start suddenly (of war, fire, disease). • To escape.

| Panic *broke out* when the alarm began to wail.

Note: *break out* in a rash or a sweat refers to the skin.

bring sth out NEUTRAL

To release a product, or to make a quality more noticeable.

| A pinch of salt really *brings out* the sweetness of the melon.

call out NEUTRAL

To shout to get attention. • To publicly criticise someone for wrongdoing.

| She *called out* his name across the busy platform.

carry sth out NEUTRAL

To perform or complete a task, plan, or order.

| The surgeons *carried out* the operation flawlessly.

chill out SLANG

To relax and stop being angry or anxious.

| Just *chill out* — the train won't leave for another hour.

clear out INFORMAL

To empty a space by removing things. • To leave quickly.

| We spent Sunday *clearing out* the cluttered garage.

come out NEUTRAL

To become known or be released. • To reveal one's identity openly.

| The truth finally *came out* during the trial.

fall out INFORMAL

To have an argument that damages a relationship.

| The brothers *fell out* over their father's will and didn't speak for years.

Note: the noun *a falling-out* means a quarrel.

fill sth out NEUTRAL

To complete a form by writing in the required information.

| Please *fill out* this application and return it by Friday.

Note: "fill in" is more common in British English.

freak out SLANG

To react with sudden fear, anger, or excitement.

| My sister *freaked out* when the spider dropped onto her desk.

give sth out NEUTRAL

To distribute things to people. • To stop working (of a machine or body part).

| Volunteers *gave out* bottles of water along the marathon route.

hand sth out NEUTRAL

To give something to each person in a group.

| The teacher **handed out** the test papers one row at a time.

help sb out INFORMAL

To assist someone, especially in a difficult moment.

| Thanks for **helping** me **out** with the move last weekend.

hold out NEUTRAL

To resist or last despite difficulty. • To extend something, like a hand.

| The defenders **held out** until reinforcements arrived.

let sb/sth out NEUTRAL

To allow someone or something to leave or escape.

| Could you **let** the dog **out** before you go to bed?

look out INFORMAL

To be careful or watchful, especially of danger.

| **Look out** — there's a cyclist coming up fast behind you!

pass out INFORMAL

To faint or lose consciousness. • To distribute items.

| He hadn't eaten all day and nearly **passed out** at the gym.

put sth out NEUTRAL

To extinguish a fire or light. • To place something outside. • To inconvenience someone.

| Firefighters worked through the night to **put out** the blaze.

run out NEUTRAL

To have no more of something left; to be used up.

| We **ran out** of milk halfway through the recipe.

Note: followed by *of* when naming what is gone — *run out of time*.

sell out NEUTRAL

To sell all available stock or tickets. • To betray your principles for money.

| The concert **sold out** within minutes of going on sale.

stress sb out INFORMAL

To make someone feel very anxious or under pressure.

| The endless deadlines were really **stressing** her **out**.

take sth out NEUTRAL

To remove something. • To buy food to eat elsewhere. • To obtain a loan or insurance.

| The dentist had to **take out** two of my wisdom teeth.

wear sb/sth out **NEUTRAL**

To exhaust someone, or to use something until it is no longer usable.

| Chasing the toddler all afternoon completely *wore* me *out*.

Note: “worn out” describes both tired people and ruined objects.

wipe sth out **NEUTRAL**

To destroy or eliminate something completely.

| A single storm *wiped out* the entire season’s harvest.

LEARNER’S TIP

A surprising number of “out” verbs add the sense of doing something *completely* or to the very end: *tire out* (fully exhaust), *sort out* (settle entirely), *sell out* (until nothing remains), *wipe out*, and *wear out*. When you meet a new “out” verb, ask whether it means “all the way, until there’s nothing left” — it often does.

Phrasal Verbs with “Off”

If “out” points outward, “off” points away. It carries the feel of departure, of one thing separating from another, of stopping a process, or of finishing it cleanly. Listen for that sense of breaking contact and these verbs become far easier to remember.

Leaving & Separating

back off **INFORMAL**

To retreat or stop being aggressive or interfering.

| When she raised her voice, the salesman quickly *backed off*.

break sth off **NEUTRAL**

To end a relationship or negotiation suddenly. • To snap a piece away.

| The two countries *broke off* diplomatic talks after the incident.

cut sb/sth off **NEUTRAL**

To interrupt or disconnect. • To isolate; to stop a supply.

| The storm *cut off* the village for three days.

Note: “cut someone off” can also mean to interrupt them mid-sentence.

fend sb/sth off **NEUTRAL**

To defend yourself against an attack, question, or demand.

| The minister *fended off* reporters’ questions with a polite smile.

get off **NEUTRAL**

To leave a bus, train, or plane. • To escape punishment.

| We *got off* the train one stop too early and had to walk.

run off **INFORMAL**

To leave quickly or escape. • To print or produce copies.

| The thief *ran off* before anyone could stop him.

see sb off **NEUTRAL**

To go with someone to their point of departure to say goodbye.

| The whole family came to the airport to *see her off*.

set off **NEUTRAL**

To begin a journey. • To trigger something, like an alarm or reaction.

| They *set off* for the coast before the morning traffic began.

Note: opening the door *set off* the alarm shows the “trigger” sense.

take off NEUTRAL

To leave the ground (of a plane). • To remove. • To become suddenly successful.

| The flight finally *took off* two hours behind schedule.

Note: for clothing it is separable — *take off your coat* or *take it off*.

Stopping, Cancelling & Postponing

blow sth off SLANG

To deliberately ignore or skip something, treating it as unimportant.

| He *blew off* the meeting to go to the beach.

call sth off NEUTRAL

To cancel an event or stop an activity.

| They *called off* the wedding just two weeks before the date.

Note: separable — *call it off*, not *call off it*.

cool off INFORMAL

To become less hot, or to become calmer after anger.

| Give him a moment to *cool off* before you bring it up again.

ease off INFORMAL

To reduce in intensity, or to put less pressure on someone.

| The rain finally *eased off* by late afternoon.

finish sth off INFORMAL

To complete the last part of something, or to use up the last of it.

| Let's *finish off* these leftovers before they go bad.

hold off NEUTRAL

To delay doing something, or to keep something at a distance.

| We decided to *hold off* buying a house until prices settle.

knock off INFORMAL

To stop work for the day. • To reduce a price by an amount.

| The crew usually *knocks off* around five.

lay sb off NEUTRAL

To dismiss workers because there is not enough work, not for poor performance.

| The factory *laid off* two hundred staff when orders dried up.

Note: the noun is *layoff*; it implies no fault on the worker's part.

leave sth off NEUTRAL

To not include something, or to stop at a particular point.

| You can *leave off* the title when you address me.

let sb off **INFORMAL**

To not punish someone, or to excuse them from a duty.

| The officer *let* him *off* with a warning this time.

log off **NEUTRAL**

To end a session on a computer or online account.

| Remember to *log off* when you leave the shared computer.

put sth off **NEUTRAL**

To postpone something to a later time.

| Don't *put off* the dentist any longer; that tooth needs looking at.

Note: "put someone off" can also mean to discourage or repel them.

wear off **NEUTRAL**

To gradually disappear or lose effect.

| By midnight the painkiller had *worn off* and the ache returned.

write sth off **NEUTRAL**

To cancel a debt as a loss. • To dismiss something as a failure.

| The bank eventually *wrote off* the unpaid loan.

Falling Asleep, Emitting & More

doze off **INFORMAL**

To fall lightly asleep, usually without meaning to.

| He *dozed off* on the sofa with the television still on.

drop sb/sth off **NEUTRAL**

To take someone or something to a place and leave them there. • To decline gradually.

| Can you *drop* the kids *off* at school on your way to work?

give sth off **NEUTRAL**

To produce or emit something such as heat, light, or a smell.

| The old radiator *gives off* a faint smell of burning dust.

go off **NEUTRAL**

To ring or explode. • To go bad (of food). • To leave.

| My alarm *went off* at six, but I slept right through it.

kick off **INFORMAL**

To begin, especially a game or event.

| The festival *kicks off* on Friday with a fireworks display.

nod off **INFORMAL**

To fall asleep briefly, especially while sitting up.

| She kept *nodding off* during the long afternoon lecture.

pay off **NEUTRAL**

To finish repaying a debt. • To produce a good result after effort.

| All those late nights of study finally *paid off*.

Note: the noun *a payoff* means a reward or, sometimes, a bribe.

pull sth off **INFORMAL**

To succeed at something difficult or unlikely.

| Nobody thought we could win, but somehow we *pulled it off*.

rip sb off **SLANG**

To cheat someone by charging too much or by stealing.

| That taxi driver *ripped us off* with a wildly inflated fare.

Note: the noun is *a rip-off* — something overpriced or fraudulent.

round sth off **NEUTRAL**

To finish something in a satisfying way. • To make a number simpler.

| We *rounded off* the evening with coffee and dessert.

sell sth off **NEUTRAL**

To sell things, often cheaply, to get rid of them or raise money.

| The company *sold off* its overseas branches to clear its debts.

show off **INFORMAL**

To behave so as to impress others with your abilities or possessions.

| He loves to *show off* his new car to anyone who'll look.

Note: the noun *a show-off* describes such a person.

shrug sth off **NEUTRAL**

To treat something as unimportant and not let it bother you.

| She simply *shrugged off* the criticism and carried on.

tell sb off **INFORMAL**

To speak angrily to someone because they have done something wrong.

| The teacher *told* the boys *off* for running in the corridor.

tip sb off **INFORMAL**

To give someone secret or advance information.

| An anonymous caller *tipped off* the police about the robbery.

Note: the noun is *a tip-off* — a warning or useful hint.

GRAMMAR

“Go off” is a classic many-in-one phrasal verb, and context decides the meaning. It can mean *to ring or sound* (the alarm *went off*), *to explode* (the bomb *went off*), *to spoil* (the milk has *gone off*), and *to depart* (she *went off* to find a seat). In British English it can even mean “to stop liking” — *I’ve gone off coffee lately*. Let the surrounding words tell you which sense is meant.

Phrasal Verbs with “On”

The little word “on” carries a surprising amount of weight. It often suggests something continuing, switching into action, connecting to a surface or topic, or leaning on someone for support—ideas that run quietly through nearly every verb in this chapter.

bring sth on NEUTRAL

To cause something, usually something unpleasant, to happen or appear. • Also *bring sth on yourself*: to be the cause of your own trouble.

| The sudden cold snap *brought on* a nasty bout of flu across the whole office.

Note: separable — *bring it on*. As a standalone challenge, “Bring it on!” means “I’m ready for the fight.”

carry on NEUTRAL

To continue doing something. • Informally, to behave in an excited or silly way.

| “Don’t mind me,” she said, “please *carry on* with what you were saying.”

catch on INFORMAL

To understand or realise something. • To become popular or fashionable.

| It took the new trainee a while to *catch on*, but now he’s the fastest on the team.

Note: intransitive — no object follows. The slang sense (popularity) is seen in “the app really *caught on* with teenagers.”

come on INFORMAL

To make progress or develop. • As an exclamation, to urge or encourage someone.

| Your garden is really *coming on*—those roses weren’t even budding last month.

count on sb/sth NEUTRAL

To rely on or trust someone or something to behave as expected.

| We’re *counting on* you to keep this between us until the announcement.

Note: inseparable. Close in meaning to *rely on* and *depend on*, but slightly warmer and more personal.

depend on sb/sth NEUTRAL

To be affected or determined by something. • To need someone for support or to trust them.

| Whether we hike tomorrow *depends on* the weather more than on us.

dwell on sth FORMAL

To think or talk about something, especially something unpleasant, for longer than is helpful.

| There’s no use *dwelling on* the mistake—let’s focus on fixing it.

Note: inseparable. Often carries a gentle reproach: to dwell on something is to linger on it too long.

egg sb on INFORMAL

To encourage or urge someone to do something, often something foolish or risky.

| He’d never have jumped off the pier if his mates hadn’t been *egging him on*.

Note: separable, and usually a person comes between the words: *egg him on*, not “egg on him.” The “egg” here comes from an old Norse word for “edge,” not the breakfast food.

get on NEUTRAL

To make progress; to manage or fare. • In British English, to climb aboard a bus, train, or plane.

“How are you *getting on* in your new job?” my aunt asked over tea.

get on with sb/sth INFORMAL

To continue with a task. • To have a friendly relationship with someone.

I’ve always *got on with* my neighbours, so house-sitting for them is no trouble.

go on NEUTRAL

To continue or carry on. • To happen. • To proceed to do something next.

The meeting *went on* for three hours, and still nothing was decided.

Note: “What’s *going on?*” asks what is happening. “Go on!” on its own can mean “continue” or express friendly disbelief.

hang on INFORMAL

To wait for a short time. • To hold tightly. • To keep going in difficult circumstances.

Hang on a second—I think I left the keys on the kitchen table.

hit on sth INFORMAL

To discover or think of something, especially a good idea, often by chance.

Halfway through the walk, she *hit on* the perfect title for her novel.

Note: a separate, slangy sense—*hit on sb*—means to make a romantic advance toward someone.

hold on INFORMAL

To wait. • To grip something firmly. • To endure or persevere.

Hold on tight—this stretch of road gets bumpy.

keep on (doing sth) NEUTRAL

To continue doing something, often persistently or repeatedly.

If you *keep on* practising scales every morning, the calluses will come.

Note: typically followed by a verb ending in “-ing.” *Keep on at sb* means to nag someone repeatedly.

lead sb on INFORMAL

To deceive someone, especially by making them believe you feel more for them than you do.

She felt he had been *leading* her *on* for months without any real intention of staying.

Note: separable, with the person between the words: *lead her on*.

log on NEUTRAL

To gain access to a computer system or website by entering your details.

You’ll need a password to *log on* to the library’s research database.

Note: often *log on to* something. The opposite is *log off* or *log out*.

move on NEUTRAL

To leave one place or topic for another. • To recover emotionally and progress past a difficult experience.

After the breakup it took her a year, but she finally *moved on*.

pass sth on NEUTRAL

To give something, especially information, to another person. • To transmit something such as a disease.

| Could you *pass* this message *on* to the rest of the committee?

Note: separable — *pass it on*, not “pass on it.”

put sth on NEUTRAL

To dress in a piece of clothing. • To switch on a device. • To gain weight; to stage a performance.

| He *put on* his coat and stepped out into the rain.

Note: separable — *put it on*. *Put on weight* means to gain weight; *put it on* can also mean to pretend or exaggerate.

rely on sb/sth NEUTRAL

To depend on or trust someone or something with confidence.

| Small farms here still *rely on* seasonal rain rather than irrigation.

sleep on sth INFORMAL

To delay a decision until the next day so you can think it over.

| It's a big offer—why don't you *sleep on* it and call me in the morning?

Note: almost always used with the object “it”: *sleep on it*.

switch sth on NEUTRAL

To start a machine or light working by operating a switch.

| She *switched on* the lamp and settled in to read.

Note: separable — *switch it on*. Interchangeable with *turn on* in most contexts.

take sth on NEUTRAL

To accept a responsibility or task. • *take sb on*: to employ someone, or to compete against them.

| She *took on* far too much work this term and is now exhausted.

Note: separable. *Take on sb* in a contest means to challenge them: “the underdogs *took on* the champions.”

try sth on INFORMAL

To put on a garment to see if it fits or suits you. • In British English, *try it on* means to attempt to deceive or test someone's patience.

| Do you mind if I *try* these boots *on* before I decide?

Note: separable — *try it on*.

turn sth on NEUTRAL

To start the flow or operation of something by means of a switch, tap, or button.

| Could you *turn on* the kettle while I find the mugs?

Note: separable — *turn it on*, not “turn on it.”

wait on sb NEUTRAL

To serve someone, especially food and drink at a table. • In American English, also to wait for something.

| The same waiter has *waited on* us at that restaurant for fifteen years.

Note: distinct from *wait for*. “Wait on someone hand and foot” means to serve their every need.

work on sth/sb **NEUTRAL**

To spend effort improving or repairing something. • To try to persuade or influence someone.

He's been *working on* his thesis every evening for the past two months.

LEARNER'S TIP

Be careful with *get on* and *get on with*. On its own, *get on* means to make progress (“How are you getting on?”) or, in British English, to board a vehicle (“get on the bus”). Add “with” and the meaning shifts: *get on with a task* means to continue or press ahead with it, while *get on with a person* means to have a friendly relationship. So “I get on with my boss” is a compliment—but “Get on with it!” is an impatient nudge to hurry up.

Phrasal Verbs with “In” & “Into”

Where “on” keeps things going, “in” and “into” draw things inward. These verbs cluster around the ideas of entering a space, joining a group, including something, or finally yielding—and the small step from “in” to “into” often adds a sense of motion and arrival.

With “In”

barge in INFORMAL

To enter a room or interrupt a conversation rudely and abruptly.

| She **barged in** without knocking and demanded to know what we were laughing about.

Note: often *barge in on* someone or something.

break in NEUTRAL

To enter a building by force, usually to steal. • To interrupt. • *break sth in*: to make new shoes or equipment comfortable through use.

| Burglars **broke in** through the back window while the family was away.

Note: the burglary sense is intransitive (*break in*); the related noun is “a break-in.”

bring sth in NEUTRAL

To introduce a new law, system, or idea. • To earn or generate money. • To involve someone new.

| The council **brought in** a ban on plastic bags last spring.

Note: separable — *bring it in*.

butt in INFORMAL

To interrupt rudely or interfere in something that does not concern you.

| Sorry to **butt in**, but I couldn’t help overhearing your travel plans.

cash in (on sth) INFORMAL

To take advantage of a situation for profit. • To exchange something for money.

| Plenty of brands tried to **cash in on** the sudden craze for cold-water swimming.

check in NEUTRAL

To register on arrival at a hotel or airport. • To make brief contact with someone to see how they are.

| We need to **check in** at least two hours before an international flight.

Note: the opposite at a hotel is *check out*. The noun and adjective are “check-in.”

chip in INFORMAL

To contribute money toward something shared. • To add a comment to a conversation.

| If everyone **chips in** a fiver, we can afford a decent leaving gift.

come in **NEUTRAL**

To enter. • To arrive or become available. • To finish a race in a particular position.

“*Come in,*” he called from the study, “the door’s open.”

cut in **INFORMAL**

To interrupt someone speaking. • To move suddenly in front of another vehicle.

A taxi *cut in* so sharply that I had to slam on the brakes.

Note: *cut in on* a conversation; *cut sb in* means to include someone in a share of profits.

drop in **INFORMAL**

To visit someone casually, without an appointment.

Feel free to *drop in* any time you’re passing—we’re almost always home.

Note: often *drop in on sb* or *drop in at a place*.

fall in **NEUTRAL**

To collapse inward. • Of soldiers, to form into ranks. • *fall in with:* to begin associating with a group.

The old mine roof had *fallen in* long before the surveyors arrived.

fill sth in **NEUTRAL**

To complete a form by adding information. • *fill sb in:* to give someone the details they have missed.

Please *fill in* your name and date of birth at the top of the page.

Note: separable. British English prefers *fill in a form*; American English often says *fill out*.

fit in **NEUTRAL**

To belong comfortably within a group or setting. • *fit sb/sth in:* to find time or space for them.

It took a few weeks, but the new student soon began to *fit in*.

give in **NEUTRAL**

To stop resisting and accept defeat or another’s wishes. • In British English, to hand in work or a document.

After hours of pestering, his parents finally *gave in* and bought the puppy.

Note: often *give in to* pressure or temptation.

hand sth in **NEUTRAL**

To submit or return something to a person in authority.

She *handed in* her resignation the morning after the argument.

Note: separable — *hand it in*.

jump in **INFORMAL**

To get involved quickly or enthusiastically, often without much preparation.

Don’t wait for an invitation—just *jump in* when you have something to add.

kick in **INFORMAL**

To begin to take effect or come into operation.

Give the painkillers twenty minutes to *kick in* before you try to sleep.

move in NEUTRAL

To begin living in a new home. • To advance toward something, often to take control.

| They *moved in* together just six months after meeting.

Note: *move in on* someone or something suggests closing in to seize or attack.

plug sth in NEUTRAL

To connect a piece of electrical equipment to a power supply or socket.

| Remember to *plug* the heater *in* before you wonder why it's cold.

Note: separable — *plug it in*. The opposite is *unplug*.

sink in INFORMAL

Of information or a fact, to be fully understood or realised, often slowly.

| It took a few days for the news of his promotion to really *sink in*.

step in NEUTRAL

To become involved in a situation, especially to help or to settle a dispute.

| When the two sides couldn't agree, a mediator had to *step in*.

take sth in NEUTRAL

To understand and absorb information. • To deceive. • To give shelter to someone. • To make a garment narrower.

| There was so much detail on the slide that I couldn't *take* it all *in*.

tune in INFORMAL

To watch or listen to a particular broadcast. • *tune in to*: to become sensitive to someone's feelings or a situation.

| Thousands *tuned in* to hear the final episode of the series.

turn in INFORMAL

To go to bed. • To submit something. • To hand someone over to the authorities.

| It's past midnight; I think I'll *turn in*.

Note: the "go to bed" sense is intransitive and rather old-fashioned but still common.

With "Into"

break into sth NEUTRAL

To enter a place by force. • To begin doing something suddenly. • To start succeeding in a new field or market.

| The band finally *broke into* the American market after years of touring.

Note: *break into song* or *break into a run* means to begin suddenly.

bump into sb INFORMAL

To meet someone unexpectedly. • To collide accidentally with something.

| You'll never guess who I *bumped into* at the supermarket this morning.

Note: very close in meaning to *run into*.

come into sth NEUTRAL

To inherit money or property. • To become relevant or play a part.

| She *came into* a small fortune when her great-aunt passed away.

Note: “That’s where luck *comes into it*” means luck becomes a factor.

delve into sth FORMAL

To investigate or examine something thoroughly and in depth.

| The biographer *delved into* letters no one had read for a century.

get into sth INFORMAL

To become involved or interested in something. • To be admitted to a school or organisation. • To enter a difficult state.

| Lately I’ve really *got into* baking sourdough on the weekends.

go into sth NEUTRAL

To describe or examine something in detail. • To enter a profession or state.

| I won’t *go into* the whole story now, but it didn’t end well.

look into sth NEUTRAL

To investigate or examine a matter in order to find out the facts.

| The manager promised to *look into* the billing error first thing on Monday.

Note: inseparable, and a standard polite way to say you will investigate a complaint.

run into sb/sth INFORMAL

To meet someone by chance. • To encounter a problem or difficulty. • To collide with something.

| We *ran into* trouble the moment the river current picked up.

tap into sth NEUTRAL

To make use of an existing resource, source of energy, or feeling.

| The campaign cleverly *tapped into* people’s nostalgia for the seaside.

talk sb into sth NEUTRAL

To persuade someone to do something they were reluctant to do.

| My sister *talked me into* running the marathon with her.

Note: the person goes between the words. The opposite is *talk sb out of sth*.

trick sb into sth NEUTRAL

To deceive someone so that they do something they would not otherwise do.

| The scammers *tricked* dozens of pensioners *into* handing over their savings.

Note: usually followed by a verb ending in “-ing”: *tricked into paying*.

turn into sth NEUTRAL

To change or be transformed into a different state or thing.

| What began as a quiet drink *turned into* a long night of old stories.

walk into sth NEUTRAL

To collide with something while walking. • To become caught in a trap or awkward situation, often unawares.

He *walked into* the interview with no idea they'd already chosen someone else.

Note: “walk into a trap” suggests blundering into trouble you should have seen coming.

GRAMMAR

Take sth in is a master of disguise—context decides its meaning. It can mean to **understand and absorb** (“I couldn’t take in all the figures”); to **deceive** (“don’t be taken in by his charm”—here it is usually passive); to **give shelter** (“they took in three refugees”); or to **make a garment smaller** (“the tailor took in the waist”). In every sense it is separable, so a short object slips between the parts: *take it in*, never “take in it.”

Phrasal Verbs with “Over”, “Back”, “Away” & “Around”

A handful of small particles do an enormous amount of work in English. “Over” carries the sense of crossing or repeating, “back” of return, “away” of departure or removal, and “around” of aimless or scattered movement. Learn the particle and dozens of verbs suddenly click into place.

Particle: Over

blow over NEUTRAL

To pass without serious consequence; to be forgotten after a while.

| Don't worry about the argument—these things usually *blow over* in a day or two.

Note: often used of storms, scandals, and quarrels alike.

bowl sb over INFORMAL

To impress or astonish someone greatly. • To knock someone down by colliding with them.

| Her audition completely *bowled* the judges *over*.

Note: separable — *bowl him over*, not *bowl over him*.

come over

To visit someone's home. • To suddenly affect someone's mood or behaviour.

| Why don't you *come over* on Sunday and we'll cook lunch together?

do sth over INFORMAL

To do something again, usually because the first attempt was wrong.

| The paint dripped, so I had to *do* the whole wall *over*.

Note: chiefly North American; British speakers prefer *redo* or *do again*.

fall over

To lose one's balance and drop to the ground; to topple.

| The toddler took three wobbly steps and then *fell over*.

get over sth

To recover from an illness, shock, or disappointment.

| It took me months to *get over* the flu I caught last winter.

Note: also figurative: *I can't get over how much you've grown* means “I'm astonished.”

gloss over sth NEUTRAL

To deal with a problem or fault briefly so as to hide or minimise it.

| The report *glossed over* the safety failures in a single vague paragraph.

go over sth

To examine or review something carefully.

| Let's *go over* the figures once more before we send the invoice.

hand sth over

To give something to someone, especially by passing control or responsibility.

| The thief was told to **hand over** the keys at once.

Note: separable — *hand it over*, not *hand over it*.

look sth over

To inspect or read something fairly quickly.

| Could you **look** my essay **over** before I hand it in?

mull sth over NEUTRAL

To think about something carefully over a period of time.

| I'll **mull** your offer **over** and call you on Friday.

pull over

To move a vehicle to the side of the road and stop.

| The officer signalled for the driver to **pull over**.

run sb over

To hit and drive over someone or something with a vehicle.

| He nearly got **run over** stepping into the road without looking.

Note: separable — *run him over* or *run over him* are both heard, but pronoun objects usually go in the middle.

take over

To gain control of something, such as a company, role, or task.

| When the manager fell ill, her deputy **took over** for the rest of the season.

think sth over

To consider something carefully before making a decision.

| Take the weekend to **think** it **over**; there's no rush.

win sb over

To gain someone's support, agreement, or affection.

| A few honest answers were enough to **win** the sceptical board **over**.

Note: separable — *win them over*, not *win over them*.

Particle: Back

answer back INFORMAL

To reply rudely or defiantly, especially to someone in authority.

| Don't **answer back** to your grandmother like that!

bounce back

To recover quickly after a setback, illness, or defeat.

| The team lost the opener but **bounced back** with three straight wins.

bring sth back

To return something. • To cause a memory or feeling to return.

| That old song *brings back* so many memories of summer camp.

call sb back

To return someone's telephone call.

| She's in a meeting, but she'll *call* you *back* within the hour.

Note: separable — *call me back*, not *call back me*.

cut back

To reduce the amount of something, especially spending or consumption.

| We've had to *cut back* on takeaways to save for the deposit.

Note: often followed by *on*: *cut back on sugar, on staff, on overtime*.

fall back on sth

To rely on something as an alternative when other plans fail.

| If the gallery doesn't sell, she can always *fall back on* her teaching qualification.

fight back

To defend oneself or retaliate. • To struggle to hold back tears or emotion.

| Cornered, the small company *fought back* with a clever advertising campaign.

get back

To return to a place. • To recover something that was lost or lent.

| Call me the moment you *get back* from the airport.

give sth back

To return something to its owner.

| Please *give* me *back* my pen when you've finished.

Note: separable — *give it back*, never *give back it*.

hold sb back

To prevent someone from progressing or advancing.

| A fear of public speaking was really *holding* her *back* at work.

look back

To think about the past; to reflect on earlier times.

| When I *look back*, leaving that job was the best decision I ever made.

pay sb back

To return money owed. • To take revenge on someone.

| I'll *pay* you *back* as soon as my wages come through.

Note: the revenge sense is often emphatic: *I'll pay him back for this*.

pull back

To withdraw or retreat; to become less involved.

| After the bad reviews, investors began to *pull back* from the project.

put sth back

To return something to its original place. • To postpone something.

| Read it if you like, but **put** the book **back** on the shelf afterwards.

set sb back INFORMAL

To delay progress. • To cost someone a stated amount of money.

| The storm **set** the harvest **back** by nearly two weeks.

Note: the money sense is casual: *That watch must have set you back a fortune.*

take sth back

To return a purchase to a shop. • To withdraw something one has said.

| I take it all back—you were right and I was wrong.

Particle: Away

break away

To escape or separate from a group, organisation, or controlling force.

| Several members **broke away** to form a rival party.

do away with sth NEUTRAL

To abolish or get rid of something.

| The new head **did away with** the old uniform rules entirely.

Note: a three-word phrasal verb; the object always follows *with*.

fade away

To gradually become weaker, fainter, or less noticeable until gone.

| The applause slowly **faded away** as the lights dimmed.

get away

To escape. • To take a holiday or short break.

| We're hoping to **get away** for a few days before term starts.

get away with sth

To escape blame or punishment for something wrong.

| He cheated on the test and somehow **got away with** it.

Note: a three-word phrasal verb — inseparable; the object follows *with*.

give sth away

To give something for free. • To reveal a secret unintentionally.

| His trembling hands **gave away** how nervous he really was.

keep away

To stay at a distance; to avoid going near something.

| Signs warned visitors to **keep away** from the cliff edge.

pass away FORMAL

To die. A gentle, polite way of referring to death.

| Her grandfather *passed away* peacefully in his sleep.

Note: a euphemism, preferred in condolences over the blunt *died*.

put sth away

To return something to its proper place; to tidy away.

| Could the children *put* their toys *away* before dinner?

run away

To flee; to leave secretly, especially from home or a difficult situation.

| As a boy he threatened to *run away* and join the circus.

take sth away

To remove something. • To buy cooked food to eat elsewhere.

| The waiter *took* our plates *away* before we'd finished.

throw sth away

To get rid of something as rubbish. • To waste an opportunity.

| Don't *throw* that box *away*—I can use it for packing.

Note: figurative use is common: *throw away a chance, throw away your money*.

turn sb away

To refuse to admit or help someone.

| The clinic never *turns* anyone *away*, regardless of ability to pay.

walk away

To leave a situation, often a conflict or relationship, rather than deal with it.

| Sometimes the bravest thing is to *walk away* from a bad deal.

while away sth NEUTRAL

To pass time in a relaxed or pleasant way.

| We *whiled away* the afternoon playing cards on the porch.

Note: almost always paired with a period of time: *while away the hours*.

Particle: Around / Round

boss sb around INFORMAL

To give someone orders in an annoying, domineering way.

| I'm tired of being *bossed around* by people half my age.

Note: British speakers often say *boss about*.

come around

To change one's opinion and agree. • To regain consciousness.

| She was against the idea at first, but she's starting to *come around*.

fool around INFORMAL

To behave in a silly way; to waste time.

| Stop *fooling around* and finish your homework.

get around

To move from place to place. • To circumvent a rule or obstacle.

| It's easy to *get around* the city by tram.

mess around INFORMAL

To spend time doing nothing in particular; to behave carelessly.

| The kids spent the morning *messing around* in the garden.

play around INFORMAL

To experiment casually. • To behave irresponsibly.

| I've been *playing around* with a new recipe for sourdough.

run around

To be very busy doing many small tasks.

| I've been *running around* all day getting ready for the party.

shop around

To compare prices or options at different places before buying.

| It pays to *shop around* before choosing an insurance policy.

turn around

To face the opposite direction. • To improve a failing situation.

| The new manager *turned* the struggling branch *around* in a year.

LEARNER'S TIP

Mind the difference between *get over* and *get away with*. You *get over* something when you recover from it—an illness, a shock, a heartbreak (*It took her a year to get over the loss*). You *get away with* something when you escape punishment or blame for a wrongdoing (*He lied and got away with it*). One is about healing; the other is about dodging consequences.

Phrasal Verbs for Work, Study, Travel & Technology

Phrasal verbs aren't just for casual chat—they run quietly through the office, the classroom, the departure lounge, and your phone screen. This practical chapter groups the most useful ones by setting, so you can reach for the right expression exactly where you need it.

At Work

branch out

To expand into a new area of activity or business.

| The bakery decided to **branch out** into catering for weddings.

carry sth out

To perform or complete a task, plan, or instruction.

| The engineers will **carry out** the safety inspection on Monday.

Note: separable with nouns, but the object usually follows: *carry out a survey*.

draw sth up

To prepare a written document, plan, or list.

| Our solicitor will **draw up** the contract by the end of the week.

hand sth over

To transfer responsibility, control, or a task to someone else.

| Before her sabbatical, she **handed over** the account to a colleague.

Note: in offices, a written “handover” document often accompanies the verb.

lay sb off NEUTRAL

To dismiss an employee, usually because there is not enough work.

| The factory **laid off** two hundred workers when orders dried up.

Note: separable — *lay them off*, not *lay off them*. Differs from being fired for poor performance.

roll sth out

To launch a new product, service, or system, often in stages.

| We'll **roll out** the updated software to all branches next quarter.

run sth by sb INFORMAL

To tell someone an idea or plan to get their opinion or approval.

| Let me **run** the budget **by** the director before we commit.

Note: a three-word phrasal verb; the thing comes after *run*, the person after *by*.

scale sth back

To reduce the size, scope, or ambition of something.

| Rising costs forced the firm to **scale back** its hiring plans.

set sth up

To establish or arrange something, such as a company, meeting, or system.

| They **set up** a small consultancy after leaving the bank.

sign off on sth NEUTRAL

To give formal approval to something.

| The finance team still needs to **sign off on** the expenses.

Note: a three-word phrasal verb implying official, accountable approval.

step down

To resign from a position of authority or responsibility.

| After fifteen years, the chairman announced he would **step down**.

take sb on

To employ someone. • To accept a challenge or opponent.

| The warehouse is **taking on** extra staff for the holiday rush.

Note: separable — *take them on*, not *take on them*.

Study & Learning

brush up on sth

To improve or refresh knowledge or a skill you once had.

| I'm **brushing up on** my Spanish before the trip to Seville.

Note: a three-word phrasal verb; the object follows *on*.

catch up on sth

To do something you have not had time for, so as not to fall behind.

| I spent Sunday **catching up on** the reading I'd missed all week.

cram for sth INFORMAL

To study intensively at the last minute before an exam.

| Half the dorm was up all night **cramming for** the chemistry final.

go over sth

To review or revise material so you understand it thoroughly.

| The tutor **went over** the tricky equations until everyone followed.

Note: in study contexts this means careful revision, not a quick glance.

hand sth in

To submit completed work to a teacher or authority.

| Remember to **hand in** your essays before midnight on Friday.

Note: separable — *hand it in*, not *hand in it*.

read up on sth

To find out about a subject by reading a lot about it.

| She **read up on** the topic for weeks before her presentation.

take sth in

To absorb and understand information.

| There was so much detail in the lecture that I couldn't **take** it all **in**.

Travel & Getting About

check in

To register on arrival at a hotel or airport.

| We need to **check in** at least two hours before the flight.

Note: the opposite at hotels is *check out*; the noun is *check-in*.

get in

To arrive somewhere, especially a train, plane, or person reaching home.

| Our overnight train **gets in** to Vienna at half past six.

set off

To begin a journey.

| We **set off** at dawn to beat the holiday traffic.

stop over

To break a long journey by staying somewhere briefly.

| On the way to Sydney we **stopped over** in Singapore for a night.

Note: the noun is *stopover*: *a twelve-hour stopover in Doha*.

take off

When an aircraft leaves the ground and begins to fly.

| The plane finally **took off** after a two-hour delay on the runway.

Note: the noun is *takeoff*; the opposite is *land* or *touch down*.

pull over

To steer a vehicle to the roadside and stop, often to rest or check something.

| Feeling drowsy at the wheel, she **pulled over** at the next service station.

see sb off

To go to a station or airport to say goodbye to someone leaving.

| The whole family came to the platform to **see us off**.

Note: separable — *see them off*, not *see off them*.

Technology

back sth up

To make a spare copy of computer data in case the original is lost.

| Always **back up** your files before installing a major update.

Note: the noun is *backup*: *keep a backup in the cloud*.

boot up

To start a computer so that it is ready to use.

| The old laptop takes nearly two minutes to **boot up**.

log in / log out

To enter or leave a system by giving, or ending, your credentials.

| Remember to **log out** when you use a shared computer.

Note: also *log on / log off*; *login* as one word is the noun.

plug sth in

To connect a device to a power supply or another device.

| Could you **plug** my phone **in**? The battery's almost dead.

Note: separable — *plug it in*, not *plug in it*. Opposite: *unplug*.

scroll through sth

To move through text or images on a screen by sliding the display.

| I **scrolled through** dozens of photos looking for the right one.

sync up

To make data on two or more devices match. • To coordinate plans with someone.

| My calendar should **sync up** automatically across the laptop and the phone.

zoom in

To make an image or part of a screen appear larger and closer.

| **Zoom in** on the map and you'll see the side street clearly.

Note: the opposite is *zoom out*.

GRAMMAR

Three-word phrasal verbs such as *look forward to*, *get on with*, and *run out of* are inseparable: the object always comes after the final particle, never inside. Say *I'm looking forward to it* (not *looking it forward to*), *get on with the work*, and *we've run out of milk*. Even a pronoun object stays at the end—*run out of it*, never *run it out of*.

PART THREE

III

Idioms by Theme



Hundreds of idioms, organised by the ideas they express — emotions, time and money, work, people, the body, animals, food and the natural world — so that related expressions reinforce one another.

Idioms of Emotion & Feeling

When feelings run high, plain words rarely seem enough — so English reaches for pictures. We do not simply say we are happy; we are over the moon, walking on air, or on cloud nine. This chapter gathers the most vivid expressions for the whole range of human feeling, from pure joy to cold fear, and shows you exactly when each one fits.

Happiness & Delight

in high spirits NEUTRAL

Cheerful, lively, and in a noticeably good mood.

| The whole team was *in high spirits* after closing the deal a week ahead of schedule.

in seventh heaven INFORMAL

Extremely happy; in a state of perfect bliss.

| Give my grandmother a garden and a pot of tea and she's *in seventh heaven*.

Note: The phrase comes from old Jewish and Islamic cosmology, in which the seventh heaven was the highest and holiest level — the dwelling place of God and the angels.

jump for joy INFORMAL

To be openly, visibly delighted about something.

| When the letter said she'd won the scholarship, she practically *jumped for joy* in the kitchen.

Note: Often used a little ironically in the negative — “I wasn't exactly *jumping for joy* about the extra shift.”

like a kid in a candy store INFORMAL

So excited and delighted by your surroundings that you can hardly contain yourself.

| At the vintage guitar fair, Dad was *like a kid in a candy store*, picking up every instrument on the wall.

Note: Chiefly American; British speakers may say *like a kid in a sweet shop*.

on cloud nine INFORMAL

Blissfully happy, usually because of a specific piece of wonderful news.

| Ever since the baby was born, the two of them have been *on cloud nine*.

Note: Said to come from a US weather classification in which “cloud nine” was the towering, fluffy cumulonimbus — the highest cloud of all.

on top of the world INFORMAL

Extremely happy and full of confidence; feeling that everything is going your way.

| After acing the interview, Marcus felt *on top of the world* for the rest of the day.

over the moon INFORMAL

Absolutely delighted; thrilled.

| “We're *over the moon* with the new house,” she told her parents on the phone.

walking on air INFORMAL

Feeling light, joyful, and elated, as though nothing could weigh you down.

| She'd been *walking on air* all week, ever since he asked her to marry him.

Sadness & Low Spirits

a heavy heart NEUTRAL

A feeling of deep sadness or reluctance, especially when doing something difficult.

| It was with *a heavy heart* that the captain announced his retirement from the game.

broken-hearted NEUTRAL

Overwhelmed by grief or sorrow, especially after the end of a love affair.

| He was *broken-hearted* for months after she moved abroad.

choke up INFORMAL

To become so emotional that you can barely speak; to be on the verge of tears.

| I started to *choke up* halfway through the toast and had to pause.

down in the dumps INFORMAL

Sad, gloomy, and low in spirits, usually for a while rather than a moment.

| Ben's been a bit *down in the dumps* since his football club got relegated.

down in the mouth INFORMAL

Looking visibly unhappy or dejected.

| You're looking a bit *down in the mouth* — is everything all right at home?

feeling blue INFORMAL

Mildly sad, melancholy, or low.

| The long grey winters always leave me *feeling blue* by February.

Note: The colour *blue* has meant sad in English since at least the 1600s, and gives its name to the musical genre.

Anger & Frustration

bite sb's head off INFORMAL

To respond to someone with sudden, sharp anger, out of proportion to what they said.

| I only asked if she needed help, and she *bit my head off*.

Note: Separable, and the object normally sits in the middle — *bit my head off*, never “bit off my head.”

blow off steam INFORMAL

To release pent-up anger, stress, or energy in a harmless way.

| After a brutal week, the nurses go bowling on Fridays just to *blow off steam*.

Note: Also *let off steam*. The image is of a steam engine venting excess pressure through a valve.

fly off the handle **INFORMAL**

To lose your temper abruptly and explosively.

| Try to explain calmly — if you *fly off the handle*, he'll just stop listening.

Note: From a loose axe-head flying off its handle in mid-swing — sudden and dangerous.

get bent out of shape **INFORMAL**

To become unreasonably upset, annoyed, or offended about something minor.

| Don't *get bent out of shape* over a parking ticket — we'll sort it out.

have a chip on one's shoulder **INFORMAL**

To carry a lasting sense of grievance or resentment, often feeling treated unfairly.

| He's had *a chip on his shoulder* about his old school ever since they rejected him.

Note: From a 19th-century custom: a man wanting a fight would balance a wood chip on his shoulder and dare others to knock it off.

hit the roof **INFORMAL**

To become suddenly and intensely angry.

| When Dad saw the dent in the car, he *hit the roof*.

lose one's cool **INFORMAL**

To lose your composure and react with anger or panic.

| The referee *lost his cool* and sent two players off in as many minutes.

see red **INFORMAL**

To become so angry that you briefly lose self-control.

| When I heard how they'd treated my little sister, I just *saw red*.

Note: Popularly linked to the myth that bulls are enraged by red — in fact bulls are colour-blind to it and react to the movement of the cape.

Fear & Nerves

a nervous wreck **INFORMAL**

A person who is extremely anxious, jittery, and unable to relax.

| By the morning of the wedding, the groom was *a nervous wreck*.

at the end of one's tether **INFORMAL**

Having no patience, strength, or coping ability left; close to breaking point.

| With three sick children and no sleep, she was *at the end of her tether*.

Note: American English usually prefers *at the end of one's rope*. A *tether* is the rope tying a grazing animal to its peg.

butterflies in one's stomach **INFORMAL**

A fluttering feeling of nervous anticipation, often before something important.

| I always get *butterflies in my stomach* just before I step on stage.

Note: Describes nervous excitement rather than dread — the feeling can be pleasant, as before a first date.

get cold feet **INFORMAL**

To lose your nerve and hesitate or back out of something you had planned to do.

He'd booked the skydive months ago, but *got cold feet* at the door of the plane.

jump out of one's skin **INFORMAL**

To be violently startled by a sudden shock or noise.

The balloon popped behind me and I nearly *jumped out of my skin*.

on edge **NEUTRAL**

Tense, anxious, and easily startled or irritated.

Everyone in the waiting room was *on edge*, watching the door for the surgeon.

on pins and needles **INFORMAL**

In a state of anxious, suspenseful waiting.

We were *on pins and needles* until the results finally came through.

Note: The image is the prickling sensation of a limb that has "gone to sleep." British speakers may also say *on tenterhooks*.

scared out of one's wits **INFORMAL**

So frightened that you can barely think straight; terrified.

The thunderstorm scared the dog *out of his wits*.

scared stiff **INFORMAL**

So frightened that you freeze and cannot move.

I'm *scared stiff* of spiders — I can't even look at a photo of one.

shake like a leaf **INFORMAL**

To tremble visibly from fear, cold, or nerves.

When the police knocked, he was *shaking like a leaf*.

Courage & Composure

keep a stiff upper lip **NEUTRAL**

To stay calm and hide your emotions in the face of difficulty or distress.

However bad the news, his father always told him to *keep a stiff upper lip*.

Note: Strongly associated with traditional British reserve; a trembling lip betrays emotion, so a steady one signals self-control.

keep one's chin up **INFORMAL**

To stay cheerful and resilient in a hard situation.

It's been a tough year, but she's managed to *keep her chin up* throughout.

pull oneself together **NEUTRAL**

To regain control of your emotions after being upset, panicked, or distracted.

Give me a minute to *pull myself together* and I'll be fine.

Note: Reflexive — the pronoun must agree with the subject (*pull yourself together, he pulled himself together*).

take it in one's stride **NEUTRAL**

To deal with a difficulty calmly, without getting upset or thrown off course.

| The schedule changed three times, but the crew *took it in their stride*.

Note: American English spells it *take it in stride*, without the possessive. From a horse clearing an obstacle without breaking its pace.

Envy & Exasperation

can't stand **INFORMAL**

To strongly dislike someone or something; to be unable to tolerate it.

| I *can't stand* the sound of people chewing with their mouths open.

Note: Followed by a noun or an *-ing* form — “I *can't stand* waiting,” not “to wait.”

fed up **INFORMAL**

Annoyed, bored, and out of patience with a situation.

| I'm absolutely *fed up* with the trains being late every single morning.

green with envy **INFORMAL**

Intensely jealous of what someone else has.

| When she showed off the holiday photos, we were all *green with envy*.

Note: The link between green and jealousy goes back to Shakespeare's “green-eyed monster” in *Othello*.

sick to death of **INFORMAL**

Utterly tired of and exasperated by something; a strong form of *fed up*.

| Voters say they're *sick to death of* hearing the same empty promises.

LEARNER'S TIP

Emotional idioms are some of the most register-sensitive expressions in English, so choose with the setting in mind. *Over the moon*, *down in the dumps*, and *hit the roof* are warm and informal — perfect with friends, but jarring in a formal report, where *delighted*, *disheartened*, or *extremely angry* read better. A few, such as *with a heavy heart* and *keep a stiff upper lip*, carry a more dignified, literary tone and suit serious or ceremonial moments. When in doubt, picture saying the phrase aloud to the person in front of you: if it would raise an eyebrow, reach for the neutral version instead.

Idioms of Time & Money

Time and money are the two currencies we all spend, so it is no surprise that English is rich in expressions for racing the clock and watching the wallet. This chapter brings the two themes together, from working around the clock to paying through the nose.

Time

a stitch in time saves nine NEUTRAL

Dealing with a problem promptly prevents it from becoming much bigger later.

| Service the boiler now — *a stitch in time saves nine*.

Note: A proverb: one stitch in torn cloth today saves you sewing nine once the tear has spread.

against the clock NEUTRAL

Working hurriedly to finish before a fast-approaching deadline.

| The rescue team was working *against the clock* to reach the trapped hikers before dark.

ahead of one's time NEUTRAL

Having ideas or methods too advanced to be fully understood or appreciated in one's own era.

| The architect was *ahead of her time*, designing solar homes decades before they caught on.

around the clock NEUTRAL

All day and all night, without stopping.

| Engineers worked *around the clock* to get the network back online.

Note: As an adjective it is hyphenated — *round-the-clock care*. British English often uses *round* rather than *around*.

at the eleventh hour NEUTRAL

At the very last possible moment, just before a deadline or disaster.

| A buyer stepped in *at the eleventh hour* and saved the factory from closing.

Note: From the biblical parable of labourers hired at the eleventh hour of a twelve-hour working day.

beat the clock INFORMAL

To finish or arrive before time runs out.

| We posted the application at 11:58 and just *beat the clock*.

behind the times NEUTRAL

Old-fashioned; out of touch with current ideas, fashions, or technology.

| Their booking system is hopelessly *behind the times* — everything is still done on paper.

better late than never INFORMAL

It is preferable for something to happen late than not at all.

| He finally apologised after a year — *better late than never*, I suppose.

burn the midnight oil NEUTRAL

To work or study late into the night.

| She's been *burning the midnight oil* all week to finish her thesis.

Note: Dates from the days when people literally lit oil lamps to read and write after dark.

call it a day INFORMAL

To decide to stop working on something, for now or for good.

| We've been at this for nine hours — let's *call it a day*.

Note: Can also mean ending a career or relationship: "After forty years on the force, he decided to *call it a day*."

in no time INFORMAL

Very quickly; almost immediately.

| Follow the recipe and you'll have dinner on the table *in no time*.

in the long run NEUTRAL

Over an extended period of time; considering the eventual outcome rather than the immediate one.

| Buying quality boots costs more now but saves money *in the long run*.

in the nick of time INFORMAL

At the last critical moment, just before it would have been too late.

| The goalkeeper got a fingertip to the ball *in the nick of time*.

Note: Here *nick* means a precise notch or point — the exact instant before disaster.

kill time INFORMAL

To pass the time idly while waiting for something.

| We had three hours before the flight, so we *killed time* browsing the bookshop.

on the dot INFORMAL

Exactly on time; at the precise minute.

| The 8:15 train pulled in *on the dot*, as always.

Note: Often paired with a time — "Be there at nine *on the dot*." The "dot" is the dot marking the minute on a clock face.

once in a blue moon INFORMAL

Very rarely; hardly ever.

| My brother lives abroad now, so we only see him *once in a blue moon*.

Note: A "blue moon" is a second full moon in a single calendar month — genuinely uncommon, roughly every two to three years.

sb's days are numbered NEUTRAL

Someone or something is approaching the end of its existence or usefulness.

| With sales falling for years, the old high-street chain's *days are numbered*.

sooner or later NEUTRAL

At some point in the future, even if you cannot say exactly when; inevitably.

| *Sooner or later*, they'll realise the old software has to be replaced.

take a rain check **INFORMAL**

To politely decline an invitation now while suggesting you would accept another time.

| I'm swamped this week — can I *take a rain check* on lunch?

Note: From American baseball, where a *rain check* was a ticket stub letting fans return if a game was rained off.

the crack of dawn **INFORMAL**

Daybreak; very early in the morning.

| To beat the traffic, we set off at *the crack of dawn*.

time flies **INFORMAL**

Time seems to pass surprisingly quickly.

| Is it really September already? *Time flies*.

Note: Often extended to “*time flies* when you’re having fun.” From the Latin *tempus fugit*.

Money

a cash cow **INFORMAL**

A product or business that reliably generates large, steady profits.

| The basic model is dull, but it’s the company’s biggest *cash cow*.

a gravy train **INFORMAL**

A situation in which someone makes easy money for little effort, often unfairly.

| Critics say the consultancy contracts have become a *gravy train* for insiders.

Note: Usually disapproving. Here *gravy* means easy or unearned money — the rich extra on top.

a nest egg **NEUTRAL**

A sum of money saved up steadily for the future.

| They built up a tidy *nest egg* over the years for their retirement.

Note: From the old trick of leaving a real or fake egg in a nest to encourage a hen to keep laying.

a penny for your thoughts **INFORMAL**

A friendly way of asking what someone quiet is thinking about.

| You’ve been staring out of that window for ages — *a penny for your thoughts*?

a rip-off **INFORMAL**

Something far too expensive for what it is; a swindle.

| Twelve pounds for a small coffee and a muffin? What *a rip-off*.

Note: The verb form is *rip sb off* — “That garage *ripped us off*.”

born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth **INFORMAL**

Born into a wealthy, privileged family.

| He was *born with a silver spoon in his mouth* and never had to work a day for it.

Note: Wealthy families once gave silver spoons as christening gifts, so owning one from birth signalled money.

break the bank INFORMAL

To cost more than you can afford; to use up all your money.

| A weekend away won't *break the bank* if we book early.

bring home the bacon INFORMAL

To earn the money that supports a household; to achieve a desired result.

| With both parents working, they both *bring home the bacon* these days.

cook the books INFORMAL

To falsify a company's financial records, usually to hide fraud.

| The auditors discovered the firm had been *cooking the books* for years.

Note: "The books" are the accounts; *cook* here means to tamper with or fake.

cost an arm and a leg INFORMAL

To be very expensive.

| Heating an old house like this *costs an arm and a leg* in winter.

flat broke INFORMAL

Completely out of money.

| I'd love to join you, but I'm *flat broke* until payday.

foot the bill NEUTRAL

To pay for something, especially something expensive.

| In the end, taxpayers had to *foot the bill* for the failed project.

Note: From totalling a bill and writing the sum at the foot, or bottom, of the page.

go Dutch INFORMAL

To share the cost of a meal or outing equally, each paying their own way.

| There's no need to treat me — let's just *go Dutch*.

in the black NEUTRAL

In credit; making a profit or having a positive balance.

| After a brutal first year, the cafe is finally *in the black*.

Note: The opposite of *in the red*. Bookkeepers traditionally wrote positive figures in black ink.

in the red NEUTRAL

In debt; spending more than you earn or overdrawn.

| Three loss-making branches pushed the whole company *in the red*.

Note: From the old practice of recording debts and losses in red ink in the ledger.

make ends meet NEUTRAL

To earn just enough money to cover your basic living costs.

| On a single wage, the family is struggling to *make ends meet*.

money to burn INFORMAL

So much money that you can spend it freely, even carelessly.

| Unless you've got *money to burn*, skip the extended warranty.

on a shoestring **INFORMAL**

On a very small budget.

| They travelled across Asia *on a shoestring*, staying in hostels the whole way.

pay through the nose **INFORMAL**

To pay an unreasonably high price for something.

| If you buy tickets at the door, you'll *pay through the nose*.

pinch pennies **INFORMAL**

To be extremely careful and sparing with money.

| We had to *pinch pennies* as students, living on pasta and tinned soup.

Note: A *penny-pincher* is the noun — sometimes affectionate, sometimes a charge of stinginess.

rolling in it **INFORMAL**

Extremely rich.

| After the company floated, the founders were absolutely *rolling in it*.

save for a rainy day **NEUTRAL**

To put money aside for a future time of need.

| My grandmother always told me to *save for a rainy day*.

tighten one's belt **NEUTRAL**

To cut back on spending and live more frugally.

| With prices rising, a lot of households are having to *tighten their belts*.

Note: The image is of losing weight in lean times and needing a notch tighter on the belt.

worth its weight in gold **NEUTRAL**

Extremely valuable or useful.

| A reliable babysitter is *worth her weight in gold*.

MONEY IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

Money idioms are everywhere in the world of work, and several have become standard professional vocabulary rather than mere slang. A profitable division is a *cash cow*; a company that is losing money is *in the red* and aims to get back *in the black*; a careful firm runs *on a shoestring* until it can stop *pinching pennies*. Used well, these add colour to a report or pitch. A word of caution, though: keep the more pointed ones — *cook the books*, *a gravy train*, *a rip-off* — for informal moments, since each carries an accusation of dishonesty that can land you in trouble if you use it loosely about a real client or colleague.

Idioms of Work, Success & Effort

The workplace runs on a language of its own — a shorthand of effort, ambition, and quiet competition. Master these expressions and you will not only understand the meeting; you will sound like you belong in it.

Getting Started & Effort

bite off more than one can chew INFORMAL

To take on a task or commitment that is too big or difficult to manage.

By agreeing to three deadlines in one week, Marcus had clearly *bitten off more than he could chew*.

burn out NEUTRAL

To become physically or emotionally exhausted from sustained overwork or stress.

She loved the job at first, but after two years of eighty-hour weeks she completely *burned out*.

Note: Also a noun, written as one word: *burnout*. The verb is intransitive here — you cannot “burn out the job.”

climb the ladder NEUTRAL

To rise steadily through the ranks of an organisation or profession.

He started in the mailroom and slowly *climbed the ladder* to vice president.

cut corners INFORMAL

To do something cheaply or quickly by leaving out steps, usually harming quality or safety.

The builders *cut corners* on the wiring, and the inspector failed the whole project.

get down to business NEUTRAL

To stop chatting or delaying and start dealing with the serious matter at hand.

Once the coffee was poured, the committee decided to *get down to business*.

Note: Often follows small talk. A common variant is *get down to brass tacks*, meaning to focus on the practical details.

get the ball rolling INFORMAL

To start an activity or process; to set things in motion.

Let's *get the ball rolling* with a quick round of introductions.

go the extra mile NEUTRAL

To make more effort than is required or expected in order to do something well.

Our agent *went the extra mile*, staying late to make sure every detail was right.

hit the ground running NEUTRAL

To begin a new job or task with great energy and to be productive immediately.

The new director *hit the ground running*, closing two major deals in her first month.

jump through hoops **INFORMAL**

To do a series of difficult or annoying things in order to achieve something.

| We had to *jump through hoops* just to get the budget approved.

Note: From circus animals trained to leap through hoops — it implies the demands are tiresome and somewhat pointless.

learn the ropes **INFORMAL**

To become familiar with how a particular job or activity is done.

| Give the intern a few weeks to *learn the ropes* before you hand over the accounts.

Note: Nautical in origin — new sailors had to learn the many ropes that worked a ship's rigging. Compare *show sb the ropes*.

pull one's weight **NEUTRAL**

To do one's fair share of the work in a group or team.

| The project only failed because two members never *pulled their weight*.

put one's nose to the grindstone **INFORMAL**

To work hard and steadily, with full concentration, for a sustained period.

| With finals approaching, she *put her nose to the grindstone* and stopped going out.

Note: Also *keep one's nose to the grindstone*. Originally referred to sharpening tools or blades on a rotating stone.

raise the bar **NEUTRAL**

To set a higher standard or expectation than before.

| Their last album really *raised the bar* for the whole genre.

take the bull by the horns **INFORMAL**

To deal with a difficult or risky situation directly and boldly.

| Instead of waiting for the problem to grow, she *took the bull by the horns* and confronted her manager.

think outside the box **NEUTRAL**

To approach a problem in an unconventional, creative way.

| We won't beat the competition by copying them — we need to *think outside the box*.

Note: A business cliché now, so use with care in writing. It comes from a classic nine-dot puzzle solved by drawing beyond the implied square.

Doing Well (and Badly)

ahead of the game **INFORMAL**

In a position of advantage; more advanced or better prepared than others.

| By learning to code early, she stayed *ahead of the game* when the market shifted.

an uphill battle **NEUTRAL**

A struggle that is very difficult to win because the odds are against you.

| Convincing the board to fund the idea was an *uphill battle* from the start.

a tough nut to crack INFORMAL

A problem that is hard to solve, or a person who is hard to understand or persuade.

| The encryption was a *tough nut to crack*, and the team spent weeks on it.

back to the drawing board INFORMAL

Used to say that an attempt has failed and you must start planning again from the beginning.

| The prototype leaked, so it was *back to the drawing board* for the engineers.

Note: Usually said with a sigh of resignation. The phrase gained popularity from a 1941 cartoon caption.

go down in flames INFORMAL

To fail suddenly, spectacularly, and completely.

| His campaign *went down in flames* after the scandal broke.

Note: Evokes a crashing aircraft. The failure is dramatic and very public, not quiet.

hit the nail on the head INFORMAL

To describe exactly what is causing a situation or problem; to be precisely right.

| When you said we lacked focus, you *hit the nail on the head*.

land on one's feet INFORMAL

To end up in a good or secure position after a difficult or uncertain period.

| Despite the layoff, Priya *landed on her feet* with an even better role a month later.

Note: From the way a cat twists to land safely. It implies good fortune as much as skill.

pass with flying colours NEUTRAL

To succeed at something, especially a test, very easily and impressively.

| She revised for weeks and *passed with flying colours*.

Note: Nautical again — a victorious ship returned to port with its flags (colours) still flying high.

sail through INFORMAL

To succeed at or complete something with great ease.

| He *sailed through* the interview and had an offer by the afternoon.

throw in the towel INFORMAL

To give up or admit defeat.

| After the third rejection, she nearly *threw in the towel* on the whole idea.

Note: From boxing, where a fighter's corner throws a towel into the ring to stop the bout. Compare *throw in the sponge*.

Office & Business Talk

a ballpark figure INFORMAL

A rough estimate or approximate number, not an exact one.

| I can't give you a final quote yet, but a *ballpark figure* would be around ten thousand.

a paper trail NEUTRAL

A series of documents that record a sequence of events or transactions.

| Always keep emails and receipts — a clear *paper trail* protects you if there's a dispute.

cover all the bases INFORMAL

To deal with every part of a situation so that nothing is overlooked.

| We rehearsed every question to make sure we'd *covered all the bases*.

in the pipeline NEUTRAL

In the process of being developed, prepared, or arranged; coming soon.

| We have two new products *in the pipeline* for the autumn launch.

move the goalposts INFORMAL

To unfairly change the rules or requirements of something after it has already begun.

| Every time we met the target, the client *moved the goalposts* and asked for more.

red tape NEUTRAL

Excessive official rules and procedures that make something slow and difficult.

| Importing the equipment was buried in months of bureaucratic *red tape*.

Note: Uncountable — say *a lot of red tape*, not *a red tape*. Named for the ribbon once used to bind official documents.

run a tight ship INFORMAL

To manage an organisation or team in a strict, well-organised, and efficient way.

| The new manager *runs a tight ship* — everything is on time and nothing is wasted.

the ball is in your court INFORMAL

It is now your turn or responsibility to take action or make a decision.

| I've made my offer; the *ball is in your court* now.

touch base INFORMAL

To make brief contact with someone to share or check information.

| Let's *touch base* on Friday to see how the numbers are looking.

Note: Yet another baseball term, now firmly office jargon. Followed by *with* (a person) or *on* (a topic).

on the same page INFORMAL

In agreement, or sharing the same understanding of a situation.

| Before we present, let's make sure everyone is *on the same page* about the budget.

Note: About shared understanding, not necessarily approval — you can be on the same page yet still dislike the plan.

MEETING-SPEAK

Modern meetings run on a handful of stock phrases. To *touch base* is to check in briefly; to *circle back* is to return to a point later (“Let’s circle back to the budget after lunch”); and being *on the same page* means everyone shares the same understanding. They are convenient and widely understood — but overused, they can sound like empty corporate filler, so reach for plain words when clarity matters more than fitting in.

Idioms of People & Relationships

Few subjects fill everyday talk like other people — who we click with, who we clash with, who we love and who we trust. English has a rich vocabulary for every stage, from the first hello to the final falling-out.

Getting Along

break the ice INFORMAL

To say or do something that eases tension and gets people talking, especially among strangers.

| A silly joke about the weather was enough to *break the ice* with the new neighbours.

Note: The opening remark or game itself is an *icebreaker*. Originally nautical — ships once broke harbour ice to clear a path.

build bridges NEUTRAL

To create or improve good relations between people or groups, especially after conflict.

| The new mayor worked hard to *build bridges* between the two communities.

Note: The opposite is *burn bridges* — to destroy a relationship so badly that return is impossible.

get along NEUTRAL

To have a friendly, harmonious relationship with someone.

| The two of them *get along* surprisingly well for ex-business partners.

get on like a house on fire INFORMAL

To get along extremely well and become friendly very quickly.

| I worried they'd clash, but they *got on like a house on fire* from the first minute.

hit it off INFORMAL

To quickly become friendly and like each other on first meeting.

| We *hit it off* at the conference and have been close ever since.

on the same wavelength INFORMAL

Thinking in a similar way and understanding each other easily.

| My co-writer and I are completely *on the same wavelength* — we finish each other's sentences.

see eye to eye NEUTRAL

To agree with someone or share the same opinion.

| The partners rarely *see eye to eye* on money, but they trust each other completely.

Note: Most common in the negative: *don't see eye to eye*. Followed by *with sb* and *on sth*.

a shoulder to cry on NEUTRAL

A sympathetic person who listens to your troubles and offers comfort.

| After the breakup, her sister was *a shoulder to cry on* for weeks.

win sb over NEUTRAL

To gradually gain someone's support, approval, or affection.

| She was sceptical at first, but his patience eventually *won her over*.

Note: Separable — *win her over*, not *win over her*. The pronoun must sit between the verb and the particle.

Falling Out

bury the hatchet INFORMAL

To make peace and end a quarrel or disagreement.

| After years of silence, the brothers finally *buried the hatchet* at their mother's wedding.

Note: From a Native American custom of burying weapons to mark peace. Compare *let bygones be bygones*.

drift apart NEUTRAL

To gradually become less close or emotionally connected over time.

| After university, the old gang slowly *drifted apart*.

get off on the wrong foot INFORMAL

To start a relationship or situation badly.

| We *got off on the wrong foot* when I forgot her name, but we're good friends now.

give sb the cold shoulder INFORMAL

To deliberately ignore someone or treat them in an unfriendly way.

| Ever since the argument, he's been *giving me the cold shoulder* at the office.

Note: A pointed, intentional snub. The object goes after *give*: *give him the cold shoulder*.

on speaking terms NEUTRAL

Friendly enough with someone to talk to them, especially after a disagreement.

| They're barely *on speaking terms* since the inheritance dispute.

rub sb the wrong way INFORMAL

To irritate or annoy someone, often without meaning to.

| Something about his confident tone *rubbed her the wrong way*.

Note: The British variant is *rub sb up the wrong way*. The image is of stroking an animal's fur against its grain.

Love & Friendship

a match made in heaven INFORMAL

A couple or pairing that is perfectly suited.

| They share every hobby and finish each other's jokes — a real *match made in heaven*.

a third wheel INFORMAL

An unwanted extra person present with a couple who would rather be alone.

| I felt like *a third wheel* tagging along on their date night.

head over heels INFORMAL

Completely and deeply in love.

He fell *head over heels* for her within a week of meeting.

Note: Usually *head over heels in love*. The phrase is slightly illogical — the head is normally over the heels — but it conveys being turned upside down.

lead sb on INFORMAL

To make someone wrongly believe you are romantically interested in them, or to mislead them generally.

She never meant to *lead him on*; she just enjoyed the attention.

Note: Separable — *lead him on*, not *lead on him*. Carries a clear note of disapproval.

on the rocks INFORMAL

Experiencing serious difficulties and likely to fail (of a relationship).

After months of arguing, their marriage was clearly *on the rocks*.

pop the question INFORMAL

To ask someone to marry you.

He *popped the question* at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Note: “The question” always means the marriage proposal. The verb *pop* captures its sudden, nervous timing.

tie the knot INFORMAL

To get married.

The couple *tyed the knot* in a small ceremony by the sea.

wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve NEUTRAL

To show one’s emotions openly rather than hiding them.

You always know how Tom feels — he *wears his heart on his sleeve*.

Note: Often appears in Shakespeare; the modern sense praises emotional honesty while gently noting vulnerability.

Family & Trust

birds of a feather INFORMAL

People who are similar in character, interests, or behaviour.

The two collectors are *birds of a feather* — obsessive and proud of it.

blood is thicker than water NEUTRAL

Family loyalty is stronger than other relationships.

They argue constantly, but when trouble comes, *blood is thicker than water*.

Note: A proverb, usually quoted whole. It asserts that family bonds outweigh those of friends.

a fair-weather friend NEUTRAL

Someone who is a loyal friend only when things are going well, and disappears in hard times.

When the money ran out, his *fair-weather friends* vanished one by one.

go way back **INFORMAL**

To have known each other for a very long time.

Don't worry about him — we *go way back*, all the way to primary school.

have sb's back **INFORMAL**

To be ready to support, defend, or protect someone.

Whatever happens in that meeting, I've *got your back*.

Note: Usually in the form *have got sb's back*. From the idea of guarding the vulnerable side a person cannot see.

keep in touch **NEUTRAL**

To stay in contact with someone over time.

Promise me you'll *keep in touch* after you move abroad.

Note: Followed by *with sb*. The opposite, losing contact, is *lose touch*.

like two peas in a pod **INFORMAL**

Two people who are very similar or always together.

The twins are *like two peas in a pod*, right down to the way they laugh.

lose touch **NEUTRAL**

To gradually stop communicating with someone.

We were close as kids, but we *lost touch* after his family moved away.

Note: A second sense exists: *lose touch with reality* or current trends means to stop understanding them.

stab sb in the back **INFORMAL**

To betray someone who trusts you, especially secretly.

She trusted her deputy completely, so the leak felt like being *stabbed in the back*.

Note: The noun is *a backstabber*. The betrayal is treacherous and hidden, not an open attack.

the apple of one's eye **NEUTRAL**

A person who is cherished above all others.

His youngest daughter has always been *the apple of his eye*.

Note: An old expression, found in the Bible, where the "apple" once meant the pupil of the eye — something precious and carefully guarded.

two-faced **INFORMAL**

Insincere; saying pleasant things to someone's face while criticising them behind their back.

I can't stand how *two-faced* he is — all smiles to your face, all sneers behind it.

Note: An adjective, always insulting. Linked to the two-faced Roman god Janus.

DON'T MIX THESE UP

Two common idioms sound alike but mean very different things. To *see eye to eye* (with someone) means to **agree** — "The partners don't see eye to eye on strategy." To *keep an eye on* (someone or something) means to **watch or supervise** — "Can you keep an eye on the kids while I cook?" One is about shared opinions; the other is about careful attention. Swapping them is a frequent learner slip.

Body Idioms

From the top of your head to the soles of your feet, the human body is a goldmine of English expressions. We talk about losing our heads, twisting arms, and getting cold feet — rarely meaning any of it literally. This chapter walks you through the body, part by part, so the images stick.

Head & Face

face the music NEUTRAL

To accept and deal with the unpleasant consequences of one's actions.

| After weeks of dodging his manager, Tom finally had to *face the music* and explain the missing funds.

Note: Often used when punishment or criticism is unavoidable; the “music” is the trouble you must endure.

head in the clouds INFORMAL

Out of touch with reality; daydreaming or impractical.

| She's a brilliant artist, but she has her *head in the clouds* when it comes to paying bills.

head over heels INFORMAL

Completely and helplessly in love.

| Within a month of meeting, the two of them were *head over heels* and talking about marriage.

Note: Originally “heels over head” (a somersault); the modern, scrambled version stuck. Usually paired with *in love*.

keep a straight face NEUTRAL

To avoid laughing or smiling, especially when something is funny.

| I could barely *keep a straight face* while the toddler solemnly explained why the dog ate his homework.

lose one's head NEUTRAL

To panic or lose self-control in a difficult situation.

| The captain stayed calm in the storm; a lesser sailor would have *lost his head*.

Note: Contrast with *keep one's head*, meaning to stay composed.

off the top of one's head INFORMAL

From memory, without checking or careful thought; as a rough guess.

| “*Off the top of my head*, I'd say about fifty people came,” she said, “but let me count the tickets.”

Note: Signals that the answer is approximate and unverified — a polite hedge before an estimate.

Eyes, Ears & Mouth

all ears INFORMAL

Listening eagerly and attentively.

| “Tell me everything about the interview — I'm *all ears*,” said Grandma, leaning forward.

a frog in one's throat **INFORMAL**

A temporary hoarseness or loss of voice, often from a dry or tickly throat.

Excuse me — I've got *a frog in my throat* this morning, so the lecture may be a little croaky.

Note: Describes a passing, physical condition, not a permanent voice problem.

bite one's tongue **NEUTRAL**

To stop oneself from saying something, especially a criticism or retort.

I wanted to tell him his plan was hopeless, but I *bit my tongue* and just nodded.

Note: Implies deliberate self-restraint; you have an opinion but choose silence.

get up sb's nose **INFORMAL**

To irritate or annoy someone. (Chiefly British.)

His constant humming really *gets up my nose* during long car journeys.

Note: British informal; an American speaker would more likely say *get on my nerves*.

keep an eye on sth/sb **NEUTRAL**

To watch carefully; to look after or supervise.

Could you *keep an eye on* the soup while I answer the door?

my lips are sealed **INFORMAL**

A promise to keep a secret and tell no one.

"Don't worry about the surprise party," Priya whispered. "*My lips are sealed.*"

pay through the nose **INFORMAL**

To pay an excessively high price for something.

We *paid through the nose* for hotel rooms during the festival weekend.

Note: Always conveys resentment at being overcharged.

play it by ear **INFORMAL**

To improvise; to decide how to act as a situation develops rather than planning ahead.

We don't know if it'll rain, so let's just *play it by ear* and pack an umbrella.

Note: From music — playing without sheet music, by listening.

raise eyebrows **NEUTRAL**

To cause surprise, mild disapproval, or suspicion.

Her decision to resign at the peak of her career *raised eyebrows* across the company.

see eye to eye **NEUTRAL**

To agree fully; to share the same view.

The two directors rarely *see eye to eye* on budgets, but they respect each other.

Note: Usually negative or conditional: people often say they *don't* see eye to eye.

turn a blind eye **NEUTRAL**

To deliberately ignore something wrong that one knows is happening.

Management *turned a blind eye* to the long lunch breaks as long as the work got done.

Note: Said to come from Admiral Nelson, who raised a telescope to his blind eye to ignore a signal to retreat.

Hands & Arms

get out of hand **NEUTRAL**

To become uncontrollable or chaotic.

| What started as a friendly debate quickly *got out of hand* and turned into a shouting match.

give sb a hand **INFORMAL**

To help someone. • Also: to applaud someone.

| Could you *give me a hand* carrying these boxes up the stairs?

Note: “Give her a hand” can also mean “applaud her,” depending on context.

lend a hand **NEUTRAL**

To offer help with a task.

| When the flood hit, neighbours came from all over to *lend a hand*.

a rule of thumb **NEUTRAL**

A rough, practical guideline based on experience rather than exact measurement.

| As *a rule of thumb*, you should drink water before you feel thirsty.

Note: Implies an approximation that works in most cases but isn’t a strict rule.

twist sb’s arm **INFORMAL**

To pressure or persuade someone to do something they are reluctant to do.

| I wasn’t going to order dessert, but the waiter *twisted my arm* with talk of warm chocolate cake.

Note: Often light-hearted; “You’ve twisted my arm” means “Fine, I’ll happily agree.”

Heart & Gut

by the skin of one’s teeth **INFORMAL**

Only just; by the narrowest of margins.

| We caught the last train *by the skin of our teeth*, jumping on as the doors closed.

Note: A biblical phrase (Job 19:20); always describes a very narrow escape or success.

get sth off one’s chest **INFORMAL**

To say something that has been worrying you, so as to feel relieved.

| She finally *got it off her chest* and told her sister how hurt she’d felt for years.

get under sb’s skin **INFORMAL**

To irritate or annoy someone deeply. • Less commonly, to fascinate or obsess someone.

| Don’t let his snide comments *get under your skin* — he’s only trying to provoke you.

Note: The annoyance sense is most common, but it can also mean “to captivate,” as in a song that gets under your skin.

a gut feeling **INFORMAL**

An instinctive sense or intuition, not based on reasoning.

| I had *a gut feeling* the deal would fall through, and sure enough it did.

have a heart **INFORMAL**

To show compassion or mercy; a plea for kindness.

“Oh, *have a heart* — let the poor kid finish his ice cream before we leave,” she said.

Note: Most often used as an appeal: “Have a heart!”

lose heart **NEUTRAL**

To become discouraged and give up hope.

After three rejections, he began to *lose heart*, but his mentor urged him to keep trying.

Note: Don’t confuse with *lose one’s heart* (to fall in love) — the article changes the meaning entirely.

a sweet tooth **INFORMAL**

A strong liking for sugary foods.

My father has such *a sweet tooth* that he keeps a chocolate stash in his desk.

thick-skinned **NEUTRAL**

Not easily offended or upset by criticism.

You need to be *thick-skinned* to survive in journalism, where everyone has an opinion about your work.

Note: The opposite is *thin-skinned*, meaning overly sensitive.

a weight off one’s shoulders **INFORMAL**

A great relief after worry or responsibility is removed.

Handing in the final report was *a weight off my shoulders* — I slept properly for the first time in weeks.

Legs & Feet

get a foot in the door **INFORMAL**

To gain an initial opportunity that may lead to bigger things.

The internship doesn’t pay much, but it’s a way to *get a foot in the door* at a top studio.

Note: From door-to-door salespeople who literally wedged a foot to stop the door closing.

get cold feet **INFORMAL**

To become nervous and hesitant about something just before doing it.

He’d planned to propose all week, but he *got cold feet* at the last moment.

pull sb’s leg **INFORMAL**

To tease someone playfully by telling them something untrue.

“You won the lottery? Stop *pulling my leg!*” she laughed.

Note: Always good-natured; for a malicious deception you’d say *trick* or *deceive* instead.

put one’s foot in it **INFORMAL**

To say something tactless or embarrassing by accident.

I really *put my foot in it* when I asked about her husband — they’d divorced last year.

Note: The American variant is *put one’s foot in one’s mouth*.

shoot oneself in the foot **INFORMAL**

To harm one's own cause through careless words or actions.

| By insulting the client in that email, he completely *shot himself in the foot*.

stand on one's own two feet **NEUTRAL**

To be independent and self-reliant, especially financially.

| After college, she was determined to *stand on her own two feet* and stop relying on her parents.

LEARNER'S TIP

Body idioms shift their meaning with tiny changes to articles and possessives. *Lose heart* means to give up hope, while *lose one's heart* means to fall in love; *keep one's head* means to stay calm, while *lose one's head* means to panic. When you learn one of these expressions, memorise it as a whole chunk — including its exact little words — rather than translating it piece by piece.

Animal Idioms

English keeps a whole menagerie hidden in plain sight. We let cats out of bags, take bulls by their horns, and wait until the cows come home. Once you spot the animals lurking in everyday speech, you'll hear them everywhere. Here is the zoo, cage by cage.

Cats & Dogs

a dog-eat-dog world INFORMAL

A ruthlessly competitive environment in which people will harm others to succeed.

“It’s *a dog-eat-dog world* out there,” the old broker warned the new recruits.

Note: Used as a modifier too: *a dog-eat-dog industry*. Don’t write “doggy dog,” a common mishearing.

curiosity killed the cat INFORMAL

A warning that being too inquisitive can lead to trouble.

“Why do you want to know what’s in the safe? *Curiosity killed the cat*,” he said with a wink.

fight like cats and dogs INFORMAL

To argue or quarrel constantly and fiercely.

The twins adore each other now, but as children they *fought like cats and dogs*.

go to the dogs INFORMAL

To decline badly; to deteriorate in quality or condition.

Since the new owners took over, this once-grand hotel has really *gone to the dogs*.

let sleeping dogs lie NEUTRAL

To avoid reopening an old problem or conflict that is currently causing no trouble.

We could reopen the inheritance dispute, but honestly it’s wiser to *let sleeping dogs lie*.

Note: Advice not to provoke trouble that is currently dormant.

let the cat out of the bag INFORMAL

To reveal a secret, often accidentally.

It was meant to be a surprise, but Dad *let the cat out of the bag* over dinner.

Note: Compare *spill the beans*, which means the same thing.

raining cats and dogs INFORMAL

Raining very heavily.

We’d planned a picnic, but it was *raining cats and dogs* all afternoon.

Note: A little old-fashioned now; many speakers prefer *pouring* or *bucketing down*.

sick as a dog INFORMAL

Very ill, especially with a stomach upset or bad cold.

I was *sick as a dog* after the seafood and spent the whole night in the bathroom.

the cat's whiskers INFORMAL

An excellent or superior person or thing. (Chiefly British.)

| In his new suit, he thought he was *the cat's whiskers*.

Note: A 1920s expression; close cousins are *the cat's pyjamas* and *the bee's knees*.

work like a dog INFORMAL

To work extremely hard.

| She *worked like a dog* for two years to get the bakery off the ground.

Birds

a bird's-eye view NEUTRAL

A view from high above. • A general overview of a subject.

| From the rooftop café you get *a bird's-eye view* of the entire harbour.

Note: The figurative sense — a broad summary — is just as common: *a bird's-eye view of the economy*.

a little bird told me INFORMAL

Used to say you heard something without revealing your source.

| "*A little bird told me* it's your birthday tomorrow," she said with a grin.

kill the goose that lays the golden eggs NEUTRAL

To destroy a reliable source of profit through greed or short-sightedness.

| Raising rents so high that all the tenants leave would *kill the goose that lays the golden eggs*.

Note: From Aesop's fable; often shortened to *kill the golden goose*.

kill two birds with one stone NEUTRAL

To achieve two aims with a single action.

| By cycling to work I *kill two birds with one stone* — I save money and stay fit.

the early bird catches the worm NEUTRAL

Those who act promptly gain an advantage over those who delay.

| Tickets sell out fast, so book early — *the early bird catches the worm*.

Horses

a dark horse NEUTRAL

A person whose abilities or intentions are little known but may surprise everyone.

| Nobody expected the junior clerk to win the contract — he turned out to be *a dark horse*.

beat a dead horse INFORMAL

To waste effort on something already settled or hopeless.

| The vote is over; arguing about it now is just *beating a dead horse*.

Note: British speakers often say *flog a dead horse*.

eat like a horse INFORMAL

To eat a very large amount of food.

For someone so slim, he *eats like a horse* — three helpings at every meal.

get back on the horse INFORMAL

To try again after a failure or setback.

The startup folded, but she dusted herself off and *got back on the horse* within months.

Note: Fuller form: *get back on the horse that threw you*.

hold your horses INFORMAL

Wait a moment; slow down and be patient.

“*Hold your horses* — we haven’t even read the contract yet,” the lawyer cautioned.

straight from the horse’s mouth INFORMAL

From the original, most reliable source.

I heard about the merger *straight from the horse’s mouth* — the CEO told me herself.

Note: From horse racing, where a tip was most trustworthy if it came from the horse itself.

On the Farm

a leopard can’t change its spots NEUTRAL

People cannot change their essential nature.

He promised to be more honest, but *a leopard can’t change its spots*.

pig out SLANG

To eat greedily and to excess.

We *pigged out* on pizza and ice cream while binge-watching the whole series.

Note: Separable with the food given by *on*: *pig out on snacks*.

take the bull by the horns NEUTRAL

To deal with a difficult situation boldly and directly.

Instead of stalling, she *took the bull by the horns* and called the angry customer herself.

until the cows come home INFORMAL

For a very long, indefinite time.

You can argue about politics *until the cows come home*, but you won’t change his mind.

when pigs fly INFORMAL

Never; used to say something is impossible.

“He’ll apologise *when pigs fly*,” she scoffed.

Note: A sarcastic way of saying “never.”

Other Creatures

a fish out of water **NEUTRAL**

A person who feels uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings.

| At the formal gala, in his old jeans, he felt like *a fish out of water*.

a snake in the grass **INFORMAL**

A treacherous person who pretends to be a friend.

| Watch what you tell him — he's *a snake in the grass* who'll repeat it to the boss.

a wild goose chase **INFORMAL**

A pointless, time-wasting search or pursuit.

| The anonymous tip sent the detectives on *a wild goose chase* across three counties.

ants in one's pants **INFORMAL**

Restlessness; an inability to keep still.

| The children had *ants in their pants* on the last day before the holidays.

busy as a bee **INFORMAL**

Very busy and industrious.

| Ever since she retired, Grandma has been *busy as a bee* in her garden.

monkey business **INFORMAL**

Mischievous or dishonest behaviour.

| The auditors suspected some *monkey business* in the quarterly accounts.

Note: Ranges from harmless mischief to actual fraud, depending on context.

smell a rat **INFORMAL**

To sense that something is wrong or that one is being deceived.

| When the deal seemed far too generous, the investors began to *smell a rat*.

the bee's knees **INFORMAL**

An outstandingly good person or thing.

| She thinks her new espresso machine is *the bee's knees*.

Note: A playful 1920s coinage; usually said with a touch of irony or affection.

the elephant in the room **NEUTRAL**

An obvious major problem that everyone avoids discussing.

| Nobody mentioned the looming layoffs — the classic *elephant in the room*.

the lion's share **NEUTRAL**

The largest part of something.

| The eldest brother took *the lion's share* of the estate.

Note: From Aesop; means the biggest portion, not merely a fair one.

the rat race **INFORMAL**

The exhausting, competitive struggle of modern working life.

They quit the city, left *the rat race* behind, and opened a vineyard.

REGISTER

Most animal idioms are conversational and best kept out of formal writing. Plainly *informal* ones include *the bee's knees*, *the cat's whiskers*, *raining cats and dogs*, *sick as a dog*, and *a little bird told me*; *pig out* is outright *slang*. By contrast, several are register-neutral and fine in reports or essays: *the elephant in the room*, *the lion's share*, *a fish out of water*, *take the bull by the horns*, and *a leopard can't change its spots*. When in doubt, save the colourful ones for speech.

Food & Drink Idioms

Few subjects feed the imagination like the kitchen. English is stuffed with idioms drawn from cakes, beans, eggs and cheese — tasty little phrases that have almost nothing to do with eating. Here is a full plate of them.

Easy & Difficult

a piece of cake **INFORMAL**

Something very easy to do.

Don't worry about the driving test — once you've practised, it's *a piece of cake*.

in a pickle **INFORMAL**

In a difficult or awkward situation.

We were really *in a pickle* when the car broke down miles from anywhere.

Note: often introduced by *get into* — *I've got myself into a bit of a pickle*.

a recipe for disaster **NEUTRAL**

A situation or plan almost certain to go badly wrong.

Tired drivers on icy roads are *a recipe for disaster*.

too many cooks spoil the broth **NEUTRAL**

A task is done badly when too many people try to control it.

We had five managers redesigning one logo — *too many cooks spoil the broth*.

Note: a proverb; often shortened in speech to just *too many cooks*.

Bread, Cake & Sweets

bread and butter **NEUTRAL**

The main source of someone's income; the basic, ordinary part of something. • As an adjective, everyday and dependable.

Wedding photography is nice, but corporate work is our *bread and butter*.

the best thing since sliced bread **INFORMAL**

An excellent new invention or idea (often said half-jokingly).

He thinks his new phone is *the best thing since sliced bread*.

Note: mildly ironic; can gently mock someone's over-enthusiasm.

butter sb up **INFORMAL**

To flatter someone, usually to get something you want.

She spent all morning *buttering up* the boss before asking for time off.

Note: separable — *butter him up*, not *butter up him*.

eat humble pie NEUTRAL

To admit you were wrong and apologise, often humiliatingly.

| After his confident prediction failed, the pundit had to *eat humble pie* on live TV.

Note: “humble” here is a pun on “umble”, the offal once eaten by servants.

have one’s cake and eat it INFORMAL

To want two good but incompatible things at the same time.

| You can’t keep your weekends free and earn overtime — you can’t *have your cake and eat it*.

the icing on the cake NEUTRAL

An extra good thing that makes an already good situation even better.

| We won the match, and the free pizza afterwards was *the icing on the cake*.

sell like hot cakes INFORMAL

To sell very quickly and in large numbers.

| The limited-edition trainers *sold like hot cakes* within an hour of release.

a slice of the pie INFORMAL

A share of something valuable, such as money or profits.

| Everyone who worked on the project wanted *a slice of the pie*.

Note: also *a piece of the action*; compare “a bigger slice of the pie”.

sugarcoat sth INFORMAL

To make unpleasant news seem more acceptable than it really is.

| I won’t *sugarcoat* it — the results were disappointing.

Fruit & Veg

apples and oranges INFORMAL

Two things so different that comparing them makes no sense.

| Comparing a startup to a multinational is *apples and oranges*.

cool as a cucumber INFORMAL

Very calm and relaxed, especially under pressure.

| While everyone panicked, the pilot stayed *as cool as a cucumber*.

a couch potato INFORMAL

A lazy person who spends a lot of time sitting and watching television.

| Since he retired, my uncle has become a complete *couch potato*.

the cream of the crop NEUTRAL

The very best of a group of people or things.

| These graduates are *the cream of the crop* — we hired all of them.

go bananas INFORMAL

To become extremely excited, angry or irrational.

| The crowd *went bananas* when the band finally came on stage.

Note: can express either delight or fury, depending on context.

a hot potato INFORMAL

A controversial issue that nobody wants to deal with.

| Funding for the new hospital became a political *hot potato*.

small potatoes INFORMAL

Something unimportant or trivial, especially a small amount of money.

| A fifty-pound fine is *small potatoes* for a company that size.

Note: American in origin; the British equivalent is *small beer*.

Beans, Eggs & Cheese

a bad egg INFORMAL

A dishonest or untrustworthy person.

| Most of the team were lovely, but there was one *bad egg*.

Note: slightly old-fashioned; the opposite is *a good egg*.

the big cheese INFORMAL

The most important or powerful person in a group.

| You'll need to ask the *big cheese* before changing the schedule.

full of beans INFORMAL

Lively, energetic and in high spirits.

| The kids were *full of beans* after their afternoon nap.

in a nutshell NEUTRAL

Said when giving a very brief summary of something.

| So, *in a nutshell*, we're over budget and behind schedule.

put all one's eggs in one basket NEUTRAL

To risk everything on a single plan or venture.

| Spread your savings around; don't *put all your eggs in one basket*.

Note: usually negative, warning against over-reliance on one option.

spill the beans INFORMAL

To reveal a secret, often accidentally.

| Come on, *spill the beans* — who got the promotion?

walk on eggshells NEUTRAL

To be extremely careful not to upset or offend someone.

| Since the argument, everyone's been *walking on eggshells* around her.

Cooking & Eating

chew the fat INFORMAL

To chat in a relaxed, leisurely way.

| We sat on the porch *chewing the fat* until well past midnight.

eat one's words NEUTRAL

To admit that something you said earlier was wrong.

| He said we'd never finish in time, but we made him *eat his words*.

Note: compare *eat humble pie*, which adds a sense of humiliation.

not one's cup of tea INFORMAL

Not the kind of thing one enjoys or is interested in.

| Opera's *not really my cup of tea*, but I'll come along.

Note: almost always used in the negative; politely understated.

the salt of the earth NEUTRAL

An honest, decent, reliable person.

| Her grandparents were *the salt of the earth* — kind to everyone.

take sth with a grain of salt NEUTRAL

To treat information with healthy doubt rather than believing it fully.

| He exaggerates, so *take* his stories *with a grain of salt*.

Note: British English often prefers *with a pinch of salt*.

LEARNER'S TIP

Food idioms are everywhere in casual English, but watch the register: phrases like *the big cheese* or *go bananas* are playful and best kept for friendly, informal settings. In a formal report you'd write "the senior decision-maker" rather than "the big cheese." When unsure, save the spicier idioms for conversation.

Idioms of Weather, Nature & Colour

English speakers love to talk about the weather — and they borrow it constantly to talk about feelings, fortunes and difficulties. This chapter gathers the storms, rivers, trees and colours that quietly shape everyday speech.

Weather & Storms

a bolt from the blue NEUTRAL

A sudden, completely unexpected event, usually unwelcome.

| The redundancy notice came as *a bolt from the blue*.

Note: the image is lightning out of a clear blue sky.

the calm before the storm NEUTRAL

A quiet, peaceful period just before a time of trouble or intense activity.

| The empty shop at dawn was *the calm before the storm* of the holiday rush.

come rain or shine NEUTRAL

Whatever happens; no matter the circumstances.

| She goes for her morning run *come rain or shine*.

every cloud has a silver lining NEUTRAL

Every difficult situation has some positive aspect.

| Losing that job led to a better one — *every cloud has a silver lining*.

Note: a proverb; the phrase *a silver lining* can stand alone.

a ray of sunshine INFORMAL

A person or thing that brings happiness to a gloomy situation.

| Amid all the bad news, your visit was a real *ray of sunshine*.

Note: can be used ironically of a gloomy person: *well, aren't you a ray of sunshine?*

a snowball effect NEUTRAL

A process that grows ever larger and faster once it starts.

| One viral post created a *snowball effect* of new subscribers.

snowed under INFORMAL

Overwhelmed with too much work.

| I'd love to help, but I'm completely *snowed under* this week.

steal sb's thunder NEUTRAL

To take attention or credit away from someone else.

| She announced her own news at his party and totally *stole his thunder*.

Note: originates from an 18th-century playwright whose stage thunder-effect was copied by rivals.

a storm in a teacup NEUTRAL

A great deal of fuss about something trivial.

| The scandal turned out to be a *storm in a teacup*.

Note: American English usually says *a tempest in a teapot*.

take sth by storm NEUTRAL

To become extremely successful in a place or field very quickly.

| The young singer took the festival *by storm*.

the tip of the iceberg NEUTRAL

A small, visible part of a much larger hidden problem.

| These complaints are just *the tip of the iceberg*.

under the weather INFORMAL

Slightly ill or unwell.

| I'm feeling a bit *under the weather*, so I'll skip the gym.

weather the storm NEUTRAL

To survive a difficult period without serious harm.

| Small firms that *weathered the storm* emerged stronger.

Water

a drop in the ocean NEUTRAL

An amount too small to make any real difference.

| My donation feels like *a drop in the ocean*, but every bit counts.

Note: American English often says *a drop in the bucket*.

go with the flow INFORMAL

To relax and accept a situation rather than trying to control it.

| We had no fixed plans on holiday — we just *went with the flow*.

in deep water INFORMAL

In serious trouble or difficulty.

| He's *in deep water* after missing three deadlines in a row.

make waves INFORMAL

To cause trouble or attract attention by challenging the status quo.

| The new manager isn't afraid to *make waves*.

test the waters NEUTRAL

To try something cautiously before committing fully.

| We launched in one city to *test the waters* before going national.

water under the bridge INFORMAL

A past event or conflict that is over and no longer worth worrying about.

| We argued years ago, but it's all *water under the bridge* now.

Earth, Trees & Plants

barking up the wrong tree **INFORMAL**

Pursuing a mistaken line of thought or action.

| If you think I broke it, you're *barking up the wrong tree*.

Note: from hunting dogs that bay at the wrong tree after their quarry has fled.

beat around the bush **INFORMAL**

To avoid getting to the point; to speak evasively.

| Stop *beating around the bush* and tell me what happened.

Note: British English also uses *beat about the bush*.

can't see the wood for the trees **NEUTRAL**

To be so caught up in details that you miss the bigger picture.

| Take a step back — you *can't see the wood for the trees*.

Note: American English says *can't see the forest for the trees*.

chase rainbows **NEUTRAL**

To pursue unrealistic or impossible goals.

| Be practical for once instead of *chasing rainbows*.

down to earth **INFORMAL**

Practical, sensible and modest; not pretentious.

| Despite her fame, she's remarkably *down to earth*.

the grass is always greener **NEUTRAL**

Other people's situations always seem better than your own.

| He keeps switching jobs, but *the grass is always greener*.

Note: full proverb: *the grass is always greener on the other side (of the fence)*.

a late bloomer **INFORMAL**

A person who develops a skill or reaches success later than usual.

| A *late bloomer*, she didn't publish her first novel until sixty.

nip sth in the bud **NEUTRAL**

To stop a problem at an early stage before it grows.

| We *nipped* the rumour *in the bud* with a quick announcement.

out of the woods **INFORMAL**

Past the most dangerous or difficult part of a situation.

| The patient is stable but not yet *out of the woods*.

Note: usually negative — *not out of the woods yet*.

Colours

a black sheep **NEUTRAL**

A member of a family or group regarded as a disgrace or misfit.

| As the *black sheep*, he rarely came to family gatherings.

caught red-handed **INFORMAL**

Caught in the act of doing something wrong.

| The thief was *caught red-handed* with the jewellery in his pocket.

Note: the image is of blood on the hands of a poacher or killer.

give the green light **NEUTRAL**

To give official permission for something to proceed.

| The board finally *gave the green light* to the new factory.

a golden opportunity **NEUTRAL**

An excellent chance that should not be missed.

| The scholarship was a *golden opportunity* to study abroad.

a green thumb **INFORMAL**

A natural talent for growing plants.

| Everything she plants thrives — she really has *a green thumb*.

Note: British English prefers *green fingers*.

a grey area **NEUTRAL**

A situation where the rules are unclear and not easily judged right or wrong.

| Whether the tweet broke policy was a real *grey area*.

in black and white **NEUTRAL**

In writing, and therefore official or beyond dispute.

| I want the agreement *in black and white* before I sign anything.

out of the blue **INFORMAL**

Suddenly and unexpectedly, with no warning.

| She called me *out of the blue* after ten years of silence.

paint the town red **INFORMAL**

To go out and celebrate lavishly, having a wild night out.

| After exams we're going to *paint the town red*.

roll out the red carpet **NEUTRAL**

To welcome someone with great ceremony and special treatment.

| The town *rolled out the red carpet* for its returning champion.

show one's true colours **NEUTRAL**

To reveal one's real character, usually a less pleasant one.

| Under pressure, he *showed his true colours* and blamed everyone else.

Note: a nautical metaphor — ships once flew false flags to deceive enemies.

tickled pink **INFORMAL**

Extremely pleased or delighted.

| Grandma was *tickled pink* by the surprise visit.

a white lie **INFORMAL**

A harmless, small lie told to be polite or to avoid hurting someone.

| I told a *white lie* and said I loved the gift.

GRAMMAR

Several colour idioms work as adjectives and slot neatly before a noun: *a grey area*, *a white lie*, *a golden opportunity*. Others are fixed verb phrases that resist change — you *give the green light* (not “the green permission”) and you are *caught red-handed* (the hyphen and word order are fixed). Treat each idiom as one unbreakable chunk rather than swapping its parts.

Everyday Conversational Idioms

These are the workhorses — the high-frequency phrases native speakers reach for without thinking. Master this handful and your English will instantly sound more natural, relaxed and fluent.

Everyday Sayings

bite the bullet INFORMAL

To force yourself to do something unpleasant or painful that can't be avoided.

| I finally *bit the bullet* and booked the dentist.

Note: from the days when wounded soldiers bit a bullet to endure surgery without anaesthetic.

the bottom line NEUTRAL

The most important fact or the final conclusion. • A company's overall profit or loss.

| The *bottom line* is, we can't afford it this year.

call it a night INFORMAL

To decide to stop an activity for the evening and go to bed.

| It's gone midnight — let's *call it a night*.

Note: the daytime version is *call it a day*.

cut to the chase INFORMAL

To get straight to the important point, skipping unnecessary detail.

| We're short on time, so let me *cut to the chase*.

Note: from early cinema, where the exciting chase scene followed slower build-up.

easier said than done INFORMAL

Used to say that something sounds simple but is hard to actually do.

| "Just stay calm," he said — *easier said than done*.

get the hang of sth INFORMAL

To learn how to do something with reasonable skill.

| Cycling felt impossible at first, but I soon *got the hang of it*.

hit the road INFORMAL

To set off on a journey; to leave.

| If we want to beat the traffic, we should *hit the road* by seven.

hit the sack INFORMAL

To go to bed.

| I'm exhausted — I'm going to *hit the sack*.

Note: *hit the hay* means exactly the same thing.

in the same boat INFORMAL

In the same difficult situation as others.

Don't worry, we're all *in the same boat* with these deadlines.

it's not rocket science INFORMAL

Used to say that something is not difficult to understand or do.

Just follow the recipe — *it's not rocket science*.

jump on the bandwagon NEUTRAL

To join an activity or trend that has become popular and successful.

Once the diet went viral, every brand *jumped on the bandwagon*.

Note: often mildly critical, implying following a trend without real conviction.

the last straw INFORMAL

The final small problem that makes a situation unbearable.

Being blamed for his mistake was *the last straw* — I quit.

Note: from the proverb *the straw that broke the camel's back*.

miss the boat INFORMAL

To miss an opportunity by being too slow to act.

Tickets sold out — looks like we *missed the boat*.

no big deal INFORMAL

Not important or serious; nothing to worry about.

Forgot my umbrella, but it's *no big deal*.

on the ball INFORMAL

Alert, competent and quick to understand.

Our new assistant is really *on the ball*.

on the tip of one's tongue INFORMAL

About to be remembered or said, but just out of reach.

Her name is *on the tip of my tongue* — give me a second.

par for the course NEUTRAL

Exactly what you would expect; typical, even if not ideal.

Delays in August are *par for the course* around here.

Note: a golfing term; usually said of mildly annoying but expected things.

ring a bell INFORMAL

To sound vaguely familiar.

That name *rings a bell*, but I can't place it.

twenty-four seven INFORMAL

All the time; constantly (24 hours a day, 7 days a week).

The help desk is staffed *twenty-four seven*.

Note: usually written 24/7.

up in the air INFORMAL

Undecided or uncertain.

Our holiday plans are still *up in the air*.

the whole nine yards INFORMAL

Everything; the full extent of something.

For the wedding they went *the whole nine yards* — band, fireworks, the lot.

when push comes to shove INFORMAL

When a situation becomes critical and action is finally required.

He talks big, but *when push comes to shove* he backs down.

wrap one's head around sth INFORMAL

To manage to understand something difficult or surprising.

I still can't *wrap my head around* how fast the year has gone.

Encouragement & Reassurance

better safe than sorry NEUTRAL

It is wiser to be cautious than to risk something going wrong.

Take a coat — *better safe than sorry*.

a blessing in disguise NEUTRAL

Something that seems bad at first but turns out to be good.

Missing that flight was *a blessing in disguise* — it crashed... only joking, but it freed up my day.

break a leg INFORMAL

Good luck (especially said to performers before a show).

You'll be brilliant tonight — *break a leg!*

Note: theatrical superstition holds that wishing “good luck” directly brings bad luck.

give it a shot INFORMAL

To make an attempt at something.

I've never painted before, but I'll *give it a shot*.

Note: close cousins are *give it a go* and *give it a try*.

hang in there INFORMAL

Used to encourage someone to stay determined during a hard time.

Hang in there — the worst is nearly over.

keep one's fingers crossed INFORMAL

To hope for a good outcome.

I'm *keeping my fingers crossed* that the results are good.

take it easy INFORMAL

To relax and not work too hard. • To calm down.

Doctor's orders are to *take it easy* for a week.

LEARNER'S TIP

Sounding natural is often less about vocabulary than rhythm. Drop one of these idioms in at the right moment — “No worries, we’re in the same boat” or “Hang in there” — and you instantly sound more like a native speaker. The trick is restraint: one well-placed idiom warms a conversation, but stringing several together in a single sentence sounds forced. Listen for how often fluent speakers actually use them, and follow that lead.

PART FOUR

IV

Practice & Reference



Put it all to work. Graded exercises with a full answer key, a guide to the mistakes learners make most often, and a quick-reference index to everything in the book.

Practice Makes Perfect

You've met dozens of idioms and phrasal verbs in the earlier chapters — now it's time to put them to work. The six exercise sets below move from simple gap-fills to trickier word order. Try each set first, then check yourself against the complete answer key at the end.

Exercise A – Complete the Phrasal Verb

Fill each gap with the missing particle or the whole phrasal verb. A meaning is given in brackets to help you.

1. I need to _____ (= invent) a good excuse before the meeting.
2. Please don't _____ the dentist any longer; book it today. (= postpone)
3. If you don't know the word, just _____ it _____ in a dictionary. (= search for information)
4. She refused to _____ even when the task got hard. (= stop trying)
5. Could you turn _____ the music? It's far too loud. (= reduce the volume)
6. We ran _____ milk this morning, so I'll buy some. (= used all of it)
7. The plane finally took _____ two hours late. (= left the ground)
8. He takes _____ his father — same smile, same temper. (= resembles)
9. I can't _____ with this noise any longer. (= tolerate)
10. They had to _____ the meeting because the manager was ill. (= cancel)
11. Remember to _____ the lights when you leave the room. (= switch off)
12. The plumber is coming to _____ the leaking tap. (= repair)
13. She decided to _____ smoking on New Year's Day. (= quit)
14. Let's _____ at six so we have time before the film. (= meet socially)
15. Could you _____ the children while I'm at work? (= take care of)

Exercise B – Match the Idiom to Its Meaning

Match each idiom (1–12) with the correct meaning (A–L). The meanings are in random order.

Idiom	Meaning
1. break the ice	A. very rarely
2. cost an arm and a leg	B. say exactly the right thing
3. a piece of cake	C. reveal a secret
4. under the weather	D. make people feel relaxed at the start
5. hit the nail on the head	E. keep a secret to yourself
6. once in a blue moon	F. be very expensive
7. spill the beans	G. slightly ill
8. pull someone's leg	H. something very easy
9. let the cat out of the bag	I. be in serious trouble
10. cut to the chase	J. tease someone playfully
11. zip your lip	K. get to the point quickly
12. in hot water	L. reveal a secret accidentally

Exercise C – Choose the Correct Particle

Circle the particle that completes each phrasal verb correctly.

1. She takes (after / up / off) her mother — they're so alike.
2. Please fill (in / out / off) this form and sign at the bottom.
3. We've run (out of / into / over) coffee, so I'll go shopping.
4. He gave (in / up / away) trying to fix the car himself.
5. Can you turn (down / after / into) the TV? I'm on the phone.
6. I came (across / up / off) an old photo while cleaning the attic.
7. The teacher told us to look (up / after / out) the new words at home.
8. They put (off / on / down) the wedding until next spring.
9. My car broke (down / up / in) on the motorway last night.
10. Watch (out / up / off) — there's a step there!
11. I'll pick you (up / over / in) from the airport at noon.
12. He's trying to cut (down on / out of / up to) sugar this month.

Exercise D – Idioms in Context

Choose the idiom (a, b or c) that best completes each sentence.

1. Don't worry about the exam — for you it'll be _____.
a) a piece of cake b) a hot potato c) a hard nut

2. I won't come to work today; I'm feeling a bit _____.
a) over the moon b) under the weather c) on cloud nine
3. That designer handbag _____, but she bought it anyway.
a) cost an arm and a leg b) broke the ice c) rang a bell
4. To get the party going, the host told a joke to _____.
a) spill the beans b) break the ice c) hit the road
5. You've _____ — that's exactly what the problem is.
a) missed the boat b) jumped the gun c) hit the nail on the head
6. We only eat out _____, maybe twice a year.
a) once in a blue moon b) around the clock c) in no time
7. Promise you won't _____ about the surprise party.
a) pull my leg b) spill the beans c) bite the bullet
8. Relax, I'm only _____ — I didn't really sell your bike.
a) pulling your leg b) costing an arm and a leg c) under the weather
9. Stop wasting time and _____: what do you actually want?
a) cut to the chase b) break a leg c) face the music
10. He arrived late again, so now he's _____ with the boss.
a) on the ball b) in hot water c) over the moon
11. She passed her driving test first time — she's _____!
a) over the moon b) under the weather c) in hot water
12. I can't decide, but eventually I'll have to _____ and choose.
a) bite the bullet b) spill the beans c) break the ice

Exercise E — Rewrite Using an Idiom

Rewrite each sentence so it means the same, using the idiom or phrasal verb in brackets.

1. The test was extremely easy. (*a piece of cake*)
2. That holiday was very expensive. (*cost an arm and a leg*)
3. I'm feeling slightly ill today. (*under the weather*)
4. We hardly ever go to the theatre. (*once in a blue moon*)
5. Tom accidentally told everyone about the gift. (*let the cat out of the bag*)
6. Please don't postpone your dentist appointment. (*put off*)
7. Don't give your password to anyone. (*give away*)
8. You said exactly the right thing in the meeting. (*hit the nail on the head*)
9. Could you take care of my plants while I'm away? (*look after*)
10. She finally stopped trying to repair the old radio. (*give up*)

Exercise F — Put the Pronoun in the Right Place

These are all separable phrasal verbs. Rewrite each one with the pronoun in the correct position.

1. turn off / it → ?

2. look up / them → ?
3. put off / it → ?
4. throw away / them → ?
5. pick up / her → ?
6. fill in / it → ?
7. take off / them → ?
8. give back / it → ?

Answer Key

Exercise A. 1. make up 2. put off 3. look / up 4. give up 5. down 6. out of 7. off 8. after 9. put up 10. call off 11. turn off 12. fix (up) 13. give up 14. meet up 15. look after

Exercise B. 1. D 2. F 3. H 4. G 5. B 6. A 7. C 8. J 9. L 10. K 11. E 12. I

Exercise C. 1. after 2. in 3. out of 4. up 5. down 6. across 7. up 8. off 9. down 10. out 11. up 12. down on

Exercise D. 1. a 2. b 3. a 4. b 5. c 6. a 7. b 8. a 9. a 10. b 11. a 12. a

Exercise E. 1. The test was a piece of cake. 2. That holiday cost an arm and a leg. 3. I'm feeling under the weather today. 4. We go to the theatre once in a blue moon. 5. Tom let the cat out of the bag about the gift. 6. Please don't put off your dentist appointment. 7. Don't give your password away to anyone. 8. You hit the nail on the head in the meeting. 9. Could you look after my plants while I'm away? 10. She finally gave up trying to repair the old radio.

Exercise F. 1. turn it off 2. look them up 3. put it off 4. throw them away 5. pick her up 6. fill it in 7. take them off 8. give it back

LEARNER'S TIP

Don't be discouraged if you slipped up — even native speakers learn idioms by hearing them again and again. Go back to any item you missed, write your own example sentence for it, and try the set once more next week. Little by little, these expressions will start to feel like second nature. Keep at it — you're doing brilliantly!

Common Mistakes & Confusables

Even confident speakers stumble over idioms and phrasal verbs — a misplaced pronoun, a swapped particle, a dropped article, and a fixed phrase quietly falls apart. This chapter gathers the slips learners make most often, so you can hear them coming and step neatly around them.

Top Mistakes to Avoid

Idioms and phrasal verbs are **fixed expressions**: their words, articles and word order are locked in place. The table below pairs the version you may be tempted to say with the one that is actually correct, and explains exactly what went wrong.

Don't say	Say	Why
turn off it	turn <i>it</i> off	With separable phrasal verbs, a pronoun object must sit between the verb and the particle.
pick up them	pick <i>them</i> up	Same rule: <i>them, him, us</i> always go in the middle, never after the particle.
depend of	depend <i>on</i>	Fixed expressions take a fixed particle; the verb <i>depend</i> pairs only with <i>on</i> .
look forward to see you	look forward to <i>seeing</i> you	Here <i>to</i> is a preposition, so the verb after it must be the <i>-ing</i> form.
raining cats and a dog	raining cats and <i>dogs</i>	The idiom is fixed and plural; you cannot change the nouns or add an article.
a piece of the cake	a piece of cake	No <i>the</i> : the idiom for “something easy” takes no definite article.
cost an arm and leg	cost an arm and <i>a</i> leg	Both halves need their article; dropping the second <i>a</i> breaks the set phrase.
in the same time	<i>at</i> the same time	The fixed expression uses <i>at</i> , not <i>in</i> , for simultaneous actions.
by hearts	by <i>heart</i>	The phrase “to learn by heart” is always singular and never takes a plural.
kick the buckets	kick the bucket	Idioms keep their exact form; you cannot pluralise a noun inside them.
spill the peas	spill the <i>beans</i>	You cannot swap a word for a synonym — the idiom is “beans,” full stop.
break the ices	break the ice	The expression is fixed and uncountable here; no plural, no article change.
on other hand	<i>on the other hand</i>	The linking idiom always keeps its <i>the</i> ; omitting it is ungrammatical.
make up my mind about	make up my mind	Use it whole: don't split “make up” from “my mind” or pad it with extra prepositions.
a piece of pie	a piece of cake / easy as pie	Don't blend two idioms; pick one and keep its exact wording.
get rid off	get rid <i>of</i>	The expression is “get rid of” with one <i>of</i> , not the particle <i>off</i> .
hit the roads	hit the <i>road</i>	Singular and fixed: “hit the road” means to set off, and never pluralises.
under the weathers	under the weather	The idiom for feeling ill is invariable; you cannot add a plural or change <i>the</i> .

Easily Confused Pairs

Some phrasal verbs and idioms look like near-neighbours but point in quite different directions. Read each pair below side by side and let the example sentences fix the difference in your ear.

look after sb • look for sth • look up sth

look after = take care of. • *look for* = try to find. • *look up* = search for information in a reference.

| Could you **look after** the kids while I **look for** my keys? I'll **look up** the address online.

get on • get off • get over sth

get on = board, or make progress. • *get off* = leave a vehicle. • *get over* = recover from.

| We **get on** the train at nine and **get off** at noon — it took me weeks to **get over** the last trip.

bring sb up • grow up

bring up = raise a child (something you do to someone). • *grow up* = become an adult (something that happens to you).

| My grandparents **brought** me **up** in the countryside, so I **grew up** surrounded by fields.

Note: *bring up* is separable and transitive; *grow up* never takes an object.

make sth up • make sb out

make up = invent (a story, an excuse). • *make out* = manage to see, hear or understand something with difficulty.

| He **made up** an excuse on the spot, but I couldn't **make out** a word he was mumbling.

take off • take after sb

take off = leave the ground, or remove. • *take after* = resemble an older relative.

| The plane **took off** late, but at least my daughter **takes after** her calm mother, not me.

see eye to eye • keep an eye on sth

see eye to eye = fully agree. • *keep an eye on* = watch carefully.

| My partner and I don't always **see eye to eye**, but we both **keep an eye on** the budget.

in the end • at the end

in the end = finally, after everything (a conclusion). • *at the end (of)* = at the final point of a specific thing.

| **At the end** of the meeting we still disagreed, but **in the end** we found a compromise.

on time • in time

on time = punctual, at the scheduled moment. • *in time* = early enough, with a margin to spare.

| The train left exactly **on time**, and luckily we reached the platform just **in time** to catch it.

make do • make up

make do (with) = manage with what little you have. • *make up* = invent, or reconcile after a quarrel.

| We had to **make do** with leftovers, but after the row my brother and I soon **made up**.

GRAMMAR

When two phrasal verbs share a verb but differ only in their particle (*get on, get off, get over*), it is the particle that carries the meaning — so listen for it closely. And remember the pronoun rule that trips up so many learners: with separable verbs a pronoun object goes in the middle (*take it off*), while a noun can go either side (*take off your coat* or *take your coat off*).

Quick-Reference Index

This is your fast lane back into the book — an alphabetical glossary of the key idioms and phrasal verbs we have met, each paired with a one-line reminder of what it means.

A

a piece of cake — something very easy to do

above board — honest and open

account for sth — explain or be the cause of

add up — make sense; total correctly

ahead of time — earlier than planned

B

back sb up — support; copy data safely

barking up the wrong tree — pursuing a mistaken idea

beat around the bush — avoid saying something directly

bend over backwards — try very hard to help

bite the bullet — face something unpleasant bravely

C

call sth off — cancel

calm down — become less upset

carry on — continue

carry out sth — perform or complete a task

catch up — reach the same point as others

check in — register at a hotel or airport

D

deal with sth — handle or manage

depend on sb — rely on; be decided by

down to earth — practical and unpretentious

all ears — listening eagerly

all of a sudden — suddenly, without warning

ask sb out — invite on a date

at the drop of a hat — instantly, without hesitation

at the end of the day — when all is considered

blow up — explode; lose one's temper

break down — stop working; become upset

break the ice — ease tension and start talking

bring sb up — raise a child

brush up on sth — improve a rusty skill

burn the midnight oil — work late into the night

by heart — from memory

check out — leave a hotel; investigate

come across sth — find by chance

come up with sth — think of an idea

cost an arm and a leg — be very expensive

count on sb — rely on

cut corners — do something cheaply or carelessly

draw the line — set a firm limit

dress up — wear smart or fancy clothes

drop by — visit briefly and informally

drop out — quit a course or activity

E

ease off — become less intense

easy as pie — very simple

eat out — have a meal at a restaurant

F

face up to sth — accept a hard truth

fall apart — break into pieces; collapse emotionally

fall behind — fail to keep pace

fall through — fail to happen as planned

feel under the weather — feel slightly ill

G

get along — have a friendly relationship

get away with sth — escape punishment

get cold feet — lose nerve at the last minute

get over sth — recover from

get rid of sth — remove or dispose of

get the hang of sth — learn how to do it

H

hang on — wait a moment

hang out — spend time relaxing

have a change of heart — change one's opinion

hit the road — set off on a journey

I

in a nutshell — in short, briefly

in hot water — in trouble

in the end — finally, after everything

J

jot sth down — write a quick note

jump the gun — act too soon

end up — reach a final state or place

every now and then — occasionally

figure sth out — work out or understand

fill in for sb — substitute temporarily

find out — discover information

fix sth up — repair or arrange

for good — permanently

get up — rise from bed

give up — stop trying; surrender

go off — explode; ring; go bad

go through sth — experience; examine carefully

grow up — become an adult

hit the sack — go to bed

hold on — wait; grip tightly

hold up — delay; rob

in time — early enough; with time to spare

iron sth out — resolve small problems

it's raining cats and dogs — raining very heavily

jump to conclusions — judge before knowing the facts

K

keep an eye on sth — watch carefully

keep up with sb — stay at the same pace

L

let sb down — disappoint

let the cat out of the bag — reveal a secret

look after sb — take care of

look forward to sth — await with pleasure

M

make do — manage with what you have

make ends meet — have just enough money

make out — manage to see or understand

make up — invent; reconcile

N

name names — identify those responsible

no strings attached — with no conditions

O

off the top of one's head — from memory, without checking

on cloud nine — extremely happy

on the ball — alert and competent

on the fence — undecided

P

pass away — die (gently put)

pass out — faint

pay off — bring a reward; repay fully

pick sb up — collect by car

R

ring a bell — sound vaguely familiar

rule sth out — eliminate as a possibility

kick the bucket — die (informal)

kill two birds with one stone — solve two things at once

look into sth — investigate

look up sth — search for information

look up to sb — admire and respect

lose touch — stop staying in contact

make up one's mind — reach a decision

miss the boat — lose an opportunity

move on — progress; leave the past behind

nod off — fall asleep briefly

now and again — occasionally

on the other hand — from the opposite view

on time — punctual, at the scheduled moment

once in a blue moon — very rarely

out of the blue — unexpectedly

piece of cake — something very easy

pull sb's leg — tease playfully

put off sth — postpone

put up with sth — tolerate

run into sb — meet by chance

run out of sth — have no more left

S

see eye to eye — fully agree

set sth up — arrange or establish

show off — display to impress

sit tight — wait patiently

sleep on it — decide after a night's rest

sort sth out — organise or resolve

T

take after sb — resemble a relative

take off — leave the ground; remove

take up sth — start a hobby; occupy space

the ball is in your court — it is your decision now

think sth over — consider carefully

U

under the weather — slightly unwell

up in the air — uncertain, undecided

W

wake up — stop sleeping

warm up — prepare; become warmer

watch out — be careful

wear off — gradually fade away

spill the beans — reveal a secret

stand out — be noticeably different

stand up for sb — defend

steal the show — attract all the attention

sum sth up — summarise briefly

throw in the towel — give up

try sth on — test clothes for fit

turn sth down — reject; lower volume

turn sth off — switch off

turn up — arrive; appear; raise volume

use sth up — consume entirely

wind down — relax; come to an end

wipe sth out — destroy completely

work sth out — solve; calculate

wrap sth up — finish; conclude

And there we leave it. If even a handful of these phrases have started to feel like your own — slipping out naturally in conversation rather than being looked up — then this book has done its job. Language is learned a little at a time, by ear and by heart, so be patient and stay curious. Keep listening, keep trying the phrases out loud, and forgive yourself the inevitable slips. You are well on your way. Warm wishes, and happy talking.