



Learn English Through Stories

Intermediate Idioms

**Adopted and modified by
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A Hard Day Back by K S Sandhu

Anna stepped off the plane feeling like she was still floating. Her two weeks in Australia had been amazing: blue skies, kangaroos hopping around, and days full of adventure. But the moment she opened her flat door, she came back down to earth with a bump. Letters and bills were piled on the mat, her fridge was almost empty, and there was a message from her boss: “Welcome back. We need to talk about the project tomorrow.”

The next morning at work was difficult. Her colleague Mark was in a bad mood. “The managers made some terrible choices last year,” he said. “And who picks up the bill? It’s always ordinary people like us – the person in the street!”

Anna agreed silently. She felt tired already.

During the team meeting, her supervisor announced extra tasks for everyone. Anna knew she couldn’t do more hours without help. When the meeting ended, she stayed behind.

“I need to talk about my workload,” she said. “It’s too much.”

The supervisor frowned. “We’re all under pressure, Anna.”

“I understand,” she replied, “but I can’t manage alone.” He argued, raising his voice, but Anna stood her ground. She stayed calm and explained her reasons clearly. In the end, he agreed to give some tasks to another team member. Anna felt proud – she hadn’t backed down.

At lunchtime, Mark was still complaining. “That new girl in accounts made a big mistake with the invoices. Someone should tell her how stupid it was.”

Anna shook her head. “She’s already feeling miserable. There’s no need to stick the knife in too. Let’s just help her fix it.”

Mark looked embarrassed. “OK, you’re right.”

After work, Anna met her friend Lisa at a café. Lisa was excited. “I’ve applied for a better job, even though I don’t have much experience. Everyone says it’s impossible.”

“That’s brave,” Anna said. “You might succeed against all the odds.”

Lisa laughed. “If I don’t get it, I’ll come back down to earth with a bump again!”

They chatted and laughed until late. When Anna got home, her little brother Tom was waiting. He hid behind the sofa and suddenly jumped out.

“Boo!”

Anna screamed and dropped her bag. “Tom! You scared the living daylights out of me!”

He giggled. “It worked!”

“Don’t do it again,” she said, smiling, “or I’ll be banging my head against a brick wall trying to teach you manners!”

That night, Anna sat quietly with a cup of tea. Life wasn’t always easy. Holidays ended, work was hard, and surprises came when you least expected them. But she had managed difficult moments that day. She had stood her ground, shown kindness, and enjoyed time with people she cared about.

Sometimes reality hits hard, but small steps forward make everything feel better.

2

Using your dictionary

A

What do you look up?

As it can be difficult to work out what an idiom means even when you know all the individual words in the idiom, you will often need to look up idioms in a dictionary. If you are working with an online dictionary, then you will have no problems finding the idiom in question, but working with a traditional dictionary, you have to find where the idiom is listed.

As an idiom consists of several words, which of these do you look up in your dictionary? For example, do you try to find **kill two birds with one stone** under *kill*, *two*, *birds* or *stone*, or **let the cat out of the bag** under *let*, *cat* or *bag*?



If you are using either the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI) or the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD), then the easiest way of finding what you need is to look in the alphabetical index at the back of the book. This lists all the expressions included in the dictionary with the word where an entry for the expression will be found in the dictionary highlighted in bold. This shows that in CIDI **kill two birds with one stone** will be found under *two* and **let the cat out of the bag** will be found under *cat*. In CALD these two idioms will be found under *kill* and *cat*.



If you are using a different dictionary, read its introductory notes now to see how it deals with idioms. This will avoid the frustration you would otherwise feel on deciding to look up the wrong element of the idiom first.

B

What information does your dictionary give you?

Your dictionary will tell you a lot of other things as well as the meaning of the idiom. As idioms are used in such fixed ways, it is important to read the notes in your dictionary carefully if you want to use idioms as well as to understand them.

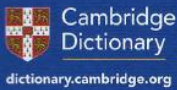
You will find all these things in a good dictionary of idioms:

- information about words that are interchangeable, e.g. **drive/send sb round the bend**
- information about how the idiom is used – brackets, for example, show if any words in the idiom can be left out, e.g. **I (can) feel it in my bones**.
- notes about the grammar of the idiom – there may be notes, for example, to say that an idiom is usually used in a passive construction or in a continuous form or in a negative sentence
- examples of the idiom in use
- comments on register – the register labels used in CIDI are *informal*, *formal*, *very informal*, *old-fashioned*, *taboo*, *humorous* and *literary*
- notes about regional variations in use – this is important as many British idioms will sound very strange to an American and vice versa

Tip

It is not possible for this book to include as much information about each idiom as you will find in a dictionary. So, look up the idioms that you particularly want to learn from this book in a dictionary as well. In your vocabulary notebook, write any further information or other examples of the idioms in the context that you find in the dictionary.

Exercises



2.1 Look up the idioms in these sentences in your dictionary. What word is each idiom listed under?

- 1 It's the person in the street who **picks up the bill** for the government's mistakes.
- 2 She had a wonderful trip to Australia, but now she's **come back down to earth with a bump**.
- 3 John had a furious argument with his supervisor, but he managed to **stand his ground**.
- 4 He's feeling very miserable, so there's no need for you to **stick the knife in** too.
- 5 You're **banging your head against a brick wall** trying to get him to help you.
- 6 You **scared the living daylights out of** me by creeping up behind me like that.

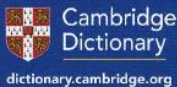
2.2 Which word(s) could be left out of the idioms in these sentences?

- 1 It's always hard when you have to **come back down to earth with a bump** after a holiday.
- 2 No one thought she could climb the mountain without oxygen, but she succeeded **against all the odds**.
- 3 She **hit him where it hurt most** by telling him that he had always been a disappointment to his parents.
- 4 The way he reacted **scared the living daylights out of** me!

2.3 Which word in each idiom could be changed for another word?

- 1 Don't worry about a thing – I'm sure the company will **pick up the bill**.
- 2 I **came back down to earth with a bump** when I saw the pile of post waiting for me after the weekend.
- 3 The army had lost many of its men, but it managed to **stand its ground**.
- 4 Why do critics seem to enjoy **sticking the knife into** untalented actors and writers?
- 5 I feel as if I'm **banging my head against a brick wall** with him at the moment.
- 6 It's a terrifying film – it **scared the living daylights out of** me!

2.4 What grammatical information does your dictionary give about these idioms? Read the information and then write a sentence with each idiom.



- 1 look a gift horse in the mouth
- 2 be banging your head against a brick wall
- 3 be on the brink of
- 4 tie yourself up in knots
- 5 be man enough

2.5 Match the register labels in the box with the idioms in the sentences below.

formal humorous informal literary old-fashioned very informal

- 1 I really don't like him – he's such a **slime ball**.
- 2 OK. I'll do the washing-up. **There's no peace for the wicked!**
- 3 Her family has lived in that village **from time immemorial**.
- 4 My grandma always used to say that **an apple a day keeps the doctor away**.
- 5 The food was so delicious – we **stuffed our faces**.
- 6 I hope that what I have said will **give you pause for thought**.

Answers

Unit 2

2.1 In CIDI and CALD these idioms are to be found under the following headwords:

- 1 pick (both)
- 2 earth (both)
- 3 ground (CIDI); stand (CALD)
- 4 knife (both)
- 5 head (both)
- 6 daylight (both)

2.2 1 *back* and *with a bump* can be omitted

- 2 either *all* or *the* could be omitted
- 3 *most* can be omitted
- 4 *living* could be omitted

2.3 1 *bill* could be replaced by *tab*

- 2 *bump* could be replaced by *bang* or *jolt*
- 3 *stand* could be replaced by *hold*
- 4 *sticking* could be replaced by *putting*
- 5 *banging* could be replaced by *hitting*
- 6 *scared* could be replaced by *frightened*

2.4 Possible answers:

- 1 **look a gift horse in the mouth** – always used in a negative sentence
You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth!
- 2 **be banging your head against a brick wall** – always used in a continuous form
Trying to reason with him was like banging my head against a brick wall.
- 3 **be on the brink of** – always followed by a noun or an -ing form
Newspaper reports say that the company is on the brink of financial disaster.
- 4 **tie yourself up in knots** – always used reflexively
She tied herself up in knots trying to explain why she had written to him like that.
- 5 **be man enough** – always followed by an infinitive with *to*
Are you man enough to accept the challenge?

2.5 1 informal 2 humorous 3 literary 4 old-fashioned 5 very informal
6 formal