

I What are idioms?

A Formulaic language

Idioms are a type of formulaic language. Formulaic language consists of fixed expressions which you learn and understand as units rather than as individual words, for example:

type of formulaic language	examples
greetings and good wishes	Hi there! See you soon! Happy birthday!
prepositional phrases	at the moment, in a hurry, from time to time
sayings, proverbs and quotations	It's a small world! Don't put all your eggs in one basket. To be or not to be – that is the question.
compounds	car park, bus stop, home-made
phrasal verbs	take off, look after, turn down
collocations	blonde hair, deeply disappointed

B Idioms

Idioms are fixed combinations of words whose meaning is often difficult to guess from the meaning of each individual word.

For example, if I say 'I **put my foot in it** the other day at Linda's house – I asked her if she was going to marry Simon', what does it mean? If you do not know that **put your foot in it** means *say something accidentally which upsets or embarrasses someone*, it is difficult to know exactly what the sentence means. It has a non-literal or idiomatic meaning.

Idioms are constructed in different ways and this book gives you practice in a wide variety of types of idiom. Here are some examples:

Tim took a shine to [immediately liked] his teacher. (verb + object + preposition)

The band's number one hit was just a **flash in the pan** [something that happens only once] (idiomatic noun phrase)

Little Jimmy has been as **quiet as a mouse** [extremely quiet] all day. (simile. See Unit 9 for more similes.)

We arrived **safe and sound** [safely]. (binomial. See Unit 10 for more binomials.)

Idioms are often based on everyday things and ideas, for example, the human body:

Mark and Alistair don't see **eye to eye**. [don't agree with each other]

C How can I use idioms?

Many idioms are quite informal, so use them carefully. You will need to be able to understand a lot of idioms if you want to read English fiction, newspapers or magazines, or understand TV shows, films and songs. People also often use idioms for humour or to comment on themselves, other people and situations.

You will also sound more natural and fluent if you can use idioms in everyday conversation or informal writing. Be careful not to use too many, though!



The words and word order of idioms are usually fixed, and we cannot change them in any way. For example, we cannot say *gave a shine to* or *sound and safe*.

Exercises

- 1.1 Read the beginning of this story and label the type of formulaic language used in the words in bold. Use the information in A to help you.

In 2009, I **set off** on a long journey. As I left my house, my neighbour shouted, 'Good luck!' I **didn't know at that moment** that I would not see him again for three years. I **boarded** the plane at Heathrow, and soon it **took off** for Malaysia. When we **touched down** in Kuala Lumpur, I couldn't wait to **get off** the plane. I **took a bus** to the city centre and **spent the night** at a youth hostel. The first person I met was someone I had been **at school** with years ago. 'It's a small world!' he said when he saw me.

- 1.2 Underline the seven idioms in the rest of the story you read in 1.1.

My friend suggested that we join forces. 'There's safety in numbers,' he said. 'Let's hit the road together.' I was in two minds whether to go with him but finally **decided to say yes**. We travelled together for six months and had a **whale of a time**. We spent money like there was no tomorrow, so I had to **twist my dad's arm** and persuade him to send me some more money so I could travel further.

- 1.3 Choose the correct answer.

- 1 His first novel was just a) a flash in a pan b) a flash of the pan c) a flash in the pan.
- 2 I think Philip has a) given a shine to b) taken a shine to c) got a shine to his new babysitter.
- 3 I hope you have a good trip and come home a) safely and soundly b) sound and safe c) safe and sound.
- 4 Oh dear! I think I've a) had a foot in it b) put my foot in it c) got my foot in it!
- 5 Kate is really noisy, but her best friend is a) as quiet as a cat b) as quiet as a mouse c) as quiet like a mouse.

- 1.4 Look at these newspaper headlines. Each one has an idiom based on a part of the human body. What do you think they mean? Choose the correct answer.

UNIVERSITY GOES **CAP IN HAND** TO FINANCE MINISTER

- 1 A university a) apologises to the minister b) asks the minister for financial help c) awards the minister a great honour.

AIRLINE **FOOTS THE BILL** FOR DELAYS AND CANCELLATIONS

- 2 An airline a) has refused to pay the costs b) sends the bill to someone else c) will pay the costs.

RITA SORAZ IS **THE APPLE OF HOLLYWOOD'S EYE**

- 3 Rita Soraz is a) loved by everyone in Hollywood b) hated by everyone in Hollywood c) missed by everyone in Hollywood.

GOVERNMENT IS **BURYING ITS HEAD IN THE SAND**, SAYS OPPOSITION LEADER

- 4 The government is a) refusing to face a difficult situation b) about to resign c) making unpopular plans.