

Off the Top of My Head

300 American Workplace Idioms for People Who Speak English as a Second Language

Jonathan Homa

Smashwords Edition

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This book is dedicated to everyone who has invested countless hours in learning second languages to facilitate communication and common understanding in a diverse world.

With loving thanks to my wife and lifemate, Anne, who was a frequent sounding board for content.

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Introduction

While English is not your first language you speak it well. You are sufficiently skilled to conduct business in English. You can present a product's features and benefits, negotiate prices and timelines, and work with your native English speaking colleagues, suppliers and customers to advance the business of your company. You can also participate in informal discussions about the news, family and personal interests.

Yet imagine this scenario. You and a native English-speaking colleague just completed a difficult but successful negotiating session with a customer. After the customer leaves your colleague turns to you and says, "Boy, that was touch and go there for a while. I really thought we would have to throw in the towel, but hey, after we sweetened the pot a bit, it was a piece of cake. Good job." As you nod politely in agreement you are thinking to yourself, in your own native language, "What did he just say?"

Of course the problem is that instead of using plain language to express his thoughts, the native English speaker used a string of idioms. Every language has idioms, short phrases or expressions that add color and depth to everyday communication. They are made up of simple words that translate into complex and varied meanings. It can take years of speaking a language to feel comfortable using idioms.

Idioms are not taught formally in school. Rather, as part of a national culture they are assimilated through conversation with others and through audio, visual and written media. We encounter and learn idioms throughout our life.

For individuals learning English as a second language idioms present a particular difficulty in that there are so many of them to learn. The website thefreedictionary.com, referencing the Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, states that there are over 5,000 idiomatic phrases used in American English, and that this number gets pushed up to 7,000 if one includes British, Canadian and Australian English.

During my thirty year career in international sales and marketing I have had the pleasure of working and conducting business with hundreds of people like you from countries all around the world who learned and speak English as a second language. So I am particularly sympathetic to your frustration when you encounter idioms. While I have always made an effort to use plain English language, I have on occasion inserted an idiom either accidentally or because I wanted eagerly to convey a thought more expressively and I thought I would give it a try. In almost all cases I was treated to a puzzled facial expression, or worse, a blank look that indicated, “Carry-on even though I didn’t understand what you just said.” If I stopped and explained why I used the idiom it typically led onto a fascinating side conversation about how that and similar idioms were expressed in their native language and how they wished they could learn more English idioms.

So this book has been prepared with you in mind, the business person who speaks English as a second language who would like to become more familiar with American English idioms used in the workplace. I have sorted through thousands of idioms and selected over three hundred that are in common use, that you have a high probability of hearing, or if you like, can use yourself in conversation or writing. I have purposefully not included idioms that are more rarely used even though they may be interesting and colorful, and I have also not included those with obscene language of which there are many.

To make this book easy and fun to use, the idioms are organized into broad categories as per the table of contents. For each idiom I have included a fun illustration, a brief explanation, and several examples of use and sometimes notes on origin. In many cases I have used people’s names in the explanatory sentences. I used whatever name popped into my head at the time so do not expect consistent context if the same name is repeated.

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Starting Work

1. Get Down to Work

Put other activities aside and focus on work.



“Tom, you need to stop browsing on the Internet and **get down to work.**”

“I’m having a difficult time **getting down to work** today since they announced our project may be cut.”

All these first expressions use a meaning of the word “get” that means to begin, as in get moving or get going.

2. Get the Show on the Road

Urge or command people to begin a work activity.



“Peter, your team has been planning this project for weeks, don’t you think it’s time to **get the show on the road** and start implementation.”

“We need to upgrade those customer units that came in this morning and have them down to shipping by 4:00 P.M. So **get the show on the road** and start working on them.”

Possible origin – Telling a travelling show or circus that it was time to pack and move to the next town.

3. Get off the Ground

Get something started.



“John, you need **get** this project **off the ground** so that we can tell the customer that we have started work.”

“Paul, I’ve given you all the resources you requested. When are you going to **get** that new product development **off the ground**?”

Possible origin – From getting a plane or rocket off the ground and into the air.

4. Get the Ball Rolling; Keep the Ball Rolling

Initiate an activity; keep an activity going.



“Peter, while we're still waiting for the formal budget approval I'd like you to **get the ball rolling** on this project.”

“Kathy, thanks for **keeping the ball rolling** while Frank was out sick.”

5. Get up to Speed

Become familiar with an activity.



“Sam, welcome to the company. Take a few weeks to **get up to speed** on how we do things here and then we'll discuss a specific assignment.”

“John, I know I am responsible for this account now, but I would appreciate if you would continue to lead our interactions for the next few weeks until I **get up to speed.**”

6. Learn the Ropes

Learn the details of a job.



“John, welcome to the company. For the next month you'll be assisting Tom here so you can **learn the ropes.**”

“Susan, we're so glad you are here because we are very short on staff. Unfortunately you won't have a lot of time to **learn the ropes** and we need you to jump right in.”

Origin – Learning all the different ropes that are used to control the sails on a sailing ship.

7. Marching Orders

Objectives or instructions.



“Your **marching orders** for the board meeting today are very simple, get the budget approved.”

“Phil, you told me what you wanted me to accomplish not how to do it. If you're not happy, next time make my **marching orders** more specific.”

Origin – From the marching orders assigned to a commander in the military.

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Working Smart

8. Ducks Lined Up; Ducks in a Row

Make sure everything is in place before taking action.



“I need to get my **ducks lined up** with a majority of the board members before I bring this issue to a vote.”

“Jim, get your **ducks in a row** with manufacturing and shipping before you visit the customers next week so you could assure them we won't be late again.”

Origin – There are several theories. I think it comes from duck hunting where one wants to shoot one duck after another.

9. Ahead of the Curve; Behind the Curve

Being ahead in the knowledge needed for a job; Being behind in the knowledge needed for a job.



“John makes an effort to **stay ahead of the curve**. That's why he is one of our best analysts.”

“I'm **behind the curve** on our latest customer crisis and their CEO is expecting a call from me. I need a detailed briefing by the end of the day.”

10. On Top of the Situation; On Top of It

Gain an understanding and control of a situation.



“Hank, I've been getting too many calls from upset customers recently. You're in charge of customer service. You need to get on **top of the situation** and fix whatever is broken.”

“John, I know all about the system problems. Don't worry I'm **on top of it** and I promise it will be fixed by tomorrow.”

11. Hit the Nail on the Head

Identify exactly the cause of a situation.



“Kathy, you **hit the nail on the head** with your analysis of the problem, now go ahead and fix it.”

“Sam, you're absolutely right that our problem is that we need to change our company's image. You **hit the nail on the head.**”

12. There is more than one way to Skin a Cat

There is more than one way to get something done.



“Corporate won't give us the resources to finish the demo, but everyone agreed to put in extra time on their own. **There is more than one way to skin a cat.**”

“We can't just fire Tom. So assign him all the undesirable jobs and maybe he will quit. **There is more than one way to skin a cat.**”

13. Level Playing Field; Level the Playing Field

Have an equal competitive situation; create an equal competitive situation.

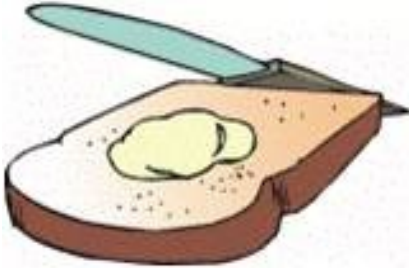


“We don't have a **level playing field** on this bid as the key decision maker used to work for our competitor.”

“Our competitor is much bigger than we are. We need to find a way to **level the playing field** if we want to get a larger market share.”

14. Know which Side your Bread is Buttered On

Know with whom one's best interests lie.



“Jim will support his boss on this issue. He **knows which side his bread is buttered on.**”

“While I agree with you in principle I can't support you. I **know which side my bread is buttered on** and I have much more than you to lose.”

Origin – Going back hundreds of years, from who would help you obtain the luxury of buttered bread.

15. Get it in Gear

Start working effectively.



“Susan, you need to **get it in gear** and finish those reports by noon so we can make the filing deadline.”

“Harry's **got it back in gear.** After nothing for one month he closed three sales this week.”

16. Dot the 'i's and Cross the 't's

Check and complete the final details of a document, or an activity.



“The report is almost ready to be issued to the shareholders. It just needs a final review to **dot the 'i's and cross the 't's.**”

“We're having a final run through of the customer demo to **dot the 'i's and cross the 't's.** Everything needs to be perfect.”

Likely origin – In a final review of a text making sure there is a dot over every i and a line crossing every t.

17. Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

Let things alone or don't raise subjects that could cause problems.

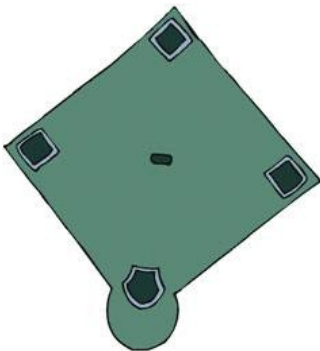


“Don't tell the customer that we discovered and fixed a problem when we upgraded their system last week. **Let sleeping dogs lie.**”

“When you do Joe's performance review don't mention the argument he had with the customer. We discussed it at the time and it's better to **let sleeping dogs lie.**”

18. Cover All the Bases

Make preparations to anticipate all possibilities.



“Make sure you **cover all the bases** for the product demo, including what you will do if things don't work properly.”

“Don’t worry about the customer audit of the factory next week. I’ve been working closely with the production team and have **all the bases covered**.”

Origin – From baseball, where the fielders are ready for a play to any base.

19. Toe the Line

Follow the rules or agreements without argument.



“Frank, I welcome your inputs and even disagreements during the planning phase. But once we decide on a course of action I expect you to **toe the line** like everyone else.”

“There are a lot of rules in the employee handbook that I don’t agree with. But I find it easier to **toe the line** than to fight them.”

Possible origin – Several origins are suggested. It is likely from the British navy where sailors lined up behind a seam in the planks for inspection.

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Working Intensely

20. The Heat is On

Under a lot of pressure to show results.



“The customer expected delivery yesterday and we are still in production. **The heat is on.**”

“James, **the heat is on** your sales team to close some deals in the next month or else we won’t make our numbers for the year.”

21. Crunch Time

When critical action needs to take place in a short period of time.



“It’s **crunch time** for the bid team. They will be working all weekend to complete the proposal by Monday.”

“John, it’s **crunch time**. We need to deliver a fix by tomorrow or the customer will cancel the order.”

Origin – Unclear. I'm guessing it's from American football teams crunching against each other with added intensity at the end of a close game.

22. Where the Rubber Meets the Road

The time for final action that determines success or not.



“James, this is **where the rubber meets the road**, you have been working this sale for months. You need to close it today for us to make our numbers for the year.”

“Steve, the customer is giving us one last opportunity next week to show that the product works. This is **where the rubber meets the road**, you need to deliver!”

23. Burning the Midnight Oil

Working very late.



“Joe's been **burning the midnight oil** for several weeks now. Even with all the problems he's encountered, he's really committed to finishing the project on schedule.”

“If you to need me to keep **burning the midnight oil** then we should negotiate a bonus now.”

Likely origin – From the extra oil needed to keep lamps burning late.

24. Nose to the Grindstone

Working intensely with high focus.



“John, keep your **nose to the grindstone**. You need to finish all those reports before you leave today.”

“Sue really has her **nose to the grindstone**; she is by far the most productive person in the department.”

Likely origin – When using a grindstone to shape or sharpen an object the operator often had to put his face very close to the grindstone surface to monitor the work.

25. Step Up to the Plate

Take ownership of an activity and accomplish more than expected.



“Frank, I know you prefer to focus just on engineering. But since Chuck left I need you to **step up to the plate** and become the project manager.”

“Management is giving everyone a 10% bonus for **stepping up to the plate** the last six months and doing what was needed to get the company through this recent crisis.”

Origin – From stepping up to bat in baseball.

26. Pulling your Weight

Doing one’s expected share of work.



“Sue, the other members of the team are complaining that you haven’t been **pulling your weight lately**. What’s going on?”

“I like Ted. He always **pulls his weight** even when he’s assigned additional work.”

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Working Aggressively

27. Pull Out All the Stops

Do whatever is needed to accomplish a goal.



“Steve, you need to get your team to **pull out all the stops** so that the product ships this week as per the revised schedule. If we have another delay the customer will cancel the order.”

“Our competition seems to be **pulling out all the stops** on this bid. It’s going to be tough to win.”

Origin – The stops are valves that control the airflow in an organ. When all the stops are pulled the organ operates at maximum volume.

28. Push the Envelope

Go to the edge and even beyond current limits of performance, or currently accepted boundaries.



“Those guys in Engineering are really **pushing the envelope**. They can execute a real time analysis that a few years ago was not even considered possible.”

“Tony, I need you to **push the envelope** on this new product development. We need something dramatic to differentiate our offering from the competition.”

Origin – The envelope describes a mathematical boundary, and pushing the envelope became a popular term in achieving continuous engineering and performance improvements in the aerospace industry.

29. Shake Things Up

Significantly change the way things are done to improve results.



“We are going to **shake things up** here. No one is getting a raise until customer satisfaction is up 10%.
“I heard that both Kathy and Bob were fired today. I guess that management is trying to **shake things up.**”

30. Get the Lead Out

Take decisive action.



“Joe, tell your team it’s time to **get the lead out**. This store needs to open in two days and there is a lot of work left to do.”

“Kathy, you better **get the lead out** and finish that report. If we don’t submit it today we have to pay a penalty .”

Likely origin – Orders to the troops to load their muskets or guns with lead bullets in preparation for battle.

31. Strike While the Iron is Hot

Take timely action based on the current situation to improve the chance of getting positive results.



“I heard our competitor is having major delivery problems. Have sales contact the customer to see if they’ll give us an order. We should strike **while the iron is hot.**”

“James, your project was a huge success and is the talk of the company. You should **strike while the iron is hot** and ask the boss for a raise now before it becomes old news.”

Origin – A blacksmith must strike the piece of metal he is working on while it is still red hot.

32. Take the Bull by the Horns

Assume control of a situation.



“Susan, I admire the way you **took the bull by the horns** and led the project when John quit.”

“Jim, I know you don’t have all the resources you asked for, but you’re just going to have to **take the bull by the horns** and make do with what you have.”

33. Light a Fire Under

Get people to work with greater urgency.



“I’m going to have to **light a fire** under John. He is already two weeks behind schedule and he still hasn’t shown me a first draft.”

“Steve, you need to **light a fire** under your team to fix the problem. The customer is complaining every day and your team is carrying on like business is normal.”

34. Get to the Bottom of This

Determine the underlying cause of a problem.



“Joe, our competitors keep getting information on our plans. I want you to **get to the bottom of this** and find out how they are doing it.”

“Susan, our software keeps crashing even though we supposedly fixed all the bugs. You need to **get to the bottom of this** and find out what’s gone wrong.”

35. Don’t Leave any Stone Unturned

Investigate a situation thoroughly, often in reaction to a negative situation.



“Joe, you need to find out how our product plans leaked to our competitor. **Don’t leave any stone unturned.**”

“Susan, your team needs to find and fix all the outstanding bugs in our software. I don’t want you to **leave any stone unturned.**”

Note: This and the previous expression are similar as shown from the usage examples. One difference is that “get to the bottom of this” sets the goal for a task, while “not leaving any stone unturned” is how the task should be accomplished.

36. Knock his Socks Off

Provide a very strong positive impression.



“This new feature will save our customers a ton of money. I can’t wait to present it to them. It will **knock their socks off.**”

“Steve, when I told our CEO that you completed your project two months early and under budget it **knocked his socks off.**”

37. Swing for the Fences

Take a chance to exceed your objectives.



“We’re **swinging for the fences** with this new product. Either it will be a huge success or a complete failure.”

“Richard is a great salesman. He’s always **swinging for the fences**. He doesn’t always win but when he does he wins big.”

Origin – Try to hit a homerun in baseball.

38. Gung Ho

Very dedicated and eager.



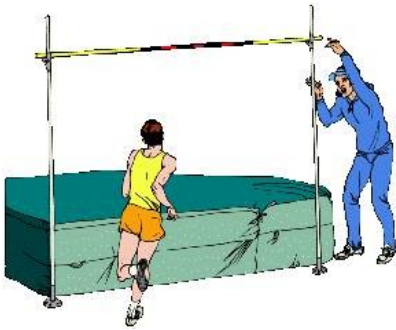
“John has a real **gung ho** attitude. Let’s give him a larger role on the next project.”

“Nancy, I am concerned you are too **gung ho** to start working on the next phase. We need to make sure we receive and incorporate all the customers’ feedback from the trials.”

Origin – The term is an unofficial motto of the US Marine Corps. It comes from an Anglicization of the slogan Gongye Hezhoushe of the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives. It implies to work cooperatively in an unstoppable manner.

39. Raise the Bar; Set the Bar

Set higher expectations.



“I think you have **set the bar** too high for me; I’ll never meet my sales quota this quarter.”

“Now that Kathy has been here for several months, she should be able to produce more. I’m **raising the bar** for her.”

Likely origin – From the bar on a high jump apparatus.

40. In the Zone; In a Zone

Working very efficiently and productively.



“Susie was really **in the zone** at that customer meeting today. She was able to answer all their questions without hesitation.”

“Don’t disturb Chuck right now; **he’s in a zone** and just banging out (producing) code like crazy.”

41. Leapfrog

Make a large advance forward at one time.



“Team, for this development cycle I don’t want the usual product enhancements. I want you to think about **leapfrog** improvements so that we can blow away the competition.”

“With the additional revenues from this acquisition we can **leapfrog** into the position of market leader.”

Origin – From the children's game of jumping over each other's backs.

42. Play Hardball

Act aggressively in a situation.



“Management is **playing hardball** in the labor negotiations. They are not offering any concessions.”

“If our competitor wants to **play hardball** so can we. We'll match every bid they make and better it.”

Origin – You need to be aggressive to succeed in major league hardball baseball.

43. The Squeaky Wheel gets the Grease

Constant demands or complaints get attention.



“They made Alice the project leader because she was pushing for that every day. **The squeaky wheel gets the grease.**”

“Tony, in this company if you want a raise you need to be a **squeaky wheel** and keep asking for one. Otherwise they assume it’s not important for you.”

Origin – The wheels working properly are ignored. But the poorly functioning wheel receives attention just to make it be quiet.

44. Give a Run for the Money

Compete strongly against someone who is expected to win.



“Customer feedback indicated that although we lost, we gave their preferred supplier a **run for the money** in the recent bidding. If we improve further in the next bid we will win some business.”

“The test results of our competitor's latest release show they are beginning to give us a **run for the money**. We need to work harder to maintain our lead.”

Likely origin – From horseracing where the fastest horse was pushed hard by a lesser competitor in order to win.

45. Deep Dive

Do a detailed investigation or review of something.



“Carol, the source of the problem is buried somewhere in the data. Tell your team to do a **deep dive** until they find it.”

“It's not clear why we are losing money. I plan to do a **deep dive** this weekend on our numbers to try and find out why.”

46. Stake in the Ground

Take an initial position on a new initiative. Take a definite position on an important issue.



“Tim, congratulations for getting that customer in Brazil. We finally have a **stake in the ground** in South America.”

“Harry, what's your **stake in the ground** on this prospective merger? It's very controversial and I need to know where you stand.”

Origin – From placing a stake in the ground when claiming a piece of land.

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Working Unconventionally

47. The Tail Wagging the Dog

The weaker party influencing the stronger party.



“Why are we changing our system to accommodate the new software we are paying them to develop for us? That’s **the tail wagging the dog**; they need to modify their software.”

“I can’t believe they changed the industry standard to accommodate that startup company’s new product. That’s really **the tail wagging the dog**.”

48. Monkey Business

Business conducted in unconventional, foolish or even unethical ways.



“When the potential new customer visits next week we’ll need some **monkey business** to convince them that we are bigger than we really are. Call a temp agency to fill all the empty desks.”

“Jim I have had enough of your company’s **monkey business**. You keep making promises and excuses but never deliver on time.”

49. Rock the Boat

Try to change the way things are done, usually against resistance.



“Kathy’s been **rocking the boat** over in marketing. I predict she either gets promoted or fired.”

“Jim, I know things are not perfect but I suggest you don’t **rock the boat** because the boss owns the company and he has always done business this way.”

50. Making Waves

Having a widely noticeable impact on the status quo.



“Tony is **making waves** in engineering by managing two successful products developments in one year. We need more people like him in the company.”

“Scott doubled his revenues for the second quarter in a row. He is **making waves** in Sales but not everyone agrees with his methods that many feel are not sustainable.”

51. Cherry Pick

Select only the best to obtain an optimum result.



You should **cherry pick** the samples you bring to prospective customers. It's important to show the best performance we can achieve.”

“Henry somehow gets to **cherry pick** his team members from across the company. It's no wonder he consistently gets the best results.”

52. Go Against the Grain

Take a more difficult or less accepted course of action.



“John, I know you are trying to save the company some money, but you’re **going against the grain** and making everyone upset.”

“Kathy I hope the customer likes your marketing plan, but I really think it’s **going against the grain** of what they expect.”

Possible origin – From the more difficult task of cutting against the grain of the wood.

53. Hail Mary

A desperate last action in the hope of saving a situation.



“John, I know that investing our last bit of cash into this new product is a **Hail Mary**. But we need to do something radical to generate new revenues because our current sources are drying up fast.”

“If we restart the system it may or may not recover. But if you need it operational in a half-hour I think we need to take a **Hail Mary** approach and hope it works. I don’t see any other choice.”

Origin – In American football a Hail Mary, from the Catholic prayer by that name, is a long almost blind pass into the end zone at the end of the game hoping for a catch and winning score.

54. Pull a Rabbit Out of the Hat

Do something almost impossible.



“I don’t know how Harry **pulled the rabbit out of the hat**. We were last place in the customer ranking yet he got them to award us the contract.”

“We’re going to have to **pull a rabbit out of the hat** to complete the shipment on time. The line has been down most of the week and the operators are refusing to do any more overtime.”

Origin – From the magician's famous trick.

55. Put a Spin on Something; Spin it

Interpret a generally negative situation to show how it benefits you.



“We can **spin the fact** that our sales are down this year by saying that it is due to our shift to address new but larger market segments.”

“I suggest we **spin it** to the customer that the product release is delayed because of the additional quality checks. But they will still be upset.”

56. Shoot from the Hip

Respond or react quickly but without much consideration or thought.



“Keith was **shooting from the hip** at the meeting today. His answers were all over the place. It was clear he wasn't prepared but he felt he needed to respond.”

“Robby, you have a bad habit of **shooting from the hip**. If you don't know the answer to something just say you need to look into it.”

Origin – Cowboys could draw and fire their guns most quickly from the hip, but without much accuracy.

57. Play the Devil's Advocate

Argue the position of the opposing side.



“Chris, if I **play the devil's advocate** I can identify some key problems with our product that our competition will point out. You need to prepare to counter that.”

“John, I know you are trying to help by **playing** the role of **the devil's advocate**, but I would prefer if you would put your energy into building our business case.”

Likely origin – The person the church would assign to argue against someone being beatified as a saint.

58. Play it by Ear

Deal with a situation as it occurs without planning.



“I didn’t have time to prepare for the customer visit today. I’ll need **to play it by ear.**”

“When the reporter comes for the interview today just **play it by ear** and try not to say anything stupid.”

Origin – Playing a new piece of music without notes, just by following along.

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Working Against Difficulties

59. Uphill Battle

Difficulty in making progress.



“I am having an **uphill battle** getting the customer to sign off on this project. They keep finding reasons to delay.”

“Getting meaningful results is turning into an **uphill battle**. We just don’t have the right test equipment.”

60. Last Ditch Battle; Last Ditch Attempt

A final perhaps desperate effort to succeed with an activity before failure.



“Engineering is making a **last ditch effort** to solve the problem this weekend before the customer cancels the order.”

“John is making a **last ditch attempt** to convince the board today to continue funding our project.”

Origin – Relates to soldiers defending the last trench so as not be completely overrun by the enemy.

61. Weather the Storm

Get through a difficult period.



“I know the customers are unhappy but engineering assures me they can fix the problem. We’re going to have to **weather the storm** until they do.”

“Our cash position is very low. I don’t see how we can **weather the storm** without layoffs.”

62. Under the Gun

Under pressure to complete something, usually by a certain deadline.



“We’re **under the gun** to complete and send the report by noon before the call with the customer.”

“I wouldn't disturb Chris right now. His is the only section not complete and he's **under the gun** to finish by the end of the day.”

Likely origin – Someone has a gun on you to do something.

63. Bite the Bullet

Continue working under very difficult conditions.



“Look, I know you are all exhausted but you’re just going to have to **bite the bullet** and keep working until this is done.”

“Sue, I’m sorry you accidentally erased your report, but you need to **bite the bullet** and re-write it.”

Likely Origin – This phrase comes from depictions of wounded soldiers biting a bullet to lessen the pain while someone operates on them. Perhaps it really was that way in real life before anesthetics were available.

64. Dodge a Bullet

Barely avoid a bad situation.



“We really **dodged a bullet** by finally making the shipment last week. We would have incurred huge penalties if we had further delays.”

“James, you **dodged a bullet** in the customer meeting today when they didn’t ask for a detailed project schedule and cost analysis. Next time be better prepared.”

65. Pushing on a Rope

Work futilely to achieve something.

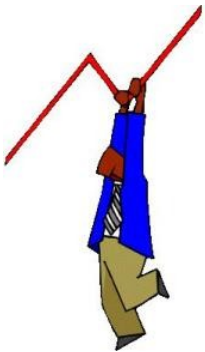


“Jim, I’m going to stop trying to sell to that customer who always finds a reason to not even test our products. It’s like **pushing on a rope**.”

“I feel like I am **pushing on a rope** trying to get Sally to document her work better. She agrees to change her habits but then nothing happens.”

66. Hang in There

Have patience while waiting for an expected event to happen.



“Kim, I need you to **hang in there** a bit longer until we announce your promotion. It’s going to happen so please don’t do something that will jeopardize it.”

“We need to **hang in there** and hope we receive that new customer contract or we will need to start laying off people.”

67. Jump through Hoops

Go through elaborate and often unnecessary procedures to get something.



“I can't believe the **hoops I needed to jump through** to get this small purchase order approved. What a waste of time.”

“I don't like working with that particular customer. Their purchasing department makes **you jump through so many hoops** before they buy anything; you sometimes wonder if it is worth the effort.”

Likely origin – Circus animals are trained to do elaborate tricks like jumping through hoops.

68. Tighten our Belts

Reduce expenses.



“Revenues are down. We're going to need to **tighten our belts** to stay profitable.”

“Spending is out of control. We need to start **tightening our belts** immediately.”

Likely origin – In tough times people eat less so they need to tighten their belts as they become thinner.

69. Banging my Head against the Wall

Being frustrated from not receiving cooperation.

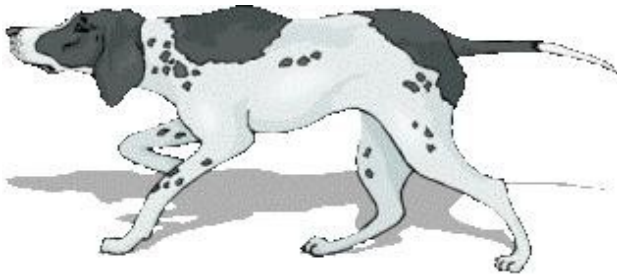


“I'm tired of **banging my head against the wall** trying to get Phillip to prepare for the weekly reviews. He can't even answer basic questions without saying he will look into it.”

“I'm **banging my head against the wall** trying to get my computer fixed. The technical support department keeps promising to send someone over, but no one shows up.”

70. That Dog Won't Hunt

An approach or idea that won't work.



“Kathy, in this business you can't close deals over the phone. **That dog won't hunt.** Now get on the road and visit your customers in person.

“John, your approach is getting us nowhere. **That dog won't hunt.** We need to try another way.”

71. Come to Jesus Meeting

A serious meeting to resolve disagreements and come to a common understanding on how things should proceed in the future.



“Henry, your group totally messed up that last bid. Assemble everyone at 9:00 A.M. tomorrow for a **come to Jesus meeting** so we don't repeat that.”

“Peter, you and I need to have a **come to Jesus** meeting. Either you will start doing things my way or you are out of here.”

Origin – From the life-changing religious event for those who come to and accept Jesus.

72. At the End of my Rope

To have few options remaining in a difficult situation, almost ready to give up



“I’m **at the end of my rope** trying to find this software bug. I’ve tried everything.”

“I’m **at the end of my rope** with John's attitude and performance. If he messes up this new assignment I gave him, I will need to fire him.”

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Overworked

73. Running on Empty

Very little energy left from overworking.



“I’ve been working twelve hours days for the last two weeks including weekends. I’m **running on empty**, so I don’t even want to talk about the next assignment until this one is finished.”

“Ted looks like he is **running on empty**. Even though we’re behind schedule tell him not to come in this weekend so he can get some rest.”

74. Burned Out

Become ineffective due to overworking or working too long at the same job.

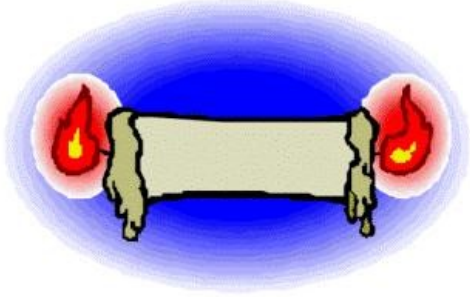


“Steve, you need to stop working so hard or you are going to **burn out**.”

“I think Martin is **burned out** and he just doesn’t care anymore. The report he submitted was full of errors.”

75. Burning the Candle at Both Ends

Constantly working on many things to the point of wearing oneself out.



“Between the new baby at home and the customer pushing to speed up delivery I've really been **burning the candle at both ends**. I'm constantly exhausted.”

“Tony, if you keep **burning the candle at both ends** you will get yourself seriously sick. You need to find a way to slow down a bit.”

76. Running Out of Gas

Have little energy left to continue working.



“Paul, I know you want this done by tonight but I'm **running out of gas**. It will need to wait until tomorrow.”

“The team has been working night and day for over a month and they are **running out of gas**. They need help.”

77. Up to my Ears; Up to my Eyeballs

Overloaded with something.



“Steve, I can’t meet you for lunch today. I’m **up to my ears** with work I need to finish.”

“We need to do something immediately to fix that product defect. We are **up to our eyeballs** with customer complaints.”

78. Full Plate; My Plate is Full

Have a full workload. Cannot take on any more work.



“Sally, I know you would like me to take on this project but you need to assign it to someone else. I have a **full plate** right now.”

“I wanted to assign this project to John but he convinced me that his **plate was totally full**. Who do you suggest as the next choice?”

79. Too Many Irons in the Fire

Working on too many items at the same time.



“Sarah, I'm sorry that I can't take on even a small project for you right now. I just have **too many irons in the fire**.”

“I'm concerned that Richard has **too many irons in the fire** that the quality of his work will suffer.”

Likely origin – A blacksmith is working on many pieces at the same time and cannot handle any more.

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Working Not So Smart

80. Beating a Dead Horse

Trying to pursue a matter where a decision has been made and the matter is considered closed.



“John, stop asking to restart your project. The board shut it down and I am not going to ask them to reconsider their decision. You’re just **beating a dead horse**.”

“I think you are **beating a dead horse** trying to get the customer to re-open the bidding, but good luck anyway.”

81. Too many Chiefs and not enough Indians

Too many managers and not enough people doing the actual work.



“It’s making me crazy. I have Steve, James and Susan all giving me different assignments and telling me theirs is the top priority. That’s the problem with this company; there **are too many chiefs and not enough Indians**.”

“It takes too long to get anything done in this company. There are **too many chiefs and not enough Indians**.”

82. Bit Off More than He could Chew

Takes on more than one can handle.

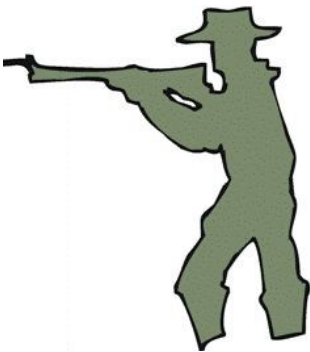


“I think Bob **bit off more than he could chew**, but he has too much pride to ask for help.”

“Maybe we were too aggressive in our bid. Now that they awarded us the contract I wonder if we **bit off more than we can chew.**”

83. Shooting in the Dark; A Shot in the Dark

Trying to solve a problem based on guessing. (“Shooting in the dark” has an entirely negative meaning, while “shot in the dark” implies an educated guess.)



“Sally, we’re **shooting in the dark** on this bid. You need to get better competitive information.”

“Jim, I know it’s a **shot in the dark**, but I think we can get better product performance if we re-write this one section of the code.”

84. Asleep at the Switch

A missed action due to negligence that causes a negative situation.



“I don’t understand how we released the product with such an obvious problem. Someone in quality control was **asleep at the switch**.”

“Jim, I hate to say it but you were **asleep at the switch**. Because you ignored our customers’ requests several have started looking for alternate suppliers.”

Origin – The switchman who fell asleep did not switch the tracks causing a train wreck.

85. Beating Around (or About) the Bush

Not getting to the point.



“Stan, stop **beating around the bush**. If you want to tell me something just come out and say it.”

“Ted, I’m not going to **beat about the bush**. You totally messed up on that last assignment and I need to demote you.”

Origin – Hunters would first beat around the bush to try and make game come out, before needing to beat directly on the bush itself.

86. Barking up the Wrong Tree

Taking a wrong approach or believing in a wrong explanation for something.



“Steve, you’re **barking up the wrong tree** if you think that a software bug is causing the product to fail. It’s clear to me that it’s a hardware problem.”

“Susan, you’re **barking up the wrong tree** if you think you can get the customer to accept a higher price. The only way we will increase margins is by cutting costs.”

Likely origin – A dog barking at a tree where it believes, wrongly, is the animal it is pursuing.

87. Shoot Yourself in the Foot

Make a stupid mistake that could have been avoided.



“I think I just **shot myself in the foot** by telling the customer that we would reduce the price even though they weren’t asking for a reduction.”

“We **shot ourselves in the foot** by releasing that software update without proper testing. Some customers discovered problems and now they will think all our software is of poor quality.”

88. Digging a Hole

Making a situation worse.



“Joe, we would just be **digging a deeper hole** for ourselves if we tell the customer that we almost have the problem fixed just to make them happy. We still don’t know what’s going on.”

“Susan, you’re **digging a hole** with your new verification process. I know you’re trying to save money, but it’s going to take longer and it may not even work.”

89. Spinning your Wheels

Giving the appearance of working or doing something significant without anything really happening.



“I don’t think that engineering knows what they are doing. They’re just **spinning their wheels** and hoping they will get lucky.”

“Ted, stop **spinning your wheels** and make some progress on this project.”

90. Over My (His) Head

Doesn’t understand; Doesn’t have the capacity to understand.

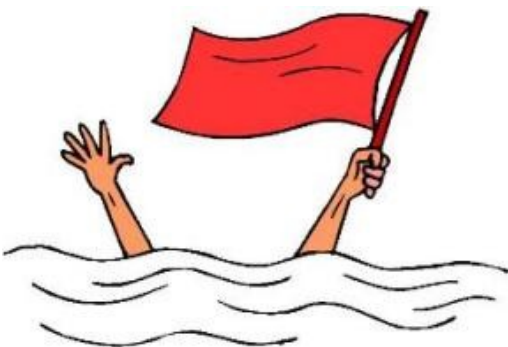


“Sue, you need to slow down and explain step by step. What you're telling me now is going right **over my head**.”

“I would try to explain it to you but it's **over your head**. Just trust my expertise on this one.”

91. Out of My (His) Depth

Does not have the competency for a particular task.



“Bob, I hate to admit it but I’m **out of my depth** here. You should assign this to someone else.”

“You should not have assigned that job to Richard. I know he’s trying hard but he’s clearly **out of his depth**.”

Likely origin – A swimmer in water deeper than he can handle.

92. Beat it to Death

Review a situation endlessly even when nothing more can be gained.



“We’ve been discussing why we lost the bid for the last four hours. I think we **beat this topic to death**. Let’s move on to the next agenda item.”

“We need better balance in our failure review process. There is no need to **beat every little problem to death** when the cause and solution are obvious.”

93. Dropped the Ball

Failed to perform something expected, often due to carelessness.



“Henry **dropped the ball** at the customer meeting today. He wasn’t prepared to answer even their basic questions. This is going to hurt us.”

“The system was supposed to be up by noon, but it’s one o’clock and it’s still down. Find out who **dropped the ball** and get this fixed.”

94. Putting the Cart before the Horse

Focusing on an activity prematurely, before other events that should happen first.



“Jack, you shouldn’t be talking about your new executive office, you haven’t even got the promotion yet. You’re **putting the cart before the horse.**”

“Sally, I think you’re **putting the cart before the horse** by contacting distributors now. We still need to decide what product to develop.”

95. Bury One’s Head in the Sand

Ignore reality.



“You just can’t **bury your head in the sand** and hope the customer will forget this incident. You need to go there and apologize in person.”

“Everyone at corporate seems to be **burying their head in the sand**. If we don’t get some real leadership to address our problems this company is history.”

Origin – From the ostrich that supposedly buries its head in the sand in the face of danger.

96. Get Cold Feet

Become fearful of moving ahead to the next step.



“I think Sally is **getting cold feet** about presenting to the CEO tomorrow. Talk to her and give her some encouragement.”

“Tom was planning to go skydiving last weekend, but I heard that at the last minute he **got cold feet**.”

97. Don't Count your Chickens before they are Hatched

Don't expect positive results prematurely.



“Preliminary feedback from the customer was that they liked our bid. But we **shouldn't count our chickens before they are hatched** until we actually get the award.”

“Just because one investor promised us funding doesn't mean we will line up all the investment required. **Don't count your chickens before they are hatched** and start hiring people.”

98. Putting all your Eggs in One Basket

Letting success or failure depend on a single factor.

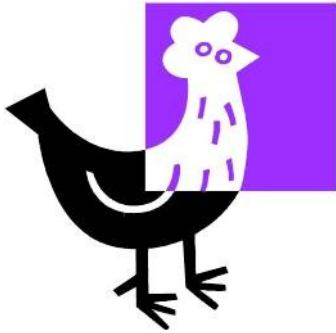


“By focusing all of engineering on this one new product we are **putting all our eggs in one basket**. The future of the company is at risk if they don't succeed.”

“James, you need to find a second supplier for the key technology in our product. If they don’t deliver, production stops. We can’t **put all our eggs in one basket.**”

99. Running Around Like Chickens without their Heads On

Working without direction.



“Mike, you need to do a better job of organizing the manufacturing floor. When I visited the other day everyone seemed to be **running around like chickens without their heads on.**”

“Tony, you need a system to handle customer complaints. I get the impression your team is **running around like a chicken without its head on.**”

Likely origin – A chicken still running about after its head has been chopped off.

100. Don't Kill the Goose that Lays the Golden Eggs

Don't be greedy by trying to get even more from a reliable producer.



“Our employee stock plan has been great for increasing employee ownership and loyalty. But your suggested expansion will dilute the stock too much. **Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.**”

“I know that Sam's our best programmer but he is already fully loaded. If you give him another assignment it will affect all his work. **Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.**”

Origin – Based on a fable of peasants who kill their goose that lays golden eggs thinking to get to the gold inside.

101. Wild Goose Chase

A worthless pursuit.



“The customer had us on a **wild goose chase** this last bid. We spent a lot of effort in responding, but a source there told me afterwards they never intended to buy from us.”

“Trying to improve system performance is turning out to be a **wild goose chase**. Nothing we have tried makes a difference.”

Likely origin – This dates back hundreds of years and is found in Shakespeare’s works, but the current meaning probably comes from the simple fact that it is nearly impossible to chase and catch a wild goose.

102. Off Base

Wrong, mistaken.



“Frank, you're **off base** if you think you can get our vice president to reverse his decision. He'll never do that.”

“Peter, that comment about your co-worker is **off base**. I won't tolerate that language in the office.”

Possible origin – In baseball when you are off base you can be tagged out.

103. Boil the Ocean

Try to accomplish too many things or take on such an impossible task that nothing gets accomplished



“Jim, I've reviewed your project plan and you're **boiling the ocean**. I'm not going to approve it until you limit the objectives and scope.

“Harry, I don't want you going to the customer and **boiling the ocean** with all the stuff we are going to do for them. It's not credible and creates problems later.

Origin – While it is obviously impossible to boil the ocean the specific origin is obscure. This may have been suggested with black humor as the solution to get rid of German U-boats during the war.

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Negotiations

104. Talk is Cheap

It doesn't cost anything to claim something.

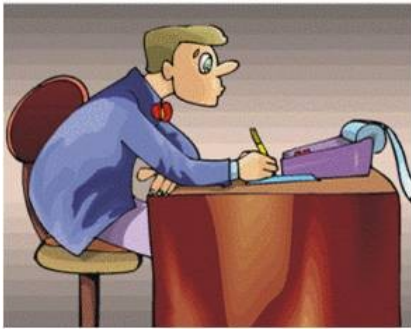


“Susan, you keep telling me what a great salesperson you are. But **talk is cheap**, and you don't get a bonus unless you meet your quota.”

“Frank, you keep talking about what a great product your company is developing. But **talk is cheap** and until you show us something we'll keep buying from your competition.”

105. Bottom Line

The actual situation or the necessary result.



“Okay, Frank, what's the **bottom line** with this new problem. How many months will it delay the product launch? I need to inform the board.”

“Tom, give me the **bottom line**, how much do we need to reduce the price to win the bid?”

Likely origin – When adding up a column of figures the bottom line contains the result.

106. Carrot and Stick

Motivate someone using a combination of the promise of a reward (the carrot) and a punishment (the stick).



“ I like to motivate my employees with a **carrot and stick** approach. Big raises if they succeed and threat of being fired if they fail.”

“The customer is trying to control us with a **carrot and stick**. They increase orders when we lower price, and cancel orders when we miss shipments.”

107. Hands are Tied

Unable to take certain actions because of external forces or other obligations.

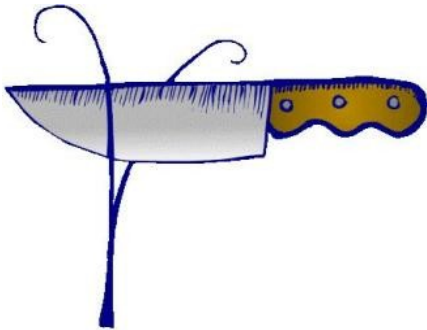


“Sam, I know you deserve a raise, but my **hands are tied**. The board of directors has said no raises for anyone this year.”

“Steve, if you want me to produce results for the department I need to have complete control. You can’t **tie my hands** by telling me what projects I must assign people to.”

108. Splitting Hairs

Argue over small often unimportant differences.



“Jim, you’re **splitting hairs** arguing whether the customer reported five or six problems with the new release. Either way there are too many problems and the customer is very unhappy.”

“I can’t believe how you’re **splitting hairs** over my bonus. I was less than 1% short of my sales goal and now you say I am not eligible for anything!”

109. Skin in the Game

Have a personal, often financial stake in the success of a project.



“You want us to develop this product because you may need it in the future, but you won't guarantee any purchases. We are willing to do that if you fund half the development cost, this way we both have **skin in the game**.”

“I want all employees to have **skin in the game**. If we exceed our financial goals then everyone gets bonuses, but if we miss them then it is salary cuts for everyone.”

110. Test the Waters

Explore a situation before taking action.



“When I meet with the VP Finance next week I'll **test the waters** with him for the impact of going over budget.”

“Karen, can you **test the waters** with the customer to see if we can delay our first shipment by a month. That would enable us to reduce costs by manufacturing in our overseas location.”

Likely origin – Testing the temperature of water before jumping in.

111. Sweeten the Pot

Increase an offer or make it more attractive.



“Richard, I would consider joining your company but your proposed salary and benefits are too low. You need to **sweeten the pot**.”

“I think we can win this bid if we revise our proposal and **sweeten the pot** by offering one year's free maintenance.”

Likely origin – Sweeten the pot of food being cooked to make something more tasty.

112. Sharpen your Pencil

Find a way to reduce a price to customers or to reduce internal costs.



“Sam, I want to give your company the business but unless you can **sharpen your pencil** and reduce your price substantially we will go with your competitor.”

“Anne, I need you to **sharpen your pencil** and find a way to reduce our expenses another 10%.”

Likely origin – An accountant would sharpen his pencil before doing another detailed round of calculations.

113. The Ball's in your Court

Taking over responsibility for something, or your turn for action.



“Michael, after six months of negotiations we finally got that big order. Now it's up to your production team to deliver so we can book the revenues. **The ball's in your court.**”

“Joe, I've given you the additional equipment and resources you asked for to complete the project on schedule. **The ball's in your court.**”

114. Read Between the Lines

Understand unsaid meanings.



“The customer is being polite by saying that he is still considering our bid. But if you **read between the lines** there is no way he is going to award it to us.”

“The CEO says he supports our department. But if you **read between the lines** we have a very short time to deliver until he shuts us down.”

115. Take it Offline

Continue a discussion privately without everyone involved.



“Kevin and Sue, it's clear you're not going to resolve your differences at this meeting and you're wasting everyone's time. **Take it offline.**”

“Patrick, let's **take** the particular situation with your customer **offline** after this general sales call is over.”

Likely origin – From the early days of computing when being online and actively using the computer's resources was more expensive than being offline.

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Positive Interactions

116. On the Same Page

Develop a common view.



“John, we need to get **on the same page** on the product rollout before we present it to the customer tomorrow.”

“Now that we are all **on the same page** on engineering priorities no one should be assigned to another project without my approval.”

117. Close the Loop

Ensure all relevant parties are communicating and understanding the same thing.



“Jim, make sure you **close the loop** with Susan so that you both have the same story to tell the customer on how we are dealing with the problem.”

“I need to **close the loop** with the legal department to make sure they agree with the updates before I submit the proposal.”

The term “the loop” often refers to all the people that are communicating and informing each other on a subject. Someone “in the loop” is included in that circle of communication, while someone “out of the loop” is not.

118. Heads Up

Provide advance notice about a situation.



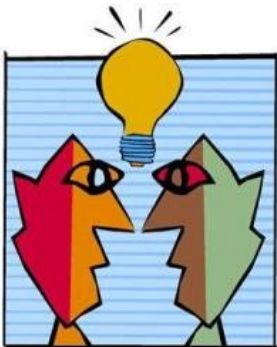
“Tony, I’m calling to give you a **heads up** that we will issue the RFP (request for proposal) next week, so you can start preparing your bid now.”

“Our biggest customer just called to give us a **heads up** that we won the bid. They said while it will take another week for formal notification, they want us to start preparing for production now.”

Likely origin – Probably from playing sports, where players are advised to keep their heads up and stay alert.

119. Put our Heads Together

Collaborate.



“Steve, rather than arguing about how this problem can sink us, let’s **put our heads together** and figure a way to solve it.”

“Kathy, I want you and Ron to **put your heads together** and come up with a marketing plan.”

120. Touch Base

Check on an understanding with someone.



“Before you visit the customer tomorrow please **touch base** with Karen to confirm the delivery schedule. I am sure they will ask and I don’t want any misunderstanding.”

“I will be ready to submit my report once I **touch base** with Roger on the customer survey.”

121. Going to Bat For

Provide personal support for someone.

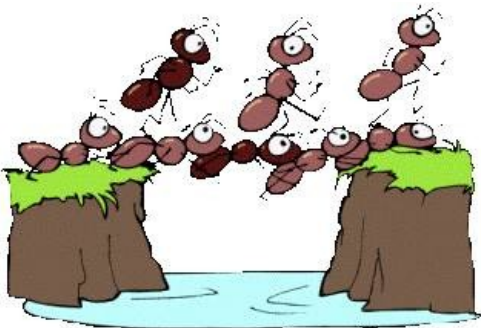


“John, thanks for **coming to bat for** me at the project review today. Your support really helped to get the additional funding I was seeking.”

“I was not expecting Susan **going to bat for** George at the meeting today, since they always seem to be arguing.”

122. Take One for the Team

Makes a personal sacrifice for the benefit of others.



“Reggie agreed to work over the long weekend to deal with any issues that come up with the new installation. He **took one for the team.**”

“Karen visited the customer yesterday to explain why we are late. I hear they really yelled at her a lot. We need to thank her for **taking one for the team.**”

123. Red Carpet Treatment

Treat someone like a VIP.



“The vice president of Purchasing from our largest customer is visiting next week. Make sure you give him the **red carpet treatment**.”

“Our CEO is visiting next week and he specifically requested **no red carpet treatment**. He wants us to spend our energy on providing a detailed operational review.”

124. Mend Fences

Get back on good terms with someone.



“It’s good to see that Susan and George have **mended fences**. The whole office is much more productive when they are cooperating with each other.”

“I know you’re asking me to **mend fences** with Craig but I can’t do that now. The way he stabbed me in the back, it will take some time until I can trust him again.”

125. You Scratch my Back and I’ll Scratch Yours

If you help me out with something I can’t do for myself then I will do the same for you.



“If you can write a note for the personnel files saying how I assisted you on this project I will do the same for you in the future. **You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.**”

“We each get only two votes. So if you vote for my project besides your own, I will do the same for you. **You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.**”

Likely origin – Based on the fact that scratching one's own back is difficult.

126. Pick your Brain

Ask someone for their input or ideas on something.



“Steve, please come by my office later this afternoon. I want to **pick your brain** on this new project our department's been assigned.”

“Sue, I want to **pick your brain** about the new system problem that developed this morning. I think you've encountered similar things in the past.”

127. Ring a Bell

Make an association with something familiar, usually from the past.



“That new feature the customer is requesting **rings a bell** for something similar we developed several years ago but then dropped because no one had interest. I'll see if I can dig up documents from that time.”

“I am sure you are correct that we met several years ago, but I am sorry that your name doesn't **ring a bell.**”

128. Preaching to the Choir; Preaching to the Converted

Wasting effort trying to convince someone who already agrees with you.



“John, you’re **preaching to the choir** telling me that we need more customer support staff. I totally agree with you. But we just can’t afford it until we increase sales.”

“Sally, I know that I am **preaching to the choir** telling you we need to upgrade our inventory system, but I am just so frustrated that management doesn’t see this as a priority.”

129. Face Time

A face to face meeting with someone.



“I’m meeting with our CEO tomorrow in his office. I plan to use this **face time** to review and get his feedback on our department's strategy.”

“Don’t expect to maintain relationships with our customers through phone calls and e-mails. I want you to get quality **face time** with them.”

130. Rain Check

Defer a meeting to a later date. (This usually refers to a personal event.)



“Sam, I need to take a **rain check** on our lunch meeting next week. Something came up and I will be out of town.”

“Sue, thanks for the invitation but I can't go out for drinks after work today. I hope you'll give me a **rain check** though.”

Origin – If a baseball game is cancelled because of rain fans receive a rain check to redeem for a ticket on another date.

131. Off the Hook

Be free from an obligation or responsibility.



“Joanne, you’re **off the hook** to make that customer visit overseas next week. Robert will be over there already and he will stay an extra day and cover for you.”

“The CEO specifically told John that he had to come in himself on the weekend to finish the work by the deadline. He’s going to have a hard time getting **off the hook** on this one.”

The opposite expression, “On the Hook” can also be used to say that someone has a specific obligation of responsibility to do something.

132. Keep Me (or someone) Posted

Keep me (or someone) informed on a situation.



“Tony, please **keep me posted** with a daily email on your investigation into the cause of the failure.”

“Susan is doing a good job **keeping us all posted** on her negotiations with the customer, and seeking input and advice when she needs it.”

Origin – From sending a letter through the postal service.

133. Reach Out To

Make an effort to communicate with someone, to ask for help or to offer help.



“Cindy, if you are having problems, feel free to **reach out to** me anytime.”

“Tom, I know you are having a tough time negotiating with that particular buyer. I happen to know his boss so I'll **reach out to** him and see how we can make things go more smoothly.”

134. Brownie Points

Superficial recognition for usually minor accomplishments.



“Sharon, I'll give you **brownie points** for setting up the meeting so quickly with the prospective new customer. Now get some business if you want real recognition.”

“Keith, stop trying to get **brownie points** with the new boss by agreeing with everything he says. It's clear to everyone what you're doing and it looks ridiculous.”

Origin – Several suggested. From good deeds performed by Brownies (junior girl scouts). From a railroad executive named Brown who had a system of points for employees.

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Negative Interactions

135. Burn your Bridges

Take actions that permanently damage personal relationships.



“I know you are very upset with Frank the way he ended your project, but don't **burn your bridges** by saying something stupid to him.”

“I hear that Susan erased all her files when they told her she was being laid off. I think she has permanently **burnt her bridges** with the company.”

136. Get Wires Crossed

Have a misunderstanding.



“John, somehow we **got our wires crossed** on this issue. Let’s review our thinking step by step to find the source of the misunderstanding.”

“Tom, why did you invite the customer for a meeting tomorrow when I know I told you I was taking the day off? We shouldn’t **get our wires crossed** like this.”

137. Pulling Teeth

Difficulty getting informative responses from someone.



“I still don’t understand the status of Susan’s project even after discussing it with her for the last hour. It’s like **pulling teeth** getting straight answers from her.”

“I am very frustrated speaking to their customer service department. It's like **pulling teeth** trying to understand what the warranty actually covers.”

138. Read the Riot Act

Give an ultimatum for unacceptable behavior.



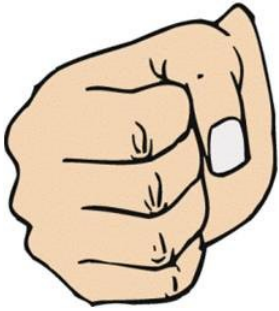
“I just **read Jim the riot act**. I told him one more incident like that in front of a customer and he is fired.”

“You need to **read Sally the riot act**. Her disruptive behavior is demoralizing the whole office.”

Origin – In 1713 the British Parliament passed the Riot Act against unlawful assembly.

139. The Gloves are Off

Previous rules of fair play are off.



“I heard we lost the bid because our competitor has been spreading false rumors about our financial stability. Well, **the gloves are off** and we can play dirty too.”

“I am sick and tired of Ted blaming our department for all the company's problems. **The gloves are coming off** and I am going to confront him in the next management meeting.”

Possible origin – Fighters remove their boxing gloves to fight bare knuckle.

140. Playing Chicken

When either side won't move off their position in a negotiation even though no agreement is bad for both sides.



“The customer needs our product now but won't place the order unless we lower the price, and we are refusing to do that because we think the price is already too low. Let's see who wins this game of **playing chicken.**”

“You think you will win by refusing to start the project unless they approve the entire budget; but they just may go ahead and cancel it. You are **playing chicken** against people with big egos and they don't always behave rationally.”

Possible origin – Two cars drive straight towards each other and the driver that swerves at the last minute is a chicken or coward. Of course if no one swerves there is a disaster.

141. Hell to Pay

Large negative consequences.



“If that report is not on my desk by noon tomorrow there will be **hell to pay**.”

“There will be **hell to pay** when I find out who is leaking information to the competition.”

142. The Last Straw

The last event in a string of negative events that causes someone to threaten or take severe action.



“You said that Cynthia insulted the customer at the meeting today after I specifically warned her to watch her tongue. If that's true then that's **the last straw** for her. She's fired.”

“Tony, this is now the third month in a row your project has missed all its major milestones. This is **the last straw**. I'm appointing someone else as project leader.”

Origin – From an Arab tale where more and more loads of straw were loaded on the camel's back until one final load made the camel collapse.

143. Pass the Buck

Pass on your responsibility to someone else.



“I am fed up with Peter looking for a way to **pass the buck** whenever he gets an assignment he doesn’t like.”

“Don’t try and **pass the buck** to me. You specifically asked for this project so now you need to deal with its problems yourself.”

Likely Origin – Passing a buck-handled knife in a poker game to designate the dealer. The buck here is another name for a deer. It has nothing to do with a dollar bill that is also called a buck, which is what most people imagine.

144. Sour Grapes

Someone behaving badly after not getting what he or she expected.



“It’s clear that Keith refusing to work on Brian’s project is just **sour grapes** because his own project was cancelled.”

“It’s been very difficult to work with Marcia lately. She’s still showing **sour grapes** for not getting the promotion.”

Origin – From Aesop’s fables, about a wolf who decided that the grapes it was unable to reach were probably sour anyway.

145. Dog Eat Dog

Maximizing one’s position to the disadvantage of others.



“Our competitors really undercut us on price to win the contract. It’s a **dog eat dog** world and they did what they needed to do.”

“It's **dog eat dog** out there among the people being considered for the VP position. Each candidate is pushing hard as to why he should be promoted and the others should not.”

146. Making a Mountain out of a Molehill

Making a big issue out of a small issue.



“Stop **making a mountain out of molehill** every time Jane comes in a bit late. She works late almost every day and is a major contributor to this department.”

“You're **making a mountain out of a molehill** complaining that we need to improve several features. It was a very difficult project and we still have plenty of time until customer delivery.”

147. Left Holding the Bag

Abandoned by others to be solely responsible for something.



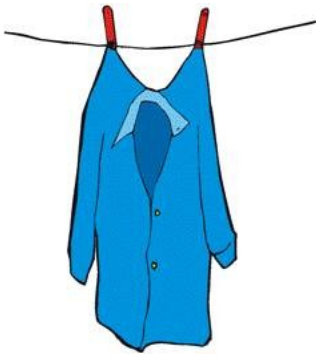
“All the investors pulled out except for us. So now we're **left holding the bag** if we want to continue providing funding.”

“It was wrong the way Scott was **left holding the bag** to complete the project on his own. Management should have given him more support.”

Possible origin – The robber caught holding the bag after his partners in crime have deserted him.

148. Hung Out to Dry

Abandoned, betrayed.



“They blamed everything on Ron and **hung him out to dry**. They took away his department and put him on special assignment. I bet he resigns in a month.”

“I would be very careful about opposing Karen. She has a reputation for being vengeful and eventually she'll find a way to **hang you out to dry**.”

Possible origin – Clothing or meat left to dry.

149. Got Off on the Wrong Foot

Bad start to a relationship.



“Sam, for some reason we have **got off on the wrong foot**. I'll make a commitment to work constructively with you and I hope you will do the same.”

“We were hoping that Christine would get along better with her new supervisor, but they seem to have **gotten off on the wrong foot**.”

150. Wearing Thin

Becoming insubstantial, in a negative way.



“Carl, your projects are always late and your excuses are **wearing thin**. You need to improve or there will be consequences.”

“My patience with Cindy is **wearing thin**. If she gives me any more trouble I'm going to transfer her to another department.”

151. Walking on Eggshells

Being very careful to avoid sensitive topics that might upset someone.



“I don’t know what it is with Dave lately, but I feel I am **walking on eggshells** when I am around him. It seems anything I say sets him off.

“I’d rather not have to deal with Kathy. She makes me very nervous. I feel I am **walking on eggshells** around her.”

152. Cut Off your Nose to Spite Your Face

Do something against your best interests for reasons of pride or to get back at someone.



“By not promoting Robert because he insulted you once **you’re cutting off your nose to spite your face**. He is by far the best person for the job.”

“Susan knows she should talk with Ted, but she won't. She’s **cutting off her nose to spite her face**.”

153. Pick Holes In

Find deficiencies with something.



“Instead of just **picking holes in** my work, it would be more constructive if you helped me fix them.”

“John, while I can **pick a few holes in** your proposal here and there, it is basically sound. Once you clean those up it is ready to go.”

154. Hold Feet to the Fire

Hold accountable in a hostile way.



“Harold, I'm going to **hold your feet to the fire** on this. You committed to close the deal before the end of the month. If it doesn't happen you will have to inform the board yourself.”

“These problems should have been found and fixed before we released the product. Jim's department is in charge of quality. I'm going to **hold his feet to the fire** to find out what happened and make sure this doesn't occur again in the future.”

Likely origin – Torturing someone by holding their feet over fire.

155. Getting Blood from a Stone

Great difficulty in obtaining something.



“Our customer won't reveal anything on how their selection process is proceeding. Trying to learn where we stand is like **getting blood from a stone**.”

“Getting extra work out of Sue is like **getting blood from a stone**. She leaves promptly at 5 o'clock no matter what.”

156. Take with a Grain of Salt

Be skeptical about something.



“I would **take** Melanie's claims about what her program can do **with a grain of salt**. She tends to exaggerate.”

“Honestly I don't believe your sales pitch. Until I test your product in my lab I'm **taking** everything you claim **with a grain of salt**.”

Origin – From ancient Rome where a recipe for an antidote to poison included a grain of salt.

157. Axe to Grind

A problem a person has with someone else because of something they did.



“John, I have an **axe to grind** with you. You shouldn’t have contradicted me in front of the customer yesterday.”

“Kathy, as a new member of my team we need work together smoothly. I know we have had disagreements in the past so if you still have any **axes to grind** let me know so that we can resolve them now.”

Origin – The origin is obscure. Some trace it back to a story by Benjamin Franklin in the late 1700s about a blacksmith who was tricked into sharpening someone's axe for free and then felt he was taken advantage of.

158. Bone to Pick

Someone wants to discuss a problem he or she has with someone else because of what that person did. (This is similar to 'axe to grind' but a bit more cordial.)



“Steve, I have a **bone to pick** with you. I really don’t like the way you constantly interrupt me at the team meetings.”

“Sally, several people have told me that you're complaining about how I treat you. If you have a **bone to pick** with me, then just come to my office and tell me directly.”

Likely origin – When you throw a dog a bone it picks at it for a long time.

159. Pull the Rug Out from Under

Suddenly stop providing support or cause unexpected problems for someone.



“Jim **pulled the rug out from under me** when he switched his vote at the last minute. I lost the promotion because of that.”

“While Jane did all the work, her boss took all the credit at the presentation today. It was her turn to shine and he **pulled the rug out from under her.**”

160. Song and Dance

A lengthy excuse or evasive explanation.

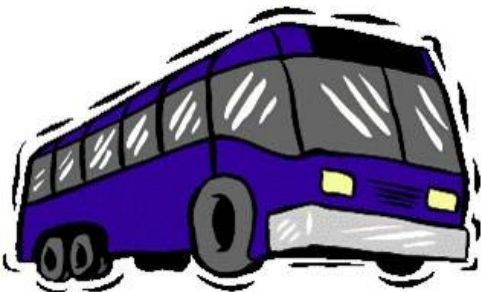


“I like John’s work but he never delivers on time. Each time it’s a different **song and dance** why he is late and how he will do better next time.”

“Peter, every time I ask you to do something, you give me this **song and dance** that you're too busy and I should assign it to someone else. I have had enough, either you take this task or you're fired.”

161. Throw Under the Bus

Put all the blame on someone even though they are not solely responsible.



“They couldn’t fire all the people responsible for the project's failure. So to show the board he was taking action, the CEO picked Charles who had a visible role and **threw him under the bus.**”

“Our company's president never liked our division. So even though the whole company is struggling I bet if we don’t make our revenue targets he will **throw us under the bus** and shut us down.”

162. **Blindside**

Take a negative action against someone without warning.



“We just got **blindsided** by our customer who called to cancel the contract. Everything seemed to be going fairly well. We’re still trying to figure out what happened.”

“Richard, I know you are the senior VP but don’t **blindside** me again by re-assigning my staff without telling me first. It makes me look like I don’t know what's going on and that undermines my authority.”

163. **Pulling your Chain**

Get a reaction from someone by saying something you know bothers them.



“Sam, you know that Bill was **pulling your chain** in the meeting today because he was trying to avoid you asking questions about his own project.”

“Frank, I was just **pulling your chain** when I commented that your work had fewer flaws than usual. You're one of our best resources. Sometimes you should take things less seriously.”

Likely origin – Pulling a chain to flush an old fashioned toilet.

164. Loaded Question

A question that implies that you did something wrong or are guilty of something.



“Asking me when I erased the files to destroy evidence of faking results is a **loaded question**. I am not going to answer that.”

“I hate working for Larry. He has a confrontational management style where he constantly asks **loaded questions** trying to trick you into admitting you did something wrong.”

165. Finger Pointing; Pointing Fingers



Placing blame on someone.

“I want everyone to stop the **finger pointing**. That's not going to help now. We need to focus our energy on solving the problem.”

“Bruce, I don't want you **pointing fingers** at members of your team for the failure. You are the project manager and have the ultimate responsibility.”

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Success, Certainty

166. It's in the Bag

A sure thing. Certain success.



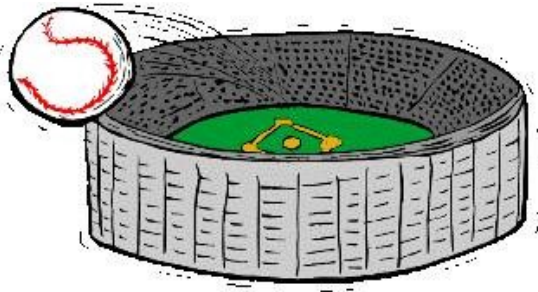
“I spoke with my friend on the customer's selection committee and he told me not to worry, that we've won the bid. **It's in the bag.**”

“Based on all the fantastic reviews our product has been getting in the press, I would say **it's in the bag** that we win the Product of the Year award.”

Possible Origin – Hunted game (animals) in the bag.

167. **Out of the Ballpark; Out of the Park**

A huge success.



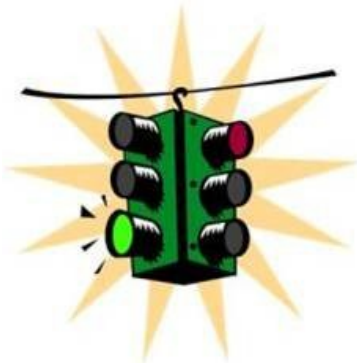
“At the customer presentation today Tom hit it **out of the ballpark.** They gave us the order on the spot.”

“Bruce, I want to extend congratulations to you and all members of your sales team. You hit the numbers **out of the park** last quarter. Keep it up.”

Origin – A massive home run in baseball that is literally hit out of the ballpark.

168. **Green light**

Permission to go ahead.



“Cathy, we have received the **green light** to start hiring again. I would like you to add five more people to your department.

“The team is all ready to start the product development and is eager to go. We're just waiting for the **green light** from corporate.”

169. No-Brainer

An obvious action or decision.



“It's a **no-brainer** we should hire Sally now that she is available. We need more programmers and she is one of the best.”

“Killing that project was a **no-brainer**. It was eating resources and based on changing market conditions could never be profitable.”

170. Piece of Cake; Easy as Pie

Easy accomplishment.



“We have a really great database. Gathering all the statistics the customer requested was a **piece of cake**.”

“The interview was as **easy as pie**. They offered me a job on the spot.”

171. Can (or can't) have your Cake and Eat it too

Can (or cannot) have it both ways on things that are usually not compatible.



“This new job is so much better than my previous one. It is motivating, pays more, and gives me more free time. I guess you **can have your cake and eat it too.**”

“I finally got the promotion and raise I wanted, but now I am working so hard my wife is complaining I don’t have time for her. You **can't have your cake and eat it too.**”

Origin – This is a very old English expression with the first recorded use in the 1500s.

172. Smooth Sailing; Smooth as Silk

Went smoothly without problems.



“It was **smooth sailing** at the customer demo today. Everything functioned perfectly.”

“The pitch to the board went as **smooth as silk**. They asked a few superficial questions and then voted unanimously in favor.”

Origin – These are two common examples of how the word smooth is enhanced to give it greater expression. There are more, like “smooth as a baby’s bottom.”

173. Blessing in Disguise

Something that at first seems bad turns out to be beneficial.



“Losing that contract was a **blessing in disguise**. We were already bidding way too low and it would have consumed too many resources for virtually no profit.”

“In the short run Tony's quitting will hurt us. But in the long run it is a **blessing in disguise**. He was very disruptive and affected everyone else's work.”

174. Silver Lining

Something positive arising from something negative.



“We lost the bid, but the **silver lining** is that we developed some great new technology we can apply to other products.”

“John, they killed your project because they found the market was too small, but the **silver lining** is that your department is now highly recognized in the company.”

Origin – Comes from the expression “every cloud has a silver lining.”

175. Music to my Ears

Good news.

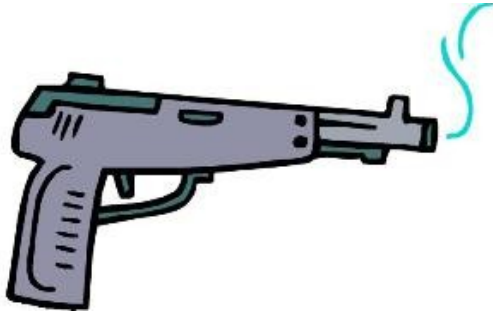


“The customer doubling the order was **music to my ears**. We really need the extra revenue this quarter.”

“Engineering solving that major problem is **music to my ears**. Now they should be able to get the development back on track.”

176. Smoking Gun

Clear evidence for what caused an event.



“We recovered an e-mail from Jim's computer sent from his personal account showing he was sending our pricing information to the competition. It's the **smoking gun** that shows the source of the leaks.”

“We probably won't find a **smoking gun** for what caused the system crash last week. I'm pretty sure that it was some mistake by one of the specialists and by now he will have removed all evidence.”

Origin – From a Sherlock Holmes story where the original usage was a smoking pistol found in the hand of someone who then became the prime suspect.

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Uncertainty

177. Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop

Expecting another problem or more bad news to occur.



“They announced one round of layoffs last week. But I don't believe they are done. I'm just **waiting for the other shoe to drop.**”

“This delay in production is really hurting us. So far only one customer has cancelled an order, but I am sure there will be more. I am **waiting for the other shoe to drop.**”

178. Touch and Go

On the edge of success or failure.



“It was **touch and go** for a while whether we would be able to deliver the prototype on schedule. But thanks to the engineering team working around the clock we made it on time.”

“I need to be honest with all of you. It is going to be **touch and go** whether we can survive much longer as an independent company. It all depends on how successful we are this quarter.”

179. Bigger Fish to Fry

More important things to do or pay attention to.



“Don't worry about losing that small account. We have **bigger fish to fry.**”

“Sorry, but I can't help you with your problems today. I have **bigger fish to fry.**”

180. Balls in the Air

A lot of things going on at the same time.



“Sam, I have a lot of **balls in the air** at the moment. I promise I will get back to you on your proposal by next month, but I can't be more precise than that.”

“I can't take on another assignment unless you get me some help. I have too many **balls in the air** as it is.”

Origin – A juggler's balls.

181. Let the Chips Fall where they May

Let events proceed no matter the consequences.



“I know he's the CEO's son but I am not going to give him the promotion. There are others much better qualified. **Let the chips fall where they may.**”

“If customers ask me, I won't lie to them about the magnitude of the problem. **Let the chips fall where they may.**”

Origin – When focused on the main task of chopping down a tree with an axe, let the wood chips fly wherever they may.

182. On Thin Ice; Skating on Thin Ice

In a dangerous situation.



“I wouldn't ask the customers if they can accept another delay. We're **on thin ice** with some of them already, and they might use that as an excuse to cancel their contracts.”

“John, I don't want to another word about why this wasn't your fault. You're **skating on thin ice**. Either you accept responsibility or you're fired.”

Origin – When skating on thin ice on a lake, the ice may break sending you into the icy waters.

183. Not Out of the Woods

While progress is being made there are still be problems to be resolved.



“We solved one major production problem last week, but yield is still lower than expected. We're **not out of the woods** yet.”

“The new investor coming in gave us a few more months to run, but we need more money until we are cash flow positive. We're still **not out of the woods**.”

184. A Coin Toss

A decision that can just as well be made one way as another.

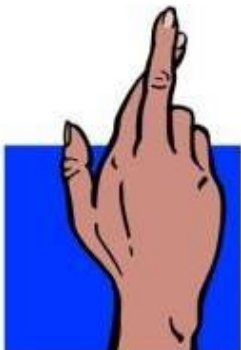


“They are still debating which supplier to use. It's really **a coin toss**.”

“I can add either Frank or Tom to my team for the project. They are both very good in their own way. It's **a coin toss** who to choose.”

185. Keep Your Fingers Crossed

Hope that something will turn out all right, sometimes involving a bit of luck.



“There is one last test for the new product, but it is the toughest one. **Keep your fingers crossed** it passes that too.”

“I heard that it just us and another company that are in the final group to win the bid. I'm **keeping my fingers crossed** they select us.”

Likely origin – Crossing your fingers like a Christian cross to invoke good luck.

186. Out of the Blue

A totally unexpected event.



“Our customer deciding not to renew the contract was totally **out of the blue**. We were in final negotiations. I am still trying to find out what happened.”

“This new order came right **out of the blue**. We weren't even working with that customer.”

Possible origin – An enemy plane or perhaps any object appearing suddenly and unexpectedly in a clear blue sky.

187. All Bets are Off

Anything can happen.



“If our supplier doesn't deliver by this Friday **all bets are off**. I am willing to cancel the order and go with someone else even if it means a further delay.”

“If we don't win this bid **all bets are off**. There will be a major shakeup in management.”

Possible origin – Something irregular occurred in a gambling situation like a horse race so that all bets are cancelled.

188. White Knight

A company that rescues another company, usually from a hostile takeover.



“Unless we find a **white knight** our competitor will acquire a majority of our shares and then sell us off in pieces.”

“We don’t have enough cash to survive on our own. We need a **white knight** to help us out or maybe even acquire us.”

Likely origin – In medieval tales the white knight fought for justice.

189. Dark Horse

A candidate or approach not considered the best but that still has a chance to succeed.



“Everyone is saying we are a **dark horse** to win the contract. Well, let's prove them right and come out with a bid response that blows away our competitors.”

“The board is looking at five candidates for the CEO position. I would say two are very strong, two have no chance, and one is a **dark horse**.”

Origin – A race horse that is not considered the best but that cannot be ignored when trying to pick the winner.

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Problems and Difficulties

190. Can of Worms

A situation that has many problems, or has the potential for many problems.



“The customer wants to audit our internal processes. What a **can of worms**. They'll discover how disorganized we really are.”

“Installing the new system has been a **can of worms**. We keep running into new problems.”

191. Littered with Landmines

A situation with many obstacles, some of which are not obvious, that could cause major problems.



“Susan, I don't think we should be so eager to win this new business. It's **littered with landmines** that could cause a serious drain on our finances.”

“John, this partnership you are proposing is **littered with landmines**. I am particularly concerned that we could end up losing all our company's intellectual property.”

192. Fly in the Ointment

A flaw in a solution.

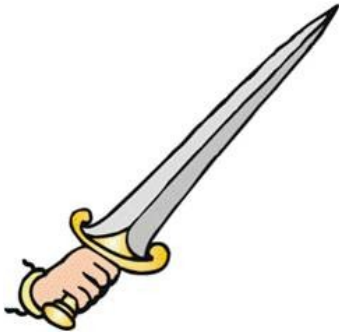


“I agree we can fix the problem by using a faster processor and more memory. But the **fly in the ointment** is the added cost. We will need to raise prices and that will hurt our market share.”

“Kathy, I agree we can meet our delivery commitment by assigning more staff to the project, but the **fly in the ointment** is that other equally important projects will then be delayed.”

193. Double-Edged Sword

Something that can help but can also cause harm.



“Lowering prices to get a larger market share is a **double-edged sword**. Our competition can do that too and then everyone's revenues go down.”

“We can use a faster processor and more memory to improve performance, but that's a **double-edged sword** because that will add cost and hurt our margins.”

194. Wouldn't Touch it with a Ten Foot Pole

Stay away from something at all costs.



“James, stay away from that customer. They are terrible company to do business with. I **wouldn't touch them with a ten foot pole**.”

“Frank, I don’t care how many times you ask me. I refuse to do that assignment. It can kill my career. I **wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole.**”

Possible origin – From the long poles used by bargemen to keep away from other boats.

195. **Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

In a difficult situation, with few if any good alternatives.



“I feel like I’m **between a rock and a hard place**. My main customer is threatening to cancel the order unless I personally visit next week to explain a recovery schedule, and I have plans I made with my wife months ago to go on vacation.”

“We’re **between a rock and a hard place**. We cannot deliver on schedule to both customers. One of them is going to be very unhappy with us.”

196. **Throws a Wrench in the Works**

An unexpected event that severely disrupts a project or plan.



“Production was shut down the last two days due to the storm and power outage. That **throws a wrench into the works** to meet our committed schedule.”

“Our competitor coming in at the last minute with a much lower bid is **throwing a wrench into the works** to win the contract.”

Origin – Throwing a wrench into machinery in order to sabotage it.

197. Down the River (or Up the Creek) Without a Paddle

To be in a difficult situation without an apparent way out.



“Our product placed last in the technology bakeoff. We have nothing competitive to offer the market. We are **down the river without a paddle**.”

“Since losing that contract we are really **up the creek**. We don’t have enough cash coming in to continue operating.”

Origin – Specific origins are obscure but many naval expressions have become common idioms.

198. A Dog’s Breakfast

A very big mess.



“I can't believe how bad Mike's code is. It's a **dog's breakfast**. Someone will need to rewrite it from scratch.”

“The manufacturing operation at the company we acquired is a **dog's breakfast**. I recommend we shut it down and move it somewhere else.”

199. A Show Stopper

An event or condition that is serious enough to stop a deal or activity from proceeding.



“If you can't make the first delivery next week we are cancelling the purchase order. That's a **show stopper** for us.”

“Team, it's a **show stopper** for this project unless we can show that the system can reboot in sixty seconds.”

Origin – While the current usage implies a negative event, it originally referred to an exceptionally good performance in a show, that stopped the show until the audience became quiet.

200. Need Like a Hole in the Head

Something totally unwanted.

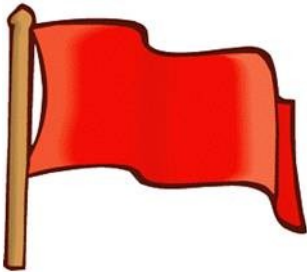


“The customer just told us they are coming to audit the production line next week. With all our problems there we **need that like a hole in the head.**”

“I heard we had another system failure overnight. I **need that like a hole in the head.** I'm sure I'll get a call from the CEO and he will want a full report by noon.”

201. Red Flag

Sign of a potential problem.



“John, the customer just called. We had a **red flag** with the system trial last night when it unexpectedly shut down for a few minutes. Get your staff over there today to investigate before we have a real problem.”

“I had a preliminary discussion with the board about the new project, and so far no one has raised any **red flags**. That’s a good sign they will approve it.”

Origin – A red flag was originally flown by ships to show they were preparing for battle. Red flags are now used as a symbol of danger.

202. In a Jam

In a difficult situation.



“Steve, call the bank and tell them we're **in a jam** with the payment due today. Ask them for a few days extension until the receivables start coming in.”

“Henry, thanks for helping me **out of a jam** yesterday. I appreciate you covering for me at the customer meeting while I dealt with other urgent business that suddenly came up.”

Possible origin – Like being in a traffic jam where you can't move.

203. Fall Between (or Fall Through) the Cracks

Something not done because it was overlooked.

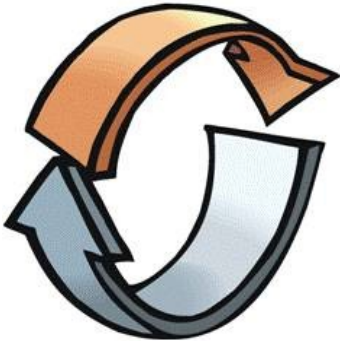


“The customer is expecting perfection on this project. We can't have anything **fall between the cracks**. That is why I am assigning Susan to keep track of every action, big or small.

“I can't understand how we released the software before it was fully tested. Clearly a few tests **fell through the cracks** because some bugs we should have caught are being discovered in the field.”

204. Catch 22

Every option for dealing with a situation leads to problems in a circular fashion.



“It's a **Catch 22** trying to get this project started. Corporate won't provide funding until they see a working demo. But they won't allow us to work on the demo.”

“We can increase profits by raising prices but then we will lose market share to competitors. It's a **Catch 22** situation.”

Origin – From Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22*. In order to be discharged a bomber pilot must prove he is crazy, but he already must be crazy if he is a bomber pilot.

205. Monkey On (or Off) Your Back

A persistent problem or an unwanted responsibility.



“The boss now wants me to write up a full report for every customer complaint, even when there is no problem. I can’t get any other work done. I’ve got to get this **monkey off my back**.

“Until Bob clears up the rumors that he broke the rules he is going to have a **monkey on his back**.”

206. Sitting Duck

Someone or something that is an easy target to attack.



“One of our competitors is a **sitting duck** for a cheap acquisition. They keep losing market share and are running out of cash.”

“Adam has lost all his executive level supporters. If they're looking for someone to blame he's a **sitting duck**.”

Origin – From duck hunting, a duck sitting on the water is an easy target.

207. When the Dust Settles

When things calm down; when things become clear after a turbulent situation.



“Phil, I know this wasn’t all your fault, but if you try and explain now when everybody is focused on fixing the problem it will just make things worse. Wait a few days until **the dust settles**.”

“They just announced the merger. It will take several months of negotiations for **the dust to settle** and to sort out who will be responsible for what.”

208. Hit a (Brick) Wall

Progress comes to a hard stop.



“We have **hit a brick wall** in our negotiations. Neither side is willing to concede anything.”

“Our investigation into the root cause of the failure has **hit a wall**. We need to invest in better diagnostic tools to proceed.”

209. All Hell Breaking Loose

A major negative upheaval.



“Our CEO needs to tell the board that we are going to have a major slip in our revenue this quarter. I expect **all hell to break loose.**”

“**All hell is breaking loose.** Not only are the customers upset that our delivery was three months late, they are also complaining that major features are not meeting specs.”

210. Going Up in Smoke

Something that functioned previously is now falling apart.



“We spent ten years building this business, now we have a few bad quarters and the bank is not extending our credit line. Everything is **going up in smoke.**”

“We were betting that those features we spent a lot of money developing would give us a competitive advantage. But no one wants them now. Our plans to be the market leader are **going up in smoke.**”

211. It Never Rains but it Pours

Problems that come in bunches.

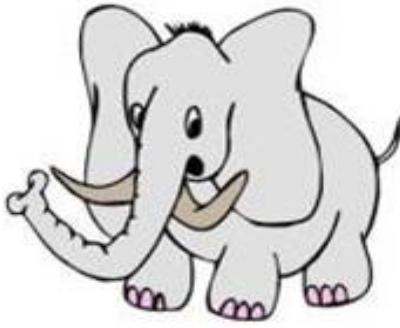


“We fixed one problem and now the customer is reporting several more. **It never rains but it pours.**”

“Two customers cancelled their orders last week, and this morning two more called to cancel. **It never rains but it pours.**”

212. White Elephant

Something that has limited usefulness, is expensive to maintain, and difficult to dispose of.



“Our new manufacturing facility is a **white elephant**. We totally over-estimated new customer demand and now our overhead costs are skyrocketing.”

“We should not have acquired that company last year. It adds little to revenues but is sucking up resources. It is turning out to be a real **white elephant**.”

Origin – Owning a white elephant in Thailand can be financially ruinous because it is holy and needs to be maintained but cannot be put to work.

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Progressing to a Conclusion

213. Foot in the Door

The first step in a new business situation that can lead to greater things.



“After one year of pushing, this company has finally agreed to evaluate our product. I finally have my **foot in the door**.”

“I don’t care if we need to sell below cost. We must get our **foot in the door** with that customer. We’ll worry about profits later.”

214. Changing Horses in Midstream

Abruptly take a very different approach that may cause difficulties.



“Ron, I know we're **changing horses in midstream** by moving all the current developments to the new platform, but if we don't do it now it's going to cause even more serious problems later.”

“I don't agree with your decision to replace Scott as team leader at this time. He has done an adequate job. Why do you want to **change horses in midstream**?”

215. Cross that Bridge when you Come to It

Deciding not to deal with a potential problem until it actually occurs.



“If we accelerate spending now we may run out of funds before the project is finished. But we need to show progress, so we'll **cross that bridge when we come to it**.”

“If the customer discovers we changed the design they may ask us to re-test the whole product. I advise not to inform them and we will **cross that bridge when we come to it**.”

216. Get On/Off Track; Get Back on Track

On or off a planned course or schedule.



“Sam, you need to manage your team better and get this project **back on track**. We are already several weeks behind schedule.”

“Cynthia, I think your investigation into the failure is **getting off track**. You seem to be looking in all the wrong places. If you don’t make some progress soon, I am going to assign this to someone else.”

217. Coming Down to the Wire

Determining the outcome or finalizing an activity at the last possible moment.



“The engineers are still working on the demo for the customer’s visit tomorrow. It’s **coming down to wire** if they will be ready.”

“Paul, we need to submit the bid in one hour at noon. It’s **coming down to the wire**; so wrap up all the loose ends and make sure the document is ready for transmittal.”

Likely origin – The wire or string at the end of a race.

218. Light at the End of the Tunnel

Being able to achieve a goal is in sight, typically after a long duration.



“The test results from the experiments are promising. Finally we can see some **light at the end of the tunnel**.”

“I had no idea it would take me so long to finish this project. But I finally see some **light at the end of the tunnel**.”

219. The Writing is on the Wall

It is clear that a bad ending is coming.



“Steve's division has lost money for the last two years. The **writing is on the wall** that management will shut them down.”

“It's no surprise that the client dropped us. Our relationship with them was deteriorating badly. The **writing was on the wall.**”

Origin – From the biblical Book of Daniel, when a heavenly hand writes on the wall prophesying the downfall of the Babylonian empire.

220. Jump the Gun

Take action prematurely.



“Frank **jumped the gun** announcing we won the bid. He was really embarrassed when it was awarded to our competitor.”

“Sam, I wouldn't **jump the gun** talking about how you are going to reorganize the department. You haven't got the promotion yet.”

Origin – In a race, begin running before the starting gun goes off.

221. Snowballing

Something that gains momentum, in either a positive or negative way.



“That advertisement we placed is really paying off. The requests for more information are **snowballing**.”

“Since we reported the problem our customer defections have been **snowballing**. We are losing more every day.”

Possible origin – A ball of snow that grows bigger and bigger as it rolls down a hill.

222. Kick it Upstairs

Refer a decision to a higher level of management.



“Tony, it’s clear we won’t be able to resolve this among ourselves. Let’s **kick it upstairs** and see what they say.”

“This decision is beyond my pay grade. I’m **kicking it upstairs**.”

223. After the Smoke Clears

After the noise of a crisis passes, it is possible to assess the situation.



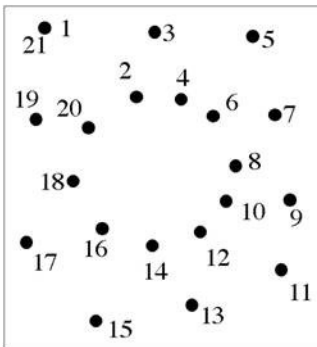
“Tom, right now most of our technical staff is at the customer trying to recover the system. **After the smoke clears** I want you to review what happened so this type of failure won’t happen again.”

“We just received our second major order cancellation this week, and the departments are all blaming each other. We need **the smoke to clear** quickly so we can figure out how to avoid more cancellations.”

Likely origin – After the smoke of a battle has cleared its outcome can become known.

224. Connect the Dots

Put separate pieces of information together to determine a larger truth.



“We see a lot of symptoms but still don’t understand the root cause of the problem. We need to do a better job of **connecting the dots**.”

“I know that Bob didn’t seem like the obvious choice, but if you **connect the dots** you can figure out why he was promoted.”

Likely origin – Connecting the numbered dots in a children's activity book to create a picture.

225. Cut to the Chase

Get to the heart of the matter.



“Bruce we really want you to join our firm. So let's **cut to the chase**, what salary offer will it take for you to come on board?”

“Susan, I need to **cut to the chase**. Your performance has not met expectations and we need to let you go.”

Origin – From forwarding directly to the climactic chase scene in a movie.

226. Train has Left the Station

A critical event has occurred, or a decision made, often limiting future choices.



“The customer issued the RFP before we could close a deal. That **train has left the station**; now we need to submit a bid with everyone else.”

“Steve committed to the board this morning that we would launch the product in six weeks. The **train has left the station** so we better focus on making it happen.”

227. Water Under the Bridge

A situation you might have dealt with differently has passed, and there is nothing more you can do about it.



“The fact that we lost market share for the last two years is **water under the bridge**. Now we need to figure out how to get it back.”

“Those product failures **are water under the bridge**. We fixed them. Our job now is to restore customer confidence.”

228. Scratch the Surface

Make only preliminary or superficial progress.

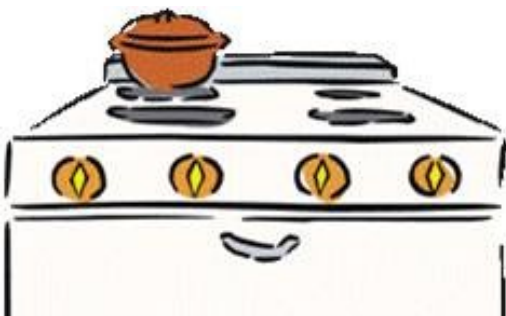


“Since we fired Bruce we have only **scratched the surface** in our investigation of his financial misdealings. But it looks like he did a lot of illegal stuff.”

“There is such a huge backlog of customer complaints that so far our new team has just been able to **scratch the surface** in responding to them.”

229. Put on the Backburner

Give something lower priority.



“Peter, **put** that project **on the backburner** for now. The customer is pushing out delivery for six months.”

“Team, whatever you are working on **put it on the backburner**. I just got a call from the head office about an emergency they want us to give top priority.”

Origin – A backburner of the stove is usually used at low heat to let something cook a long time.

230. The Clock is Ticking

There is only limited time to complete something before a deadline.



“Kathy, **the clock is ticking** to complete the customer presentation. Why are you working on something else?”

“We’re wasting time with this endless analysis. **The clock is ticking**. We need to pick one approach today and do our best to make that work.”

Note: The word deadline is itself an idiom, and means the final time within which something must be completed.

231. Move the Needle

Make measurable progress.



“Sally's really **moved the needle** since becoming VP Sales. Our revenues jumped last quarter.”

“Harry's been working on the project for a month and he's barely **moved the needle**. What has he been doing?”

Origin – From moving the needle on an old electro-mechanical meter.

232. Low Hanging Fruit

Goals that are easy to achieve.



“It only looks like John is well ahead in achieving his sales quota. But so far he has only gone after the **low hanging fruit**. From now on he'll have much tougher sales to close.”

“Peter, it's a complex project with many deliverables. My advice is to complete the **low hanging fruit** first to get started.”

Origin – It is easiest to pick the low hanging fruit from a tree.

233. Game Changer

An event that changes something dramatically.



“With this new approach we can deliver the same performance at half the cost. That's a **game changer** that will enable us to increase our market share significantly.”

“Two of our competitors announced they are merging and will now be the largest company in the sector. That's a **game changer** that will put a lot of pressure on us.”

234. Legwork

The fundamental often routine work underlying a project.



“Richard is taking all the credit for closing the deal, but he couldn’t have done it without Sally's **legwork** to prepare the bid.”

“I am fairly sure the project will get approved. Let's start doing the **legwork** now so we can gain some time.”

Origin – From the physical walking about of calling on customers or collecting information underlying a successful activity.

235. Kick the Can down the Road

Defer taking action until a later date. Putting off a problem.



“Management can't make up their mind whether to invest in the new product or not. At the review today they said it needs further study and **kicked the can down the road** until next month.”

“We know the system needs significant maintenance. But because of the time and expense, we keep **kicking the can down the road**. I hope it doesn’t have a huge crash that will cost us even more.”

236. Tie Up Loose Ends

Take care of outstanding issues to bring a situation to a proper completion.



“We’ve addressed all the major areas in the proposal. Let’s **tie up the loose ends** and send it out the door.”

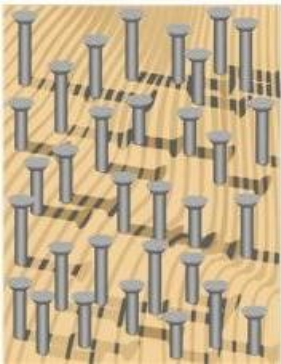
“John, you tell me you finished the project, but I still see too many **loose ends**. I am not ready to sign off on it yet.”

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A Conclusion

237. Nail Down

Determine conclusively.



“We can’t complete the cost estimate until we **nail down** the specifications with the customer.”

“Nancy, you need to speak with Jim and **nail down** when he will complete this phase of the work. He’s already two weeks late.”

238. Nail in the Coffin

An action which contributes to bringing something to an end in a negative way.

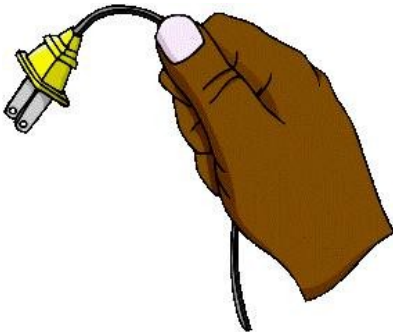


“Another customer called to complain about Bill. That's the final **nail in the coffin**. I have to let him go.”

“The demo failure at the board meeting was a **nail in the coffin** for your project. Unless you can show progress very soon, they will vote to terminate it.”

239. Pull the Plug On

Terminate an activity.



“Alex, management was this close to **pulling the plug** on your project today. I convinced them you are making progress, but you better show positive results by next month or it's over.”

“Bernie, I'm sorry, but we need to **pull the plug** on your project. I know all the effort you have put into it but it is just a business decision based on resources and priorities.”

240. The Proof is in the Pudding

How something turns out will show its actual worth.



“Our customer won't believe we can meet their specifications until we deliver a compliant product. **The proof is in the pudding.**”

“John, I'm not going to argue with you. **The proof is in the pudding.** You said you can make this department profitable, so now you need to prove it.”

Origin – This is a very old expression which was originally, *the proof of the pudding is in the eating*, or in other words, let's see how it actually tastes.

241. Pay the Piper

Suffer the consequences of knowingly committing wrongful actions.



“We decided to release the product even though we knew it still had major quality issues. Now we need to **pay the piper** dealing with all the returns.”

“New government regulations will expose the practices of our competitor. They will be forced to **pay the piper** to make their product compliant.”

Likely origin – In the medieval tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, when the piper was not paid for eliminating the town's rats he led away all the children.

242. Face the Music

Realize that there will be consequences for bad actions.



“The customer just called and was really unhappy. We're going to **face the music** in our meeting with them tomorrow.”

“Tom, you need to **face the music** and understand that your performance did not meet expectations and I cannot give you a raise.”

Some suggested origins – (1) Facing the military band when being drummed out of the corps. (2) A new actor appearing on stage for the first time and facing the orchestra between the stage and the audience.

243. Make the Cut

Survive a decision making process to go onto the next stage.



“We **made the cut** to the final round of the bidding process. Now we need to submit our best and final offer.”

“I'm sorry to tell you that your project didn't **make the cut**. The return on investment was too low.”

Likely origin – A golfer in a multi-round tournament needs a score “above the cut” in terms of strokes behind the leader to be eligible to play in the next round.

244. Throw in the Towel

Give up. Stop competing.



“Tom thinks we should **throw in the towel** on this bid. There is no way we can come close to matching the competitor's price.”

“I know the project is late and over budget. But I'm not ready to **throw in the towel**. I believe in it and I am going to request more funding.”

Origin – A fighter or his team throws a towel into the ring when he cannot come out for the next round.

245. When Push Comes to Shove

When things have intensified and decisive action must be taken.



“I know the investors say they are reluctant to keep supporting us. But they really have no choice, and **when push comes to shove** they'll come through.”

“Susan, right now I can't be seen to show any favoritism in the budgeting process. But you have my word that if **push comes to shove** I will make sure you get what you need.”

Likely origin – When an argument heats up, words turn into a push that becomes a shove that can then escalate into a full blown fight.

246. Rubber Stamp

Automatically provide formal approval to a decision without any investigation or analysis.



“Our CEO has the board in his pocket. They will **rubber stamp** whatever he recommends.” (“In his pocket” means that he controls them, usually through financial means.)

“I can see that Chris is already thinking about his retirement in next month. He just **rubber stamps** whatever I submit for approval.”

Likely origin – Administrators or officials would use a rubber stamp with ink to approve certain papers without even looking at them.

247. Silver Bullet

A miraculous solution.



“We have been trying for weeks to improve our production output. Nothing has worked so far. We need a **silver bullet**.”

“Tom's new testing method is taking half the time and cost as before, and is just the **silver bullet** we needed. I don't know why someone didn't think of that before.”

Likely origin – In legend only a silver bullet could kill magical beasts like a werewolf.

248. At the End of the Day

How things will turn out over time.



“**At the end of the day** I'm sure we can fix the problem. I just hope it's not too late before our customers go elsewhere.”

“I know you're going to keep doing things your way, but **at the end of the day** you'll see my approach is better.”

249. When Hell Freezes Over; When Pigs Get Wings and Fly

Virtually no chance something will happen.



“They will have to wait **until hell freezes over** for me to authorize payment for their useless work.”

“**Pigs will get wings and fly** before I hire Bill again. As far as I am concerned he burned his bridges when he quit when we needed him the most.”

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Thinking and Imagining

250. Brainstorm

(1) Have a free exchange of ideas; (2) Have an idea suddenly.



“I’m calling a meeting to **brainstorm** how we can improve our product.”

“I just had a **brainstorm** on how we can double our production with only a small investment.”

251. Strawman

Preliminary proposal to get discussion started.



“Sam, please present a draft budget at our management review tomorrow. We need a **strawman** at this stage to get the process started.”

“Here is my **strawman** project plan. I would like everyone to provide their comments so that we can start molding it into something real.”

Origin – From a man built of straw, perhaps like a scarecrow, that can easily be knocked down.

252. Think Outside the Box

Think of creative solutions where normal ones do not work.

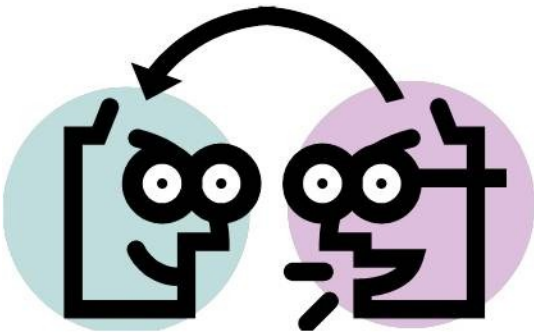


“Robert, your department’s been stuck on this problem for weeks. You need to start **thinking outside of the box** if you’re going to get it fixed.”

“Karen, we are hiring your company for our new advertising campaign based on your reputation for **out of the box thinking**. We need to do a much better job conveying our company’s image.”

253. Off the Top of my Head

Initial thoughts on a subject, without thinking them through thoroughly.



“I can give you some ideas **off the top of my head** right now, but I would prefer to get back to you tomorrow after I think about these some more.”

“**Off the top of my head** I estimate that we can increase our sales by at least ten percent next year just by doing a few simple things.”

254. Train of Thought

A set of connected ideas that you are trying to assemble into a complete explanation or conclusion.



“Steve, it's not obvious but try and follow my **train of thought** on how we can resolve this problem. I'll go through it step by step.”

“Why did you interrupt me in the middle of my explanation! You made me lose my **train of thought**. Now I need to start all over again.”

255. Tunnel Vision

Thinking limited to a few ideas; not ready to accept other ideas.

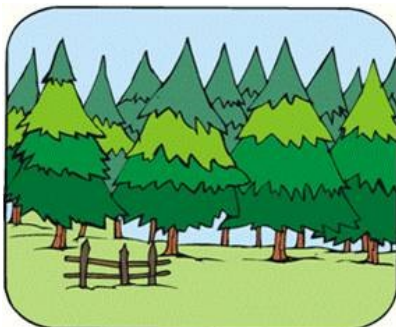


“Frank has **tunnel vision** on how we can improve our market position. He thinks that if we repeat his same bad ideas that they will become better.”

“We are all limited by **tunnel vision** in solving this problem. We should bring in some new people with a fresh approach.”

256. Can't See the Forest for the Trees

A person cannot see the total situation because he or she is just focusing on the details.



“Henry, it doesn’t make sense that we keep losing bids when it seems we are competitive on every one. Something else is going on and we **can't see the forest for the trees.**”

“Susan, instead of just fixing problems as they occur I want you to re-assess the whole design. Right now you **can't see the forest for the trees.**”

257. Half-Baked

An idea or a plan that is not sufficiently thought through.



“Frank, you keep bringing me **half-baked** ideas that are easy to find faults with. Take the time to think things through and develop your ideas more thoroughly.”

“The executive committee told us to go back and start again. That's the price we pay for submitting a **half-baked** plan.”

258. In the Weeds

The complex and sometimes unimportant details.



“All this data analysis isn't helping to solve the problem. It's just getting us lost deeper **in the weeds.** We need to take a step back and take a fresh look from a higher level.”

“Assign that project to Tim who is detail-oriented. It has a lot of complexity and I want someone who can get **into the weeds** to figure things out.”

259. Thirty Thousand Foot View

A high level overview of a situation.



“I have five minutes before I go into the board meeting. Give me the **thirty thousand foot view** of the situation now and I can get the details later.”

“Frank already gave me the **thirty thousand foot view** on this new opportunity. That was enough to get my interest and he is now communicating the details to my team for a detailed evaluation.”

Likely origin – As a view from an airplane. This is also expressed as “thousand foot view” or “ten thousand foot view”.

260. Trial Balloon

An idea advanced tentatively to test reaction.



“At the board meeting today I’m going to float some **trial balloons** on how we can grow the company. I want to see where I can get the best support.”

“I want you to put together some demos we can use with customers as **trial balloons** to determine the new features that are most important to them.”

Origin – From balloons carrying instrumentation used to test weather conditions.

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[Hiding and Revealing Information](#)

261. Smoke and Mirrors

Trying to show something as other than it actually is.



“I hope you weren't too impressed by the demo today. Those guys are notorious for **smoke and mirrors**, so I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of it was faked.”

“We're going to have to use **smoke and mirrors** to convince management we are on schedule, or there is a good chance they will cancel the program.”

262. Pull the Wool over your Eyes

Deceive or fool someone.



“It won't be easy to **pull the wool over** John's eyes. He knows what questions to ask.”

“I have to hand it to our competitor. Their press release misled us on what they were really working on. They totally **pulled the wool over our eyes**.”

Possible origin – Pull down the woolen wig that judges used to wear over their eyes to make them blind to the facts of the case.

263. Snow Job

Deceive or persuade someone using overwhelming talk or flattery.



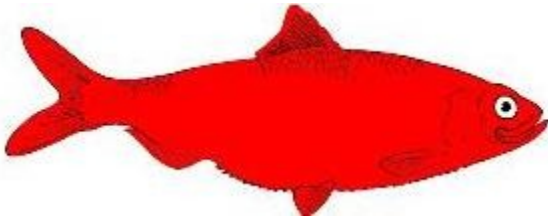
“Vince is a great salesman. Even though the customers know his pitch is a **snow job** they still believe him.”

“It took me almost an hour of non-stop talking, but I was able to **snow job** the customer to accept the shipment even though we haven't resolved the problems.

Likely origin – Overwhelm as if buried in snow.

264. Red Herring

Misleading information intended to divert attention from the important information.



“Most of our competitor's news releases are **red herrings**. We need to find an insider there to learn what they really have in development.”

“In his company wide talk today the CEO just focused on the new product developments. This was a **red herring** to avoid discussing the reorganization and downsizing we all know is coming.”

Origin – From a smelly fish dragged along the trail by a fugitive to divert the hounds. Recently bankers refer to initial investment prospectuses as red herrings to alert readers they are still incomplete.

265. Stretching the Truth

Not being fully truthful.



“It’s **stretching the truth** to say that we have no major customer satisfaction issues. We would have lost a major customer if we didn’t call in some personal favors.”

“Saying we have no reliability issues is **stretching the truth**. While there have been no failures recently we still don’t know what caused those failures last year.”

266. Cook the Books

Manipulate financial reporting information to show that business looks better than it really is.

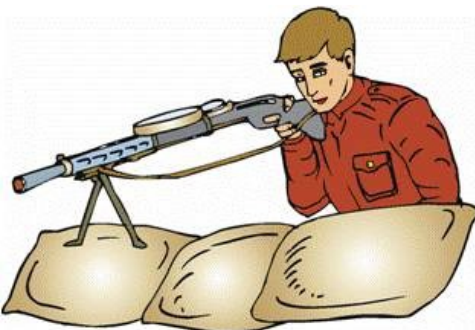


“I don’t see how they are reporting such good numbers. Unless they have some business we are totally unaware of, they must be **cooking the books**.”

“I refuse to report the results the way you want. You are asking me to **cook the books** and I could go to jail for that.”

267. Sandbag

Under represent one's ability or position in order to gain an advantage later.



“You should increase Tom's quota substantially next year. He always **sandbags** his projections to get big commissions and it's not fair to the other sales people.”

“At the tradeshow demo next month let's **sandbag** some key features of the product. As we are still months from release there is no sense in telling our competition all we have.”

Possible origin – From someone being ambushed and hit by a sandbag, or a sandbag used as a counterweight on stage falls on an actor.

268. Keep It Under Wraps

Keep information secret.



“How did news of our project leak out? We agreed we were going to **keep it under wraps** until we announce it at the tradeshow next month.”

“I received advance word from the customer that we won the contract. But he asked me to **keep it under wraps** until they make a formal announcement.”

269. The Cat's out of the Bag

A secret that is revealed unintentionally.



“Who **let the cat out of the bag**? We agreed we were going to keep this project secret until we announce it at the tradeshow next month.”

“Well, **the cat's out of the bag** that we are going to sell the company. Now we have no choice but to give the employees more details.”

Possible origin – At the market a cat jumps out of a bag that was represented to be holding a piglet.

270. Sweep Under the Carpet (or the Rug)

Hide something, pretend it doesn't exist.



“I wouldn't advise trying to **sweep those problems under the carpet**. There is a good chance they will re-occur and then it will be much harder to explain.”

“It's a good thing we were able to correct those failures remotely. Just **sweep them under the rug** and don't mention them to the customer.”

271. Lead Down the Garden Path

Mislead.



“Frank, you've been **leading us down the garden path** with your promises of the new business you will bring. If I don't start seeing results soon you're fired.”

“Every year this one particular customer evaluates our product but then buys our competitor's. I think they are **leading us down the garden path** just to put pressure on our competitor.”

Possible origin – A groom would be lead down a garden path to meet his veiled bride in a garden wedding ceremony, only to discover afterwards he was tricked into marrying someone else.

272. Keep Your Ear to the Ground

Try to obtain information by paying attention to what is going on around you.



“Jack, when you visit the customer next week, **keep your ear to the ground** about their thinking on the bid award. Maybe we still have time to influence their decision.”

“I've been **keeping my ear to the ground** and I think that management is going to announce a major reorganization soon.”

Origin – A person physically putting an ear to the ground to listen if troops are coming.

273. Show your Cards

Reveal information that was previously secret.



“It goes without saying that if you want us to make a substantial investment in your company you will need to **show us all your cards**.”

“I'm playing golf tomorrow with our customer's senior buyer. I will try and get him to **show some of his cards** to help guide us in the upcoming annual price negotiation.”

Origin – A poker player only reveals his cards after the betting is complete.

274. Open the Kimono

Reveal information about one's situation that is usually kept secret.



“John, the customer is asking us to justify our new price. If we want the business we're going to have to **open the kimono** and show our cost structure.”

“If you want me to invest in your company, you will need to **open your kimono** about your business details.”

Likely origin – The geisha who is primarily an entertainer and hostess opens her kimono to reveal her assets.

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Undesirable Behavior

275. A Bull in a China Shop

Someone who takes aggressive action without consideration for the damage it may cause.



“Harry is a **bull in a china shop**. Putting him in charge of sales will increase our revenues in the short term, but I worry about how this will affect our relationships in the longer term.”

“That new product development is in a state of total disorganization. I'm putting Anne in charge. She's like a **bull in a china shop** and will take whatever steps are needed to get things back on track.”

276. A Loose Cannon

Someone who speaks without thinking and says irresponsible things.



“Don’t bring Tom to the customer meeting tomorrow. He’s **a loose cannon** and I don’t want to risk upsetting the customer.”

“If you don’t want people to know then don’t tell Susan. **She’s a loose cannon** and who knows to whom she will repeat information.

Origin – From a loose cannon on a ship’s deck that can cause severe damage.

277. Has a Chip on the Shoulder

A grievance that someone has that he or she makes everyone aware of.



“Tom **has a chip on his shoulder** since being replaced as team leader. It’s hard working with him because he just keeps on complaining about that.”

“If you want more than a minimum effort from Michelle you will need to find a way to motivate her. She still **has a chip on her shoulder** after being passed over for promotion.”

Origin – A person looking for a fight would walk around with a wood chip on their shoulder daring people to knock it off.

278. Nose is out of Joint

Someone who is upset because he or she feels they were not treated properly.



“Kevin's **nose has been out of joint** since he was passed over for the promotion. He has become very difficult to work with.”

“You know that it will put Susan's **nose out of joint** if you don't make her the project leader. I would speak with her in advance to head off any issues.”

Origin – This is a very old expression with a recorded use from 1581. Possibly it originated from someone's nose being broken after they were punched in the face.

279. Drink the Kool Aid

Embrace a perspective, that is often controversial, without question.



“The new hires that have returned from their week-long orientation have really **drunk the kool aid**. But in a few months they will start pushing back against the system.”

“Our new CEO takes every opportunity to preach his unique philosophy on how the company should be run. Soon he will have us all **drinking the kool aid**.”

Origin – Refers to the 1978 Jamestown, Guyana, cult mass suicide where Rev. James Jones had his followers drink a kool aid like drink laced with cyanide.

280. Went Off the Deep End

Become very angry or irrational after an event that sets off this behavior.



“Jim **went off the deep end** this morning after being told for the third week in a row that there is another slip in the schedule.”

“Carl's going to **go off the deep end** when he hears that we lost the bid. We haven't won one in months.”

Possible origin – Jumps into deep water without considering safety.

281. Out of Line

Behavior or talk that is unacceptable.



“Joe, your criticism of Sue in the meeting today was **out of line**. If you have a problem with her bring it to me, don't raise it in front of everyone.”

“Roger I know you are my boss and if you think I made a big mistake then tell me, but I consider your yelling and cursing at me to be **out of line**.”

282. Low Man on the Totem Pole

Person with lowest seniority or importance.



“Jim, I'm sorry you can't go to the conference this year. We only have a few slots and you're the **low man on the totem pole.**”

“I know I'm the **low man on the totem pole** but I am not working again this weekend. It's someone else's turn.”

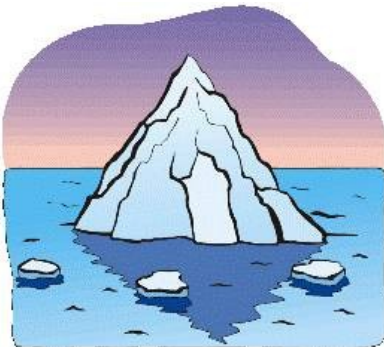
Origin – From the impression, not necessarily true, that the carving at the bottom of a west coast's Indian totem pole is least important.

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Quantities and Measures

283. Tip of the Iceberg

A small part of a much larger thing that is often a problem.



“Sarah quitting today is just the **tip of the iceberg.** There is widespread dissatisfaction among the employees and many more will leave unless you do something about it.”

“My biggest fear is that the problem the customer reported today is the **tip of the iceberg.** There are some fundamental flaws with the system design that can cause extensive failures.”

284. Hook, Line and Sinker

Believe everything that is told without reservation.



“Terry's a terrific salesman. Even though we had problems they bought his story **hook, line and sinker**. And they are even going to increase their order.”

“The investors went for the pitch, **hook, line and sinker**, and they are giving us even more funds than we asked for. I hope we can meet their expectations.”

Origin – Usually the fish just goes for the hook, but if it grabs for everything that would also include the line and sinker supporting the hook.

285. Lock, Stock and Barrel

All the parts that make up something.



“When we offered to sell the division they came back requesting to buy the whole company, **lock, stock and barrel**.”

“We don't want to buy just the product. We want to acquire everything associated with it, **lock, stock and barrel**, including manufacturing plans, intellectual property, distribution rights, everything.

Origin – From all the working parts of an antique gun.

286. The Whole Shebang

A colorful way of saying the whole thing, everything.



“John is very ambitious. His goal is not just to run this division; he wants to run the entire company, **the whole shebang.**”

“This time it wasn’t just a few parts of the system that failed; it was **the whole shebang.** I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Origin – The word shebang is an American term dating back over a hundred years and refers to a structure or a vehicle. But the expression the whole shebang is obscure.

287. Ballpark Figure

A rough estimate.



“Tony, I don’t need your exact price right now, but give me a **ballpark figure** so I can see if it makes sense to continue talking.”

“Sorry, your salary offer is not even in the **ballpark** of what I am looking for. I’m much better off staying where I am.”

Likely origin – From a hit in baseball that falls anywhere within the ballpark.

288. A Drop in the Bucket

An insignificant amount compared to what is needed.



“Karen, it's nice you were able to get that small order but **it's a drop in the bucket** against what we need. We are way behind our goal for this quarter.”

“We need to find a way to get more hits on our website. What we're getting now are just **drops in the bucket.**”

289. Line in the Sand

A point beyond which you refuse to go further.



“That's my **line in the sand** with Sam. If I get one more customer calling me about his behavior, he's fired.”

“You need to draw a **line in the sand** for Jim. He keeps finding reasons to delay his assignment and this is now affecting the whole project.”

Probable origin – Someone draws a line in the ground with a stick or a weapon, and warns the other party there will be trouble if they cross it.

290. The Devil is in the Details

Success depends on paying attention to details.



“You thought it would be easy but now we are six months behind schedule. You did not plan properly. I told you many times that **the devil is in the details.**”

“John, you're a great leader for this project. But **the devil is in the details** and your time is limited, so please hire a good program manager and don't try and keep track of everything yourself.”

Probable origin – This likely comes from an expression no longer used that “God is in the details”, that something should be done very properly. In the modern usage the devil signifies that bad things that can happen if you don't pay attention to the details.

291. Boiler Plate

Descriptive text or other material that can be re-used for various purposes with few or minor changes.



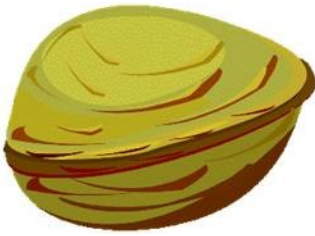
“Susan, I want you to write up the new customer agreement. You can use the one we signed last month as a **boilerplate** and modify a few of the terms and conditions as needed.”

“Chris, it should only take you a few days to write the manual for the new product release. Most of the material is **boilerplate.**”

Probable origin – The thick steel of a boiler can be used to support many things.

292. In a Nutshell

Briefly.



“I don’t have time to hear the long version. Tell me **in a nutshell** what happened at the customer meeting today.”

“It’s a complicated situation. **But in a nutshell**, unless we fire Frank or re-assign him to another department we’re going to have a major problem on our hands.”

293. Lion’s Share

The major portion.



“Tell the customer that for that price I expect the **lion's share** of their business.”

“Since our division brought in the **lion's share** of the profits last year I think it's fair that we are properly rewarded.”

294. Needle in a Haystack

Extremely difficult to find.



“Looking for that software bug is like looking for a **needle in a haystack**. The code is a complete mess and the problem only occurs intermittently.”

“You want me to find a specific e-mail in the archives from over ten years ago. It will be like looking for a **needle in a haystack**.”

295. Dime a Dozen

Something of little value because it is common or plentiful.



“Honestly I don’t care how many interns you assign to this project. Compared to regular staff they are a **dime a dozen**.”

“Don’t worry about trying to save material. All this stuff is a **dime a dozen**. Just focus on getting the product out the door.”

Origin – From over one hundred years ago, paying ten cents to get a dozen of something.

296. Chicken Feed

A derisive term for a small amount. An amount much less than expected.



“The raise you propose is **chicken feed** for all the business I have brought to the company. Unless you do substantially better, I am quitting.”

“Why did we get such a small allocation from the customer? It's **chicken feed** compared to last year. Find out what happened and see how we can improve it.”

Origin – From the small bits of grain scattered on the ground for chickens to eat.

297. The Big Picture

A summary view of the whole situation.

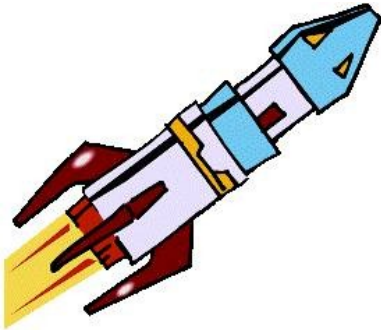


“Ron, I don’t need all the details right now about how we're spending more than we are earning. Just give me **the big picture** on when we will run out of cash.”

“Larry, give me **the big picture** on our competitive situation. Can we be number one or two in our market segment?”

298. Not Rocket Science

A sarcastic way of saying that something is not very complicated.



“Chris, I'm tired of your excuses. You should have been able to fix the problem in a week and now it's over a month. This **isn't rocket science**.”

“Sarah, you're **not** exactly working on **rocket science** here. If you find it too difficult I will need to replace you with someone else.”

299. Bleeding Edge

Innovative, risky, leading edge.



“I love working at this company. We're always working on **bleeding edge**, high risk and high reward projects.”

“This technology is **bleeding edge**. It's very difficult, but once we get it working we will leapfrog the completion.”

Origin – The edge is so sharp it can make you bleed.

300. By the Skin of their Teeth

By a very thin margin.



“I don't care that we won the bid **by the skin of our teeth**. It's ours. Today we celebrate and tomorrow we get down to work.”

“They made the delivery **by the skin of their teeth**. Literally another few minutes and by law we would have had to pay a penalty.”

Origin – Teeth have no skin.

301. In the Red

Losing money.



“We can't afford to keep operating **in the red** much longer or we'll use up all our cash reserves.”

“I know that the business unit is **in the red**. But we need to keep it because it is strategically important for the rest of our company.”

Origin – In accounting, losses were recorded with red ink.

302. The Short End of the Stick

Receiving the worst or smallest part of something where others received better.



“John, why does our department always get **the short end of the stick** in budget allocations? We have been increasing our profitability and should get more.”

“Unless we reduce our price the customer told us we will receive **the short end of the stick** of share this year.”

Origin – Very old and obscure. May have referred to the short or dirty end of the staff, or to some type of sticks used in financial transactions.

303. Rule of Thumb

A guideline based on practical experience on how to proceed with certain tasks.



“Rick, as a **rule of thumb** the initial price of the new release should be about 20% higher than the current version.”

“As a **rule of thumb** it will take engineering twice as long and cost twice as much to develop a new product as their first estimate.”

Origin – This idiom that dates back to 1600s has no certain origin. It probably relates to the thumb being used as a measure for something, like that done by a carpenter.

304. Apples to Apples; Apples to Oranges

Comparing things that are alike; Comparing things that are not alike.

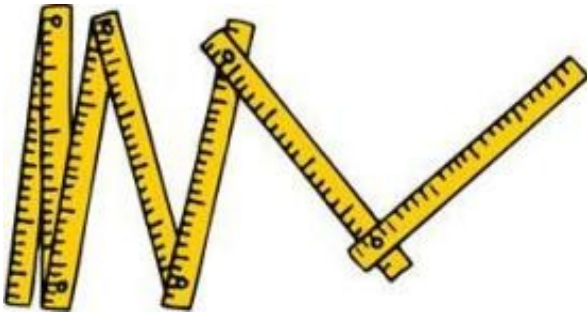


“I know our product is fairly unique, but **apples to apples**, what competitor's product is close enough that we can use it for a benchmarking test.”

“Comparing Connie's performance to Steve's is an **apples to oranges** comparison. They have totally different functions and experience levels.”

305. The Whole Nine Yards

Everything you can possibly provide.



“Sandy, the CEO of our largest customer is visiting next week. Make sure we give him the full VIP treatment, **the whole nine yards**.”

“I went **the whole nine yards** in trying to sell the project to the board today. I hope that was enough to convince them.”

Origin – There are several theories. The one I like refers to the nine yards of ammunition in a World War II fighter plane's belt. So when they gave it the whole nine yards, they gave it everything.

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[About the Author](#)



I was born in London, raised and educated in Montreal, and spent most of my working life in New Jersey. During the course of my long and still active career in telecommunications I estimate that I have accumulated several years of travel overseas in Asia and Europe where I have interacted with hundreds of people who speak English as a second language. I can be contacted at jonathan.homa@gmail.com.

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