

Idiom origins

For true fluency, students need to be able to understand English idioms, some of them might seem a bit odd. We use idioms without even thinking about where they come from, but knowing a bit about the origins of these sayings is helpful in cementing these language nuggets in the mind. Here are some most famous idioms and their origins. The activities are suitable for one-on-one and group classes for Intermediate students.

What are your most favourite idioms?

skyteach

Activity 1

Match the pictures and idioms:

pulling someone's leg
raining cats and dogs

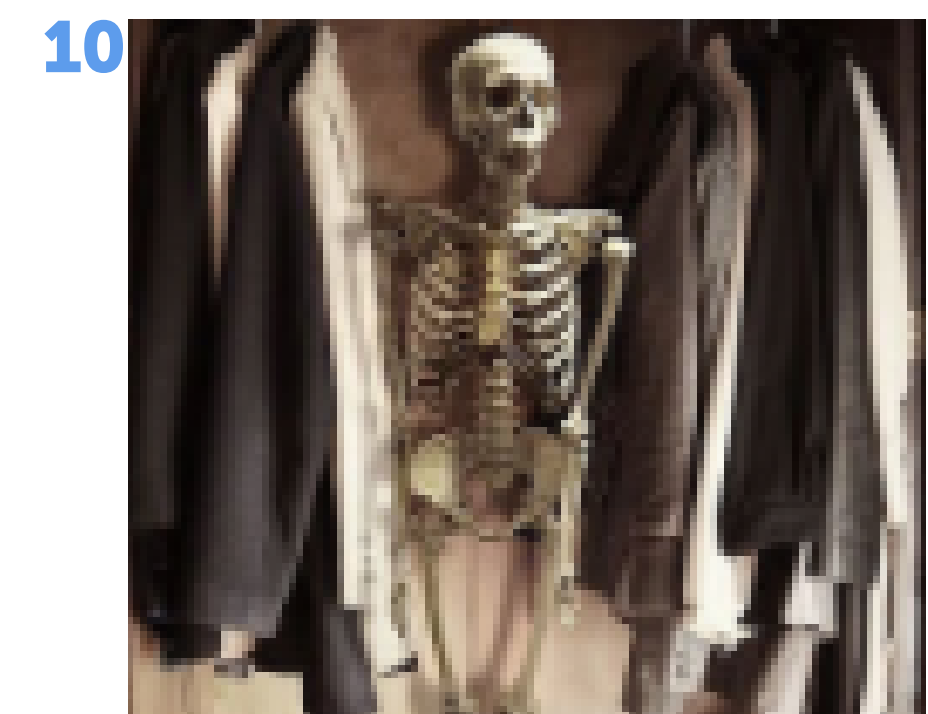
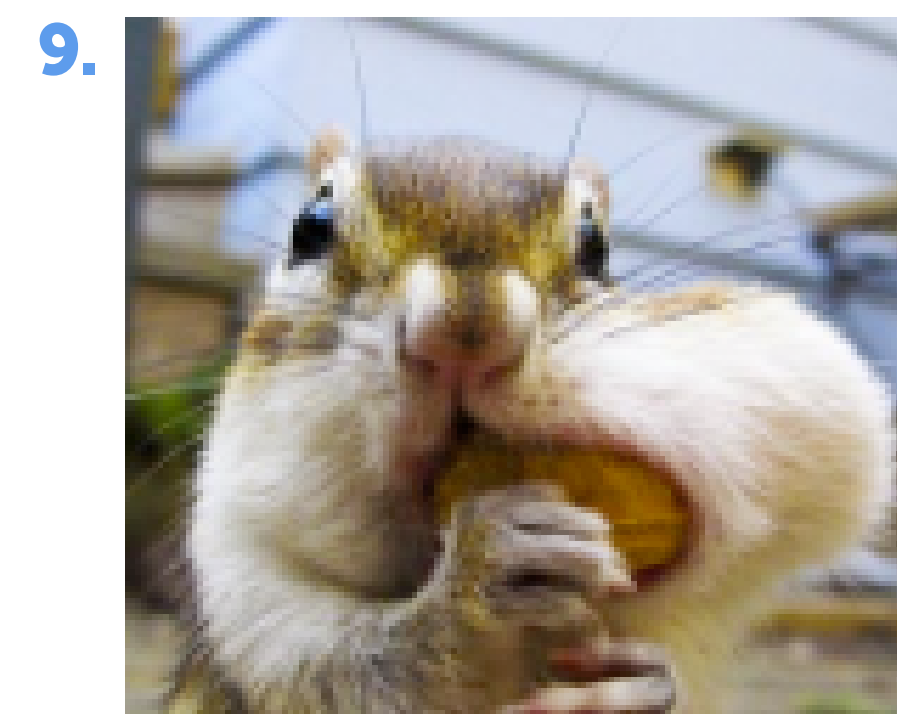
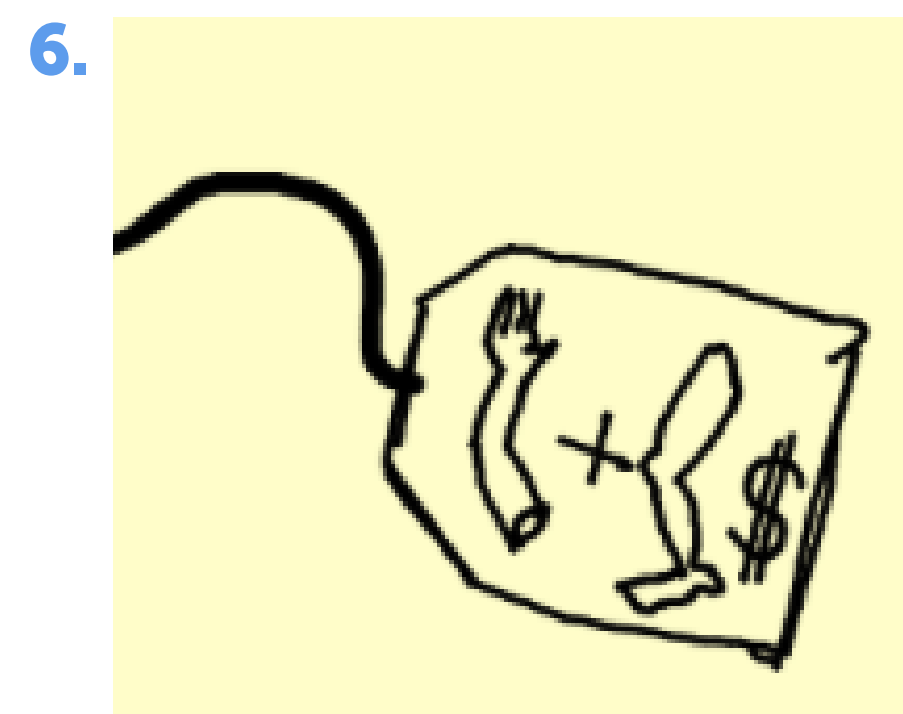
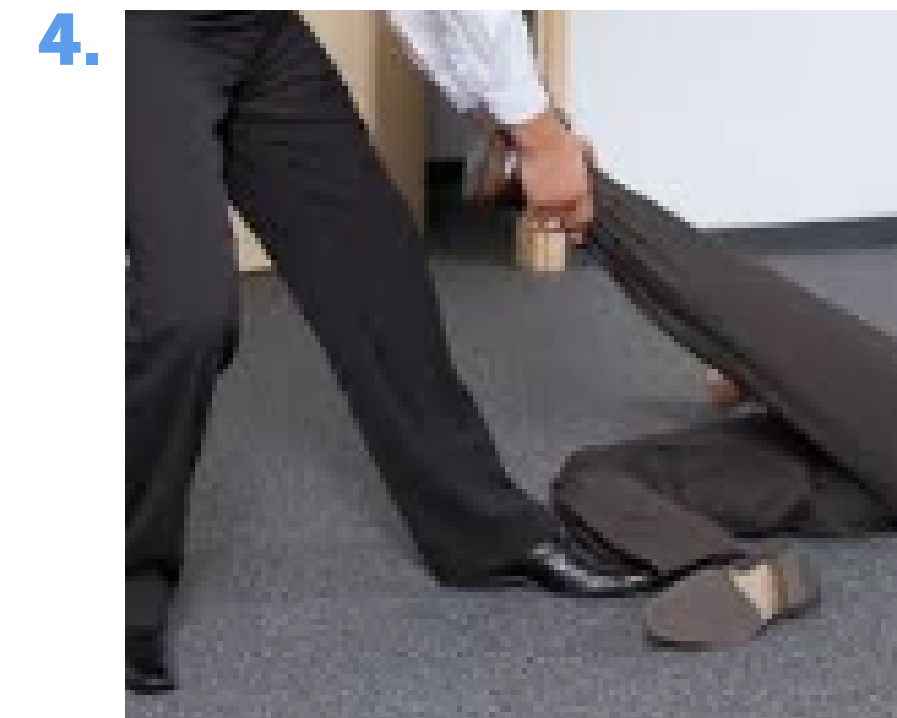
bite off more than you can chew
piece of cake

cost an arm and a leg
skeleton in the closet

let the cat out of the bag

mad as a hatter

bite the bullet
turn a blind eye



Activity 2

Match the idioms and definitions:

1. Mad as a hatter		A. you have taken on a project or task that is beyond what you are capable of.
2. Piece of cake		B. extremely expensive.
3. Let the cat out of the bag		C. to pretend not to have noticed it.
4. Pulling someone's leg		D. a secret source of shame or embarrassment, which an individual often takes pains to conceal.
5. Raining cats and dogs		E. someone who is completely crazy.

6. Cost an arm and a leg		F. to mistakenly reveal a secret.
7. Bite the bullet		G. to perform a painful task or endure an unpleasant situation.
8. Turn a blind eye		I. simple, easy to accomplish.
9. Bite off more than you can chew		H. to tease someone, usually by lying in a joking manner.
10. skeleton in the closet		K. it's raining particularly heavily.

Activity 3

Read the origins and complete with the correct idiom from Activity 2:

1. _____

This expression is said to have arisen as a result of the famous English naval hero Admiral Horatio Nelson. He couldn't see with one eye and during the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, he deliberately raised his telescope to that eye to show that he would not see any signal from his superior giving him discretion to withdraw from the battle.

2. _____

First used in print by Ogden Nash in 1936 in the 1870s, when this often served as prizes for winning a competition. In particular, there was a tradition in slave-holding areas of the American most South of holding "cake walks," where slaves would process in a circle around a cake and those deemed "graceful" would be awarded the cake as a prize.

3. _____

This saying dates back to 1800s America, when people often chewed tobacco. Sometimes the chewer would put into their mouth more than they could fit; it's quite self-explanatory!

4. _____

In the 1800s, patients would literally bite on it to cope with the pain of having surgery before anesthesia was common.

5. _____

The origins of this bizarre phrase are obscure, though it was first recorded in 1651 in the poet Henry Vaughan's collection Olor Iscanus. Speculation as to its origins ranges from medieval superstition to Norse mythology, but it may even be a reference to dead animals being washed through the streets of London by floods. In 17th-century England, public sanitation wasn't what it is today—hence during deluges, rain coursing down the streets would often carry dead animals with it. As a result, even though cats and dogs never literally showered down from above, they became associated with severe rainstorms.

Read the origins and complete with the correct idiom from Activity 2:

6. _____

During 19th-century England, one periodical, *The Eclectic Review*, used the phrase almost literally: It was mentioned in reference to a family attempting to keep a son's illness secret ("Two great sources of distress are the danger of contagion and the apprehension of hereditary diseases. The dread of being the cause of misery to posterity has prevailed over men to conceal the skeleton in the closet").

7. _____

While the second part of the idiom refers to Lewis Carroll's character in *Alice in Wonderland*, the expression has its origins in the effects of the chronic mercury poisoning commonly experienced by 18th and 19th century hat manufacturers owing to the use of mercurous nitrate in felt hats.

8. _____

The story goes that this phrase originated from 18th-century paintings, as famous people like George Washington would have their portraits done without certain limbs showing. Having limbs showing is said to have cost more.

9. _____

Up to and including in the 1700s, a common street fraud included replacing valuable pigs with less valuable cats and selling them in bags. When a cat was let out of a bag, the jig was up.

10. _____

It was originally a method used by thieves to entrap their pedestrians and subsequently rob them. One thief would be assigned 'tripper up' duty, and would use different instruments to knock the person to the ground. Luckily, these days the saying is much more friendlier, though being on the end of a joke might not always be fun.

KEYS:

Activity 1

1. Mad as a hatter
2. Piece of cake
3. Let the cat out of the bag
4. Pulling someone's leg
5. Raining cats and dogs
6. Cost an arm and a leg
7. Bite the bullet
8. Turn a blind eye
9. Bite off more than you can chew
10. Skeleton in the closet

Activity 2

1- E, 2 - I, 3- F, 4- H, 5 - K, 6-B, 8 -C, 7 - G, 9 - A, 10 - D

Activity 3

1. Turn a blind eye
2. Piece of cake
3. Bite off more than you can chew
4. Bite the bullet
5. Raining cats and dogs
6. skeleton in the closet
7. Mad as a hatter
8. Cost an arm and a leg
9. Let the cat out of the bag
10. Pulling someone's leg