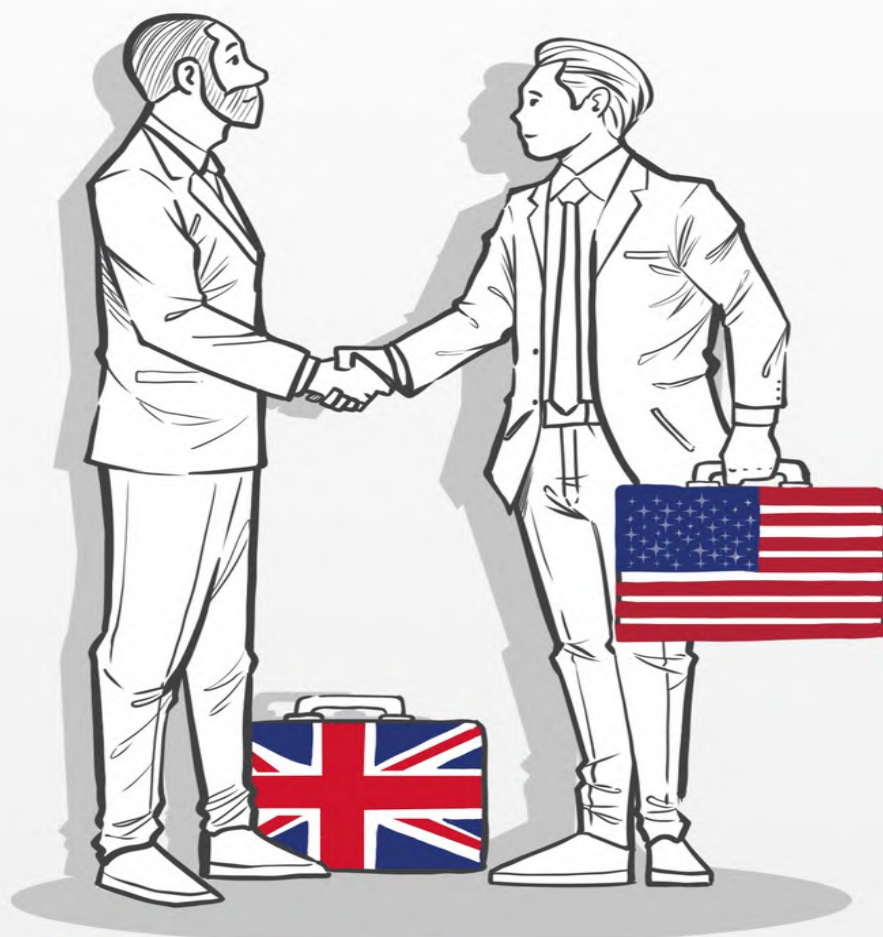


# BUSINESS ENGLISH

## VOCABULARY BUILDER

POWERFUL IDIOMS, SAYINGS AND EXPRESSIONS  
TO MAKE YOU SOUND SMARTER IN BUSINESS!



# **The Business English Vocabulary Builder**

**Powerful Idioms, Sayings and Expressions to Make You Sound  
Smarter in Business!**



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Round the clock

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Same boat

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Second nature

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See something through

See through something

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Sever ties

Shake something up

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Shoot something down

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Small talk

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Snail mail

Snap up

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Spend a fortune  
Splashed out  
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Start-up  
State of the art  
Stay on top of things  
Step up to the plate  
Stinking rich  
Strapped for cash  
Take a break  
Take place  
Take someone to the cleaners  
Take something lying down  
Take something out on someone  
Take something slowly  
Take the bull by the horns  
Talk shop  
Talk someone/something down  
Talk someone into something  
Talk someone out of something  
Test the waters  
The big picture  
The bottom line  
The cat's out of the bag  
The elephant in the room  
The eleventh hour  
The floor is all yours  
Thick-skinned  
Think outside the box

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Throw in the towel  
Throw somebody under the bus  
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Times of need  
Time's up  
To be hit hard by  
To have seen better days  
Token of appreciation  
Touch base  
Tough break  
Troubleshoot  
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Upper hand  
Value-added  
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Warts and all  
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# Introduction

Welcome to *The Business English Vocabulary Builder*.

Business idioms in English can be a confusing and intimidating territory even to the best language student, which is why a concise dictionary such as this one is such a useful and beneficial acquisition. Whenever you hear an unfamiliar phrase, you can check its definition within these pages, and reinforce the knowledge in your mind for the next time it pops up in conversation.

Within this book you'll find hundreds of new ways to express yourself in every business situation that you can imagine! While some of the idioms in this book can be applied outside of a business context too, ALL of them can be used to improve your fluency and understanding when at work, and in other professional settings.

English is a rich and versatile language – we've provided at least one example for each idiom, but we recommend that you practice using them by forming your own examples and testing them in real conversations. Don't be afraid of making mistakes in spoken English – that's how we learn!

Nothing improves communication more than actually communicating, and this book will help you to become more comfortable and fluent in native and natural English-speaking situations, both inside and outside of the boardroom. Your confidence will build, leading you to feel more at ease and less overwhelmed.

As you use this book, you'll notice some phrases highlighted in **bold** throughout the explanations on each page. These are other idioms and useful phrases for a business environment. If the meaning of the phrase is unclear, then you will be able to check its definition in the appropriate place in the book. We have alphabetized the whole book – over two hundred idioms in total! This makes it easier for you to find the right place when looking for a specific meaning.

Idioms, phrasal verbs, and other English terms and phrases are often described as being the most difficult aspect of the language to grasp. With this book, we've swapped difficulty with interesting facts! Where possible, we've tried to give you some linguistic knowledge on the roots of the idioms

and phrases discussed. Sometimes, understanding something at a deeper level can help with knowledge retention.

Some tips before you get started:

- Use each new phrase as soon as possible – **practice makes perfect!**
- Keep this book in your bag – you'll want it **close at hand** in **times of need!**
- Don't be afraid of making mistakes – you're on **a learning curve!**

So, what are you waiting for?

Delve into the interesting world of English phrases that don't mean what they seem and become the fluent language student that you were born to be!



# Idioms

## A full plate/A lot on your plate

To have **a full plate** is to be very busy. The more that you have on your plate, the busier you are. A plate is the flat dish that you eat food from, and as you know, **a full plate** cannot fit any more food on it. Likewise, if your schedule is full, you cannot agree to take on any more tasks.

A: Can you finish off Rob's assignment, please?

B: I'm sorry, I've got **a full plate** at the moment, Sarah. I can't take on any more work.

A: Are you okay, Jennifer?

B: Yes, John. I've just got **a lot on my plate** right now.

## Ahead of the curve

If you are **ahead of the curve**, then you are ahead of those around you in terms of current trends and/or business approaches. The expression is a positive one and can be used in professional situations. It was originally expressed as ahead of the power curve and dates to the 1920s when airplanes were becoming more popular and common.

A: Jennifer's Boutique offers a unique dining and shopping experience. There's really no other place like it!

B: I know, they're really **ahead of the curve** in main street shopping.

## A learning curve

To be on **a learning curve** means that you are quickly gaining knowledge in a particular subject. Adjectives such as "steep," "intense," and "rapid" may

be added to give more meaning. Often, the phrase is used to illustrate that someone has learned from a mistake.

A: This semester has been quite the **learning curve** for you, hasn't it?

B: Yes, I feel like I've learned a lot with you.

A: How do you feel about yesterday's performance?

B: It was terrible, the audience hated my jokes. But I'm on **a learning curve** – I'll change some of them for tomorrow.

## A long shot

If something is **a long shot**, then it is unlikely, but still possible. Historically, the phrase is interchangeable with “not by a long chalk” and means that something won't take place by any means. The phrase comes from the past British practice of using chalk to record scores, often on any flat surface that could be found in the vicinity.

A: Do you know anyone who can help me?

B: It's **a long shot**, but I could call my cousin.

## Ahead of the pack

If someone is **ahead of the pack**, they are better than the others around them who are trying to accomplish/learn the same things. The word “pack” refers to a pack of wolves who travel together in groups. To be ahead of the pack suggests that you are somehow better than the pack, an innovator and forward thinker.

A: Kenny is incredible; he really is **ahead of the pack**.

B: Yeah, he's moving up in leaps and bounds.

## Angel investor

**Angel investing** refers to private investment in entrepreneurial companies, that is, companies which invest in purchasing risky stocks in the hope of the company succeeding and reaping a profit. Other terms that mean the same thing include seed investor, business angel, and angel funder.

A: Liam, an **angel investor** from South California, says that start-ups should be better supported by the government as well as private investors like himself.

B: But can the government justify risking taxpayers' money on start-ups that might fail and lose the country millions, Karen?

## At arm's length

The phrase dealing **at arm's length** is used to describe the relationship between two unrelated people or entities, where neither has control over the other.

More generally, to keep something or someone **at arm's length** can also mean to keep them at a distance, and to not involve yourself directly with that person or thing.

A: The transaction was made **at arm's length**.

B: So, none of the parties had any ties to each other?

A: They were entirely unconnected and held no jurisdiction or influence over the other.

A: I've never trusted him. I keep him at an **arm's length**.

B: I feel the same. I don't think he can be trusted at all.

## At stake

When something is **at stake**, it is at risk or under question, and it may be lost as a result of current actions or circumstances. Profits may be put **at stake** by a questionable choice in packaging design, or employment positions may be **put at stake** by budget and funding cuts. You may hear the term being used

to exaggerate risks and possible outcomes of controversial suggestions and ideas. The phrase apparently originates in bear fighting, where people would place money bets on a bear tied to a stake and attacked by dogs.

A: I really hope this works, Zavi. We've got a lot resting on this presentation and the outcome of tomorrow's meeting.

B: I know, there's a lot **at stake**. Please don't put any more pressure on me!

## Backroom deal

A **backroom deal** is a decision or action that is made in secret, without the knowledge of others, or the public in general. **Backroom deals** can take place within businesses, government organizations, or any other group of people who have decision-making powers. A backroom in its literal sense is a room at the back of the main building, set away from the public eye.

A: A **backroom deal** between the two companies took place in March last year. Since then, both have benefited significantly.

B: They should have made it public, Harry. This way, it looks like they were trying to hide something.

## Back to square one

To go **back to square one** means to return to the beginning of something, usually after being unsuccessful in the first instance. The phrase stems from a popular board game but has become commonplace in spoken and written English.

A: I've lost everything; I'm **back to square one**.

B: Try not to worry, Ahmed. You can get back to where you were in no time at all.

## Back to the drawing board

If your task or activity is unsuccessful and you need to start over, you go **back to the drawing board**. The phrase originates from an American cartoon artist, who wrote the phrase at the top of an image he had published in *The New Yorker*.

A: How's the assignment going?

B: Terribly. I got the completely wrong idea; I've had to go **back to the drawing board** with the entire thing.

## Bad egg

Someone who is untrustworthy, unreliable, or crooked may be described by those around them as a **bad egg**. Eggs do not visibly change when they become inedible, and this carries through in the idiom. A **bad egg** may look like a normal person, but inside they are rotten.

A: I would stay away from her, she's a **bad egg**.

B: Really? She doesn't seem so bad, but I don't know her that well.

## Ballpark figure

A **ballpark figure** is a rough estimate of a number or amount, usually based on little other knowledge. The phrase stems from the older expression in the ballpark, possibly referring to a basketball court and meaning within a certain area, idea, or set of data.

A: How much is it worth?

B: I've no idea, Luke.

A: Come on, Max! You can give me a **ballpark figure**!

A: Do you have the data, Amy?

B: Yes, I hope the figures are in the ballpark.

## Bang for one's/bang for the buck

If you get **bang for your buck**, then you get value for your money. Thrift stores and yard sales are the kinds of places you might get bang for your buck. “Buck” is a slang term for dollar, while “bang” means exciting. The phrase suggests getting a lot for a small amount.

A: All right buddy, do you have any bargains in here? I want to get **bang for my buck**.

B: This is an amazing offer, sir. Very good value for your money. Get it now while you have the chance, they're going fast!

## Barking up the wrong tree

If you are **barking up the wrong tree**, you are pursuing an unsuccessful route of inquiry, and you will not find the answers you are looking for. The phrase can be used to describe someone's speech, or their actions, but won't usually be heard in a professional setting. A more professional alternative to use would be not on the right track, or under the wrong impression.

A: I'm going to visit him this evening, see if he thinks it might be a good idea.

B: You're **barking up the wrong tree** by visiting him, Boris. Speak to Eileen instead.

## Beat someone to

To **beat someone to** something is to reach a mutual goal before others who want the same thing. In the office, you might beat your colleague to the coffee machine at lunch.

A: I have a question about the upcoming vacancy, sir.

B: Jared has already **beaten you to** it. The job will go live on Tuesday. No questions until then.

## Behind someone's back

To do something **behind someone's back** is to do it without their knowledge and usually with the understanding that they would not be happy if they became aware of it. This is an informal phrase and should be reserved for social situations. More professional alternatives include backroom deal, “secretly,” and “covertly.”

A: Did Hannah tell anyone she was going to apply for the position? Or did she keep it to herself?

B: No, she went **behind everyone's backs**, even though she knew that Laura and Evelyn were really excited to apply!

## Behind the scenes

If something is going on **behind the scenes**, then it is going on secretly, without the knowledge of the greater part of a specific group of people, or the general population. The term originates from the theater, where it literally means backstage, away from the view of the audience. The scenes refer to the backdrops on stage; behind them, people would work in the dark to present the various illusions shown on stage.

A: What's going on at the White House, Cory? Can you tell us anything new?

B: Well, there have been some interesting boardroom maneuvers taking place **behind the scenes**, Sarah. We're still waiting for a statement from the chair.

## Belt tightening

**Belt tightening** refers to reducing the budget in any area of expenditure and is usually used when a business or government is suffering financial hardship. A belt is a band, usually used to keep a person's pants in place. Tightening a belt by a lot would therefore restrict movement for a person, as it does the movement of money for struggling companies and organizations.

A: Small, independent, and local businesses are suffering as a result of government and consumer **belt tightening**, which is—for the most part—in line with nationwide spending cuts.

B: But what can the government do to help, Howard? They're in the middle of a financial crisis themselves.

## **Bend over backwards**

When someone or something **bends over backwards**, they are doing more than was expected, and making every effort to achieve something. The phrase is usually used to refer to positive actions and achievements.

A: I wanted to get something for them, as a thank you for everything they've done for me.

B: I think that's a good idea. They've **bent over backwards** to train you in time. A little token of appreciation won't hurt anyone.

## **Between a rock and a hard place**

When someone is caught **between a rock and a hard place**, they are faced with two options that are equally unwanted. To be between a rock and something else which was hard would not only be unpleasant, but also make it difficult to maneuver.

A: This is your last chance, Charlie. You tell him right now, or I will tell him. I'll call him right now; I have his number.

B: Jane, you've really caught me **between a rock and a hard place**! I don't want to let the company down!

## **Bite the bullet**

If you **bite the bullet**, you are deciding to do something that is difficult and which you have been delaying because it is unpleasant or too consuming. The



first recorded use of the phrase was by Rudyard Kipling, and there are many possible origins, ranging from British colonial history to dental treatment.

A: What are you doing this afternoon? If you're not busy then I could use someone on the shop floor for a couple of hours.

B: Sorry, Wayne. I'm going to **bite the bullet** and get started on the storeroom upstairs. I doubt I'll even have it finished by the time we close the store.

## Bitter pill to swallow

A **bitter pill to swallow** is an unavoidable truth that someone does not want to face but must do so regardless. Bitterness is a taste mostly regarded as unpleasant, and to be forced to swallow something very bitter would not only be difficult, but also an unwelcome experience.

A: How do you feel after the presentation?

B: A little defeated... Losing the deal to an unknown company is a **bitter pill to swallow**. We have a reputation to uphold.

## Blank check

To do something with a **blank check** means that you do it without planning or thinking about how something might be paid for. It comes from the literal term blank check, which is a signed financial agreement that leaves the payee to complete the payment amount.

A: It's like they've just been given a **blank check**; they can do what they want!

B: You're right, who knows how much they'll spend.

## Blow it all

If someone **blows it all** then they fail catastrophically, with little chance of being able to recover from their losses. You can blow it all in business, in competitive sports, in education, and in many other situations.

A: What's the problem, Nigel? You look stressed.

B: I've **blown it all**, Mike. I've got nothing left. They're even taking the house.

## Blue-collar

**Blue-collar** work refers to manual work, and **blue-collar** workers are manual laborers. People in **blue-collar** jobs are expected to get their hands dirty, and these positions can be skilled or unskilled. The term is used to differentiate between various types of professional workers; it serves as a contrast to another common term, white-collar.

A: The funding cuts are expected to hit **blue-collar** workers the most; they tend to require the most personal protective equipment.

B: Where will companies find the money to replace the funds, Gerry?

## Blue-sky thinking

When a **blue-sky thinking** approach is taken toward brainstorming and idea generation, there are no limits or constraints placed on those doing the thinking and idea generation. Thoughts presented do not have to be realistic; instead, they should reflect as much creativity and originality as possible. **Blue-sky thinking** approaches are used to attempt to discover new and undiscovered approaches, ideas and systems, but some people believe are a waste of time and resources.

A: I don't want people to think we are just **blue-sky thinking** in here, we're still addressing the problem.

B: Of course we are addressing the problem; we're just addressing it in a creative way!

## Booming

When business is **booming**, it is very successful, bringing in lots of profits and revenue. The phrase usually refers to a period of increased prosperity or times of higher financial and economic growth.

A: Welcome to this year's AGM, I hope you can all agree when I say everybody in here is due huge congratulations.

B: Hugh is right. Business has been **booming** for months and that's entirely down to the incredible hard work you guys have been putting in behind the scenes.

## Bottleneck

In business terms, a **bottleneck** usually refers to a single process within a procedure which slows or creates difficulty for the entire outcome. **Bottlenecks** cause problems, usually involving too much or too little stock and unhappy customers and staff. More generally, **bottleneck** can also be used to describe a traffic jam in processes, where actions have backed up and are clogged to a point where no further movement can take place.

A: The transfer of the goods from the container into the vehicles is proving to be quite the **bottleneck**, sir. There are delays of up to three hours on some shipments.

B: Well, what can be done to speed things up? What's causing them to take so long moving the goods?

## Bounce back

Someone or something **bounces back** when they recover quickly from a setback or failure. The phrase refers to the literal meaning of bounce, which is a rebound with force. To be able to **bounce back** from difficult experiences is a positive quality.

A: What do you think of the results this week, Ben?

B: Well, we can see that the Red Sox have really **bounced back** from their losses earlier in the season. It's looking like they might even reach the World Series!

## Breadwinner

The **breadwinner** is a term used to refer to the person, usually within a household, who earns the most (or the sole) income. Over two centuries old, the word was originally used to describe the process of earning a living. It's possible that it stems from similar words found in Flemish and Dutch.

A: Lesley's going to need as much help as she can get, now that Bryan's gone.

B: Yeah, he was always the **breadwinner** in that house. I don't know what they'll do for money. Lesley's wage on its own won't keep them out of debt, and they have a funeral to pay for too.

## Bring home the bacon

**Bringing home the bacon** can refer to someone earning the materials they need to survive, usually a wage high enough to support their lifestyle.

More generally, it can mean that someone is simply achieving success in something they are doing, usually for monetary gain.

A: If you hate it so much, why don't you leave?

B: I can't quit my job at the store, it **brings home the bacon**. I've got mouths to feed!

A: It isn't necessary to climb to the top of the corporate ladder in order to **bring home the bacon**.

B: Well, that's my goal anyway. I don't want to just **bring home the bacon**, Dad. I want to buy the pigs.

## Bring to the table

To **bring** an idea **to the table** is to introduce or contribute it to a conversation, a deal, or some other interaction between several people.

You might be asked in a job interview what you can **bring to the table** at the company. The person asking you will want you to tell them your positive attributes and why you are a good choice for the role.

A: Andy can **bring** a lot **to the table**, I know it.

B: Well, invite him over. We'll play some cards and talk business.

A: Hello, Laura. Thank you for coming today. Tell me, what do you think you will bring to the table here at Anderson International?

B: Thanks for having me. I've been working in design for just under ten years, and I'm a great team player with a history of successful campaigns and programs. I'll **bring** practical and theoretical skills **to the table**, along with lots of enthusiasm and drive.

## Bummed out

When someone is **bummed out**, they are upset or disappointed. This is a very informal phrase, and it is highly unlikely you would hear it in a professional setting. More professional phrases would include "feeling down" and "not having a good time."

A: How are you feeling today, Sandra? Are you any better?

B: I don't feel sick anymore. I'm just really **bummed out** I missed the presentation day. I'd been preparing for it for weeks!

## Burning the midnight oil

To **burn the midnight oil** is to continue reading, working or doing something until late into the night. The phrase comes from the common past practice of using oil lamps to light one's home at night. You will usually hear

it spoken in reference to somebody overworking, or working very hard to accomplish something well and/or on time.

A: You look exhausted, Mel. Have you been **burning the midnight oil**?

B: I've been up until the early hours every night this week. It's the only way we're ever going to get finished in time for the deadline!

## Burnout

**Burnout** occurs when someone spends too much energy and time on a project and suffers mentally and/or physically as a result. Overwork and stress are the causes of **burnout**, and the phrase comes from the literal meaning of having burned through all of the fuel available to run a machine or operation.

A: I want to ensure that everybody gets the breaks they're owed—and don't keep anyone in late. I don't want to see people suffering from **burnout**; I need them to be alert and on task.

B: I'll make sure they know to take their breaks, Tim. Don't worry about it.

## By the book

To do something **by the book** means to follow the rules and not deviate from any protocols. The phrase likely derives from the Holy Bible and the idea that Christians live by the commandments and instructions within it. In other words, "**by the book**." People are still sometimes required to swear **by the book** (Bible), for example, when standing in court and testifying to a jury and judge.

A: I don't know what went wrong; we did everything **by the book**!

B: It's okay, Jess. We'll talk about it in the morning. Go home and rest.

## Call it a day

When someone **calls it a day**, it means they have finished with the current action or activity being undertaken. This usually follows a realization or understanding that something is not as successful or profitable as it should be, and the decision to **call it a day** is made in order to reduce further losses and/or prevent more damage taking place.

A: How's the business, Rebecca?

B: I think we're going to **call it a day**, Stuart. It's been too much of a struggle for too long; we're going to start again somewhere else.

## Call the shots

**To call the shots** is to be in control of a situation or operation. In other words, this phrase would apply to a manager who serves as the overall decision-maker regarding an operation's progress. The term is military in origin and comes from marksmanship training where a marksman could "call" his shot if he was successful in hitting it on target.

A: Everybody listen up; I'm **calling the shots** on this investigation now, which means you do what I say, or you face the consequences.

B: When did Miranda put you in charge? I haven't seen an email passing responsibilities over to you.

## Can't quite put my finger on it

If you **can't quite put your finger on something**, then you are unable to explain a feeling about a person or thing. Usually used in a negative context, it means that you know something is wrong, or odd, but you don't know exactly what it is, and you cannot grasp the detail of what it is you are unsure of.

A: What was it like in there?

B: It was strange. I knew there was something wrong with the place as soon as I got there, but I **couldn't quite put my finger on it**. I still don't know

what it was.

## Cash cow

A **cash cow** is a business, product, or investment that brings in a steady and healthy income and profit. The phrase comes literally from cows, which can continue to be milked after having given birth once. **Cash cow** has overtaken its predecessor “milch cow” in popularity and usage. Both phrases mean the same thing and can be expected to be heard in less formal business settings.

A: That laundry business you inherited is turning into quite the **cash cow**, honey. You're not thinking of selling it?

B: Of course not. I want to expand on it so that it brings us even more profit!

## Cash in your chips

In business terms, to **cash in your chips** is to sell something for what you can get in the moment because you expect its value to fall. More generally, the phrase can also be used to refer to someone dying. The phrase comes from gambling, and refers to gamblers exchanging their chips (small tokens) for their appropriate cash value.

A: Have you been watching the news reports on channel five? It's not looking good out there, Georgia.

B: I know, I've told everyone to **cash in their chips** now and hope for the best.

## Catch someone off guard

When someone is **caught off guard** they are surprised somehow. Off guard suggests unprotected and unprepared, and synonyms for the phrase include catch someone by surprise, catch someone unaware, and surprise someone.



A: I'm going to find out what their expansion plans are. I'm not sure how, but I'm going to find out.

B: **Catch them off guard** with a difficult question at the opening tomorrow. I think that's your best chance of getting a genuine answer.

## Caught red-handed

To be **caught red-handed** is to be caught in the act of doing something wrong, or dishonest, with the evidence there for all to see.

A: Pat, it's not what you think. I didn't know you wanted the promotion too!

B: Don't lie to me, Eve. I **caught** you **red-handed**; I heard exactly what you were saying about me.

## Cave in

To **cave in** is to submit to pressure and do what someone is asking or requesting of you, usually after you have made it clear that you do not wish to do so. In its literal sense, a **cave-in** is the collapse of the ceiling of a natural or man-made cave. In business terms, its meaning is similar, but it is an opinion or position that is collapsing and giving way rather than the physical roof.

A: What happened during the disciplinary hearing yesterday?

B: As expected, Mort and Jez **caved in** to pressure from the board and Livvy was given a warning. But, no further action will be taken.

## Change of pace

A **change of pace** is a change in the speed or intensity of a process or project. The phrase can also be used to refer to changing from the familiar to something less known and/or foreign. Changes to routine and activities can be referred to as **changes of pace**. For example, the introduction of new

working hours, duties, or responsibilities represents a **change of pace**.

A: You've been coming home from work much more tired than you used to, Nick.

B: Well, we've certainly had a **change of pace** on the park project. Everyone is busy, not just me.

## Clamp down on

When a person, company, or government **clamps down on** something, they attempt to reduce it or stop it. Whatever is **clamped down on** will be forced to halt in its process or function, or controls will be put in place to monitor output and action.

A: The government is **clamping down on** tax evasion; they've introduced some heavy fines for businesses that hide their accounts in offshore havens.

B: It's about time, too!

## Close of play

Literally, the term comes from sports and refers to the end of a game or competitive sporting event. When used in a business sense, **close of play** refers to the end of the working day, when employees can go home and business is closed.

A: What were the figures at the **close of play** yesterday, Lou?

B: I couldn't tell you, Ben. I wasn't on the desk in the afternoon; I was in the meeting room on a conference call.

## Close to hand

If something is **close to hand**, then it is easily accessible and will not involve much effort in retrieving or accessing it. Literally, the phrase means "within

reach.”

A: Do you have something **close to hand** that you could record my number on? I don’t want to leave without making sure we can contact each other again.

B: Wait, I’ll find something. Why can you never find a pen when you need one, huh?

## Come to think of it

To **come to think of** something is to have a reflection upon something, usually while during a conversation—verbal or written.

A: What time will you be home? Should I get dinner ready, or do you want to go out somewhere?

B: I’m not sure, honey. **Come to think of it**, didn’t Rachel and Paul say they were coming to visit tonight? Maybe we should order takeout?

## Come up with

To **come up with** something (usually an idea) is to produce it, oftentimes in a pressure-filled situation. The phrase mostly refers to thoughts that come into our heads while we are engaging in conversation. But one can also **come up with** something while writing, or while conducting an internal dialogue.

A: Did you speak to Seth about last night?

B: I’ve tried. He’s **come up with** all sorts of excuses so far. I don’t think there is anything else I can do.

## Come up short

To **come up short** is to fail to reach or achieve a set goal or expected standard, or to be deficient in something that one is expected to be successful

in. The phrase is quite informal and more conversational than professional.

A: They were hoping to beat their record from last year, but the total amount **came up short** in the end.

B: They still raised enough to be proud of themselves, Mark. The hospital charity will be grateful for whatever they receive.

## Compare apples to apples

**Comparing apples to apples** is a phrase used when making a reasonable comparison between two things that are of similar kind or quality. Examples include similar quality wines, similar foods, and cultural traditions, among others.

A: What did you think of Mary's talk?

B: She just **compared apples to apples**. There was a tasting opportunity at the end and all of the options were equally good, I thought.

## Compare apples to oranges

To **compare apples to oranges** is to compare two or more things that are very unlike, making a comparison difficult or even impossible.

A: They're **comparing apples to oranges**! Living in the city is nothing *like* living in the suburbs. There's more crime, more pollution, the services are more strained. I don't understand how they have the nerve to do it!

B: You're right, there's really no comparison at all.

## Corner the market

In business and finance terms, to **corner the market** is to have (or hold) enough of a certain commodity in order to be able to control its price. It essentially means having as much control over an industry as possible

without having a monopoly.

A: They've pretty much **cornered the market** with the recent purchase of Nancy's burger chain. There's a restaurant in every city across every state.

B: Well, I still won't be going there until they serve salad. I don't think it's fair, these big companies buying out our local independent businesses.

## Corporate ladder

The **corporate ladder** is a series of jobs of increasing importance all the way to the head of a company. To climb the **corporate ladder** is to be promoted through these jobs with the hope of reaching the top.

A: Hi, Wendy. I'm glad to see you! I'm interested in applying for the internal vacancy for floor manager.

B: If you want to start **climbing the corporate ladder**, Simon, you might have to make some sacrifices to your lifestyle.

## Corporate raider

A **corporate raider** is an individual or company that buys a large portion of shares in another company, usually in order to take control of it. Often, **corporate raiders** will force a company's share prices up as a result of their influence.

A: They're recognized as **corporate raiders**, moving in on smaller companies and taking over their shares.

B: Well, we can't just stand here and watch them do that to Osam's business!

## Cost a pretty penny

If something **cost a pretty penny**, then it was very expensive. Without the verb, a "pretty penny" refers to a large amount of money or profit.

Historically, the variants a fine penny and a fair penny were also used.

A: Hey, Stephanie. Do you like my new dress?

B: Wow, that's gorgeous. It must have **cost** you **a pretty penny**, though.

## Cost-effective

When something is **cost-effective** it is worth the money required to have it. **Cost-effective** purchases (or processes) are effective and productive for their price, and business owners and managers will often seek the most **cost-effective** means to operate their businesses.

A: The most **cost-effective** means of production is not always of the highest quality.

B: I agree, and I'd even go so far as to say that oftentimes the cheapest production gives the lowest-quality finish.

## Crunch some numbers

**Crunching numbers** refers to processing lots of mathematical equations or numerical calculations within a short space of time. You may hear the phrase regarding data analysis, accounting and finance, or any other situation involving numbers.

A: Do you have the data from this morning's shift, Daniel?

B: Can you give me an hour? I still have to **crunch some numbers** for it to make sense.

## Cut corners

To **cut corners** is to avoid something, or several aspects of an activity, in order to finish faster. People who **cut corners** are usually seeking a more cost-effective process, but quality is often sacrificed as a result.

A: The new estate is impressive, but you can see how they've **cut corners** on the finishing touches.

B: Yes, there are a lot of empty flower beds, and not many public amenities.

## Cutthroat

When talking about a business or competitive situation, **cutthroat** is used to describe a fierce and ruthless competition and/or competitor. It can also be used to describe a murderer or violent criminal.

A: The atmosphere is **cutthroat** out there. People are getting emotional.

B: I'll leave them to it; I don't need to compete with those kinds of people.

## Count on something or someone

To **count on something or someone** is to depend on them or rely on them for something of importance to you or your business. We use the phrase to describe a relationship of trust between either two people or two entities.

A: Here you go, Jack. All complete, every one of them signed and sent. The copies are filed in your office.

B: Thank you, Hayley. I knew I could **count on you**.

## Cut to the chase

To **cut to the chase** is to get to the point of a conversation, instruction, or other communication, either verbal or written. People may use this expression when someone is taking too long to explain, introduce, or discuss something, or when it is difficult to understand their reason for speaking.

A: Hello, Martin. Welcome to Zygon Enterprises. Can I offer you a drink, or something to snack on?

B: Let's **cut to the chase**, Pete. Why did you ask me to come here today?

## Daylight robbery

**Daylight robbery** is used to refer to when someone or something is significantly overpriced, or when someone is blatantly, obviously, and carelessly overcharged for a product or service. Some say this informal phrase originated from the historic British window tax, which robbed people of their access to daylight by forcing them to fill in their windows. There is little evidence to support this, however.

A: Have you seen the prices they charge for a full valet?

B: I have, and I've reported them to the regulator. It's **daylight robbery**; they're swindling unsuspecting customers!

## Diamond in the rough

A **diamond in the rough** is someone or something that is generally of good character or composition but is imperfect in some small way. For example, someone who is very kind and respectful may be lacking in style.

A: She might not look it, but she's a real **diamond in the rough**. Her mind is sharp and she's always on the ball.

B: You're right, she doesn't look the part. But I'll give her a chance if you say she's capable.

## Dime a dozen

When something is a **dime a dozen**, it is very abundant and common and therefore not worth very much. A dime is a coin representing ten cents in American currency, and a dozen is another way of saying "twelve." If something costs a **dime a dozen**, then it costs less than one cent each, which is a very low sum of money.

A: You can get things like this a **dime a dozen** at any regular thrift store. What makes these so special?



B: These socks aren't like the ones you see everywhere else, sir. They're much less common.

## Down and out

When someone is **down and out**, they have reached their lowest point. No home, no money, and no job. Often, they have no hope of regaining any of those things. The phrase can be used as an adjective or as a noun.

A: Have you heard from Ray since he lost his job?

B: It's not good news. He's lost everything. He's real **down and out**.

## Down on luck

When someone is **down on** their **luck**, they've experienced a series of unfortunate or unlucky events—usually, not through any fault of their own. If someone hasn't had a job for some time, or if a company suffers a series of unexplained losses, then they are **down on** their **luck**.

A: The store got broken into on Monday, we lost two staff members on Tuesday to a competitor across the street, and now it looks like our contract with the police department is getting auctioned again.

B: Wow, Sammy. You're really **down on** your **luck**. You need to take a break, get out of here for a while.

## Down to the wire

If a situation is **down to the wire**, then its outcome is unknown until the very last moment. The phrase originates in horse racing, where a wire was strung across the finish line to help show which horse came in first.

A: They left it **down to the wire** with the negotiations for new tariffs. People were hanging onto the edge of their seats.

B: I know. It wasn't until the last minute that they agreed to compromise.

## Drop the ball

When someone **drops the ball**, they make a mistake, forget something, or mishandle a situation. This phrase has its roots in baseball, football, and other games and sports that rely on players being able to maintain a good hold on/control of a ball.

A: Jeff, what were you thinking?!

B: I'm sorry. I really **dropped the ball** on this one.

## Earn a living

To **earn a living** is to make enough money to survive and maintain your health and happiness. It's an informal phrase, usually used to refer to lower-paid jobs that only just manage to accomplish this task.

A: Jesus Christ, Tom. You can't cut my hours that much, I need to **earn a living**!

B: There's nothing else I can do, Keith. You're lucky we're keeping you on at all.

## Easy come, easy go

If something is **easy come, easy go**, then it was not difficult or costly to gain. Therefore, it will be no huge loss should it have to go. Usually, we describe *things* as **easy come, easy go** – but sometimes people can be referred to in this sense, too.

A: I heard you lost your watch at the awards ceremony?

B: Yeah. But **easy come, easy go**. I won it in a bet. Maybe someone had a nice find that night.

## Fallout

**Fallout** refers to the negative aftereffects of a crisis. In a business sense, it can refer to price hikes, funding cuts, and increased controls after a financial crisis or shock event in the stock exchange.

A: We're still dealing with the **fallout** from last year's financial crisis. We haven't got the resources to cover another disaster.

B: I know, everyone is the same. The whole market is on edge.

## Fall through

If something **falls through**, then it fails and comes to nothing. People often use the phrase to describe a sudden failure, or unexpected change in events, that rendered a process impossible.

A: What are you waiting for? Go in there and blow them away!

B: I'm nervous. What if they take me on, it all **falls through**, and I'm left to pay for a crazy rent in New York City?

## Fall through the cracks

When something **falls through the cracks**, it is missed or overlooked. The phrase can also be heard and seen as slip through the cracks. It likely originates from losing small possessions in the cracks between floorboards, which makes them difficult to retrieve.

A: Please don't let this one **fall through the cracks**. We could really use some good publicity.

B: I'll write a press release and have it sent out by midday, I promise.

## Fast track a project

To **fast track a project** is to allow it to skip certain steps or procedures, or complete them faster than usual, in order to get to a desired point sooner. In its noun form, “fast track” means the same as fast lane, that is, the route which takes the least time. It can also mean a specific career route which allows for rapid advancement through company ranks.

A: I want you to **fast track the deal** with Greg. We need that in our portfolio.

B: All right, Ed. We can bypass the credit scrutiny – we know he’s got the money. I’ll get Don to rush the background checks too. We’ve known Greg for years; we know who he is.

## Feel the pinch

To **feel the pinch** is to experience difficulty or hardship, especially of an economic or financial sort. A pinch is a small, violent gesture in which a person squeezes someone’s skin hard between their fingers, suggesting the process is not desirable. The phrase originated from the 1800s and likely refers to the pinching of the flesh as a belt is tightened around the waist.

A: They’re going to really **feel the pinch** this winter. With profits as low as this, you have to wonder if they’ll survive the new year.

B: It’s going to be a difficult time for the company, that’s for sure

## Fifty-fifty

If something is **fifty-fifty** (sometimes written as **50/50**), then it is equally divided between two elements, amounts, or parts. It can be used as an adjective or as an adverb.

A: Do you and your wife have equal ownership over the business?

B: Yes, we’re **fifty-fifty** partners.

A: We should probably divide the money equally.

B: That’s easy. If we divide it **fifty-fifty**, then we each get twenty dollars.

## Filthy rich

If someone is **filthy rich**, they are excessively wealthy and usually display it in ostentatious fashion when in public. The term is a negative one and should be avoided in a professional setting, if at all possible. More polite alternatives include “more than comfortable” and “very affluent.”

A: Have you seen the car Maria is driving now? Her new husband must be in the money.

B: Oh, they're **filthy rich** now. They're moving to a gated community so they can have space for his classic car collection.

## Foot the bill

When someone **foots the bill**, they pay for the total cost of a purchase, event, or service. The phrase originally referred to the action of adding all costs to create a total, with “foot” meaning “the bottom.” However, now we mostly use the phrase in reference to paying for something that is generally seen as expensive.

A: Don't worry about this one, let me **foot the bill**.

B: Are you sure? Thanks very much!

## For the long haul

To be involved in something **for the long haul** means to be involved in it for its duration, regardless of however long it takes. The phrase is often used to show someone's commitment toward something—for example, a project or position.

A: What are your plans for the future, Jordan? Are you planning on staying with the company for some time?

B: I'm in this **for the long haul**, Aaron. I'm not going anywhere unless you want me gone.

## From day one

**From day one** means since the beginning of something. If a store has been open seven days a week **from day one**, for example, then it has had these hours since it first opened to the public.

A: You can't fire me! I've been here **from day one**!

B: Then you should know by now what time we open the store, Martin, and what time we need you here.

## From rags to riches

To describe someone as having gone **from rags to riches** is to say that they have risen in status and wealth from the lowest possible level to a very high one. The phrase is informal and is usually used to describe a positive change in someone's fortune.

A: She's a beautiful example of someone working their way up in the business.

B: Oh, yeah. She's gone **from rags to riches**. Raised in the projects and now look at her. She earns more than all of us put together!

## From the ground up

**From the ground up** means completely, or in its entirety. The phrase is usually used in business terms to refer to the process of establishing a successful company or business. To build something **from the ground up** means to build it from the beginning, from nothing.

A: They need to restructure the entire business **from the ground up**.

B: I'm not sure that's necessary, but something has to change in there, that's for sure.

## Game plan

A **game plan** is a plan of action that you or someone else is supposed to follow. **Game plans** will usually have clearly defined goals and a series of stages to complete. Some say the term originates in football, where the players and coach develop a **game plan** (or strategy) before the game starts.

A: Let's hear it, Gary. What's the **game plan**?

B: We need to take this slowly, one thing at a time.

## Get ahead

To **get ahead** is to be successful in your life or your job. It literally means to be in front of others. However, the phrase is usually used in more general terms rather than in relation to those you work with.

A: You have to work hard if you want to **get ahead** in life, Jake. Especially in this business.

B: I know, Chris. I'll put everything I have into this deal.

## Get down to business

To **get down to business** is to begin working on the project at hand, or to start doing whatever it is that needs to be done.

A: Hey, Carl. How's it going? You want a coffee?

B: Let's **get down to business**, Larry. Are you going to sign the agreement?

## Get off on the wrong foot

If you **get off on the wrong foot** with someone or something, then you've begun a relationship or a situation in an undesirable (maybe even wrong) way. Usually, this phrase refers to a relationship between people.

A: I hope we didn't **get off on the wrong foot** yesterday, Eleanor? I didn't mean to say that your emails were long, they're actually very informative!

B: Not at all, Lyndsey. My emails *are* very long! There was no harm done.

## Get off scot-free

To **get off scot-free** is to escape a punishment or payment that is deserved. Scot comes from an old English word which meant "tax," and someone who got away scot-free was someone who did not pay their taxes.

A: What was the outcome? Surely, they didn't find him innocent?

B: Years of embezzlement and he **got off scot-free**, Fynn. That's the justice system for you.

## Get off the ground

To **get** something **off the ground** is to start something, or begin a process/idea. Usually, we use this phrase to refer to a successful beginning, or one which is hoped to be successful, after a lot of hard work has been put into it.

A: I'm excited to see this project **get off the ground**, Hermione. It's got a lot of potential!

B: Thanks, Pip. I'm really excited too; I've been working on it for a long time!

## Get off to a flying start

If something **gets off to a flying start** when it begins, this means it is very successful in a short space of time. The term originates in competitive racing, where a competitor speeds ahead at the beginning of the race, as if they are flying ahead of the other competitors. In business, it can refer to any element of competition, to a person's career, or to a particular project or activity.



A: They've really **got off to a flying start** in design. We'll have a prototype by the end of the week.

B: Amazing, I've got buyers bothering me every single day!

## Get/be on the good side of someone

To be on someone's good side is to be in their favor, having done things they wanted or which you knew would please them. It might take some time to **get on somebody's good side**, or it might be achieved through a single, simple action. The opposite of this phrase is to get/be on the wrong side of someone.

A: What can I do to impress Mrs. Peterson? I want to **get on her good side** and make her trust me. I'm sure I can win her over, I just need the right approach.

B: Mrs. Peterson is next to impossible to impress, Cody. Good luck trying to get on her good side.

A: I don't think the area manager likes me. She never smiles when I see her.

B: It's not hard to get on the wrong side of Misha. She's very prickly.

## Get the ball rolling

To **get the ball rolling** is to begin work on a task or project. The term comes from the English sport of croquet, which some say dates as far back as the seventeenth century. This phrase can also be seen/heard as start the ball rolling. Another similar expression is keep the ball rolling, which refers to maintaining an action once it has started and not allowing it to cease or slow. This latter phrase is said to originate from William Harrison's 1840 US presidential campaign.

A: Everyone is here, Mr. Johnson. Should I start the slideshow?

B: Yes, let's **get the ball rolling**. I don't want to be here all night.

## Get wind of

To **get wind of** something is to hear about it, or to be told about it, despite the desire of those involved to keep it secret. In other words, you are learning something that wasn't originally supposed to be known.

A: I don't want you to tell anybody about this, Matt. I don't want Dan **getting wind of** it until it's certain.

B: My lips are sealed, Kevin. I won't tell anyone.

## Get your foot in the door

To **get your foot in the door** is to succeed in a first step toward accomplishing some longer and more difficult task. In business terms, the phrase may be used in reference to new employment decisions and business opportunities, but usually in a less formal environment and setting.

A: You should get yourself down there on a voluntary placement. **Get your foot in the door** before you're qualified.

B: She's right. If you get to know them, then once you graduate they'll be much more likely to give you a paid position.

## Give-and-take

If something is **give-and-take**, then processes and transactions are made equally and fairly. The phrase implies that you give what you receive, or that at least some sort of mutual exchange will take place that benefits both parties.

A: You have to be prepared to compromise and work together if you want this to work.

B: He's right, every successful business merger involves an element of **give-and-take**.

## Give him a big hand

If you **give someone a big hand**, you give them a large round of applause. This phrase is most often heard after introductions to speakers at talks, conferences, and presentations. This expression invites any audience member to clap loudly for a person or group of people.

A: And without further delay, please **give a big hand** for the president of Global Energy, Hank Gamblioni!

B: (Audience applauds.)

## Give him a hand

To **give someone a hand** is to help them in some way. The assistance may be physical (for example, helping to move a large object), or it may be more abstract (such as offering advice or recommendations).

A: I'm just over here if you need me to **give you a hand** with all those numbers, Mandy. I know it's a lot of work for someone new to the job.

B: Thanks, Alan. I think I have it under control.

## Give someone a run for their money

To **give someone a run for their money** is to give them a good competition. The phrase is informal and shouldn't be used in a professional context. It comes from horse racing, where to want a run for your money is to want a horse you have bet on to run in a planned race.

A: I'm not going to take this lightly. I'll do everything I can to get this contract.

B: Well, expect him to **give you a good run for your money**, Ed. He's been in the game a lot longer than you.

## Glass ceiling

The **glass ceiling** refers to the intangible obstruction between a certain person or group of people and the upper levels of career advancement. This obstruction usually refers to women, people of color, or other minorities within the workforce.

A: They say there's a **glass ceiling** that stops women from getting into management in the gaming industry. But here you are, Clara.

B: Here I am, Corin. Breaking that glass.

## Go bust

To **go bust** is to lose everything financially. The phrase often refers to someone going bankrupt or a business closing down. This expression is usually heard in informal social situations rather than professional settings.

A: What happened to Harper and Wilson's?

B: They **went bust** just like every other independent business in this town.

## Go down swinging

Someone (or a group of people) **goes down swinging** if they know that they are likely to fail (or be unsuccessful) in their attempts, yet they continue to fight or compete to the best of their ability.

A: It looks like the deal's going to fall through with the Opera House.

B: Well, I'd rather we **go down swinging**, Warren. I don't want people to think we are weak. Let's hold our ground.

## Go down the drain

If something **goes down the drain**, then it is unsuccessful and has been (or

should be) abandoned. Often used to describe failed plans, actions, or processes that cannot be resolved, corrected, or saved, it can also refer to investment cash or business profits. Once something has **gone down the drain**, you cannot retrieve or revive it.

A: How's the website going, Debbie?

B: Terribly. The design company got liquidated. We've lost our money; this month's profits have **gone down the drain**.

## Go for broke

To **go for broke** is to risk everything you and/or your business have, usually by expending extra effort and energy, in the hope that it will solve your current financial problems. The phrase is military in origin, coming from a Hawaiian pidgin that literally means "to wager everything."

A: You're running out of options, Neville. You need to make a decision before someone else makes it for you.

B: I think I'm going to have to **go for broke**, Helen. I'll put everything we have into this deal with the health department, and hopefully it'll be enough to save us.

## Go private

**Going private** means transferring the status of a company or business from public to private. When a company **goes private**, it stops selling its shares to the public and it doesn't have to publicly file its financial statements.

A: What's your answer to the problems on the market?

B: We're seriously thinking about **going private**, Heidi.

## Go the extra mile

To **go the extra mile** is to make an extra effort, or take extra, unexpected and unnecessary steps, in order to be successful in something. The phrase originates in England, where miles are the common unit of measurement for long distances.

A: Out of all the people we interviewed, you really **went the extra mile** with your presentation. We're happy to offer you the position.

B: That's wonderful! Thank you, I can assure you that you won't regret it!

## Gray area

**Gray area** refers to an area of any topic that is unknown, or poorly understood. The phrase can be used to describe something, or some element of a plan, that is poorly structured and leaves room for much interpretation.

A: We think we've found a legal **gray area** that allows us to export at much lower costs.

B: That sounds promising. Keep me updated on any developments; I don't want this to be too expensive.

## Groundbreaking

When something is **groundbreaking** it is shocking and new, unlike anything seen before. Ideas, products, and methodologies can be **groundbreaking**, and the term is used with the intention of complimenting the creator, or person responsible.

A: With the new model, we won't have to worry about that anymore. You'll be connected wherever you go.

B: This is **groundbreaking**, Jennifer. There's nothing else like this on the market.

## Hands are tied

When someone's **hands are tied**, they are being held back or restrained from doing something. This usually means that an agreement or relationship with someone else is stopping the person from being able to take certain actions, or say certain things.

A: Please, Jonathan. Give me the job, I'll get the best deal for the company. I really need this.

B: I'm sorry, my **hands are tied**. We've already started the negotiations.

## Hand in hand

When two people are described as being **hand in hand**, it generally means that they are holding each other's hands. In business terms, however, people, companies, ideas, and products can be described as going **hand in hand**. In this sense, it means that these two (or more) things go together and are closely associated and/or connected.

A: In the retail industry, exemplary customer service and excellent presentation go **hand in hand**.

B: You can't have one without the other, that's for sure!

## Have a gut feeling

To **have a gut feeling** is to suspect something at an instinctive level, often with little physical evidence to go on. When someone **has a gut feeling**, they feel a certain way about something for no apparent reason.

A: Why didn't you take the money?

B: I **had a gut feeling**. I don't know. Something just didn't feel right.

## Have money burning a hole in your pocket

If you **have money burning a hole in your pocket**, then you have (probably

recently) acquired money that you are very eager and excited to spend. The phrase can be used to refer to businesses that have received unexpected grants or other large sums of money, and the readiness of management to spend these funds.

A: That recent **donation is burning a hole in our pocket**. We should use it to give the welcome area a makeover. It's been looking tired for a while now.

B: Why are you always so eager to spend, Sue? Can't we leave the money where it is in case we need it for an emergency?

## Have one's voice heard

To **have your voice heard** is to ensure that your opinions, thoughts, or views on something are noticed, accepted, and acted upon. Employees may wish to have their voices heard by management, while management may want their voices heard by directors.

A: It's rare that we get the opportunity to **have our voices heard** as staff working at the lower-end of the pay spectrum.

B: Of course, buddy. What is it that you've come here to say?

## Have someone's work cut out

When **someone has their work cut out**, they are engaged in a very difficult task or problem that will take a lot of time, energy, and effort to complete. The phrase comes from the tailoring profession: even after a project has been cut out, there remains a lot of work to do until the piece is finished.

A: It's not long until the deadline. Who do you think is going to struggle the most to deliver a quality product?

B: Elizabeth has really **got her work cut out** if she wants to stay in this competition. She's got the least preparation done; as of right now, her final product has barely taken form.



## Have the penny drop

When **the penny drops**, the person in question understands what is going on, or a problem that is facing them. The phrase is usually used when someone has taken the time to understand a simple issue. Some believe the phrase originated from the use of penny-drop slot machines, where the game begins once the penny drops.

A: I just don't understand why he'd put all that effort into meeting with us several times, only to back out at the last minute without any further communication. Unless he never wanted the property in the first place?

B: And finally, **the penny drops**. He was wasting your time.

## Have your cake and eat it

This old English proverb is used when someone is trying to retain control over something that is gone, or will soon be gone. People usually say that you cannot **have your cake and eat it** when someone has unrealistic wishes, or hopes to continue a project or action after the point it is supposed to finish.

A: I'm going to ask them if I can arrange some sort of compromise where I only work some weekends, not all of them.

B: Josh, you can't **have your cake and eat it** too. The new position requires weekends. Sometimes you have to make a sacrifice.

## Head something off at the pass

To **head something off at the pass** is to forestall it, delay it, or send it off course. This phrase is sometimes used in a slightly different form – cut something off at the pass. Both phrases mean the same thing, and they come from historical Western tales of capturing villains by stopping them at a mountain pass further along their trail, rather than chasing them directly.

A: I'm going to get in early and **head them off at the pass**.

B: I know that I can count on you, Felicity. Do whatever you have to do.

## Helicopter view

**Helicopter view** is an informal way of saying “overview” or “plan view.” Literally, it suggests the view from a helicopter looking down onto a project or business. In business terms, it usually refers to a general survey of a product, project, or process.

A: Let’s get a **helicopter view** on this. What are we looking at? Five, maybe ten closures?

B: Probably closer to twenty, Alan. The general overview is that we’re going to have to halve our premises by this time next year.

## He who pays the piper calls the tune

This proverb is used to explain that the person who has funded something has the right to decide how it operates. The phrase suggests that those who have not contributed financially to something should not have any input regarding how it is run.

A: Elaine has completely taken over preparations for the awards ceremony. She’s pushed me out of all the decision-making processes.

B: Well, **he who pays the piper calls the tune**, I guess. She’s the one who’s funding everything; she’s going to want some control over what happens.

## Hit the nail on the head

When someone **hits the nail on the head** they get the perfect answer, often without contributing much effort. When a nail is hit on its head with a hammer it goes straight in with no obstruction or difficulty. It is this element that is referred to in the phrase; the speaker gets to the point quickly and clearly.

A: Doesn't that mean they've broken the law? They shouldn't have shared our details without our permission.

B: You've **hit the nail on the head**, Jimmy. We didn't give permission for them to share our details with anyone.

## Hold purse strings

To **hold** your **purse strings** is to keep strict control over your money, specifically your budget and outgoings. The phrase originates from historical money bags, which were held together by a string drawn through the top of the bag. When pulled tight, the string would force the purse to close, not allowing any money to come out.

A: What can you tell us about the future of Clarkson's Automobiles? Do you have any big plans to recover after this hit?

B: I think we'll be **holding** our **purse strings** for some time, June. We need to make sure the company gets through this loss.

## Hold one's ground

To **hold your ground**, in a debate or competition, means to not retreat, back down, or lose an advantage. The phrase means the same as stand one's ground, except that in US law, "stand one's ground" also refers to the legal right to use deadly force in self-defense. In business, it usually applies to negotiations or boardroom debates.

A: You really **held your ground** at the AGM, Neil. Well done!

B: Thanks, Dylan. I thought it was about time us mortals at the bottom had our voices heard, and I think I got management's attention!

## Hold your horses

If you **hold your horses**, then you hesitate or wait for a moment, usually

until some small problem has been corrected. The phrase originates from the past use of horses for transport, where coaches and taxis were requested to **hold their horses** and wait while passengers got on and off the vehicle.

A: I'm going to head down there right now. I'm not waiting for a response; I'm going to tell them what I think of them!

B: **Hold your horses**, Danny. You can't just bowl down there, shouting and waving your arms around. They'll call the police and you'll get yourself arrested!

## In a nutshell

To put something **in a nutshell** is to condense it to its basic facts, into as small and concise a form as possible, without losing meaning or importance. You might hear this phrase spoken when speakers need to explain something very quickly, due to time constraints or to reduce the complexity of an issue or idea.

A: So, tell us more about how the system analyzes user traffic. How does it organize each user?

B: **In a nutshell**, sir, it organizes them by age, location, ethnicity, and gender. But those categories have many, many subcategories.

## In for a penny, in for a pound

If someone is **in for a penny, in for a pound**, then they are willing to see a project through to the end and put every effort into it to ensure that it succeeds. When this expression is used, the speaker is usually unconcerned with how much time, money, or effort will be expended; rather, they want to ensure the project is finished.

A: You're really putting everything into getting this swimming pool plan approved, Martina. Make sure you don't overwork yourself.

B: **In for a penny, in for a pound**, Pete. I want to do my best because I'll be

here to reap the consequences.

## In full swing

When something is **in full swing**, it is in progress—usually at an advanced stage. Outside of the business environment, everything from parties to weather events can be described as being in full swing. Within the world of business, meetings, presentations, conferences, and speeches may be referred to as being **in full swing**. Really, any event which lasts for a substantial amount of time can get **into full swing**.

A: I got there late. The meeting was **in full swing**. It was so embarrassing.

B: Did everyone turn to look at you?

## In hot water

If you are **in hot water**, then you are in trouble for doing something that you shouldn't have done. The phrase is informal and would more likely be spoken in social situations than during formal exchanges.

A: I'd stay away from Dan if I were you. That wasn't the result he was hoping for.

B: Well, I know I've got myself **in hot water** with him. But he has to understand that there wasn't much I could do.

## In the black

If someone (or a business) is **in the black**, then they have some money available to them and are not in debt. Someone who is **in the black** is not necessarily very wealthy, they simply do not owe any money to others. The opposite of in the black is in the red.

A: Do you know what their financial situation is? Are they in debt? Do they

own their own house?

B: As far as I know they're **in the black**. We've asked around and nobody has any horror stories to share.

## In the dark

Usually accompanied by the verb to keep, if someone is kept **in the dark** about something, then details (or information) are withheld from them. Thus, they are kept unaware of any progress or changes that take place.

A: Don't keep me **in the dark** on this, Robin. I want to know what's going on, and I want to be a part of it.

B: It's not my place to tell you. You'll have to speak to Jane.

## In the dog house

If someone is **in the doghouse**, then they are in trouble and/or disfavor as a result of something they have said or done. The term is said to originate from the same word used on boats and trains to describe the small, makeshift structures built to house workers when there was no room for them in the cabins.

A: Just call them; tell them you're sick.

B: I can't miss work today, honey. I'm already **in the doghouse** after last week.

## In the driver's seat

Someone who is **in the driver's seat** is in control of a situation, process, or business. In business, you might find yourself in the driver's seat of a project or an entire company. The term comes with a sense of responsibility and accountability for one's actions.

A: With Heath off sick, that puts you **in the driver's seat** for this summer's entire events schedule. Are you going to be able to manage this?

B: I'm looking forward to showing you what I can do, Bruce.

## In (or out of) the loop

To remain (or be kept) **in the loop** is to be kept informed and updated on all developments regarding a specific project or area. The opposite is out of the loop, and this means that certain information is unavailable to you or is being held from you.

A: Stay in touch, Bernie. I want you to keep me **in the loop** on this one.

B: If and when anything changes, you'll be the first to know.

## In the money

**In the money** is a business phrase that essentially means that something can earn a profit, but it does not mean that it *will* earn a profit. Often referred to as an ITM. If an option is an ITM, it can have a higher premium.

A: That's three successful sales he's had from that window in the past week. I've been keeping track of them.

B: Well, old Mr. Burns is going to be **in the money** then. Some of the stuff in that window sells for thousands of dollars.

## It's a gold mine

If something is **a goldmine**, then there is much profit to be had from it, and it should be seen as a valuable asset or investment. The term is usually used when making (or talking about making) negotiations and decisions on valuable purchases and investments—often at a good price.

A: What do you think of their offer?

B: Their entire business is **a gold mine** in a city like this one. They just need the funds to get started.

## It's a rip-off

If something is **a rip-off**, then it is expensive and poor value for money. It's an informal and negative phrase, usually reserved for general conversation rather than professional situations. More polite ways of expressing this idea include "it's very expensive," "it's not the best," and "I've seen better offers elsewhere."

A: I can't believe the company paid for that awful website job. It's terrible.

B: I know, I thought the price they charged was a total **rip-off**. My daughter could have made a better website, Khali. She really could.

## It's a steal

If something is **a steal**, then it is a bargain, very good value for money, and therefore the opposite of a rip-off. Literally, it is almost as if you are stealing it because the price is so low. This term is also informal, with more professional expressions including it's great value for money and it's a great opportunity.

A: You can't say no at that price, Lee. Surely.

B: You're right. It's the best deal I've seen all day; **it's a real steal!**

## It's not rocket science

To say that something is **not rocket science** is to say that something is easy to understand/undertake, and that it should not be difficult or complex for regular people to figure out. The phrase is usually used in a somewhat negative fashion, the speaker often using it to ridicule those they are talking to/about for not knowing what to do.



A: I don't think I know how to upload files from the laptop to the cloud.

B: Come on, Yvonne. You can figure it out. **It's not rocket science.**

## Jump the gun

To **jump the gun** is to start before you should. The phrase comes from sports, where athletes would wait until the sound of a gun to begin their race or event. If an athlete **jumped the gun**, then they started before the gun was fired.

A: I don't want to **jump the gun** here, but is this not what we were talking about in yesterday's meeting?

B: Yes, but we agreed that we'd wait until a more suitable time frame became available. We don't have the manpower right now.

## Jump through hoops

When someone is made to **jump through hoops**, they are given lots of complicated tasks to complete in order to follow a procedure. The phrase is used to negatively describe processes that are considered too long or too arduous for the given outcome. The phrase originates from the circus, where animals were forced to **jump through hoops** for entertainment.

A: It's test after test, form after form. I feel like they're really making me **jump through hoops** for this position.

B: Well, it must be worth it if they're being so specific in their selection process.

## Jumping (or climbing) on the bandwagon

To **jump (or climb) on the bandwagon** is to start doing something that others are seen to be doing because it is popular and considered successful, or about to be successful. The phrase comes from American political history

where musicians were pulled on wagons behind election campaigns, and those who supported the campaign would jump on and/or follow the procession.

A: Has anybody else been asked about silver seat covers today? I feel like it's all anyone wants from me.

B: Everyone is just **jumping on the bandwagon** since they saw that British royal with silver seat covers in LA last week. They'll have a new trend to follow soon, you watch.

## Keep one's eye on the ball

To **keep your eye on the ball** is to ensure that you keep your attention on the task at hand, and do not allow yourself to be distracted or diverted from your goals. In business terms, this could mean maintaining a watchful eye over the stock exchange or remaining alert to changes in footfall and responses to marketing campaigns.

A: This business is highly competitive; you have to **keep your eye on the ball**.

B: I won't go out there without a plan, Ed. I've got this.

## Keep one's eye on the prize

To **keep your eye on the prize** is to always remember the reason that you are working, or what it is that you are working toward. The phrase is used to remind people of the reasons they are taking part in a discussion, action, or process.

A: **Keep your eye on the prize**, Bex. Don't let any of them distract you. Just focus. You've wanted this job for years.

B: It's difficult to **keep my eye on the prize** when they keep moving it around, John. I don't even know what job I'm applying for anymore!

## Keep pace

To **keep pace** with something is to be able to go at the same speed as something, or make progress alongside it at the same rate. You may need to **keep pace** with projects, information, or people, depending on the situation.

A: Will you be able to **keep pace** in an environment filled with people who have far more experience in this industry than you do?

B: I'm a fast learner and I adapt quickly to new situations. I'll do my best to keep up with everyone; maybe I'll overtake them in the end.

## Keep someone on their toes

To **keep someone on their toes** can sometimes mean to stretch someone in their abilities or skills, but it can also mean keeping someone alert and ready for action at any given moment. It's not usually used in a negative way. Instead, this phrase suggests that you are getting the best from someone by continuously challenging them.

A: You've been back late every day this week, honey.

B: Yeah, they're really **keeping me on my toes** there. But it'll be worth it when I get the promotion, babe.

## Keep someone updated

To **keep someone updated** is to ensure that they are aware of all of the facts on a certain topic, and to maintain their knowledge by alerting them to any changes or developments that take place. Managers may ask to be kept updated on particular customers or purchases, or you may be asked to keep your staff updated on changes to government regulations and laws regarding your business.

A: I need you to **keep me updated** on any change to the situation, Martha. No matter how small, you call me if something changes.

B: I won't hesitate, sir. Thank you for trusting me with this.

## Keep under wraps

To **keep** something **under wraps** is to keep it concealed, or secret, from other people. The phrase is another that originates in horse racing. Originally, it meant that the rider was holding the horse back from releasing its full potential in the race. The rider did this by wrapping the reins around their fist in order to control the horse and to stop it from going as fast as it could. Now, its meaning simply refers to keeping something secret.

A: I need you to **keep** this one **under wraps**, Gerry. Let's make it a surprise for the team when we get the deal.

B: I can do that. I won't say a word.

## Keep someone sweet

To **keep someone sweet** is to keep them happy, and to maintain a good experience for them, whatever situation might be at hand.

A: We need to **keep him sweet** if we want him to give us the contract.

B: But we can't come across as too needy. We don't want him to think he can take advantage of us.

## Keep your head above water

To **keep your head above water** is to survive a difficult situation without becoming overwhelmed and/or failing entirely. Mostly used in negative situations where failure is at least a possibility, the phrase suggests the idea of one drowning in their problems.

A: Times are hard in hospitality right now. We haven't taken a profit in months; we're running at a loss.

B: Everyone is in the same boat. I think the aim of the game is just to **keep our heads above water** until things improve economically.

## Kickback

Outside of the business world, **kickback** is used to refer to a sudden, repelling force. However, in business terms, **kickback** refers to secret and illicit payments made in exchange for certain favors.

A: All sorts of questionable activities have been exposed within the highest ranks of the company. Many are calling for a full inquiry into the management of its finances.

B: There's talk of **kickbacks** dating back to over a decade ago. It seems management sent money overseas in exchange for diplomatic favors.

## Land on your feet

To **land on your feet** is to experience good luck and success in something. The phrase can be used to refer to someone overcoming a specific problem, or it can be used more generally to describe someone's overall success in life or at work.

A: Peter has really **landed on his feet** since moving to Detroit. Not even a year in the city and he's already earning a six-figure salary!

B: He's certainly proving to be some healthy competition over there. Perhaps too healthy!

## Last straw

When someone refers to the **last straw**, they often refer to something small and insignificant, but which has been the cause of a total failure or catastrophe on a much larger scale. The phrase comes from the proverb it is the **last straw** that breaks the camel's back, and refers to the buildup of small

problems that can sometimes result in a much larger problem.

A: Sir, you can't fire me for dropping your coffee.

B: The coffee was the **last straw**, Colin. You've been messing everything up for months. I've had enough; you're gone.

## Lay out a plan

To **lay out a plan** is to present it in a fully detailed manner. When someone **lays out their plan**, they explain each of its steps and how they work to achieve their goals. This is sometimes accompanied by visual aids.

A: What are we going to do? They're moving in next door, and everything they sell is cheaper than our products!

B: We need to **lay out a plan**, Darren. A marketing plan.

## Learn the ropes

To **learn the ropes** is to begin learning in a specific area or subject and to successfully cover the basics of that area/subject. The phrase originates from nautical terminology; it was used to describe the training sessions given to the crew to teach them how to deal with the ship's sails and ropes.

A: I'm quite nervous about the new job. I don't know if I'll be any good! What if I'm not?

B: They won't throw you in right away, Nigel. They'll give you a chance to **learn the ropes** first.

## Leaps and bounds

When someone moves in **leaps and bounds** they are progressing very quickly and usually very successfully. In business, both people and companies can be described as moving in leaps and bounds.

A: Joanne's been coming along in **leaps and bounds** since she arrived here on her internship. Do you think she's good enough to replace Melissa when she leaves in the summer?

B: I think she'll probably end up being better than Melissa if we give her the chance.

## Lips are sealed

If someone's **lips are sealed** then the person is holding a secret and has no intention of telling anyone what that secret is. Usually, it is the person holding the secret who uses the phrase.

A: Do you think Ryan knows he's got the job?

B: Well, my **lips have been sealed** since the meeting. Unless somebody else told him, it should still be a surprise.

## Long shot

A **long shot** is an attempt at something, or a guess at the answer to a question, when the person making the attempt knows that they have little chance of succeeding or being correct. The phrase comes from sports, where a **long shot** is a more difficult shot to make.

A: Are you going to keep trying? There's another competition in three months. You could enter into that one?

B: It's a **long shot**. But I think we'll give it a try, yeah. I doubt we'll win, but if we get to the next stage then it'll be something to be proud of.

## Loophole

Originally, a **loophole** was the hole or slit in a wall through which arrows would be fired. Nowadays, loopholes are small inadequacies and/or ambiguities within laws, rules, and regulations. These ambiguities allow for

laws to be effectively (and legally) broken.

A: Is there nothing we can do to stop this?

B: Our legal team is working on it. We think there's a **loophole** that we can exploit, but we're waiting on news from upstairs.

## Make big bucks

To **make big bucks** is to make a lot of money, or to experience a high amount of profit within a business. This is an informal phrase and should be avoided outside of social situations.

A: I'm not out to **make big bucks** from this; I want to put the profit back into the local community.

B: We've heard people say that before.

## Make ends meet

To **make ends meet** is to earn enough money to survive. The phrase can be used to describe an individual person, or a larger business or corporation. People usually use this phrase when they are struggling to make a profit and are questioning the success of a business or exploit.

A: I didn't realize we weren't allowed to work for competitor stores. I swear to you, I'm just trying to **make ends meet**.

B: You should have asked us for more hours; you know we have vacancies advertised.

## Make something known

To **make something known** is to reveal something to someone or a group of people. Usually, when we make something known it has been kept secret or hidden up to that point, and the action of **making it known** is something that



will be valued and appreciated. Even if the news itself is bad, the action of revealing it is seen as a positive one.

A: I think we should **make it known** that we're not going to extend the lease. They deserve to know in time to look for new jobs.

B: They may not have to look for new jobs if they find someone to replace us.

## Mint condition

**Mint condition** is an expression used to describe something that is in perfect condition—it hasn't suffered any damage or wear. The phrase comes from coins. A coin is described as being in **mint condition** when it is in the same state as it was when it came from the mint. A mint is the place where coins are made.

A: This specimen is in **mint condition**, as if it was made yesterday.

B: My goodness, it's beautiful. How much is it expected to sell for?

## Miss the boat

When someone **misses the boat**, they are too slow, or take too much time, which results in them missing an opportunity. The phrase can also be heard as miss the bus. Both phrases mean the same thing.

A: They really **missed the boat** in delaying the rollout of its wireless features.

B: Yeah, nobody cared because all of the major brands were doing it by that point. They should have launched them with the device.

## Miss the mark

If you **miss the mark** then you are unsuccessful when you thought you were

going to succeed. **Missing the mark** is a failure to achieve something that you believed was going to work out.

A: What did you think of our presentation at the ceremony last night?

B: Honestly? I think you guys really **missed the mark** this time. Your hard work was wasted on that audience – you should have done more research.

## Money to burn

If someone has **money to burn** then they are very wealthy – so wealthy that they could burn their money and see no difference in their financial well-being. The phrase is an uncomplimentary way to describe extreme wealth. Some expressions that are considered more polite and positive include “very fortunate,” “extremely wealthy,” and “positively booming.”

A: They won’t be worried about the price. They’ve got **money to burn** in that family.

B: I hope you’re right, because we need to pay the bills.

## Monopoly money

**Monopoly money** is a term used in business to refer to bargaining tools, equity, or property which has a distinct lack of value to it. It originates from the board game Monopoly, which uses fake cash as game tokens. To say that someone trades in **monopoly money** means that they do not trade with valuable properties and objects; it can also mean that their payment is untrustworthy and possibly fraudulent.

A: You can’t pull out of the deal this close to the closing stages!

B: I can pull out of anything I want, Philip. Especially when the people I’m doing business with appear to trade in **monopoly money**.

## Move in on

To **move in on** someone or something is to take charge, or attempt to take charge, of them/it. Usually this involves taking control from someone or something who/that already has it. The phrase is often used in a predatory sense, with the person taking control through sly or dishonest means.

A: She's **moving in on** the company. That's what everyone is saying in the canteen.

B: Everyone would say that. A lot of people are scared of a strong woman who gets things done.

## Mum's the word

The word "mum" comes from Old English and means silent. When people say **mum's the word**, they are saying that silence is key. The phrase can be used to refer to oneself keeping a secret, or it can be meant as a request for others do so.

A: This is between me and you. Nobody else knows about it, so I'll know if you tell anyone.

B: You can trust me, Jaq. **Mum's the word**.

## My gut tells me

This phrase is similar to having a gut feeling. If **someone's gut tells them** something, it usually does so without them having much prior knowledge. Gut feelings are based on instinct rather than experience and fact, and people can have good or bad feelings in their gut.

A: **My gut tells me** this is going to be a good day for the company, Greg.

B: I hope so, buddy. If we don't get a deal signed soon we're going to be in trouble.

## No BS

Warning – this phrase is an abbreviated expletive. It should only be used in informal situations. The full phrase is “**no bullshit**,” and it can also be phrased cut the BS. This expression indicates that someone should tell the straightforward truth about an issue.

A: Come on, Francisco. **No BS**. Tell me what happened yesterday in the boardroom.

B: Honestly, Gina? I wasn't there; I messed up and caught the wrong train. By the time I got to the office the meeting had finished.

## No harm done

When someone says there is **no harm done** they mean that there have been no negative consequences to an action or event. We usually use this phrase to reassure people that they have not caused difficulty or problems.

A: I didn't want to upset you this morning in the briefing. But I thought that it had to be said.

B: There was **no harm done**, Richard. I'll do my best to remember which spot is your parking spot.

## No strings attached

This phrase is used to describe relationships that are free of restrictions, conditions, or attachments that might hinder progress or full control over a situation. The phrase comes from the use of puppets – wooden dolls which were controlled by a puppet master using a complex network of strings.

A: I'm offering you a deal, **no strings attached**. You can do whatever you want with the place. You can be the boss.

B: I'm not sure I'm ready for that. And I'm certain I don't have the cash.

## No-brainer

A **no-brainer** is something (usually an idea or an action) that is very obvious and should require little thinking or contemplation. **No-brainers** require no brains to figure out; they are easily solved problems.

A: What made you sell up at the last minute?

B: It seemed like a **no-brainer** to leave it until the final moment so that I could get as much profit as possible.

## Not going to fly

If something (usually an idea) is **not going to fly**, then it will not be given the chance to begin. Usually expressed in speech when giving suggestions to solve a problem, the phrase means that an idea won't even be considered.

A: We could offer new members some sort of benefit scheme that gives them special privileges and gifts as tokens of appreciation.

B: We have thousands of members. That sort of cost is **not going to fly** with the guys at the top, Jordan. It's a nice idea, but they'll say no.

## Off the top of one's head

If you say or do something **off the top of your head**, then you do it without thinking too deeply about it. We use this phrase to describe spontaneous thoughts or actions, rather than well-thought-out plans.

A: Do you have any idea how much we earned last month from sales alone?

B: **Off the top of my head**, I'd say about seven thousand dollars. But that's a rough estimate, don't quote me on it.

## On a roll

When something or someone is **on a roll** they are experiencing a series of successes or lucky incidences. The phrase is used to describe prolonged

periods of good luck, achievement, or positive results.

A: That's five successful sales made, and it's not even midday.

B: You're **on a roll**, Adrian! Keep it up and you'll be at the top of the boards by the end of the day!

## One size fits all

When we describe something as **one size fits all**, we are saying that it is suitable for (or can be used in) all appropriate situations. The phrase comes from clothing sales, where it is used to describe garments and items that do not require sizing. In business, we can use the term to describe ideas or processes that are useable and practical for everyone.

A: I'm not saying this plan is perfect. Not at all. It's **one size fits all**, and I expect you all to tweak it.

B: It's something to start from, Gary. That's all we needed.

## On good ground

If you are **on good grounds**, then you are stable and in a comfortable and reliable position. When information and ideas are expressed as being **on good grounds**, however, it means that the information is reliable, trustworthy, and well-sourced, and/or the ideas are well-researched with a good premise. The phrase can be expressed in the plural or singular form.

A: I have it **on good grounds** that you're one of the best salesmen in the state.

B: Why, thank you, sir. I do try to do my best for whichever company I work for.

## On the back burner

To put something **on the back burner** is to put it aside for a while. The back burner is of low priority. Things that are put there do not matter much and are not changed or considered often.

A: We're still waiting on permissions from the different councils, I think it's going to be some time before anything gets going on it.

B: Then let's put it **on the back burner** for now. We don't need to think about it until we have proper authorization.

## On the ball

When someone is **on the ball** they are alert and on task and able to notice and act on changes to trends, opinion, and ideas. The phrase is somewhat informal, with on task being a good, professional alternative. It likely comes from sporting vocabulary; sportsmen are sometimes required to keep their eyes **on the ball** in order to score and defend throughout the game.

A: Didn't you notice they were growing impatient? Why didn't you do something before it got to this stage?

B: I'm sorry, Greg. I wasn't **on the ball**, I had no idea this was coming.

## On the money

When you are **on the money** you are correct or accurate. We use the phrase to describe people's ideas, suggestions, and answers to questions. This is an informal phrase, and a more professional alternative should be used in professional situations.

A: I think we're going to have to get control over some of these managers before they get us into trouble.

B: You're **on the money**, Bill. Someone needs to put them in their place before they upset someone they shouldn't.

## On the same page

When someone is **on the same page** as someone else, they understand and agree with the other person's point of view. If they were reading a book, they would be reading the same page together. People referred to in such a way are usually in agreement on a certain topic or issue and foresee a similar solution or way forward.

A: Manuel, are we **on the same page**? Do you get me?

B: I think so, sir. You're asking me to sign for the delivery in your name.

## On the same wavelength

When someone is **on the same wavelength** as you, they are at a mutual level of understanding and find it easy to communicate with and respond to you. The phrase comes from radio communications, where being on the same wavelength allows people to communicate effectively across long distances.

A: I like working in that department. I feel like everyone in there is **on the same wavelength** as me.

B: I know what you mean. I always felt you'd be better suited to work in sales full-time, rather than moving you around the way they do.

## On top of trends

In business terms, trends are specific changes to behaviors seen across groups of consumers and/or buyers. Keeping **on top of trends** is important when working with stocks, as well as when working in purchasing. The phrase can also refer to someone who is up-to-date with the latest fashions and styles. A similar phrase to this definition is on-trend, which means following the latest fashion and doing so very well.

A: It's so important to keep **on top of trends**. People started buying shares for a start-up in California yesterday, and if I hadn't seen them as I was just



browsing the data, I'd have missed out on a nice profit!

B: I just don't have the time to watch it all so closely every single day, you know?

## Other side of the coin

When people refer to the **other side of the coin**, they are talking about the alternative viewpoint to an issue or the other side to an argument. The phrase usually refers to the opposite of the thing being discussed.

A: It doesn't make any money; the staff are unhappy and grumpy in there. Honestly, I don't see any reason to keep it.

B: But what's the **other side of the coin**, Dwayne? Could a new manager be put in place to turn it into a success?

## Out in the open

Once something is **out in the open**, it is no longer being hidden away from view, or kept secret. Sometimes, agreements and business transactions are referred to as being out in the open, meaning that they have been done publicly and transparently.

A: I'm so glad it's **out in the open** now. I can relax every time I get a knock on the door now that I know it won't be someone who's found out by accident.

B: I told you you'd feel better after you told everyone. You can't feel guilty for them; you're losing your job too, Frank.

## Out of line

If a person is **out of line** with someone or something, then it has broken the rules. Someone can also be simply "out of line," meaning that their behavior is generally unacceptable.

A: You were really **out of line** yesterday, Nicola. The way you spoke to Ashleigh was unacceptable.

B: I'm sorry, I just feel like we clash on everything.

## Out of one's depth

When someone is **out of their depth**, they are too inexperienced or incapable in some way to deal with the present situation. The phrase comes from literally being in water too deep to be able to stand comfortably. In business, the term is usually applied to people struggling with their responsibilities and/or workload.

A: Emma seems like she's struggling at the top. Have you spoken to her?

B: She's in denial. She's **out of her depth**, but she won't ask for help.

## Out on a limb

To be **out on a limb** is to be isolated and lacking the support of others. The phrase refers to a risk being made and originated from climbing trees to collect fruit. To go **out on the limb** of a tree to collect fruit is risky, but it pays off if you're successful.

A: I'm going to go **out on a limb** here and say what I think. I don't think it's appropriate for Kieran to remain in the office until this is over.

B: You're not alone, Kim. I agree. It's not appropriate until everything is under control.

## Overhead

**Overhead** refers to bills, fees, and payments due to be paid to ensure that a project or activity goes ahead as planned. This encompasses the costs for lighting, venue space, design, printing, advertising, water, and plumbing services. Any cost that is due to be paid in relation to a larger project is an

**overhead** to that project.

A: Can't you try to stick with it for one more year? It could be all you need!

B: The **overhead** is too much, Luke. Taxes are enough, but with everything else it's just not possible.

## Pay a premium

To **pay a premium** is to regularly pay an amount of money to an insurance company in order to receive their cover. The premium is the amount of money that is paid to cover the risk to the insurer of one day having to give you a full payout.

A: How much was the company car insured for? Was it a lot?

B: Well, we were **paying a high premium**, so I'd imagine so.

## Pay through the nose

If someone has to **pay through the nose** for something, then they have paid a much higher price for something than one would expect. The phrase is used to describe unfair prices that are deemed more expensive than they should be. Its roots are possibly in the European taxation systems, where people were counted for tax purposes by counting the number of noses in a crowd.

A: How are we going to solve this, Zach? Everything is down.

B: We'll have to replace the entire system. And at such short notice, we'll be **paying through the nose** for it, too. But it's our only option.

## Pay top dollar

To **pay top dollar** for something is to pay a lot of money for it. The phrase can sometimes mean that someone has paid the highest possible price for something and that the price will likely never be higher. For example, when a

person buys a new smartphone the day it is released they are **paying top dollar** for it. In business, we use the phrase to describe paying for things that are expensive due to their scarcity, or their high demand.

A: Is there anything we can do to talk the suppliers down a little? We're **paying top dollar** on materials at the moment.

B: You're right, they get a lot of business from us. Maybe they can strike a deal with us?

## Penny for your thoughts

When we say to someone that we'll give them a **penny for their thoughts** we are asking them what they are thinking. This is an informal expression that you might expect to hear in the family home or spoken among friends in social situations. The phrase originates from a time when a penny was worth much more than it is today in America.

A: **Penny for your thoughts**, Agnes? You've been quieter than usual all day. What's on your mind?

B: Lots of things, Paula. But mainly what we're going to do if they cut our budget again. They threatened it this morning and I don't think they're bluffing.

## Pep talk

A **pep talk** is a speech given by a superior, perhaps a team captain or an army commander, with the aim to encourage their listeners to work together and do well in whatever they are about to undertake. **Pep talks** should give enthusiasm, passion, and courage. Some believe the route of the word "pep" comes from "pepper," and it is used to convey energy and zeal.

A: If it hadn't been for his **pep talk** this morning, I don't think I would have performed so well in there.

B: Well whatever it was, Luke, it was perfect. You got us the deal!

## Pick your brains

If someone **picks somebody's brains**, they ask a lot of questions about a specific topic or event. The person having their brains picked is usually someone of a higher understanding or better experience than the person doing the picking, and the context is usually one of asking for advice rather than interrogating for answers.

A: Carla, can I **pick your brains** about something?

B: Sure, Dominic. How can I help?

## Pink slip

**Pink slip** can be used as a noun or a verb, and refers to the dismissal of someone from their job or position. It is believed that the term comes from employers in the past using pink paper to print dismissal documents, making these documents stand out against the usual white.

A: What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost. What's that?

B: I've been **pink slipped**, honey. I'm going to have to find a new job.

## Play catch-up

In a business sense, **playing catch-up** occurs when you fall behind in your work or financial matters and are constantly trying to get back on top of things. Outside of business, the phrase can be used in a sporting sense. In this context, it means trying to become equal in scores during a game or competition.

A: My train was late at the beginning of the week, and I've been **playing catch-up** ever since. My inbox is overflowing!

B: Don't stress yourself out, Gary. Just take it one step at a time.

## Play hardball

To **play hardball** is to disregard any possible negative consequences to your actions, and to undertake any means necessary in order to succeed in the given objective. The phrase is somewhat informal. A more professional alternative that means the same thing is to do whatever it takes.

A: We've got to **play hardball** in there. Don't let them talk you down.

B: Of course. I won't let any of them stop us.

## Play it by ear

In business terms, to **play something by ear** is to base your actions on the current circumstances at hand rather than on pre-determined rules, guidelines, or plans. The phrase comes from musical terminology, where it means to play a piece of music without having to read it.

A: What's the plan for the tour of the factory?

B: I'm going to **play it by ear**. They're all sensible, educated adults. I'll let them choose where they want to go.

## Plug (a product)

To **plug** something is to advertise it, often in a very blatant manner. The word "plug" can be used as a verb or a noun.

A: I just got off the phone to Darius at Heart Radio. He said they're going to **plug** the show tonight on-air!

B: Oh, my goodness. That's great news, Charlotte!

A: Did you see the shameless deodorant plug in her latest marketing video?

B: I did. It was a little excessive.

## Practice makes perfect

**Practice makes perfect** is a phrase used to encourage people to keep trying and/or practicing something. When we use this phrase, we are usually trying to keep someone (or a group of people) positive in the face of difficulty or confusion.

A: Argh! I've had enough, this just isn't working for me! I can't do it!

B: Lisa, calm down. You need to be patient with yourself. **Practice makes perfect.**

## Pretty much

**Pretty much** is a phrase used to mean “nearly” or “almost.” We can say that things are **pretty much** something, and we can say that people are **pretty much** something. The meaning of the phrase has changed over the years – in the past it meant completely or considerably.

A: Have you finished the piece on the government's changes to part-time contracts?

B: **Pretty much.** I just need to go through and check for typos.

## Price skyrocketed

When a **price skyrockets**, it increases very much in a short space of time – like a rocket being fired into the sky. The phrase can be used in a negative or positive sense, but in the business world it is usually used to describe increases in fuel costs. The verb “skyrocket” can also be used to describe a steep rise in other things, such as national debt, interest on bank loans, outbreaks of illness, and mortgage values.

A: Residents in the city are complaining that, while crime levels in its poorest areas remain the same, **prices** across all districts have **skyrocketed** in recent months.

B: Yes, many blame the city's close proximity to the capital.

## **Pull one's weight**

To **pull your weight** is to do your fair share of work, or what is expected of you. The phrase is often used in the negative to illustrate that somebody is not doing enough work, or working as hard as they should be.

A: I'm not impressed with Hannah's performance. I don't think she's **pulling her weight**.

B: I'll speak to her this afternoon. She's been good in the past, maybe there's something wrong.

## **Pull the plug**

To **pull the plug** on something is to stop it. This expression comes from the literal phrase, which refers to removing the plug of a device so as to sever the electricity connection and stop it from working.

A: I can't believe they **pulled the plug** on the show before we finished the series.

B: The ratings weren't there, Donnie. You can't argue with no viewers.

## **Pull the wool over someone's eyes**

To **pull the wool over someone's eyes** is to willfully deceive them by purposefully lying or obscuring a truth in order to get the desired reaction/consequence. In business, the phrase usually refers to somebody withholding information or being deceptive with regard to an important upcoming deal, or a decision due to be made.

A: Don't try to **pull the wool over my eyes**, Gene. I know your brother works in the motor industry. What will he get out of this?



B: This isn't about him, Jack. He works for a different company anyway.

## Punch a puppy

To **punch a puppy** is to do or say something that you know people are going to hate and disagree with. People often say that they do not want to **punch a puppy** before revealing that they are going to do the one thing that will upset people most.

A: I don't want to **punch a puppy**, but we're going to have to make some drastic cuts to our budget to get through this.

B: Jill, we can't cut any more from the budget, there'll be nothing left!

## Put a lid on

To **put a lid on** something is to stop it in its tracks and contain it, often because it is becoming difficult to control. The phrase is usually used in relation to a discussion or conversation that has become unproductive or negative.

A: All right, let's **put a lid on** this before people get too emotional.

B: It's a very emotional topic, Daphne. Maybe we should let them continue and have their voices heard?

## Put all one's eggs in one basket

To **put all of your eggs in one basket** is to put all of your energy and resources into one area, without giving time or attention to any other. The idea follows that if you do this, you may drop the basket and all of the eggs will break. If you spread your eggs (or resources) over several baskets (or areas), then you are less likely to end up with nothing should one area fail.

A: Try not to **put all your eggs in one basket**, Jacqui. The swimming pool

isn't the only project we have, and it's one of the most difficult to achieve.

B: Don't worry, Leanne. I'm working on other projects too. I'm just concentrating on the pool right now.

## Put a stake in the ground

**To put a stake in the ground** is to make the first step in enacting a plan. The phrase comes from the historical period of American expansion, when people would claim land by placing a numbered stake in the ground.

A: Get out there and **put a stake in the ground!** Show them that we mean business!

B: All right, I'll arrange a meeting for tomorrow. You're right; we need to get moving before the opportunity is gone.

## Put the cart before the horse

When someone **puts the cart before the horse**, they complete tasks in the wrong order, or do something in a way that doesn't seem logical. Literally, a horse pulls the cart. Should the cart go before the horse, it will not move. In business terms, this phrase is used to describe unfeasible plans or unrealistic ideas.

A: They're **putting the cart before the horse** in there! We haven't even got a budget yet, and they want to make decisions on materials.

B: I'll tell them to hold back until we know what we have to spend.

## Put your money where your mouth is

When someone **puts their money where their mouth is** they do as they say, or they act as they expect others to act. In business terms, people use the phrase to suggest that someone should do what they are saying, especially in a situation where that person has been talking a lot.

A: You need to quit talking and **put your money where your mouth is**, Ashton. Show them you're listening instead of telling them you are.

B: But they want something I can't provide. A three-dollar raise is too much! It's simply too much.

## Quick buck

A **quick buck** is profit that was earned quickly and without difficulty. We tend to combine this expression with the verb "make" or "earn." It is a positive phrase, though quite informal. You are unlikely to hear it spoken when referring to profits in a professional setting.

A: Bet you made a **quick buck** on the group bookings that the festival brought in?

B: Well, we took a lot, for sure. But it wasn't easy work; we didn't stop for three days!

## Raise the bar

To **raise the bar** is to increase expectations and standards in some area that is assessed or which people are required to qualify for. The bar is usually raised as a result of the person being extremely skilled or talented in that area, rather than through pure luck. An alternative expression is to lift the bar, and the opposite form is to lower the bar. The phrase comes from track and field sports, where bars are raised in accordance with the skill of gymnasts and athletes.

A: Tony really **raised the bar** for interview candidates.

B: Yeah, I'm not sure any of the others have what it takes to beat that.

## Rally the troops

To **rally the troops** is to gather support and encourage involvement and

participation in a project or process, and to generally get people to work harder and produce more together. It comes from a wartime phrase used to describe commanders and captains giving pep talks to their soldiers before sending them into battle.

A: Let's **rally the troops**. We need to get this finished by Monday.

B: I'll call a meeting for after lunch. You can give them one of your inspirational talks.

## Ramp-up

**Ramp-up** can be a noun, or it can be used as a phrasal verb in the form to ramp something up. As a noun, we use it to refer to an increase in the amount of something a company or business sells. As a verb, we use it as the action of making these increases.

A: We're going to **ramp-up** our marketing; we want everyone in the city to know who we are and what we do.

B: That's going to cost money, sir. Marketing doesn't have the budget for it.

## Reality check

A **reality check** is when someone is reminded of how things are in the real world, as opposed to a theoretical, hypothetical, or imaginary reality. People use this term when an individual is being unrealistic, or when events are being overly exaggerated.

A: She wants to be manager in six months' time.

B: She needs a **reality check**. There are people who have been here much longer and have much more experience than her.

## Read between the lines

To **read between the lines** is to look for implied meaning rather than what is obvious. We usually use this phrase when we suspect that someone is being evasive in what they say, or purposefully not stating the truth. It comes from the military practice of writing secret messages in between the lines of normal text as a means of sending important information home during times of conflict.

A: Come on, **read between the lines**. They're not saying it's over, Rob. They're saying they have something bigger to focus on.

B: I hope you're right, because otherwise we're out of a job.

## Red tape

**Red tape** refers to obstructions to something, usually of a bureaucratic sort. People use this term when there is an excess in rules and regulations, complicating procedure and increasing costs for no clear reason.

A: The project would have been completed by now if it wasn't for all their **red tape**, Leon.

B: Well what more can you expect from the government, huh?

## Rock the boat

When people talk of **rocking the boat**, they are talking about disrupting the regular course of events or actions and introducing new and often controversial elements. The phrase can sometimes refer to shaking up organizations, or introducing new ideas to traditional environments.

A: Don't **rock the boat**, Joey. They don't like new ideas, especially ones that cost money.

B: They need to change with the times. Everyone else is.

## Round the clock

When something is open **round the clock**, we mean that it is always in operation. Likewise, if someone does something **round the clock**, we mean that they do it constantly, without stopping. The phrase literally means “all of the time.”

A: We’ve been working **round the clock** to get this finished on time for you, sir. We’ve had staff staying over in the motel next door.

B: Well, it looks like it was all worth it, Tyler. It’s better than I’d even hoped.

## Rule of thumb

A **rule of thumb** is a generally accurate principle or guide. This broad rule is not supposed to be appropriate for every single situation, but more of a one-size-fits-all rule used to give general guidance. The phrase is said to originate in the old English custom of making trades using the length or width of the thumb as a means for measurement.

A: A good **rule of thumb** in the office kitchen is that any mug without a sticker on it is safe to use.

B: Safe? Why wouldn’t it be safe?

## Run around in circles

To **run around in circles** is to repeat your actions over and over without seeing any progress or change in your circumstances. This is usually meant figuratively rather than literally. For example, this phrase might be used to refer to conversations that come to no resolution or conclusion.

A: We’re just **running around in circles** with this guy; we’re not getting anywhere.

B: What’s the alternative? Risk losing the deal to a competitor?

## Same boat

If you are in the **same boat** as someone, then you share a similar situation, or similar experiences. Being in the **same boat** is often used as a unifying phrase, to encourage people to work together for a greater purpose.

A: Everyone in here is new to this; we're all in the **same boat**.

B: We'll be able to support each other because we'll know exactly what we're all going through!

## Scale back

To **scale** something **back** is to reduce it in size, extremity, or expense, usually due to budget or time restrictions. **Scaling** a project **back** is not usually seen as a positive action; rather, it reflects the actions of a company that is failing to maintain its funding, or an unsuccessful design plan.

A: We've made the decision to **scale back** the developments to the headquarters.

B: We can't afford to spend millions on design features when the company is so close to falling into debt.

## Scratch someone's back

To **scratch someone's back** refers to the older saying "if you scratch my back, then I'll scratch yours," suggesting that a favor (or act of kindness) will be repaid by the person benefiting. In other words, the favor will be returned in some way.

A: Do you think we'll be able to persuade him to loan us the money?

B: He's **scratched our back** enough times before. What matters is whether or not we can offer him anything in return.

## Second nature

If something is **second nature** to you, then it is almost instinctive and you do not need to think about doing it. We use the phrase to emphasize how well we know something, or can do something.

A: Will Maddy be sure that she locks all of the doors when she leaves tonight?

B: She closes the building all the time, sir. It's **second nature** to her.

## See eye to eye

To **see eye to eye** on something is to agree on it, to understand it, and to see it from the same perspective. Two or more people can **see eye to eye** on something. The phrase originates from the Bible where it means literally to see the same thing.

A: We've never **seen eye to eye** on design but, in general, I appreciate her talent.

B: Yes, I remember your many disagreements on design, Jin.

## See something through

To **see something through** is to continue it until the end. This is a phrasal verb and is usually used to describe something, an action or a project, that is difficult and requires hard work or a lot of effort. The expression "**see something through**" shouldn't be confused with see through something, which has an entirely different meaning.

A: You're not thinking of giving up, Brad?

B: You're kidding, right? I have to **see this through**. I've been working on it for too long to see it fail.

## See through something



To **see through something** is to see past its exterior, or any lies or falsity it presents. People usually use this phrase when they believe someone is deceiving them, or when they know that they have been deceived. Literally, it suggests that the lie is transparent, and the truth can be seen behind it.

A: I can **see through** your calm exterior, Jenkins. You're worried.

B: Is it that obvious? Of course I'm worried. This is a big moment for us.

## Selling like hotcakes

If something is **selling like hotcakes**, then it is selling very quickly and it is in high demand from the public. Since there is a large amount being sold, and stocks are expected to run out very fast, there is often an element of concern that suppliers will be unable to keep up with demand.

A: Can we get some more baseball caps down here, please? These things are **selling like hotcakes**.

B: More baseball caps coming right up, Vic.

## Set in stone

When something is **set in stone** it is definite and determined. The phrase is often used to describe agreements, rules, or regulations. Once something has been set in stone, it is unchangeable and therefore permanent.

A: Let's take one more look at that final clause, before this whole thing gets **set in stone**.

B: That's a good idea, Yolande. Let's make sure we haven't missed anything.

## Sever ties

To **sever ties** with someone or something is to relinquish all contact and connections with them/it. Once ties have been severed, there should be no

further contact between each party concerned. There is an element of spontaneity to severing ties, and the cease of contact is often abrupt and instantaneous.

A: We've **severed ties** with Mr. Ronson. All of his accounts have been closed and it's in the hands of our lawyers now.

B: Everybody has been instructed to cease all communications with him and his team at the Ronson headquarters.

## Shake something up

To **shake something up** is to reshuffle it or reorganize it, usually with the intention of improving the finished outcome. **Shaking things up** can be both positive and negative – you will need context to determine which it is!

A: I've only been in this position for a month. I don't want to **shake things up** too much, not before I've shown them they can trust me.

B: I think that's a good idea. After losing Chloe, the team needs some stability for a while, not more change and upheaval.

## Shoot from the hip

When we **shoot from the hip**, we react to something without thinking about the consequences of our actions or words. We use the phrase to describe spontaneous responses to emotional or personal stimulus.

A: Someone calm him down. He's upset. The last thing we need is him finding the press and **shooting from the hip**.

B: I'll speak to him.

## Shoot something down

When someone **shoots** something (or someone) down, they launch a

powerful criticism on an opinion or view expressed by that person. The phrase comes from the military, referring to fighter planes and drones using ammunition to attack the enemy from the air.

A: Leona brought up her crazy printing idea at the meeting.

B: I know, I heard Abe **shot her down** immediately.

## Short on cash

When someone is **short on cash**, they do not have much to offer; usually, they do not even have enough for the present situation. This is an informal phrase and won't be heard in a professional setting.

A: I was going to ask Sasha next door, but I know they're **short on cash** at the moment too.

B: It's the recession, Tim. Everybody is living on the edge.

## Small fries

A **small fry** is someone who is unimportant and insignificant. This phrase is mostly used in a derogatory manner, giving the impression that the person (or people) being referred to does not matter. The phrase likely comes from the same expression used in fishing and cooking to describe very small fish such as whiting.

A: What about that new company, Carrick and Maxim? Aren't you worried about them?

B: They're **small fries** compared to us, Sven. I don't have any concerns about Carrick and Maxim.

## Small talk

**Small talk** is conversation that serves no purpose other than to allow two

people to converse. **Small talk** is polite, unpolitical, and unlikely to cause any upset or problems. It is usually made during social interactions, or in situations where conversation with others relieves tension. For example, **small talk** may take place in waiting rooms for job interviews and before conferences and meetings begin.

A: How did it go? Did you get through to the next stage?

B: I'm not really good at **small talk**, so the group activities felt awkward. But yeah, I got through.

## Smooth sailing

If something is **smooth sailing**, then you are making easy progress and shouldn't come across any difficulties. The phrase comes from sailing, where calm, smooth waters lead to an easy course; there aren't any storms or waves to risk the safety or direction of the boat and crew.

A: We've faced a lot of difficulties, but everything should be **smooth sailing** from now on.

B: Can you guarantee the project will get the green light?

A: Yes, we have it on paper. Everything is a go.

## Snail mail

**Snail mail** is a slang term used for the traditional means of sending messages through a postal system. It is often used in a derogatory context, with people comparing it to the speed achieved through email messaging systems.

A: I've sent you an email. But I've sent a hard copy through **snail mail** too. Hopefully, it'll get to you on time and save you the job of printing one.

B: Thanks, Geoff. I'll let you know once I have it.

## Snap up

To **snap** something **up** is to acquire or purchase it very quickly, as soon as (or almost as soon as) it goes on sale. Though it usually refers to produce or objects on sale, this phrasal verb can also be applied to people and opportunities, such as jobs or excursions.

A: Yesterday, there were eleven places remaining on the company ski trip. But they've all been **snapped up** now!

B: Oh no! I didn't reserve my place!

## Sparks flying

When **sparks** begin to **fly**, an encounter or conversation has become more heated and volatile. Passionate exchanges in meetings or debates may be described as causing **sparks** to **fly**. The phrase alludes to having a lot of energy and enthusiasm for an opinion or topic, and it does not necessarily always lead to a negative result.

A: The debate was heated yesterday. **Sparks** were **flying** across the table on every single issue.

B: I can't see a resolution coming soon.

## Spend a fortune

If someone **spends a fortune**, then they spend a lot of money. The expression is not very formal and is usually used outside of a professional context.

A: How much is the head contractor's car worth?

B: I don't know, but I know that he **spent a fortune** on it. Nice to have that sort of money, huh?

## Splashed out

To **splash out** on something, or to **splash out** in general, is to spend a lot of

money at once. People may **splash out** on new possessions, holidays, clothing, or makeup. The phrase is usually used in a positive sense but is informal and not usually used in a professional setting.

A: I was feeling generous, and we've had a good year. Everyone in the office has a ticket.

B: Wow, Duncan. You've really **splashed out** this Christmas!

## Stand one's ground

To **stand your ground**, in a debate or competition, means to not retreat, back down, or lose an advantage. The phrase means the same as hold one's ground. In US law, "stand one's ground" also refers to the legal right to use deadly force in self-defense. In business, it usually applies to negotiations or boardroom debates.

A: You need to **stand your ground** in there. You don't deserve a disciplinary action.

B: I'll do my best, but I don't want to seem defiant.

## Start off on the right/wrong foot

To **start off on the right foot** is to be successful in the first step of a plan, interaction, or activity. The phrase comes from the historic superstition that beginning walking from the right foot is luckier and leads to the best outcomes, whereas the left (wrong) foot would lead to the opposite.

A: I hope we didn't **start off on the wrong foot** yesterday? I'm very excited to work alongside someone with so much experience in our field.

B: Not at all, I'm excited to be here.

## Start-up

A **start-up** is a newly established business or a newly founded company. The phrase can also be used as a verb to describe the action of beginning something, or setting something in motion.

A: Online **start-ups** are taking over the business market with their low setup costs and minimal overheads.

B: But will they stand the test of time, Carl? We're seeing a lot of **start-ups** begin to struggle after their first few months of business, when the novelty wears off and they have exhausted all of their personal connections.

## State of the art

When something is described as **state of the art**, we mean that it has been produced and built using the best and most modern equipment and materials. The phrase is used to describe new technologies, buildings, and systems and can be used in informal or formal settings.

A: This new device is unlike anything else on the market, with **state-of-the-art** graphics and sound capabilities and an attractive, accessible user interface.

B: Yeah, it's probably the most technologically advanced device we have in stock, wouldn't you say?

## Stay on top of things

To **stay on top of things** is to understand and maintain control over a situation or process. The phrase to keep on top of things means the same thing.

A: I'm really struggling to **stay on top of** all these incoming messages, Sara. Can you come over here and help?

B: Of course, what do you need me to do? I can take the phone while you answer the emails, if you want?

## Step up to the plate

To **step up to the plate** is to begin taking action on something or respond to a crisis that is taking place. The phrase is often heard in regard to people who are avoiding doing what they should to help a situation.

A: Mr. Leigh has been ill for nearly two years. Isn't it about time his son **stepped up to the plate**? How old is he now?

B: Old enough to run the business, but the rumor is that he's incapable. They're looking for someone else to take it on.

## Stinking rich

To describe someone as **stinking rich** is to say, in an informal and insulting way, that somebody is very wealthy or has a lot of money and/or equity. The phrase shouldn't be used in a professional setting at all, and more polite alternatives are available to describe the same thing. These include well-to-do and well-off, as well as "very affluent" and "extremely wealthy."

A: Have you seen their car? Farhan in IT says his entire family is **stinking rich**.

B: I heard his mother has connections to Italian royalty.

## Strapped for cash

If someone is **strapped for cash** then they are suffering from a lack of funds and have very little money. The phrase is informal and shouldn't be used in formal or professional settings.

A: Our department has been **strapped for cash** for months. We're running out of materials.

B: I'll do my best to put an order through for you, but I can't promise anything.



## Take a break

To **take a break** is to have a rest, a holiday, or a brief period of inactivity in order to recuperate and re-energize for future activity. People are usually encouraged to **take a break** when they have been working very hard, or when they are overworking and becoming stressed.

A: I really think you should **take a break**, Tanya. You look exhausted.

B: I am a little tired, to be honest, Sal. Maybe I'll go take a walk outside and get some fresh air. I can't go home until it's finished.

## Take place

When something **takes place**, it happens. We use the phrase to describe events occurring in the moment.

A: There are a lot of changes to the structure of the business **taking place** right now, and we're asking you to bear with us as we get accustomed to our new roles and responsibilities.

B: What does this mean for us? Will we feel any negative repercussions as a result of these changes?

## Take someone to the cleaners

When someone is **taken to the cleaners**, we usually mean that they have suffered a crushing and devastating defeat. Often, this is done unfairly or dishonestly, with the person or organization being deceived so that they suffer losses.

A: That lawsuit really **took them to the cleaners**. It's unfair, they didn't really do anything wrong and they've all but lost their business.

B: People can get a lawsuit for anything these days. You have to be careful.

## Take something lying down

If someone **takes something lying down** then they do not protest or complain in response to a setback, complaint, or insult. We usually hear the phrase used in the negative form, with people stating that they will not allow someone to get away with their actions. It can also be expressed as a question.

A: Apparently, they paid for someone to post those negative reviews online. None of them were even real!

B: And you're just going to **take that lying down**? You can't, Michael! You have to do something! Show them you won't let them do that!

## Take something out on someone

When we **take something out on someone**, we treat them in an unpleasant way because we are angry, hurt, or upset. Usually, when we take something out on someone, that person is not the reason for our distress; often, they have absolutely no involvement in the problem at all.

A: I didn't mean to **take my anger out on you** yesterday afternoon, Josie.

B: It's all right, sir. I understand that the meeting didn't go as well as you'd hoped?

## Take something slowly

When we **take something slowly** we approach it with caution and care, thinking about our actions and their consequences on the greater whole. We may ask people to **take something slowly** if we are wary of the outcome, or if we are unsure of what will be asked of us who are involved in the process.

A: All I'm asking is that you **take this slowly**. Don't run at it, think about it. This is a big deal. I don't want you to mess it up.

B: I won't mess it up! I just don't see any reason to hold back; we want to get

in there quick and blow her away!

## Take the bull by the horns

To **take the bull by the horns** is to confidently deal with a difficult problem or situation. The phrase is believed to originate in Spanish bullfighting, as an instruction for the safe handling of a tethered bull (not for the matador fighting it in the ring!).

A: I don't know how we're going to get through the AGM with her in the crowd.

B: Just **take the bull by the horns**, Eve. You have to face her one day, why not tomorrow? You'll be fine.

## Talk shop

To **talk shop** is to talk about a mutual interest, such as a business venture shared by two or more partners. You will usually hear people apologize for **talking shop**, and the phrase carries some negativity. It is usually frowned upon to **talk shop** outside of the workplace.

A: I didn't expect to see you in here tonight, Meghan. How's that million-dollar contract moving along? Will we have a signature by the end of the week?

B: Jay, let's not **talk shop** tonight. I'm here with my family; let's talk about the deal tomorrow. How's your wife?

## Talk someone/something down

When we **talk something down**, we present the negative aspects of it, or discuss its composition in such a way as to highlight its faults and inadequacies. We may **talk an idea down** during a meeting if we don't like the idea or don't agree with it. When we **talk a person down**, we point out

the faults in their argument.

A: Go in there and **talk him down**. Please! He's going wild in there, running away with this idea that we can fund the entire city's supply of water!

B: Well, it won't take a lot to **talk that trash down**. We don't even have a connection to a third of the city.

## Talk someone into something

To **talk someone into something** is to convince them to do something that they were previously unwilling to do. The term refers to persuading someone to change their mind, usually to serve a purpose that will benefit both parties.

A: Are you coming to the staff party tonight? Go, Shauna. You'll meet *loads* of new people, you'll make new connections, there'll be opportunities there to move up in the business... You'll be able to keep me company.

B: All right, Angie. You've **talked me into it**. I'll go to the party.

## Talk someone out of something

To **talk someone out of something** is to convince them not to do something that they were previously going to do. The term refers to persuading someone to change their mind, usually to serve a purpose that will benefit both parties.

A: I was going to go to the party tonight, but I saw Gail at the store on my lunch break and she **talked me out of it**. It'll be too wild for me, I'm too old.

B: Well, you did say you needed to finish your speech this evening. I want you in top form tomorrow!

## Test the waters

To **test the waters** is to attempt to gauge the reaction or result of an idea before launching it completely to its target audience. The phrase comes from

literally testing the temperature of water before getting into it.

A: I'm going to **test the waters** first. See how they feel about renewable energy before I give them my sales pitch.

B: I think that's a good idea; you need to know which angle to go in with.

## The big picture

When someone refers to **the big picture**, they mean a larger, wider, more generalized view of the world, or a specific aspect of it. When someone asks you to think of **the big picture**, they are usually asking that you think about the wider context of a situation and the implications certain actions will have on everybody involved, not just the immediately obvious.

A: I don't understand why they didn't like our pitch.

B: Look at **the big picture**, Candy. We're small fries compared to the other people in there.

## The bottom line

**The bottom line** is, in financial terms, the final total of an account, transaction, or balance. However, it can also be used in a more general sense to mean the most important element to something.

A: What's **the bottom line**, Dave?

B: We've got the Dubai contract, but without transport. It's better than I expected, after our performance yesterday.

## The cat's out of the bag

Once **the cat is out of the bag**, something that was previously a secret, or hidden from people, becomes visible and known by all. The phrase is usually used in a less formal sense, and you wouldn't expect to hear it in a

professional setting.

A: Well, **the cat's out of the bag** now. Before someone else tells you, I should let you all know that I've been offered a transfer to London, and I'm taking it.

B: Oh, my goodness, Jan! Congratulations! What are we going to do without you?

## The elephant in the room

**The elephant in the room** is used to refer to something which is unspoken among a group of people, but which remains glaringly obvious regardless. People can use the term in both positive and negative situations.

A: It was so awkward; I didn't know what to say.

B: Well, **the elephant in the room** was that we all knew long before the meeting that the company was being dissolved, and the real reason why.

## The eleventh hour

To arrive or accomplish something at **the eleventh hour** is to achieve it in the last moment possible, at the last opportunity available. This phrase refers to the last moments of the day before it finishes and a new one begins. It is an old expression that comes from the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, in the King James Bible.

A: We thought it was too late, but at **the eleventh hour** an investor made themselves known.

B: Has the company been bought out?

A: It certainly seems so, Claire.

## The floor is all yours

If **the floor is all yours** then you have the attention of your audience, without any distractions. The phrase will usually be heard during introductions on a stage, or when hosts present speakers and/or entertainers to an event. You may also hear it during meetings, when someone is given the opportunity to talk at length about a project, idea, or process.

A: And without further delay, let me introduce you to our new company president!

B: **The floor is all yours**, Vernon. Blow them away.

## Thick-skinned

Someone who is **thick-skinned** is someone who is tough and can withstand criticism or negative comments on their ideas or work. **Thick-skinned** people are insensitive to attacks on their opinions or actions, and they do not take criticism to heart.

A: We need somebody who is **thick-skinned**. Somebody who can face the public and their complaints every single day and not let it destroy them.

B: I've worked in customer service for twenty-five years, sir. I've learned not to take what people say to heart.

## Think outside the box

To **think outside the box** is to address a problem from a more unusual perspective. People who **think outside the box** are creative thinkers and do not necessarily think in a logical or linear fashion. This phrase is used to positively describe people's methods of thinking and solving problems.

A: There are a lot of promising interns, but none **think outside of the box** quite like Dagny does.

B: I've seen some of her work. She's very creative. We need more original thinkers like her on the team.

## Thought shower

A **thought shower** is an idea-formation method which involves members of a group contributing their ideas and thoughts spontaneously, without concern for others' opinions or the smaller details of each idea.

A: Let's have a **thought shower** right now; let's see what we got.

B: All right, I say we increase our attack and launch a competitor model for half the price.

C: I say we leave the games industry behind us and focus on cell phones.

D: How about we combine game consoles and cell phones?

## Throw cold water over/on (an idea/plan)

To **throw cold water on an idea** is to discourage it, give it a negative review, or be otherwise derogatory toward it. Usually, if someone **throws cold water on something** then they want to make someone feel bad, as well as discredit the idea or project being discussed.

A: I've had it with Reg. He's always **throwing cold water on my ideas**.

B: Some of your ideas *are* a little wacky, Sinead.

## Throw in the towel

To **throw in the towel** is to give up on something that you know to be destined for failure. Someone **throwing in the towel** knows that their actions are not going to lead to success, and so they cease activity in the moment to save from wasting more energy and time.

A: After six years of trying to convince the company to go renewable, he's **thrown in the towel** and moved on.

B: It's a shame. He was an asset to this company, and a forward thinker.



## Throw somebody under the bus

To **throw somebody under the bus** is to cause someone else negativity or to get them into trouble in order to save yourself from the same. Sometimes we use the phrase to describe people sacrificing their colleagues or friends in order to get to a better position than them.

A: I didn't mean to **throw you under the bus** in there, Wendy. I hope you're not upset with me?

B: What did you mean to do, Max? It certainly seemed like you went in there with the intention of getting me into trouble.

## Time on your hands

When you have **time on your hands**, you have a surplus of time. The phrase means the opposite of being busy and suggests that someone might be available for some extra task or engagement.

A: Barney, since you have **time on your hands** with the cancellation, could you do me a favor?

B: Of course, I'm not busy at all.

## Times of need

**Times of need** are moments when help or assistance is needed and required. We may ask for favors in times of need, or request special treatment or processes. In others' times of needs, we may offer what we can to reduce the negative impact of their struggles.

A: I think we should offer a donation to the victims of the flooding outside of the city. I want our company to be one that people can trust in **times of need**.

B: It's a nice gesture, Pip, but what do you suggest we donate?

## Time's up

When **time is up**, there is no time left and the deadline has been reached. **Time's up** is most frequently heard on game shows and in other sport or play situations, but you may also hear it in a professional context.

A: **Time's up**, guys. Let me have your finished presentations before you leave the building, and we'll work through them all at the AGM this evening.

B: Make sure you send the email – no presentation at the AGM will result in us losing out on a prospective new customer.

## To be hit hard by

When someone is **hit hard by** something, they experience a more emotional reaction to a dramatic or unexpected event. In a business sense, companies can be **hit hard by** changes to government regulations, or the economic climate of their local area and the world at large.

A: Stevenson's has been **hit hard by** the recession. I haven't seen any staff in there apart from the old man himself for at least six months.

B: It's a sad story that we see happening across the city, Jim.

## To have seen better days

If something has **seen better days**, then it is beginning to look tired and worn and perhaps doesn't work as well as it did in the past. The phrase is used to negatively describe something and to suggest that it should be replaced or fixed.

A: We've inherited a lot of computers in the merger, and a fair amount of other electronic equipment, like TVs and security systems.

B: All of it has **seen better days**, of course. But some of it may be useful. We'd like you to sort through it all.

## Token of appreciation

A **token of appreciation** is something that you receive in thanks for some service or action you undertook. The token may be anything, but is usually smaller than the action you are being thanked for. It is essentially a small gift offered in thanks for good service.

A: Please accept this small **token of our appreciation** for the valuable services you provide us with here at Kingston College.

B: Why, thank you. I wasn't expecting a gift; you've surprised me!

## Touch base

To **touch base** with someone (or a group of people) is to very briefly make contact with them, for however short an amount of time, in order to receive an update on current information or to assure the safety of one or more parties.

A: You can go wherever you want, the city is yours. Just be sure to **touch base** in the afternoon, to let us know what you're up to and update us on any changes.

B: Will do, sir.

## Tough break

When someone has a **tough break**, they're experiencing some bad luck, or some other negative and/or troublesome experience. The word "tough" means difficult in this instance, a meaning used in English for over four hundred years.

A: I can't believe they've retracted their offer. I really thought we had it!

B: You guys have had a really **tough break**, Ken. Hopefully things will start to look better soon and you'll get someone else who's interested.

## Troubleshoot

To **troubleshoot** something is to address it in its entirety in order to understand what is going wrong and causing problems. We usually **troubleshoot** serious problems, and the process often involves more than one person.

A: Let's **troubleshoot** this together. When did it go wrong? Had anything been changed before that?

B: I turned it on as normal. It wasn't until midday that something went wrong. I saw Owen working on it just before that. Maybe he made some changes to the programming?

## Turn (or show) up like a bad penny

When someone or something **turns up like a bad penny**, they are undesirable and are regularly present. The phrase comes from the dislike for counterfeit or tampered with coins, stemming from historical times where this was much more achievable and common.

A: What happened in yesterday's meeting? I noticed everybody had left by three and it was scheduled to go on until five.

B: Sonia showed up. She's **like a bad penny**. Every time we see her she brings bad vibes and negativity. Nobody wanted to continue with her breathing down our necks.

## Twenty-four-seven

When something takes place **twenty-four-seven** (often written as **24/7**) it takes place all of the time, without a break. The phrase is used by stores, motels, restaurants and other businesses that are open for operations all day and all night long. However, we often use the phrase to exaggerate how much someone or something is doing something, rather than meaning that it really doesn't stop.

A: Have you seen Trevor?

B: He'll be in his office. He's on the phone **24/7** since he got that promotion. I doubt his wife has even seen him.

## Twist someone's arm

To **twist someone's arm** is to forcefully persuade them to do something, usually something which they do not want to do. The term refers to violent coercion, often to serve a purpose which benefits the arm twister more than the twisted.

A: I didn't want to take on the extra shifts, but he **twisted my arm**.

B: You shouldn't let people persuade you to do things you don't want to do, Keira!

## Two sides of the same coin

When we say that two things are **two sides of the same coin**, we mean that they are different perspectives or outlooks on the same situation.

A: Overworked and underpaid. They're **two sides of the same coin**, and the coin is staff management.

B: Well, what's your answer? Pay them more to be here less?

## Two-faced

When someone is **two-faced**, they say one thing to you and very different things to other people. The phrase is informal and should be avoided in a professional setting.

A: I'd stay away from Francesca in reprographics. She's quite **two-faced**.

B: Yeah, I saw her talking to Angie yesterday, and as soon as she left she turned to me and started telling me all about Angie's affair with Rick! I

wouldn't trust her at all.

## Under the (wrong) impression

To be **under the impression** is to think, believe, or assume something. We use the phrase to talk about our thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions to what we experience. To be under the wrong impression is to misunderstand something, or to have been misinformed about it by someone else.

A: I hope you didn't get **the** wrong **impression** yesterday. I'm here to help the company, not hinder its progress.

B: I'm sure you are. I'm just concerned that your help might be my hindrance.

## Under the table

If something is **under the table** then it is out of view, hidden from sight, and a secret to most concerned. When someone asks you to "keep something **under the table**," they are asking you to keep a secret and trusting you with some information.

A: Keep that **under the table**, Mika. I don't want it to be public knowledge until we have the papers signed.

B: I won't tell a soul.

## Up in the air

If something is **up in the air**, then it is uncertain and anything could happen. In a business sense, unexpected circumstances or changes may cause a deal to be thrown **up in the air**, or the future of a company could be described in the same way.

A: I thought we had it in the bag but, just like that, it's all **up in the air** again.

B: It's a battlefield out there, Dave.

## Uphill battle

An **uphill battle** is a struggle, and one which takes a lot of energy and resources. Projects faced with multiple problems and difficulties can be said to be engaged in an **uphill battle**. The term is used to describe projects that may fail as a result of things outside of the business' control.

A: We're facing an **uphill battle** at the moment, and it's not certain that we'll achieve everything on time.

B: That's understandably, Tyler. You've had a lot of obstacles pop up, and lot of red tape to free yourself from.

## Up to speed

To get someone **up to speed** is to inform them of all the details involving a specific event, project, or process. More generally, to be "**up to speed**" on something means to be totally informed and up-to-date on the most recent developments on a topic, project, or relationship.

A: I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about Hayley. I've been in Atlanta for three days.

B: Of course, Ben. Let me bring you **up to speed** on the opera house deal.

## Upper hand

When someone has the **upper hand** in an argument, discussion, or any other event, they are the ones in control of the situation. The term can be used to mean the general power dynamic between different tiers within a company, for example, or it can be used to more specifically describe someone winning in an argument.

A: His first few questions were weak but, by the end of the debate, I'd say he had the **upper hand**.

B: I'd agree with you, if it wasn't for his answer to the final question.

## Value-added

**Value-added** is a production term that refers to the amount a product's value increases through each stage of the production process – in this sense, it is literally the difference between the cost to produce an item, and the price it is put on sale for. The phrase can also be applied to a more general business environment, where it refers to the additional features that can be added to a product at extra expense to the customer.

A: What's the total **value-added** for the product at this stage, compared to the last?

B: At this stage, forty-seven dollars, sir. Compared to twenty-five at the previous stage.

## Walking a tightrope between

To **walk a tightrope between** two things is to balance precariously between to different options. In general, the expression refers to dealing with difficult situations. But, in a business-specific sense, it usually means making a difficult decision between two opposing factors and can refer to compromise.

A: I feel like we're always going to be **walking a tightrope between** paying the suppliers enough and charging people a low enough price to keep them coming back.

B: That's business for you, Nathan.

## Warts and all

If something is described as **warts and all**, then it is unpleasant to look at,



and all of its ugly aspects are on display for people to see. The phrase is often used to allude to a perspective that promotes accepting the good with the bad.

A: You're going to have to accept the changes, **warts and all**. There's nothing we can do now.

B: I suppose there are positives to the whole thing.

## Water under the bridge

**Water under the bridge** is used to describe things, events, or actions that have already taken place and are now in the past. We use the phrase to suggest that we should move on from said past events, rather than dwell on things that cannot be changed.

A: Can't we just try to forget about this now? It happened a long time ago, and we've dealt with the consequences.

B: He's right, it's all **water under the bridge** now. Let's move on.

## Well-to-do

If someone is **well-to-do**, then they are wealthy and usually successful. Individual people can be described as **well-to-do**, as well as families and areas of cities and towns. Close synonyms include affluent and rich.

A: He comes from a very **well-to-do** district in New York, and his family is known to have money.

B: Does that alone make him a good match for our portfolio? He needs to have connections and a good business model too.

## Well-off

Someone who is **well-off** has a good job, a nice home, and a considerable amount of income or equity. The term is informal and would not be used in a

professional setting. Alternatives include rich, wealthy, and affluent.

A: She's very **well-off**. Her records show some interesting deposits.

B: Yes, I heard. Someone we should try to keep sweet, I'd say.

## White-collar

**White-collar** work is used to refer to office or professional work, and **white-collar** workers are people who work in offices or other professional environments. The phrase is a contrast to black-collar, and can be used to ease comparisons and analyses between different classes of workers.

A: **White-collar** workers are expected to suffer most from these changes as statistics show they are more inclined to use fast-food outlets at lunchtime.

B: But is it fair to pin these extra costs on the customers themselves, or should the companies be the ones to foot the bill?

## Win-win situation

**Win-win** situations are situations that are good for everybody, in which all participants or people involved will benefit from the proceedings.

A: I'm going to go to the meeting this evening with the presentation and some flyers. It's a **win-win** situation. Even if nobody is interested, at least they know I'm here.

B: Yeah, maybe they know someone who would be interested.

## Word of mouth

**Word of mouth** is used to refer to how information is being passed on. If something is learned through **word of mouth**, then people have learned through communicating with each other face to face. This contrasts with receiving information through advertisements, internet searches, or marketing

initiatives.

A: How did you hear about today's event?

B: Just **word of mouth**, I guess. Some of my friends told me about it, and I work with some of the performers.

## Worth it

If something is **worth it**, then it is enjoyable and beneficial to you in spite of the effort required in order to attain it. We often use this phrase when something has been hard work or a lot of effort to accomplish, and we are proud or thankful for the outcome of success.

A: I hope that all this hard work is **worth it** in the end, Donovan. I would hate to see that you wasted all this time on nothing.

B: I don't think it will be a waste of time, sir. They seemed very keen when they saw my prototype, and they are very comfortable with the cost.

## Writing is on the wall

If you say that the **writing is on the wall** then you know that something is going to be very difficult, and you can see this clearly and easily. The phrase originates from the Holy Bible, in which a king receives an ominous message via writing which appears on his wall.

A: I don't want to sound negative, Jason, but do you really think this is possible in the timeframe we have?

B: The **writing is on the wall**, Isobel. We knew what we were up against when we started.

## Yes man

A **yes man** is somebody who always agrees to do something, no matter what

it is they are being asked to do. The term is a negative one, used to describe weakness and lack of substantial character or motivation.

A: I've met him before. I wasn't sure about him. Seemed to be a bit of a **yes man**.

B: A lot of people have said that about him. I think he's just eager to impress people.

# Conclusion

Congratulations! You've reached the end of our book on business idioms in English!

By no means is this an exhaustive list of American English business idioms, and we've included business idioms that originate from all over the English-speaking world, not just America. Don't expect to be able to recite them all by heart after just one or two readings. With practice, the phrases and terms within this book will become **second nature** to you – but you absolutely must practice!

The English language is rich in descriptive and emotive language which can help you to express yourself in as many ways as you want. Keep learning, keep studying, and keep adding to your vocabulary and speaking experience. Before you know it, you'll hear idioms flowing out of your mouth as if they've always done so.

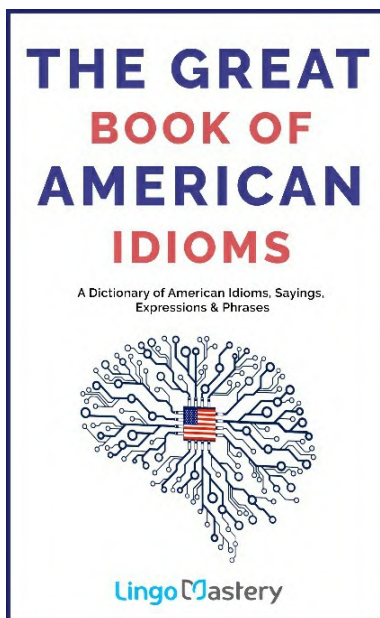
The best way by far to become familiar with idioms, phrases, and terms that seem confusing or difficult at first is to use them in real life! Don't be afraid of making a mistake—people will usually be able to understand what you mean, and it shows initiative that you're doing your best to integrate and converse in familiar terms.

Once you've learned all of the phrases and terms in this book and can confidently use them in professional and social situations, don't stop there! The English language is a never-ending journey of knowledge and cultural understanding – think of all the useful

pieces of historical information you now know! Language is a key to understanding people and places, and now you are in possession of that key!

Now, why are you still reading? Get out there and SPEAK like an expert!

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