IN THE LOOP

A Reference Guide to American English Idioms

In the Loop:
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Something to Crow About by Shelley Vance Laflin;
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Illustrated American Idioms by Dean Curry

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Introduction

Idiom: a group of words that means something different than the individual words it contains

As with any language, American English is full of idioms, especially when spoken. Idioms add color and texture to language by creating images that convey meanings beyond those of the individual words that make them up. Idioms are culturally bound, providing insight into the history, culture, and outlook of their users. This is because most idioms have developed over time from practices, beliefs, and other aspects of different cultures. As a culture changes, the words used to describe it also change: some idioms fall out of use and others develop to replace them. With idioms in particular, the beliefs or practices leading to their use may disappear while the idiom itself continues to be used. Idioms can be so overused that they become clichés; or they can become slang or jargon, expressions used mainly by specific groups or professions.

Idioms can be complimentary or insulting. They can express a wide range of emotions from excitement to depression, love to hate, heroism to cowardice, and anything in between. Idioms are also used to express a sense of time, place, or size. The range of uses for idioms is complex and widespread.

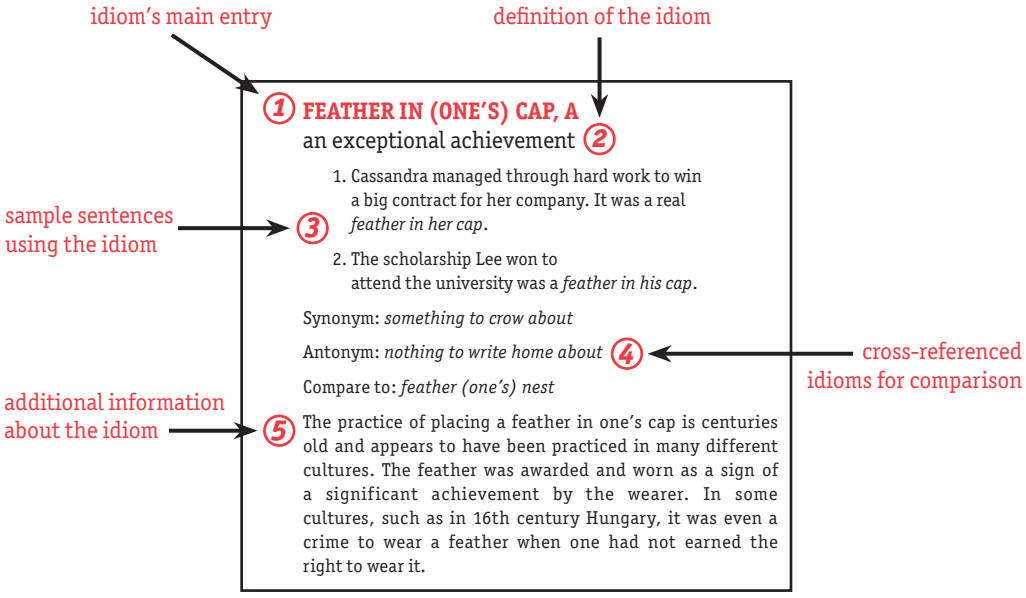
The complexity of idioms is what makes them so difficult for non-native speakers to learn. However, this complexity is also what can make idioms so interesting to study and learn; they are rarely boring. Learning about idioms, in this case those used in the United States, provides a way to learn not only the language, but a little about the people who use it.

In the Loop is a collection of common idioms updated and compiled from two previous books of idioms published by the Office of English Language Programs: *Illustrated American Idioms* by Dean Curry and *Something to Crow About* by Shelley Vance Laflin. *In the Loop* combines the popular aspects of the previous books, while also updating the content by including idioms that have come into use more recently and eliminating those that are rarely used. When available, background information is included about the origins of the idioms. Additionally, *In the Loop* includes categories of commonly used idioms and suggestions to the teacher to aid in developing classroom exercises for learning the meanings and uses of idioms. In essence, this book is intended to be both a teaching tool and a reference.

Organization of this Book. *In the Loop* is divided into three parts: Part 1, "Idioms and Definitions"; Part 2, "Selected Idioms by Category"; and Part 3, "Suggestions for the Teacher." The idioms are listed alphabetically in Part 1. Part 2 highlights some of the most commonly used idioms, grouped into categories. Part 3 contains classroom suggestions to help teachers plan appropriate exercises for their students. There is also a complete index at the back of the book listing page numbers for both main entries and cross-references for each idiom.

How to Locate an Idiom. In Part 1, "Idioms and Definitions," idioms are listed alphabetically by first word. The only first words not used to place the idioms in order are articles (*a, the, some*) and pronouns and possessives (*someone, one*). Instead, these are placed at the end of the idiom, separated by a comma.

How Each Entry is Arranged



The idiom (1) is given first, followed by its definition (2). Then, two or three example sentences (3) are provided to illustrate how the idiom is used. Occasionally, an idiom has more than one meaning. Where this occurs, each meaning for the idiom is numbered with corresponding numbers in the sample sentences. All entries include the idiom (1), definition (2), and sample sentences (3).

The final two elements—cross-referenced idioms (4) and additional information (5)—are included only where relevant or available. There are three types of cross-references used: *synonym*, *antonym*, and *compare to*. *Synonyms* are expressions that have the same meaning as the idiom. *Antonyms* are expressions that mean the opposite of the idiom. *Compare to* includes expressions that might be mistaken as similar to, or related to, the idiom. In the illustrated entry above, for example, *feather (one's) nest* has a completely different meaning than *feather in (one's) cap*, even though they both refer to a feather. The final section, additional information (5), includes notes such as the origins of the expression, restrictions on usage, or any additional information that might help a learner understand when and how a particular idiom is used.

Symbols Used in the Entries. Some idioms may have one or two alternate words that are used interchangeably without altering the meaning. One example of this is *in a fix/bind/jam*. In this idiom, *fix*, *bind*, or *jam* can be used without changing the idiom's meaning. In such cases the possible alternates are separated by a slash (/).

Some idioms require context-specific subjects or objects. In these cases *someone*, *something*, or *one* are placed in parenthesis within the idiom. (*Someone*) or (*something*) is used when the idiom's object is different than the subject. For example, in *beat (someone) to the punch*, *someone* is a different person than the subject as in *I beat him to the punch*. The pronoun *one* is used when the subject and object of the idiom is the same person, as in *ace up (one's) sleeve (He had an ace up his sleeve)*.