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Idioms

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Oxford Dictionary of Idioms

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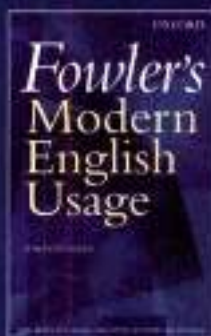
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The *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* is the most comprehensive and up-to-date dictionary of idioms available. It covers both long-established idioms and phrases, and recent arrivals. It tells us, for example, that 'run amok' was first introduced into English in the 16th century from the Malay word *amok* meaning 'in a homicidal frenzy', while 'off the cuff' refers to the rather messy practice, common in the days of starched shirt cuffs, of writing last-minute notes on one's shirt cuff before speaking in public. More recent coinages include 'jump the shark' (referring to a film or TV show that has had events added to it merely for novelty rather than for quality) and 'give someone the hairy eyeball' (staring angrily at someone through partially closed eyes). These and many more idioms are defined, explained, and put into context.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* is based on the resources of Oxford's unique language research programme; each entry has been meticulously researched by the Oxford Dictionary department, with many new findings being incorporated for the new edition. Several hundred new idioms have been added together with many new examples of use; in addition the text has been redesigned, presenting idioms alphabetically by key word and including special new origin and background notes. Lastly, a new thematic index groups together idioms and phrases which have a common theme, such as jealousy and envy, strength, age, and death.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* is an essential reference tool for students and teachers of English, both at university level and for English as a second language, as well as for anyone interested in the more colourful side of the English language and its history.

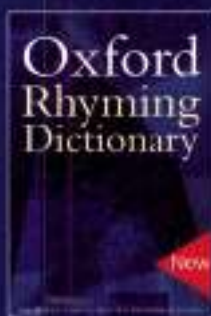
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Idioms

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Edited by
Judith Siefring

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Preface

The aim of the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* is to provide clear definitions of phrases and sayings for those who do not know what they mean, but also to offer the curious reader interesting facts about the origins of phrases and examples of their use. This second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* is based on the first edition, edited by Jennifer Speake. It maintains the first edition's focus on contemporary and historical phrases, sayings, and proverbs, and uses a combination of definition and (where required) explanatory note and illustrative quotation to provide a rounded picture of idiomatic usage. The coverage of the previous edition has been extended by the inclusion of more than 350 new idioms, and a great many contemporary illustrative quotations have also been added. These quotations have been taken from a variety of sources: from novels to travel guides, broadsheet newspapers to teenage magazines. They help to give the reader a better understanding of how an idiom is used: a typical context, a certain tone, or a particular resonance. The formation of new phrases and sayings is one of the most colourful aspects of language development, and by adding idioms such as **chew the scenery**, **be in like Flynn**, and **give someone the hairy eyeball**, and quotations from the likes of Anthony Bourdain, Arundhati Roy, Melvin Burgess, and Tom Clancy, the new edition hopes to reflect this colour.

A new index section at the end of the book groups together idioms which share a common theme or subject, so giving readers a vivid snapshot of those areas and aspects of life that have generated a particularly rich variety of figurative expressions.

My thanks must go to Richard Jones for his work on sourcing quotations, to Georgia Hole for proofreading, and above all to Sara Hawker for her help and insight throughout the project.

JUDITH SIEFRING

Aa

A

A 1 excellent; first-rate.

❶ The full form of this expression is *A 1 at Lloyd's*. In Lloyd's Register of Shipping, the phrase was used of ships in first-class condition as to the hull (A) and stores (1). The US equivalent is *A No. 1*; both have been in figurative use since the mid 19th century.

from A to B from your starting point to your destination; from one place to another.

1987 K. Rushforth *Tree Planting & Management* The purpose of street tree planting is to... make the roads and thoroughfares pleasant in their own right, not just as places used to travel from A to B.

from A to Z over the entire range; in every particular.

1998 Salmon, *Trout & Sea-Trout* In order to have seen Scotland's game fishing in its entirety, from A to Z, visiting 30 stretches of river and 350 lochs a year, you would have to be travelling for a hundred years.

aback

take someone aback shock, surprise, or disconcert someone.

❶ The phrase is frequently used in the passive form (*be taken aback*): this was adopted in the mid 19th century from earlier (mid 18th-century) nautical terminology, to describe the situation of a ship with its sails pressed back against the mast by a headwind, preventing forward movement.

1991 Kathleen Jones *Learning Not To Be First* They were taken aback by the shabbiness of the hotel and lack of cleanliness in the city generally.

ABC

as easy (or simple) as ABC extremely easy or straightforward.

❶ From the 15th to the 17th century, a child's first spelling and reading book was commonly called an ABC, and this led to the development of its metaphorical use, 'the basic elements or rudiments of something'.

abdabs

give someone the screaming abdabs induce an attack of extreme anxiety or irritation in someone.

❶ *Abdabs* (or *habdabs*) is mid 20th-century slang whose origin is unknown. The word is sometimes also used to mean an attack of delirium tremens.

abet

aid and abet: see AID.

about

know what you are about be aware of the implications of your actions or of a situation, and of how best to deal with them. informal

1993 Ski Survey He ran a 3-star guest house before this, so knows what he is about.

above

above yourself conceited; arrogant.

1999 Frank McCourt *'Tis Many a Man* made his way in America by the sweat of his brow and his strong back and it's a good thing to learn your station in life and not be getting above yourself.

not be above — be capable of stooping to an unworthy act.

1991 Maureen Duffy *Illuminations* The copyist was not above turning author or forger and several MSS from this period must be viewed as highly suspect.

Abraham

in Abraham's bosom in heaven, the place of rest for the souls of the blessed. dated

❶ The phrase is taken from Luke 16:22: 'And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom'. In the Bible, *Abraham* was the Hebrew patriarch from whom all Jews traced their descent.

acceptable

the acceptable face of the tolerable or attractive manifestation or aspect of.

1996 *New York Review of Books* He presents himself as the acceptable face of gambling... the man who, almost single-handedly, has turned a huckster's paradise into a gangster-free zone.

accident

an accident waiting to happen ① a potentially disastrous situation, usually caused by negligent or faulty procedures. ② a person certain to cause trouble.

① **1997** *Times* Accidents are often said to be 'waiting to happen'. It does not take much imagination to see that the chaotic start to the Whitbread round-the-world race... could easily have ended in tragedy.

accidents will happen however careful you try to be, it is inevitable that some unfortunate or unforeseen events will occur.

① This phrase is a shortened form of the early 19th-century proverb 'accidents will happen in the best regulated families'.

a chapter of accidents: *see* CHAPTER.

accord

of your own accord voluntarily or without outside intervention.

account

give a good (or bad) account of yourself make a favourable (or unfavourable) impression through your performance or actions.

settle (or square) accounts with someone ① pay money owed to someone. ② have revenge on someone.

accounting

there's no accounting for tastes it's impossible to explain why different people like different things, especially those things which the speaker considers unappealing. proverb

① Since the late 18th century, this has been the usual English form of the Latin expression *de gustibus non est disputandum* 'there is no disputing about tastes'.

ace

have an ace up your sleeve have an effective resource or piece of information kept hidden until it is necessary to use it; have a secret advantage.

① The ace is the highest playing card in its suit in many card games, so a cheating player might well hide one to use against an unwary opponent. A North American variant is *an ace in the hole*. The next two idioms are also based on this meaning of ace.

hold all the aces have all the advantages.

play your ace use your best resource.

within an ace of very close to.

① Ace here has the figurative meaning of 'a tiny amount' and is used with reference to the single spot on the playing card. The phrase was first recorded in the early 18th century.

Achilles

an Achilles heel a person's only vulnerable spot; a serious or fatal weakness.

① In Greek mythology, the nymph Thetis dipped her infant son Achilles in the water of the River Styx to make him immortal, but the heel by which she held him was not touched by the water; he was ultimately killed in battle by an arrow wound in this one vulnerable spot.

1998 *Times* The inclination to outlaw that of which it disapproves... is, if not the cloven hoof beneath the hem of Tony Blair's Government, certainly its Achilles heel.

acid

the acid test a situation or event which finally proves whether something is good or bad, true or false, etc.

① The original use of the phrase was to describe a method of testing for gold with nitric acid (gold being resistant to the effects of nitric acid).

1990 *Which?* These deals are designed to encourage impulse buying, so the acid test is whether you would have bought anyway.

come the acid be unpleasant or offensive; speak in a caustic or sarcastic manner.

put the acid on someone try to extract a loan or favour from someone. Australian & New Zealand informal

acquaintance

have a nodding acquaintance with someone or something: *see* NODDING.

scrape acquaintance with: *see* SCRAPE.

acre

God's acre: *see* GOD.

across

across the board applying to all.

i In the USA, this expression refers to a horse-racing bet in which equal amounts are staked on the same horse to win, place, or show in a race.

1999 *Wall Street Journal* The decline for the euro across the board was mainly attributed to the further erosion of global investors' confidence toward the euro-zone economy.

be across something fully understand the details or complexity of an issue or situation. Australian

act

act your age behave in a manner appropriate to your age and not to someone much younger.

act the goat: *see* GOAT.

act of God an instance of uncontrollable natural forces in operation.

i This phrase is often used in insurance contracts to refer to incidents such as lightning strikes or floods.

a class act: *see* CLASS.

clean up your act: *see* CLEAN.

do a disappearing act: *see* DISAPPEARING.

get your act together organize yourself in the manner required in order to achieve something. informal

2002 *New York Times* There are still many who think all that the dirty, homeless man on the corner talking to himself needs is just to get his act together.

a hard (or tough) act to follow an achievement or performance which sets a standard difficult for others to measure up to.

1996 *Independent* Her determination and championing of tourism will be a tough act to follow.

in on the act involved in a particular activity in order to gain profit or advantage. informal

1997 *What Cellphone* Conference calls are becoming big business for the fixed-line operators, and now there are signs that the mobile networks are getting in on the act.

read someone the riot act: *see* READ.

action

action stations an order or warning to prepare for action.

i Originally, this was an order to naval personnel to go to their allocated positions ready to engage the enemy.



man of action a man whose life is characterized by physical activity or deeds rather than by words or intellectual matters.

a piece of the action: *see* PIECE.

where the action is where important or interesting things are happening. informal

1971 *Gourmet* You can dine outside, weather permitting, or in the bar where the action is.

actual

your actual — the real, genuine, or important thing specified. informal

1968 *Kenneth Williams Diary* There's no doubt about it, on a good day, I look quite lovely in your actual gamin fashion.

Adam

not know someone from Adam not know or be completely unable to recognize the person in question. informal

the old Adam unregenerate human nature.

i In Christian symbolism, *the old Adam* represents fallen man as contrasted with *the second Adam*, Jesus Christ.

1993 *Outdoor Canada* It is the Old Adam in us. We are descendants of a long line of dirt farmers, sheepherders... and so forth.

add

add fuel to the fire: *see* FUEL.

add insult to injury: *see* INSULT.

adder

deaf as an adder: *see* DEAF.

admirable

an admirable Crichton a person who excels in all kinds of studies and pursuits, or who is noted for supreme competence.

i This expression originally referred to James Crichton of Clunie (1560–85?), a Scottish nobleman renowned for his intellectual and physical prowess. In J. M. Barrie's play *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), the eponymous hero is a butler who takes charge when his master's family is shipwrecked on a desert island.

adrift

cast (or cut) someone **adrift** ❶ leave

someone in a boat or other craft which has nothing to secure or guide it. ❷ abandon or isolate someone.

❷ **1998 Oldie** The various dissenting movements... should be cut adrift and left to their own devices.

advance

any advance on —? any higher bid than —?

❶ This phrase is said by an auctioneer to elicit a higher bid, and so is used figuratively as a query about general progress in a particular matter.

advocate

play devil's advocate: see DEVIL.

afraid

afraid of your own shadow: see SHADOW.

Africa

for Africa in abundance; in large numbers.

South African informal

1980 C. Hope *A Separate Development* An entire museum of vintage stuff including... Bentleys for Africa.

after

be after doing something be on the point of doing something or have just done it. Irish

1988 Roddy Doyle *The Commitments* I'm after rememberin'. I forgot to bring mine back. It's under me bed.

age

act your age: see ACT.

the awkward age: see AWKWARD.

come of age ❶ (of a person) reach adult status. ❷ (of a movement or activity) become fully established.

feel your age: see FEEL.

a golden age: see GOLDEN.

under age: see UNDER.

agenda

a hidden agenda: see HIDDEN.

agony

pile on the agony: see PILE.

prolong the agony: see PROLONG.

agree

agree to differ cease to argue about

something because neither party will compromise or be persuaded.

agreement

a gentleman's agreement: see GENTLEMAN.

ahead

ahead of the game ahead of your competitors or peers in the same sphere of activity.

1996 Daily Telegraph The smart money headed for Chinatown, where you can pick up all those Eastern looks the designers are promoting for next spring ahead of the game.

ahead of your (or its) time innovative and radical by the standards of the time.

streets ahead: see STREET.

aid

aid and abet help and encourage someone to do something wrong, especially to commit a crime.

❶ **Abet** comes from an Old French term meaning 'to encourage a hound to bite'.

1986 Frank Peretti *This Present Darkness* She strained to think of... any friend who would still aid and abet a fugitive from the law, without questions.

in aid of in support of; for the purpose of raising money for. chiefly British

1999 Teesdale Mercury A wine and savoury evening in aid of cancer research will be held... on Friday.

what's all this in aid of? what is the purpose of this? British informal

air

airs and graces an affected manner of behaving, designed to attract or impress. British

give yourself airs act pretentiously or snobbishly.

1948 Christopher Bush *The Case of the Second Chance* It was said she gave herself airs, and it was also hinted that she was no better—as they say—than she might be.

❶ **Air** in the sense of 'an affected manner' has been current since the mid 17th century; from the early 18th century the plural form has been more usual in this derogatory sense.

hot air: see HOT.

up in the air (of a plan or issue) still to be settled; unresolved.

1995 *Scientific American* Prospects for federal research and development are up in the air as Republicans looking for budget cuts take control on Capitol Hill.

on (or off) the air being (or not being) broadcast on radio or television.

take the air go out of doors.

walk on air feel elated.

1977 **Bernard MacLaverly** *Secrets* 'I'm sure you're walking on air,' my mother said to Paul at his wedding.

aisle

have people rolling in the aisles ❶ make an audience laugh uncontrollably. ❷ be very amusing. informal

❶ **1940** **P. G. Wodehouse** *Quick Service* I made the speech of a lifetime. I had them tearing up the seats and rolling in the aisles.

aitch

drop your aitches: see DROP.

Aladdin

an Aladdin's cave a place full of valuable objects.

an Aladdin's lamp a talisman that enables its owner to fulfil every desire.

❶ In the *Arabian Nights* tale of Aladdin, the hero finds a magic lamp in a cave. He discovers that rubbing it summons a powerful genie who is able to carry out all his wishes.

alarm

alarms and excursions confused activity and uproar. humorous

❶ *Alarm* was formerly spelled *alarum*, representing a pronunciation with a rolling of the 'r'; the phrase was originally a call summoning soldiers to arms. The whole phrase is used in stage directions in Shakespeare to indicate a battle scene.

alight

set the world alight: see SET.

alive

alive and kicking prevalent and very active. informal

1991 **Mark Tully** *No Full Stops in India* You deliberately choose unknown actors, although India is a country where the star system is very much alive and kicking.

alive and well still existing or active (often used to deny rumours or beliefs that something has disappeared or declined).

1990 *Times* Thatcherism may be dying on its feet in Britain, but it is alive and well in foreign parts.

a

all

all and sundry everyone.

1991 *Sunday Times* In the manner of an Oscar-winner, she thanks all and sundry for their help.

all comers anyone who chooses to take part in an activity, typically a competition.

1992 **Al Gore** *Earth in the Balance* He has traveled to conferences and symposia in every part of the world, argued his case, and patiently taken on all comers.

all-in ❶ with everything included.

❷ exhausted. British informal

all my eye and Betty Martin: see EYE.

all of as much as (often used ironically of an amount considered very small by the speaker or writer).

1995 **Bill Bryson** *Notes from a Small Island* In 1992, a development company... tore down five listed buildings, in a conservation area, was taken to court and fined all of £675.

be all one to make no difference to someone.

all out using all your strength or resources.

all over the place in a state of confusion or disorganization. informal

❶ Other variants of this phrase include *all over the map* and *all over the lot* which are North American, and *all over the shop* which is mainly British.

1997 *Spectator* The government... proposed equalising standards and making them comparable... there could be no clearer admission that standards are all over the place.

all the rage: see RAGE.

all round ❶ in all respects. ❷ for or by each person.

all-singing, all-dancing with every possible attribute; able to perform any necessary function. British informal

❶ This phrase is used particularly in the area of computer technology, but it was originally used to describe show-business acts. Ultimately, it may come from a series of 1929 posters which advertised the addition of sound to motion pictures. The first Hollywood musical, MGM's *Broadway Melody*, was promoted with the slogan *All Talking All Singing All Dancing*.

1991 *Computing* Each of the major independents launched an all-singing all-dancing graphics-oriented version last year.

all systems go: *see* SYSTEM.

be all that be very attractive or good.

US informal

2002 *Guardian* I can't believe how she throws herself at guys, she thinks she's all that.

not all there not in full possession of your mental faculties. informal

be all things to all men: *see* THING.

— **and all** used to emphasize something additional that is being referred to.

informal

1992 *Kenichi Ohmae* *The Borderless World* You can whip up nationalist passions and stage-manage protectionist rallies, bonfires and all.

be all go: *see* GO.

be all up with: *see* UP.

for all — in spite of —.

1989 *Independent* For all their cruel, corrupt and reckless vices, the Maharajahs were worshipped as gods by tens of thousands of their subjects.

all of a sudden: *see* SUDDEN.

on all fours: *see* FOUR.

all-clear

give (or get) the all-clear indicate (or get a sign) that a dangerous situation is now safe.

1 To get the signal or order is often sounded to indicate that a bombing raid is over.

alley

a blind alley: *see* BLIND.

up your alley: *see* up your street at STREET.

ally

pass in your ally: *see* PASS.

along

along about round about a specified time or date. North American informal or dialect

1989 *Motor Trend* Along about this time, it had started raining, so they red-flagged the race for a change to rain tires.

alpha

alpha and omega **1** the beginning and the end. **2** the essence or most important features.

1 Alpha and omega are respectively the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Christ uses the alpha and the omega, taking it from Revelation 1:8: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, saith the Lord'.

2 **1994** *BBC Holidays* At Cambridge... you'll find the alpha and omega of American academic life: historic Harvard and space-age MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

altar

sacrifice someone or something on the altar of make someone or something suffer in the interests of someone or something else.

1994 *Post (Denver)* The cherished goal of a color-blind society... has been sacrificed on the altar of political expediency.

altogether

in the altogether without any clothes on; naked. informal

1991 *Today* The mothers... have agreed to pose in the altogether.

American

as American as apple pie typically American in character.

1995 *New York Times Magazine* To reward people for something beyond merit is American as apple pie.

the American dream the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved.

amok

run amok behave uncontrollably and disruptively.

1 *Amok*, formerly also spelt *amuck*, comes from the Malay word *amuk*, meaning 'in a homicidal frenzy', in which sense it was first introduced into English in the early 16th century.

1990 *New York Review of Books* Hersh's article is sensationalism run amok. It does no credit to him or to *The New York Times Magazine*.

analysis

in the final analysis when everything has been considered (used to suggest that the following statement expresses the basic truth about a complex situation).

ancient

ancient as the hills: *see* HILL.

the ancient of Days a biblical title for God, taken from Daniel 7:9.

angel

the angel in the house a woman who is completely devoted to her husband and family.

❶ This was the title of a collection of poems on married love by Coventry Patmore (1823–96), and it is now mainly used ironically.

on the side of the angels on the side of what is right.

❶ In a speech in Oxford in November 1864 the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli alluded to the controversy over the origins of humankind then raging in the wake of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859): 'Is man an ape or an angel? Now I am on the side of the angels' (*The Times* 26 Nov. 1864).

angry

angry young man a young man who feels and expresses anger at the conventional values of the society around him.

❶ Originally, this term referred to a member of a group of socially conscious writers in Britain in the 1950s, in particular the playwright John Osborne. The phrase, the title of a book (1951) by Leslie Paul, was used of Osborne in the publicity material for his play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), in which the characteristic views of the angry young men were articulated by the anti-hero Jimmy Porter.

answer

the answer's a lemon: *see* LEMON.

a dusty answer: *see* DUSTY.

ante

up (or raise) the ante increase what is at stake or under discussion, especially in a conflict or dispute.

❶ *Ante* comes from Latin, in which it means 'before'. As an English noun it was originally (in the early 19th century) a term in poker and similar gambling games, meaning 'a stake put up by a player before drawing cards'.

1998 *New Scientist* This report ups the ante on the pace at which these cases need to be identified and treated.

ant

have ants in your pants be fidgety or restless.
informal

any

not be having any of it be absolutely unwilling to cooperate. *informal*

anyone

anyone's game an evenly balanced contest.

be anyone's (of a person) be open to sexual advances from anyone. *informal*

anything

anything goes: *see* GOES.

apart

be poles apart: *see* POLE.

come apart at the seams: *see* SEAM.

ape

go ape go wild; become violently excited.
informal

❶ Originally mid 20th-century North American slang, the expression possibly refers to the 1933 movie *King Kong*, which stars a giant ape-like monster.

apology

an apology for a very poor example of.

1998 *Imogen de la Bere* *The Last Deception of Palliser Wentwood* It's an apology for a bridge, built of left-over stones.

with apologies to used before the name of an author or artist to indicate that something is a parody or adaptation of their work.

2001 *This Old House* With apologies to Robert Frost, boundary expert Walter Robillard says, 'Good fences on the proper line make good neighbours'.

appeal

appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober ask someone to reconsider, with the suggestion that an earlier opinion or decision represented only a passing mood.

❶ This phrase comes from an anecdote told by the Roman historian and moralist Valerius Maximus concerning an unjust judgement given by King Philip of Macedon: the woman condemned by Philip declared that she would appeal to him once again, but this time when he was sober.

a

appeal to Caesar appeal to the highest possible authority.

i The allusion is to the claim made by the apostle Paul to have his case heard in Rome, which was his right as a Roman citizen. 'I appeal unto Caesar' (Acts 25:11).

appearance

keep up appearances maintain an impression of wealth or well-being.

to (or by) all appearances as far as can be seen.

1991 Eric Lax *Woody Allen* To all appearances, theirs was a unique case of sibling amity.

apple

apple of discord a subject of dissension.

i This expression refers to the Greek myth in which a golden apple inscribed 'for the fairest' was contended for by the goddesses Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite.

the apple of your eye a person or thing of whom you are extremely fond and proud.

i In Old English, the phrase referred to the pupil of the eye, considered to be a globular solid body; it came to be used as a symbol of something cherished and watched over.

apples and oranges (of two people or things) irreconcilably or fundamentally different. North American

a rotten (or bad) apple a bad person in a group, typically one whose behaviour is likely to have a corrupting influence on the rest. informal

she's apples used to indicate that everything is in good order and there is nothing to worry about. Australian informal

i *Apples and spice* or *apples and rice* is Australian rhyming slang for *nice*.

apple cart

upset the apple cart wreck an advantageous project or disturb the status quo.

i The use of a cart piled high with apples as a metaphor for a satisfactory but possibly precarious state of affairs is recorded in various expressions from the late 18th century onwards.

1996 Business Age The real test will be instability in China ... Another Tiananmen Square could really upset the apple cart.

apple pie

as American as apple pie: *see* AMERICAN.

apropos

apropos of nothing having no relevance to any previous discussion or situation.

approval

seal (or stamp) of approval an indication or statement that something is accepted or regarded favourably.

i This expression stems from the practice of putting a stamp (or formerly a seal) on official documents.

apron

tied to someone's apron strings too much under the influence and control of someone (especially used to suggest that a man is too much influenced by his mother).

area

a grey area: *see* GREY.

a no-go area: *see* NO-GO.

argue

argue the toss dispute a decision or choice already made. informal, chiefly British

i The toss in this phrase is the tossing of a coin to decide an issue in a simple and unambiguous way according to the side of the coin visible when it lands.

ark

out of the ark extremely old-fashioned.

i The ark referred to is the biblical Noah's ark (Genesis 6–7), in which Noah endeavoured to save his family and two of every kind of animal from the Flood.

arm

a call to arms a call to make ready for confrontation.

cost an arm and a leg be extremely expensive. informal

give an arm and a leg for pay a high price for.

keep someone or something at arm's length avoid intimacy or close contact with someone or something.

the long arm of coincidence the far-reaching power of coincidence.

the long (or strong) arm of the law the police seen as a far-reaching or intimidating power.

as long as your arm very long. informal

put the arm on attempt to force or coerce someone to do something. North American informal

up in arms about protesting angrily about something.

1994 *Asian Times* A lack of checks and balances... or legal redress for workers have trade unions up in arms.

with open arms with great affection or enthusiasm.

would give your right arm for be willing to pay a high price for; greatly desire to have or do. informal

armchair

an armchair critic a person who knows about a subject only by reading or hearing about it and criticizes without active experience or first-hand knowledge.

❶ The phrase *armchair critic* is first recorded in 1896, but the concept was around at least a decade earlier: in 1886 Joseph Chamberlain sneered at opponents as 'arm-chair politicians'. Another common variant is *armchair traveller*, meaning 'someone who travels in their imagination only'.

armed

armed at all points prepared in every particular.

armed to the teeth ❶ carrying a lot of weapons. ❷ heavily equipped.

armpit

up to your armpits deeply involved in a particular unpleasant situation or enterprise. chiefly US

army

you and whose army? used to express disbelief in someone's ability to carry out a threat. informal

around

have been around have a lot of varied experience of the world, especially a lot of sexual experience. informal

arrow

an arrow in the quiver one of a number of

resources or strategies that can be drawn on or followed.

arrow of time (or time's arrow) the direction of travel from past to future in time considered as a physical dimension.

a straight arrow an honest or genuine person. North American

arse vulgar slang

go arse over tit fall over in a sudden or dramatic way.

kiss my arse: see KISS.

kiss someone's arse: see KISS.

lick someone's arse: see LICK.

not know your arse from your elbow be totally ignorant or incompetent.

a pain in the arse: see PAIN.

art

art for art's sake the idea that a work of art has no purpose beyond itself.

❶ This phrase is the slogan of artists who hold that the chief or only aim of a work of art is the self-expression of the individual artist who creates it.

be art and part of be an accessory or participant in; be deeply involved in.

❶ *Be art and part of* was originally a Scottish legal expression: *art* referred to the bringing about of an action and *part* to participation in it.

have something down to a fine art: see FINE ART.

state of the art: see STATE.

article

an article of faith a firmly held belief.

❶ *Article* is here used in the sense of 'a statement or item in a summary of religious belief'.

1994 Paul Ormerod *The Death of Economics* It is an article of faith in orthodox economics that free trade between nations is wholly desirable.

the finished article: see FINISHED.

the genuine article: see GENUINE.

as

as and when used to refer to an uncertain future event.

1996 *She* The single most important strategy you can adopt to boost your energy levels is to learn to deal with an issue as and when it rears its head.

a

as if! used to express the speaker's belief that something is very doubtful or unlikely.
informal

as it were in a way (used to be less precise).

1991 *Atlantic Jazz* audiences permit older musicians to go on suiting up, as it were, until they drop.

ascendant

in the ascendant rising in power or influence.

i This expression has been in figurative use since the late 16th century. Literally, in technical astrological use, an *ascendant* is the sign of the zodiac that is just rising above the eastern horizon at a particular moment.

ash

dust and ashes: *see* DUST.

rake over the ashes: *see* RAKE.

rise from the ashes: *see* RISE.

turn to ashes in your mouth become bitterly disappointing or worthless.

i This phrase alludes to the Dead Sea fruit, a legendary fruit which looked appetizing but turned to smoke and ashes when someone tried to eat it. The fruit are described in the *Travels* attributed to the 14th-century writer John de Mandeville.

1995 *Guardian* Those who marvelled at the phenomenal climbing feats of Pedro Delgado in the 1988 Tour found words such as 'heroic' and 'Herculean' turn to ashes in their mouths during the probenecid (a masking agent) scandal.

ask

ask for the moon: *see* MOON.

ask me another! used to say emphatically that you do not know the answer to a question. informal

ask no odds: *see* ODDS.

a big ask a difficult demand to fulfil.
informal

don't ask me! used to indicate that you do not know the answer to a question and that you are surprised or irritated to be questioned. informal

I ask you! an exclamation of shock or disapproval intended to elicit agreement from your listener. informal

asking

be asking for trouble (or be asking for it)

behave in a way that is likely to result in difficulty for yourself. informal

for the asking used to indicate that someone can easily have something if they want it.

1991 *Mark Tully* *No Full Stops in India* Second helpings come automatically, and third helpings are there for the asking.

asleep

asleep at the wheel not attentive or alert; inactive. informal

i The image here is of falling asleep while driving a car. A North American variant is *asleep at the switch*, which refers to the points lever or switch on a railway.

2003 *Guardian* Rowling has not been asleep at the wheel in the three years since the last Potter novel, and I am pleased to report that she has not confused sheer length with inspiration.

ass North American vulgar slang

bust your ass try very hard to do something.

chew someone's ass reprimand someone severely.

cover your ass take steps to protect yourself.

drag (or haul) ass hurry or move fast.

get your ass in gear hurry.

kick (some) ass (or kick someone's ass): *see* KICK.

kiss ass: *see* KISS.

kiss someone's ass: *see* KISS.

no skin off your ass: *see* SKIN.

not give a rat's ass not care at all about something.

a pain in the ass: *see* PAIN.

a piece of ass: *see* PIECE.

put someone's ass in a sling get someone in trouble.

whip (or bust) someone's ass use physical force to beat someone in a fight.

at

at it engaged in some activity, typically a reprehensible one.

1993 *G. F. Newman* *Law & Order* Oh, don't take me for a complete idiot, Jack. I know you're at it.

at that in addition; furthermore (used for emphasis at the end of a statement).

1994 *Sunday Times* The sensitivity to social change may play its part, but in reality fashion is a business, and a hard-nosed one at that.

where it's at at the most fashionable place, possession, or activity. informal

1990 Ellen Feldman *Looking for Love* New York is where it's at, stylewise.

atmosphere

an atmosphere that you could cut with a knife a general feeling of great tension or malevolence.

attendance

dance attendance on: see DANCE.

auld

for auld lang syne for old times' sake.

❶ The phrase literally means 'for old lang since', and is the title and refrain of a song by Robert Burns (1788).

auspice

under the auspices of with the help, support, or protection of.

❶ *Auspice* (since the late 18th century almost always used in the plural), comes from the Latin word *auspicium*, which means the act of divination carried out by an *auspex* in ancient Rome. The *auspex* observed the flight of birds in order to foretell future events. If the omens were favourable he was seen as the protector of the particular enterprise foretold.

authority

have something on good authority have ascertained something from a reliable source.

away

away with something used as an exhortation to overcome or be rid of something.

get away with you! used to express scepticism. Scottish

far and away: see FAR.

out and away: see OUT.

awkward

the awkward age adolescence.

the awkward squad a squad composed of recruits and soldiers who need further training.

❶ Shortly before his death Robert Burns is reported to have said, 'Don't let the awkward squad fire over me'. Nowadays, the expression is often used to refer to a group of people who are regarded as tiresome or difficult to deal with.

axe

have an axe to grind have a private, sometimes malign, motive for doing or being involved in something.

❶ The expression originated in a story told by Benjamin Franklin and was used first in the USA, especially with reference to politics, but it is now in general use.

1997 Times I am a non-smoker, and have no personal axe to grind.

aye

the ayes have it the affirmative votes are in the majority.

❶ Aye is an archaic or dialect word meaning 'yes', now used in standard speech only when voting. Compare with **the noes have it** (at NO).

2000 Guardian The arguments will continue. But we think the 'ayes' have it.

Bb

B

plan B an alternative strategy.

1999 *8 Days* And if that doesn't work, well, there's always Plan B.

babe

babes in the wood inexperienced people in a situation calling for experience.

- ❶ The *babes in the wood* are characters in an old ballad *The Children in the Wood*, which dates from the 16th century.
- The two children are abandoned in the wood by their wicked uncle who wishes to steal their inheritance. The children die of starvation and robins cover their bodies with leaves; the uncle and his accomplice are subsequently brought to justice.

baby

be someone's baby (of a project) be instigated and developed by one particular person; be someone's creation or special concern. informal

be left holding the baby: see HOLDING.

throw the baby out with the bathwater

discard something valuable along with other things that are inessential or undesirable.

- ❶ This phrase is based on a German saying recorded from the early 16th century but not introduced into English until the mid 19th century, by Thomas Carlyle. He identified it as German and gave it in the form, 'You must empty out the bathing-tub, but not the baby along with it.'

1998 *New Scientist* It is easy to throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to UFO books—there are some seriously bad titles out there.

back

at the back of your mind not consciously or specifically thought of or remembered but still part of your general awareness.

back in the day in the past; some time ago.

a back number ❶ an issue of a periodical before the current one. ❷ a person whose ideas or methods are out of

date and who is no longer relevant or useful.

back o' Bourke the outback. Australian informal

- ❶ *Bourke* is the name of a town in north-west New South Wales.

the back of beyond a very remote or inaccessible place.

1998 *Sanjida O'Connell Angel Bird* This is London, Niall, not some poky wee place in the back of beyond.

back to the drawing board used to indicate that an idea or scheme has been unsuccessful and a new one must be devised.

- ❶ An architectural or engineering project is at its earliest phase when it exists only as a plan on a *drawing board*.

1991 *Discover* Even as Humphries fine-tunes his system, however, he realizes that NASA could send him back to the drawing board.

back to square one back to the starting point, with no progress made.

- ❶ *Square one* may be a reference to a board game such as Snakes and Ladders, or may come from the notional division of a football pitch into eight numbered sections for the purpose of early radio commentaries.

back the wrong horse make a wrong or inappropriate choice.

be on (or get off) someone's back nag (or stop nagging) someone. informal

by the back door using indirect or dishonest means to achieve an objective.

get someone's back up make someone annoyed or angry.

- ❶ This phrase developed as an allusion to the way a cat arches its back when it is angry or threatened.

get your own back: see GET.

know something like the back of your hand be entirely familiar with something.

not in my back yard: see NOT.

on your back in bed recovering from an injury or illness.

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- [read online In Like Flynn \(Molly Murphy, Book 4\) here](#)
- [read online Earthship, Volume 1: How to Build Your Own](#)
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