

# IDIOMS



A Contemporary Study of some common  
idioms

by Jan Levy

## **IDIOMS**

Idioms exist in every language. An idiom is a word or phrase that is not taken literally, like “bought the farm” has nothing to do with purchasing real estate, but refers to dying. Idiom also refers to a dialect or jargon of a group of people, either in a certain region or a group with common interests, like in science, music, art, or business.

### **Introduction**

Idioms are something that we all use every day, and the artist wanted to make a fun piece where the viewer works out which idiom the pictures relate to. The artwork is fun, and engaging with a strong colour combination. The artwork is a visual game which is in line with some other pieces.

### **The ball is in your court**



### **Meaning**

It's your responsibility now; it's up to you. For example, I've done all I can; now the ball's in your court. This term comes from tennis, where it means it is the opponent's turn to serve or return the ball, and has been transferred to other activities. This term originated in the second half of 1900s.

If the ball is in someone's court, they have to do something before any progress can be made in a situation. In a game of tennis, if the ball is in your court then it is your turn to hit the ball.

## **Miss the boat**



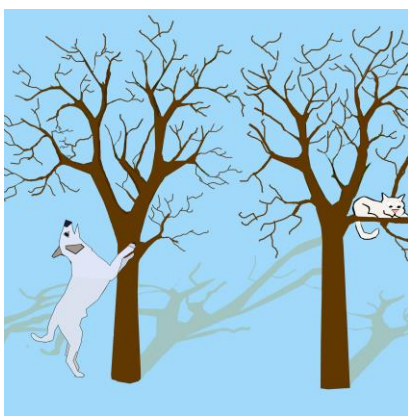
### **Meaning**

To fail to get what one wanted.

### **Origin**

from mid-13c. Sense of "to escape, avoid" is from 1520s; that of "to perceive with regret the absence or loss of (something or someone)" is from late 15c. Sense of "to not be on time for" is from 1823; to *miss the boat* in the figurative sense of "be too late for" is from 1929, originally nautical slang. To *miss out (on)* "fail to get" is from 1929.

## **Barking up the wrong tree**



### **Meaning**

To make a wrong assumption about someone or something.

If a person is being falsely accused of something, they might use this [phrase](#) to inform the accuser that they are mistaken.

## Origin

The origin of this phrase is believed to be rooted in dogs and hunting. Dogs are sometimes used during hunting because of their strong sense of smell, their ability to chase and track other animals, and they add a bit of extra security for the hunter.

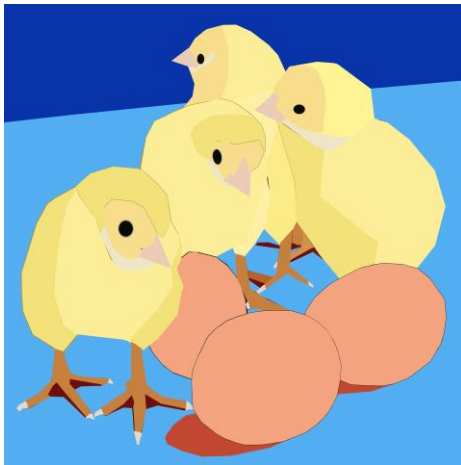
After spotting another animal, a dog will likely give chase. The fleeing animal, if it is capable, may decide to climb a tree in order to get away. However, since dogs are not great at climbing trees, they will instead remain at the trunk of the tree and bark, which gives the hunter an indication on where the fleeing animal went.

Well, a dog can make a mistake and choose the wrong tree. How would the dog get it wrong? Well, there are a number of factors that could have led to the mistake. Perhaps the dog was unable to keep pace with the fleeing animal during the chase, or maybe it got distracted along the way by something. Whatever the case, if a dog fails to pick the right tree, well, then they are literally 'barking up the wrong the tree.'

This expression goes back to at least the earlyish 19th century, where the idiom is already being used in a figurative sense. For example, the *Knickerbocker Magazine* from 1836 reads:

"You've been barking up the wrong tree, cried the Ohioan."

## Don't count your chickens before they're hatched



## Meaning

Something that you say in order to warn someone to wait until a good thing they are expecting has really happened before they make any plans about it.

## Origin

This phrase, for the most part, is seen in a poem called *Hudibras*. The first two parts of the poem were written by poet Samuel Butler in the years 1663 and 1664:

"To swallow gudgeons ere th' are catch'd,

And count their chickens ere th' are hatch'd."

It is also said that Thomas Howell used the phrase in *New Sonnets and Pretty Pamphlets*, 1570:

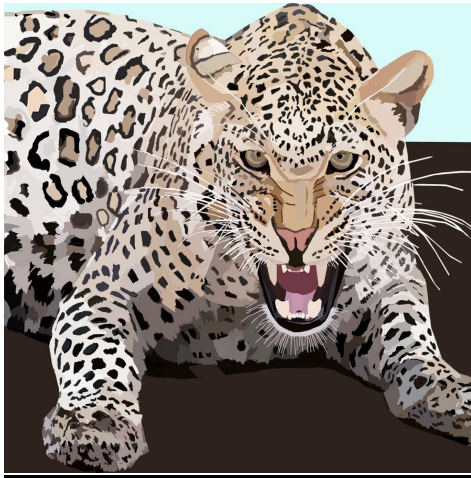
"Counte not thy Chickens that vnhatched be,

Waye wordes as winde, till thou finde certaintee."

Additionally, a Greek fabulist named Aesop, said to have lived from 620 to 560 BCE, is also credited as using this expression. He has several written fables attributed to his name; today, these are collectively known as Aesop's Fables. One of them is titled *The Milkmaid and Her Pail*, and there's a line from the tale that reads:

"Ah, my child," said the mother, "Do not count your chickens before they are hatched."

### **A Leopard doesn't change its spots**



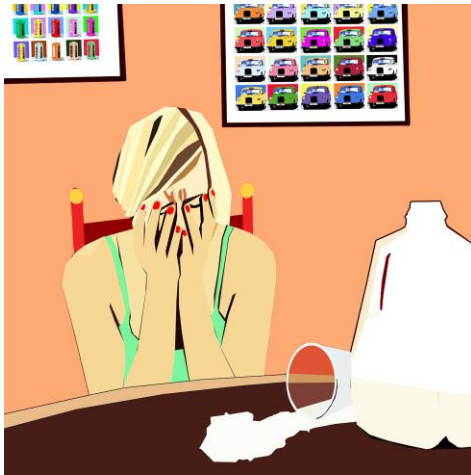
### **Meaning**

Something you say that means a person's character, especially if it is bad, will not change, even if they pretend that it will.

### **Origin**

The *American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* by Christine Ammer states that it was first recorded in English in 1546, but no source was provided. This doesn't mean that it wasn't first recorded in English in 1546, only that Idiomation has not identified what that source may be.

## Don't cry over spilt milk



### Meaning

Do not be upset about making a mistake, since you cannot change that now.

### Origin

Not much is known about the origin of this phrase. The earliest that I could find the expression in writing is in a book called *Banking Under Difficulties* from 1888, and its wording is similar to what we see today. To give some context on the upcoming quote: a man had just been robbed of all his cash and by the looks of it, he was out and away from town. Quite the predicament to be in. However, despite the circumstances, the man said:

*"It was no use, however, crying over spilt milk."*

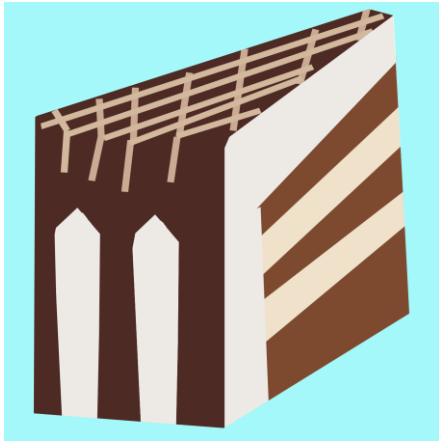
The robbed man was in a difficult situation, but he realized that there really wasn't much he could do about it at that time other than moving forward.

Apparently, though, this common saying goes back even further. It's believed that James Howell, a historian and writer, used the phrase in one of his literary works in 1659, called *Paramoigraphy* (Proverbs). I don't have access to the book to see the quote for myself, but supposedly it reads:

*"No weeping for shed milk."*

This would mean that this idiom is at least over 350 years old.

## A piece of cake



### Meaning

That's *as easy as pie!* Wait a second, that's the wrong phrase, but its meaning is identical to *a piece of cake*; both expressions convey the idea of simplicity. The question is: Why? What makes cake "easy," anyways? Well, I doubt it's referring to the cooking process involved with baking a cake, because that requires a fair bit of work. You have to crack eggs, mix stuff up in a bowl, set the temperature of the oven, and so on. Alright, it's not *that* complicated, but it still requires effort, so much so that some people don't even care to bother with it.

Do you know what *is* easy though? Eating a baked cake! Yeah, that's a pretty easy thing to do because it tastes good. Thus, this phrase *may possibly* get its "easy to accomplish" meaning from how simple it can be to eat a piece of this delicious desert. However, that is simply a guess; the origins for this phrase are not certain.

### Origin

The figurative meaning of this phrase goes back to at least the 1930s. The term is used by an American poet named Ogden Nash, who wrote *Primrose Path* 1936. There's a quote from that that reads. "Her picture's in the papers now, and Life's a piece of cake."

## Hit the nail on the head



### Meaning

Get to the precise point. Do or say something exactly right.

## Origin

No one knows the exact origin of this phrase. What is known is that it is extremely old. It appears in The Book of Margery Kempe circa 1438. This was an account of the life of religious visionary Margery Kempe and is considered to be the earliest surviving autobiography written in English:

Kempe and is considered to be the earliest surviving autobiography written in English:

"Yf I here any mor thes materys rehersyd, I xal so smytyn ye nayl on ye hed that it schal schamyn alle hyr mayntenowrys."

In modernised English, that reads as:

"If I hear any more these matters repeated, I shall so smite the nail on the head that it shall shame all her supporters."

Kempe's meaning in that citation isn't entirely clear. Some have interpreted her 'hit the nail on the head' as 'speak severely'. The current 'get to the heart of the matter' meaning is unambiguous in a later reference; William Cuninghame's *The Cosmographical Glass*, 1559:

You hit the naile on the head (as the saying is).

## A fish out of water



## Meaning

Someone being in a situation that they are unfamiliar or unsuited for.

## Origin

Let me state the obvious by saying that the natural habitat of a fish is in the water; it's the place where they are most comfortable. However, if you remove a fish from that environment and drop them onto land, what happens? Well, they flop and wiggle around as they desperately try to find their way back home. Yes, fish are completely out of their element anywhere else except for in the water. Thus, at some point, people must have noticed how awkward a fish looks after being taken out of the water, and that uncomfortable, fishy situation began being applied metaphorically to people who look to be out of their comfort zone.

There's an early example of this phrase that comes from the year 1483, written by an English poet named Geoffrey Chaucer in one of his literary works:

"...a huge man, uncouth; a master of vessel and knew all the ports; not ride well; like a fish out of water as sat on his horse."