

Shakespeare's idioms (higher level)

Worksheet

Warmer – Idioms

a. Work with a partner. Look at the short dialogue, and discuss the following questions.



I heard that your cousins have come to stay with you in your flat. How's it going?

It's lovely to see them. But they've **eaten me out of house and home!**

1. What does the phrase in bold mean?
2. Is it literally true that the woman has lost her home, or is this idiom just a creative way of describing something?
3. Do you have any similar idioms, or other idioms, about eating in your language?

b. Work with a partner. Decide together if you think the statements below are true or false.

1. Shakespeare is quoted more often than any other playwright.
2. It is always impossible to understand the meaning of an idiom from just the individual words.
3. The meaning of some of Shakespeare's idioms has changed since he first used them.
4. Shakespeare invented Modern English.
5. Shakespeare added around 1,700 new words to the English language.

Task 1 – Reading to check predictions

Read the text to check if the above statements are true or false.

Shakespeare's idioms

Shakespeare is the world's most quoted poet and dramatist, but most people who quote him have no idea that they are doing so. His expressions have simply entered the language and become common English idioms.

Idioms are fixed combinations of words where the meaning may not be obvious from looking at the individual words. For example, the idiom *to melt into thin air*¹, which comes from *The Tempest*, simply means to disappear suddenly and completely. Sometimes, though, the meaning is pretty clear. For example, the idiom *to come full circle*² (from *King Lear*), where the idiomatic meaning, to end up in the place where you started, is close to the literal meaning.

Because idioms are fixed, we can't change the word order or substitute any of the parts of the idiom. For example, the idiom *neither here nor there*, from *Othello*, which means irrelevant or unimportant, cannot be expressed as *neither there nor here*.

The meaning of some of Shakespeare's idioms would have been clearer in the sixteenth century, such as the idiom *a laughing stock*³ (from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), which means someone that everyone is laughing at. The phrase, which is actually found in earlier writings than Shakespeare's, refers to the way that people used to be punished for small crimes by being locked into wooden stocks, and having people throw things, such as rotten fruit and vegetables, at them. *Mum's the word*⁴ (from *Henry VI, Part 2*), is usually assumed by modern-day speakers to refer to mothers, or mums for short. However, it actually refers back to a kind of theatre performance, called 'mumming', which was done silently. So *mum's the word* means don't talk about it.

Other Shakespearean idioms have changed meaning slightly over the years. For example, *in a pickle*⁵ nowadays means in a difficult or problematic situation, but when Shakespeare used it in *The Tempest*, he simply meant that Trinculo was drunk. And Shakespeare used *the game is up*⁶ in *Cymbeline* to mean that a series of events had ended badly. Nowadays it tends to mean that we have discovered someone's bad or criminal behaviour.

At the time that Shakespeare was writing, Modern English was less than 100 years old, and Shakespeare was the first author to write much of it down. He is also thought to have created around 1,700 words himself by changing verbs to nouns or adjectives, adding prefixes and suffixes, and so on, such as *amazement*, *bedroom*, *dawn*, *unreal*, *hurried*, *luggage* and many, many more. Without Shakespeare, the English we speak today would be very different.

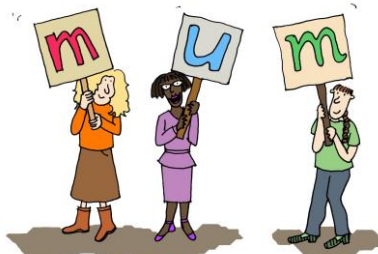
Task 2 – Literal and idiomatic meaning

a. Read the text again and match each idiom (1–6) in the text with a picture (a–f) that shows the literal meaning of the words in the idiom.

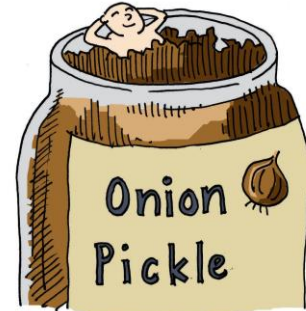
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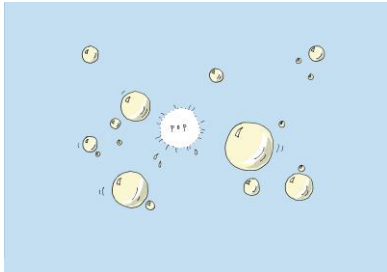
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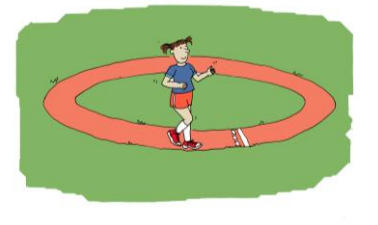
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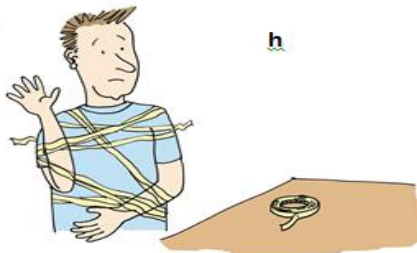
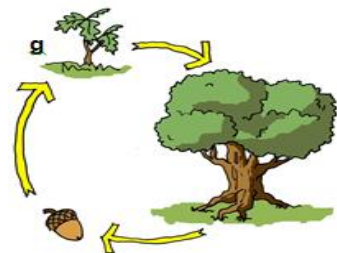
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f



b. What is the idiomatic meaning of each idiom? Look back at the text to help you, then match the idioms (1–6) again, with the pictures below (g–l) showing the idiomatic meaning.



Task 3 – Practice

Complete each sentence with the correct idiom from Task 2.

1. The city grew and prospered by manufacturing cars in the 1970s, became poorer in the 1990s, but it has now _____ with the growth of new IT-based industries.
2. _____! Don't tell him, or it won't be a surprise!
3. I got myself _____ when I forgot to fill the car with petrol and ran out miles from anywhere.
4. OK, _____. I know what you've been doing and I'm going to tell your parents.
5. I can't possibly wear that ridiculous hat. I'll be _____.
6. No one knows where he has gone. He seems to have _____.

Task 4 – Personalisation

Choose three of the idioms and think of situations in your life where you could have used each one. Tell the other students about them.