
Fun with idioms

Exercise 1

For each definition below, two of the idioms (a–c) have been invented, but one is correct. Can you identify the correct idiom in each case?

1. If someone is very angry, we can say they are:
 - a) mad enough to spit nails.
 - b) mad enough to chew peanuts.
 - c) mad enough to swallow fire.
2. If someone hears something that sounds very interesting and therefore begins to listen carefully, we say they:
 - a) prick up their ears.
 - b) turn on their ears.
 - c) grow new ears.
3. Work that we do because we enjoy it or because we think it is worthwhile, not because it gives us a financial reward, can be described as:
 - a) a job from the stars.
 - b) work of the heart.
 - c) a labor of love.
4. If we think something will certainly happen, but we don't know when, we can say it is:
 - a) a decision by time.
 - b) a question of time.
 - c) a present from time.
5. Another way of saying that something happens very quickly is that it happens:
 - a) as fast as a mouse.
 - b) as rapid as a rabbit.
 - c) as quick as a flash.
6. If we store something or keep it safe for future/emergency use, we:
 - a) pepper it out.
 - b) salt it away.
 - c) spice it up.
7. If you get an opportunity to start working in an organization or business, especially when this will give you more opportunities in the future, it can be said that you:
 - a) get your foot in the door.
 - b) get your elbows on the table.
 - c) get your feet on the stairs.

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Exercise 2

For each idiom below, two of the definitions (a–c) are incorrect, and one is correct. Can you identify the correct definition in each case?

1. What does it mean if you “lose face”?
 - a) You no longer impress people or are respected by them, usually because you show you are not in control of a situation or have failed in some way.
 - b) You start showing physical signs of getting older.
 - c) Your relationship with a very close friend starts to become more distant.
2. What does it mean if you “lose your head”?
 - a) You start becoming less anxious.
 - b) You start becoming less powerful.
 - c) You become so upset or anxious that you stop thinking clearly or behaving in a sensible way.
3. After someone has been successful in something, what does it mean if the success “goes to their head”?
 - a) They start behaving more intelligently.
 - b) They start thinking they are better or more important than they really are.
 - c) They become determined to continue their success.
4. If you “bury your head in the sand,” you:
 - a) work hard to try to solve a very difficult problem.
 - b) try to do something that will be impossible to achieve.
 - c) ignore a problem or an unpleasant situation and hope that it will disappear.
5. What is a “yes man”?
 - a) Someone who will usually lend money to people if they ask for it.
 - b) Someone with a positive attitude who generally believes they can achieve their goals.
 - c) Someone who always agrees with people in authority, usually because they want those people to like them.
6. If you are “under someone’s thumb,” it means that:
 - a) you are always making that person angry.
 - b) you are completely controlled by that person.
 - c) you are always competing with that person.

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Exercise 3

Complete the sentences below with the appropriate idioms from Exercises 1 and 2. You may need to change the verb forms.

1. "You have such a beautiful home. I can't believe you built it yourself! That must have been such hard work."
"Yes, but it was a _____ of _____. I found it so satisfying."
2. "I've been there four years and not been promoted yet. I'm starting to think they don't like me. What they want is a _____ like John Spencer – someone who never questions anything and always does what he's told."
"Has he been promoted?"
"Not yet, but it's only a _____ of _____.."
3. "Poor Bill! He has to mow that huge lawn of his on a day like this. Just because his wife told him to. He's _____ her _____, you know."
"No, he's not. He loves yard work. I'm sure he only does it because he wants to."
4. "I was in the corridor and I heard Liz Hawking, the area manager, talking to someone in one of the meeting rooms. She mentioned promotions, so obviously I _____ my ears."
5. "When Jim graduated from college, he worked as an intern in one of the country's most successful companies. He wasn't getting paid, but it was a way of _____ his _____ in the _____."
6. "The security-camera footage shows what happened. The thieves work in pairs. One of them goes to ask the woman a question, she turns towards him to answer, and as _____ as a _____, the other man grabs her purse."
7. "I can't stand listening to him now. He's an assistant manager, but he talks like he's the chairman! That promotion's really _____ to his _____."
8. "His business is losing money every month, but whenever he talks about it, he says it's doing as well as before. It's as if he's scared of _____. If he doesn't come to some kind of agreement with the bank, he's going to be in serious trouble, but I don't think he's even spoken to them yet – it seems he's just _____ his _____ in the _____."
9. "She was given the job because she's the kind of person who can keep calm under pressure. She won't _____ her _____ in a crisis."