

The Most Common Business Idioms

IDIOM	MEANING	EXAMPLE
24/7	"24/7" means 24 hours a day, seven days a week.	The convenience store on the corner is open 24/7.
a tough break	When something unfortunate happens, it can be called a "tough break."	It was a tough break for us when Caroline quit. She was one of our top performers.
ahead of the curve	To be "ahead of the curve" means to be more advanced than the competition.	We're investing a lot of money in research and development so we can stay ahead of the curve.
ahead of the pack	To be "ahead of the pack" means to be better or more successful than the competition.	If we want to stay ahead of the pack, we're going to have to work hard and continue to innovate.
ASAP	"ASAP" is an acronym for "as soon as possible."	I need to finish these reports. My boss needs them ASAP.
at stake	"At stake" means at risk.	I'm a little nervous about giving this presentation. There's a lot at stake.
back to square one	To go "back to square one" means to start something over again.	Our programmers identified what they thought the problem was with

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		<p>the software. After working for several hours, it turns out that the problem is something different.</p> <p>We're back to square one, unfortunately.</p>
back to the drawing board	To go "back to the drawing board" means to start something over and go back to the planning stage.	The prototype wasn't successful. We have to go back to the drawing board.
backroom deal	A "backroom deal" is an agreement or decision that is made without the public knowing about it.	I think they got the government contract because of a backroom deal.
ballpark number/figure	A "ballpark number" is a very inexact estimate.	I'm not sure what a Super Bowl commercial costs, but to give you a ballpark figure I'd say about three million dollars.
behind someone's back	To do something "behind someone's back" means to do something without someone's knowledge and in an unfair way.	She didn't think it would be fair to go behind his back and talk to management, so she confronted him directly.

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behind the scenes	What happens in secret or not in front of the general public is said to happen "behind the scenes."	They make it look so effortless, but they do a lot of hard work and planning behind the scenes.
big picture	Everything that is involved with a particular situation is called "the big picture."	Even though we all have very specific tasks to do, our manager makes sure we don't lose sight of the big picture.
blue collar	A "blue collar worker" is someone who works with his hands (manufacturing, construction, maintenance, etc.). The opposite is a "white collar worker." A white collar worker is someone who works in an office (customer service, management, sales, etc.). "Blue collar" (and "white collar") can also be used to describe a job, position, or a place.	It's a blue collar town with a lot of farmers and factory workers.
by the book	To do things "by the book" means to do things according to company policy or the law. It means to follow	We are regularly audited by several regulatory agencies. It's important that we do everything by the book.

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	the rules 100%.	
call it a day	To "call it a day" means to decide to stop working for the day.	Well, John, it's 7:00 and I'm getting hungry. How about we call it a day?
catch someone off guard	To "catch someone off guard" means to surprise someone by doing something that he or she was not expecting.	Mike was caught off guard when they asked him to direct the meeting.
cave (or cave in)	To "cave" or "cave in" means to give in or agree to something that someone previously did not want to accept.	The employees complained about the change in policy, but the supervisor refused to cave in.
change of pace	"A change of pace" is something different from a normal routine or schedule.	It's nice to go on business trips because it's a change of pace.
come up short	To "come up short" means to try to achieve something but fail. We often say that someone has "come up short" when someone fails to achieve a goal, but not completely.	The charity fund raiser was supposed to raise three million dollars, but we came up short.

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corner a market	To "corner a market" means to dominate a particular market.	Apple has cornered the market on mp3 players. They have a large percentage of market share.
cut corners	To "cut corners" means to take shortcuts and find an easier or cheaper way to do something.	We don't cut corners on our luxury products.
cut one's losses	To "cut one's losses" means to stop doing something that is unproductive and won't ever generate results.	Our advertising campaign was expensive and not showing results, so we cut our losses.
cut-throat	"Cut-throat" is used to describe something that is very intense, aggressive, and merciless.	In business school, the competition was cut-throat.
diamond in the rough	A "diamond in the rough" is something or someone that has a lot of potential but first requires a lot of work.	He was a diamond in the rough. He was intelligent and had great ideas, but his management and English skills weren't very good.
easy come, easy go	"Easy come, easy go," is an expression used to communicate that something gained easily is also lost	A lot of people who inherit money waste it on stupid things. I guess it's easy come, easy go.

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	easily. We often use this expression after something has been lost.	
fifty-fifty	"Fifty-fifty" means something is divided equally -- 50% for one party, 50% for the other party.	My business partner and I split everything fifty-fifty.
from the ground up	If you start a business, project, or something else from zero, you start it "from the ground up."	Bill Gates built Microsoft from the ground up.
game plan	A "game plan" is a strategy or plan.	They're not sure what their game plan is for the upcoming election.
get back in/into the swing of things	To "get back in/into the swing of things" means to get used to doing something again after having a break from that activity.	Our company shuts down operations for three weeks during the holiday season. When I go back to work in January, it's difficult to get back in the swing of things.
get down to business	To "get down to business" means to stop making small talk and start talking about serious topics related to business.	Now that everyone's here, let's get down to business and talk about the proposal.

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get something off the ground	To "get something off the ground" means to start a project or business.	We're glad the planning process is over. We're looking forward to getting the project off the ground.
get the ball rolling	To "get the ball rolling" means to start something (a project, for example).	We need to get the ball rolling on this project. The deadline is in June, and it's already April.
get/be on the good side of someone	If someone likes you, you are "on the good side" of that person.	I always remember my coworkers' birthdays and get them a card or small gift. I like to get on people's good side.
get/have one's foot in the door	To "get or have one's foot in the door" means to take a low-level position with a company with the goal of eventually getting a better position with the same company.	My son just took a low-paying internship position with a large company. He was happy to get his foot in the door at a well-known, respected company.
give someone a pat on the back	To "give someone a pat on the back" means to tell someone that they did a good job.	The boss gave Brian a pat on the back for coming up with such a good idea.
give the thumbs	To "give something or someone the	I can't believe she gave us the thumbs

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down	thumbs down" means to deny approval.	down. I thought it was a great idea.
give the thumbs up	To "give something or someone the thumbs up" means to give approval.	They gave our new proposal the thumbs up. We're going out to celebrate tonight.
go broke	To "go broke" means to go bankrupt or to lose all the money a person or business had.	There was too much competition and their expenses were too high. They eventually went broke.
go down the drain	When someone wastes or loses something, it is said to "go down the drain."	He dropped out of college in his third year and never continued his studies. All of his hard work and money went down the drain.
go the extra mile	To "go the extra mile" means to do more than what people expect.	We go the extra mile for our customers. If someone is dissatisfied with a purchase, we refund their money and offer them a discount on their next purchase.
go through the roof	If something is "going through the roof," it means it is rapidly increasing.	We're happy our number of Facebook followers has gone through

IDIOM	MEANING	EXAMPLE
		the roof.
gray area	If something is in a "gray area," it means that it is something undefined and not easily categorized.	I asked our lawyers if it was legal, and they said it wasn't clear. It's a gray area.
ground-breaking	If something is "ground-breaking," it means it is new and innovative.	The iPhone was a ground-breaking piece of technology when it was released in 2008.
hands are tied	Someone's "hands are tied" if they do not have control over a situation.	I would love to get you a job at my company, but my hands are tied. Management isn't hiring any additional employees this year.
have someone's work cut out	If you have a lot of work to do or a particularly difficult assignment, you "have your work cut out for you."	She has to sell \$35,000 worth of products by the end of the month. She has her work cut out for her.
hit the nail on the head	To "hit the nail on the head" means to do or say something 100% correctly.	I agree with John 100%. I think he really hit the nail on the head.
in a nutshell	"In a nutshell" means in a few words.	In a nutshell, this book is about how to motivate employees.

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in full swing	If a project is "in full swing," it means that it has been completely started and that it is progressing or moving as fast as it ever will.	Construction on the new site is in full swing now.
in the black	If a company is "in the black," it means that it is making a profit.	We're not having a great year, but at least we're in the black.
in the driver's seat	To be "in the driver's seat" means to be in control.	I'm not used to being in the driver's seat. I should probably buy some management books.
in the red	If a company is "in the red," it means that is not profitable and is operating at a loss.	When I started my own business, we were in the red for the first two years. We didn't see a profit until the third year.
keep one's eye on the ball	To "keep one's eye on the ball" means to give something one's full attention and to not lose focus.	I know we can do it. We just need to keep our eyes on the ball and not lose focus.
last straw	The "last straw" means the last annoyance, disturbance, or betrayal which causes someone to give up,	Our boss had been unhappy with Brian's performance for a while, but it was the last straw when he came to

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	lose their patience, or become angry.	work three hours late without calling.
learn the ropes	To "learn the ropes" means to learn the basics of something.	I like my new position. I'm starting to learn the ropes.
long shot	A "long shot" is something that has a very low probability of happening.	Winning the lottery is a long shot, but millions of people still buy lottery tickets.
loophole	A legal "loophole" occurs if a law is unclear or omits information. This lack of legal clarity allows people or corporations to pay less in taxes or gain some other advantage.	Some people complain that millionaires avoid paying taxes by finding loopholes in tax laws.
lose ground (opposite: gain ground)	To "lose ground" means to lose some type of an advantage (market share, for example) to a competitor.	Apple lost some ground to Samsung last quarter.
lose-lose situation (or no-win situation)	A "lose-lose situation" is when there will be a negative outcome regardless of what decision is made.	It's a lose-lose situation. If they lay off more workers, they'll get bad press. If they don't lay off more workers, they won't be able to compete.
nine-to-five	A "nine-to-five" is a job during normal	She was tired of working a nine-to-

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	working hours. The term came into existence because many work days start at 9 a.m. and end at 5 p.m.	five job, so she took her savings and opened a restaurant.
no brainer	If a decision is really obvious or really easy to make, the decision is a "no brainer."	Taking the new job was a no brainer. They offered me more money, a better schedule, and more vacation days.
no strings attached	If something is given without expecting anything in return, it is given with "no strings attached."	They will let you try the product for free with no strings attached. If you don't like it, there is no pressure to buy it.
no time to lose	If there is "no time to lose," it means that there is a lot of pressure to finish something quickly.	I told them I'd be finished by the end of the day and it's already 4:45. I need to get to work. There's no time to lose.
not going to fly	If a solution isn't effective, we can say that it "isn't going to fly."	I don't think that's going to fly. Let's keep generating ideas.
off the top of one's head	If someone says something "off the top of their head," it means that they	I have no idea how many branches they have. Off the top of my head, I'd

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	give a response without thinking about it much or doing any research on the subject.	say about 20.
on a roll	If someone is "on a roll," it means that he or she has had several successes in a row.	Our profits have been above our projected numbers for five months in a row. We're really on a roll.
on the ball	To be "on the ball" means to be alert and aware of things.	My new personal assistant is working out well. He's really on the ball.
on the same page	If two people are "on the same page," they are in agreement about something.	Let's go over the details of what we agreed on to make sure we're on the same page.
on top of something	To be "on top of something" means to be in control of a situation and aware of changes.	I read a lot to stay on top of the latest changes in my industry.
on your toes	To be "on your toes" means to be alert.	Stay on your toes. Anything can happen.
out in the open	If something is "out in the open," it is public knowledge and not hidden from people.	I think it's good to do things out in the open because people get suspicious if you do things in secret.

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out of the loop (opposite: in the loop)	To be "out of the loop" means to not know something that a select group of people knows. The opposite, to be "in the loop," means to be part of a select group with knowledge that others do not have.	I felt like I was out of the loop after being on vacation for two weeks.
pink slip	Someone who gets the "pink slip," has been fired by their employer.	They gave him the pink slip. He wasn't performing very well.
play hardball	To "play hardball" means to be competitive in a cruel and merciless way. Playing hardball means doing anything possible to win.	He played hardball to get where he is, so I would be careful what you say and do around him.
put all one's eggs in one basket	To "put all one's eggs in one basket," means to rely on only one thing to bring success.	It's not good to only invest in the stock market. You don't want to put all your eggs in one basket.
put the cart before the horse	To "put the cart before the horse" means to do or think about things in the wrong order.	They were trying to find investors without even having a business plan. They were putting the cart before the horse.

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raise the bar	To "raise the bar" means to set the standards or expectations higher, usually by achieving or creating something better than what had previously existed.	The new software is getting great reviews. It looks like the bar has been raised for the competition.
read between the lines	To "read between the lines" means to understand something that isn't communicated directly. Reading between the lines involves understanding what someone is implying or suggesting but not saying directly.	He didn't say that he wants to leave the company, but I can read between the lines. He's not happy here.
red tape	"Red tape" refers to excessive rules, procedures, and regulations that make it difficult to accomplish something. We usually use "red tape" to talk about government requirements that create difficult, time-consuming barriers for people and businesses.	The new law is going to create a lot of red tape, and we're going to have to pay our lawyers a lot more money.

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rock the boat	To "rock the boat" means to cause problems or disrupt a peaceful situation.	I'd ask for a raise, but I don't want to rock the boat.
round-the-clock	"Round the clock" means 24 hours a day.	We have round-the-clock production at all our manufacturing facilities.
run/go around in circles	To "run (or go) around in circles" means to do the same thing over and over again without getting any results.	Everyone kept restating their opinions but nothing was agreed on. We were running around in circles.
safe bet	A "safe bet" means something that will probably happen.	It's a safe bet that smartphones will be much more advanced in 10 years.
same boat	If people are in the same situation, they are in the "same boat."	We're all worried about losing our jobs. We're in the same boat.
second nature	When someone does something so well that it seems like they were born knowing how to do it, we say that the activity is "second nature" to that person.	She's been a computer programmer for ten years. At this point, programming is second nature to her.
see eye to eye	To "see eye to eye" with someone	We don't always see eye to eye, but I

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	means to agree with that person.	respect her opinions and appreciate her honesty.
see something through	To "see something through" means to do something until it is finished.	I told my boss that I really wanted to see this project through before taking on another project.
sever ties	To "sever ties" means to end a relationship.	We had to sever ties with several of our suppliers due to late shipments.
shoot something down	To "shoot something down" means to reject something, such as a proposal or idea.	It's best not to shoot down people's ideas during a brainstorming session. The goal is to generate ideas, not to criticize them.
sky's the limit	"The sky's the limit" if there is no limit to what can be achieved.	With their commission structure, the sky's the limit to what you can earn.
small talk	"Small talk" is conversation about unimportant topics that do not offend people (the weather, for example).	We typically spend about 15 minutes making small talk before we start our meetings.
smooth/clear sailing	"Smooth sailing" is a term used to describe a situation where success is	Once our largest competitor went out of business, it was smooth sailing.

IDIOM	MEANING	EXAMPLE
	achieved without difficulties.	
snail mail	"Snail mail" is the term used for the traditional mail that goes through the post office.	If you want to fill out form 52-E and send it to the government, you have to do it using snail mail. They don't allow you to scan the document.
stand one's ground	To "stand one's ground" means to not change one's opinion or position.	We tried to change the dress code, but Human Resources stood their ground.
start off on the right foot	To "start off on the right foot" means to start something in a positive way.	We offered them a very generous price on their first order and everything shipped on time. We really started off on the right foot.
start off on the wrong foot	To "start off on the wrong foot" means to start something in a negative way.	I just switched cable companies. They overcharged me for the first month's service. They really started off on the wrong foot.
state of the art	Something that is "state of the art" is modern and technologically advanced.	We have a brand new, state-of-the-art facility.

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take something lying down	To "take something lying down" means to accept something unpleasant without fighting back.	The proposed law would kill our industry, but we're not going to take it lying down. We're going to fight back and make sure the law isn't passed.
take the bull by the horns	To "take the bull by the horns" means to directly confront a difficult situation.	One of our mid-level managers wasn't very popular and was causing some problems, so we took the bull by the horns and replaced him with somebody else.
talk someone into something	To "talk someone into something" means to convince someone to do something.	I was hesitant to redesign our website, but my employees talked me into it. I'm glad they did. The new site looks great.
talk someone out of something	To "talk someone out of something" means to convince someone not to do something.	I wanted to make a real estate investment, but my financial adviser talked me out of it.
the elephant in the room	"The elephant in the room" refers to an obvious problem or controversial issue that no one wants to talk about.	We should have been talking about our huge debt, but no one wanted to talk about the elephant in the room.

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think big	To "think big" means to have ambitious goals and big plans for the future.	I'm not content with just opening one or two more stores. I'm thinking big -- I think we can open 10 stores in the next five years.
think outside the box	To "think outside the box" means to think of creative, unconventional solutions instead of common ones.	Creating a product that no one has sold before is an example of thinking outside the box.
throw in the towel	To "throw in the towel" means to quit.	I was trying to learn Portuguese, but I got frustrated and threw in the towel.
time's up	"Time's up" means that the time for something or someone has ended.	I think his time's up as the CEO. They're going to replace him as soon as they find a suitable candidate.
touch base	To "touch base" means to make contact with someone.	Let me make a few phone calls to try to get an answer to your question. I'll touch base with you later today.
twist someone's arm	To "twist someone's arm" means to persuade or convince someone to do something that he or she does not want to do.	The owner thought the budget was a little high. We had to twist his arm to get him to agree to it.

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under the table	Something done secretly (and usually illegally) in the business world is done "under the table."	To avoid paying taxes, they paid some of their employees under the table.
up in the air	If something is undecided, it is "up in the air."	We're looking for a test market right now, but nothing has been decided yet. Everything's still up in the air.
uphill battle	Something that is difficult to achieve because of obstacles and difficulties is an "uphill battle."	Winning the election is going to be an uphill battle. He doesn't have much support at the moment.
upper hand	If someone has an advantage over someone else, he or she has the "upper hand."	John is more experienced and well respected, so he had the upper hand in the argument.
white collar	A "white collar worker" is someone who works in an office (customer service, management, sales, etc.). The opposite of a white collar worker is a "blue collar worker." A blue collar worker is someone who works with his hands (manufacturing, construction, maintenance, etc.).	There are mostly manufacturing positions here. There aren't many white-collar jobs.

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	"White collar" (and "blue collar") can also be used to describe a job, position, or place.	
win-win situation	A "win-win situation" is a situation where everyone involved gains something.	We were happy to get the contract, and they were happy to get such a good price. It was a win-win situation.
word of mouth	If something spreads by "word of mouth," people hear about it through informal conversation with friends, family members, acquaintances, etc.	Many local restaurants rely on word of mouth to get new customers.
writing on the wall	The "writing on the wall" refers to the evidence and clues that something (usually negative) is going to happen.	I'm going to get my resume ready. I can see the writing on the wall.
yes man	A "yes man" is someone who always agrees with his or her superiors.	The company isn't looking to hire someone who is going to try to make a lot of changes. They're just looking for a yes man.