

RESOURCE LIST IDIOMS – FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

ants in his/her pants	restless, can't sit still	Ants in one's pants would make one jump around and be restless.
apple of one's eye	that which is held dearest	Because it is essential to sight, the eye's apple, or pupil, is to be cherished and protected.
at the end of the rope	out of patience	An animal at the end of its tether cannot go any further.
bark up the wrong tree	follow an incorrect course	Hunting dogs were trained to tree raccoons and bark, but often the raccoon fooled them and escaped.
batting a thousand	doing a perfect job	1,000 is the perfect average in baseball, with a base hit every time at bat.
beat around the bush	not getting to the point	Hunters need to proceed slowly and carefully if approaching a bush to beat out a bird.
behind the eight ball	out of luck	The eight ball in a pool game must be sunk last or the person loses.
between the devil and the deep blue sea	between two dangers	Wooden ship decks have long seams at the edges called devils. Sailors repairing them risk falling overboard.
bite off more than one can chew	try to do more than one has time or ability for.	One who takes a very large bite is trying to chew too much in a mouthful.
bitter pill to swallow	hard to accept	Some bitter ingredients in pills cannot be masked and are hard to swallow.
blow off steam	release anger or tension	Early steam engines had no safety valves, so engineers pulled a lever to release pressure.
blow one's stack	vent anger, lash out	A steamboat's smokestack could blow off if the boiler overheated.
bone to pick	an area of contention	Two dogs will fight over a single bone tossed between them.
bone up	refine, study	Bones were once used to polish shoes; to study would polish one's knowledge.
born with silver spoon in one's mouth	wealthy	Sterling silver is expensive; babies in rich families may have had silver baby spoons.
break the ice	to initiate and be friendly	Sometimes it is necessary for ships to break up the ice so other ships can pass.
bring the house down	applauding enthusiastically	The applause a performer receives may seem like it could cause a building to collapse.
burn the candle at both ends	doing too much	Candles would burn quickly and run out of energy if the wick was lit on both ends.
bury the hatchet	let bygones be bygones	When peace was made between two Indian tribes, it was customary to bury the chiefs' tomahawks.
butterflies in one's stomach	nervous, fearful	A nervous stomach feels fluttery.
by the skin of one's teeth	barely escaped	Teeth have no skin, only a thin film.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
bury head in sand	ignore danger	Saying comes from a mistaken belief that ostriches bury heads in sand when afraid; actually, they are eating or sleeping.
call it a day	to quit	This refers to the end of the workday.
carry a torch	loving someone	Venus, goddess of love, carries a torch.
carry the weight of the world on one's shoulders	worried	Zeus, king of the Greek gods, punished Atlas by making him carry the heavens.
chew the fat	talk	Sailors worked their jaws on tough salt pork in a motion similar to talking.
chip off the old block	like one's parent	A piece of wood has the same characteristics as the larger block it was cut from.
chip on one's shoulder	negative attitude	When two boys fought in olden days, one would have a chip on his shoulder and the other would try to knock it off.
cold feet	nervous, hesitant	People jumping into cold water might complain of cold feet and back out.
cold shoulder	reject someone	Knights got hot meals, but unwelcome guests were given cold mutton shoulder.
close shave	narrow escape from danger	A razor blade has a dangerous edge.
couldn't see the forest through the trees	too close to a project or problem to see solution	A forest may be so thick that one is not able to see much of it beyond the close trees.
counting chickens before they hatch	making plans based on what has not yet happened	Farmers cannot count on one chicken per egg since some will not hatch.
cream someone, to	totally beat	Cream is whipped to harden.
crocodile tears	faked crying	Crocodiles can't shed real tears, but moan and cry to attract sympathetic helpers, only to snatch and eat them.
cry over spilled milk	feel bad if it can't be undone	Once milk has been spilled, little can be done about it.
cry wolf	to lie or spread alarm	Aesop's fable tells of a shepherd who called false "wolf" alarms; when the real wolf appeared, no one came.
cup of tea	favorite	Tea has many flavors; people have favorites.
cut off your nose to spite your face	harm yourself while trying to hurt another	Spiteful behavior generally ends up hurting the one who is doing it.
day late and a dollar short	unsuccessful	This century-old saying describes someone who just misses being successful.
dead as a doornail	not responsive, dead	Since nails weren't typically used in doors, means, "dead as something that never existed."
dog-eat-dog	doing whatever is necessary to get one's way	Competition among dogs for food may make life in the wild difficult.
down in the dumps	feeling dismal and depressed	Being in a garbage dump would feel gloomy.
dyed in the wool	deeply ingrained traits	Wool that is dyed before it is spun into yarn holds its color better.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
early bird catches the worm	the person to start the job first succeeds	Birds are out early looking for food.
eat one's words	regret something said	When a courier delivered parchment bearing bad news to a nobleman, the angry nobleman made the courier eat the paper.
elbow grease	hard work	A slang expression for sweat since the 1600s.
eyes bigger than stomach	ask for more than can be eaten	Hungry people may look at food and decide they can eat more than they actually can.
face the music	stand up to adversity	In the army, the <i>Rogue's March</i> was played when offenders were drummed out.
fair-weather friend	person who does not stick with friend having problems	Some friends are there for you when things are good, but flee when things are bad.
feather in one's cap	something to be proud of	American Indians often wore feathers to show their bravery in past wars.
fish out of water	outside natural element	A fish out of water is out of its element and cannot function properly.
fit as a fiddle	in great shape	Fiddles must be carefully tuned.
flash in the pan	something that starts well, but goes downhill	A gunpowder flash in the priming pan of muskets made them fire; they sometimes flashed but didn't fire.
fly in the ointment	something spoiling things	In the Old Testament, dead flies ruin the apothecary's ointments.
fly off the handle	lose control	Handmade axes sometimes flew off the handle and injured someone nearby.
for the birds	foolish, worthless	Birds have limited intelligence.
forty winks	short nap	The number 40 was used in old stories, such as those about Ali Babba and Noah's Ark, to mean an indefinite number.
full of hot air	talks a lot, does little	Hot air balloons, when filled with hot air, can float away.
get down to brass tacks	get to the bottom of things	Hidden brass tacks usually hold upholstery fabric to the furniture's frame.
get in someone's hair	bother or annoy	It is especially difficult to remove certain things from hair.
get one's goat	annoy and make angry	Goats are often kept in stables of high-strung racehorses because goats tend to calm horses.
get the brush-off	be dismissed, pushed aside	Certain brushes rid clothes of lint.
get up on wrong side of bed	be in a bad mood	Romans thought getting up on the left side of the bed brought bad luck.
give a taste of own medicine	do same bad thing to person who did it to you	Tasting someone's gross medicine, such as castor oil, might make one more sympathetic.
going bananas	acting ridiculous	Monkeys love bananas and can act crazy.
going to the dogs	run-down, needs repaired	Dogs were once lowly hunting animals, not pets, so they were fed leftover scraps.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
gone to pot	ruined	Food breaks down in stewing pot.
good sport	one who doesn't complain	In sports, losers should accept defeat.
goose is cooked	plans are ruined	Medieval townspeople hung a goose outside the town to insult attackers. The enemy then burned the town down.
green thumb	talent for growing things	Stories tell of an Italian monk who had a green thumb, which made him a fine gardener.
green with envy	quite jealous	Green is associated with envy so jealous suitors used green jade as a potion.
hands were tied	unable to help in any way	Captives' hands are tied, which renders them powerless.
have one's head in clouds	not know what is going on	One whose head is in the clouds cannot keep track of what is going on.
heart in one's mouth	nervous	If you are scared and catching your breath, it might feel like your heart is in your mouth.
high horse	acting superior	In parades in medieval England, royalty rode on horses at least a hand taller than the average mount.
hit the nail on the head	be exactly right	The correct way to hit a nail is on the head.
hit the spot	satisfies fully	The spot is the bull's eye on a target.
hold your horses	be patient	Jockeys must not start their horses before the signal is given.
hold your tongue	watch what you say	If one's tongue is held in place, it would be impossible to speak.
horse of a different color	a different matter or way of looking at something	In medieval tournaments, armored knights were distinguished by the color of their horses.
in a nutshell	in very few words	The <i>Bible</i> , <i>Koran</i> , and <i>Iliad</i> have all been copied in such tiny print that they fit in a nutshell.
in a pickle	in trouble	Falling into pickling solution (brine, vinegar) would be unpleasant.
in one ear and out the other	not hearing or remembering	Something that passes right through makes no impression on the mind.
in the bag	success is assured	Birds and other small animals safely in the game bag mean a successful hunt.
in the doghouse	in trouble for doing something bad or wrong	Stories tell of husbands whose wives made them sleep in the doghouse when in trouble.
jump off the deep end	take risky action without sufficient thought	For one who cannot swim, the deep end of a pool is dangerous.
jump out of one's skin	be extremely frightened	When frightened one may jump so quickly that skin is left behind.
jump the gun	start too soon	An anxious runner may jump before the starter fires the pistol in a track event.
keep one's shirt on	stay patient or calm	Men used to take off their stiff, starched shirts before engaging in a fight.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
kick the bucket	die	Friends sprinkle a deceased's body with holy water from a bucket.
kill time	to waste time waiting	Once time is past, it is gone forever.
knee-high to a grasshopper	very young and small	Grasshoppers are quite small and have distinct bends in their legs, like a knee.
know the ropes	be familiar with details	Experienced sailors knew the ropes on their sailing vessels.
knuckle under	submit to defeat	In British taverns, people knocked knuckles under the table when beaten in an argument.
lay an egg	fail or flop	In the sport cricket, "duck's egg" means no score, so the game is lost if an egg is laid.
leave no stone unturned	look everywhere	Polycrates found the treasure that the Persians had hidden in the battlefield by turning over every stone.
let sleeping dogs lie	do not stir up trouble	An aroused pack of dogs can be dangerous.
lemon	appliance or car that has constant problems	The sour taste of a lemon can cause one to pucker face into what looks like a scowl.
let the cat out of the bag	tell the secret	Unscrupulous merchants put cats in bags that were supposed to contain piglets.
lion's share	the largest allotment	In Aesop's fable, the lion hunts with other animals, but claims all the spoils of the hunt.
look a gift horse in the mouth	don't complain about present	You can tell a horse's age by its teeth.
mad as a wet hen	furious	Hens don't actually become upset from getting wet, so this expression isn't accurate.
mind one's Ps and Qs	be careful and precise	A "p" reversed carelessly looks like a "q."
nose to the grindstone	working very hard	Grindstones are tools used for working.
off one's rocker	behaving in a crazy manner	One who is insane might not be able to stay seated in a chair and may fall out.
once in a blue moon	infrequently to never	Blue moon refers to the rare celestial occurrence of two full moons in a month.
on cloud nine	feeling elated or happy	Meteorologists classify clouds by number, with number nine being the highest clouds.
on pins and needles	very nervous	These sharp objects could make one quite uncomfortable.
open a can of worms	start trouble that is hard to stop	Worms are wiggly and would be difficult to contain.
out of the woods	out of trouble or difficulty	Danger seems to lurk in the woods, partially because one cannot see what is ahead.
out on a limb	a risky, unsure position	Limbs get thinner the further away they are from the trunk; too much weight may cause them to break.
over the hill	getting too old	Comparing life to a hill, once people pass the midpoint, they are headed downhill.

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over a barrel	in a submissive position	Before modern lifesaving methods, lifeguards tried to save drowning victims by rolling them back and forth over a barrel.
pain in the neck	obnoxious and irritating	Having a pain in the neck is irritating.
paint the town red	have a wild time	In olden days, bonfires lit on holidays would cast a red glow on a town.
pass the buck	convey blame	Poker players pass responsibility for the deal during a poker game.
penny-wise and pound-foolish	not a good investment	Sometimes one loses perspective by focusing on pennies, causing the loss of pounds (English currency worth more than a dollar).
piece of cake	very easy	Most people find it simple to eat cake.
play hooky	stay home without reason	In the 1800s, "hook it" meant to escape.
play it by ear	decide as one goes along	Some musicians can play songs without sheet music (by ear).
play possum	pretend to be sleeping	Possums protect themselves by lying still.
play second fiddle	be in an inferior position	The first violinist is the most important musician in an orchestra.
poor as church mice	extremely poor	A mouse living in a church would have trouble finding a crumb.
pound the pavement	look very hard	People looking for work must go to job sites to apply, and walking pounds pavement.
pulled a fast one	fooled or cheated someone	Baseball pitchers throw fast balls to opponents to fool them with the speed of the ball.
pull strings	use influence to get desires	Marionettes are puppets that are worked by pulling on strings attached to their limbs.
pulling one's leg	fooling someone	British muggers used a cane or wire to pull their victim's leg in order to trip him so they could steal his wallet.
pull rug out from under one	sabotage, withdraw support	Pulling the rug out from under someone would cause him or her to fall and not succeed.
pulling the wool over eyes	tricking	In the 19th century, judges wore woolen wigs. Lawyers hoped to fool judges, or pull their wigs over their eyes.
punch the clock	get to work	Time clocks are used in some workplaces to keep track of employee hours.
push the panic button	become terrified, overreact	During World War II, pilots often pushed the bailout button, causing the crew to bailout unnecessarily.
put foot in one's mouth	say something one shouldn't	If your foot was in your mouth, you couldn't say the wrong thing.
putting on the dog	pretentious, flashy display	Long ago, Americans copied a European custom and bought small, expensive dogs to hold on their laps.
put the screws to	exert pressure	Screws were once used for torture.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
put one's cards on the table	not to conceal anything	When playing card games, cards are laid on a table at the end of a hand to see who truly has the better cards.
put the cart before the horse	reverse the order of things	Often there is an order that must be followed if things are to work, and the cart before the horse wouldn't work.
raining cats and dogs	torrential (very hard) rain	During heavy rains in 17th-century England, some streets became filthy rivers carrying cats and dogs.
raise Cain	cause a disturbance	In the Bible, Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother Abel out of jealousy.
rat race	furious pace of thing	This originally referred to a fast 1930s dance, but now refers to keeping ahead of the competition with tiring activity.
read between the lines	examine the details	Cryptographers used a code in which the secret message in a letter was decoded by reading alternate lines.
read the riot act	express anger at one in significant trouble	The Riot Act of 1714 was written to control the English middle class and prevent sedition.
red herring	meant to throw one off track	In olden days, escaped prisoners dragged dried red herring behind them to mislead the bloodhounds.
right off the bat	immediately	A baseball hit sharply on the body of a bat brings immediate results.
run into a stone wall	something hard to overcome	A stone wall would be very difficult to pass through.
save for a rainy day	plan ahead	Since people can't know what the future will bring, they should prepare for bad times (rainy days).
scarce as hen's teeth	very rare	Nothing is rarer because hens have no teeth.
scratch the surface	not all the facts of story	Scratches are usually not very deep.
shake a leg	hurry up	Boat travelers would show a leg or stocking to let the crew know if it was a man or woman in the hammock.
six of one, half a dozen of the other	makes no difference	If you do the math, you'll find these are two names for the same thing.
skeleton in the closet	secret that can ruin reputation	In old story, the world was searched for person with a perfect reputation. The one they found turned out to have a skeleton in her closet.
smell a rat	suspicious	A cat can smell a rat before seeing one.
sour grapes	saying you never wanted something you couldn't get	In Aesop's fable, the fox was unable to retrieve the luscious grapes, so he says they are sour.
sow one's wild oats	conduct oneself foolishly	In agriculture, sowing weed seed instead of good grain seed is a senseless practice.
sponge off someone	take things and not repay	Sponges soak things up.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
spill the beans	let the secret out	Greeks voted by dropping beans into a jar. Occasionally voters knocked over the jar to reveal the results.
split hairs	arguing over trivial matters	Hair strands are so thin that it was once it was believed they were impossible to split.
stick one's neck out	take risks	Chickens stick their necks out on the chopping block so the butcher can chop their heads off.
stir crazy	restless	Stirring requires motion, and confined people crave activity.
stir up a hornet's nest	causing lots of trouble	Hornets will attack when their nest is disturbed.
stuffed shirt	person who is formal	Laundered, starched shirts are quite rigid.
stool pigeon	telling secrets to get others	In the past, fowl hunters tied pigeons to stools to use as decoys.
straight from the horse's mouth	information received from the highest authority	One can tell how old a horse is by looking at its teeth.
straw that broke the camel's back (also, last straw)	alludes to the final tiny thing that makes things fall apart	A camel can carry about 1200 pounds, but a straw more might literally break its back.
stretch the truth	exaggerates	To make the truth into something similar yet different might be called "stretching."
strike it rich	become wealthy	Prospectors' finds of oil, gold, and other precious minerals are called strikes.
take the bull by the horns	face unpleasant situations	A bullfighter may grab the horns to tire the bull out.
take the cake	receive prize or honor	Cakes have been awarded as prizes since olden times.
take with a grain of salt	to be skeptical or accept with reservations	Ancient Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, originated this saying about being skeptical.
talk a blue streak	talk rapidly and incessantly	Lightening bolts and other fast things seem to leave a blue streak behind them.
talk turkey	get down to business	When Indians and Pilgrims divided the fowl after hunting, they talked of turkey while doing their business.
threw a monkey wrench	wreck a project	If one throws the wrench into the gears, it wrecks the machine.
throw in the towel	give up	A fighter's manager stops the fight by throwing a towel into the ring when the fighter cannot go on.
throw the book at someone	give a severe punishment	Judges look in law books to find maximum sentences for criminals
tickles funny bone	appeals to sense of humor	The humerus bone in the upper arm sounds like the word <i>humorous</i> , which means funny.
tip of the iceberg	small part of larger problem	The tip of an iceberg is only a fraction of the whole; the rest is hidden under the water, concealing its danger.

IDIOM	MEANING	ORIGIN
tongue-in-cheek	ironic or insincere words	Satirical words would not be understood if one's tongue was lodged in one's cheek.
touch base	contact	Baseball players must touch the bases when they run around the field after a hit.
under the weather	sick	Cold or rainy weather can cause sickness; also, storms cause ship passengers to feel queasy.
under the wire	just in time	The finish line in horse racing is an imaginary wire; the horse that beats another horse is just under the wire.
up the creek without a paddle	hopeless situation	A boatman in a creek without a paddle would have no way to move against the current.
upper crust	richest people	Once the top slices of bread were served to nobility.
upset the apple cart	ruined plans	A farmer headed to market would have a mess if the cart of apples overturned.
walking on air	thrilled	When someone is happy or elated, they are said to rise up as if walking on air.
wear heart on sleeve	show feelings	If people can see what's in your heart, they know how you feel.
weather the storm	be patient until things improve	Sailors had to ride out bad storms.
wet behind the ears	inexperienced	The last place to dry on newborn animals is the small indentation behind each ear.
wet blanket	putting a damper on things	Wet blankets are used to put out fires.
white elephant	useless possession	The king of Siam punished courtiers by giving them rare Albino elephants, which proceeded to eat up their money.
white lie	untruth that causes little harm	White represents purity; refers to a harmless lie, possibly meant to spare someone's feelings.
whole kit and caboodle	in its entirety	This American saying means "the whole lot."
wild-goose chase	useless waste of energy	In this 16th century horse race, the lead horse could go in any direction and the other horses had to follow.
win by a landslide	get most of the votes	Once a landslide starts, it builds momentum and cannot be stopped.
wolf in sheep's clothing	enemy disguised as a friend	In Aesop's fable, the wolf dresses up as a sheep in order to catch a sheep for dinner.
work like a dog	work very hard	Sheepdogs work diligently for long periods.
worth one's salt	earned salary	Roman soldiers used part of pay to buy salt. Salary comes from Latin word for salt (sal).
worth weight in gold	quite valuable	At present gold prices, a 150-pound person who was worth his weight in gold would be worth a million dollars.
wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole	avoid scrupulously	Boatmen once used 10-foot poles to move their boats through shallow water.