



LIGHT-BULB MOMENTS: *Thinking of Idioms*

by Peter Ball

We all love idioms don't we? I mean, from a language-learner's point of view, they are the real 'icing on the cake' aren't they? But how do we remember what they mean and how to use them? We can memorise a few, and try to use them as often as we can (probably too often!), but how do we deal with an idiom that we are meeting for the first time? Firstly, you need to know that idioms are everywhere in English: anything that doesn't have a literal, physical meaning is an idiom. Let's look at some examples:

- *I find his excuses hard to swallow, he's lying.*
- *The police have been digging around in his accounts looking for evidence of fraud.*
- *He's a really bright spark, so I think he'll do well at school.*

These sentences all contain idioms, because you can't swallow words or dig in a bank account in any literal or physical way – and how can a 'spark' do well at school? These kinds of idioms are far more common, and therefore far more important, than the more colourful expressions like 'He's kicked the bucket' (died), 'She's hitting the books' (studying), or 'Break a leg!' (Good luck!), and without them students often sound too formal – saying things like:

- *I don't believe his excuses.*
- *The police have been investigating his accounts looking for evidence of fraud.*

- *He is a very intelligent student, so I think he'll succeed at university.*

So how can you get to know idioms? Well luckily there is a basic logic at work behind most idiomatic usage in English and if you can crack the pattern you can follow what people are saying or writing about, and how they feel about this – and you'll be able to make a good guess at the meaning of an idiom that you haven't heard before.

This is because somewhere, deep in our subconscious, there is a group of basic ideas that help to govern the way we create, use and interpret idioms. We are going to look at some of these in the following blog posts (keep coming back – as we'll be adding more later):

[Life Is A Road](#)

[Time Is Money](#)

[Knowledge Is Food](#)

[The Temperature of Relationships](#)

[Economics Is Gardening](#)

[Arguments Are Buildings](#)

[The Archaeology Of Truth](#)

[Intelligence Is Light](#)

[The Geography Of Opinions](#)

[Information is Water](#)

Some Basic Advice About Idioms

Context: Idioms are unusual expressions. So ask yourself 'Why is that person using an unusual expression?' The reasons are likely to be connected with emphasis, exaggeration, or a high state of emotion! So check the context – and the facial expression!

Check: Use expressions like; 'so you're pretty angry about that right?' or 'OK, you mean that you're too busy at the moment.'

Be honest: Try using; 'I'm sorry, but I don't know what you mean.'

Never translate: Idioms from your own language may use the same imagery or concepts (and it is always interesting to notice

these similarities) but they are unlikely to translate word-for-word into English.

Listen: Native English speakers NEVER say 'it's raining cats and dogs' – so why should you? Listen to what native speakers actually say in a given situation, and copy.

Notes: Keep a notebook of your favourite expressions and add anything new that you hear. Try to use new expressions soon after you learn them, this is called 'use it or lose it.'

Tolerate: You will definitely make mistakes and create confusion when you use idioms, so be brave and allow yourself the space to try, fail, and try again.

GOOD LUCK!



Native English speakers NEVER say 'it's raining cats and dogs.'



LIFE IS A ROAD

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” – so said Lao Tzu, the founder of Chinese Taoism. When he said these wise words, he wasn’t just offering encouragement to people who had to walk long distances in Zhou Dynasty China during the 6th BC, but was talking about every kind of journey in life. The quotation is generally taken to mean that any undertaking in life – even really big ones – must start with small steps, and that we must not become discouraged by the size of the tasks in front of us. The idea that our tasks, and indeed our lives, can be seen as physical journeys that can be broken down into steps is common in many languages; English is no exception.

So we might set out on a new career, saunter through life without a care, follow in someone’s footsteps or take a difficult task one step at a time. And just as the physical hikes, strolls or walks that we go on require paths or roads, which can be straight or winding, and sometimes lead to dead ends – so it is with our projects, careers and lives. This means that some of us want to follow a clear career path, are proud of the milestones we achieve and don’t want to work in a dead end job. When deciding on a course of action we might find ourselves at a crossroads in life, wondering which way to turn, hoping we don’t take the road to ruin! Let’s look at some examples:

- *He’s put his criminal past behind him – He’s on the straight and narrow now!*
- *It’s a difficult system to get used to, so let me just walk you through the first few steps.*
- *We need to come up with a road map to go forward with these negotiations.*

- *Being selected for the national team was the first major milestone in my career.*
- *So you want to invest in his business? I wouldn’t go down that road if I were you!*
- *I feel like I’m at a crossroads in my career and I’m not sure which way to turn.*
- *I have tried to follow in Dad’s footsteps and to do the right things.*
- *I suppose I’ve gone down quite a winding career path – I’ve never done things the easy way!*
- *Holmes had crossed paths with Moriarty several times before and it had never gone well.*
- *I know I said you should read a bit more, but War and Peace? Don’t run before you can walk!*

Please note that we use the imperial system, rather than the modern metric system, to refer to distances in idioms:

- *We are just inching forward with this project at a snail’s pace.*
- *I think I can get good mileage out of this idea.*



Going at a snail’s pace?



Dead End

NEXT EXIT



Career Change

NEXT EXIT

Notice the way that prepositions are used to imply movement or direction in life:

- *He envied his grandchildren having their whole lives in front of them.*
- *I always try and put failures behind me and get on with my life.*

Also, if we are travelling along a road or pathway, we might expect to find obstacles to our progress and have to deal with them in some way:

- *We need to tread carefully here because ethnic tensions in the area can be a minefield.*
- *I don't know yet what we'll do if they reject our offer – but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.*

And please note that idioms involving roads can refer to other things:

- *The information superhighway has changed the way we think about the world.*

Activity

- 1 Books about morals often have a picture of a maze on the cover – why is this?
- 2 Is there anyone you admire whose footsteps you would like to follow in?
- 3 What do you see as a dead end job?
- 4 Have you ever been stuck at a crossroads in your life? – Which way did you turn?
- 5 Do you know anybody who you need to tread carefully with?

- 6 Is gambling always the road to ruin?
- 7 Do you try and take life at an easy pace or do you feel rushed off your feet?
- 8 Can you describe a major milestone in your life?
- 9 What steps would you need to take to get a job in an English-speaking country?
- 10 Do you like having everything planned, or do you like not knowing what's round the next corner?

Commentary

There are so many idioms in English that treat processes as journeys, and refer to either the movement itself, or the path which it takes – that the hardest thing about writing this blog has been deciding which examples to leave out! So, can you think of any other expressions in English that treat our various projects, choices, careers or lives as journeys along some kind of road?

Do we use roads or walking to express any other meanings in English?

Are there any idioms in English that involve other forms of transport – for example boats, cars or trains?

Can you think of any idioms from your own language which involve walking or roads in some way?

And remember, learning English is a long journey and wherever you are on that road we at LOI can be with you every step of the way. It's a journey full of surprises and you never know what you'll find round the next bend in the road!

TIME = MONEY



When Benjamin Franklyn wrote that 'time is money' in his *Advice to a Young Tradesman* in 1746, he meant that time was a commodity which can be treated the same way that we treat money or any other resource. He was right too, from a linguistic perspective anyway, as we have long had this attitude towards time within the English language. Like money, time is something that we save, waste or spend. We praise good time management, we complain that we don't have enough time, and we wonder how long our time will last. So in this blog we are going to look at the way in which the English language treats the concepts of time and money in pretty much the same way.

Let's begin with a few examples – look at these sentences and decide if you can substitute the word 'time' for the word 'money' (you may have to make a few extra changes):

- *We will have to go soon - we are getting short of money.*
- *I have wasted a lot of time on this project.*
- *We made some changes at work to save money.*

- *He is determined to make it work – he's invested so much time in the business already.*
- *He worked my shift at work for me – so I guess I owe him some time in return.*
- *I would like to devote more time to keeping the garden in shape.*
- *This problem has cost us too much money already!*
- *We are living on borrowed time.*
- *I thought I gave him enough money – but he seems to have squandered it all!*
- *She's always had better money-management skills than me.*

In most of the sentences above you can substitute 'time' for 'money' without a problem. The context may change, but the sentences themselves still look fine.

Please note that we can replace the actual word 'time' with an *amount* of time – and we can do this with 'money' too:

- *We spent three weeks there.*
- *I spent \$50 on it.*
- *It takes half an hour to get there.*
- *It took \$100 to convince him!*

Activity

Write answers to some of these questions (use full sentences).

- 1 Is it worse to waste time or money?
- 2 How much time and money do you spend on your hobbies?
- 3 How much money would it take to make you do a bungee jump?
- 4 Do you ever steal a quiet moment for yourself at work?
- 5 Are you able to make time for the things you enjoy?
- 6 How much time and money is it right to invest in a new relationship?
- 7 Should criminals pay for their crimes by going to prison or paying fines?

- 8 How important is it for a family to have good money-management skills?
- 9 How much time and money do you spend on your appearance?
- 10 Is it better to spend time to save money or spend money to save time?

Commentary

Are time and money related in the same way in your language – are there any idioms that reflect this?

Are there any other words or phrases in English that can be used with 'time' and 'money' in this way?

What other commodities can we invest, waste, save or run out of? Here are a few ideas – but feel free to add to this list!

- **Patience:** *I'm running out of patience with him.*
- **Energy:** *He devotes a lot of energy to worrying.*
- **Effort:** *They invested a lot of effort into the project.*
- **Breath:** *Talking to them is just a waste of breath.*
- **Resources:** *We need to save the world's resources.*



Knowledge Is Food

What is the basic unit of knowledge – a fact, a truth, a maxim or a law? Well, from a computing point of view it is called a 'byte'. In 1956 Werner Buchholz, a computer scientist working at IBM, wanted a term he could use to describe the eight binary digits (bits) needed to encode a single letter, number or symbol on a computer. He chose the word 'byte' – a deliberate misspelling of the word 'bite' – and this term now refers to the basic unit of all the information held on all computers, everywhere. When he chose this word, Buchholz was (perhaps unknowingly) using a very common, basic and important idiom in the English language; Knowledge (or information) is food.

If you think about it, this idiom is quite easy to understand; information exists in the outside world and must somehow come inside us so that we can learn and understand it. This process of bringing information into ourselves can be thought of as eating. So we might hear a tasty bit of gossip or devour a newspaper, we may need to add a pinch of salt to unlikely stories, chew over a difficult subject, or digest information – we may even need to spit information out if required!



Now while you chew that over, let's look at some examples:

- *He absolutely devours newspapers – he gets about three every morning!*
- *You have a great appetite for knowledge, and I respect that.*
- *I won't give you an answer yet – Let me chew it over for a while.*
- *Who broke the school window? Come on lad – spit it out!*
- *I got my dad a subscription to The Reader's Digest.*
- *She always exaggerates so if I were you I'd take what she says with a pinch of salt.*
- *Don't give them too much information at the start of the course – just bite-sized chunks for now.*
- *We sat with a bottle by the river ruminating on the meaning of life.*
- *The exam system is terrible – you just have to regurgitate the textbook, basically.*
- *Information is food? – I'm not swallowing that!*

Please note that idioms involving food or eating can express other meanings in English, for example if you bite off more than you can chew, you try to do too much or more than you are able to do; or if you eat your own words, you retract what you said earlier:

- *He bit off more than he could chew when he agreed to paint the house by himself.*
- *He's going to regret saying that – I'm going to make him eat his own words!*

And choices, for example, have taste:

- *I can offer you a couple of tasty options from our new winter collection.*
- *The delegates are being forced to choose between two unpalatable candidates.*

Devour a newspaper?

Activity

Fill in the blanks using words and phrases from this blog – the number of words you need is in brackets at the end of each sentence:

- 1 We've seen all of the performers and while the judges _____ their decision, we'll listen to some music. (2)
- 2 What did she tell you? Come on _____! (3)
- 3 I was always a really fast reader – I _____ all the Harry Potter books in a single summer holiday. (1)
- 4 There is nothing new in his arguments; he's just _____ the company policy. (1)
- 5 Our travel guides are arranged into informative _____ sections. (2)
- 6 He always tells unlikely stories so you should _____ (1) what he says _____. (5)
- 7 I've never found him sincere so I found his apology hard to _____. (1)

- 8 It was a long and informative lecture but there was almost too much information for me to _____. (1)
- 9 I love teaching students who have an _____ for science. (1)
- 10 We spent time _____ about how our childhood experiences had shaped us. (1)

Commentary

Can you suggest any other English idioms that show us 'eating' information in any way?

What other meanings can we express in English with words or expressions about eating and food?

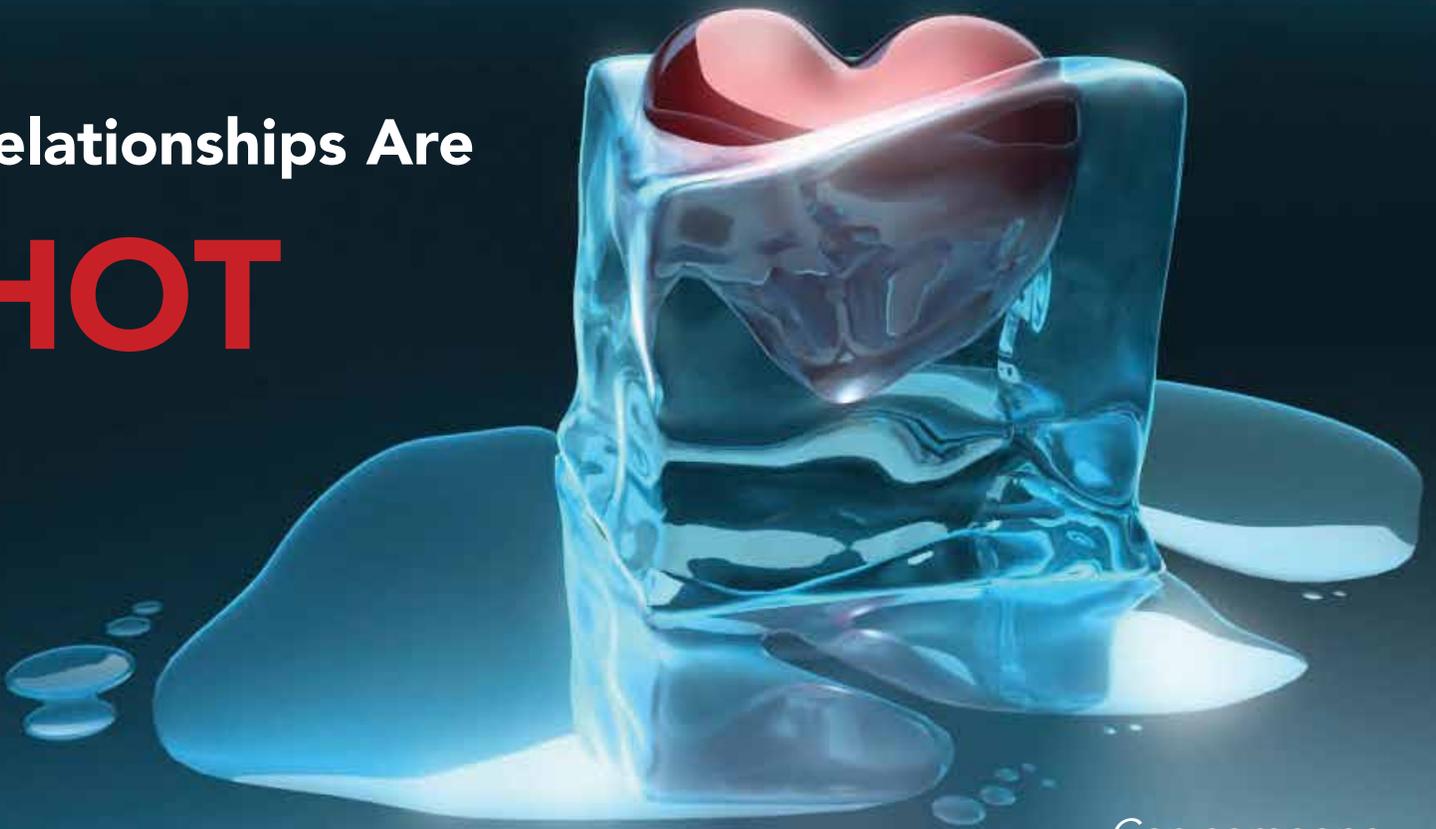
Can you think of any idioms from your own language which link eating and food with information or knowledge in some way?

Anyway I hope that this blog has given you plenty to digest and that you will always be hungry to learn English!



Don't bite off more than you can chew!

Relationships Are **HOT**



*Can someone
be cold-hearted?*

Here is a party game that I used to play with friends and family when I was young (a long time ago!) It involves somebody hiding something, and somebody else searching for it. Firstly, I would close my eyes or leave the room. Then someone would hide something, some keys perhaps, in some part of the room. After this I would be allowed to look for them and the rest of the players could offer encouragement by saying; 'You're getting warmer,' when I approached the hidden object, or; 'You're getting colder,' when I went in the wrong direction. When I got really close to the hidden keys, some of the younger children would be shouting 'You're really hot now – boiling!' And finally I would find the keys under a magazine on the coffee table!

The idea that you get warmer when you are closer to something is quite common in English and is particularly strong when applied to our relationships with each other. Heat is a metaphor for how close we feel to someone else, and how well we think they are treating us. Close relationships are 'warm', and unfriendly

relationships are 'cold'. This means that if I say that the receptionist at the hotel greeted me very warmly, you can be sure that she was very friendly and welcoming. Equally, if I tell you that the audience gave me a frosty reception, you will know that my lecture was not a great success!

So we can say that our relationships and feelings have some sort of 'linguistic temperature!' Here are some examples:

- *Hello – and a very warm welcome to the show!*
- *I tried to explain to her but she just gave me the cold shoulder.*
- *Perhaps you should cool things off with him for a while.*
- *I think things are heating up between Dave and Mary!*
- *She was a very cold-hearted mother who never gave us hugs or praise.*
- *We have set up a 24-hour hotline for anyone who wants more information.*

- *Well, that was a very frosty reception – I don't think we're very welcome here!*
- *The cold war was a low point in East-West relations in Europe.*
- *She liked him immediately; it was the warm smile and the warm handshake.*
- *I can't stand these cold callers trying to sell me things I don't want!*

Notice that heat can also describe our relationship to ideas:

- *We took the temperature of the group as to whether John would be a suitable replacement for Mark and found that most people were quite warm to the idea.*

Activity

Match the words on the left with those on the right to make temperature idioms – you can use the same word more than once.

Warm / Hot

Handshake / Reception

Cold / Freeze

Out / Stare (x2) / So

Frosty

Relations / Heart / On

Examples: hotline / so cold / hot on

Now use them in these sentences:

- 1 I've convinced management and now they are really _____ the idea.

- 2 He had a friendly smile and a _____ - I knew we would get on.

- 3 I don't think my girlfriend's mum liked me much – she gave me a rather _____.

- 4 Don't _____ me _____ of this – I want to be fully informed.

- 5 She's a lovely kid and has a really _____.

- 6 I smiled at the security guard but he just gave me a _____.

- 7 Our two countries have always enjoyed very _____.

- 8 Don't be _____, you should have more sympathy for people!

Commentary

Can you suggest any other English idioms where heat is used to express relationships through temperature in this way?

Do we use heat to express any other meanings in English?

Can you think of any idioms from your own language which involve heat in some way?

Hopefully you have warmed to this idea and will now begin noticing this idiom in the English you read, hear – and speak!



They gave
a warm
welcome.

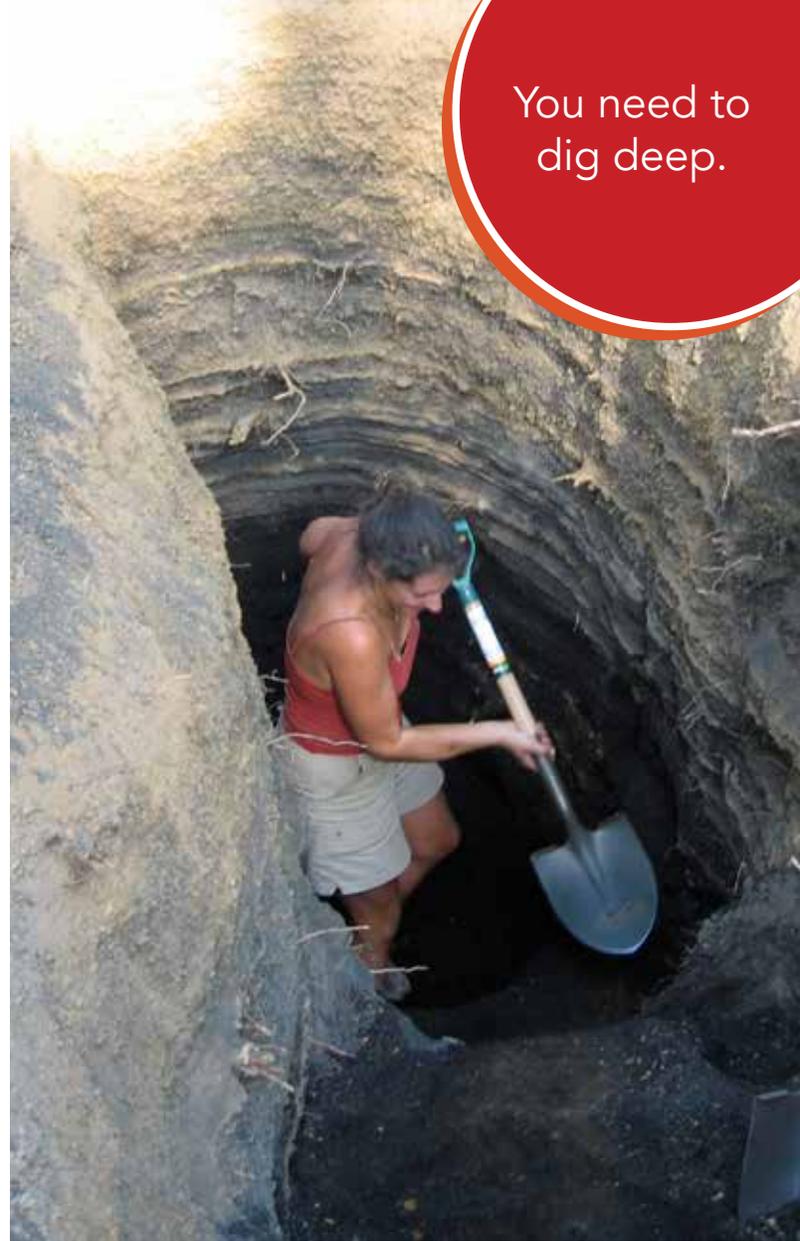
Economics Is Gardening

In Hal Ashby's excellent 1979 comedy 'Being There', Peter Sellers plays the part of a simple-minded gardener who accidentally becomes a top financial adviser in Washington DC. One of the running jokes in the film is the way that Sellers' character misunderstands questions about the economy to be questions about his garden – and how businessmen and television presenters mistake his answers and comments about gardening to be sound financial advice!

How can this be? Well, in the English language there are many words and expressions that we use in agriculture and gardening that can also be used to describe the world of economics and business. After all, if a gardener and an economist meet at a party, we can be sure they'll agree with each other that encouraging growth is a good idea! Let's look at some examples:

- *If you work hard now, you'll reap the rewards later.*
- *We needed to prune out the deadwood to make the company more competitive.*
- *The first stage of the interview process is really just to separate the wheat from the chaff – to discount the applicants who are definitely unsuitable.*
- *Our main business is rooted in this sector.*
- *There have been sharp staff cutbacks since they lost the contract.*
- *We will have to dig deep if we want this project to succeed.*
- *There has been great growth over the second quarter.*
- *The company was in a terrible state – we needed to make root and branch reform.*
- *We have invested a lot of seed money in this project.*
- *After the recession we can now see the first bright shoots of recovery, with several new businesses opening around town.*

You need to dig deep.



Please note that many of the above phrases can be used in other contexts; for example, 'dig deep' simply means 'try harder' and can be used in any situation where more effort is required;

- *Liverpool are going to have to dig deep here if they are going to win this match.*

Also, some agricultural idioms can be used in non-business contexts:

- *The entire university should act as one on this issue, rather than each department trying to plough its own furrow.*

And some gardening idioms don't seem to transfer to other contexts:

- *I've killed every plant I've ever owned. But she has got really green fingers, you should see her garden – it's beautiful!*

Activity

Match these phrases with their definitions:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Cutbacks | a) Get the benefit of doing something |
| 2. Seed money | b) Hopeful early signs |
| 3. Root and branch reform | c) Improvement |
| 4. Rooted in | d) Try harder |
| 5. To reap the rewards | e) Money needed to start a business |
| 6. Separate the wheat from the chaff | f) Remove old procedures, materials – or people |
| 7. Bright (green) shoots | g) Savings |
| 8. Dig deep | h) Substantial changes |
| 9. Prune out the deadwood | i) Based on |
| 10. Growth | j) Identify the useful, and the unsuitable, materials, information – or people |

Now try and use the expressions in sentences...

Commentary

Can you suggest any other English idioms where agricultural or gardening terms are applied to economics or business?

In what other contexts can horticultural idioms be used?

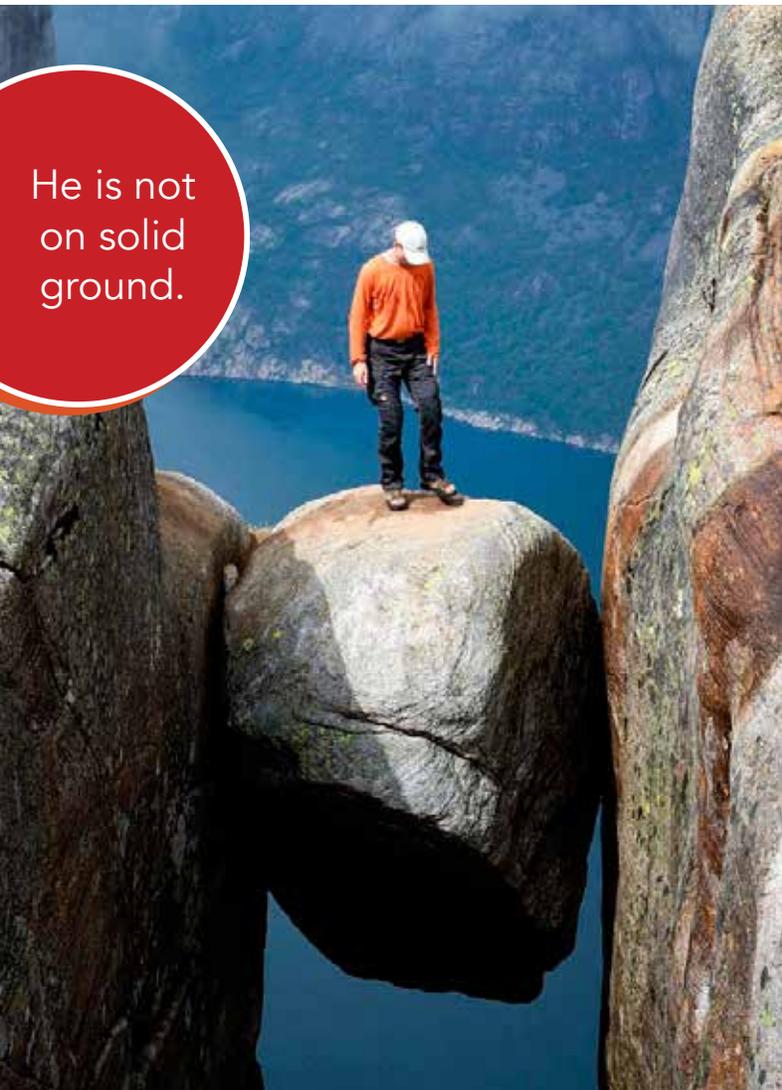
Can you think of any idioms from your own language which use words and phrases from gardening or farming in some way?



Is your money growing?

Arguments Are Buildings

'The wise man builds his house on the rock,' – so goes the traditional saying (it's loosely based on Matthew 7:24-27 in the Bible), but while it is certainly wise to build a house on solid ground, and with the proper materials, this saying is generally taken to be about the foundations of our beliefs. In fact there has always been a close link between buildings and beliefs; for example, the word 'church' originally referred to a group of people who worshipped together (now more commonly called a 'congregation'), the teachings and philosophy they followed, and the physical building that they used. Keeping this mind (and checking your dictionary for details) it won't be surprising for you to find that the word 'edifice' refers to an important or imposing building (like a church), 'edification' means 'moral improvement' and 'edified' means 'educated' or 'informed'.



He is not on solid ground.

This idiom now has a wider use in the English language so that phrases mentioning construction or foundation can refer to knowledge and ideas generally. So ideas and theories should be grounded in fact or based on truth, an argument should have a clear structure; we can deconstruct a complex idea in order to explain it, or even demolish ideas which we strongly disagree with. Let's look at some examples, and decide if they are more about the structure of something, or more about the ground beneath it:

- *With so much supporting evidence, the police can build a good case for conviction.*
- *He is such an unreliable witness – his entire testimony was a fabrication of lies and half-truths.*
- *I feel like I am on pretty solid ground when I'm talking about my thesis.*
- *Our products are strong on reliability and we can build on this foundation in the future.*
- *His essay was terrible – there was no structure to the argument.*
- *His reputation has been completely shattered by these baseless accusations.*
- *If she is taking bribes, it completely undermines her position on corruption.*
- *These conclusions are based on years of research in the field.*
- *She won the debate easily – she just demolished their arguments!*
- *I welcome any constructive criticisms of my work.*

'Ground' is the most commonly used word in this context:

- *Being rude to customers is grounds for dismissal.*
- *These allegations are completely groundless and are just intended to disrupt our preparations for the Games.*
- *Is any of this grounded in fact?*

Activity

Use these words and expressions:

Brick by brick / Ground / Undermining

Founding / Constructive / Grounds

Fabricated / Constructed / Groundless

Based / Cornerstone

To complete these sentences:

- 1 On what _____ have you arrested my client?
- 2 I don't trust him; I think he _____ the entire story.
- 3 These princess toys are _____ our efforts to empower young girls.
- 4 This principle of fairness is the _____ of all our projects.
- 5 Both parties said that the first day of negotiations had been both positive and _____.
- 4 I don't accept anything you say – your claims are _____!
- 6 Freud was the _____ father of psychoanalysis.
- 7 I am going to take his arguments apart _____.
- 8 Cyber security is not really my area, I feel like I'm on difficult _____ lecturing teenagers about it!
- 9 _____ on these positive sales figures, I would say that the outlook is good.
- 10 If you have a well _____ argument I'm sure you'll convince them.

Commentary

Can you think of any other idioms in English which describe the structure of ideas or the 'ground' which they stand on?

Do you have any expressions in your own language that describe ideas as if they are buildings which need good foundations?

Are buildings and foundations used to describe or express any other ideas in English, for example; why do we often seem to build somebody up just to knock them down?

What expressions do you normally use to describe how ideas are organised, or how reliable they are?

Please note that while we might dig foundations for an argument, we also dig for secrets and information – see [The Archaeology Of Truth](#).

Obviously, when you build your house on solid ground it will be in a particular location – and this position will affect your view of the world – see [The Geography Of Opinions](#).



Information Is Water

Get your
feet wet

What is the source of all wisdom? Where do knowledge and learning come from? This sounds like the kind of question that can only be answered in a fairy tale. In Ireland, where I live, we have plenty of those! Many Irish fairy tales mention a magic place called Connla's Well where the rivers of Ireland rise up from the ground (there is some disagreement about exactly which rivers, and exactly where the well is located). The well is not only spoken of as a source of life-giving water, but also as a source of wisdom and knowledge – it even has wise fish (salmon) living in it. Over the years and in various different tales, many bards and poets have searched for this well of knowledge and wisdom – with varying degrees of success. I wonder if you have similar fairy tales in your own culture which link water and knowledge in this way.

In any case, water-as-knowledge or information is a very deep, frequent and important idiom in English. We can talk about a source, pool or well of knowledge, or of tapping into someone's experience. But the idiom works particularly well with the movement of information. Take the way that a scandal becomes news; first there is the occasional drip of rumours, this becomes a steady flow of allegations and finally a deluge of accusations! So while you let that information sink in, here are a few examples:

- *You've been at the company for longer than me do you mind if I tap in to your experience and get some advice?*
- *We need to ensure an easy flow of information between our departments.*
- *Before you publish your story, you should check your sources.*
- *There is no point asking me about that subject – I won't be drawn on it.*
- *Do you know any good websites where I can stream old movies?*
- *Ask Mary, she'll know – she's a real fountain of knowledge!*
- *He resigned amid a flood of allegations.*
- *We need to begin by opening channels of communication between the two sides.*
- *If we are going to succeed here, we will need to pool our resources.*
- *The story of their affair was first leaked to the press at the end of last week.*

Of course, water can have other meanings in our culture; for example cleaning the body and soul – and have you ever thrown a coin into water to make a wish?

Also, in the English language, other forms of movement can be described using water – the movement of people for example:

- *We have had a steady stream of customers all morning.*
- *The turnstiles were installed to control spectator flow in the stadium.*

Also, water-related idioms can express other ideas and meanings in English; here we see a river as some kind of a barrier to success:

- *I have only had a few piano lessons so far – I've barely gotten my feet wet.*
- *I was worried about entering for the marathon, but in the end I took the plunge!*

Activity

Write answers to some of these questions (use full sentences).

- 1 Do your ideas flow better at work or at home?
- 2 Should we all have to pay for online streaming services?
- 3 Who is the fountain of gossip where you work, or in your family?

- 4 Has any politician you know been affected by a flood of allegations?
- 5 If you saw corruption at work, would you leak it to the press?
- 6 How efficient are channels of communication where you work?
- 7 Should phone-tapping be illegal?
- 8 How important is it for journalists to check their sources?
- 9 Have you ever suffered from a mental block?
- 10 Can you tap into the experience of other people at work?

Commentary

Can you suggest any other English idioms that describe information as some kind of water?

What other meanings in English can we express with idioms based on water?

Can you think of any idioms from your own language which treat information as water in some way?

Finally, I hope that you have not been inundated with information in this blog and that the ideas won't take too long to sink in!



How well do
your ideas
flow?

The Archaeology Of Truth

In Steven Spielberg's excellent 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones must find the Ark of the Covenant. This was a kind of box which was supposed to contain the 10 commandments that were given to Moses. There's something symbolic in this – if you consider that the commandments represent some kind of universal truth or wisdom, then perhaps you can see the search for the covenant as a search for truth. I used to work as an archaeologist and watching this excellent movie was more or less compulsory for us 'diggers' at the time - we used to joke that Indy was searching for truth itself and that an archaeologist was the ideal person to choose for a search for truth and wisdom!

But you don't need to get your hands dirty to unearth interesting information, because in the English language, any kind of discovery can be made under the ground. It often seems that an investigation is an excavation: information may be hidden from us, perhaps buried deep somewhere; it needs to be dug around for, and finally brought to light. Look at these examples and decide which parts of this process they refer to:

- *I want you to dig deep into your memories and think about your first day at school.*
- *The Police have reopened the case after new evidence came to light.*

- *I've been working in the archives for the last few months and have unearthed some interesting stories about him.*
- *Ask Mary – she's a mine of information on the subject!*
- *They have started an investigation and hope to get to the bottom of the problem soon.*
- *I don't want the newspapers digging into my private life.*
- *She had tried to bury the memory of it for years.*
- *New developments in the scandal emerged over the weekend.*
- *I think we need to get things out in the open and talk about them honestly.*
- *The city is home to a vibrant underground music scene.*

When a meaning is obvious and easy to understand we use a reversal of the idiom:

- *We need new financial transparency regulations*
- *I understand you – your message is crystal clear*

Interestingly, if we have an exam to prepare for or a bill to pay, many of us adopt a very interesting strategy – often called the 'Ostrich method!'

- *This is no way to run a company – whenever there's a problem you just put your head in the sand and hope it will go away!*

Stick your
head in the
sand.



Activity

Match the first parts of these sentences (1-10) with their endings (A-J)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 It is no longer a secret | A but John will get to the bottom of it – he’s a great mechanic. |
| 2 Four soldiers have now been charged | B since the incident came to light last March. |
| 3 An autopsy report unearthed | C buried since the last election. |
| 4 I wish I had dug deeper | D a clear pattern will emerge. |
| 5 I’m not sure what’s wrong with the engine yet | E of information about that era. |
| 6 If you study the figures long enough | F is digging into all of my accounts. |
| 7 I wish I had done my tax return on time because now the tax office | G punk rock movement in the city. |
| 8 The riots were an explosion of some of the anger that has been | H they are completely out in the open about their relationship these days. |
| 9 She is one of the leading voices in the underground | I by a newspaper suggested his death was no accident. |
| 10 This collection of essays is a goldmine | J into granddad’s war memories, but it’s too late now. |

Commentary

- Can you suggest any other English idioms that refer to information, searching and discovery in this way?
- What other idioms can you think of that are about searching or discovering information – especially secrets (think about wrapping a parcel or opening a box)?

- Are there any other meanings that we can express by referring to the ground, or digging in it?
- Can you think of any idioms from your own language that are about hiding or searching for information or secrets?

Finally, I hope that you continue to dig into the English language, you never know what treasures will emerge if you dig deep enough – and if you like getting your hands dirty try reading [Economics Is Gardening](#).

He
unearthed a
good story.



Intelligence Is Light

Do others
keep you in
the dark?



Imagine that you are in a college lecture and that your teacher is trying to explain something that the class have been having difficulty with. Maybe a tough equation, a difficult moral problem or a poem that nobody understands. Finally the teacher shows, proves or says something that finally makes everybody understand; everything now makes sense! Around the room, people nod in agreement; some raise their eyebrows and smile; the mood in the room lifts – as if some new bright light is now shining.

This is called a 'light-bulb moment' and it's the moment when we conceive or understand a (usually good) idea for the first time. It's quite a common expression; The Oxford Dictionary defines it as 'A moment of sudden realization, enlightenment, or inspiration' and it is a powerful image. For example, we often see cartoon characters with light-bulbs above their heads when they have a new idea, or come to understand something.

The idea that understanding (and, as we will see, intelligence) can be expressed as light is very common in English; people have bright ideas, become brilliant scholars, shine a light on things when they explain them, and achieve enlightenment.

This idiom also works in reverse; in English, darkness often refers to different types of ignorance. We get kept in the dark when people

don't tell us a secret; we make dim-witted mistakes, and we walk out of dull movies.

So we can say that knowledge is bright and ignorance is dark – here are some examples:

- *John came top of his class in all of his tests again – he's a real bright spark!*
- *People come from all over the world to find enlightenment at the meditation centre.*
- *The recent discovery of King Richard's body has thrown light on his actual cause of death.*
- *This film is really dull – when is something interesting going to happen?*
- *He was always a brilliant student and it was no surprise when he won the scholarship.*
- *New evidence has recently come to light that could lead to further charges in the case.*
- *Let's keep Sarah in the dark about it for now – she loves a good surprise.*
- *I think that his political supporters are pretty dim-witted, they don't seem to know much about the world.*
- *These kinds of injuries were more common back in the Dark Ages of NFL concussion awareness.*
- *Well that was a very illuminating lecture – I think I really get it now!*

The Geography of Opinions

What is a political map and why might we need one? In some countries there seem to be so many different political parties and points of view that things can become rather confusing for voters at election time – so maybe some kind of map would be useful. But why a map – why not a list, or a diagram? Perhaps the reason is that we imagine some kind of political landscape in which people stand in particular places which indicate their opinions on particular issues. For example, in most democratic parliaments the political parties sit together in particular parts of the room that they meet in. The prime minister sits in a seat at the front of his grouping with his supporters behind him and with the opposition politicians sitting opposite. The minor parties usually sit according to whether they support the government or not – which side they are on. This is why we can talk about right – or left-wing politics, and how we can take a position on an issue, stand behind someone we agree with, or change sides in an argument.

Interestingly, if I express my opinion by standing in a particular location then this will effect what I can see, what my view of the world is. So I can see things differently from other people, have a positive outlook, look up to – or down on people, or describe my point of view of a situation or issue.

So we stand in a particular place, and this gives us a particular view of the world; let's look at some examples and decide which are about locations and which are about views:

- *I don't want him to come to dinner – he has very right-wing views.*
- *I think the royal family look down on us all.*
- *She was always very well regarded in the company and commanded great loyalty.*
- *How are things on your side of the political fence?*
- *There has always been a complex political landscape in the country.*
- *Artists and musicians often look at life in new and interesting ways.*



She is sitting on the fence.

- *We'll give you all the support you need – we're behind you all the way.*
- *From my point of view, I think that it's a very good deal.*
- *We need more information to give us a better perspective of this situation.*
- *It's not fair - whenever there's an argument you always take his side!*

Notice that 'stand' can be used in both senses:

- *From where I stand it looks like the economy is going nowhere.*
- *Where do you stand on nuclear energy?*

Perhaps it's not surprising to note that altitude affects morals:

- *I've always looked up to my Mum; she's been an inspiration to me.*
- *I think we hold the moral high ground on this issue.*

Also, the two sides of an argument are often separated by some kind of barrier:

- *He's always sitting on the fence whenever there's an argument.*

Activity

Use the following expressions:

Perspective / Stand (x2) / Sitting on the fence

Look up to / Point of view / Looked at

Left-wing / Taking sides / Look up to

To complete these sentences:

- 1 Why should I _____ rich people? They're no better than you or me!
- 2 She has never _____ life in the same way as other people – she always had her own ideas.
- 3 If we all _____ together I'm sure we can get the management to back down.
- 4 Perhaps we should try to look at things from their _____.
- 5 After the briefing I hope you will all have a better _____ of the problem.
- 6 Our whole family is very _____ – we've always been involved in trade unions.

- 7 Many voters are _____ and waiting until after the televised debate before they decide.
- 8 Many people _____ him for inspiration – he's done such a lot for charity.
- 9 I think that the economic outlook is good from where I _____.
- 10 I don't like _____ when my brothers fight – I usually think they are both wrong!

Commentary

Can you think of any other idioms in English which use geographical features or physical locations to express or describe opinions or outlook in this way?

Do you have any expressions in your own language that use geography to express opinions or attitudes in some way?

Can maps and geography express or describe any other ideas in English?

What expressions do you normally use to describe what you, or other people, think?



Take the high ground.

Activity

Use the words and phrases below –

Dull / Dark Ages / Dim witted / Brilliant

Enlighten (someone)

Shine a light on (something) / In the dark

Enlightenment / Bright

– to make these sentences sound less formal and more natural:

- 1** We are all ignorant about this topic, so could you explain?
- 2** I thought the lecture was really boring, so I walked out.
- 3** Most people think that Dinosaurs were stupid, but recent research suggests otherwise.
- 4** We all like teaching intelligent students.
- 5** Back in the old days, at the start of the 20th Century, people paid for things in cash.
- 6** We all thought her idea was excellent.
- 7** In education we need to overcome ignorance and bring knowledge.
- 8** New excavations near Stone Henge have revealed how our ancestors lived.

Commentary

Can you suggest any other English idioms where light or darkness are used to express knowledge or ignorance in this way?

Do we use light and darkness to express any other meanings in English?

Can you think of any idioms from your own language which involve light or darkness in some way?

Anyway I hope that this blog has shone a light on this topic and illuminated it for you – there's never a dull moment when you are learning English!



About the Author

Peter Ball has been teaching English for 15 years and has taught in Poland, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Pakistan, Britain and Ireland, he still really enjoys the challenge - each student is unique.

Peter has a Cambridge certificate in teaching (CELTA) and a Cambridge diploma (DELTA). He's also an FCE and Cambridge examiner.

He works with students of all levels from beginner to advanced and has taught professionals from all walks of life.

Peter loves teaching pronunciation, explaining grammar, learner-training and better conversation.

In his free time he has his own radio show in Connemara, Ireland and he swims, juggles and plays guitar - but not all at the same time!

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