

## When and how are idioms used?

### A Idioms and change

Idioms frequently change in English. Although many idioms last for a long time, some disappear very quickly. Therefore, some idioms that were popular fifty years ago may sound very old-fashioned and odd today. For example, the idiom as **stiff / straight as a ramrod** [to sit or stand with a very straight and stiff back] is not frequently used nowadays. It is therefore important to be careful if you learn an idiom from, say, an older novel, as it may sound unnatural if you use it in your own speech or writing. In this book we focus only on up-to-date idioms which are still commonly used.

### B What are idioms used for?

- For emphasis, e.g. The singer's second album **sank like a stone**. [failed completely]
- To agree with a previous speaker, e.g.  
A: Did you notice how Lisa started listening when you said her name?  
B: Yes, that certainly made her **prick her ears up**. [start listening carefully]
- To comment on people, e.g. Did you hear Tom has been invited for dinner with the prime minister? He's certainly **gone up in the world!** [gained a better social position – or more money – than before]
- To comment on a situation, e.g. The new finance minister wants to **knock the economy into shape**. [take action to get something into a good condition]
- To make an anecdote more interesting, e.g. It was just one disaster after another today, a sort of **domino effect**. [when something, usually bad, happens and causes a series of other things to happen]
- To catch the reader's eye. Idioms – particularly those with strong images – are often used in headlines, advertising slogans and the names of small businesses. The writer may play with the idiom or make a pun (a joke involving a play on words) in order to create a special effect, e.g. a *debt of dishonour* instead of the usual debt of honour. [a debt that you owe someone for moral rather than financial reasons]
- To indicate membership of a particular group, e.g. surfers **drop in on** someone, meaning to get on a wave another surfer is already on. This kind of group-specific idiom is outside the focus of this book.

### C Where will you see or hear idioms?

You will see and hear idioms in all sorts of speaking and writing. They are particularly common in everyday conversation and in popular journalism. For example, they are often found in magazine horoscopes, e.g. You'll spend much of this week **licking your wounds** [trying to recover from a bad experience], or in problem pages, e.g. Do you think that my relationship has **run its course?** [come to a natural end] However, idioms are also used in more formal contexts, such as lectures, academic essays and business reports, e.g. It is hoped the regulations will **open the door** to better management. [let something new start] See Unit 41 for more idioms used in formal writing.



**TIP** Look out for idioms being used in headlines and advertisements. Make a note of any interesting examples that you find.

## Exercises

### 2.1 Are these sentences true or false? If the answer is false, say why.

- 1 Few idioms stay in frequent usage for a long time.
- 2 Your English may sound unnatural if you use certain idioms.
- 3 Idioms can be used for dramatic effect.
- 4 Idioms are frequently used to comment on people and situations.
- 5 Headline writers always use idioms in their correct form.
- 6 Idioms are only used in some types of speaking and writing.
- 7 Newspapers and magazines are a good place to find idioms in use.
- 8 Idioms are not used in academic writing.

### 2.2 Complete each idiom.

- 1 My essay is really not very good. Could you please help me knock it into .....
- 2 It's time you stopped ..... your wounds and got back to your normal life.
- 3 Although the film cost a lot of money to make, it enjoyed no success at all; in fact, it sank like a .....
- 4 There was a kind of domino ..... when Jill left the company. Others in her team decided to follow her example, and that then gave the idea to other employees too.
- 5 Ben and Sarah went out together for a long time, but the relationship eventually ran its ..... - they're both happily married to other people now.
- 6 The children ..... up their ears when they heard the word 'chocolate'.

### 2.3 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?

1



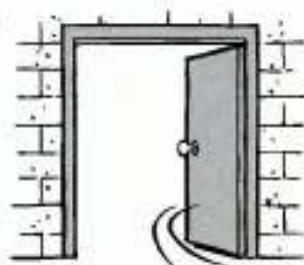
2



3



4



### 2.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Would *Going up in the world* be a better name for a mountain-climbing organisation or a furniture business?
- 2 Would *Knock yourself into shape* be a better slogan for dance classes or a boxing club?
- 3 Would *Let things run their course* be advising someone to act quickly or to be patient?
- 4 If a headline mentioned a *debt of honour*, would it be suggesting that the law or the person's conscience should be encouraging them to pay something back?
- 5 Would *This'll make you prick up your ears* be a better slogan for a hi-fi company or an earring business?

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UP**

This website lists the names of businesses that use puns: [http://www.listology.com/content\\_show.cfm/content\\_id.21596/jetsam](http://www.listology.com/content_show.cfm/content_id.21596/jetsam). Go to the website and find three puns that you can explain.