

# English Proverbs and Idioms List for the Competition

## A bad workman always blames his tools

When someone blames their tools for doing a bad job rather than accepting the blame themselves.

*A: I wasn't able to upload my homework as my internet connection was bad.*

*B: You know what they say, **a bad workman blames his tools!** Everybody else managed to hand it in on time.*

## A leopard can't change its spots

People can't change their personality, especially their more negative characteristics.

*Michael said he would never cheat on his girlfriend again, but you know what they say – **a leopard can't change its spots!***

## Actions speak louder than words

Put more value on someone's actions or behaviour than their words or promises. It is often easier to say that you will do something than to actually do it.

*I will wait and see if he improves his test score before rewarding him, **actions speak louder than words.***

## Better late than never

It is always better to arrive or do something late than not at all.

*Ah, here comes Beth ten minutes late to the meeting – **better late than never** though I suppose!*

## Better safe than sorry

It is better to invest time and effort in preparing for something than to suffer the consequences if or when things go wrong.

*I'm glad I invested in a good waterproof (coat) for the hike now that it's chucking it down (raining hard) – **better safe than sorry!***

### Blood is thicker than water

Family is more important than friends or acquaintances.

*I would always choose my family over my friends – **blood is thicker than water!***

### Curiosity killed the cat

This is often used to stop someone asking too many questions. It implies that asking too many questions could lead to trouble.

*I'd be careful how many questions you ask him about his time in prison. **Curiosity killed the cat, you know!***

### (Don't) bury your head in the sand

To refuse to accept the truth about something.

*I don't think John has really moved on after the break up – he's just **burying his head in the sand**. I wish he'd start dating again.*

### Don't count your chickens (till they are hatched)

To avoid disappointment, don't rely on something good happening until it has actually happened.

*I wouldn't buy the furniture until you've signed for the house – **don't count your chickens just yet!***

### (Don't) judge a book by its cover

You shouldn't judge a person by their appearance.

*My neighbour is a heavily tattooed man who wears metal chains in his face and all black clothes, but he's one of the nicest people I've ever met! It's like they say, **don't judge a book...!***

### Don't put all your eggs in one basket

It would be unwise to focus all of your efforts or invest all of your money into one thing. It is more sensible to divide your efforts or money up into more than one opportunity in case one fails.

*He invested all of his life earnings into one tip on the stock market and lost all of his money. You know what they say – **don't put all your eggs in one basket!***

### Give them an inch and they'll take a mile

If you allow people to take advantage of you once, they will continue to do so more.

*I said Ben could use my coffee machine once, now he always using it. If you **give them an inch...!***

### Good things come to those who wait

If you wait patiently for something you want, you will eventually get it.

*A: He's been doing the lottery for more than 20 years and finally won big!*

*B: I guess **good things come to those who wait!***

### (You can't) have your cake and eat it too

To have the best of both worlds or to enjoy the advantages of two things that should not exist together.

*Rachel is getting married to Ricardo while still having an affair with Wayne – **you can't have your cake and eat it too!***

### If it ain't broke, don't fix it

If something is working, there's no need to change or update it.

*I've been using the same computer for 15 years and it still does the job – as they say, **if it ain't broke...***

### If you can't beat them, join them

If you aren't able to do better than your opponent, you might as well cooperate with them.

*I didn't make much money as a freelance journalist so I decided to get a job with a local newspaper. **If you can't beat them, join them, right?***

### If you play with fire, you get burned

Used when someone who was involved in a dangerous or problematic situation gets in trouble.

*Charlene's in the headmaster's office after getting caught cheating on her maths exam. **If you play with fire...!***

### If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours

If you do something for me, I'll return the favour.

***If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.*** Get me an interview with your boss and I'll lend you my Porsche next weekend.

### Ignorance is bliss

You will be happier not knowing the facts. A good example of this is the red pill in the film The Matrix.

*Joan doesn't know that her dad got her the job at M & S, she thinks she got it by herself. As they say, **ignorance is bliss!***

### It never rains, but it pours

When one bad thing happens, it is always followed by more bad events.

*First I got caught in a storm, then I got a flat tyre and now I've got a parking fine on top – **it never rains, but it pours!***

### It takes two to tango

When two people are involved in a tricky situation the blame should be split equally.

*Sally says that it was all Peter's fault but, you know what they say, **it takes two to tango!***

### It's not over till the fat lady sings

Don't assume the outcome of a situation until it has actually ended.

*Beckham surprised us all with a goal in the ninety-third minute! No one could have predicted it. It goes to show, **it's not over till the fat lady sings!***

### Let sleeping dogs lie

Avoid bringing up an issue that is currently causing no problems.

*I wanted to tell the neighbours that their son had a loud party last weekend while they were away, but I thought it was better to **let sleeping dogs lie.***

### Money doesn't grow on trees

Money is often acquired through hard work and therefore shouldn't be spent wastefully.

*Those jeans you want would cost me a week's wages – **money doesn't grow on trees**, you know?!*

### No news is good news

Usually used to tell someone who is waiting for some news to remain optimistic.

*We haven't heard back from the doctor about the test results. **No news is good news** as far as I'm concerned!*

### No pain, no gain

You can't get the benefits of something without putting in some strenuous effort.

*I can't walk properly today after the long run I did yesterday, but **no pain no gain**, I guess!*

### No use crying over spilt milk

This means that it is a waste of time to regret something that has already taken place. Spilt milk cannot be "un-spilt".

*A: I'm so upset with myself for crashing your car!*

*B: Well, there's **no use crying over spilt milk** – let's go and take a look at the damage.*

### Out of sight, out of mind

It is easy to forget about someone/something if you don't see them for a period of time.

*A: I haven't even thought about that idiot Sandra since I saw her at the party.*

*B: You know what they say – **out of sight, out of mind!***

### Practise what you preach

You should behave in the same way that you tell others to behave.

*You can't tell your kids not to lie and then lie to them yourself! You should **practise what you preach** if you want them to grow up right.*

## [Rome wasn't built in a day](#)

Good results take time to achieve – you should not rush a job at the expense of quality.

*I know that you want to complete this deal, but I don't want to rush it through – Rome **wasn't built in a day**, you know!*

## [Strike while the iron is hot](#)

For best results, take advantage of an opportunity as soon as it appears.

*You should put an offer in on that house now if you want to buy it – **strike while the iron is hot!***

## [Hit the books](#)

Literally, *hit the books* means to physically hit your reading books, but this phrase is actually used to say you're going to study:

*Sorry but I can't watch the game with you tonight, I have to **hit the books**.*

## [Hit the sack](#)

The literal meaning of this would be physically hitting or beating a sack (a large bag), but idiomatically it means you're going to bed. You can also say *hit the hay*.

*It's time for me to **hit the sack**, I'm so tired.*

## [Stab someone in the back](#)

While it still hurts, the idiomatic meaning of this phrase is not nearly as painful as literally being stabbed.

What this actually ends up meaning is hurting someone who trusted us by betraying them.

*I can't believe she would cheat and **stab me in the back** like this! I really trusted her.*

## [Lose your touch](#)

No, this doesn't mean you've lost your physical sense of touch, to *lose your touch* actually means that you lose an ability you once had.

*She used to be the best hairstylist in town, but she's really **losing her touch**.*

## [Sit tight](#)

This does not mean you sit down and hold your body as tight as you can. If a person tells you to *sit tight*, what they really want you to do is wait patiently.

***Sit tight** while I go see if Mr. Henkel is ready to see you.*

### [Pitch in](#)

This phrase actually makes no sense if you try to take it literally. Figuratively speaking, it means to contribute (give) to something or someone or to join in.

*Let's all **pitch in** a few dollars so we can buy Sally a really good present for her birthday.*

### [Go cold turkey](#)

To *go cold turkey* means to suddenly quit or stop a (usually dangerous) behavior such as smoking or drinking alcohol.

This idiom originates from the fact that a person who suddenly quits something addictive can suffer from pale skin and goosebumps, making them look like a cold, uncooked turkey.

*Go cold turkey on fried foods, white carbs and sugary drinks.*

### [Face the music](#)

If someone tells you to *face the music*, they want you to deal with the reality of a situation and accept all the consequences.

*You need to **face the music**. You failed because you didn't study so you need to take the class again next semester.*

### [Ring a bell](#)

When someone says something that you may have heard before, but don't remember entirely, you can use this phrase to let them know it's familiar but you may need a reminder.

*That name **rings a bell**, but I can't quite remember where I know her from.*

### [Blow off steam](#)

If you're experiencing some strong feelings and you want to get rid of them, you will *blow off steam* by doing something to get rid of the stress.

*If my mom gets mad, she'll usually go on a run to **blow off some steam**.*

### [Cut to the chase](#)

When somebody tells you to *cut to the chase* it means that you've been talking too long and you need to cut out all those extra details to get to the point.

Be careful how you use this idiom, it could be rude or disrespectful if used with someone like a boss or teacher.

*Hi guys, as we don't have much time here, so I'm going to **cut to the chase**.*

### [On the ball](#)

If you're *on the ball* it means that you're very quick to understand certain things or react quickly (and correctly) to a situation.

*Wow, you've already finished your assignments? They aren't due until next week, you're really **on the ball**.*

### [Get over something](#)

Imagine something happens that you have a hard time with, but as time goes on, you stop feeling as strong about it as you did before. This means that you've *gotten over it*, you no longer worry about it and it no longer affects you in a negative way.

*It took a while, but I finally **got over breaking up** with Chandler.*

### [Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth](#)

This refers to someone who comes from a wealthy and successful family.

*John **was born with a silver spoon in his mouth**, so he doesn't know what it's like to work hard.*

### [To go from rags to riches](#)

This means you've gone from being poor to having a lot of money.

*Jim Carrey **went from rags to riches**. He was once living in a van, but eventually became one of the highest-paid comedians in the world.*

### [Pay an arm and a leg for something](#)

Use this one when you have to pay a lot of money for something. You can also say that something "costs an arm and a leg."

*Nowadays, you have to **pay an arm and a leg** just for a tank of gas.*

### [To have sticky fingers](#)

If you *have sticky fingers*, you probably steal a lot.

*The manager fired the cashier because he **had sticky fingers**. He stole more than \$200 in a month.*

### [To pony up](#)

This means you need to pay for something or settle a debt.

***Pony up** and give me the \$5 you owe me.*

### [Break even](#)

This is the term you use when you've spent a certain amount of money, but you hit the point where you've neither gained or lost money.

*The trip to the beach cost me \$100, but I almost **broke even** after winning \$90 in a contest.*

### [To be close-fisted](#)

*To be close-fisted* is to not wanting to spend any money (almost like you're physically gripping your money). Other words for this could be *stingy* or *cheap*.

*Carl is so **close-fisted**, he won't even buy snacks for the Christmas party.*

### [To go Dutch](#)

This is used when everyone pays for their own meal at a restaurant.

*Usually we **go Dutch** when we eat out, but this time I paid for her food since it was her birthday.*

### [To be loaded](#)

If someone is *loaded*, it means they have a lot of money.

*Billy paid his Harvard Law School tuition with cash. His family is **loaded**.*

### [Make ends meet](#)

This refers to making enough money to cover the necessities, like buying food and paying the bills.

*I don't make much from my job as a cashier, but I'm able to **make ends meet**.*

### [As genuine as a three-dollar bill](#)

This is an American idiom that is used to say that something is fake.

The U.S. never made three-dollar bills, which means that there's no such thing as a genuine three-dollar bill.

*Those supposed designer bags they sell on the street are **as genuine as a three-dollar bill**.*

### [Rule of thumb](#)

If you hear someone say *as a rule of thumb*, they mean that it's a general unwritten rule for whatever they're talking about.

For example, there's no written rule that you must add oil to boiling water when cooking pasta, but it's a *rule of thumb* practiced by most people.

*As a **rule of thumb** you should always pay for your date's dinner.*

### Keep your chin up

If you're having a hard time, a supportive friend might tell you to *keep your chin up*.

This means they are encouraging you to stay positive and don't let difficult circumstances get you down.

*I know it's hard having a sick family member, but **keep your chin up**.*

### Find your feet

If you find yourself in a new situation, like living in a new country and having to get used to a new college, you could say *I'm still finding my feet*.

It means that you're still adjusting and getting used to the new environment.

*I only moved to France two months ago, so I'm still **finding my feet**.*

### Spice things up

To *spice things up* means to make them more interesting or exciting.

*Instead of just buying Sam a birthday gift, let's **spice things up** by taking him out for dinner.*

### A piece of cake

A *piece of cake* refers to a task or job that's easy to complete or accomplish.

*I expected the English test to be difficult but it was **a piece of cake**.*

### Cool as a cucumber

Cucumbers have a refreshing taste and leave you with a cool, calm feeling.

So if you're *cool as a cucumber*, you're someone who's very calm and relaxed.

*My friend is nervous about taking his driving test but I'm **cool as a cucumber**.*

### A couch potato

A *couch potato* refers to someone who spends a lot of time sitting on the couch watching TV.

*After my uncle retired from his job, he became **a couch potato**.*

### Not one's cup of tea

If something is *not your cup of tea*, it's an activity you have no interest in, don't enjoy or don't do well in.

*Camping is really **not my cup of tea** so I'm going to visit my friend in New York instead.*

### Eat like a bird

How much does a bird eat? Not very much, right? So to *eat like a bird* is to eat very little.

*Don't trouble yourself cooking such a big meal. I **eat like a bird**.*

### [Eat like a horse](#)

Now, a horse is much bigger than a bird. So how much do you think a horse eats?

A lot! To *eat like a horse* is to eat a large amount of food.

*My mother has to cook a lot of food when my brother comes to visit. He **eats like a horse**.*

### [A smart cookie](#)

Here's an easy one. A *smart cookie* is an intelligent person.

*It shouldn't be hard too hard for **a smart cookie** like you to learn Spanish.*

### [Spill the beans](#)

To *spill the beans* is to accidentally or prematurely give out information that's supposed to be kept secret.

*Owen **spilled the beans** to Joyce about her surprise party, so she knows what's happening.*

### [A bad apple](#)

If you have a basket of apples and one of them is rotten, it often makes the whole batch taste bad. Keep this in mind and you will remember that a *bad apple* is someone who creates problems or is a bad influence on the other people in a group.

*John's the **bad apple**, he gets his friends to do dangerous and illegal things.*

### [Bread and butter](#)

Bread and butter are some of the most basic food items that one can live off of.

The idiom *bread and butter* refers to a job that makes the money you need to live and afford basic necessities like food, housing, etc.

*Fishing is the **bread and butter** of the friendly people I met on the island last summer.*

### [A hard nut to crack](#)

Is it easy to crack open a nut? Not always.

Well, a *hard nut to crack* refers to a person who's difficult to get to know or get information out of.

*I want to know what secret she's hiding, but she's **a hard nut to crack**.*

### [Have a sweet tooth](#)

Do you like eating cakes, candy and other sweet-tasting food? If you do, then you can say you *have a sweet tooth*.

*I definitely **have a sweet tooth**, I need dessert every night.*

Source:

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