

Slow English Listening Practice 20 Idioms for Natural Conversations

English learning resource · EN

Key words & expressions · English

20 idioms

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

1

a big fish in a small pond

DEF

Someone important or successful within a limited environment.

Neutral observation, not normally an insult.

He was a big fish in a small pond until he joined the national company.

She enjoys being a big fish in a small pond.

2

a cold fish

DEF

Someone who seems unfriendly, distant or emotionally unavailable.

More common in British English; hard to read is a common alternative.

The new manager seems like a cold fish, but he is simply shy.

At first she appeared to be a cold fish.

3

a rough diamond

DEF

Someone with valuable qualities but little social polish.

A warm British expression; diamond in the rough is also common.

The young chef is a rough diamond with enormous potential.

His manners need work, but he is a rough diamond.

4

a dark horse

DEF

Someone who reveals unexpected talent or ability.

From horse racing; often used for an unexpected competitor.

Nobody expected Maya to win; she was the dark horse.

That quiet candidate could be a dark horse.

5

a pain in the neck

DEF

An annoying person or situation.

Informal but milder than a more vulgar body-based alternative.

This paperwork is a real pain in the neck.

My neighbour can be a pain in the neck.



6

to bite off more than you can chew

DEF

To accept more work or responsibility than you can manage.

Usually a gentle warning rather than an attack.

I bit off more than I could chew by accepting three projects.

Do not bite off more than you can chew this week.

7

to get out of hand

DEF

To become difficult or impossible to control.

Common with parties, arguments, costs and children.

The discussion got out of hand after midnight.

Call for help before the situation gets out of hand.

8

to cost an arm and a leg

DEF

To be extremely expensive.

Informal and very common in conversation.

That tiny flat costs an arm and a leg.

The repairs did not have to cost an arm and a leg.

9

to be in hot water

DEF

To be in trouble or a difficult situation.

The intensity can be increased: in very or seriously hot water.

He is in hot water for missing the deadline.

We will be in hot water if the client finds out.

10

to be on thin ice

DEF

To be in a risky situation where one mistake may cause serious trouble.

A quiet warning based on the image of ice that may break.

You are on thin ice after arriving late again.

He knew he was on thin ice with his boss.

11

to let the cat out of the bag

DEF

To reveal a secret accidentally.

Usually implies accidental disclosure.

Lena let the cat out of the bag about the surprise party.

Do not let the cat out of the bag before Friday.



12

to spill the beans

DEF

To reveal secret or private information.

Can be intentional or accidental and often has a light, gossipy tone.

Come on, spill the beans—who got the job?

Someone spilled the beans about the new product.

13

to hit the nail on the head

DEF

To say or identify exactly the right thing.

A strong compliment in discussions and meetings.

You hit the nail on the head: the problem is poor communication.

Her comment really hit the nail on the head.

14

to burn your bridges

DEF

To damage a relationship or opportunity so badly that returning is impossible.

Serious idiom suggesting there is no way back.

Leave professionally; there is no reason to burn your bridges.

He burned his bridges when he insulted the entire team.

15

to pull someone's leg

DEF

To tease someone by saying something untrue as a joke.

Always light-hearted, not serious deception.

Relax—I am only pulling your leg.

She believed me until I told her I was pulling her leg.

16

the tip of the iceberg

DEF

The small visible part of a much larger hidden situation.

Often suggests the hidden part is a problem.

These complaints are only the tip of the iceberg.

The visible damage was the tip of the iceberg.

17

to go back to square one

DEF

To start again from the beginning after a failure.

Used in work, relationships and problem-solving.

The test failed, so we had to go back to square one.

Losing the file sent us back to square one.



18

once in a blue moon

DEF

Very rarely.

*Normally appears after the verb or at the beginning of a sentence.**I eat fast food once in a blue moon.**Once in a blue moon, the whole family meets.*

19

the life and soul of the party

DEF

The person who makes a social event lively and enjoyable.

*A compliment, sometimes with mild British irony.**Amir is always the life and soul of the party.**Even among strangers, she became the life and soul of the party.*

20

a wet blanket

DEF

Someone who spoils other people's fun or enthusiasm.

*The image is a wet blanket putting out a fire.**Do not be a wet blanket—come and dance.**He sounded like a wet blanket when he dismissed every idea.*