

# Work Idioms

**Exercise 1:** Choose the best definition, (a) or (b), to explain the idiom or other expression in **bold** in these sentences.

1. Sue has always been a **high-flier**.  
(a) *Someone who has achieved a lot and is determined to continue being successful.*  
(b) *Someone in a company who thinks they are more important than other people.*
2. I hate **carrying the can** for people in my department.  
(a) *Taking instructions from people and doing what they tell you to do.*  
(b) *Being the person who is considered responsible for something that has gone wrong.*
3. My boss is such a **slave driver**!  
(a) *Someone who never has his / her own ideas, and so steals other people's.*  
(b) *Someone who makes his / her employees work very hard for long hours.*
4. This job can be difficult at times, but just **go with the flow**.  
(a) *Work as hard as you can for as long as you can.*  
(b) *Do what seems like the easiest thing in a particular situation.*
5. You want 2000 items delivered by Monday? That's a **tall order**.  
(a) *Something very difficult that someone expects you to do.*  
(b) *Something which happens very suddenly, especially when you don't expect it.*
6. This company has a long history of employing **movers and shakers**.  
(a) *People who are powerful or have a lot of influence.*  
(b) *People who work for a company for a very short time, then leave.*
7. You've got a choice: you can **shape up or ship out**!  
(a) *Do a simple job and receive low pay, or do a more difficult job and get more pay.*  
(b) *Improve your work and behaviour, or leave the company.*
8. Friday is **dress down day** in our department.  
(a) *A day when employees wear what they like to work.*  
(b) *A day when each employee's work and performance during the week is assessed by his / her boss.*
9. Our boss always gives us a lot of **ear candy**, although we would rather have a pay rise instead.  
(a) *Kind words that praise and encourage an employee.*  
(b) *Small gifts, such as chocolate, cinema tickets, bottles of wine, etc.*
10. It's time we **cut out the dead wood** in this company.  
(a) *Dismiss the employees who do not work very well or efficiently.*  
(b) *Reduce the number of unnecessary meetings and discussions.*
11. He's an industrious member of staff, but his work really isn't **up to the mark**.  
(a) *Good enough.*  
(b) *Fast enough.*
12. Our line manager is always **picking holes in my work**.  
(a) *Giving someone more work than they can do in the time allowed.*  
(b) *Finding faults or mistakes with someone's work.*
13. This newspaper survey says that most people who call in sick on Monday are **pulling a fast one**.  
(a) *Working too hard the rest of the week, and not relaxing enough during their free time.*  
(b) *Pretending something that is not true in order to trick someone.*
14. My boss is always **laying down the law**.  
(a) *Breaking the rules in order to get what you want.*  
(b) *Telling people what to do or how to behave.*

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15. Your request for a pay rise is **out of the question**.  
(a) *Not possible.*  
(b) *Being considered by the people responsible for giving pay rises.*

Exercise 2: Choose the correct idiomatic word or expression for each of these sentences.

1. A job that offers no prospect of promotion is sometimes known as a / an...  
(a) **hatchet job** (b) **dead-end job** (c) **inside job** (d) **nose job**
2. Boring and detailed work, such as examining documents for mistakes, can be described as...  
(a) **hammer and chisel work** (b) **nut and bolt work** (c) **bucket and spade work** (d) **pick and shovel work**
3. We sometimes say that people who compete for success in business or in a career are working for the...  
(a) **horse race** (b) **dog race** (c) **rat race** (d) **camel race**
4. We might refer to a bad employer with a reputation for losing talented staff as a...  
(a) **people churner** (b) **people mixer** (c) **people stirrer** (d) **people beater**
5. If you do a lot of different types of work in an office for very low pay, you could be referred to as a...  
(a) **catsbody** (b) **pigsbody** (c) **ratsbody** (d) **dogsbody**
6. When an employee telephones to say that s/he is not coming to work because s/he is ill, but in fact is only pretending to be ill, we say that s/he is throwing...  
(a) **a sickie** (b) **the book at someone** (c) **a wobbly** (d) **a punch**
7. If an employee gets very angry at work because of something bad or unpleasant that happens, we can say that they are experiencing...  
(a) **office anger** (b) **work rage** (c) **shopfloor strops** (d) **workplace wobbles**
8. Work that offers the same money for less effort than another similar job is often known as...  
(a) **a cushy number** (b) **a doddle** (c) **a pushover** (d) **child's play**
9. When somebody is dismissed from their job, we can say that they have...  
(a) **got the shoe** (b) **got the sandal** (c) **got the boot** (d) **got the slipper**
10. Someone who receives very little money for their job can be said to make, earn or receive...  
(a) **water** (b) **stones** (c) **sweets** (d) **peanuts**
11. Someone who works extremely hard for a long time might complain that they are working their...  
(a) **nose to the grindstone** (b) **fingers to the bone** (c) **ear to the ground** (d) **back to the wall**
12. An employee who works very hard in a determined way can be said to...  
(a) **chisel away** (b) **cut away** (c) **beaver away** (d) **hammer away**
13. Some people have a second job in addition to their main job, which they might want to keep secret from their employer. This is called...  
(a) **sunlighting** (b) **starlighting** (c) **lamplighting** (d) **moonlighting**
14. A lazy employee who only pretends to work is said to be...  
(a) **swinging a cat** (b) **swinging both ways** (c) **swinging the lead** (d) **swinging the balance**
15. Someone who is out of work and claiming money from the government can be said to be...  
(a) **on the dole** (b) **on the pull** (c) **on the razzle** (d) **on the level**

Also see: Phrasal verbs, idioms and other expressions using 'work' on the next page.



## Phrasal verbs, idioms and other expressions using 'work'

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**Exercise 1:** Complete sentences 1 – 10 with an appropriate form of *work* (for example, present continuous, past simple, etc), and an appropriate particle or particles, to make phrasal verbs.

1. The exact details of the event haven't been \_\_\_\_\_ yet. (*To decide or agree on something*)
2. We'll have to \_\_\_\_\_ Joey to find out what's going on. (*To try to influence someone, often in order to get information from them*)
3. In my experience, the best way of \_\_\_\_\_ tension is by playing a good game of tennis. (*To get rid of a feeling, or get rid of some weight, by doing something that involves physical activity*)
4. Are you \_\_\_\_\_ tell me that you've lost my camera? (*To prepare yourself to do something difficult, or try to prepare someone for bad news. This phrasal verb needs 2 particles.*)
5. I've finally \_\_\_\_\_ what that strange noise in the attic is. (*To solve a problem by considering the facts*)
6. The total cost of our holiday last year, including flights and accommodation, \_\_\_\_\_ at about £300. (*To add up to a particular amount*)
7. When I damaged my father's car, he made me \_\_\_\_\_ the cost of the repairs. (*To pay someone what you owe them by doing a job for them instead of giving them money*)
8. I'm not very hungry. Perhaps I should go for a walk to \_\_\_\_\_ an appetite. (*To develop a particular feeling*)
9. If she \_\_\_\_\_ improving her game, she could be a champion. (*To try hard to develop or improve something*)
10. Unless we \_\_\_\_\_ getting fit before the game, we won't win. (*To spend time producing or improving something*)

**Exercise 2:** Try to decide what the idioms and other expressions in sentences 11 – 20 mean, then check your answers in the back of the book.

11. He cooked us a fantastic breakfast. We had **the whole works!**
12. Everything was going really well, and then the boss **threw a spanner in the works**.
13. We'll **have our work cut out for us** if we want to continue making money from this project.
14. I was hot, tired and in a really bad mood, but a cold shower **worked wonders!**
15. You will pass your exams, but only if you **work your socks off**.
16. He was very hungry, and **made short work** of the meal I had cooked.
17. We're only a little bit late, and we have got a good excuse, so don't get so **worked up!**
18. It is very difficult to obtain a visa to visit the country, but if you know how to **work the system** it can be very easy.
19. I've **worked my fingers to the bone** for this company for twenty years, and now they tell me that they don't need me anymore!
20. I work in the customer complaints department for a major airline, so being shouted at by angry customers is **all in a day's work** for me.