75 Fixed phrases

A What are fixed phrases?

There are many groups of words which you need to learn as complete phrases, because they often have a meaning which is different from the words on their own. Many of these are called idioms.

They arrived **out of the blue** [I didn't know they were coming; it was unexpected].
Does the name Merchant **ring a bell** [sound familiar]?
You'll have to **make up your mind** soon. [make a decision]

Some fixed phrases are easier to understand, but the same idea may be expressed in a different way in your language.

I think we'll have to **get rid of** some of this furniture. [remove it, e.g. sell it, throw it away, give it away, etc.]
I'm afraid I can't talk to you now; **I'm (just) about to** leave. [I am going to leave very soon]
I don't know what Martin said, but Natalie **burst into tears** [suddenly started crying]. She was very upset.
Everyone was there **apart from** Yasmine. [not including Yasmine; *syn* **except for**]



B Time phrases

He's leaving **in four days' time** [four days from now; also in three weeks'/six months'/two years' time, etc.].
I got here **the week before last** [during the week/month, etc. before the previous one].
The course is fine **so far** [up until now].
I rang our local doctor and fortunately she was able to come **at once** [now, immediately; *syns* **right away** / **straight away**].
He's so busy at work; he comes home late **night after night** [every night; also **day after day**, etc.].

C Pairs of words

A number of fixed phrases consist of two words, usually joined by **and**, and sometimes **or**.

I go to the theatre **now and again** [occasionally; *syns* **now and then**].
Andy had **one or two** [a few] suggestions.
I've got a house in the country, and I like to go there whenever possible for a bit of **peace and quiet** [a calm situation without noise].
I've been **up and down** the street, but I can't find their house. [first in one direction, then the other]
I've been to Paris **once or twice** [a few times].
I'll finish this report **sooner or later** [I don't know when, but I'll finish it].

D Introducing advice, opinions, etc.

Many fixed phrases are used to introduce advice, an opinion, an example, etc.

If I were you [in your situation], I'd accept the job they offered you.
In general [usually, or in most situations; *syn* **on the whole**] the summers are quite warm in this part of the country.
There were lots of questions. **For instance** [for example], how much will it cost?
I'm sure you'll have a great holiday. **By the way**, what time does the train leave? (used to introduce a new subject to the conversation)
To be honest, I didn't like her boyfriend very much. (used to say what you really think)

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Exercises

75.1 **Using all the words in the square, find eight more phrases.**

~~ON~~	DAY	SOONER	~~AND~~	RIGHT
SO	AND	NOW	TWO	LATER
UP	OR	~~OFF~~	PEACE	AFTER
FAR	AND	ONE	AWAY	AGAIN
AND	DAY	QUIET	OR	DOWN

on and off ....
....
....

75.2 **Complete the sentences with one word, then underline the full fixed phrase in each sentence.**

1 She's been working on that essay night after *night* .
2 I'm arranging everything for next week. By the ....., is your sister coming this evening?
3 My parents always turn up at my flat out of the ..... .
4 Some people enjoyed the book, but to be ....., I thought it was boring.
5 I'd like to get ..... of these CDs because I don't listen to them any more.
6 In ....., people are much happier when they have jobs that they enjoy.
7 I don't know what to do at the moment but I'll have to make up my ..... soon.
8 It's a flexible ticket. For ....., you can use it during the week or at weekends.
9 Can I ring you later? I'm just ..... to have lunch.
10 If I ..... you, I'd get a new dictionary.

75.3 **Complete the fixed phrase in each dialogue.**

1 A: Do you go there much?
B: Now *and again* .
2 A: Have you had any ideas?
B: Yeah. One ..... .
3 A: Was she very upset?
B: Yes. She burst ..... .
4 A: You arrived ten days ago?
B: Yeah, the week ..... .
5 A: Should I accept the job?
B: Yes, I would if ..... .
6 A: Will they get here?
B: Yeah, sooner ..... .
7 A: Have you been there often?
B: Once ..... .
8 A: Do you need me there now?
B: Yes. Could you come at ..... ?
9 A: When are you going back?
B: In two weeks' ..... .
10 A: How's the course?
B: It's good so ..... .
11 A: I spoke to Chris Myler. Do you know him?
B: No, the name doesn't ring ..... .
12 A: Have you done all the housework?
B: Yes, apart ..... the washing.

75.4 **Here are more idioms. Can you underline one in each sentence, and guess what it means?**

1 I've been in the job a few days, but I already feel at home. *feel comfortable and relaxed*
2 I've just bought these shoes and they cost a fortune. .....
3 Could you keep an eye on my bag for me? .....
4 The answer's on the tip of my tongue. .....
5 We had a night on the town last night. .....
6 I could do with a new computer; mine's quite old now. .....

LIVEWORKSHEETS