ADVANCED DICTIONARY of English Idioms

For Effective Communication

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Advanced Dictionary of English Idioms

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Explanatory Diagram

Shows the first entry on even-numbered page

Shows the last entry on odd-numbered page

can't hear oneself think

You know the ways and means; you just can't go wrong.

can't hear oneself think one is irritated by too much surrounding noise
Everyone kept talking louder and louder till I couldn't hear myself think.

can't help but do something to be unable to choose any other course of action
He can't get a taxi, so he can't help but walk home.

can't help doing something find it natural to do something
I can't help laughing at his funny way of speaking.

C

Idioms arranged in alphabetical order

can't/couldn't help it/that to be unable to control things or change events
I'm sorry to be coughing like this, but I've got a cold and I can't help it.

cap in hand humbly
I hope you won't go cap in hand to ask for help.

capable of doing something able to do something
Is your company capable of handling such a large order?/Mr Lin is capable of playing tricks.

capitalize on something to take advantage of (a situation, etc.)
She capitalized on her opponent's obvious weakness and won the game in the end.

capture one's imagination to make one imagine
The pantomime really captured the children's imagination, as they had been talking about it for days.

Meaning of the idiom

care about something to think that something is important
Some people don't care about saving money for future use.

care for someone/something
1 to look after someone/something
Who will care for you when you are old?
2 to like (in negative sentences or questions)
I don't really care for coffee./Would you care for some beer?

Shows the multiple meanings of the idiom

care of someone at the house or address of someone
Send the letter to me care of Mr Peter Lin, 15 Hill Street.

careful/careless with something cautious/unconcerned about something
You should be more careful with your money next time. She seems very careless with money.

carp/cavil at someone/something to find fault with small errors
She is always carping at unimportant details./It's no good carping at the boy about his behaviour./The teacher is cavilling at my handwriting.

carried away to be controlled by one's feelings.
She was much carried away when she argued with her husband over a misunderstanding.

carrot-and-stick the hope of reward and the threat of punishment
To a large extent, a student benefits from the carrot-and-stick approach to teaching.

Useful examples

carry all/everything before someone to be completely successful
At college, Peter carried all before him./Our soldiers carried everything before them and gained control of all the important towns.

carry conviction to be convincing
You don't have to shout truths at people in order to carry conviction.

carry forward (of accounts) to move to the next page for further addition
He forgot to carry the total figure forward, so there was a mistake in the calculation.

carry on (with something) to continue (with something)
It's difficult to carry on a conversation in a crowded place./Please carry on with your work.

carry one's point to succeed in making others agree with what one suggests
Now that you've carried your point, there is no need to be thinking up fresh arguments any more.

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Aa

a bit much too much
His playfulness is a bit much.

a fool and his money are soon parted
if one is not careful with his money, the money will be gone
He spent all his money on worthless fake gems. A fool and his money are soon parted.

a fresh pair of eyes
someone who is newly brought into an event or activity
Dr Peters was brought in as a fresh pair of eyes to shed light on the investigation.

a lot on my plate very busy
I've a lot on my plate lately.

abandon oneself to something to give oneself up completely to something, especially passions or impulses
Tom failed many times and finally abandoned himself to despair.

about average
no better or no worse than others
Tom's work is just about average. He has never done any better.

about time the appropriate time
It's about time you had a new car.

about to ready to
We were about to go out when it rained.

above all most importantly
A successful person must be learned, healthy, and, above all, diligent.

above and beyond the call of duty
greater than the usual courage and effort
The police officer went above and beyond the call of duty to help the elderly lady.

above average above the ordinary standard
Susan's school work is above average. She is better than most of her peers.

above-board honest
The deal is fair and above-board. No one has raised any objection.

above criticism/suspicion
Someone or something that cannot be criticized/suspected
No ruler should believe he is above criticism./Judges ought to be above suspicion.

above/over one's head too difficult for someone to understand
What he had said was well above our heads; he should have made his speech much simpler.

above oneself self-satisfied
He was above himself after he was elected captain of the team.

above/below par at a price higher/lower than the original value
Most of the shares are above par now./ When the market is bad, it is possible to purchase the stock at a price below par.

above someone too difficult for someone to understand
The speaker's lecture on astronomy was above me.

absence of mind inattention
Absence of mind during driving may lead to serious accidents.

accident waiting to happen
a dangerous situation or a situation that could go wrong
Drivers like to speed along this road. It is an accident waiting to happen.

ace up your sleeve to have something to your advantage
Although she seems to be losing the debate, I'm sure she has an ace up her sleeve.

aches and pains
considerable fatigue, especially in the muscles or joints all over one's body
Henry is still young but has become like an old man, continually complaining about aches and pains.

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achilles' heel
the weakest point in a person's character
Dishonesty is the Achilles' heel of some businessmen.

acid test
a way of proving whether something is true or not.
The joint military exercise is seen as an acid test of the countries' relations.

acquired taste something which people don't like at first but which they like after they have tried it
Travelling by air is often an acquired taste for elderly people.

acquit oneself well
to perform one's task well
Our school's debating team has acquitted itself well in the interschool debate.

acquit someone of a charge to declare someone to be innocent
For lack of evidence against the woman, the judge acquitted her of murdering her husband.

across the board/across-the-board
applying in all cases; affecting everybody or everything
The civil servants were awarded wage increases across the board./The U.S. government has announced an across-the-board cut in national spending.

act as a brake on/upon someone's activities
to make someone act with more caution; to play the roles of deterring someone or something
The rise in interest rate acted as a brake on people's unnecessary expenditure.

act high and mighty to act proudly and powerfully
If Sally hadn't acted high and mighty, she would have had more friends.

act in bad faith to act dishonestly
We don't like Joshua, who often acts in bad faith.

act of God natural event that is not caused by man
This disaster was an act of God.

act on/upon someone/something
1 to do something according to someone's advice, instructions, etc.
Have you acted on Mr Lin's instructions?
2 to have an effect on someone/something.
This medicine doesn't act on him at all./ Certain acids act on metals.

act out
1 to show an idea, etc. by your looks, speech, etc.
The teacher asked the children to act out a story they had read.
2 to put something into action
Betty used to be an idealist who tried to act out her ideals somehow or other.

act out of duty to do what one ought to do, not because what one wants to
As the head of the department, Dr Wee generally acted out of duty.

act up to something to act according to one's principles, etc.
Mr Yong professes to have high principles, but he doesn't always act up to his proclaimed ethics.

add fuel to fire/flames to cause someone to be angrier
To add fuel to fire, the underpaid workers were told to work longer hours.

add insult to injury
to make matters even worse
Asking the wounded man to pay for the damage of the car was simply adding insult to injury./To add insult to injury, the penalty was awarded to the fouling side.

address oneself to something to give one's attention to something
Whenever I do something, I address myself to it with enthusiasm.

advanced in years old
The Prime Minister is quite advanced in years.

after a fashion in a way, but not very well
I can speak Malay after a fashion.

after all in spite of everything
It looked cloudy, but it turned out to be fine after all.

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after all one's efforts
in spite of the trouble that one has taken
After all her efforts to prepare the food, nobody wanted to eat it.

after one's own heart of the type one likes
Mary married the man after her own heart.

again and again/time and again/over and over again very often; repeatedly
I have told them again and again not to quarrel over trifling matters./Some students visited me time and again./The teacher referred to the student's common mistakes over and over again.

against a background of something
judging from the existing conditions
The riots took place against a background of widespread unemployment.

against all (the) odds
despite strong opposition, etc.
They fought on against all the odds and finally broke through the encircling forces.

against one's better judgement despite one's opinion of what would be a better course of action; it would be better not to do something
I know it was against his better judgement to allow his daughter to get married at so young an age./It would be against my better judgement if I let that fool pass the examination.

against one's grain in a way that is forced or contrary to one's inclinations
Are you happy to work against your grain?

against one's wishes in opposition to one's desires
Helen married the man against her wishes.

against the law illegal
Don't do anything against the law.

against time/the clock
as fast as possible so as to finish something before a certain time; with all speed
I'm working against time to get this book published./They were behind time and were working against the clock.

agree to differ to stop trying to persuade each other
Tom and I agreed to differ on certain matters of principles.

ahead of one's time further advanced in knowledge, outlook, etc.
Some students' technological ingenuity is well ahead of their time.

aid and abet someone
to provide help and encouragement for a bad or illegal activity
Ali's wife aided and abetted him in his misdeeds.

air/parade one's knowledge to show the amount of knowledge one has on a certain subject
Mr Lin seldom misses the opportunity to air his knowledge./Tony liked to parade his knowledge in front of acquaintances.

airs and graces affected manners
The upstart is conceited and full of airs and graces.

air your dirty laundry in public to reveal your personal life during a quarrel or when telling a secret
You've embarassed yourself by airing your dirty laundry in public.

alarm and despondency acute fear and hopelessness felt for something that is happening, or is expected to happen
Nothing special happens. I don't know what his purpose of spreading alarm and despondency is.

alien to different in nature and character
Some western ideas are quite alien to our oriental ways of thinking.

alive and kicking healthy and active
His grandfather was ill but is now alive and kicking.

alive to aware of
We must be alive to the dangers of the present situation.

alive with covered or infested with
The park was alive with people./The dead dog was alive with maggots.

all alone completely by oneself
He has been all alone since the death of his wife.

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all along the whole time
I suspected all along that he was lying.

all and sundry
everybody; all types of people
The newly announced policy concerns all and sundry.

all at once suddenly
All at once the light went out.

all bark and no bite to sound tough but is not tough inside
My father is all bark and no bite.

all brawn and no brain
strong but unintelligent
A football player who is all brawn and no brain will not have a successful career.

all but all except
All but 12 of the girls passed the school-leaving examination with flying colours.

all clear everything is all right after a check
He will return to work after he gets the all clear from his doctor.

all day and every day continuously
I have been typing my manuscript for a new language book all day and every day for the whole month.

all day long the whole day
It is wrong to play all day long, but it is also wrong to study day and night.

all ears/eyes attentive by listening eagerly or looking closely
Tell us what happened; we are all ears./ Everyone wanted to have at least a glance at the royal visitor, so the people were all eyes.

all fingers and thumbs/one's fingers are all thumbs very awkward or clumsy in handling things
Mary's father is all fingers and thumbs in doing housework./He was so excited that his fingers were all thumbs as he served the diners.

all for in favour of
Opening shop on Sundays? I'm all for it.

all for nothing with no result
I searched the room for one hour and all for nothing.

all for the best it is a good thing
I was sorry that I had to quit, but it was all for the best.

all grist to the mill something which brings profit or advantage to a person
For a writer, human problems are all grist to the mill.

all honey and no sting excellent things without unpleasant feelings
The government's new budget gives the people all the goodies – all honey and no sting.

all hours at all times
Dr Liaw has been working all hours recently to get his new grammar book published.

all important/all-important
of the greatest importance
In saving a drowning boy, speed is all important./The all-important matter in this case is speed.

all in with everything included
He sold me his second-hand car for $15,000, with the radio and CD player all in.

all in a day's work part of your work
The police officer said that arresting criminals is all in a day's work.

all in all considering everything; on the whole
Tom passed all the science subjects but failed in his foreign language paper. He didn't do badly, all in all.

all in convulsions
in a violent fit of laughter, etc.
The story was so funny that we were all in convulsions.

all in one's head one's imagination
No one is making fun of you. It is all in your head.

all is (not) lost there is no/still some chance of success, etc.
Despite the initial failure, our team didn't think that all was lost./Tom failed the examination, but all was not lost yet.

all is (not) well with the general situation is (un-) satisfactory

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