

AN  

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IDIOMS  

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GUIDE

TO THE ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE



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## Feeling under the weather

In the past, when sailors were feeling unwell, they would shelter underneath the bow, at the front of the boat, to try and keep out of the weather that would make their symptoms worsen. They would therefore literally be "under the weather".





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## Straight from the horse's mouth

Apparently originating from the 1900s, this idiom means to gain information directly from the most reliable source.

It is said that buyers could reliably assess the age of a horse by looking at its teeth.

It's also why you shouldn't "look a gift horse in the mouth," as inspecting a gift is considered bad etiquette.





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## Let the cat out of the bag

Giving away a secret is sometimes described as "letting the cat out of the bag".

During the 16th century, unscrupulous farmers would sometimes substitute a piglet being sold in a bag at market for a cat!

If the cat was discovered, the secret was too.





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## Butter Someone Up

An idiom meaning to flatter or praise someone as a means of gaining their help or support.

A customary religious act in ancient India included throwing butter balls at the statues of gods to seek good fortune and their favour.





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## Riding Shotgun

How many times have you heard someone shout "Shotgun!" when they get into a car? Have you ever stopped to think where this might originate?

In the Wild West, the person who sat next to the driver was often equipped with a shotgun to kill any robbers that might happen upon the coach.





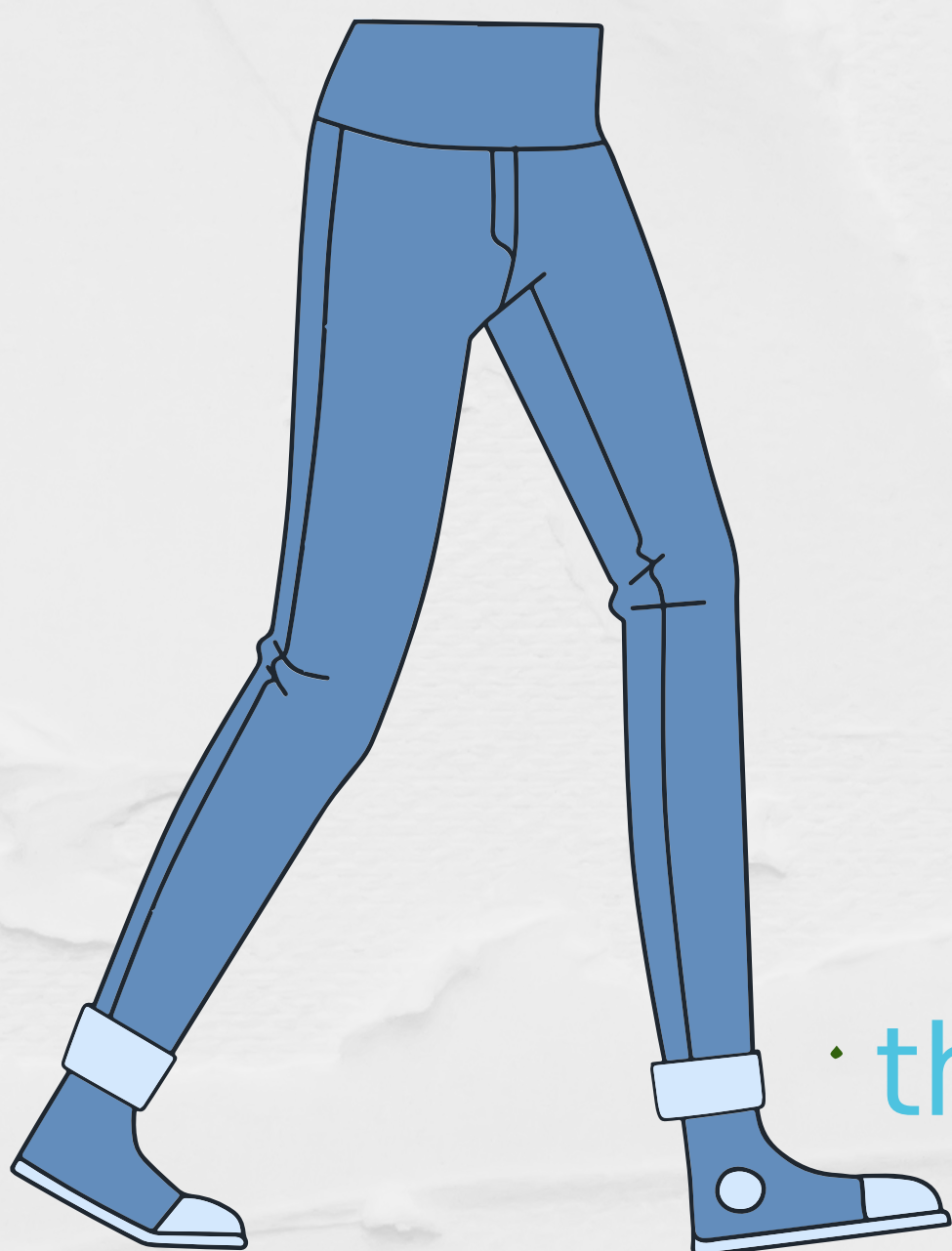
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## Pulling your leg

Used to describe the act of fooling or tricking someone nowadays, this idiom has grown from dark roots!

In the 18th & 19th centuries, on the streets of London, thieves would often work in pairs. One would trip the victim, "pulling their leg", and while the victim lay on the floor, the second thief would swoop in and commit their crime!





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## Sleep Tight

We frequently say, "Sleep tight."  
when someone goes to bed,  
wishing them a restful night.  
But why?



In the past, when mattresses  
were supported by ropes,  
sleeping tight meant sleeping  
with the ropes pulled tight,  
which would make for a more  
comfortable mattress and a  
better night's sleep.



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## Get one's goat

When someone is really irritated by someone else, you might just hear them say, "Oh, he REALLY gets my goat!"



In the past, jockeys placed goats in the stables with their horses to relax them. However, competitors would remove the goats of their rivals to spook their competitors' horses, hoping they would consequently lose the race.



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## Bury the hatchet

A frequently used term, meaning to forget indifferences but what are the origins?

In North America in the 17th century, peace talks were held between the Puritans and Native Americans.

Once an agreement was reached, hatchets and other weaponry were buried, making them unusable, indicating that the conflict had ended..



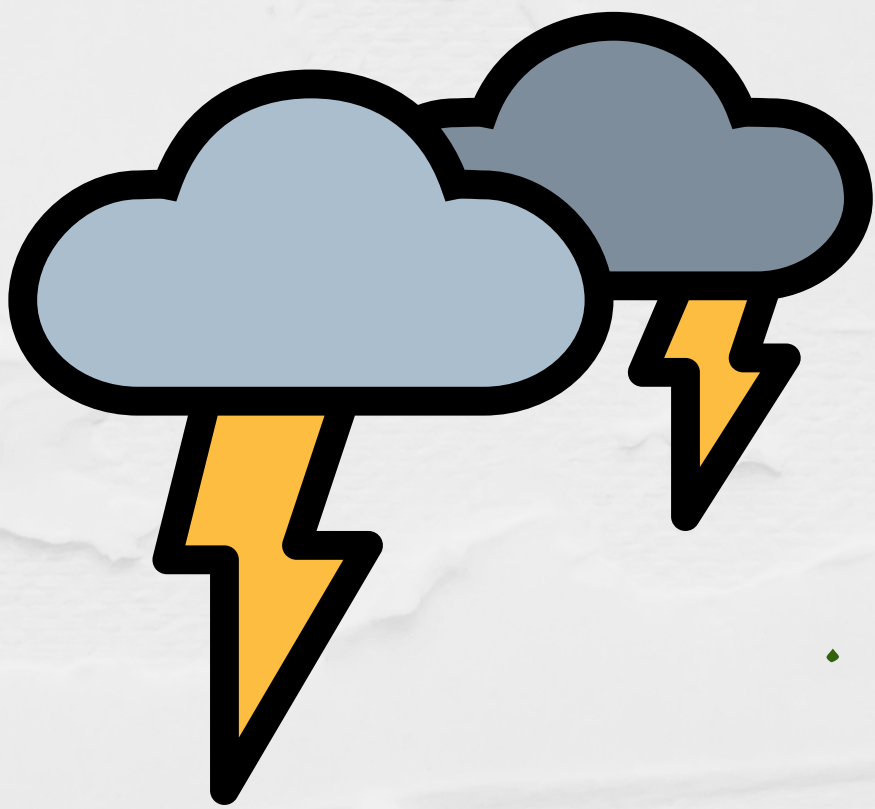


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## Stealing someone's thunder

Used to describe the act of stealing someone's idea or recognition, this idiom stems from the 18th century.



Playwright John Dennis claimed to have invented a machine to replicate the sound of thunder in his production. The claim is though, that this machine was copied and used in a later production of Macbeth.



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## Up to scratch

In the early days of boxing, before bells were introduced, boxers were required to step up to a line scratched on the floor by the referee, to indicate they were ready to fight.

If a boxer had been rendered unable to step up to the line, they were "not up to scratch" or in other words, not fit to continue.





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## Cost an arm and a leg

During the 18th century, portraits painted were priced not by how many people were to be depicted but by the number of limbs the artist was required to paint.

Cheaper portraits included only the person's head and shoulders. The most expensive ones would include all four limbs!





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## Turn a blind eye

"Turning a blind eye" is often used to describe ignoring something.

The story goes that Horatio Nelson deliberately put a telescope up to his blind eye during a conflict, so that he was unable to see any signal from his superior on another ship.





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## Red herring

Often used to describe something designed to distract or throw someone off the trail, this idiom stems from the days when smoked herrings, with their reddish colour and strong smell, were used to train hunting hounds.

The dogs were trained to ignore the strong smell of these fish, drawn across their track, and overcome the distraction.





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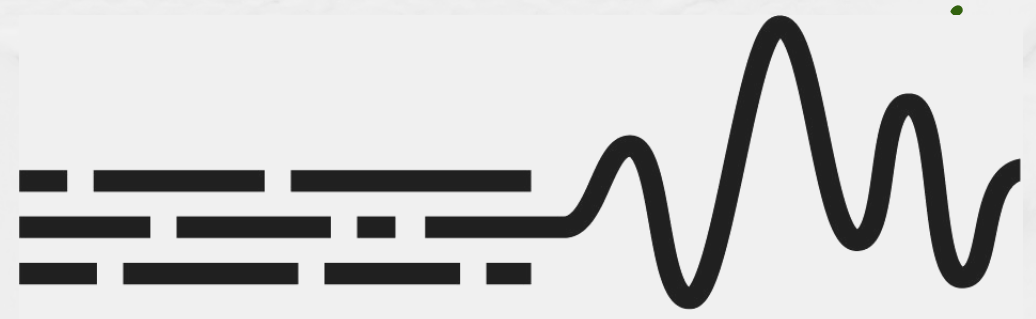
## Cold feet

This phrase might be used to describe someone not keen to commit to or go through with something.

The origins are military, illustrating when the feet of those in armed forces would freeze, rendering them unable to rush into battle.







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