American English
Idioms in the News
Meaning and Origin

more than **1,000** phrases explained with real examples

by PETER BENGELSDORF

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Introduction

Americans love to use idioms, phrases that are colorful and mysterious. Whether you are a native English speaker or learning the language, you will find this book useful and entertaining. If you teach English, this book will be a valuable resource.

It explains phrases (combinations of words) that are difficult or impossible to understand based on the usual meaning of the words. Knowing the usual meaning of **grease** and **palm** doesn't help us understand that **greasing someone's palm** can mean tipping generously or bribing.

Some of the phrases are considered idiomatic because they include a word that is not often used. An example is **hunker** in **hunker down**.

In a phrasal verb, a verb gets a special meaning when combined with another word. For example, **act** can mean "do something" or "perform in a play or movie." But **act up** means "behave badly," and **act out** means "have an emotional outburst." There are thousands of phrasal verbs. The ones in this book have meanings that you would not expect based on the usual meaning of the words when used separately.

Why I Wrote This Book

You can find definitions of many idiomatic phrases on the Internet. Such definitions can be helpful. But examples of the phrases, as they are used in standard language, often give us a better understanding of their meaning.

Explaining idioms in my English classes has made me more aware that definitions alone can be misleading.

Almost all the entries in this book are among the most-used expressions in American English.

Many of the citations are from news accounts produced by major media organizations, which generally use language considered to be "mainstream" or "standard." The examples are brief—just long enough to help us understand the phrases. They will not help you understand the news. If one of the citations from a news organization mentions a topic that interests you, I suggest visiting the Web site of the source.

[Idiomatic Phrases From A to Z]

15 minutes of fame

There are things about me that my girls will only know from the stories told by old friends: How I earned my 15 minutes of fame as the editor of my high-school newspaper, which decided to devote most of its 28 pages to the topic of sex. —Austin American-Statesman (11/18/2011)

"Everything that he is saying is false and nonsense," says Kardashian's lawyer, Marty Singer. "This guy is in it to promote himself for his 15 minutes of fame." —New York Post (11/14/2011)

Winning bidders got their 15 minutes of fame with bit parts in movies and TV shows at auctions benefitting the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Southern Florida. —The Miami Herald (11/12/2011)

"Today, it's all about your set five minutes of fame, and then it's over for you." —Ian Gillan, lead singer for the English rock band Deep Purple (2/19/2013)

15 minutes of fame comes from Andy Warhol's 1968 statement—as famous as his art—that "in the future everybody will be world famous for 15 minutes."

As in the New York Post example, the phrase is sometimes used as an insult, accusing someone of seeking publicity for a bad or selfish purpose. But in most uses it is neutral, assuming there's no harm in people wanting a little bit of fame.

Gillan made this idiom 10 minutes shorter, or he was misquoted. But that variation of the expression is common. As TV commercials and movie scenes get shorter, 15 minutes seems longer than it did in 1968.

20-20 hindsight

"Everybody reported to the executive director, and with 20-20 hindsight, that is not a good system." —Jack Schaffer, a member of the board directors of Metra, Chicago's commuter rail system (5/15/2010)

"With 20-20 hindsight and all that has followed I would not have offered him the job and I expect he would not have taken it." —U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron (7/20/2011)

"In the rearview, with 20-20 hindsight, would we have changed some things? Maybe." —Kevin Hamilton, police chief in Fullerton, California (8/13/2011)

"Hindsight is 20-20. I still think we made decisions that were right at the time. It's really easy for someone to be an armchair quarterback." —Lindsay Vonn, talking about competing in downhill ski races (3/7/2011)

"Looking back, of course with 20-20 hindsight, I wish we would have done more to encourage competition." —Jill Sommers, former member of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, talking about large financial institutions that continue to dominate derivatives trading (9/4/2013)

If you have 20-20 vision, you can see clearly. **20-20 hindsight** means seeing the past clearly.

A common expression, "hindsight is 20-20," means, "It's easy to see things clearly when they are in the past."

In the news examples, "with 20-20 hindsight" means "knowing what we know now."

Lindsay Vonn's "armchair quarterback" referred to people who are not involved in something but give their opinions about it, or make judgments long after the event is over. See **Monday morning quarterback**.

20-20 (sometimes spelled 20/20 or 20:20) refers to a measuring system in which the first number is the distance in feet from an eye-test chart, and the second is related to the size of the symbols on the chart. In places where meters are used instead of feet, hindsight is 6-6.

20-20 dates to the 1860's and 1870's, when Herman Snellen was developing the eye charts named after him. "20-20 hindsight" did not become popular until the mid-1950's. The earliest example in my searches was in a 1951 statement to a Senate committee by Secretary of State Dean Acheson:

"It seems better...to put these events that we have been talking about in the context of their time instead of trying to view them with the 20-20 hindsight that so many of our distinguished gentlemen seem to be gifted with." (6/8/1951)

800-pound gorilla

See **elephant in the room**

a bird in the hand

Although Renaissance Learning officials are taking the [new] offer "very seriously"... board members still must pursue the Permira deal, James said... "It's a bird in the hand." —Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune (8/26/2011)

Barnes & Noble's future remains uncertain. So the board may prefer to take the bird in the hand in the form of the Liberty Media bid, particularly since the risk of Barnes & Noble's digital strategy is high. —The New York Times (1/1/2011)

In January, Mr. Cymbal sold the land to Sweet Virginia Acquisitions LLC..."My initial response was I'm not selling because this was my baby. But I kept hearing my mother saying 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,'" says Mr. Cymbal. —The Wall Street Journal (2/1/2012)

A bird in the hand is a shortened version of an old saying: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Its current meaning, usually, is having something now is more valuable than the possibility of having something greater in the future.

The old saying, which has been traced to the 1500's, alluded to the use of trained falcons to catch smaller birds. It was better to have a falcon in one's hand than two small birds caught in the bush.

Few people are aware of the origin. As the news examples show, the meaning of the expression has changed.

a far cry, far from it

Carpe Diem Collegiate High School and Middle School is a far cry from the schools that today's parents attended. —The Arizona Republic (3/6/2011)

"I think those songs are still a far cry from the full-length [recording] that will be coming out this upcoming summer..." —singer Philip Anselmo (1/7/2013)

"But that doesn't mean South Florida's leadership ranks are filled. Far from it." —The Miami Herald (3/7/2011)

"EPA has seen one of the most productive times in the agency's history...It doesn't get any better than that, but that doesn't mean these actions were without controversy; far from it." —Gina McCarthy, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (7/30/2013)

A far cry, which means much different, usually is combined with "from."

Far from it means not at all.

In the past, cry often meant shout, and a far cry was a shout over a long distance.

The expression is similar to "far from." In many sentences, including the Arizona Republic example, "a far cry from" could be changed to "far from" and the sentence would have the same meaning.

about-face

The announcement is the latest sign of the abrupt about-face Minnesota has executed on the landmark federal care overhaul since Gov. Mark Dayton took office. —Minneapolis Star Tribune (2/22/2011)

In an about-face, Navistar this month said it would purchase a competitor's engines to meet the standards. —Chicago Tribune (8/28/2012)

...lawmakers have done an about-face on Internet cafes by seeking a ban instead of more regulations. —The Miami Herald, referring to an argument about Internet gambling (3/18/2013)

About-face is the command that makes soldiers turn and face in the opposite direction. Used figuratively, an about-face is a change from one direction to the opposite one.

The phrase is shorter than it used to be. Long ago, the command and the idiomatic expression both were "right-about-face." This refers to a radio broadcast by President Franklin D. Roosevelt:

"But since the clarion call for action by the new President echoed into every home Saturday, the national spirit has become electrified. Not since the Armistice has there been the sudden right-about-face from pessimism to optimism." —Brooklyn Daily Eagle (3/7/1933)

above and beyond, beyond the call

"You'll see in our budget that we're going to have new savings above and beyond what we proposed before, just like we're going to have some new initiatives above and beyond what we proposed before." —Jason Furman, deputy director of President Obama's National Economic Council (2/13/2013)

"Nab is a very hard worker, and he's always willing to go above and beyond," Mr. Henderson said. —Worcester Telegram & Gazette (7/31/2011)

I love the teachers who spend their own money for classroom supplies and go way beyond the call to reach out to troubled kids and families. —Battle Creek Enquirer (7/31/2011)

Every day, they go above and beyond the call of duty to protect our borders from illegal entries... —Bangor Daily News (7/31/2011)

Above and beyond means in addition to, or more than expected, or more than required.

Frequently, as in the Telegram & Gazette example, the phrase refers to work or activity that is being praised.

Beyond the call is a shortening of "beyond the call of duty." It refers to doing more than required.

The two expressions are sometimes combined, as in the Bangor Daily News example. That adds emphasis but uses more words than necessary.

Above and beyond has been traced to the 1500's. Beyond the call of duty has been in use at least since the 1800's.

ace in the hole, ace (or card or trick) up one's sleeve

[Texas Governor Rick] Perry may have another financial ace in the hole. The U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in the Citizens United case empowers wealthy individuals and businesses to spend unlimited amounts of money outside of the formal campaign structure to help the candidate of their choice. —Houston Chronicle (7/4/2011)

"I like the excitement of a new idea and the surprise. As a comedian, that's our ace in the hole. A joke is a surprise." —Ricky Gervais, comedian (9/12/2013)

However, Amazon has an ace up its sleeve that other tablet makers do not, in that the Kindle Fire will offer Amazon's full spread of digital content... —The New York Times (9/28/2011)

The port has an extra card up its sleeve—it has built the new facility with the potential to deepen the water to 18m, in case of the arrival of yet another new class of container ships. —Financial Times (9/19/2011)

"Jim Harbaugh, he got a little trick up his sleeve, huh?" —Terrell Suggs, linebacker for the Baltimore Ravens football team, joking that the opposing team's coach tried to avoid losing the Super Bowl by ordering a power failure at the New Orleans Superdome (2/4/2013)

An **ace in the hole** is a powerful advantage that others cannot see, or is kept secret. The phrase comes from poker, in which cards that are kept secret from other players are "in the hole."

However, the idiom is sometimes used (or misused, some might say) to mean an advantage—secret or not. In the Chronicle news example, Gov. Perry's advantage is not a secret. If he is keeping no secrets, you could say his **cards are on the table**, and he may succeed if he **plays his cards right**.

Examples of ace in the hole have been cited from as early as the late 1800's.

Having an **ace** or **card** or **trick up one's sleeve** also means a hidden advantage.

In a real card game, keeping a card hidden in a shirt sleeve is cheating, but the phrases are often used without implying wrongdoing, as in the New York Times and Financial Times examples.

Achilles' heel

Health care reform is supposed to be former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's Achilles heel in the Republican primary, and it may very well turn out to be. —Politico (8/7/2011)

For the first time in 14 months, the Washington area lost more jobs than it gained...largely because of job losses in the federal government..."What gave us early growth last year and made us the fastest-growing metro area looks like our Achilles' heel this year." —The Washington Post

(8/3/2011)

"Toyota realizes their Achilles' heel is design. Toyota design needs a makeover." —John Wolkonowicz, a car industry expert in Boston (8/13/2013)

In Greek mythology, the warrior Achilles could only be killed if he was wounded in the heel of his foot, and that is how he died. **Achilles' heel** is used as a metaphor meaning fatal weakness, but often its meaning is weakness, not necessarily fatal.

In the Politico example, the Achilles' heel might be fatal to Romney's political goal. In the Washington Post example, the loss of government jobs is harming the local economy but will not kill it, so Achilles' heel means weakness, not fatal weakness.

Some people use the possessive apostrophe after Achilles'. Some don't.

References to the story of Achilles were common in early English literature. An early example that hints of the future use of the phrase as a metaphor is in a poem published in 1705:

> Leave then, said he, th' invulnerable Keel
> We'll find they're feeble, like Achilles Heel.
> —"Directions to a Painter" by Sir John Dehham (1705)

acid test, litmus test

Here's the acid test for the Cuomo administration's plan to authorize expanded natural gas drilling upstate: It absolutely, positively must keep New York City's drinking water safe. —New York Daily News (7/11/2011)

"This is an acid test. If he decides to support these horrible bills, then we in New Hampshire are going to do everything we can to tell our voters not to vote for him in the New Hampshire primary." —Sam Cohen, officer of a gun-rights support group, talking about New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (8/2/2013)

Bachmann dodged two questions about whether she saw same-sex marriage as a litmus test in nominating judges. —CBS News (6/30/2011)

"I think our litmus test is, 'Is there a purpose to it?' Are we helping build Hukkster? Are we helping to build SumZero?" —Cameron Winklevoss, talking about how he and his twin brother decide whether to make public appearances. Hukkster and SunZero are companies that he and his twin brother invested in. (3/24/2013)

An **acid test** makes a sure, conclusive determination.

Public awareness of the phrase increased during the mid-1800's, when an acid test could help make someone wealthy if it confirmed that the rock he pulled from a California stream really contained gold. But it wasn't until the 1900's that the expression was commonly used to describe tests not involving chemicals.

Like an acid test, a **litmus test** gives a definite answer to a question. In chemistry, a litmus test uses paper that turns blue in alkaline solutions, red in acidic solutions. The phrase became popular in American politics during the 1970's. It meant that based on their answer to a single question, politicians or judicial nominees could be labeled as liberal or conservative, or judged acceptable or not.

The question Michele Bachman "dodged"—avoided answering directly—was whether she would

make decisions on nominating judges based on a litmus test: their support for, or opposition to, gay marriage.

Sometimes either of the phrases is used simply to add emphasis, when the word test alone would have the same meaning:

The summer internship, a rite of passage for generations of MBA students, is for many of us the first true litmus test of whether the sacrifices we'd made and months of hard work we'd endured were leading us in the direction we'd hoped. —Bloomberg Businessweek (7/11/2011)

across the board

Havas could spend between EUR700 million and EUR750 million on acquisitions over the next three years to strengthen the group across the board and particularly in digital, Bollore said. —The Wall Street Journal (3/8/2011)

"The reason we have been in such an enormous economic crisis was prompted by reckless behavior across the board." —Barack Obama (presidential debate, 10/3/2012)

"I think the real estate market really has bottomed...there's different sectors in real estate but generally I think across the board it has bottomed." —Hank McLarty, president, Gratus Capital Management (5/19/2012)

"In a matter of days, across-the-board cuts are going to take place, and it will affect defense to the tune of six hundred billion dollars." —Senator Harry Reid, criticizing Republicans for delaying approval of Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense (2/14/2013)

Across the board means including all parts or categories, with no exceptions. The idiom came from horse racing more than a century ago. Gamblers could bet on a horse to win, place or show (finish first, second or third), or bet across the board on all three possibilities.

"E.R. Thomas is said to have wagered $10,000 on Lady Amelia in the second race and $5,000 across the board on Buttons in the Long Island Handicap." —New York Sun (July, 1904)

act of faith

"It's an act of faith because you're saying I'm going to go without food and spending time with God is more important that food," Pastor Baxter Stanley said. —The Augusta Chronicle (7/21/2011)

As an act of faith to restore relations with Pakistan, U.S. intelligence in recent weeks shared the location of two such compounds [bomb-making facilities] in Pakistan's tribal areas. —Associated Press (7/13/2011)

"If you trust the music, and stay within the parameters, within that framework, you'll get home. Same with writing. That's why I say writing is an act of faith." —James McBride, writer and musician (8/1/2013)

If something you do is an **act of faith**, you do it because you believe in something or you are testing your belief in something—such as religion, an idea, a person or group. An act of faith usually involves taking a risk or doing something difficult.

Act of faith appears in the Bible published in Rheims, France, in 1582, a translation of the New Testament from Latin to English.

act of God, act of nature

Maryland Bankers Association President Kathleen Murphy says banks, too, are willing to work one-on-one with customers dealing with a financial crisis from an "act of God or inactivity of Congress." —The Baltimore Sun (8/1/2011)

"The behavior of that fire was very predictable. You can call it an act of God, but it was a predictable act of God." —Peter Morrison, executive director of the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, talking about the fire that changed direction and killed 19 firefighters in Arizona (8/11/2013)

"Barring any significant act of nature, we will finish the project on or before Dec. 31." —Tampa Bay Tribune (8/2/2011)

"The Oak Hill CC [Country Club] grounds staff did a magnificent job in managing this act of nature." —Steve Martin, a local bank vice president, talking about heavy rain before a golf tournament in Rochester, New York (8/16/2013)

An **act of God** is a powerful event that cannot be avoided or controlled. It often refers to severe weather, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which are also called **acts of nature**.

Act of God is a legal term and is often used in insurance documents.

Act of God, with a meaning close to its modern meaning, has been in use since the 1600's, and as a legal term, along with act of nature, since the 1800's.

act up, act out

It is only when markets act up—plunge and languish for months on end—that our true stomach for risk is revealed. —The Baltimore Sun (8/6/2011)

Jurors who don't show and attorneys who act up also may face contempt charges. —The Virginian-Pilot (7/30/2011)

She had been close to her father and, in his absence, began to act out, getting into fights, distrusting others and losing friends. —The Indianapolis Star (8/7/2011)

"People seem to feel entitled to act out on other people, whatever their anger might be." —Dr. Drew Pinsky, radio and television show host (4/19/2013)

Act up means behave badly or cause trouble.

Other examples of things that can act up are a medical condition that gets worse, and a machine that stops working.

A person who **acts out** uses disruptive behavior to express anger or unhappiness. It is based on an older but still common meaning of act out: to put something into action, like a scene from a play, or a fantasy.

Act out in its original meaning has been traced back to the 1600's; with the meaning behaving badly, it was not in use until the 1900's.

Act up has been traced to the late 1800's but was not in frequent use with its current meaning until the 1900's.

ad nauseam

"Washington is a very divided town, as the country has seen ad nauseam," he said. —Hartford Courant (8/2/2011)

For more than a month, Democrats and Republicans have spoken ad nauseam about the need for "compromise" and "mutual sacrifice." —Philadelphia Daily News (8/3/2011)

"This guy has already confessed ad nauseum." —Frank Holthaus, defense attorney in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (8/16/2013)

Ad nauseum means continuing a long time, or repeatedly—so much that it might make us sick.

Ad nauseum is one of many Latin phrases used in English. Latin is also the source of nauseous: sick to one's stomach.

Examples of ad nauseum in printed English have been found in books from as early as the 1600's.

add fuel to the fire, pour gasoline on the fire

The markets, the European crisis, and the political battles are wreaking havoc on our summer vacation. Adding more fuel to the fire, the S&P just lowered their long-term sovereign credit rating on the United States of America... —Seeking Alpha (8/7/2011)

"I think the ability to spread the word about it via the Internet is adding some fuel to the fire. If you watched the kids doing it on YouTube, you'd think it was the most fun thing people have ever done." —W. Hobart Davies, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, referring to a dangerous choking game played by children (8/16/2012)

Peter Gioia, senior economist for the Connecticut Business and Industry Association, who called the [S&P] downgrade "pouring gasoline on the fire," said Monday's Wall Street drop also reflected global concerns over the European Central Bank's decision to buy Italian and Spanish debt, relations with China, and how Washington and the Federal Reserve will deal with the sluggish U.S. economy. —Meriden, Conn., Record-Journal (8/8/2011)

"One of the biggest drags on the stock have been questions about succession. This definitely pours gasoline on the fire." —Joe Magyer, a financial analyst, after Berkshire Hathaway announced that its leader, Warren Buffett, had prostate cancer (8/17/2012)

Adding fuel to the fire or **pouring gasoline on the fire** is making a bad problem worse.

Add fuel to the fire has been used with similar meaning at least since the 1700's. In her 1785 autobiography, George Ann Bellamy, a popular English actress, wrote that when a person's reputation is harmed unfairly, seeking damages in court does no good; "it only adds fuel to the fire."

add insult to injury

"If they are leaving things in plain view, they might as well leave the vehicle unlocked," Officer Mark Wolfberg said. "Is that good advice? No. But we've had people who had their cars locked and to add insult to injury, they had their items stolen and their windows broken." —The (Sunbury, Pa.) Daily Item (8/4/2011)

Uranium tailings have already polluted large stretches of the Colorado River... To add insult to

injury, multinational mining companies would be able to get new hard rock mining leases on public lands without having to pay royalties. —Sacramento Bee (8/4/2011)

"This region has already been hit in recent weeks by two previous typhoons...Typhoon Utor could add insult to injury, with the potential for severe flooding." —Tom Yulsman, science writer (8/12/2013)

When **insult is added to injury**, someone suffers an indignity or act of disrespect (an insult) after being harmed (injured) in some other way.

Add insult to injury is a cliché, used frequently and often thoughtlessly. In most of the other examples I analyzed, the meaning was, "another thing that's bad (or annoying, or outrageous)."

Printed examples of add insult to injury have been found from as early as the 1740's.

add up

Sharia Pettiford is a good mother and would never abandon her 8-month-old baby son in a car, her cousin, Daniele Pettiford said today...There are so many people, aunts and uncles and cousins, she could leave the child with; something doesn't add up." —The Jersey Journal (8/5/2011)

As it stands, the school leadership is saying we might charge to play sports or for extra-curriculars, but we won't let students within the two-mile limit ride a bus, even if they want to pay. That doesn't add up. —The Sun-Chronicle (Attleboro, Mass., 8/6/2011)

"I was also very far from being the only journalist to notice that the Bush administration's case for Saddam Hussein's imaginary 'weapons of mass destruction' didn't add up." —Gene Lyons, newspaper columnist (3/22/2013)

If you write the correct total under a list of numbers, your total adds up. If your total is incorrect, someone might say: "This does not add up." When used figuratively, it **does not add up** means it does not make sense; something about it is contradictory.

This expression is usually in the negative, but not always: "With this new piece of information, it's all starting to add up means it's starting to make sense."

Using addition as a metaphor goes back at least to the early 1900's. This example is from an article about painting:

Wacik puts a white house into a patch of sunlight and it blazes whiter than any house could outside of a Bohemian picture, and his shadows are full of hot color. It doesn't add up technically, perhaps, but there it is for those who care for color that blazes and sun that shines. —The New York Times (11/21/1913)

after all

"No one knows better than Algeria how ruthless these groups are. After all, they fought a very terrible war against them for a number of years, with great loss of life." —Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (1/18/2013)

Many business leaders said they have already adjusted to that new reality, well before the latest rough patch [period of time]. After all, economic troubles—rising oil prices, anemic global growth and shaky consumer confidence—have plagued the market for months. —The Washington

Post (8/21/2011)

Love was confined to private life, where only women and novelists and psychoanalysts were supposed to pay much attention to it. Then, a little more than half a century ago, biologists and economists and psychologists decided that love mattered after all, and began conducting experiments to determine how much. —The New York Times (8/12/2011)

In the Clinton quotation and Washington Post example, **after all** means considering everything that has happened. In the New York Times example, after all means despite what happened, or what was thought, before.

When it is at the end of a sentence, after all usually expresses surprise, indicating that something was unexpected. For example:

"What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy! There is nothing like dancing after all." —Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen (1853)

A phrase with similar meaning in some contexts is **when all is said and done**.

after hours

[The store] Posh boasts several talents who create one-of-a-kind jewelry items at various prices, Dittrich said. They also offer private after-hours parties, which they are already booking through fall. —Tulsa World (8/9/2011)

After hours, Array BioPharma (ARRY) said it signed a deal worth up to $685 million with Genentech... —Seeking Alpha (8/9/2011)

Furlan couldn't be reached for comment after-hours Monday. —Burlington Free Press (8/8/2011)

After hours means after the normally scheduled hours.

In the Tulsa World example, the store Posh will be available for parties when it is closed to customers. The Seeking Alpha example refers to an announcement made after the stock market closed. The Burlington Free Press mentions after hours to be fair to Furlan, a lawyer. It is a brief way to say that the newspaper tried to contact the lawyer after his normal business hours.

Shortening phrases like "after normal business hours" to after hours began around the 1850's.

after one's own heart, kindred spirit

He says he can get plenty of books on tape (or CD) from local libraries, thereby saving buckets of cash. A cheapskate after my own heart. —San Jose Mercury News (7/30/2011)

I felt a kindred spirit with Cocoa—we were both wounded and needed time and space and compassion. —Santa Barbara Independent (8/17/2011)

"In Washington, she found a kindred spirit in President Ronald Reagan, sharing his harder line toward the Soviet Union in the climactic final years of the Cold War." —Margaret Warner, television news reporter, talking about Margaret Thatcher (4/8/2013)

If someone is **after your own heart**, he or she is a **kindred spirit**—someone who shares your ideas, feelings, personality or experience.

After one's own heart is in the King James version of the Bible (first printed in 1611) and later versions of the Bible. (See 1 Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22.)

Kindred, seldom used in American English except in the phrase kindred spirit, originally meant having a family relationship. Examples of kindred spirit used with the modern meaning (not referring to spirits or ghosts) appear as early as 1800.

against the grain

"Lidcombe goes against the grain of conventional therapy, which seeks to address the stuttering indirectly and to avoid making stutterers self-conscious." —Burlington Free Press (3/13/2011)

His votes in Congress have gone against the grain at times. When Republicans have attempted to repeal federal wage protection laws for unions, Ryan has sided with Democrats in opposition. —Associated Press (8/12/2012)

"...as a fiction writer, I am always looking to go against the grain, for you get more interesting material that way." —Elizabeth Strout, novelist (3/23/2013)

Against the grain is opposing a force or tendency. The idea is consistent with cutting or sanding wood, which is easier in the direction of the grain (lines in the wood) than against it. But the idiom is centuries old and its origin is unknown.

The phrase is often (but not always) used after the verb **go**.

An early example, from an essay by John Foster, published in 1846, about the difficulty of writing: "And, unhappily, any mental labour is to me a hard business. It is always against the grain, and a business of dogged self-denial..."

ahead of one's time

The son and grandson of Quaker abolitionists, he was ahead of his time as an advocate of fair treatment for African Americans... —Pittsburg (Kansas) Morning Sun (8/11/2011)

The three essays on Picasso were ahead of their time in seeing the artist's career as a unity of motifs, themes and obsessions spread across eight decades, rather than, as had long been the practice, in narrowly stylistic terms—"Cubism-and-everything-else." —The Wall Street Journal (3/24/2011)

Lewis was ahead of his time in various ways. He recruited Hayes and Don Chaney in 1964, giving UH its first black players before any school in the SWC. —Houston Chronicle (3/30/2011)

"It's in many ways ahead of its time, both in terms of musical theater as well as what it was trying to say." —Gabriel Barre, stage director, talking about the musical "South Pacific" (7/31/2013)

A person **ahead of his time** does things or has ideas that are new and not yet accepted or successful. Sometimes an idea is said to be **ahead of its time**.

An early example is in the transcript of a political speech:

Possibly Mr. Van Buren is ahead of his time. So was Jefferson, whose plans of emancipation and education were long postponed... —Proceedings and debates of the convention of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1838)

ahead of time

Unlike most auto dealerships, CarMax sets its prices ahead of time rather than encouraging buyers to negotiate with sales staff. —The Washington Post (8/21/2011)

We just had a $500 million campaign that was successful. We actually finished ahead of time. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (8/21/2011)

"I would say ahead of time that it is a huge mistake for him to choose to do that, because it will...further isolate his people who, frankly, are desperate for food, not missile launches..." —Secretary of State John Kerry, talking about a threat by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un (4/12/2013)

Ahead of time often means sooner, or in advance—before something else happens. Ahead of time may also mean before the scheduled time, describing things that happened faster than expected, as in the Las Vegas Review-Journal example.

Both meanings came into use during the 1800's. The second meaning, ahead of schedule, was common, often referring to railroad schedules. A popular variation (it is not clear which came first) was **ahead of time and tide**:

> ...he is self-possessed,
> Is always ahead of time and tide;
> Ere he starts on a plan, he is sure 'tis the best,
> Then to carry it out, is his greatest pride.
> —The Hartford Courant (5/23/1840)

ahead of the game

"That is the kind of leadership that puts you ahead of the game. Collaboration and regionalism are the only ways for us to be competitive as we grow and move forward." —Natchez, Miss., Democrat (3/31/2011)

If your home has been painted recently, consider yourself ahead of the game. —Bankrate.com (advice to people selling houses, 3/31/2011)

"Tompall was way ahead of the game in terms of artist rights and taking control of the creative process... " —Kyle Lehning, music producer, talking about Tompall Glaser, country music singer (8/14/2013)

"...the President hasn't made a decision yet, so we're all getting about four steps ahead of the game here when we're talking about these issues." —Marie Harf, State Department spokesperson, telling reporters she would not discuss what role Congress might have in deciding what the United States should do in Syria (8/29/2013)

In the first three news examples, those who are **ahead of the game** are successful or in a good position to succeed. The phrase often refers to financial situations but may be used in other competitive situations.

In the Marie Harf quotation, **ahead of the game** was a negative comment. It meant thinking too far ahead.

The expression has been in use since the 19th Century.

albatross (around one's neck)

"They thought all along that they could call me a libertarian and hang that label around my neck like an albatross, but I'm not a libertarian." —Rand Paul, during his successful campaign for U.S. Senate in Kentucky (3/17/2010)

"He was an albatross around all of our necks. " —State Senator Liz Krueger, after scandals led to the defeat of State Sen. Pedro Espada Jr. in New York City (9/16/2010)

For many consumers, the ultimate test for the embattled health-care law is simple: Will it push down insurance premiums—or at least slow their relentless rise? It's a pressing question for the Obama administration, which is hoping its signature domestic policy achievement doesn't end up as an election year albatross. —The Washington Post (8/7/2011)

Albatross means a burden or curse. It is often shortened to one word from **albatross around one's neck.**

Literally, an albatross is a bird. Its metaphorical meaning comes from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a 1798 poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the poem, a sailor kills an albatross. Because other sailors believe the killing will bring bad luck, he is punished by being forced to hang the large bird around his neck.

all ears

That's why when school board members talk of a change in the academic calendar, everyone is all ears. —The Tennessean (3/4/2011)

"If someone can explain to me the pathway to 1,144, I'm all ears, but mathematically we're fast approaching the point where it's going to be a virtual impossibility." —Eric Fehrnstrom, an adviser in Mitt Romney's campaign for the Republican Presidential nomination, saying that Rick Santorum could not win enough delegates to challenge Romney (3/14/2012)

"If someone has a workable plan to snatch Assad and his henchmen, haul them before the International Criminal Court and put them on trial, I'm all ears." —Eugene Robinson, opinion columnist, writing in The St. Louis American (9/11/2013)

If you are **all ears**, your attention is on the speaker and you are listening closely.

The expression may also be used in situations when there are no speakers or listeners to hear them, as in the Associated Press example. "It" referred to a proposed new law in Florida, and Haridopolos meant that he would pay attention to everything said or written about it.

The use of all ears has been traced to the 1700's.

all over but the shouting

The contentious debate over council district boundaries is all over but the shouting. —Peoria Times (7/14/2011)

Playboy basically acknowledged yesterday that it's pulling virtually all of its operations out of Chicago... Yesterday, the company admitted in a statement that it's all over but the shouting... —New York Post (12/14/2011)

"The Washington Post's Brian Fung says the war between Apple and Samsung is all over but the shouting. " —Macalope, a blog at macworld.com (8/13/2013)

All over but the shouting means that the result or conclusion is almost certain.

In this context, but means except. A variation common in previous centuries was "all over except shouting." (Where British English predominates, "all over bar the shouting" is used.)

The earliest examples of this expression I found were in sports magazines of the 1830's, most frequently in articles about horse racing. It meant that it was clear which horse would win, even if the race was not over—or sometimes, even if the race had not started.

all systems go

"I am proud of our successes to date, and bullish about the future. In the meantime, it's all systems go for us." —PC Magazine (8/22/2011)

...if Gov. Andrew Cuomo signs the bill into law, it will be all systems go unless Canada blocks the plan. —Los Angeles Times (8/15/2011)

Seal is scheduled to appear on Ellen DeGeneres' talk show today to promote his new album, and so far it's all systems go. —tmz.com (1/23/2012)

All systems go means, "Everything is going ahead as planned."

The phrase originally meant, "Everything has been checked and is working correctly." It originated with the U.S. space program.

In 1962, millions of people heard or read about Colonel John Glenn saying, "All systems are go" as his rocket rose into space for America's first orbit of Earth.

all that glitters is not gold

They've fast learned how all that glitters is not gold. Higher parking rates and extended enforcement hours have so shafted the very people the city tax man was counting on for increased revenues that it's not worth the effort. —Pittsburgh Tribune-Review (9/2/2011)

The gold rush is on and South Floridians are shedding all that glitters. They're holding gold parties and heading to jewelers, estate dealers and strip-mall gold buyers with trinkets, coins and broken chains for cash on the spot. —(South Florida) Sun-Sentinel (8/29/2011)

All that glitters is not gold. Pretty packaging does not mean that what lies beneath has any true value. Delve beneath the surface before drawing any conclusions. Look for the best bargain when shopping. —horoscope, Tribune Media Services (5/15/2013)

All that glitters is not gold means, "Some things that appear to have high value actually do not."

To glitter is to shine, gleam or sparkle. Sometimes "all that glitters" appears by itself in attempts at clever writing, as in the Sun-Sentinel example.

Earlier variations were made famous by Chaucer and Shakespeare. Versions of the same idea have been traced to texts from as early as the 12th Century.

all the rage

Artisanal olive oil is all the rage these days, with orchards and presses springing up from Napa to Livermore. –San Jose Mercury News (12/1/2010)

Mapping the brain is all the rage these days. –The Economist (blog, 3/10/2013)

Shorter skirts were all the rage in the 1920s. –San Francisco Chronicle (2/20/2013)

Rage, by itself or in other expressions such as road rage, means intense anger, but **all the rage** means "very popular now."

In the 1700's "the rage" was used with similar meaning. All the rage has been traced to the early 1800's.

all things to all people

Moose's Martini Pub, owned by brothers Hisam and Chad Elawad, has no interest in being all things to all people... It makes no effort to masquerade as a bar and grill or a club or a sports bar, and its customers seem to like it just the way it is. —Detroit Free Press (8/18/2011)

You can never be all things to all people. But when you look at 40 years of the big picture, Rod Stewart's done a fair job of juggling the various interests of his fans. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (8/26/2011)

"We believe BlackBerry cannot succeed if we try to be everybody's darling and all things to all people." —Thorsten Heins, chief executive of Research In Motion (4/2/2012)

Trying to be **all things to all people** usually means trying to please or satisfy everyone.

It comes from a phrase in the Bible: "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

all thumbs

But we had never seen any evidence our dad could do such crafts. He seemed to be all thumbs when it came to doing anything that smacked of handyman capabilities. —Lubbock Avalanche-Journal (8/12/2011)

Not particularly technical? There are an increasing number of "hybrid" jobs if you're all thumbs on a keyboard. —Fortune (7/22/2011)

"We know how to pack a deployment bag in three minutes flat. But tell a new dad to get a diaper bag ready and they are all thumbs." —Tech Sergeant David Bellamy, instructor in a class for new fathers in the U.S. Air Force (8/11/2013)

All thumbs means clumsy, like a person with five thumbs on each hand and no other fingers.

It often refers to physical ability, as in the Avalanche-Journal example, but may also refer to intellectual ability, as in the Fortune example, which means not knowing which buttons to press, rather than not being able to press buttons.

This expression has been traced back to the 1500's.

all-out, go all-out

But no state has an all-out ban on cellphones. —The Wall Street Journal (12/21/2011)

"Muslim Brotherhood leaders [are] calling this an all-out massacre." —Leila Fadel, radio journalist (8/14/2013)

"Christmas just isn't Christmas for one Kansas teenager without lights, and lots of them. To say he goes all out might be an understatement." —Carol Costello, television news anchor, referring to 13-year-old Cody Hanna's display of Christmas lights around his house in Clearwater, Kansas. (12/25/2012)

"Tony and Manny were unlike anybody you'd ever seen in American cinema, and we went all out to make it realistic." —Fort Worth Star-Telegram (8/30/2011)

All-out means completely, to a maximum. **Go all-out** means make a maximum effort; use all available power.

Examples of all-out meaning completely have been found as early as the 1300's.

See also, go for broke.

all's well that ends well

But, having a bit of time to rebound from the shock, the couple were able Sunday afternoon to adopt an all's-well-that-ends-well attitude. —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (8/22/2011)

The final chapters of the novel resolve the mysteries that have been underlying the rest, and there's a powerful resolution in which all's well that ends well. —Austin American-Statesman (8/11/2012)

All's well that ends well means that if there is a happy ending, previous problems do not matter.

In the Post-Gazette example, the couple were expressing relief after their baby girl was born in their car, next to an Interstate highway.

Examples of all's well that ends well has been found as early as the 1500's, but the best known is the title of William Shakespeare's 1616 play.

all-you-can-eat

"All those all-you-can eat data programs were sort of a necessary evil to entice users to use the iPhone." —TIME (8/23/2012)

"Netflix charges $8 a month. It's all-you-can-eat programming." —Rocco Pendola, director of social media for The Street.com (5/6/2013)

All-you-can-eat deals have been offered in some restaurants at least since the 1930's. Used in other contexts, the phrase means that the price includes unlimited amounts of whatever is being sold.

This early example of all-you-can-eat as a metaphor adds smorgasbord—a selection of many foods—which, like buffet, was commonly associated with unlimited eating deals:

Johnson, lead designer in his firm, sees that history as an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord, from which he grazes at will. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (10/11/1987)

along the lines of

The President is expected to outline his proposal to create jobs and ways to pay for the plan. "I hope I hear something along the lines of incentives that would help small business owners like

me," said Scott. —WSFA-TV (Montgomery, Ala., 9/6/2011)

William Deresiewicz...observed that we have few novelists such as John Steinbeck or John Dos Passos who take the lives of working people seriously. Nor do we have television shows along the lines of "The Honeymooners" or even "All in the Family," which were parodies of an affectionate sort. —The Washington Post (9/4/2011)

"The Syrians are going to have to develop a vision of what freedom means in a new Syria. And it's not going to be easy. We...are working to give them a chance to develop that vision by helping them prepare for an inclusive, democratic transition as we push steadily for a negotiated political transition along the lines of the Geneva communique." —Robert Ford, U.S. ambassador to Syria (4/12/2013)

Along the lines of means similar to. Sometimes **on the lines of** has the same meaning.

This expression came into common use during the mid-1800's.

an arm and a leg

I could have fixed it right there, of course, by just getting my credit card out and buying a replacement ticket, but one day in advance it would have cost me an arm and a leg. —Anchorage Press (3/3/2011)

Today when so many family destinations cost an arm and a leg, Sorenson said the district staff enjoys offering a day of fun that won't break the bank. —Chicago Tribune (7/23/2013)

"The shirt, whether dressy or casual, is the staple of a man’s wardrobe, and it should by no means cost an arm and a leg." —Jeffrey Zhang, founder of Spectre & Co., an online shirt retailer, in a news release (8/7/2013)

An arm and a leg is a colorful way of saying a lot of money or a high price.

Although examples have been found from as early as 1949, this expression was not in frequent use in print until the late 1960's and 1970's. It probably refers to the idea of losing arms and legs by amputation, which was all too common in World War II and the wars in Korea and Vietnam.

ante up

Those vendors would have never been able to ante up the big bucks for political campaigns under state pay-to-play laws. —Philadelphia Inquirer (9/12/2011)

Before you ante up hard-earned money for a New Year's resolution to lose weight, take time to assess what you need from a program to be successful. —Oregon Statesman Journal (January, 2011)

Ante is the small payment required each time the cards are dealt in poker, and **ante up** is what players do when they place that payment in the middle of the table. Outside of poker, **ante up** means making a payment to participate in something. **Upping the ante** means raising the required payment.

Ante up, based on the Latin word ante, meaning before, has been in use in poker games at least since the 1830's. Using the phrase outside of poker began in the later 1800's.

apples and oranges

"The increase in median home prices could just be the result of a shifting market, and comparing home prices in such an unstable economy could be like comparing apples and oranges. For instance, Monroe County saw a 50.8 percent increase in median price, but that doesn't mean the housing market is heating up," Clark said. —La Crosse Tribune (9/27/2011)

Yet comparing an office assistant's income tax to Buffet's capital gains tax is patently deceptive. Talk about apples and oranges. —The Phoenix (Swarthmore, Penn., 9/29/2011)

"...you may think it's apples and oranges; cars and traffic accidents and prescription drugs, but both things are necessary to our society." —NPR (9/27/2011)

"I don't think that Italy is at all comparable to Cyprus. It's apples and oranges." —George Soros (5/12/2013)

Comparing **apples and oranges** means comparing things that are different, leading to an incorrect conclusion.

Similar ideas were expressed earlier in the 1900's using other words (and other fruit), but the earliest example of the figurative apples and oranges phrase in my searches comes from 1945:

And finally, to people who wonder whether BMB isn't designed to put other and current radio research organizations out of business they say, "You can't compare apples and oranges." —Billboard Magazine (7/21/1945)

armed to the teeth

Never in memory have so many unjust or simply despicable rulers felt quite so nervous—or possibly quite so helpless (despite being armed to the teeth)—in the presence of unarmed humanity. —CBS News (2/24/2011)

"We had a situation where people who were armed to the teeth, attacked and killed others, even police officers..." —Los Angeles Times (8/16/2012)

"With the arms depots being thrown open, it was an excellent opportunity for these groups to arm themselves to the teeth with everything from Kalashnikovs to SA7s [missiles]." —Scott Stewart, vice president of analysis at Stratfor Global Intelligence, referring to the spread of weapons after the revolution in Libya (1/25/2013)

Being **armed to the teeth** is a colorful way of saying well-armed or having many weapons. The idiom sometimes is used in vivid writing when the subject is not military, as in this example:

But the Pew survey seems to suggest that the concern over the dangers of adolescent activity online—while perhaps well placed—is a mere cul-de-sac in a larger landscape where a new generation, armed to the teeth with digital sophistication, is redefining media on its own terms. —The New York Times (11/3/2005)

In military contexts, armed to the teeth has been traced as far back as the 1300's.

arm's length

A little more than a year later, acting on a tip from Gary Bradley, the flashy Austin developer, Perry bought 60 acres of land southwest of Austin...Perry's office has described the transaction as

"completely at arm's length." —The Texas Tribune (7/29/2011)

...she is drawn to Lucas but seems to be held at arm's length. —USA Today (8/17/2012)

Fitting in at a new job isn't always easy and there may be times when antacids should be within an arm's length. —The Miami Herald (8/21/12)

In an **arm's length** transaction, the participants no have no special relationship or connection. Neither side has the power to control or influence the other. An arm's length relationship usually means that the two participants do not have a financial connection or common financial interest.

In the Texas Tribune and USA Today examples, the phrase is a metaphor suggesting a fixed amount of separation, like the length of a person's arm.

In other contexts, **arm's length** may mean almost the opposite: within easy reach, as in the Miami Herald example.

A 16th-Century ancestor of the phrase—keep at arm's end —suggested a close relationship. In the 1580's, Sir Philip Sidney wrote about Pamphilus, a man who was handsome, friendly, witty and good a good companion in "music, dancing, hunting, feasting, riding & such like." He was also untrustworthy and would break the hearts of "poor, silly women":

And to conclude, such a one, as who can keep him at arm's end, need never wish a better companion. But under these qualities lies such a poisonous adder...—Arcadia (~1586)

By the 1700's, we have a clear example of arm's end meaning to keep away, rather than to keep close:

There are no Penelopes now, to keep importunate suitors at arms-end, in their husbands' absence... —"Praise Poverty" by Thomas Brown (~1704)

around the corner

"And Ireland, if anyone ever says otherwise ... remember that, whatever hardships winter can bring, springtime is always just around the corner..." —President Barack Obama, talking about the Irish economy (5/23/2011)

"It's a fun time of year, the playoffs are right around the corner and we thrive in these situations." —Paul Pierce, Boston Celtics basketball player (4/12/2012)

"2030 is just around the corner. It's about three Rolling Stones farewell concerts away." —Bono (2/26/2013)

"...it's not surprising that the rhetoric gets more and more heated, because interest groups depend on convincing their members that there's a threat around the corner." —Ross Douthat, newspaper columnist, talking about the National Rifle Association (5/3/2013)

In contexts like these (when it does not mean nearby or on the next street) **around the corner** means imminent; about to happen soon.

The phrase has been used to mean imminent at least since the early 1900's. In a 1912 magazine article, H.L. Mencken wrote, "Spring is just around the corner—and here are its literary harbingers: books of travel."

as old as the hills

Graft is as old as the hills, but alleged corruption scandals surrounding [India's] Commonwealth Games in October appear to have given a focus to citizens' wrath in recent weeks. —The Wall Street Journal (blog, 11/17/2010)

The instinct to make money a second time round, with a book that follows a roughly similar format to its predecessor, is as old as the hills. —The New York Times (8/19/2012)

"I'm old as the hills...but nothing has changed...I'm still strong and ready to create." —Barry Manilow (2/16/2013)

As old as the hills means very old. The phrase is not quite as old as the hills. It has been used since the 1800's, probably inspired by references to age-old hills in the Bible.

as the crow flies

Yet interviews here, 280 miles southeast of Beijing as the crow flies, point to a central challenge for the nation's leadership... —Kansas City Star (9/7/2011)

Close as the crow flies, it was an hourlong down-and-up from Crystal into the valley that separates the two areas and then up a steeply climbing road to 6,400-foot Sunrise. —Seattle Times (9/3/2011)

"When I heard it had crossed New Liberty Road—that's about three miles as the crow flies from my house—I knew I had two or three minutes." —Gary Singleton, talking about surviving a tornado in Alabama (4/23/2012)

As the crow flies means in a straight line from one place to another—the route that a bird would take, not having to go around obstacles on land.

The origin of this expression, and why it specifies a crow, rather than a bird, is a mystery. The earliest example in my searches is from a London literary magazine published in 1757:

This is the substance of Mr. Keyfler's last volume. In our extracts from it we shall take the same liberty as in the preceding, of travelling with him as the crow flies, passing over many places, and only stopping at those which seem best to deserve our reader's attention. —The Critical Review, or: Annals of literature (July, 1757)

asleep at the switch, asleep at the wheel

"And increasingly," she said, "regulators are being called to task for doing too much too fast, just as a few years ago we were being pilloried for being asleep at the switch." —The Wall Street Journal (3/22/2011)

"We're going to find people asleep at the switch when it comes to the State Department, including Hillary Clinton." —Senator Lindsey Graham, before a committee hearing on the 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya (5/8/2013)

"This case presents a textbook example of officers and directors of a financial institution being asleep at the wheel and robotically voting for approval of transactions without exercising any business judgment in doing so," the 102-page complaint states. —The Fairhope Courier (9/23/2011)

In the Wall Street Journal example, regulators were pilloried (criticized harshly) for neglecting

their duty, the meaning of being **asleep at the switch**.

A poem published in the 1870's, "Asleep at the Switch," may have originated this idiom or helped to make it popular. The poem,credited to George Hoey, is about a man whose job was to make trains change tracks by operating a switch. The man has a nightmare about failing to do his duty and causing the deaths of passengers:

> Murdered by one who should guard them from harm,
> who now lies asleep at the switch.

Literally, **asleep at the wheel** means asleep while driving a car or boat. Its figurative meaning in the Courier example is similar to asleep at the switch, neglecting duty and failing to pay enough attention. Unlike asleep at the switch, asleep at the wheel is often used literally.

The literal use dates to the early 1800's. An early example of a figurative use is in a magazine published in 1917:

The will is man's inherent nature, tendency to act...Is your will asleep at the wheel? Awake it. —American Artisan and Hardware Record (Chicago, 3/24/1917)

at first blush

"At first blush, there appears to be some value." —Congressman Mike Rogers, talking about documents and computer files taken from Osama bin Laden's house after he was killed (5/5/2011)

"At first blush, they appear to be more about shocking and repelling than warning." —Richard J. Leon, a federal judge, in a decision that the Food and Drug Administration could not require new warning labels on cigarette packages (11/7/2011)

"I think that's why this is a little more delicate than it appears at first blush." —Ari Fleischer, former press secretary to President George W. Bush (3/21/2013)

At first blush means at the first glance; before thinking about something or looking at it longer.

Blush usually means turn red or slightly red, and the noun blush means a reddening. The expression **at first blush** uses another meaning of blush that has been obsolete for centuries: glance; a brief look.

Printed examples of the phrase have been found from as early as the 1600's.

at the drop of a hat

This is actually all you need to make a flavorful...soup at the drop of a hat. —Christian Science Monitor (12/11/2011)

U.S. actresses pose nude at the drop of a hat. No big deal. —Hollywood Reporter (12/4/2011)

"I'm one of those people who will cry at the drop of a hat. What really inspires me is music and opera like Puccini." —Ana Tzarev, artist (8/16/2013)

At the drop of a hat means immediately, without planning.

Various books assert that the expression came from dropping or lowering hats to signal the start of an event, such as a fight or a race. That explanation is plausible but none of the authors offers any evidence in support of it.

The earliest example I have found in print is in the transcript of a U.S. Senate debate over a new bankruptcy law. The speaker was Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri:

"They [banks] could agree in the twinkling of an eye—at the drop of a hat—at the crook of a finger—to usurp the sovereign power; they cannot agree, in four months, to relinquish it." —U.S. Senate debate (10/12/1837)

at your fingertips

And, thanks to paper books as well as the wonder of technology—whether it's a netbook, a smart phone or a laptop—great educational resources are at your fingertips in a classroom, at home or on a beach. —The Baltimore Sun (7/8/2011)

The trail map puts all of West Texas' cultural and natural resources at your fingertips. —Alpine Avalanche (7/7/2011)

A traditional Southern favorite, this cake may be frozen and refrozen for up to six months, giving you the luxury of elegant entertaining at your fingertips. —carolinescakes.com (2013)

At your fingertips means convenient: you can touch it with the tips of your fingers.

The phrase is often used in advertising. Sometimes it's an exaggeration, an attempt to make something ordinary sound exciting, as in the Alpine Avalanche example.

The earliest example I have found was printed in 1870.

automatic pilot, on autopilot

Doctors, overextended and sleep-deprived, were taught to accept the terms as a rite of passage. A "fraternity kind of mentality" prevailed, says William Friedman, chairman of the neurosurgery department at the University of Florida, who recalls being "dead tired" as a resident and operating "on autopilot" at times. —Philadelphia Inquirer (7/1/2011)

If you've left your company retirement plan on automatic pilot because you're afraid to take the controls, you're not alone. —bankrate.com (7/11/2011)

"The entitlements are the engine on the train driving us to the cliff. They were on automatic pilot." —former Senator Alan Simpson, referring to spending on Medicare, Social Security and other social programs. (12/9/2012)

Literally, an **automatic pilot** keeps an airplane on course. The human pilot doesn't have to operate the controls. **Autopilot** has the same meaning. The words are used figuratively to describe things that happen with little or no human thought or action. Leaving your retirement plan on automatic pilot means not making any changes in the plan's investments. The overworked doctor was on autopilot because he was too tired to do much thinking.

The first automatic pilot was a small, unmanned boat that traveled in front of a ship to alert the crew to dangerous objects, like icebergs, around the late 1800's.

average Joe

A growing body of research seems to suggest that what you do when you are not exercising determines your true level of fitness. So if you are someone who sits for not less than 9.3 hours as

the average Joe does in America, you need to be concerned about serious side-effects of just sitting. —The Economic Times (9/1/2011)

Calderone went on to describe himself as Jersey-bred Average Joe: "My family's from Palermo, Sicily. And I'm not a singer or a model or actor or anything, I'm just a guy." —Los Angeles Times (8/28/2011)

"These guys, it's just their jobs. The average Joe looks at it like more than a job, but that's all it is." —Jay Rood, an expert on sports betting, talking about professional athletes (2/9/2012)

An **average Joe** is an ordinary person.

Joe is sometimes used to mean man or guy. Joe Doakes is a generic term for a man, like John Doe, but it is used less frequently, and never in legal documents, where John Doe also means a man whose real name is not revealed.

An early version of average Joe appeared in a newspaper story that said a prominent boxing match would attract wealthy and prominent spectators:

Pittsburgh's society will be well represented, mingling with the average Joe Fan, who never misses a scrap. —The Pittsburgh Press (9/11/1934)

AWOL

Fred the stray tortoise and owner Heather Galvin were reunited Thursday at the Charleston Animal Society...Late Wednesday afternoon, the Galvins noticed Fred was AWOL from his pen. —Charleston, S.C., Post and Courier (8/5/2011)

Republican strategists complained that as many as 4 million social conservatives were AWOL in the 2000 election... —Fort Worth Star-Telegram (8/4/2011)

"Because her family and the military have said she's not the type of person to go AWOL, we believe that she's in danger."—Gavin MacRoberts, police spokesman, talking about a 23-year-old soldier who disappeared after leaving a bar in Fayetteville, North Carolina (4/19/2012)

AWOL is an abbreviation for Absent Without Official Leave.

Its original meaning is used in the last example: a soldier who leaves duty without permission. In the two other examples it simply means missing or absent. The tortoise named Fred could not have gotten permission to leave his pen, and the social conservatives did not need permission when they decided not to vote in 2000.

AWOL mostly refers to people and animals but may also refer to objects, sometimes in a joking way ("My favorite hat has gone AWOL.") and sometimes not joking ("Lab equipment worth $3 million has been reported AWOL.").

AWOL with its original meaning has been traced to the late 1800's, and people began using it with different meanings in the early 1900's.

ax to grind

His attorney, Robert Byrum, said at least one of the accusers is a former employee with an ax to grind. —The Virginian-Pilot (4/20/2011)

"Simply stated, he is a disgruntled, disgraced and dishonest ex-employee with an ax to grind." —

Frank A. Sedita III, district attorney for Erie County, New York, talking about a former official who criticized Sedita's political fundraising methods (8/3/2013)

"People in city government maybe had an ax to grind with Mr. Conway." —Judge Norm Shapiro, dismissing a criminal conflict-of-interest case against Nicholas Conway, an official of San Gabriel Valley, California (8/14/2013)

Having an **ax to grind** means being motivated by a hidden purpose or opinion.

The idiom is believed to have originated with an early-1800's story about a man who praised a boy only because he wanted to persuade the boy to sharpen his ax.

baby boom, baby boomer, baby boomlet

Because of the immense size of this baby boom generation, the number of senior citizens will more than double between now and 2050, from 40 million to 89 million. —Los Angeles Times (11/6/2011)

"The Baby Boomer women had to fight the fight against sexual harassment in the workplace." —Detroit Free Press (11/9/2011)

"Back in the late '70s, people thought we were on the verge of decriminalization of marijuana. But back then, barely a third of Americans were in favor. Most of the older generation were not baby boomers. They didn't know the difference between marijuana and heroin." —Ethan Nadelmann, executive director, Drug Policy Alliance (4/5/2013)

U.S. births fell in 2008, the first full year of the recession, marking the first annual decline in births since the start of the decade and ending an American baby boomlet. —Associated Press (8/8/2011)

Baby boom usually refers to the increase in birth rates after World War II.

The baby boom generation usually refers to people who were born between 1946 and 1964. People in that group are called **baby boomers**, often shortened to boomers.

The decline in birth rates after the baby boom has been called the baby bust, and the "echo" increase in births when the boomers had children has been called a **baby boomlet**, meaning a small boom.

Baby boom had other meanings before World War II, but the expression was not as common as it is today. The earliest example of baby boomer I have seen is from 1970.

back against the wall

"I believe our team is just best when our backs are against the wall," Pastner said. —Memphis Commercial Appeal (2/11/2011)

In his campaigns for the Democratic nomination and the general election, Obama fought effectively when his back was to the wall. —Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette (9/18/2011)

Ortiz was part of the remarkable comeback story in 2004. He says a turnaround now is possible, yet will be even more difficult..."You don't want to be up against the wall, because then you don't have anywhere to escape." —New York Daily News (9/26/2011)

"Our backs are against the wall and we are desperately trying to make a series out of this, and the

only way to do it is we've got to win Game 4 to force Game 5." —Mike Woodson, coach of the New York Knicks basketball team (5/5/2012)

If your **back** is **against the wall**, you are in a difficult situation and making a mistake is likely to result in failure.

Up against the wall is sometimes used with the same meaning, as in the Daily News example.

Another variation with the same meaning is **back**...**to the wall**, as in the Journal-Gazette example.

Printed examples of variations of these expressions have been found from as early as the 1500's.

back burner, front burner

"It seems that the Greece situation is closer to being put on the back burner." —Bloomberg News (6/30/2011)

"It just seems like the homeless are on the back burner and nobody gives a care about them." —Thomas Steinberger, director of a church food pantry in Jeffersonville, Indiana, talking about efforts to find a location for a homeless shelter (8/17/13)

"Maine's long-term debt, especially in the state retirement system, has been a front-burner issue in the State House this year." —Associated Press (6/21/2011)

"I don't remember a time when there have been so many national-security issues on the front burner as there are today." —Michael Morell, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (8/6/2013)

A **front-burner** issue is likely to get immediate attention. Something on the **back burner** will wait while more important things get attention. Sometimes the phrase appears as a verb. ("The project was back-burnered for years.")

The expression is assumed to refer to the back and front burners of cooking stoves, but it is unclear how its metaphorical use originated. The earliest example I found was in a 1959 issue of LIFE Magazine, describing how two projects to build new rockets were on the back burner.

back of the envelope

"According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations, its fourth-quarter operating profit is around 150 billion yen." —Toshiyuki Kanayama, a financial analyst, quoted by Reuters about Toyota (2/7/2012)

"As a back-of-the-envelope estimation, one could assume that by 2017 the total could be about 4.5 million barrels a day." —Manouchehr Takin, an oil analyst quoted by The Wall Street Journal (8/19/2012)

"Unfortunately, there's surprisingly little data on how much tethering goes on today...But we can make a few back-of-the-envelope calculations." —The Washington Post (7/30/2013)

When you want to write something down quickly, you may use a piece of blank paper that is nearest to you, such as the back of an envelope. The analysts in the first two examples probably used a calculator or computer, not paper, but **back of the envelope** means that the calculation was done quickly.

The earliest example of a back-of-the-envelope calculation in my searches is in a 1960 scientific

journal:

There was a great deal of speculation, hunch-backing, and back-of-the-envelope calculation indicating a starry-eyed curiosity as to what indeed would happen when a nuclear device was exploded in a salt bed. —Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (December, 1960)

back seat

Despite rebel setbacks and an increasingly public rift with NATO allies, the U.S. will stick to its plan to remain in the back seat of the Libya air campaign, the Obama administration insisted Tuesday after three weeks of air missions that have failed to turn the tide against Moammar Gadhafi. —Associated Press (4/12/2011)

But oil diplomacy may take a back seat in the future as nations find precious new oil reserves are now located in increasingly difficult terrain where technology, not political clout, are tantamount. —The Wall Street Journal (4/11/2011)

"...the President has sent a clear message that the hundreds of thousands of children who are suffering because of this strike take a back seat to his political allies." —Tim Pawlenty, former Governor of Minnesota (9/10/2012)

"We will never take a back seat when it comes to safety." —Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood (2/22/2013)

A passenger in the back seat of a car is not driving. In figurative use, a **back seat** may mean a position that leaves someone else in control or doing most of the activity, as in the Associated Press example.

Taking a back seat may also mean being in an inferior position, or being less important, as in the Wall Street Journal sentence and the LaHood and Pawlenty quotations.

Examples of figurative uses of back seat have been found from the 1880's.

back to back

A partnership with NBC's top stations, where Harvey's show will air back-to-back with Ellen DeGeneres, gives him a fighting chance. —Associated Press (9/2/2012)

"I'd done 10 or 12 plays back to back. Suddenly this new medium offered itself and I was fortunate enough to work with some good people." —Jude Law, talking about the beginning of his success in film acting (3/3/2013)

Back-to-back means consecutively. When two events happen back to back, they happen one after another, and nothing else happens in between.

Baseball broadcasters may describe three consecutive home runs as **back to back to back**, but the idiom is normally limited to two "backs."

More literal uses of back to back describe people or things with their backs touching or close together: The fighters stood back to back, giving them a better chance against their attackers, or "The houses were built back to back."

Examples of the more literal meanings are found in the 1800's. In my searches, the earliest examples of back to back used to describe consecutive events are in accounts of baseball games

(back to back hits) in 1946.

back to square one

Mr. Obama said he was calling Congressional leaders to the White House Saturday morning at 11 a.m. "to explain to me how we are going to avoid default," acknowledging that discussions were basically back to square one. —CBS News (7/22/2011)

And even those [London residents] who are enjoying the sporting pageant worry about the long-term impact on their neighborhoods... "After the Olympics, we're back to square one." —USA Today (8/8/2012)

"After all the reforms you did, you're back to square one." —Sachin Shukla, an economist at a financial-services firm in Mumbai, India, talking about India's difficulties in attracting foreign investment (8/16/2013)

To go **back to square one** is to return to the beginning. It often suggests having to repeat action or work, so it expresses disappointment or some other negative feeling. This negativity makes back to square one slightly different from **come full circle**, which otherwise has a similar meaning.

An example of back to square one from 1952 is the earliest anyone has found, and it was not in frequent use until the 1970's. To Americans, it suggests board games in which players may be sent back to the first square, but I have found no conclusive explanation of how the phrase originated.

back to the drawing board, on the drawing board

"I am quite sure that they will rethink that plan if they are required to go back to the drawing board," —Bill Swelbar, researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, talking about the future of AMR, the corporate parent of American Airlines (8/14/2013)

"The NRC will quickly spend the remaining funds and then Congress must go back to the drawing board to develop new laws on how highly radioactive spent fuel is managed." —Katherine Fuchs, a campaigner for Friends of the Earth, talking about the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (8/14/2013)

"Things which work well on the drawing board at low velocities are notorious for failing at extremely high velocities." —Michio Kaku, a physicist at City College of New York, talking about Elon Musk's plan for a new high-speed transportation system (8/13/2013)

Back to the drawing board means starting over after a failure or rejection. It was used in the first half of the 1900's literally, when engineers and designers made large drawings on boards:

He went back to the drawing board himself, and, gifted draughtsman that he was, made all the constructional drawings. —"Great Engineers" by Conrad Matschoss, 1939

If something is now **on the drawing board**, it is in a planning stage or being developed.

The plural of **board** may also be used in these phrases, with no difference in meaning.

back-room bargaining, back-room deal

A cache of a quarter-million confidential American diplomatic cables, most of them from the past three years, provides an unprecedented look at back-room bargaining by embassies around the

world, brutally candid views of foreign leaders and frank assessments of nuclear and terrorist threats. —The New York Times (11/29/2010)

"You take two years to put together a back-room deal and then two weeks to talk about it," he said. —The Columbus Dispatch (10/3/2011)

"What she did giving Bloomberg a third term in a back-room deal was morally and politically unacceptable." —Bill de Blasio, candidate for mayor of New York, talking about another candidate, Christine Quinn (8/20/2013)

Back-room bargaining, which may result in **back-room deals**, happens in secret, where the public cannot go or see.

In the early 1900's **backroom** appeared frequently in news accounts about saloons. For example:

He was arrested at 2 o'clock in the morning by Roundsman Yost, who alleged that McLaughlin was doing a backroom business at that time. —The New York Times (6/16/1902)

bad apple, one bad apple

Just as important, you will have a large impact on the atmosphere in the office. One bad apple truly can ruin the bunch. Taking on an employee is as risky for a startup as it is for you. —Business Insider (10/3/2011)

He said another part of his job is to educate students about Islam and the different sects within it. "There was a lot of profiling following 9/11," Gray said. "Unfortunately, our students get in a habit of blaming everyone because of one bad apple." —(Indiana) News and Tribune (9/12/2011)

"Unfortunately, a few bad apples spoil it for too many good people because almost all coaches are really good people dedicated to helping youth." —Ed Kranepool, former player for the New York Mets baseball team (4/18/2012)

"When there is a bad apple, we need the regulators to take action." —Congressman Jason Chaffetz, talking about the dietary supplement industry (7/31/2013)

One bad apple and **bad apple** refer to a proverb, "One bad apple spoils the bunch" (or barrel, or bin).

This very old metaphor alludes to the harmful effect or influence that one person or thing may have on others.

Sometimes the metaphor seems forgotten, as in the News and Tribune example, in which there is no reference to one bad person influencing others.

A variety of similar expressions have been used over the centuries. They are descendants of the Latin **pomum compunctum cito corrumpit sibi iunctum**, a rotten apple quickly corrupts another.

baked in the cake, baked in

However, market participants noted that the payrolls number, though bullish, was widely expected. Traders may have already built the figure into earlier trades, said Matt Smith, analyst with Summit Energy in Louisville, Ky. "A good deal of the optimism was already baked in the cake," Smith said. —Dow Jones Newswires (12/2/2011)

But is $4 a gallon inevitable? It looks like it. "Short term there's not a hell of a lot that you could

do" to bring prices down, said Ron Capone, a Wilmington-based energy expert and author of thedataleopard.com blog. "It's pretty much baked in the cake." —StarNews Online (3/30/2012)

A good quarter is baked in right now, but I think there are going to be a lot of surprises..." —Reuters (3/28/2011)

Netflix told us several months ago to expect a deficit. All of the negativity is baked in, opening the door for a well-received report that will drive the stock higher when traders return on Tuesday morning. —DailyFinance.com (4/22/2012)

Baked in the cake means already included in calculations. Often shortened to **baked in**, this expression is usually used in financial contexts.

The origin may be a comment by Walter Wriston, chairman of Citicorp, in 1978. He predicted a recession in 1980 and added, "It's baked in the cake."

ball in (someone's) court

"As a leader, the ball's in Intel's court." —Andrew Feldman, chief executive of SeaMicro (7/18/2011)

"Now the ball's in your court. Your turn. What have you got for me?" —Harry Belafonte, in a speech to students at Yale University (4/21/2012)

"The ball is in the government of Iran's court, and it's well past time for Tehran to adopt a serious, good-faith approach to negotiations..." —Vice President Joe Biden, in a speech to the Munich Security Conference (2/2/2013)

If the **ball is in your court**, it is your turn to do something.

This phrase is a metaphor from tennis.

The earliest examples have been found from the 1950's.

ballpark estimate, ballpark figure

Republican party officials won't have a ballpark estimate of how many Iowans are expected to attend this year until a meeting with the campaigns on Thursday. —Des Moines Register (7/13/2011)

The exact cost of the restoration project depends on the bidding process...But church officials are working with a ballpark estimate of $35,000. —The Berkshire Eagle (8/9/2013)

The analysis uses neighborhoods' median noise-exposure level, a ballpark figure for noise. —Seattle Times (7/30/2011)

"The chairman talked about a 7 percent ballpark figure for unemployment. He was thinking the middle of next year that we'd be around that number." —James Bullard, chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (8/2/2013)

A **ballpark estimate** is a calculation made quickly, without as much work as a formal estimate might require. A **ballpark figure** is the number produced by estimating quickly.

Ballpark is sometimes used as an adjective in other phrases, with the same meaning. The idea is that a ballpark—a stadium for baseball—is large, so the acceptable range for the estimate is large. A related phrase, in the ballpark, means within a reasonable range of accuracy or acceptability.

If you are asked for a ballpark estimate or **ballpark figure**, you may do a back-of-the-envelope calculation—fast and informal.

Like many other words in American English, ballpark is sometimes converted to a verb. "Can't you just ballpark it?" means "Can't you give me a quick estimate?"

Early examples of these phrases have been found in text printed during the 1960's.

bang for the buck

PCs are less expensive, and they deliver more bang for the buck. —Washington Times (10/8/2011)

The Department of Transportation says the problem is a shortage of money, forcing officials to decide which projects will give them the biggest "bang for the buck." —The Providence Journal (10/7/2011)

"And tomorrow, my Administration will release a new College Scorecard that parents and students can use to compare schools based on a simple criteria: where you can get the most bang for your educational buck." —President Barack Obama, in his State of the Union speech (2/12/2013)

If you get the most **bang for the buck**, you get the most value for the money you spend.

The phrase dates from the 1950's, when it was more frequently written as bang for a buck, and often referred to the cost of nuclear arms or the military as a whole:

The struggle to get a bigger bang for a buck—or more combat effectiveness for less money—passes a major milestone this week. —The New York Times (12/16/1953)

bang the drum, beat the drum

"The party has banged the drum for spending cuts but shies away now when push comes to shove on politically volatile programs like Medicare. —New York Daily News (7/12/2011)

"He was banging the drum on this long before many in Congress even knew the term 'trafficking in persons' or understood what it really meant." —Secretary of State John Kerry, praising Congressman Chris Smith during a news conference about the department's annual report on forced labor and sex trafficking (6/19/2013)

The Government Accountability Office has been beating the drum for more than two decades, pointing to the billions that could be saved by transitioning to a dollar coin. —USA Today (7/20/2012)

"We're beating the drum and I'm not going to let this die, because we are losing a generation of young people." —Congresswoman Robin Kelly, talking about gun violence in urban areas (7/26/2013)

Banging the drum for something is making noise (or speaking out, or conducting a media campaign) to gain public support. **Beating the drum** is also common and has the same meaning.

This simple metaphor alludes to using a drum to attract attention. Examples of the phrases are found as early as the 1600's.

bank on, take it to the bank

When it comes to watches, Piaget is banking on the adage: one can never be too rich or too thin. —Bloomberg News (1/12/2011)

Developers and investors are banking on similar growth around Loudoun County's new rail stations for years to come. —The Washington Post (8/19/2012)

"What we can bank on is that better information will always lead to a better informed public, which will lead to better environmental protection." —Gina McCarthy, assistant administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Air and Radiation (4/21/2012)

Take it to the bank: Obama will veto the U.N. resolution... —The Washington Post (1/20/2011)

"We've seen other deals advance to this stage...only to get broken...I'm not sure I'd take this to the bank until we see a firm contract." Richard Aboulafia, a business consultant in Virginia (2/1/2012)

"You can **bank on** this" means you can depend on it.

A variation is, "You can **take it to the bank**," which means you can be sure of it.

"Bank on" uses bank in the sense of trusting or depending on something. The phrase has been in use since the 1800's.

bare bones, bare essentials

Many want to support their workers who need time off, but they are operating with bare-bones staff and need to keep their companies on track. —The Columbus Dispatch (10/30/2011)

The tiny Chevrolet Spark from General Motors is about as bare bones as cars come these days, with hand-crank windows, no floor mats and one of the smallest engines of any car. —The New York Times (8/16/2013)

Although many will choose to continue working to stay engaged socially and to stay mentally engaged in their senior years, the main reason many cited was the bare essentials. Nearly half of all workers surveyed said they'll need a job to keep earning enough money to live on.—Ventura County Star (10/22/2011)

Many Syrians are unable to buy anything but the bare essentials. —Reuters (3/21/2012)

Bare bones refers to a human skeleton, and means only the amount necessary; the bare minimum required.

Bare essentials has a similar meaning.

The phrases have been used at least since the 1800's. An 1884 New York Times article about a troubled bank said "the bank manager has as yet been unable to make an analysis of the assets, but he does not think for a moment that after everything is pruned down to the bare bones that the rest of the fund will be impaired or the standing of the bank injured."

bark up the wrong tree

There's lots of talk about unfair, or at least excessive, support for the clean energy industry. According to the International Energy Agency, critics of clean energy are barking up the wrong tree. —TheStreet.com (11/9/2010)

"People are barking up the wrong tree in trying to lay the blame at the door of sincere physicians acting in good faith" —Newsday (2/9/2012)

"That would have been barking up the wrong tree." —Cate Blanchett, saying her role in the film "Blue Jasmine" was not based on Ruth Madoff, Bernard Madoff's wife (7/27/2013)

A dog looks up at a tree and barks but the cat it was chasing sits safely in a different tree. If you are **barking up the wrong tree**, it doesn't mean you are acting like a dog. You may be accusing the wrong person or accepting the wrong explanation.

The two earliest examples in my searches are in one book, published in 1832:

"Hullo! stranger, you're barking up the wrong tree; what business have you to pass this house?"

...so I thought I'd set him barking up the wrong tree a little. And I told him some stories that were enough to set the Mississippi afire...—"Westward Ho" by James Hall (1832)

basket case

One plaintiff, Lenora Hummel, said her son and daughter felt so harassed by the other high-school students...that both stopped going..."I went to the school and told the school, 'You have to do something, my son is a basket case.'" —Associated Press (1/20/2011)

...the finances of the corporation never worked; they fell apart almost immediately. The company has been considered a financial basket case by the credit markets... —Houston Chronicle (9/30/2011)

"I read no social media, period," Blakeney said. "I'm sure I'd be a damn basket case if I did." —Montgomery Advertiser (11/11/2011)

"Egypt is not a basket case. It's an economy that was one of the most dynamic of the world during the five years or so preceding the revolution." —Uri Dadush, director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace international economics program (3/1/2013)

A **basket case** is someone (or something) too sick or incapacitated to function.

The expression is sometimes used for humorous exaggeration, as in the Montgomery Advertiser example.

In the early 1900's, the phrase meant a person who had both arms and both legs amputated, and had to be carried in a basket. The earliest example in my searches for basket case used as a metaphor, not referring to amputated limbs, is in an Associated Press review of a new play, "Town House." The review, published Sept. 25, 1948, said the play fell "pretty flat" and was "a theatrical basket case."

bated breath

Then the room hushed and we all waited with bated breath to find out who the new monarch was to be. —Corpus Christi Caller-Times (5/8/2011)

Millions of television viewers wait with bated breath for the conclusion of the story. —New York Daily News (11/1/2011)

"We are excited every year when we find out we're on the list and we wait with bated breath to see where we land." —Theresa Jackson, spokeswoman for Wegmans, after the grocery store chain

was included in Fortune magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For." (1/20/2012)

A person with **bated breath** is taking short breaths, because of some emotion.

Bated, a shortened form of abated (reduced), is a peculiar word used only in this idiom. Because bated is so obscure, the more common word baited is often substituted, but "baited breath" makes no sense.

The earliest known use of bated breath is in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice (1600).

bean counter, don't know beans about

We regret to say that Jacob Lew is the director of the Office of Management and Budget—the federal government's chief bean-counter. And he doesn't seem to know beans about accounting. —Barron's (2/26/2011)

"He pulled me from the Chicago division where I literally was just a bean counting peon, and he gave me my first opportunity to work in a managerial/finance role as a controller for AT&T Local in New Jersey." —Peter Chantel, chief financial officer of SugarSync (4/24/2012)

Is Jeff Bezos journalism's savior or just another bean counter? —headline in the Los Angeles Times (8/13/2013)

Bean-counter once was a negative term for accountant, suggesting people who were interested in numbers and little else. But just as the use of "cops" gradually became acceptable to the police, many accountants decided there was honor in counting beans, and although the phrase is still used negatively it doesn't have the sting it once did.

If you **don't know beans about** something, you don't know anything about it. Beans are used in both expressions because they are small and not worth much.

Examples of bean counter referring to accountants begin appearing in the early 1970's. Before that, the phrase already had a negative connotation, when referring to swindlers who would bet that they could come closest to guessing the number of beans in a jar—after they had already counted them in secret.

beat a dead horse

To once again beat a dead horse, the population is growing and not only that, it is getting richer. —Seeking Alpha (6/10/2011)

"Not to beat a dead horse, but if we score runs we've got a good chance to win," Ryan said.—Tacoma News Tribune (6/13/2011)

"What else can you do? I think it's non-productive to keep on...I'm not pleased. But I know we can't just keep beating a dead horse. —The Register Herald (Beckley, West Virginia, 12/7/2011)

The expression **beat a dead horse** is based on the idea that a dead horse will not get up no matter how many times it is hit. Used metaphorically, as in the Register Herald example, it means repeat an action that will have no results or success. Frequently, as in the Seeking Alpha and News Tribune examples, it means say something that already has been said many times.

In the past, **flog a dead horse** was also common. The earliest example of beat a dead horse I have found is from 1889; flog a dead horse, from 1864.

beat around the bush

The petite, 74-year-old shopkeeper was born in Puerto Rico, has a Tosado campaign sign in her store window...and doesn't beat around the bush when asked why she wants him to win. —The Boston Globe (11/6/2011)

These words of Paul still resonate with Christians today. Paul did not beat around the bush when speaking to his beloved followers. He spoke to them from his heart. —Clanton (Alabama) Advertiser (10/26/2011)

"Let's not beat around the bush here, I'm not Brad Pitt, all right." —Brian McFadden, singer and songwriter, saying that his girlfriend Vogue Williams was attracted by his fame and his Ferrari (4/18/2012)

Beat around the bush means talk about something without stating the main point. It is usually put in the negative. The Brian McFadded quotation means, "Let's get right to the point."

The version used in England, **beat about the bush**, has been traced to the 1500's. It alludes to hunting, when beating bushes was a way to start catching birds, but was easier than actually catching them.

beck and call

Auletta points to critics who argue that Sandberg is not your typical working mother and doesn't understand that challenges faced by moms with fewer resources at their beck and call. —The Atlantic (7/6/2011)

"We seem to be at the beck and call of the gadget [smart phone] all the time." —Nicholas Carr, author of "The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains" (11/22/2012)

"Her huge circle of friends demands that she be available to party at their beck and call." —letter to Amy Dickinson, syndicated advice columnist (8/16/2013)

People or groups who are at your **beck and call** are always available and ready to do what you want.

The word **beck** is no longer used except in this idiom. It meant a hand signal, used in giving an order. (The word **beckon**, still in use, means a gesture to instruct someone to approach, such as a waiter in a restaurant.)

In a 1668 book about witches, Joseph Glanville wrote:

...good and happy Souls can never return hither from their Celestial Abodes; and they are not certainly at the Beck and Call of an impious Hag.

beef up

Police promised to set up DUI checkpoints outside the stadium and to beef up police presence in the stadium and parking lot. —Contra Costa Times (1/19/2012)

In the wake of this incident, cruise lines may beef up their safety tactics. —Newsday (1/19/2012)

"I think most all of us applaud the efforts to beef up our missile defense on the West Coast." —

Senator Bob Corker (3/17/2013)

Beef up means to improve by adding or strengthening.

Beef sometimes is used to mean strength or substance, as in "Where's the beef?", a question made popular by a 1984 television commercial.

This is the earliest example of beef up found in my searches:

Carrier-based planes must be "beefed up," that is, strengthened, to take the unusual shocks of landings on a moving deck... —The New York Times (6/7/1942)

been there, done that

"We've been there, done that with Portugal, Greece and Ireland. It would really complicate the solvency problem for Italy." —David Gilmore, a financial analyst in Essex, Connecticut (11/8/2011)

There was so much attention given to the May 21 doomsday prediction—end-of-the-world parties and so forth—that when the Oct. 21 prediction date rolled around last month, the world responded largely with a "been-there, done-that" shrug. —Los Angeles Times (11/2/2011)

Florida had been there, done that with a pilot test of drug testing in 1998 and found few benefits for the poor or for taxpayers. —Miami Herald (11/1/2011)

If you say you have **been there, done that,** you mean that the experience is not one you want or need to repeat.

Sometimes (especially in conversation) the expression is shortened to **been there**.

Been there, done that is assumed to have originated in Australia, and indeed, the earliest printed examples come from there. This is from a Melbourne newspaper:

Mr. Lynch has continued to recover from the 1977 crisis when he was forced to resign over his family financial affairs. Although he now appears certain to stay past the next election, he has the air of the man who says "I've been there, done that." —The Age (12/3/1979)

before you know it

Before he knew it, his home was destroyed and he was swept out to sea on what used to be the roof of his house. —msnbc.com (3/16/2011)

Summer will be here before you know it! You know what that means? Bathing suit season! —WBTV.com, Charlotte, N.C. (3/15/2011)

"Even with this accident, BP remains the world leader in deepwater drilling. They have an offshore India gas position that could significantly boost its market value over the years, and before you know it the company will be one of the foremost explorers in the Arctic." —Fadel Gheit, energy industry analyst (7/12/2013)

Before you know it means happening quickly, before you are aware of it. When referring to the future, it means very soon. It is a phrase of exaggeration, almost never literally true.

The msnbc example does not mean that the man was not aware he was being swept out to sea until after it happened. It is a way of saying that the event happened quickly. The WBTV example means that summer will arrive very soon, perhaps before you have prepared for it.

An early example is in "The Rage," a 1795 comedy by Frederick Reynolds, when Gingham, worried that talking too much may get him into trouble, stops and says, "I shall be a dead man, before I know it."

behind the eight ball

"We have to just correct that underfunding and if we don't get started now, we'll be further behind the eight ball," he said. —Sarasota Herald-Tribune (3/23/2011)

Financial advisers say they're seeing an increasing number of workers and new retirees with no savings and no plan to dig out of debt. "There are a lot more people behind the eight ball," says Joel Redmond, a financial planner for Key Private Bank in Syracuse, N.Y.—USA Today (12/4/2011)

Chrysler's...2010 lineup ranks last in terms of fuel economy among major automakers, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. "They're way behind the eight ball and technology keeps changing"... —Reuters(1/27/2011)

If you are **behind the eight ball**, you are in a difficult position.

(See also, **back against the wall** and **between a rock and a hard place**.)

This idiom is assumed to be related to the game of pool, in which special rules apply to the Number 8 ball. But the origin is unknown. Its use apparently began around or after the late 1920's.

behind the scenes

Still, Mr. Shimizu's extended absence from the public eye has begun to raise comment, although the company says he is directing efforts from behind the scenes.—The Wall Street Journal (3/29/2011)

"For years she has worked quietly behind the scenes, making her job look easy, which it isn't." —Ventura County Star (12/29/2011)

"Behind the scenes, they'll do everything they can to block any common-sense reform and make sure nothing changes whatsoever." —President Barack Obama, referring to opponents of new restrictions on guns (1/16/2013)

Literally, **behind the scenes** means where the audience can't see—which typically refers to theater, movie or television productions. When there are no "scenes," the phrase means out of public view or knowledge.

Examples of behind the scenes used literally have been found in the early 1700's. This is an example of a figurative use later in that century:

We love to retire behind the scenes, and to observe the undisguised appearance of those, who please us...Hence the private letters of great men have been always read with avidity. —The Critical Review (London, July, 1779)

be in someone else's shoes, fill someone's shoes

"If I were in your shoes at this moment, I probably would have reacted in the same manner." —Nigerian President Goodluck Johnson, talking to people who protested rising fuel prices

(1/7/2012)

"Your president and your first lady were in your shoes just a few years ago. We didn't come from wealthy families. The only reason we were able to achieve what we achieved was because of education." —President Barack Obama, speaking to students (1/27/2012)

"I would not want to be in Mr. Armstrong's shoes." —Paul Butler, law professor at Georgetown University, after Lance Armstrong admitted that he cheated to win the Tour de France seven times (1/18/2013)

"But the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, their right to justice must also be recognized. And put yourself in their shoes. Look at the world through their eyes." —President Barack Obama, speaking to an audience of young people in Jerusalem (3/21/2013)

"Poor John Oliver, I mean, he's wonderful. But you can never fill those shoes, and he just doesn't have that sort of background that Jon has." —Marisa Guthrie, journalist for The Hollywood Reporter, talking about Oliver's selection as substitute for comedian Jon Stewart during Stewart's three-month absence (3/10/2013)

To **be in someone's shoes** means to be in a similar situation.

To **fill someone's shoes** means to do the work, or take the responsibility, of that person.

Examples of this expression have been found from as early as the 1700's.

be like

"I am aggressive on the road. He was like, 'You drive crazy.' I'm like, 'I do, don't I?'" Danica Patrick, race car driver, talking about a conversation with her boyfriend (2/9/2013)

"Postal workers were shocked. They were like, 'We were supposed to deliver mail on Saturday?'" —Jimmy Fallon, television show host, joking about the U.S. Postal Service plan to end Saturday delivery (2/8/2013)

"It's not like I'm like, 'Oh, I'm really just dying to play in Korea.' I'm not dying to play in Korea." —Black Francis, alternative rock musician (2/13/2013)

"I constantly get asked...'Are you more like Laura Bush or are you more like Hillary Clinton?' And I'm like, 'Is that it? Those are the two choices?'" —Michelle Obama (7/7/2013)

"They **were like**" means they said. This slang is widely used in talking about previous conversations, as in the Danica Patrick quotation. Although referring to past conversations, either the past or present tense may be used. (Danica Patrick used both tenses even though they referred to the same conversation in the past.)

Sometimes the "like" expressions refer to opinions or attitudes, rather than quoted speech, as in the Black Francis quotation.

Although still considered slang, this usage is no longer confined to teenagers, as it generally was before the 1990's.

bells and whistles

A new car with, as Palmer noted, "all the bells and whistles," is a sweet treat to drive. —The Hartford Courant (12/29/2011)

TV manufacturers increasingly have been building 3-D capability—as well as Internet connectivity and other bells and whistles—into many of their larger flat-panel sets. —Chicago Sun-Times (12/28/2011)

Pawlenty's Web strategy shows that online campaigning—once considered extraneous bells and whistles—now ranks up there with trips to Iowa and New Hampshire for presidential hopefuls —Minneapolis Star Tribune (4/10/2011)

"It's a dizzying array of options...It does make us wonder, though, whether the average consumer will even be aware of all these added bells and whistles." —Joseph Volpe, writer for engadget.com, describing the new Samsung Galaxy S4 phone (3/14/2013)

Bells and whistles means extra features that may be desirable but are not necessary.

The phrase often refers to technological products such as cars and electronic equipment. The most expensive models have bells and whistles—the most and newest features.

The Star Tribune example means that online campaigning used to be considered desirable but unnecessary, like luxury features in a car. (Speaking of unnecessary features, extraneous means unnecessary, so the word itself is extraneous.)

The figurative use of bells and whistles became popular in reference to computers during the late 1970's and 1980's, but an earlier example refers to music made with all kinds of sound:

Walters noted that Crewe brought in a full string section, horns in short, all the bells and whistles that characterized full-scale pop sessions in the past. —Billboard Magazine (11/25/1972)

below the belt, low blow

Time magazine's editor-at-large, Mark Halperin, was suspended indefinitely from MSNBC after delivering a below-the-belt blow to President Barack Obama Thursday on live television -- calling the commander-in-chief a profane name. —New York Post (6/30/2011)

Citizens United let political ads get even more vicious. Now, so-called independent committees hide the true sources of megabucks. They hit opponents below the belt so their candidates don't have to. —the Daily Californian (12/16/2011)

"I think Jen and I are really proud of how we stood by each other during the difficult times. We never hit below the belt and we always encouraged one another." —Caroline Cutbirth, singer, talking about her experience on the "Amazing Race" television game show (5/14/2013)

In Chinese with English subtitles, the video targeting Philadelphia delivers one low blow after another. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (6/18/2011)

Call him mean, call him "uncivil," but Ricky Gervais had us laughing...Ricky...took some low blows at Bruce Willis (calling him "Ashton Kutcher's dad")...—SodaHead.com (1/17/2011)

In boxing, a punch **below the belt** is against the rules. In other situations, hitting below the belt means violating rules or accepted standards of behavior. A **low blow** and a hit **below the belt** have the same meaning.

The 1865 Marquess of Queensbury rules for boxing have been mentioned as the origin of below the belt, but hitting below the waistband was considered unacceptable earlier in the 1800's, and I have found examples of the phrase used metaphorically as early as 1859.

bench strength

Among the benefits of the merger, Clark said then, is additional bench strength it will bring, particularly to the firm's real estate, health care and financial services practice areas. —Memphis Daily News (10/21/2011)

Can "Rosie" save the struggling Oprah Winfrey Network?...while one hit can boost a whole network, that network has to have a store of other shows ready to score. OWN doesn't seem to have the bench strength. —Denver Post (10/1/2011)

"John Cryan adds depth to our bench strength, bringing with him considerable experience and capabilities to our senior leadership focus on markets," a Temasek spokeswoman told Reuters. (1/4/2012)

Bench strength refers to capable people who can substitute for the regular, most talented, participants.

The phrase comes from baseball, where substitute players sit on a bench until they are needed in the game.

Bench strength appears in articles about baseball as early as the 1940's, and the phrase soon became popular in other sports. The first non-sports example in my searches is in a July 19, 1972 news account of the Democratic National Convention, in which Frank Mankiewics said supporters of George McGovern were able to defeat a divisive statement in support of abortion rights because "we have good bench strength."

bend over backward(s)

"The view seems to be that Greece will vote 'yes' and Europe will bend over backwards to prevent a default."—Reuters (6/29/2011)

"Republicans have bent over backwards...We wanted an agreement." —Mitch McConnell, Senate Republican leader, referring to negotiations on taxes and spending. (12/27/2012)

"Let's quit trying to bend over backwards to give the benefit of the doubt to people who have proven time and again that they don't like us." —Representative Dana Rohrabacher, Republican of California, referring to Pakistan. (6/1/2012)

"President Obama has bent over backward to accommodate Russian President Vladimir Putin in recent years and gotten virtually nothing in return." —Lionel Beehner, in an opinion column in USA Today (8/20/2013)

Bend over backward (or **backwards**) means take maximum, difficult or unusual action.

The meaning used to be more specific: take an extreme position or action to avoid a possible bias; go against one's natural inclination. Sometimes the phrase still conveys that meaning ("The customer was impolite but he bent over backward to please her.") but now it often describes action that is simply difficult or inconvenient.

Lean over backwards, less common in American usage, is a variation with the same meaning.

Printed examples of the idiom date back to the late 1800's.

bent out of shape, take umbrage, in a lather, nose out of joint

"It's hard to get too bent out of shape for being fined $40, if you're speeding in a school zone." —Annapolis Patch (12/6/2011)

"It's very difficult to understand now just how bent out of shape people became in 1967." —singer Janis Ian, talking about negative reaction to "Society's Child," her song about an interracial couple (3/6/2013)

The public is right to take umbrage at being ignored. —Newsday (10/6/2011)

The Obama campaign is in a lather over Mitt Romney's first TV spot, calling it "a deceitful and dishonest attack"...—FactCheck.org (11/22/2011)

Our local media pillars take umbrage and get in a lather about it and everyone gets their noses out of joint because it's just not fair. —Detroit News (3/25/2011)

There is some similarity in the meanings of all four expressions, which usually describe getting angry or reacting negatively to something:

Those who are annoyed are **bent out of shape**, an expression that developed during the mid-1900's. It also may mean intoxicated, but that usage may be fading into history.

Take umbrage goes back to the 1600's and comes from the Latin word for shadow. Umbrage is an archaic word that is rarely used except in take umbrage.

Get in a lather means get angry in an excited manner, or be in an emotional state. Lather, an old English word, is what you get when you rub soap with water. From the 1600's it was used to mean the sweat of a horse that had a lot of exercise. Later, referring to people, it came to mean agitated and upset.

Examples of **nose out of joint** meaning annoyed or upset have been found as early as the 1500's. We may guess its origin was related to the anger felt after being hit in the nose hard enough to change its shape.

Bermuda Triangle

Mars' environs can be a Bermuda Triangle for spaceships. Many attempts to study it have ended in partial or complete failure, with equipment breaking or disappearing under mysterious circumstances. —San Jose Mercury-News (8/5/2012)

In this highly partisan era, when common ground seems to be located somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle... —The Washington Post (2/3/2012)

He struck out the side in the third and the fifth as his fastball, slider and changeup formed a Bermuda Triangle of pitches into which Pittsburgh's offense disappeared. —David J. Neal, reporting on a baseball game in the Miami Herald (7/29/13)

In the news examples, a **Bermuda Triangle** is a place where bad things happen or objects are lost forever.

The Bermuda Triangle is part of the Atlantic Ocean between Bermuda, Florida and islands of the Caribbean. Public interest in unexplained disappearances of planes and ships there began in the 1950's.

By the 1970's, people began to use Bermuda Triangle as a metaphor:

The three TV networks form a sort of Bermuda Triangle. Shows go there and are never heard of

again. —Kiplinger's Personal Finance (June, 1979)

better half

Eric Felder...just paid a whopping $7.5 million for a seventh-floor apartment...The seller is another Wall Street moneyman, James T. Pappas, and his better half, dentist Adriana Leone. —New York Post (11/10/2011)

She'd also like to spend more time with her husband, after being away from their Manhattan home base for at least six months out of every year to shoot The Closer in Los Angeles. Ultimately for Sedgwick, says Closer executive producer James Duff, none of the show's critical accolades, the impressive ratings, the Emmy and Golden Globe nominations and wins could measure up against not seeing her better half every day. —USA Today (7/11/2011)

"I can wear cute little nightgowns without feeling uncomfortable because of sagging breasts, and most importantly, my better half is happy with the new me." —publicity release for a plastic surgery practice in Florida (4/11/2012)

Better half means spouse.

Sometimes, "my better half" is a sarcastic reference when making a joke about one's spouse. As in the news examples, better half is used when the subject is appropriate for informal language. It is not used as a synonym for spouse when the situation is solemn, such as in an obituary.

Similar phrases were written by the poets of ancient Rome, and in English better half once referred to close friends, or to the soul. A well-known example of an early version of the phrase is in Shakespeare's Sonnet 39 (1609):

> O! how thy worth with manners may I sing,
> When thou art all the better part of me?

between a rock and a hard place

President Obama's policy in 2011 has him stuck between a rock and a hard place politically, criticized by both sides of the immigration debate. —U.S. News & World Report (12/29/2011)

Union officials acknowledge the tough position for legislators. "In many respects, lawmakers are caught between a rock and a hard place," said Stephen Madarasz, a spokesman for the Civil Service Employees Association union that represents 70,000 state workers. —Syracuse Post-Standard (3/19/2011)

"You're sort of caught between a rock and a hard place. You should have left but it's also getting to be too late to leave." —New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, referring to evacuation orders for Hurricane Sandy (10/29/2012)

If you are **between a rock and a hard place**, you have two choices, both of them bad.

In the U.S. News and Syracuse Post-Standard examples, politicians were in a difficult position because they were forced to decide which people to make unhappy.

The phrase was listed in a 1918 academic journal on American dialect, but how it began is unknown. A phrase with a similar meaning, used less frequently, is **between the devil and the deep blue sea**.

beyond a shadow of a doubt

The current administration has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, even to many of its early and strongest supporters, that it lacks both the will and the focus to respond effectively. —New York Daily News (10/16/2011)

"Republicans' No. 1 priority is to defeat President Obama, and their strategy is to keep the economy weak as long as possible," Reid said. "So they oppose legislation we know beyond a shadow of a doubt will support 400,000 American jobs without adding a penny to the deficit." —Las Vegas Review-Journal (10/1/2011)

"It's not a job, it's so much more. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is what I was meant to do." —Lynchburg News & Advance (10/17/2011)

Beyond a shadow of a doubt means completely certain.

Beyond doubt has the same meaning, but a shadow of a doubt adds emphasis, asserting that not even a tiny amount of doubt exists

An early example is in a 1698 translation of a religious tract originally written in French:

But since my design is not to leave the Reader the least shadow of a doubt, I promise to prove by and by, that the Apostles both received and imparted many miraculous gifts. —"A Vindication of the Truth of Christian Religion, Against the Objections of all Modern Opposers" (London, 1698)

beyond the pale

At Monday's monthly Metropolitan Transportation Authority transit meeting, Charles Moerdler, a board member from The Bronx, said he's beyond frustrated. "The Bronx service, according to the statistics they have here, has gotten beyond the pale," said Moerdler. "It's got to stop." —NY1 (7/25/2011)

West's red-hot response was clearly beyond the pale and uncalled for. —South Florida SunSentinel (7/22/2011)

"Once you see this video, all these videos, you hear the things that were being said, he goes beyond the pale." —Grant Wahl, sports journalist, talking about Mike Rice, who was fired as Rutgers University basketball coach after shouting abusive slurs at his players and throwing balls at them during practices. (4/3/2013)

Beyond the pale means unacceptable; not within the standards most people agree on.

The expression comes from an almost forgotten meaning of pale: an area enclosed by a fence. (Earlier, fences and the wooden stakes of fences were also called pales.) People who lived within the area (the pale) were safer and subject to the laws there.

The use of beyond the pale has been traced back to the 1600's.

Big Apple, Big Easy and other city nicknames

Hear tales about the Big Apple and the people who made it great during the New York Historical Society's weekly "Sunday Story Hour" for kids. —New York Daily News (12/18/2011)

Mardi Gras is not the only holiday celebrated in style in New Orleans. The Big Easy offers Creole traditions and other festivities throughout the Christmas season, —Associated Press (12/12/2011)

As much as Las Vegas has promoted itself as Sin City, it's also considered a top destination for couples celebrating their commitment. —Los Angeles Times (12/12/2011)

No doubt losing the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and to a lesser extent Sears would damage the economic prestige of the Windy City and the entire state. —The Wall Street Journal (12/12/2011)

Chrysler Group announced today that it will reopen its Conner Avenue Assembly Plant in Detroit for the production of the next- generation SRT Viper..."We're extremely excited that our ultimate American sports car will continue to live on and be produced exclusively here in the Motor City." —USA Today (12/13/2011)

The news examples above include five well-known nicknames of American cities. There are hundreds more, and some cities have more than one nickname. Detroit is **Motown** as well as **Motor City**.

The origin of some nicknames, including the **Big Apple** and **Big Easy**, is unknown or in dispute. Chicago tour guides inform visitors that **Windy** refers to the long speeches of politicians, not the icy wind blowing from Lake Michigan.

Why city nicknames are included in this book of idiomatic expressions is a reasonable question. These five are well-known and likely to be used without also mentioning the city's real name. (For clarity, I selected examples that do mention the city's name.) Knowing them may be helpful to students of American English.

big fish in a small pond, big fish

Wes Moyer was the big man on campus when he was a senior on the Alameda High football team in 2007...Then he got to college. After a late recruiting process brought him to Yale, Moyer was no longer a big fish in a small pond. —Contra Costa Times (11/3/2011)

The Thinking Student’s Guide to College recommends small colleges to the student who is less confident, not less talented....bigger universities call for more competition. So becoming a big fish in a small pond can actually work out as a huge advantage. —wcn.com (3/23/2012)

The Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security, which tracks Iran's nuclear programs, describes Sairafi as a core member of the smuggling networks and the kind of big fish rarely caught in the U.S. net. —Associated Press (11/10/2011)

"A big fish in al Qaeda here. In fact, the son-in-law of Osama bin Laden has landed in U.S. custody and is now on U.S. soil." —Brooke Baldwin, television news anchor (5/7/2013)

A **big fish in a small pond** is important or successful only in a small place or limited situation.

In contexts like the Associated Press example and Brooke Baldwin quotation, **big fish** means an important or successful person. It often describes people who investigators want to catch because they are the most important or prominent.

Examples of phrases close to big fish in a small pond have been found as early as 1871, and figurative uses of big fish as early as 1827.

big if

So if the Republicans are smart—a big if—they will simply run a campaign on economics. —Fox News (10/18/2011)

Budget Travel notes that the [airline ticket] giveaway would begin in April if approved by the Japanese government, but that may be a big "if" since the promotion is expected to cost the country $150 million. —TheStreet.com (10/13/2011)

The vote is still a big if, and leaves the euro zone at the mercy of Slovakia's precarious domestic politics —TIME (10/12/2011)

When we say, if something happens, we assume there is a possibility it will happen. When we then say, "That is a **big if**," we mean there is a strong possibility it will not happen.

In conversation, emphasizing the word **if** expresses doubt that something will happen. In writing, placing "if" in capital or bold letters (making it "big") has the same effect. Saying explicitly, "It's a big if," adds more emphasis to the idea that something is doubtful.

An early example is in a book published in 1880:

"Oh!" Edward replied, "there is a big if in the way. Besides, you are counting the chickens before they are hatched, and you have a good many of them too." —"The Pioneer Church" by Montgomery Schuyler (1880)

big picture

In the big picture, no, an extra few minutes' wait is not an unreasonable price to pay if it helps reduce the likelihood of a bomb being smuggled onto a plane. But neither is it necessary, and in that same big picture we're talking about millions of wasted minutes. —Salon (9/22/2011)

It was a gathering of big-picture thinkers and change agents from illustrious big companies who sensed that there were massive shifts on the horizon... —Harvard Business Review (9/23/2011)

Michelle Santee, manager for atmospheric sciences at JPL, explained that aircraft and ground-based missions had measured chemical mechanisms responsible for the destruction of the ozone - but the big picture remained elusive. "The vast scale over which these processes operated were not known." —The Pasadena Star-News (9/22/2011)

"I think the big picture here is that President Obama has got to deliver on the big issue, which is fixing the financial house of the U.S. federal government." —Bob Woodward, political commentator (11/11/2012)

"They're not looking at the Republican Party's future in a big picture...they're looking at their viability in their own seats...Their concern is not being defeated by a Democrat, it's being defeated by a conservative..." —Kevin Madden, Republican political strategist, talking about opposition in Congress to changes in immigration laws (6/23/2013)

A **big picture** is a broad overview or understanding, not focused too much on details.

A **big-picture person** (such as the big-picture thinker in the Harvard Business Review example) is someone who is good at keeping a wider perspective and not getting too involved in details.

Someone who can't **see the forest for the trees** cannot be a big-picture person.

In the early 1900's, longer movies were called big pictures, and later that phrase distinguished

long movies, or feature films, from shorter ones. But that is apparently not the origin of the current expression. Instead, it began in science and technology. An early example is in a 1921 business journal:

This [statistical] step is taken for the purpose of rendering a clearer picture of the trend of activity in the given years by reducing the short time fluctuations which in the big picture would mean nothing... —The American Contractor (1/1/1921)

big shot

Bill Daley used to be a big shot at Boeing as a member of its board of directors. Now he's a big shot at the White House as President Obama's chief of staff. —Charleston Post and Courier (5/11/2011)

Mark Meckler...is the co-founder of the Tea Party Patriots and a big shot national Tea Party Leader. —Gawker.com (12/16/2011)

The Raleigh leadership needs to wise up or they will be the first Republican big shots to face mutiny. —Beaufort (North Carolina) Observer (4/28/2012)

"He may be the leader of 1.2 billion Roman Catholics but he talks to us like a brother, not a big shot." —Cathleen Falsani, religion journalist, writing about Pope Francis (9/16/2013)

When it refers to a person, **big shot** means an important person.

Big shot is informal language and usually does not suggest great respect for the person it refers to.

In the 1800's and early 1900's important people were also called high shots, great shots and big guns. The earliest example of big shot I have found is from 1905.

bite off more than one can chew

The biggest mistake that most of us are making is biting off more than we can chew with our New Year's resolutions. —New York Daily News (1/11/2011)

Because so few cats are adopted—about 30 found homes last year—Clough says more cats are rarely accepted. "We have to keep strict limits, " she says. "That's how rescue groups get into trouble, biting off more than they can chew." —Buffalo News (9/13/2011)

Don't bite off more than you can chew during the week ahead. You may have the know-how to get the job done, however you may lack the resources to see it through successfully. —daily horoscope, Tribune Media Services (8/4/2013)

Bite off more than a person or group **can chew** means set goals too high or take on too much work.

The earliest examples of this phrase have been found in the 1870's. This was published in 1878:

It is a sign of a petty man to be always in a hurry. It shows that he has "bit off than be can chew." —Ayer's American Almanac (Lowell, Mass., 1878)

bite the bullet

With all of the risks that come with smoking, it's time to bite the bullet and stop. —The Daily

Times (Salisbury, Md., 1/1/2011)

...the city had to bite the bullet and fix its stormwater system. —The Beacon Herald (Stratford, Conn., 1/1/2012)

"America has to bite the bullet of what these incidents mean to our people, to our nation, and our nation's standing in the world. When you have someone walking in and slaying in the most brutal way 6-year-olds, something is really wrong." —Senator Dianne Feinstein (12/30/2012)

"The more successful you are, the less likeable you are...For a woman. Not for a man. There's no problem being a successful man...Women just have to bite the bullet on that cultural reality." —Dee Dee Myers, political analyst (8/10/2013)

Bite the bullet means accept a bad situation and endure the pain or pay the price.

In the 1700's and early 1800's, a person was said to **chew a bullet** to endure pain or show bravery during surgery or punishment.

In its figurative sense, "bite on the bullet" appeared in an 1891 story by Rudyard Kipling. An early example of the current form, bite the bullet, is in a news article about municipal budget cutting in the Oct. 14, 1907 edition of the Ellensburg, Wash., Daily Record.

bite the dust

Coins tell the story of U.S. history: 2-cent, 3-cent and half-dime pieces that bit the dust during the Civil War in favor of nickels —The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal (10/22/2011)

Another show that bit the dust was NBC's workplace romantic comedy "Free Agents" after four episodes. —Indiana Statesman (10/17/2011)

Yet another South African chief of police and two ministers have bitten the dust in the latest swirl of corruption scandals to hit President Jacob Zuma's government. —The Economist (10/29/2011)

Bite the dust means die in a struggle, like a warrior falling in battle.

Sometimes, as in the Economist example, the phrase refers to the end of careers, not the people themselves. The context of the Economist article was the only way to know that the phrase did not mean the three officials were wounded or killed.

Psalm 72 in the King James version of the Bible (1611) says, "They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust."

bitter pill to swallow

"We know it's a tough pill for people to swallow," said Mayor Fowler. "But we don't see it any other way."...Bridgetown and Area Chamber of Commerce president Andy Kerr agreed with Fowler that the new budget is a bitter pill. —The Annapolis County Spectator (9/23/2011)

Congress should pledge to continue its direct military support of Israel, at current levels, until Jan. 1, 2021. Knowing that the sharp edge of Israel's sword will not be blunted during this time of transition is a key dimension of sweetening what we know to be a bitter pill. —The Baltimore Sun (9/21/2011)

Koch's embrace of Christie, and his touting of Christie as a possible candidate for higher office, must be a bitter pill for Lonegan to swallow. —The (Bergen) Record (9/18/2011)

A **bitter pill to swallow**, often shortened to **bitter pill**, is something unpleasant or disliked, which must be accepted anyway, like bad-tasting medicine. Versions of bitter pill to swallow have been traced back to the 1500's.

An example close to current usage comes from 1779, when Horace Walpole wrote in his "Journal of the reign of King George II":

"It was a bitter pill for the King and Lord Mansfield to swallow—resistance to Popery from Scotland."

See also, hard (tough, easy, etc.) to swallow.

black eye

Johnson & Johnson (JNJ) agreed to pay $70 million to settle U.S. and U.K. allegations that it paid bribes to doctors in three European countries... The news is the latest black eye for J&J, which has been grappling with a series of product recalls because of manufacturing-quality lapses, as well as government investigations of its U.S. marketing practices. —Dow Jones News (4/8/2011)

Opponents had warned the bill would give another black eye to Arizona after last year's controversy over the state's illegal immigration enforcement law. —Associated Press (4/19/2011)

"It would be the ultimate black eye to his campaign to lose his home state..." —Christopher Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion (4/6/2012)

"We know that the announcement of the [Major League Baseball] Hall of Fame not having Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds or Sammy Sosa, because of the doping, has really put a black eye on that sport." —Victor Blackwell, television news anchor (1/12/2013)

When the phrase is not used literally, referring to a facial injury, **black eye** means a severe and public rebuke, or a mark of embarrassment or shame.

Literally, a black eye is a dark bruise around the eye, a result of being hit. It came to be associated with embarrassment because a person with a black eye was often assumed to have been fighting or to have lost a fight.

(Black-eyed, referring to the color of eyes, is usually a positive description.)

Examples of the literal use of black eye have been found as early as the 1600's, and its figurative sense apparently developed in the 1700's.

blank check

"So basically, from a political institutional standpoint, FDR had a blank check. He could do whatever he wanted, and no president has ever enjoyed such margins." —Michael Cornfield, professor at George Washington University (1/19/2013)

"After a decade of blank-check spending in the Department of Defense it was important...to meet this challenge of reducing the defense budget." —Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (2/6/2013)

"This is just a blank check for the party, and it undermines the whole message of cracking down on special interests' influence in Washington." —Tyson Slocum, director of Public Citizen's energy program, criticizing Duke Energy's loan of up to $10 million to the Democratic Party (3/4/2013)

If you are given a **blank check**, you have the freedom to spend or do what you want, without limit.

The literal phrase, which has been in use since the 1700's, means a signed check with the amount left blank.

An early figurative use is in "The Master Mason" by Rev. John J. Lanier, published in 1921: "...life is a blank check signed by God and handed to us at birth."

blow off (someone, something)

Romney has four paid staff and a consultant working in Iowa to organize support..."Whether or not he's here, he has expectations to do well as the national front-runner," Robinson said. "So it would be wise to embrace Iowa in some capacity and not just blow it off." —Reuters (10/20/2011)

Tacoma voters will decide whether city police and prosecutors should continue to pursue pot crimes—or simply blow them off altogether. —Tacoma News Tribune (10/16/2011)

When Sabina resident Steve Pauley met his Ashley nearly a decade ago, she blew him off. After countless phone calls went unreturned, Steve started to give up. Then, months later at a Kenny Chesney concert amid thousands, the two ran into each other. He quickly struck up a conversation, and she hugged him back. "I call it love at second sight," she giggled. Six years later, they got married. —Wilmington News Journal (10/28/2011)

...hip-hopper Flo Rida was forced to settle a nasty lawsuit brought by a Canadian concert promoter because the singer blew off court-mandated deposition and mediation —Miami Herald (8/1/2013)

If you **blow** someone or something **off**, you don't respond or take meaningful action, usually because you regard them as unimportant.

English learners must pay close attention to context. The verb blow is used in various phrases with different meanings, one of them vulgar. In the news examples, the expression blow off is a metaphor for the literal act, such as using a puff of breath to get an insect off one's arm.

But it is unknown whether the phrase originated with such a metaphor. The use of blow off has been traced as far back as the 1600's.

blow the whistle on, whistleblower

Hoare repeatedly expressed the hope that the hacking scandal would lead to journalism in general being cleaned up, and said he had decided to blow the whistle on the activities of some of his former NoW [News of the World] colleagues with that aim in mind. —The Guardian (7/18/2011)

"...was what happened in Cartagena...a pattern of behavior that happened over time elsewhere, and if it did, ...why didn't somebody at the Secret Service essentially blow the whistle on it?" —Senator Joe Lieberman (4/22/2012)

"If there are people that want to come forward and tell their story, this department is not blocking whistleblowers and is not stopping people from telling their story." —Patrick Ventrell, spokesman for the State Department (5/6/2013)

Blow the whistle on someone or something means expose actions or situations that are wrong or illegal.

The allusion is to a police officer blowing a whistle to stop a crime or bad behavior. Someone who blows the whistle is a **whistleblower**, and laws protecting informers from retaliation are

whistleblower laws.

In the past, blowing the whistle meant causing an activity to stop suddenly. Now it usually refers to giving information to an authority (such as government or police), or making information public.

In my searches, the earliest examples of the phrase used with its current meaning were found in the 1940's.

blue in the face

"I could run around and scream until I'm blue in the face, but it really doesn't do anything." —New York Daily News (5/1/2011)

Ben Bernanke can talk until he's blue in the face about how there's no inflation ... but people who actually buy things know better. —BusinessInsider.com (4/28/2011)

"I know I can say that until I am blue in the face, but as a white man in a uniform, I know it doesn't mean anything to anybody." —Bill Lee, police chief in Sanford, Florida (3/17/2012)

Doing something until **blue in the face** means doing it for so long that one's face turns blue—an exaggeration used for emphasis.

As in the news examples, it often refers to something that could happen but will not. Or, it may exaggerate something that happened in the past: "I talked to them until I was blue in the face but I didn't convince anyone."

To be blue in the face literally is the result of a medical emergency, such as being unable to breathe.

The medical use of blue in the face is many centuries old. The idiomatic version goes at least as far back as the early 1800's. This example is from an 1829 book: "...we will not believe their oaths, though they should swear themselves black and blue in the face."

boil down

He said it boils down to a simple choice: "We're going to have to reduce our rate of increase in corn consumption or we're going to have to produce more corn." —Associated Press (11/23/2011)

Though the housing bubble boils down to a simple matter of too much money chasing too few good borrowers, to see it coming was no simple matter. —The Wall Street Journal (11/19/2011)

We asked Nicole Lazzaro, a psychologist and an expert on what makes games fun to play. Lazzaro, who has spent years dissecting all manner of bestselling games to discover the essence of fun, boiled it down to four ingredients. —Los Angeles Times (11/5/2011)

"It boils down to price, convenience and selection." —Andrew Lipsman, analyst for the comScore measurement company, talking about the growth of retail sales on the Internet (11/27/2012)

Boil down means reduce something to its essence or make it simpler. It is used in many contexts as a metaphor for cooking something to remove liquid and make it concentrated.

An early example of boil down used figuratively is in an 1867 report about a political convention in Virginia dominated by African-Americans:

The political cauldron is a mixture of very strange ingredients, and it is difficult to tell at this moment whether it will boil down to sugar or to potash, or, in other words, whether the child will

be black or white. —The New York Times (10/18/1867)

booby trap, booby prize

Jameel Perrin, 30, of Belleville, allegedly turned on the gas stove in what authorities believe was an attempt to spark an explosion when a concussion grenade was thrown in. Perrin was charged with maintaining a booby trap... —Newark Star-Ledger (12/2/2011)

This legislative booby trap seems unlikely to make it through the Senate, and the president has all but said he would reject it if it does. —The New York Times (12/12/2011)

There is no booby prize for community-college incompetence... —The Chronicle of Higher Education (12/11/2011)

No, the Post-Feminist Booby Prize does not go to 85-year-old playboy Hugh Hefner, who was dumped by a 25-year-old runaway bride. It goes to NBC's Chad Hodge, the producer who resurrected "The Playboy Club" for a new TV series, and then claimed that it was show about empowering women. We send Hodge a bikini, a cotton tail, and a pair of bunny ears so he can feel powerful around the office. —The Boston Globe (8/26/2011)

A **booby trap** is a mechanical ambush, a hidden device designed to harm a person by surprise. Used figuratively in the New York Times example, it meant legislation that was intended to do political harm to those who opposed it.

A **booby prize** is a mocking award for the competitor who finishes last.

Booby originated as a term of ridicule for slow-witted people. The first booby traps, in the 1800's, were silly practical jokes. Later the phrase was adapted by the military and the phrase became more sinister.

By contrast, the use of booby prize rarely gets more serious than in The Chronicle of Higher Education example. It has been found as early as 1882; this example is from 1887:

At a progressive euchre party at St. Thomas the other night the booby prize was a drum, the only thing the recipient could beat. —The New York Times, quoting the Toronto Globe (3/12/1887)

booked solid

The Culver City auto mechanic is busier than ever—booked solid, he said, for a week at a time—as Americans hold on to their cars longer, making repairs that in better times might have spurred a new vehicle purchase. —Los Angeles Times (9/15/2011)

"It's probably 90 percent of my income right now. I'm always booked solid for two weeks ahead." —Meagan Cignoli, a fashion photographer who said Twitter's Vine video sharing service helped her business (8/1/2013)

"It's like trying to get a seat on a plane that is booked solid. The people who are out of work are on standby." —Bill Crandall, a consultant, talking about the difficulty of getting jobs in the advertising industry (8/4/2013)

Booked solid means sold out, or a schedule completely filled.

In the first half of the 1900's it mainly referred to events in which all the tickets were sold. Now it is used in a wider variety of situations.

Examples before the 1900's are rare. The earliest one I found is in an advertisement for the Rogers Brothers, "emperors of German comedy," in the New York Clipper Annual of 1893: "We are booked solid for forty weeks in First Class Theatres only."

box in

Laffer was boxed in both by the considerable evidence against him and a lack of viable defenses he could use at a trial, said his lawyer, Eric Naiburg of Central Islip. —Newsday (9/9/2011)

"Society has boxed in women on what's considered to be beautiful, and this defies how we're supposed to look." —Terri Holley, author of the blog "Going Gray" (4/5/2012)

"I don't want to box myself in. I don't want to box anybody else in." —John Boehner, speaker of the House of Representatives, referring to negotiations about taxes (11/9/2012)

To be **boxed in** is to be restricted in movement, action or thought—as if kept in a box. A variation is to **box someone in**.

In basketball, **boxing out** is taking a position that keeps an opponent away from the basket.

The use of box in as a metaphor for confinement or restriction has been traced to the 1700's.

brace yourself

Start bracing yourself. Next fall, stores may be carrying some very colorful overcoats, thanks to designer labels such as Bottega Veneta, Burberry and Jil Sander. —The Wall Street Journal (1/28/2011)

Now brace yourself for another blow: Getting the right treatment at an affordable price can be next to impossible, even with health insurance. —Times of Trenton (12/30/2011)

More than half of all cancer cases occur in people 65 or older, and as baby boomers age, doctors are bracing themselves for an onslaught. —New York Post (12/25/2011)

Brace yourself means get ready for something, usually something challenging or difficult. One literal meaning of **brace** is strengthen (or as a noun, something used to strengthen something else).

In the Wall Street Journal example, colorful overcoats are not challenging, except perhaps to a few people who feel strongly about fashion, and the writer's use of the idiom is **tongue-in-cheek** [joking].

Examples of this phrase have been found from the early 1800's.

brass tacks

But at the end of the day, when you get down to brass tacks about what matters, "if you look at it, corporate America is in excellent shape." —New York Magazine (6/24/2011)

DevCon 2011, which continues today, has been mostly devoted to brass-tacks information aimed at people who write software for RIM devices. —TIME (10/20/2011)

When the November 7 Baucus meeting began, the seven members there were ready to get down to brass tacks...—Reuters (11/22/2011)

Brass tacks are the important points, the necessary details. The phrase is usually part of **get down to brass tacks**, which means focus on the most important or difficult things.

A similar idea is in **nitty gritty** and **get down to business** and **talk turkey**.

This expression has been traced back to the 1860's. I could find no conclusive explanation of its origin.

breathe easier

Greece on Sunday announced a new set of austerity measures...Even so, critics warn, it's unlikely Greece's lenders and markets will breathe easier. —Los Angeles Times (9/11/2011)

"The latest downgrade is completely unfair and loaded with ulterior motives. Just when the Cyprus economy is breathing easier and showing signs of emerging from the crisis..." —Cyprus President Dimitris Christofias, reacting to a decision by Standard & Poor's to downgrade the credit ratings of nine European countries (1/14/2012)

"It was a boy. A beautiful boy. He didn't cry when he came out. Then he cried, and I breathed easier knowing he was alive." —Flora Vargas, who helped deliver a baby in the restroom of a Subway restaurant in Nevada (8/3/2013)

Breathe easier, when not referring literally to moving air in and out of the lungs, means relax and not worry as much.

The Centers for Disease Control created a program to control asthma, a lung disease. The title of its publication about the program is both literal and figurative: "America Breathing Easier."

An early example: An article dated 1839 in the Church of England Quarterly Review said that the "state breathes easier for the loss of its surplus inhabitants."

bridge the gulf

The White House and congressional Democrats find their political interests diverging as President Barack Obama presses for a far-reaching deficit-reduction deal, and the fate of any agreement could hinge on the president's ability to bridge the gulf. —The Wall Street Journal (7/9/2011)

Trying to bridge the gulf between their proposals, the two sides found some common ground... —Reuters (12/13/2011)

Four months after the opening of peace talks between the Thai government and Malay separatist insurgents, the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces has become, if anything, more violent. Rumors of the imminent demise of the talks are probably premature, but bridging the gulf between the two sides will likely take years. —AsiaTimes Online (7/12/2013)

In the news examples, **bridge the gulf** means persuade two sides to agree when their negotiating positions are far apart.

The metaphor refers to building a bridge over a large body of water. The Wall Street Journal's use of the phrase signaled that President Obama's task was not easy. Obama could only hope his chances for success were better than the description in this sermon:

"Were there accumulated in hell all the noblest talents of the created universe, they could not escape the hand of justice. They could neither bridge the gulf that partitions hell from heaven, nor extinguish the fires that consume them." —The Rev. Daniel A. Clark, 1836

broad daylight

The daily grind of corruption was something Russians viewed as the price for a kind of stability and the rise of living conditions, but crimes committed in broad daylight, the perpetrators known

and protected by officials, have grown too numerous to ignore. —The Wall Street Journal (12/8/2011)

And the single best way to defeat Obama is to sabotage the economy. But there's just one problem with that strategy: The Republicans have no choice but to pursue it in broad daylight. —The Daily Beast/Newsweek (12/12/2011)

Documents indicate she paid sky-high fees and that she agreed to an adjustable loan that eventually included monthly payments greater than her monthly income. "This is how you steal a house in broad daylight," said Sunnyvale lawyer Wayne Silver, who with Ayhan Menekshe is representing Bowland without pay in her predatory lending suit. —San Jose Mercury News (12/6/2011)

"Time calls the Shin Bet a 'shadowy' organization, as if the work of the CIA or NSA is carried out in broad daylight. Why on earth would a security organization not be shadowy, and why is that a crime? —The Washington Post (1/11/2011)

Literally, **broad daylight** is the main part of the day, after sunrise is complete and before sunset begins. The phrase most frequently describes crime made more frightening by the fact that the criminals were not afraid of being seen. The Wall Street Journal example uses broad daylight in that way.

Used figuratively, as in the other news examples, **in broad daylight** means out in the open, not in secret.

Examples of **broad day**, with the same literal meaning, have been found as early as the 1300's.

A figurative example is in the 1828 novel "The Fair Maid of Perth" by Sir Walter Scott: "It cannot be concealed, father Torquil," said Eachin; "it will all out to the broad day."

brush up on, brush up against

"The subcontractor didn't realize he'd brushed up against the switch while doing other work and said he was completely unaware of its critical function," Tepco spokesman Hiroshi Aizawa, based in Fukushima City, said in a recent telephone interview. —The Wall Street Journal (6/15/2011)

Some [people] brushed up against Dyett when he taught at Wendell Phillips High School, in the early 1930s. —Chicago Tribune (8/21/2013)

Romano brushed up on his skills at Marciano's restaurant in Vineland, making a few practice pies. —Vineland, N.J. Daily Journal (6/25/2011)

Boston mob boss James "Whitey" Bulger is the kind of notorious, made-for-the-movies character who motivates actors to brush up on their scowls. —Los Angeles Times (8/13/2013)

The meanings of **brush up against** and **brush up on** are different but both are based on the verb brush: to move a brush quickly across a surface, or to move against something slightly.

The Wall Street Journal example of **brush up against** means that part of the contractor's body moved across the switch, touching it slightly. The Chicago Tribune example is figurative: It means some people met with Dyett, not that he touched them physically.

Brush up on means improve skills, as in the Vineland Journal and Los Angeles Times examples.

From the 1600's the meaning of brush up has been brighten or refresh knowledge, but when the preposition against is added, the meaning is contact lightly. The earliest example of brush up against I could find was in an 1834 book, "Journey to the north of India":

"...the most scrupulous of the Sheeahs [Shias] will even send their clothes to be washed, if you brush up against them in the street. "

bucket list, kick the bucket

At Memory Lane Music, Michael Cooney enjoys teaching his senior students how to play piano. "I hear so many people say it was on their bucket list," Cooney said. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (8/3/2011)

"I always encourage people to have an emotional bucket list. Is there forgiveness that you have to grant or forgiveness that you have to ask? Are there regrets that you have to correct right now?...If these are things that we can do now, why wait?" —Erica Brown, writer and lecturer (4/22/2013)

But if you could only do ONE thing or visit ONE place on the Cape before you "kick the bucket," what would it be? That's right, we're assembling a Cape Cod bucket list for an upcoming Cape Cod Online Top 10... —Cape Cod Times (8/1/2011)

Affluent and attractive, they have a stylish car and an inheritance coming once her parents kick the bucket. —The Plain Dealer, describing the film "Week End" by Jean-Luc Godard (4/18/2012)

Kick the bucket means die. A **bucket list** includes things person wants to do before dying.

Kick the bucket has been traced to the 1700's. Bucket list, which is based on the meaning of kick the bucket, became popular after the 2007 film, "The Bucket List," about two cancer patients (played by Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson) who are inspired to take a high-spirited vacation around the world.

Several guesses have been advanced to explain the origin of kick the bucket. A now forgotten meaning of bucket—a wooden yoke used to hang pigs, which might kick it when dying or dead—seems the most persuasive and preferred by authoritative sources.

burn cash, burn rate, money to burn

So can being relatively older hinder an entrepreneur's ability to attract investors? It can, and here's why: If you're a little older, you probably have a family and a lifestyle that requires a higher burn rate. —CNN Money (9/20/2011)

This year, Kodak's operations burned $847 million in the first half. The concern is cash consumption may be growing more entrenched. "It appears that they burned cash during the quarter, and I had anticipated more of a break-even quarter," says Shannon Cross, an analyst with Cross Research. —The Wall Street Journal (9/27/2011)

"I think they have money to burn...the Romney campaign is flush and I think they're making Obama spend money there." —Anna Greenberg, polling company executive (11/4/2012)

"They're not going to be able to charge $8 a month forever. They need more revenue. They're burning cash." —Rocco Pendola, director of social media for The Street.com, talking about Netflix (4/12/2013)

Burn cash usually does not mean put money in a fire. It means spend it quickly.

Burn rate usually refers to how fast a company is spending money, often without making a profit. (Burn rate is also used literally in technical language.)

Have **money to burn** means have more money than is needed.

The first two phrases were not widely used until the 1990's, but I found examples of money to burn from as early as 1893.

burn bridges

I wonder if Sony, a company that has burned one too many bridges and done very little to endear itself to the public, realizes what a mess it is in. —PC Magazine (6/3/2011)

...the coalition last week surveyed 240 local homeless people and found the majority...have very few family or friends still willing to help them. "At the point where they are sleeping on the streets, they have usually burned all their bridges." —Louisville Courier-Journal (9/25/2011)

"Don't burn bridges. Build them. Everything is connected." —Mark H. Murphy, president of the Green Bay Packers football team, speaking to graduates of Colgate University (5/20/2012)

"He can be very blunt with people without burning bridges." —Anthony Coles, attorney and former deputy mayor of New York, talking about Joseph Lhota, a candidate for mayor (1/17/2013)

Burn bridges means do something that makes it hard or impossible to have a good relationship in the future.

The phrase comes from a proverb (old saying), "Don't burn your bridges behind you," and an older, 1700's expression, "burning your boats"—ending the possibility of retreat in a battle.

burn out

Because there's still so much to do with regard to long-term recovery, there's a real danger that the volunteers themselves will become burned out. To prevent that, the Red Cross is taking steps to keep volunteers from becoming exhausted. —NBC17.com (5/7/2011)

Talented young musicians run the risk of burning out early —The Washington Post (headline, 12/30/2011)

Under federal law, you can require your employees to work overtime shifts, although the American Nurses Association cautions that mandatory overtime plays a key role in employee burnout. —Chron.com (8/11/2013)

When people **burn out**, they become tired, discouraged and ineffective, usually because of working too hard. This is a metaphor for things that burn out, such as fires and light bulbs.

The noun form, **burnout**, is used in the Chron.com example.

The metaphor may also be expressed as **burn oneself out**, as in this example from LIFE Magazine, Jan 27, 1961: "Agee lived and worked intensely, unsparing of himself in whatever he did. And he burned himself out physically."

The idiom has been in use since the 1800's.

burn the midnight oil

But Amazon has been burning the midnight oil, and what it came up with was the Fire, its own color e-book reader. —The Times Leader (Wilkes-Barre, Penn., 9/29/2011)

"Our service went through an excruciating process to make sure that this will have minimal impact on everybody," Poist said. "They really burned the midnight oil to try to make it as painless as possible." —The Cornell Daily Sun (9/22/2011)

Sources tell us Ashton...was burning the midnight oil at FLUXX nightclub in San Diego early Saturday morning... —TMZ (9/29/2011)

Burn the midnight oil usually means work hard.

It suggests working late into the night, but often is used in situations in which all the work may have occurred during the day, as in the Times Leader and Daily Sun examples. In the TMZ example, burning the midnight oil is mildly sarcastic, suggesting that Ashton was hard at work—partying.

An ancestor of the phrase is in poetry by Francis Quarles, published in 1635: "We spend our mid-day sweat, our midnight oil; We tire the night in thought; the day, in toil." The earliest example of burn the midnight oil in my searches is in a medical journal from 1840:

For the honor of the profession, for the good of humanity, I would say to all physicians, read Magendie, if you are obliged to burn the midnight oil to accomplish it. —Boston Medical and Surgical Journal (2/26/1840)

burst one's bubble

I hated to burst his bubble. But he's relatively new to New York...I felt obligated to inform him that planting a live tree after the holidays in the Northeast, when the ground is often already frozen, may not be that easy... —The Wall Street Journal (11/23/2011)

He attempted to join a pilot program for the Navy/Air Force, but his eyesight prevented him from joining. "I wanted to be a pilot so bad," he told The Log. "That just burst my bubble." —The Destin Log (11/19/2011)

"I don't want to burst your bubble over there, but the NCAA selection committee did make Louisville the number one overall seed, so I'm not sure Louisville's a secret." —Rachel Nichols, television sports reporter, telling former basketball star John Salley that he was not the first to predict success for Louisville in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's tournament (3/18/2013)

When something **bursts your bubble**, you are suddenly or unexpectedly disappointed.

The phrase is a metaphor for a soap bubble bursting. (The metaphor is also used in economics, when bubble describes a steep rise in prices, which may fall quickly.)

Burst one's bubble has been traced to the 1800's, when it began as **prick** (or **pierce**, or **break through**) **one's bubble**. Burst one's bubble is the ancestor of on the bubble.

bury the hatchet

A federal appeals court ruled today that a settlement's a settlement—no do-overs for the Winklevoss twins, who the court said knew what they were getting into when they buried the hatchet with Facebook in 2008. —TIME (4/11/2011)

Egypt's military-appointed Prime Minister Kamal Ganzouri has called on protesters to bury the

hatchet and begin a national dialogue to ensure calm and stability after five days of clashes that left at least 15 dead and over 800 injured. —Los Angeles Times (blog, 12/22/2011)

Adam Lambert says he and his reality star boyfriend have buried the hatchet after their drunken brawl at a Finland gay bar last night ... blaming the whole thing on jet lag and vodka. —TMZ.com (12/22/2011)

Bury the hatchet means make peace.

The phrase was born when English settlers observed that American Indians buried hatchets as symbolic acts of peace.

A 1727 letter in "The Baxter manuscripts" reported that tribes in Maine pledged "to bury ye hatchet and not to offer any hurt for ye futer for they ar in Good frindship wth the English."

butter up

... they've certainly not hired high-powered lobbyists to butter up members of Congress with attention and campaign contributions. But they know others have. —The Washington Port (2/25/2011)

The CEO buttered up her employees and partners, claiming it was them who had "kept HP working" during the "craziness happening in the boardroom" and promised to make further investments into "people" in the future. —ITPro (2/16/2012)

There's his brother Pat (Ed Helms), a crass retail manager who opens the film trying to butter up his wife (Judy Greer) with an elaborate breakfast in the hopes that she'll finally let him buy that Porsche he's been eyeing. —movie review, NPR.org (3/15/2012)

Butter up means flatter; praise for the purpose of gaining something.

In the 1700's and early 1800's, butter (without up) was sometimes used with similar meaning. The phrase suggests the slippery qualities of butter; it may also be related to spreading butter to soothe burned or irritated skin.

butterflies in the stomach

"Fans here are crazy," he said this week. "Just cheering and acknowledgement will put butterflies in my stomach." —USA Today (12/16/2010)

Mark-Viverito...confessed the thought of performing onstage before crowds of youngsters gave her butterflies. —New York Daily News (12/23/2011)

Interviewing is typically perceived as one of the most universally stressful and traumatic undertakings by the average job-seeker...Referred to as "anticipatory anxiety," it induces a serious case of butterflies. —Times Herald Record (1/1/2012)

If you have **butterflies in your stomach** you feel nervous.

Sometimes the idiom is shortened to a **case of butterflies**, as in the Times Herald Record example, or just **butterflies**, as in the Daily News example.

The USA Today example quotes a basketball player at the University of Kansas, talking about how playing in front of a big crowd would make him feel nervous.

The precise origin is unknown; the idiom seems to have become popular around the 1930's. An

early example is in a newspaper article about golf:

Golf more than any other game requires nerve control. You have to get toughened up in tournaments, learn to handle...stomach butterflies... —Vancouver Sun (9/8/1938)

buy in, buy into

When Utah's Intermountain Healthcare system rolled out its plan, doctors feared losing control and nurses feared getting into arguments with doctors. But once they saw the data, they bought in. —St. Petersburg Times (12/6/2010)

Corbett's job approval ratings began to tick up in the latter half of the yea...even without voter buy-in on some of his policies. —The Patriot-News (1/1/2012)

"Certainly, if people are going to buy into it, there has to be further input from the Senate and obviously the House will move its own bill." —Senator Jeff Flake, talking about negotiations to change immigration rules (3/31/2013)

When people agree with and support an idea, plan or program, they may be said to **buy in**.

Other forms of this expression are **buy into** (an idea), and the noun **buy-in**, which means agreement and acceptance.

Buy sometimes has a similar meaning without the preposition in: "If am reasonable, he'll buy my argument."

Buy in and buy into are used literally in a variety of contexts. In financial contexts they usually mean invest, which is what they always meant before the 1980's, when the idiomatic usage gained popularity.

buy time

Senate negotiators agreed on a way to raise enough money to extend the expiring provisions for two months...it would buy time for lawmakers to come up with an alternative both parties can accept... —Los Angeles Times (12/20/2011)

"The only thing the regime is doing is buying time, thinking that in this time they might find a way to put an end to the revolution." —Akil Hashim, retired Syrian army general (4/20/2012)

But as the administration buys time with an insistence that it’s conducting “a broad review,” close U.S. partners already are taking much more decisive stances... —The Miami Herald (8/19/2013)

"The North Koreans certainly hope they're buying themselves more time. If the U.S. doesn't do something more forcefully this time, the North Koreans—like the Iranians—simply continue to buy time building nuclear weapons and acquiring a ballistic missile capability." —Jan van Tol, a retired U.S. Navy captain and military analyst (8/19/13)

To **buy time** is to do something that delays an unwanted event.

A partly literal example of buying time appears in a history of Rome printed in 1768:

Sertorius...[said] that he would buy time, which of all things is the most precious to those who have great matters in view, he gave the Barbarians money, passed the mountains, and by his expedition saw himself master of Spain. —The Roman History by Rollin and Crevier

by a nose, by the nose

If I had to choose a favorite, I would say the cheese blintz beat out the blueberry by a nose. —Narberth-Bala Cynwyd Patch (6/30/2011)

A proposal to ban an anti-bleeding drug on race days in Kentucky lost by a nose on Monday... —Associated Press (4/17/2012)

Sal obviously couldn't resist the temptation of being able to lead a new governor around by the nose—to have breakfast at the Four Seasons and tell Deval Patrick what he wanted to see in an emergency bond bill. —Boston Herald (6/16/2011)

They [the Republicans] are wasting time trying to stop Obamacare, and being led around by the nose by the cretinous Ted Cruz. —Maureen Dowd, in an opinion column in The New York Times (8/6/2013)

By a nose and **by the nose** both allude to the noses of animals but their meanings are very different.

Winning **by a nose** means winning by the smallest margin possible. The phrase is most often used literally, in horse racing, to describe a close finish, because the nose is the first part of horse to cross the finish line.

To be led, or led around, **by the nose** is to be directed or made to obey, like an animal pulled by a rope attached to a ring through its nose. If you can lead a governor around by the nose, you have a lot of influence.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces by the nose back to the 1500's, and it appears in the first act of Shakespeare's "Othello" (1622). By a nose goes back to the 1850's, but its metaphorical use, outside of horse or dog racing, came after the mid-1900's.

by the book

...on court matters, the best policy is to behave by the book. —Miami Herald (11/8/2011)

Everything is by the book. I read all the books too, but at times you should use your common sense. —Nicole Gay, mother, talking about raising children (8/9/2013)

Beware of contractors who do not obtain permits, warns John West, owner of JW Landscapes. "With rooftops, especially, you have to play by the book," he said. "The building codes are there to keep you safe." —Chicago Tribune (8/17/2013)

"All of that will depend on the method. If we do it by the book it can take a long, long time. If we simply take them out to the desert and blow them up, it can be very quick." —Anthony Cordesman, an expert on military strategy, talking about the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria (9/17/2013)

Things done **by the book** are done strictly according to the rules.

When Shakespeare's Juliet told Romeo, "You kiss by the book," what did she mean?

In 1597, a reference to "the" book strongly suggested the Bible. Romeo had just said to Juliet, "Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again." The meaning of Juliet's reply was not, "You kiss by the rules" (which today would be a criticism) but more like, "Your kisses are not

sin, they are divine."

By the 1800's, the book in **by the book** was more generic. When Edgar Allen Poe used the phrase, he meant by the rules:

To have a retentive memory, and to proceed 'by the book', are points commonly regarded as the sum total of good playing. But it is in matters beyond the limits of mere rule that the skill of the analyst is evinced. —"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841)

by the same token

"It does happen that people...do not have a real case," said Gerald J. Williams, a Philadelphia lawyer who has handled civil rights cases involving child abuse. "But by the same token, in this kind of case, there are often a lot of people who have just been quiet about their encounters with the defendant." —TIME (11/18/2011)

"Just because the data shows, on average, the federal government overpays, that does not mean that every federal worker is overpaid," he said...By the same token, Sherk told readers he did think that federal employees' pay was a fair place to start much needed budget cuts within the government. —The Washington Post (blog, 11/10/2011)

...if this is your worry about Germany, you should by the same token be very optimistic about the prospects for Greece. —Reuters (11/9/2011)

"America's ability to project power all over the globe remains essential...By the same token, America's traditional allies and friends in Europe and East Asia remain invaluable partners on nearly everything we do." —Hillary Clinton, the day before her last day as U.S. secretary of state (1/31/2013)

By the same token means "according to that thinking," or "for the same reason."

A somewhat related use of the word token is in, "Take this gift as a token of my esteem [high opinion of you]. " In that expression, token means evidence or fact.

The Oxford English Dictionary traced "by the same token" back to the 1400's. By 1875, it's possible that Mark Twain regarded it as a cliché and used it deliberately, for effect:

"In the space of one hundred and seventy-six years the Lower Mississippi has shortened itself two hundred and forty-two miles. That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Therefore, any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the Old Oolitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upwards of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing-rod. And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three quarters long, and Cairo and New Orleans will have joined their streets together, and be plodding comfortably along under a single mayor and a mutual board of aldermen. —"Old Times on the Mississippi" by Mark Twain, in The Atlantic Monthly (August, 1875)

by the skin of one's teeth

For retailers that have been hanging on "by the skin of their teeth," the potential for change has been a long time coming, said John Heavener, president of the Georgia Retail Association. —

Atlanta Journal-Constitution (3/22/2011)

Ma and Pa, (grandma and grandpa) escaped the Nazis in Germany by the skin of their teeth in 1939. —Business Insider (4/4/2011)

Obama's Affordable Care Act passed by the skin of its teeth in 2010... —The Bakersfield Californian (8/17/2013)

The **skin of...teeth** means the smallest possible margin. An escape by the skin of their teeth is a narrow escape.

The expression is used frequently in sports, usually when a player or team wins by a small margin. It is sometimes used when describing someone or something struggling to survive.

By the skin of one's teeth comes from the Bible: "I have escaped with the skin of my teeth," in the Book of Job. We may guess that was a colorful way of saying escaped with nothing but my body, or perhaps something was lost in translation from the Hebrew of centuries ago.

by the way

"I'll tell you the truth," Toby Perlman is saying on the phone from New York. "My husband gets tons of those things." Her husband, by the way, is a revered violinist named Itzhak Perlman. —The Plain Dealer (5/8/2011)

One of the small consolations of flying the Delta Shuttle out of LaGuardia is the absence, at the Marine Air Terminal, of the Transportation Security Administration's patented Let's-Look-At-Passengers-Naked-While-They-Raise-Their-Hands-Like-We're- Mugging-Them Machines. (This is not, by the way, how the federal government refers to these devices.)—Bloomberg (1/2/2012)

"Are you freaking kidding me?" [Anderson] Cooper (repeatedly) asked her, after turning around to discover that [Kathy] Griffin had misplaced her clothes. "Lady Gaga's performance is over, and I was inspired," she explained as Cooper tried to use the "no nudity" sign to cover her. "You've got a rocking body, by the way," he noted. —CNN (1/2/2012)

"I want to thank every American who participated in this election, whether you voted for the very first time or waited in line for a very long time. By the way, we have to fix that." —President Barack Obama (11/7/2012)

By the way means incidentally: "This isn't my main point but I want to say it."

The phrase is common in conversation, and also is used frequently in writing because writers often want their work to seem conversational. Sometimes, as in the Plain Dealer example, it is used ironically—meaning that the statement is actually central to the main point, or is surprising or startling.

The expression has been used since the 1500's. It apparently refers to the literal sense of way and the idea of something encountered accidently or informally during a journey.

call it quits

The restaurant decided to close on Sundays prior to the Labor Day weekend and finally decided to call it quits this past week. —Rome (Georgia) News-Tribune (10/1/2011)

R.E.M., the alternative rock group that formed in Athens, GA, in 1980 and were inducted into the

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, has called it quits. —Pasadena Star-News (9/29/2011)

James Marsden and his wife Lisa Linde are calling it quits after 11 years of marriage. —Los Angeles Times (10/1/2011)

"And just weeks ago, Barbara Walters said she is not going anywhere, but now a new report in The New York Times says she is calling it quits." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor (3/28/2013)

Call it quits means to end something or announce that something is ended.

The phrase may refer to the end of a business or marriage (as in the news examples), or to a daily activity, as in, "It's raining too hard to keep playing golf. Let's call it quits."

Use of this expression began in the mid-1800's but the meaning was different: to stop a competition or argument and declare things even. That was based on an older meaning of quits—even, or equal with—which was used in the expression "cry quits."

Today the meaning of call it quits is closer to "give up." An expression with a similar meaning is **throw in the towel**.

call on the carpet

Last year he was called on the carpet once again after delivering a sermon in which he said flatly that "there should be women priests." —CatholicCulture.org (3/17/2011)

As part of my employment, I must file my taxes promptly each year. If I fail to do so, on the first offense I will be called on the carpet with the potential of being fired. —Philadelphia Daily News (12/8/2011)

Officials...were called on the carpet Wednesday to explain why the loan was made without adequate screening, and whether political pressure was applied to accelerate the process. —Tribune Media Services (9/16/2011)

If you are **called on the carpet**, you may be in trouble with an authority (the boss usually has a carpet), and you must answer questions or face criticism.

It is similar to being **called to task, taken to task**, or **called to account**.

The expression comes from an older meaning of on the carpet (1700's and 1800's): under discussion or official consideration. By the later 1800's, a person called on the carpet might have been an official answering questions, or a servant reporting to an employer.

From a story in a children's journal published in London in 1875:

Whatever could have effected such a marked change in our hero? Had the head-master called him on the carpet and given him a long lecture and a severe reprimand for neglecting his lessons? —The Juvenile Instructor and Companion

call someone out

"...when a rather small group on one side is blocking any progress, you have to be willing to call that group out if you want to get anything done." —Senator Charles Schumer (8/13/2011)

Romney praises Clinton in some of his ads for inaugurating work requirements, so Clinton can call Romney out directly for inaccuracy. —The Washington Post (9/2/2012)

"Senator Ayotte is now getting a lot of heat...the daughter of the principal who was killed in Newtown essentially calling her out for her vote on it." —Maria Cardona, political strategist and commentator, talking about negative reaction to Senator Kelly Ayotte's vote against gun control legislation (5/4/2013)

When you **call someone** (or a group) **out**, you challenge them, firmly and in a way that gets the attention of others.

This should not be confused with call out or call out something—shout or shout something. The phrase also has another relatively literal meaning, as in "call the army out to stop a rebellion," or "call a plumber out to fix a leak"—which means call the plumber to come out to one's house. The meaning is also different in baseball, where an umpire calls a player out.

Call someone out is relatively new: I have not found an example of the phrase used to mean a challenge before 2000, or any persuasive theory to explain its origin.

calm before the storm

Gonzales said the nervousness went away after his first [parachute] jump six years ago. "It's more of a calm-before-the-storm situation," said Gonzales, —Indianaoplis Star (8/17/2011)

Could the market's move today indicate that the worst is now over and the Dow's ready to start climbing? Yes. Or could it be the calm before the storm, a brief tick up before the next leg down? —The Motley Fool (8/11/2011)

"You can put glitter on your eyes. Big hair. The bigger, the better. It's fun. It's a nice relaxing time, a calm before the storm..." —Carrie Underwood, country music singer, talking about preparing for a performance (4/23/2012)

Before a storm, there may be a quiet period without wind or rain or snow. **Calm before the storm** is a universal and powerful metaphor, and a cliché used in many situations.

The metaphor has been traced back as far as 1602.

"What is our vain mirth, but a little Sunshine before a storm? what is worldly and secure peace, but a calm before a tempest?" —"Disce Vivere" by Christopher Sutton (1602)

"...a calm before a storm is commonly a peace of a man's own making; but a calm after a storm, a peace of God's." —"Sermons preached upon several occasions" by Robert South (1715)

can of worms

Anderson also said there were questions over whether the district should impose penalties against a student who is found to be an abuser outside school hours. "It would open up a whole new can of worms," Anderson said. —Arizona Republic (7/2/2011)

...Mexico's cartels are criminal groups with no known political agenda, branding them terrorists will open an international can of worms. —The Miami Herald (12/17/2011)

"...he [President Obama] has opened up a can of worms. There is no way we are going to disarm Syria." —Charles Krauthammer, newspaper columnist (9/16/2013)

Open a **can of worms** means start something that may be complicated and troublesome. It might cause more problems than ignoring the situation and doing nothing.

The expression is assumed to refer to worms used for bait in fishing. In a can, they look tangled and complicated. But the origin of the phrase, apparently in the mid-1900's, remains unexplained.

carbon copy

A spokesman for Obama's 2012 campaign said Perry is offering a "carbon copy" of Republican policies that favor the wealthy over middle-class Americans. —USA Today (8/14/2011)

Those involved in the hijackings may have gotten that experience in the Niger Delta, where thieves tapping pipelines running through swamps steal hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil a day. "This is a carbon copy of a crime at sea that we're seeing on shore," Gibbon-Brooks said. —Associated Press (11/3/2011)

He also takes a jab at Gaga by insinuating she is a carbon copy of Madonna yet tries to give off the impression that she is "original." —Newsday (6/21/2011)

A **carbon copy** is an exact duplicate, a replica.

Carbon paper, placed between blank sheets of paper in a typewriter to make carbon copies, is almost extinct. But the abbreviation "cc"—carbon copy—survives in e-mail.

Carbon paper was invented in the early 1800's, and by the 1900's carbon copies were part of office routine. Carbon copies were easily distinguished from originals, and when the phrase was first used figuratively, its meaning was a copy but not the real thing—much different from the current meaning. Here is an early example:

Are you a carbon copy of a real result-getter—one of the cripples in the organization, with your mind in a strait-jacket? —"By the Side of the Road" by F.D. Van Amburgh (1916)

cards on the table, show (one's) cards

"An open dialogue will lay all the cards on the table, and City Council can ultimately decide what's best for downtown Columbia." —Columbia Missourian (6/23/2011)

"O.K., let's lay all our cards on the table. "Jack Russell terriers are small and cute. Dobermans are enormous and—handsome." —Filmmaker Martin Scorsese, arguing that Blackie, the Doberman in "Hugo," should have been nominated for an award given to dog actors. (1/29/2012)

Senior negotiators who travelled from their capitals to Geneva this week said that leading countries returned to the table with "more of the same" arguments..."Nobody is ready to show their cards," one official said. —Reuters (9/16/2009)

"...we've gotten a little bit quicker and more comfortable, more willing to reach and show our cards a bit more, inject a little more personality." —Adam Levine, a judge on the television singing competition, The Voice (2/16/2012)

If all your **cards are on the table**, you are not keeping secrets or saving any action for later.

If you **show your cards**, you reveal your advantages, ideas or plans.

(If you show your cards, you do not keep an **ace in the hole**.)

These phrases, using card games as a metaphor for life, have been popular for centuries; examples have been found from as early as the 1500's.

carrot and stick

U.S. policy toward Tehran, mostly comprising of carrot and stick, has so far failed to persuade Tehran to halt uranium enrichment. —Council on Foreign Relations (9/23/2011)

Bequelin said China could take a carrot and stick approach to Lufeng, arresting ringleaders but paying off the villagers. —Reuters (9/23/2011)

Such moaners do not understand that the carrot is a much more effective tool than the stick. —Financial Times (10/4/2011)

"The NICS database is only as good as the records that are in it...We think the Congress needs to use a carrot-and-stick approach and condition federal funds going back to the states to require them to get the records into the system..." —Lawrence Keane, attorney for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, talking about the database that prevents potentially dangerous people from buying guns (4/9/2013)

Carrot and stick means threatening both reward and punishment.

The phrase is based on the idea of a donkey, mule or horse with a carrot held in front, and a stick held in back. A **carrot and stick approach** means that both positive and negative methods are used as motivation.

In some cases, carrot and stick are used separately to emphasize the contrast between two methods, as in the Financial Times example.

The earliest example of carrot and stick in my searches comes from Litell's Living Age, a periodical published in Boston in 1876: "It was this carrot and stick discipline to which Mr. John Mill was subjected... "

(the) cart before the horse

School board member David Lawson, a history teacher in New York state, said he doesn't want to "put the cart before the horse." For online learning to be effective, all students need to first have a technology foundation, Lawson said. —Danbury News-Times (11/16/2011)

He also noted that in order for more jobs to be created, the government needs to improve the business climate. "They are putting the cart before the horse," he said. —The Jackson (Michigan) Citizen Patriot (11/14/2011)

Because of Mr. Jeal's prioritizing of people over events, his tale frequently presents the cart before the horse: We open with Livingstone's journey to confirm Speke and Burton's findings, only to dart back several decades. —The Wall Street Journal (11/12/2011)

If you put the **cart before the horse**, you do (or place) things in the wrong order.

The phrase is based on the ancient idea that horses pull carts, not push them. Versions have been traced to the 1300's, and it seems to have been translated into English from writings of the ancient Greeks.

An American slang expression with similar meaning is **ass backward** (or ass backwards or bass ackwards). These may mean all wrong as well as in the wrong order. Ass (when not referring to the animal) is considered somewhat vulgar, and these phrases appear in print less frequently.

carte blanche

"The German position has to soften and if survival of the euro zone is at stake, the ECB has to be given carte blanche effectively to buy bonds and print money." —CNBC (11/15/2011)

"It has piqued the imagination and interest of people who are asking if 9/11 gave carte blanche for the government to do whatever it wants as long it says it's in the name of national security." —Widney Brown, senior director of international law and policy for Amnesty International, talking about Bradley Manning's leak of classified secrets (7/31/2013)

"...if we stand quietly by while a tyrant like Assad uses chemical weapons on his own people, that we will be giving carte blanche to any dictator anywhere in the world to develop and use chemical weapons." —Senator Jeanne Shaheen (9/3/2013)

If you have **carte blanche**, you have the power to make your own rules, or permission to ignore rules.

Taken from the French, meaning blank paper, the phrase probably was familiar to the English in the 1600's. By 1701, as this example illustrates, it also referred to a man's offer to a woman of generous terms if she would be his mistress:

Women are like Commanders in small Garrisons, reject the Carte Blanche, and pretend to maintain it to the last Man; but when your Approaches are made, and the Batteries play smartly upon 'em, they'l hang out the Flag, and that Town is not far from Surrendring... —Letters of Wit, Politicks and Morality (London, 1701)

carve out a niche, niche market, find one's niche, niche business

...blow-dry bars...don't cut or color hair; they simply wash, dry and style it...Most of the blow-dry bars have tried clever branding to carve out a niche in the market. —The Wall Street Journal (9/28/2011)

Despite the tough economy, junk hauling companies have wedged into a thriving niche market between the trash truck that lumbers down the street and the sporadic donation pickup services offered by charities. —Kansas City Star (9/30/2011)

Peter Fogel and Anna Collins...have found their niche: an Internet radio show in which they talk about themselves and everyone else their age, laugh a lot and make money doing it. —South Florida SunSentinel (9/23/2011)

Novick adds that while there is potential to grow, this is a niche business. "This program will likely affect 1 percent of the fan population." —Bloomberg Businessweek (4/17/2012)

Carve out means cut or separate a smaller part from something larger, such as an industry or business. In business, a niche is a specialized activity or service. **Carve out a niche** means create a specialized business, or meet a demand that larger businesses have not met.

If you enter a **niche market**, a specialized area of business, you have a **niche business**. You may be said to have **found your niche**, your special place in the world.

The phrases are metaphors based on niche, which since the 1600's has meant a small hollow or space in a wall where a candle or art object may be placed.

An early example from a religious text:

> If you ask in what aisle of the temple of fame,
> You may carve out a niche for your lowborn name
> —The British Millenial Harbinger (1853)

An early version of the business phrases, from a publication of the Vermont Department of Agriculture:

There are hundreds of men in both primary and consuming markets, who may not be able to score a tub of butter according to a scale of points, but can quickly place it in its proper market niche. —"Marketing Farm Products" (January, 1914)

cash cow

The exhibition of Egyptian material in foreign museums...can be a cash cow for blockbuster-hungry institutions. —The Washington Post (4/18/2011)

"It must be tough to be on the Microsoft Office team. Year after year, you're given the same assignment: add new features to Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook. New features that people will pay for, but that won't turn Microsoft's cash cow into a bloated, sloshing mess." —David Pogue, newspaper technology columnist (3/6/2013)

"Taco Bell has gone from a fix-it story to a growth story. It has momentum, and is a cash cow." —Ned Dewees, investment manager (6/29/2013)

A **cash cow** is something that reliably produces money, like a cow producing milk. In business, it may refer to a profitable part of a company that provides funds for other company activities.

The phrase has been in common use since the 1970's. An early example:

Bruce Ward, executive with Gunderson Bros., a large manufacturing firm in Portlant, said: "Business is not a cash cow. You can't keep milking it to supply all of the community's needs." —Eugene Register-Guard (2/6/1973)

cash in on, cash in

Some of the outsiders who came to cash in on the storm arrived with plans to prey on desperate or impatient homeowners, members of the Arizona Roofing Contractors Association say. —The Arizona Republic (10/2/2011)

Ms. Adams's food truck is also her primary source of income...Sitting on a bench in front of her truck this summer, Ms. Adams said she fears that New York City restaurateurs trying to cash in on Montauk's surging hipness could snag her spot next year. —The Wall Street Journal (9/1/2011)

A fumble, a fourth-down stop and an interception then helped the Friars take the lead. They didn't cash in on two trips inside the 10-yard line, however... —ESPN (10/1/2011)

"Some people believe the Mayan calendar points to the end of the world tomorrow...The Mexican tourism industry, they are cashing in..." —Suzanne Malveaux, television news anchor (12/20/2012)

Cash in and **cash in on** mean take advantage of an opportunity. The usual topic is making money, but sometimes the phrases refer to other kinds of success, such as scoring points in sports.

An early example of cash in on is in a 1907 advertisement for the "Sheldon Course in Scientific Salesmanship":

Salesmanship is the foundation of all business. It is the vital principle in all human relations. Scores of professional men have taken this course with profit. It taught them how to "cash in" on their professional training and experience; how to inspire the confidence that is the basis of all trade, professional and otherwise. —Northwestern Dental Journal (Chicago, December, 1907)

cast a shadow

Strauss-Kahn's arrest cast a shadow over a meeting of European finance chiefs in Brussels —Bloomberg News (5/19/2011)

Despite the show of resilience, the debt crisis in Europe continues to cast a shadow over the U.S. economy. —Reuters (12/27/2011)

Prince Philip, 90, had a coronary stent put in late Friday to fix a blocked artery...The illness has cast a shadow over the royal family's traditional Christmas gathering... —Associated Press (12/24/2011)

Literally, something that blocks light casts a shadow. Figuratively, as in the news examples , **cast a shadow** means create (or created) a sense of gloom, bad feeling or pessimism.

Shadow comes from Old English and has many meanings, but it is not clear how long it has been used in this way. The idea may have been inspired by Biblical references to the shadow of death.

A Jan. 18, 1858, New York Times article makes clear that the phrase was familiar to American readers of that time: it said that the execution of England's King Charles I "cast a shadow" over the crowned heads of Europe.

And "Pamela," a book published in London in 1776, refers to "hopes so charming, that they must, if confirmed, irradiate many a gloomy Appearance, which, at times, will cast a Shadow over the brightest and happiest prospects."

(the) cat's meow

Gishnock's industry also has a new program for green certification of building sites for landscaping. "The future is moving us in a direction where sustainable landscape is going to be the cat's meow," he said. —Evansville Gazette (7/5/2011)

"I thought I was the cat's meow. I learned real quick. It was a tough first year out here. It wasn't fun." —Hunter Haas, professional golfer (7/1/2011)

So when did wristwatches suddenly become the cat's meow?... Samsung is planning to unveil its latest bit of wearable tech in September. —San Jose Mercury News (8/19/2013)

To be the **cat's meow** is cool, in the colloquial sense of cool—well-liked, in vogue, the best. A person or thing can be the cat's meow.

The cat's meow became popular in the 1920's. I could find no conclusive explanation of its origin. Similar phrases began around the same time, all with the same meaning: the **cat's pajamas**, the **cat's whiskers**, and the **bee's knees**.

Catch-22

"It's the old Catch-22 situation. Without a suit, how do you go for a job interview? But without a job, how can you afford to buy a suit?" —Houston Chronicle (3/3/2011)

...they faced a kind of Catch-22: They were told there was no conclusive evidence to prove health effects, because low-level exposure hadn't been studied. —The Wall Street Journal (12/23/2011)

"It really is a Catch-22 for us...the federal government, the state, everybody says, 'we're not paying for the undocumented.'" —Dr. Mark Purtle, vice president of Medical Affairs for Iowa Health System, explaining why hospitals put some immigrants on flights to their home countries. (4/23/2013)

In "Catch-22," a novel by Joseph Heller, a bomber pilot asks to be relieved of duty because he is mentally ill. His request to stop flying dangerous missions is denied because it proves he is not mentally ill. The rules are written to make sure that everyone, crazy or not, will keep fighting. After the novel became popular in 1961, a rule that seemed contradictory or paradoxical was called a **Catch-22**.

People gradually forgot the origin, and now the phrase is often used to describe anything contradictory or paradoxical.

catch fire

Will Amazon's Kindle Catch Fire in China? —headline in The Christian Science Monitor (8/3/2011)

"The Wolverine" is an erratic affair, more lumbering than compelling, an ambitious film with its share of effective moments that stubbornly refuses to catch fire. —Los Angeles Times (7/25/2013)

Economists say it is possible inflation can still catch fire if banks lend more aggressively and money starts circulating more widely. —The Wall Street Journal (7/29/2013)

Literally, **catch fire** means start to burn. In figurative use, it means spread quickly, gain rapid success or cause excitement.

In this example, an early version of the phrase is used as a metaphor:

The good man Bohemus had warmed his imagination a little by this vivid manner of representing the argument. His soul catched fire, was seined with a sacred enthusiasm...—"Reliquiae juveniles: miscellaneous thoughts in prose and verse" by Isaac Watts (1734)

chalk up

Some retail experts chalk up the aggressive expansion to the simple fact that it's Wal-Mart and likes to be first. —Myrtle Beach Sun News (3/13/2011)

I chalk up a lot of my ignorance of red-blooded American football to my teenage years, which were spent more in northern England than here in the wonderful land of Oz (and Dr. Naismith). —The University Daily Kansan (3/13/2011)

"It’s impossible to chalk up any of this to a periodic loss of control." —Judge Amy Berman Jackson, sentencing former Congressman Jesse L. Jackson Jr. and his wife, Sandra, to prison terms for illegally spending campaign funds (the judge and defendants have the same last name but are

not related) (8/14/2013)

In its literal sense, **chalk up** means write with chalk. It is still used in sports to mean score or earn: "the Mets chalked up 15 victories in April." But in the news examples it means attribute, identifying the reason for something—or blame, if the connotation is negative.

An early printed example of **chalk it up** is in a 1917 novel, "Parrot & Co." by Harold MacGrath: "You can chalk it up as revenge."

chances are, odds are

And even if you have a job, chances are you're having a tougher time paying the rising costs of everything from groceries to gas. —President Barack Obama's weekly address (4/30/2011)

"If it gets attached to a bill that's not popular, chances are it won't pass." —The Miami Herald (1/3/2012)

"Joe and I are both NRA members with A ratings with the NRA, so chances are, we probably see things roughly the same way." —Senator Pat Toomey, referring to Senator Joe Manchin (4/14/2013)

Odds are, however, that January optimism will wither...—The Washington Post (12/30/2011)

Whether your New Year's festivities include planning a big cocktail party or hosting a simple dinner, odds are you'll want something to feed your guests over the hours as they count down to 2012. —Los Angeles Times (12/29/2011)

"Odds are students in Danville, Ky., are attending classes that do not look like the ones you remember. They're learning how to make a guitar, design a presentation, debate an argument, and more." —John Merrow, television news reporter (4/3/2013)

Chances are means it is likely. **Odds are**, when not referring to specific numbers, has the same meaning.

Versions of these phrases, which use chance and odds in the sense of probability or likelihood, have been traced to the 1500's. In 1625, Francis Bacon wrote: "If a Man watch too long, it is odds he will fall asleepe."

change horses in mid-stream

None offered a concrete reason to change horses in mid-stream... —The Washington Post (9/8/2010)

...there is something despicable about the way in which Swiss bankers change horses... —Slate (2/25/2011)

"Plenty of people said to him, 'Change horses and go on camera,'" said one campaign insider who asked not to be identified. "But he wouldn't do it." —Buffalo News (11/13/2011)

A proverb (old saying), **Don't change horses in mid-stream**, refers to making a risky change before an important action is finished.

The expression is now often shortened to **change horses**.

The proverb seems to have been a favorite of President Abraham Lincoln. He was quoted using versions of it at different times and in different situations. According to the Oct. 26, 1861 edition

of The Saturday Review, the way he put it on one occasion was, "it's not the time to swap horses when you are swimming a river."

Lincoln was not the originator. In 1852, the proverb was familiar enough to the public to be the basis of a joke:

The man who was crossing the river, and who was thrown from the boat, with a large horse and a small pony—was emphatically "quick-witted." He seized upon the pony's tail, that being nearest to him, for he could not swim a yard. Some one on the shore cried out, "Catch hold of the tail of the big horse!" "No, no," he answered, "this isn't exactly the time to swap horses." —"Yankee Notions" (New York, July, 1852)

change tack

In the past we might have responded in a corporate voice, but our chief executive officer took a different tack. He wrote a personal response in the comments, acknowledging that the blogger was right and that we had to work to improve. —Bloomberg Businessweek(9/20/2011)

After an attempt to defund Planned Parenthood was blocked by the Senate and failed last week, Republican senator Cliff Stearns tried a new tack: His House Oversight and Investigations Committee demanded an audit of the non-profit organization's financial records dating back to 1998. —The Atlantic (10/3/2011)

How do you get disillusioned workers to change tack? —Fortune (10/3/2011)

Change tack means change direction.

Various phrases in which tack means direction, including a different tack, wrong tack and new tack, allude to sailing. In sailing, tack is a boat's angle in relation to wind direction.

Tack has been used at least since the 1600's, both in sailing and in its figurative sense.

chicken-and-egg

But the debate at times becomes a chicken-and-egg argument. —Boston Globe (3/23/2011)

There is no chicken-and-egg debate as to what comes first in D.C. "Our defense dictates our offense; it does not go the other way," Williams-Flournoy said. —ESPN (3/22/2011)

...it's possible that moviegoers like trailers with male voices because they're used to trailers with male voices, a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma... —TIME (8/12/2013)

This idiom is based on a humorous philosophical question: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? When a question or argument is called **chicken-and-egg**, it means there will be no definite answer or conclusion.

The expression evolved from a similar expression, **hen and egg**, which was in use by the early 1900's:

To attempt to fix the origin of the railway trouble is as idle as to discuss the classic hen and egg controversy. After centuries of debating this question, there is still lack of agreement as to whether the hen or the egg first came into the world. —Municipal Engineering (Chicago, February, 1918)

chickens come home to roost

"The chickens come home to roost" beginning in 2014, Laszewski said in an interview, referring to the point when top provisions in the health-care overhaul take effect. —Bloomberg News (4/4/2011)

"Kinshasa has no control over what's going on in the east. Joseph Kabila's government has made deals with Rwanda that were highly compromising and these chickens are coming home to roost." —Stephanie Wolters, political analyst and journalist, on fighting between rebels and government troops in eastern Congo (11/20/2012)

Chickens come home to roost usually means that bad consequences will result from bad actions. But in the Bloomberg News example, it is used to predict when something will happen, without saying it is good or bad. Shorter versions of the idiom are common, as in this example, which leaves out the chickens:

"America's dangerous deficits have come home to roost," said Rep. Kevin Brady, vice chairman of the House's Joint Economic Committee. —Fox Business (4/18/2011)

Robert Southey has been given credit for originating the idiom because the title page of his 1810 epic poem, The Curse of Kehama, contains this proverb: "Curses are like young chickens, they always come home to roost." But the idea is much older. In "The Parson's Tale," Geoffery Chaucer put it this way, in the English of 1380: "And ofte time swich cursynge wrongfully retorneth agayn to him that curseth, as a bryd that retorneth agayn to his owene nest."

See also, **what goes around comes around**.

chill out, take a chill pill

"After school my mom works late, so I come here and chill out, have some food and have fun," the 11-year-old said. —The Patriot-News (Harrisburg, Pa., 10/2/2011)

"This is the first season that I'm going home to just chill and relax over the winter," Brown said. —Allentown Morning Call (9/17/2011)

Or should Red Sox fans take a chill pill? Nobody is better at overreacting than sports fans... —Reno Gazette Journal (9/30/2011)

Chill out means relax and try to stay in a good mood. Sometimes **out** is omitted and **chill** is used with the same meaning.

Take a chill pill also means relax. It is usually directed at someone who is unhappy or angry.

The earliest printed reference to these phrases in my searches is in a 1979 newspaper article:

He roamed the halls all day, stopping fights, and his phrase for simmering down tempers, "take a chill pill," became a favorite saying of the Boys High five [basketball team]. —The New York Times (2/24/1979)

The origin of chill pill could be related to the early use of drugs to treat students with learning and behavioral difficulties, but that is a guess. The earliest printed example of chill out in my searches is in a New York Times "On Language" column by William Safire (Oct. 26, 1980), which suggested it might have been a variation of **cool it**, but did not mention the existence of chill pill.

Being cool can mean relaxed or unemotional, and "cool" it could be substituted for "take a chill pill" in the Gazette Journal example. But cool it would not be used in the Patriot-News and

Morning Call examples.

chip away

The scientists ... discovered that a certain type of neurodegenerative disease may chip away at the ability to understand the social, physical and verbal cues that help people recognize indirect language, such as sarcasm, and even deceit. —MSNBC (4/18/2011)

...Hawkins' staff has been chipping away at the audits. Hawkins has about 1,000 remaining cases...She estimates it will take about six months to finish the audits. —Contra Costa Times (12/22/2011)

Leaders used the courts, demonstrations, public opinion and economic power to chip away at the South's segregationist policies. —The Washington Post (1/3/2012)

"We are continuing to chip away at this problem, step by step." —President Barack Obama, after the House of Representatives approved a compromise on taxes and spending (1/1/2013)

Chipping away at something reduces it slowly, taking away small amounts.

In sports, the phrase often refers to a team gradually gaining after falling behind in the score (chipping away at a lead).

The idiom is based on the idea of removing small pieces, such as chips from a larger piece of wood. Chip has been used as a verb at least since the 1400's, when it meant removing crust from bread.

chip in

By next year, those employees will chip in 9 percent of their salaries, which will save the city $840,000 a year, officials said. —Sacramento Bee (4/22/2011)

Arnold said what's important to remember about these types of holiday programs is that everyone chips in and helps. —Contra Costa Times (12/14/2011)

"Keep the stakes low and don't take it too seriously," advises Ghezzi, who chipped in a modest $30 a month to her investment club. —Chicago Tribune (1/3/2012)

Chip in means contribute.

It is assumed to have originated in the 1800's in poker, a card game in which wooden chips (now usually plastic) were used as money. The phrase has a different meaning in golf—making a kind of shot—and when chip is a noun, which can have many different meanings.

chip off the old block

Diana's sister, Jane, recently said after a weekend visit with William, that it was almost "spooky," and "just like being with Diana." She called him a "real chip off the old block." —Fox News (4/15/2011)

Kenji Fujimoto, a former Japanese sushi chef for Kim Jong-Il, described the Swiss-educated Jong-Un as a "chip off the old block, a spitting image of his father in terms of face, body shape and personality." —Agence France-Presse (12/19/2011)

"Rand Paul is a chip off the old block. He stands for the same things Ron Paul stands for, and I support him." —The Washington Post (1/2/2012)

"He was very proud of being his own man, and chafing at the idea that he's a chip off the old block." —Laura S. Washington, political commentator in Chicago, talking about Jesse Jackson Jr. (11/23/2012)

If you are a **chip off the old block**, you are similar to your parent—like a piece (chip) from a larger block of wood.

An example of this expression from 1621, cited by the Oxford English Dictionary, is a Biblical reference from a sermon: "Am I not a child of the same Adam, a chip of the same block, with him?"—an observation that all people are chips off an old block.

chip on one's shoulder

Northwood police Chief Glen Drolet tells the Concord Monitor that it's obvious whoever did this "had a chip on his shoulder with the owner." —Associated Press (4/19/2011)

Juno Temple credibly plays Danielle, an Oklahoma teen in 1987 with a big chip on her shoulder. As the school-tramp outcast, she mouths off [speaks improperly] in class and gets sent to remedial school. —Omaha World-Herald (10/21/2011)

"If you have a chip on your shoulder, you can't bring it to this job," he said... —The Chronicle-Telegram (Elyria, Ogio, 12/13/2011)

Having a **chip on one's shoulder** means being angry about something and refusing to forget it.

It is usually negative except in sports, where it often describes a player who is aggressive and as a result, effective. Whether negative or positive, it usually suggests that the person has something to prove or does not want to hide his or her angry feelings.

The origin is thought to be from the 1800's, when one boy would place a chip of wood on his shoulder as a challenge and fight anyone who dared to knock it off.

chips are down

"I think they do believe the chips are down...Now we have a strongly pro-abortion administration in power." —James Hitchock, history professor at St. Louis University, talking about Catholic bishops who oppose abortion (5/4/2009)

"Germany will probably delay the process but is unlikely to block it when the chips are down." —Stephen Lewis, economist (4/22/2010)

"It's something we did a few times last year when the chips were down and we had to win hockey games after long road trips." —Peter Laviolette, coach of the Philadelphia Flyers (1/19/2011)

"So there should not be a shred of doubt by now. When the chips are down, I have Israel's back." —President Barack Obama (3/6/2012)

When the **chips are down** means when a decision or action is required; or, when the situation is difficult or challenging.

This expression alludes to card games, especially poker, where chips are used to represent money. Sometimes, "when money is on the table" has a meaning similar to "chips are down."

President Obama meant that when the need was important, he would support Israel. (See **have someone's back**.)

Printed examples of "chips are down" have been found from as early as the 1940's.

See also, **push comes to shove**.

chow down

As they do every year, the less fortunate showed up at soup kitchens across the city this Thanksgiving to chow down on some turkey, stuffing and the usual fare. —New York Daily News (11/25/2011)

The good news is that the Bandera Burger and Benchmark Burger are on their respective restaurant's menus, so even if you missed the event, you can chow down on the winners. —Chicago Tribune (9/24/2011)

...certain fatty acids are released, and these cause a spike in amounts of a hunger-signaling peptide...When this process was blocked in experiments, mice didn't chow down as much after a period of fasting, and thus remained lean. —Los Angeles Times (8/2/2011)

Chow down means eat, hungrily or enthusiastically.

In the 1800's chow became slang for food, perhaps because of the name of a Chinese dog that was a food source (for lack of another theory, rather than persuasive evidence).

Chow down originally meant report to the mess hall (cafeteria), and was U.S. Navy slang in World War I, according to this history:

With the elasticity of the American spirit they adjusted themselves to this new manner of life and to the ways of the Navy. Their language suffered an extraordinary sea change. They talked the lingo of the bluejacket, which is not so much slang as a strong and racy sort of expression...To pipe down for mess, or the call to meals, was shortened to "chow down"... —"The Corsair in the War Zone" by Ralph D. Paine (Boston & New York, 1920)

clam up

But DiMattina clammed up when the feds asked about former Genovese underboss Venero (Benny Eggs) Mangano, whom he's related to by marriage. —New York Daily News (11/10/2011)

When I like someone a lot I tend to clam up and not show my true self. —The Washington Post (11/13/2011)

Even if your child complains about friends or school, don't dismiss what he's saying or try to talk him out of what he's feeling. "That's the fastest way to get him to clam up again." —Parenting.com (3/28/2012)

"We're told that he clammed up then...after reading the Miranda rights. Certainly I would." —Candy Crowley, television news anchor, talking about the suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings (4/28/2013)

Clam up means refuse to talk.

Clams never have much to say, but this metaphor refers to the clam's defense: when disturbed it closes its shell tightly.

Clam up was used with other meanings in the 1800's. An early example of the phrase used with its current meaning is in a short story published in 1909 (caterwauling means howling like a cat): "I mean that they started caterwauling, and as they refused to clam up I shoved 'em off." —"Concord of Sweet Sounds" by James Barr (1909)

clean house

Many here—including members of a City Council accustomed to Mr. Daley, whom they rarely bucked, and city workers, who fear that Mr. Emanuel will clean house, cut benefits and privatize city services—are bracing for something Chicago, the nation's third largest city, has rarely known: the unknown. —The New York Times (5/14/2011)

Presidents often have resorted to staff changes as a way to signal a new direction...Dissatisfied with his campaign staff in 1980, Ronald Reagan cleaned house. —Los Angeles Times (10/9/2011)

While I disagree with a lot of the Occupy Wall Street movement, they do bring up one good point: it is time to clean house in Washington. —Evansville Courier & Press (1/3/2012)

When it does not refer literally to washing windows, sweeping floors or other chores, **clean house** may mean replace top administrators, end bad practices, eliminate what is unnecessary, or all three.

Cleaning house as a metaphor for ending bad practices dates back at least to the late 1800's.

cloak and dagger

Indeed, the Coca-Cola Company has for decades cultivated a mystique surrounding its trademark formula, even calling it by the cloak-and-dagger name "Merchandise 7x." —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (2/16/2011)

"The Abduction From the Seraglio" [the opera by Mozart] will assume a cloak-and-dagger, early 20th-century ambience—- mixed in with a little 1930s screwball comedy—when it opens this weekend at the Benedum Center. —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (4/26/2012)

This isn't really cloak-and-dagger stuff. There is nothing illegal or unethical about using the Internet to learn as much as possible about your industry, your competitors, and even your prospects. —CBS MoneyWatch (4/27/2012)

A cloak is a large, loose garment worn over other clothing. A dagger is a knife made for killing. **Cloak and dagger** may involve secrets, mystery, spying or all three, but there is often an additional hint of comedy.

Sometimes the phrase suggests that something is being treated too seriously, as in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution example.

Charles Dickens was among the first, if not the first, to use cloak and dagger as a reference to spying and intrigue:

"Where in the name of the gunpowder-plot did you pick up this?" said his master.
"It was given me by a person then waiting at the door," the man replied.
"With a cloak and dagger?" said Mr. Chester.
With nothing more threatening about him, it appeared, than a leather apron and a dirty face.
—"Barnaby Rudge" (1841)

close the book on

Patrick Pélata resigned as Renault SA's chief operating officer Monday, as the French car maker attempted to close the book on an embarrassing episode in which it falsely accused and wrongfully fired three senior managers for alleged corporate espionage. —The Wall Street Journal (4/11/2011)

"We have to do a much better job of demonstrating who we are as a company," Lou D'Ambrosio, chief executive of Sears Holdings Corp., told me Friday as the struggling retail giant prepared to close the book on 2011.—Chicago Tribune (12/31/2011)

"I think this enables Libya to close the book on 40 years of a nightmare."—Reuters (10/21/2011)

Closing the book on something is giving it an ending. It sometimes means ending an investigation or stopping questions from being asked.

The idiom has been used for at least two centuries. In August, 1929, The New York Times published Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt's 21-part series about Prohibition. She said she wanted "to close the book on those pages of my life and work."

cobble together

Only three weeks after the idea was first publicly floated, China has cobbled together its own peace prize and plans to award it Thursday - the day before the Nobel Committee honors an imprisoned Chinese dissident in a move that has enraged Beijing.—Associated Press (12/7/2010)

Mr. Obama reiterated that the United States...was confronting the complexities of running the military campaign with a multilateral force cobbled together quickly and without a clear understanding among its members about their roles. —The New York Times (3/22/2011)

"Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has to figure out a way to cobble something together that will be able to get some Republican support in both the Senate and the House." —Brianna Keilar, television news reporter (12/24/2012)

To **cobble together** is to make or repair something quickly, using whatever materials are available.

Cobble, used for centuries to mean make or fix something in a rough or clumsy way, now is usually followed by together when used as a verb. This early version is similar to the expression used today (spelling changed to modern):

The Latins... [did not have] convenient single words to express that which the Greeks could do by cobbling many words together. —"The arte of English poesie" by George Puttenham (1589)

cold comfort

True, it's not a full replay of the Great Depression, but that's cold comfort. Unemployment in both America and Europe remains disastrously high. —The New York Times (12/11/2011)

Bronx attorney Joe Macaluso, whose firm specializes in elevator and escalator accidents, said such fatalities in modern Manhattan buildings are a rarity...But that was cold comfort for Cindy Hernandez, 40, of Brooklyn. The elevator horror makes her fear riding the ones at her midtown

office building.—New York Daily News (12/14/2011)

Sure, mergers-and-acquisitions activity seems to have picked up [increased] at the Fortune 500 level. That's cold comfort to small businesses that are simply looking for their sales to pick up. —Philadelphia Inquirer (4/11/2011)

Cold comfort is something positive (such as good news) that does not do enough to encourage someone who needs encouragement.

Versions of this expression have been found from the 1300's, and examples similar to modern usage exist from the 1600's.

cold snap, cold spell

Body glitter and goosebumps were the fashion accessories for many of the women on the red carpet, as they braved the cold snap in sleeveless gowns. —Variety (2/28/2011)

A cold snap helped drive up the annual death toll to the second-highest on record for the endangered sea cows. —The Miami Herald (1/4/2012)

A cold spell poses a real threat to the flowers. He lost 25,000 plants to the chill last year... —Los Angeles Times (10/31/2011)

"What Snowden has done should not lead to a cold spell between our countries..."—Mikhail Margelov, member of Russia's parliament (8/8/2013)

A **cold snap** is a short period of cold weather. A **cold spell** may mean the same thing, but a longer period (such as a week or two) is more likely to be called a spell than a snap.

When not talking about weather, a cold spell may mean a period of unfriendly relations (in politics) or a period of unsuccessful play (in sports, such as basketballs missing the basket).

In the Variety example, the women on the red carpet were attending the annual Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood, California, where they shivered in unusual temperatures below 45 degrees Fahrenheit.

The temperature was likely much lower when the Rev. Thomas Smith wrote in his journal during February, 1776, that Portland, Maine, was having a dismal cold snap of weather. And in a poem published in London in 1790, Robert Merry wrote:

> Ah! sure, not even Death's cold spell
> Could the fierce fury of my passion quell!

collateral damage

"Even though a strong majority of Americans support a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the country, it will remain a difficult legislative battle...there is some risk that a failed legislative effort will trigger collateral damage to [President] Peña Nieto's image in Mexico." —report by the Center for American Progress (11/30/2012)

So, the SEALs [Navy soldiers] had to take the women and children out of the house to get them away from the site of where the disabled helicopter was. You didn't want any collateral damage. —Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (4/10/2012)

A bank loan that Scranton Parking Authority cannot pay is "collateral damage" of the political war

between the mayor and city council that nearly sunk the city last year... —The Times-Tribune (8/22/2013)

Collateral damage means additional, unintended damage.

It is familiar to Americans as a military euphemism, an unemotional way to report that a bomb killed innocent people nearby.

The adjective collateral, meaning on the side, has been traced back to the 1400's, but I could find no helpful research on the origin of collateral damage. It was in use during the 1800's, mostly in legal texts, referring to various kinds of damage, including the building of a road in a way that blocked someone's front door.

come clean

A whopping 71% of voters said they favor the tax cap and a stunning 80% want lawmakers to come clean about their business affairs. —New York Daily News (5/24/2011)

"When you come clean with voters, you truly have to come clean and it doesn't appear that he did." —Joel Sawyer, political public relations consultant, talking about former Congressman Anthony Weiner (8/2/2013)

Friends of Brewers outfielder Ryan Braun... said that Braun will soon come clean about everything and apologize to those who got hurt along the way. —NBCSports.com (8/16/2013)

Come clean means admit all wrongdoing, make a full confession, reveal everything.

An older and now seldom-used version with the same meaning is **make a clean breast of it**.

An early example of a figurative use of come clean is in a labor union journal published in 1903: "...we are pushing a quiet but very effective boycott against nine unfair places. It is only a question of time when the remaining nine must come clean."

come full circle

It all came full circle for Harry Belafonte on Thursday night when "Sing Your Song" screened at the Apollo Theater in Harlem... —Variety (10/11/2011)

... after more than eight decades of handing out Academy Awards, we've come full circle. Let's call this the Retro Oscars. Billy Crystal was back. Silent movies were back. —The Orange County Register (2/26/2012)

"So in some ways, this visit [by Japanese Prime Minister Abe] brings us full circle in the sense that...the first leader to be received by the President in the Oval Office in 2009 was the Japanese Prime Minister." —Danny Russell, senior director for Asia at the National Security Council (2/21/2013)

"Norman Lear was a great first inspiration for me...And he's writing his memoir. So you know, things come full circle." —Billy Crystal, comedian (9/11/2013)

If you **come full circle**, you return to the place where you started, as if you began and ended at a point on a circle. Coming full circle may refer to an idea, a situation or an experience.

In William Shakespeare's King Lear (1623), Edmund says to Edgar, "The wheel has come full circle, I am here." Edmund, who is dying, means that his father's immorality, which caused

Edmund's birth, became part of his own personality and led to his death.

come hell or high water

Martin famously vowed to tackle the deficit "come hell or high water." —Reuters (11/21/2011)

"The ECB has sent clear signals that come hell or high water that they intend to raise interest rates," Bergsten said. —The Washington Post (3/24/2011)

In some cases, this clause will take the form of a "hell or high water clause" requiring a bidder to make any divestitures and take all other steps necessary to satisfy the regulatory authorities and close the deal. —The New York Times (3/21/2011)

"Come hell or high water—we had both—we're voting on Tuesday." —William Biamonte, Nassau County, N.Y., elections commissioner, referring to problems caused by Hurricane Sandy (11/3/2012)

Come hell or high water means no matter what happens.

In a business agreement, a "hell or high water clause" (as in the New York Times example) describes action to be completed even if there are serious obstacles.

The origin is unknown. The earliest known example of a version of the phrase is in records of an 1871 dispute over an election in an Arkansas Congressional district:

He said that it was understood before this, between him and Senator McDonald, that he was to go to the United States Senate, and that "they might fight him as much as they were a mind to, but he was going there in spite of hell and high water." —The Case of Thomas Boles vs. John Edwards (3/22/1871)

come to a head, bring to a head

Yet the council was pressing for the administrative salary reductions even before it voted for the revised budget. On Wednesday, the issue came to a head. "We are not IBM; we are not GE, so we cannot afford to pay those competitive salaries," Morris said. —Bergen Record (3/31/2011)

A showdown brewing in Newark over the "co-location" of charter schools and district schools is expected to come to a head tonight as hundreds of parents, students, teachers and city officials debate the merits of a proposal to meld almost a dozen charter and district schools next year. —The (Newark) Star-Ledger (3/22/2011)

KPMG welcomed an inquiry which it said would bring to a head the long-running debate on competition and choice. —Dow Jones Newswires (3/30/2011)

Concerns about the water temperature had been raised throughout the week and were brought to a head on Saturday when U.S. officials advised their swimmers not to participate —Reuters (7/23/2011)

A struggle, issue or argument **comes to a head** or is **brought to a head** when it reaches a climax or crisis. In the news examples, a public debate is the climax of a growing argument.

Examples of these and other phrases using "to a head" have been found from as early as the 1300's, apparently metaphors for medical conditions such as a boil or abscess that comes to a head and may burst.

come to grips with

"It will take all of us some time to come to grips with the full magnitude of the damages." —USA Today (11/11/2011)

But even after Berlusconi goes, Italy will still need to come to grips with a $2.6 trillion pile of debt and a moribund economy that has wallowed for years in low or negative growth. —The Washington Post (11/9/2011)

"It's very hard to say you're mentally ill, and we are. The sooner you can come to grips with that, the sooner you can begin to heal." —Houston Chronicle (11/9/2011)

"People here are still trying to come to grips with the magnitude of that explosion in this very little town." —David Mattingly, television news reporter (4/18/2013)

Come to grips with means deal with, confront, or engage with (as in battle).

The origin may be an older phrase, at grips, meaning to be in close combat.

An early example of come to grips with is in a letter written in 1640 by the Rev. Samuel Rutherford: "...ye shall find great peace when ye come to grips with death, the king of terrors."

comes with the territory, goes with the territory

Students at Tech say crime comes with the territory. "We go to school in downtown Atlanta; there's going to be crime," said Ross Ferguson, 21, an Augusta native training to be a chemical engineer. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (10/31/2011)

Selma Blair knows how to pick her battles—and for the new mom, a daily run-in with the paparazzi [photographers] isn't one of them! "If I were terribly rich and famous, I would say it comes with the territory. But I'm just a regular actor trying to get a job." —People magazine (11/1/2011)

"It doesn't bother me at all. Listen, you know, it's part of the game. It comes with the territory." —Ana Navarro, Republican strategist and political commentator, after being criticized by Rush Limbaugh and Donald Trump (3/22/2013)

Walcott gave a pep talk to several hundred employees gathered at the department's headquarters and told them not to be discouraged by negative stories in the press. "That just goes with the territory," he said. "I don't want you ever to get disheartened." —Associated Press (10/27/2011)

Something that **comes with the territory** is a disadvantage that should be expected. **Goes with the territory** has the same meaning.

In the Journal-Constitution example, territory is used literally—in that place, crime is expected. In the other examples, territory is used figuratively, meaning situation.

The earliest known example, and possibly the origin, is in Arthur Miller's 1949 play, "Death of a Salesman." Willy Loman's friend says, "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

common touch

Although she's as rich as King Midas, Oprah succeeds because she has the common touch. —New York Post (5/22/2011)

"He could walk with Kings and still maintain a common touch." —Chuck Woolery, television game show host, after the death of Dick Clark, host of the long-running variety show "American Bandstand" (4/19/2012)

A cardinal since 2003, Erdo is known as an erudite scholar with a common touch. —Associated Press (3/8/2013)

Common touch means an ability to please ordinary people, those without much money or power.

The origin is "If...", a 1910 poem by Rudyard Kipling. Other words from the poem are sometimes included, as in the Woolery quotation.

> If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
> Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,...
> Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
> And—which is more—you'll be a Man my son!

connect the dots

McDermott said he didn't want to "connect the dots" between particular political statements and recent threats or attacks. —The Seattle Times (1/12/2011)

At his year-end news conference, Ban said..."we must connect the dots—between climate change, energy, food, water, health and education, and oceans." —Associated Press (12/31/2011)

"His speech laid the dots alongside each other without connecting them." —James A. Lewis, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (10/12/2012)

"And if you can't ultimately trust people, then you're in real trouble...You will be back in the same kind of situation that we apparently had prior to 9/11, where you don't have the ability for people with a broad enough access to connect the dots." —Robert Gates, former secretary of defense, talking about government tracking of phone and Internet data (6/26/2013)

Connecting the dots is showing the relationships between separate things, which results in understanding or seeing something new. The expression comes from games in which children draw lines between numbered dots, creating a picture.

An early example of the phrase used as a metaphor:

His statements, like his songs, are unpunctuated puzzles. You connect the dots between images, and become involved. —New York Magazine (8/5/1968)

cool it

President Obama's two most important allies in the region are on a collision course. It will not be resolved by the State Department's injunction to Turkey and Israel to "cool it. " —The Washington Post (9/16/2011)

Hailey and her girlfriend were travelling from Baltimore to St. Louis Monday when they started smooching mid-flight and were told to cool it. —New York Daily News (9/27/2011)

"John Kerry's lobbying trip to Beijing earlier this month, pressing China's new leaders to use their

leverage to get the North to cool it." —Jill Dougherty, television news reporter, talking about North Korea (4/30/2013)

When not used literally, **cool it** means calm down, or control one's emotions or behavior.

Cool has been used to talk about becoming less emotional at least since the 1400's. We may think of the phrases cool down and cool off as ancestors of cool it, which has been in use since the 1950's.

Related phrases are **chill out** and **take a chill pill**.

corner the market

Once they've cornered the market, profits soar, Van Hassel explained. —Yuma Sun (8/6/2011)

...chocolate does not corner the market on flavonoids. A range of plant foods contain various flavonoids... —Reuters (8/29/2012)

To **corner a market** is to acquire enough of something to control it and its price. Extended beyond business, as in the Reuters example, the phrase means "have something exclusively."

This phrase dates to the 1800's. The idea is related to cornering an animal or enemy: chasing it to a place where it cannot escape.

count one's blessings

"This is really about life safety. If you live in an evacuation zone and the order is given, you need to leave. Delay can be deadly. If you return and your home is fine, count your blessings." —Boston Herald (8/26/2010)

We should count our blessings that the economic ignorance that has led us to this point has at least not led to default. —St. Petersburg Times (8/3/2011)

"The town of Granbury, Texas, 40 miles southwest of Fort Worth, [was] absolutely devastated [by tornadoes]. Six people dead; the rest, counting their blessings." —Poppy Harlow, television news anchor (5/18/2013)

When you **count your blessings**, you are thankful for what you have. If something bad happened, it could have been worse.

This phrase is not in any version of the Bible, but was almost certainly inspired by the Bible's many references to God's blessings. The earliest examples in my searches are in religious texts of the 1800's. The Missionary Herald, published in Boston in 1829, included this: "My friend! look around you, and count your blessings..."

cover bases, cover all bases

But for Tuesday's protest, James Cary, president of the local letter carrier's union (four different national unions represent postal workers), wanted to make sure he had all his bases covered. So a couple of weeks ago he approached the Muncie Board of Public Works and Safety to apply for a right-of-way permit... —The Star-Press (Muncie, Indiana, 9/27/2011)

And physicians who join the Baptist universe also benefit from the company's considerable ability

to handle administrative tasks, he said. "It allows the physician to focus on what they do best, that's to practice medicine," Sim said. "We will have all the bases covered." —Florida Times-Union (9/24/2011)

Zink visited the Purpose Built Community in Atlanta and caught a vision for neighborhood renovation covering all bases—crime control, better schools, home renovation and new businesses. —Indianapolis Star (10/6/2011)

"This is a development that meets the needs of the community in terms of having a supermarket and a community center. And the soccer field would be available to the public 365 days a year. I think we are covering all the bases." —Steven Krieger, partner in a New York housing development company (3/13/2013)

If all **bases are covered**, all important aspects are satisfactory—someone has paid attention, done work, or solved problems.

This is a metaphor from baseball, where being ready to make a play at any base is an important part of the game.

An early example of the metaphor is in "Partners in Providence," a novel by Charles D. Stewart published in 1907, which contains a chapter titled, "Clancy Gets All Bases Covered."

Related phrases are **touch base** and **touch all bases**.

cracked up to be

Cutting back on salt might not be all it's cracked up to be for heart health. A new study suggests reducing dietary salt intake may actually raise several risk factors for heart disease. —CBS News (11/9/2011)

In "Maple and Vine," Jordan Harrison's exceptionally clever play about dealing with the present by seeking refuge in a past that might have been something less than it was cracked up to be, nostalgia is neither easily dismissed nor wholly glorified. —Chicago Sun-Times (11/2/2011)

Post-wedding bliss isn't all it's cracked up to be for Kris Humphries. —New York Daily News (10/30/2011)

Something that is not what it's **cracked up to be** is not as good as its reputation suggests.

This phrase is almost always used in the negative: things are rarely said to be as good, or better, than they are cracked up to be. To crack up, meaning to praise, was used in the 1800's, but now, crack up has other meanings, such as:

"That cracks me up." (That makes me laugh.)

"He drove too fast and cracked up the car." (He had an accident.)

An early example of **cracked up to be** that is similar to current usage appeared in a New York monthly magazine in 1822:

...there were several ladies whom he might have had, and whom, at one time or another, he had determined to marry, "but...the more I hesitated, the less inclination I felt to try the experiment, and I am now convinced that marriage is not the thing it is cracked up to be!" —The Port Folio (December, 1822)

crazy about

Zorro was the puppy we kept from Abbey's litter. He and my daughter really bonded. She was crazy about him. —The Seattle Times (10/10/2011)

The Army is crazy about smartphones, hoping to one day issue each soldier a secure phone like it does a rifle... —Wired News (blog, 10/10/2011)

And if you have a job you're not crazy about, you can't stop believing you're worthy of something better. —Chicago Tribune (10/9/2011)

When asked, Americans aren't all that crazy about mayors, governors, police chiefs, school board officials, or anyone else who has and exercises some power over their lives. —Center for American Progress (10/4/2011)

"I have never been crazy about all-white wedding dresses, for me at least." —Jessica Biel, explaining why she wore pink when she married Justin Timberlake. (12/7/2012)

If you are **crazy about** something, you like it very much. If you are crazy about someone, you may like the person very much, or depending on the context, be deeply in love. I might say, "I'm crazy about Ann Patchett" because I enjoy reading her novels; if her boyfriend said it, he would talking about her, not her work.

To be not crazy about something (or someone) is to not like it (or them) much. To be not all that crazy about means the same thing. "All that," meaning very, is only used in the negative versions of "crazy about" phrases.

The use of crazy in connection with liking or loving has been traced back to the 1700's. (Mad, a synonym for crazy, has been used the same way but not as frequently in America as crazy.) A popular song of 1892, "Bicycle Built for Two," began: "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do! I'm half crazy, all for the love of you!"

And in 1935, Fats Waller recorded:

> I'm the world's most happy creature
> Tell me, what can worry me?
> I'm crazy about my baby
> Baby's crazy about me.

crocodile tears

They detailed how the midtown hotel maid told bald-faced whoppers [lies] to investigators and the grand jury, even shedding crocodile tears - making her a nightmare witness. —New York Daily News (7/1/2011)

You may not think Jennifer Lopez is much of an actress, but the Bronx-born diva deserves an Oscar for shedding those crocodile tears on stage at Mohegan Sun the other night. —Boston Herald (10/25/2011)

"Blame the deficit scolds, who weep crocodile tears over the supposed burden of debt on the next generation, but whose constant inveighing against the risks of government borrowing, by undercutting political support for public investment and job creation, has done far more to cheat our children than deficits ever did." —Paul Krugman, economist and newspaper columnist (3/29/2013)

A person shedding **crocodile tears** is only pretending to be sad or upset.

The phrase is based on the idea that tears fall from the eyes of crocodiles while they are eating. The legend that crocodiles would "weep" while eating men is very old, and the phrase is reported to have existed in ancient Latin and Greek.

Scientists have observed that liquid does indeed fall from the reptiles' eyes. Although they have not fully explained the observation, they are pretty sure it's not because the crocodiles are sad or sorry.

References to crocodile tears have been in English literature at least since the 1500's. This example is in Rudyard Kipling's "Just So Stories." It describes a crocodile deceiving a baby elephant:

'Come hither, Little One,' said the Crocodile, 'for I am the Crocodile,' and he wept crocodile-tears to show it was quite true. —"The Elephant's Child" by Rudyard Kipling (1902)

cross a bridge when one comes to it

It is uncertain how the plane will be removed from the field. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said. —The Poughkeepsie Journal (6/4/2011)

...he [Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani] doesn't believe Washington is really going to cut aid. If it does, he said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." —TIME (5/12/2011)

The city manager didn't say what would happen if the Occupy Murfreesboro participants return to the tents by noon today. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to 12 noon," said Lyons, whose office has a view of Civic Plaza. —The Daily News Journal (Tennessee, 12/28/2011)

Don't cross a bridge till you come to it, a proverb recorded by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1850, means don't deal with a problem until you have to.

The idea is sometimes used in shorter phrases, as in the Daily News Journal example, when people are talking about dealing with a question or problem later.

cross one's mind

If you can think of it, he has it, as well as all sorts of things that would likely never cross your mind.—CNBC (11/12/2011)

I am 29. A question that crosses my mind frequently these days is: "What will the world look like when I am 79?"—NJ Press Media (1/2/2012)

"It never crossed my mind that I wasn't going to make it." —Albert Watson, who survived more than 300 bee stings while hiking in Nevada. (5/14/2012)

"I had nothing to do with this...I don't know how my brother got away with it for so many years...That would never cross my mind." —Onil Castro, brother of Ariel Castro, the man accused of kidnapping three women and keeping them hidden for years in his home in Cleveland (5/13/2013)

If something **crosses your mind**, you think of it briefly. An expression with similar meaning is **pass through one's mind**.

An early example:

I should have esteemed myself a very happy Man; but whenever her Remembrance crossed my Mind, as it frequently would, all the Acquisitions I made were Matters of Grief to me, as I was sure I could never enjoy them with my lovely, charming Maid...— "The Life and Adventures of Joe Thompson, Written by Himself" (London, 1751)

cross the Rubicon

"We want a state with peace. And I think they have to cross the Rubicon. They have to decide that Israel is here to stay, and agree to live alongside it."—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, interviewed by ABC News (9/23/2011)

And once large numbers of people cross the Rubicon from temporary unemployment to chronic joblessness, they, their families, and their communities can be lost for good. —Reuters (Blog, 9/8/2011)

"What I also say is, we don't have a choice. We've crossed the Rubicon...we have eighteen to nineteen billion dollars in debt and no funding mechanism for it." —Kevyn Orr, emergency manager for the City of Detroit (7/21/2013)

Crossing the Rubicon refers to a decisive action or historic event, leading to permanent change.

The origin is Julius Caesar's crossing the Rubicon River from Italy into Gaul in 49 B.C., which marked the beginning of the Roman civil war. The use of cross the Rubicon as a metaphor has been traced to the 1600's.

(one's) cup of tea

...this very British way of playing golf on wind- and weather-bitten shorelines will never, and was never meant to be, everyone's cup of tea... —Associated Press (7/16/2011)

Though I'm a conservative, the charismatic and optimistic Palin isn't exactly my cup of tea. I preferred the charismatically challenged and much more pessimistic Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels... —Chicago Tribune (6/17/2011)

...if I had been an Anglophile...she would never have married me. Those types of people are not her cup of tea. —TIME (4/28/2011)

If something or someone is your **cup of tea**, you particularly like that person or thing.

It is used more frequently in the negative. The Chicago Tribune example means that Anglophiles are not her favorite people. But when the expression first became popular in the 1930's and 1940's, it was often used positively. A positive example helped make the phrase more popular in 1951, in the musical "The King and I," in which Anna sings to her students:

> Getting to know you
> Putting it my way
> but nicely.
> You are precisely
> my cup of tea.

Although a United Nations study surprisingly placed the United Kingdom only sixth in per-capita tea consumption (United Emirates was first), England is the most likely source of cup of tea. The earliest known printed example is in "Christmas Pudding," a 1932 novel by Nancy Mitford: "I'm

not at all sure I wouldn't rather marry Aunt Loudie. She's even more my cup of tea in many ways."

cup runneth over

...with the latest smartphone apps—oh, our cup runneth over! —Buffalo News (9/26/2011)

The loudest thing about Kvitova may be her game. When it comes to weapons—a fashionable word in the tennis world these days—her cup runneth over. —USA Today (8/28/2011)

...his cup will be half full instead of half empty, and in fact, it may runneth over once Facebook gets its business model honed. After all, not very long after Mr. Zuckerberg started the business in his dorm room at Harvard the company has generated $1 billion in profit on $3.7 in revenue. —BusinessInsider.com (2/3/2012)

If your **cup runneth over**, you have a surplus—much more than you need.

It has been a long time since people stopped saying runneth instead of run, but the word persists in this familiar phrase. It comes from the King James Bible's version of Psalm 23:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

In modern English, it means: You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me, anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with a surplus of blessings.

cut a break, catch a break

Your employer may offer lower insurance premiums in exchange for taking a health-risk assessment or cut you a break on the cost of a gym membership. —MarketWatch (4/6/2012)

...Barry Bonds caught a break from a federal judge Friday. —New York Daily News (12/16/2011)

...airline management could not "catch a break" between bad winter weather and soaring fuel prices. —Reuters (4/12/2011)

Cut a break (or **give a break**) means allow an exception to a rule; give favorable treatment. If you **catch a break**, you are the one who receives the exception, favorable treatment or timely good luck.

Catch a break often means have good luck, as in the Reuters example. The idea in such cases is that God, or fate, is cutting the break.

Examples of phrases using break in this way have been found from the early 1900's.

cut and run

"Newt Gingrich is my friend and I support his campaign for the presidency," [Georgia Governor Nathan] Deal declared... "When the going gets rough, I don't cut and run on my friends." —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (7/1/2011)

"...his campaign's few pronouncements on this subject are reminiscent of Richard Nixon's "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam, which turned out to be a plan to cut and run without ever admitting as much." —CNN.com (4/23/1012)

Prime Minister John Key says New Zealand won't "cut and run" from Afghanistan after three Kiwi

soldiers were killed in a Taliban bomb attack. —Reuters (8/19/2012)

Cut and run means run away, as fast as possible. It often has a negative connotation, and sometimes implies cowardice.

In centuries past, the fastest way for a ship to start moving was to cut its anchor line and run, leaving the anchor behind. Charles Dickens used the phrase as a metaphor in "Great Expectations," 1861: "I'd give a shilling if they had cut and run."

cut corners

"Employers have legitimate questions about a person's job performance, but they can get that information the regular way, without cutting corners and violating people's privacy." —California State Senator Leland Yee (2/23/2012)

"This isn't the time to be cutting corners on protecting our wildlife and environment." —Noah Greenwald, director of The Center for Biological Diversity endangered species program (2/27/2012)

"We don't cut corners. We don't work with frozen products. It is all here for you to see." —Robert Siegmann, restaurant owner (3/8/2013)

"The result is factories striving to meet the demands of these brands and retailers by ignoring the rights of workers, by cutting corners on safety." —Scott Nova, executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, talking about clothing factories in Bangladesh (4/26/2013)

Cut corners means do something in a way that is quick, easy or not following all rules.

The phrase is a metaphor for going too fast in making a turn, or taking a shorter route to save time.

An early example is in The Oxford Magazine, published in London in 1865: "I do not believe either in what we used to call cutting corners or going short roads to places. The short road I have always found is in the end the longest."

cut the mustard, cut it

"Going forward with the status quo [keeping things the way they are] is not going to cut it for the American people who are struggling today." —Mitt Romney (presidential debate, 10/3/2012)

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't cut the mustard, experts said. —Port Huron (Michigan) Times Herald (3/27/2011)

"Part-time work generally doesn't cut it as far as having the income necessary to buy a new vehicle," said Kim... —Bloomberg News (4/11/2011)

"We must match and train our work force for the jobs of today and tomorrow...A generic job training program just doesn't cut it any more." —New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, in his State of the State speech (1/9/2013)

In the news examples, **cut the mustard** and the shortened version, **cut it**, mean meet the requirements to succeed.

It's not known exactly how the expression began or how success could be related to mustard.

From The Railroad Trainmen's Journal, February, 1898: ...if he could not "cut the mustard" he was liable to "hit the grit" between stations...

This meant that if he was not strong enough to meet the requirements of the job, he might fall down (hit the grit, an archaic expression meaning fall on the road).

cut to the chase

To cut to the chase, Le colis just isn't particularly funny, and that is something of a problem for a film that's supposed to be a comedy. —Montreal Gazette (4/1/2011)

"What is more sensible, rather than pestering the regents, is to cut to the chase and go straight to the governor and the Legislature," he said. "Those are the people they should be talking to." —San Jose Mercury News (11/29/2011)

Land Rover's Goss cut to the chase Monday in his acceptance speech: "We're going to market the hell out of this." —Associated Press (1/9/2012)

Cut to the chase means get right to the point, or go directly to the most important part.

It comes from early 1900's film editing, when the phrase meant, "End this scene here and start the chase scene."

The figurative expression was in use by the 1940's.

cut-and-dried

Critics of the law, however, argue the wages-and-benefits issue is not cut-and-dried. —Newsday (6/21/2011)

The article the JJ-C wrote sounds like it's already cut-and-dried that he will be mayor of Beardstown. He doesn't even live in city limits and hasn't for years. —Illinois Journal-Courier (6/9/2011)

"It's really a pretty cut-and-dried rule. The public needs to have information about any public official or potential public official's personal financial interests." —Gary Winuk, chief of enforcement for the California Fair Political Practices Commission (7/29/2013)

In the Newsday example and Winuk quotation, **cut-and-dried** means simple and clear. In the Journal-Courier example it means finished, settled, decided. The first meaning is more common; it is possible for the phrase to have both meanings.

Cut-and-dried refers to the cutting and drying of herbs, or wood, depending on which lexicographers you believe. The earliest example in my searches is from 1702.

cutting edge, leading edge

The research, relayed to growers through universities and their cooperative-extension agents in the field, has made Washington's fruit industry the envy of the world, on the cutting edge, profitable while so many other industries falter. —The Seattle Times (10/9/2011)

Griffin Hall boasts at being on the cutting edge of both high technology communications and energy efficiency. —The Kentucky Post (10/10/2011)

"That's why we've got the best universities and colleges in the world. That's why we have cutting-edge research..." —President Barack Obama (4/18/2012)

"Getting away from fossil fuels to a renewable energy source is a very positive, very green thing to do," Kelly told The State in 2006. "We are excited about being on the leading edge of this." —Charlotte Observer (10/10/2011)

"And over 1,000 mayors across the country have signed agreements to cut carbon pollution in their cities. These local and state officials are the leading edge in this effort, and we at EPA want to build on and complement these efforts already under way." —Gina McCarthy, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (7/30/2013)

Something that is **cutting-edge** or **on the cutting edge** is the most advanced. The phrase usually refers to science and technology.

Leading edge is frequently used with a similar meaning. Both use the allusion to physical edges as a metaphor for the first things to achieve an advance or change.

Examples of the figurative meaning have been found as early as the 1800's, but it became widespread in the 1900's.

dark horse

In the debate surrounding the routes, a dark horse option has emerged in the form of a pipeline backed by BP... —Reuters (11/15/2011)

Councilman James Kenney is...considered a dark-horse candidate to lead Council... —The Philadelphia Inquirer (11/10/2011)

Mr. Santorum's campaign had less than $200,000 in the bank at the end of September...he remains a favored dark horse because social-issues conservatives, who might not be inclined to support Mr. Romney, have yet to coalesce around another candidate. —The Wall Street Journal (11/3/2011)

"I have a dark horse idea. I have the sense that the name is going to be Arthur." —Pamela Redmond Satran, an expert on baby naming, after the birth of a son to Britain's Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge. (7/22/2013)

A **dark horse** is someone (or something) in a competition who is not expected to win.

The phrase is often used in political campaigns, as an adjective or noun: a **dark-horse candidate** may be shortened to a **dark horse**.

In the past a dark horse meant a little-known contender, but now well-known candidates are called dark horses if they have only a small chance to win. For example, in the 2011 U.S. presidential campaign, news accounts referred to the well-known former House Speaker Newt Gingrich as one of the dark-horse candidates.

The "favored dark horse" in the Wall Street Journal example seems like a contradiction, but it means that some people at the time preferred Santorum to other dark horses.

Pamela Redmond Satran did indeed have a "dark horse idea." Soon after, the baby was named George Alexander Louis, not Arthur.

The phrase comes from horse racing, and is related to **in the dark**—knowing nothing about. A winning horse that is unfamiliar to most bettors can make a lot of money for the few bettors who do know.

In early 1800's the expression only referred to horses. By the mid-1800's it specifically referred to American presidential candidates who were nominated at party conventions after the previously

leading candidates failed to win enough of the delegates' votes.

dawn on

"It dawned on us that these were remains of Palestinian villages that had been depopulated in 1948. —The Harvard Crimson (10/24/2011)

"For years I had many questions about this Mark Twain, the first being, 'Who is he?'" Ferrell said upon accepting his bust from the chairman of the Kennedy Center, David Rubenstein. "Then it dawned on me that, since I was a small boy, I thoroughly enjoyed his delicious fried chicken." —TIME (10/24/2011)

Like the great novellas of Thomas Mann and Flannery O'Connor, this book manipulates...But then, slowly, it dawns on the reader that its teller is not as in control of the facts as he first appears. —Cleveland Plain Dealer (10/13/2011)

When an idea **dawns on** a person, he or she begins to understand it or be aware of it.

(A related expression, "The light dawns!," often used with sarcastic humor, means that someone after long delay, finally perceives or understands something.)

An early example of dawn on was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe:

From her infancy, she had been surrounded with servants, who lived only to study her caprices; the idea that they had either feelings or rights had never dawned upon her, even in distant perspective. —"Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852)

dead in the water

So if you're looking for work, you can't let yourself give up, or you're dead in the water. —Chicago Tribune (10/9/2011)

Though the legislation appears dead in the water, it is likely to be revived often on the campaign trail, as both sides are expected to hit each other over the state of the economy. —Newsroom America (10/12/2011)

"...at the time that Kennedy was assassinated...his two top-priority bills, civil rights and tax cuts, are really dead in the water." —Robert Caro, biographer of Lyndon Johnson (5/10/2012)

"Since then, the U.S. economy has continued to grow, although more slowly than we'd like—but Britain's economy has been dead in the water." —Paul Krugman, economist and political columnist (2/1/2013)

Except when it is used literally, **dead in the water** means not moving, like a boat with no power. The phrase originally described boats with no wind in their sails.

In my searches, the earliest examples of the phrase referring to boats are from the 1830's. It was used frequently in war stories during the 1940's, and its use as a metaphor began in the next decade. This example, in a work of fiction, quotes a man in a hospital bed:

"We'll lick this thing yet. I may be dead in the water but I'm far from foundered." —LIFE (7/2/1956)

dead ringer

Kraig Parker, who closed the concert, was a dead ringer for Elvis. —Forth Worth Star-Telegram (7/2/2011)

The iPhone 4S is a dead ringer on the outside for the iPhone 4. —Houston Chronicle (1/14/2011)

He was a dead ringer for the FBI's composite sketch of the suspect. —Associated Press (1/9/2012)

At times Thursday, Rinehart's deep, bluesy voice was a dead ringer for Caleb Followill's, right down to the wounded whine. —Dallas Morning News (2/17/2012)

A **dead ringer** is a duplicate.

One meaning of **ringer** is a sneaky substitute. If my company allows a talented non-employee to play on our softball team to help us beat another company's team, we call that player a ringer.

One meaning of **dead** is precise or exact. If your aim was dead-on, you hit the target.

Bring those two meanings together, and dead ringer means exact copy, or something that looks (or sounds, as in the Dallas Morning News example) exactly the same.

Examples of this idiom have been found from as early as 1878.

deep pockets

China has used its deep pockets to secure Latin oil supplies. Last year, China promised to lend oil-rich Venezuela $20 billion as part of a deal to give Chinese firms access to its vast fields. —The Wall Street Journal (3/19/2011)

Voters in Florida's largest county, Miami-Dade, go to the polls Tuesday to choose whether to recall their mayor. The effort is being led by a deep pocketed local businessman who disagreed with the mayor's budget. —National Public Radio (3/14/2011)

"I knew a lot of people with deep pockets and made calls, and I kicked in some of my own money." —Octavia Spencer, actress and producer, talking about raising money to make the 2011 film, "The Help." (7/5/2013)

Having **deep pockets** or being **deep pocketed** is being wealthy.

This idiom has been in use for more than a century. The president of the University of California said in a November, 1899, speech that civil service reform will be forced upon the government by "square-shouldered, deep-pocketed merchants."

(**Square-shouldered**, suggesting a strong person with broad shoulders, is still used, but infrequently.)

derring-do

Richard Engel, NBC's man in the Arab world, delivered a story that was more a stunt of derring-do than a news report, sneaking in and out of Syria to see how the liberation movement there is able to keep the world informed of its protests. —The Washington Post (11/1/2011)

The mission of 7 Fingers, a Montreal team founded in 2002, is to bring the sort of derring-do associated with super circuses down to street level... —The New York Times (8/9/2011)

Space program analysts say the flurry of interest is...destined to fade as NASA spends the next decade focused on engineering instead of derring do. —USA Today (4/27/2011)

Derring-do means attention-getting acts of courage. (Some hyphenate it, some do not.)

The phrase is a spelling variation of "daring to do." From Chaucer's dorryng don (1370's) to Spencer's derring doe (1579), to derring-do in Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe" (1819), popular literature helped the variation endure.

Derring is not used by itself—like hunker, aback, gung, beck and shebang, almost-forgotten words that survive only in idiomatic phrases.

devil's advocate

Behind the scenes, Biden sometimes plays the role of devil's advocate. While known for his public gaffes, Biden is considered within the White House a knowledgeable voice on foreign affairs... —Reuters (11/17/2011)

Clarence voters could have decided to keep him around, if for no other reason than to allow him to play the devil's advocate to keep everyone else honest. —Buffalo News (9/20/2011)

O'Donnell said the church "is very strong" in its belief that any negative aspects of the potential saint must also be revealed...Until 1983, the church would appoint someone to argue against the cause—the "devil's advocate." The position was eliminated by John Paul in 1983. —USA Today / Religion & Ethics Newsweekly (4/28/2011)

If you play **devil's advocate**, you take an opposing or unpopular side of an argument.

A person who begins a comment with, "Let me play devil's advocate," usually means, "Let me present this opposing argument, so we may have a full discussion (but I may or may not agree with this opposing argument)."

The origin of devil's advocate is the advocatus diaboli in the Catholic Church, the position explained in the USA Today news example. The position was established in 1587. Examples of the phrase used outside of Catholicism have been found as early as 1760.

diamond in the rough

Bruno bought Atkins Park Restaurant in 1983 as a "diamond in the rough." —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (11/10/2011)

Chemicals distributor Samchen Holdings Bhd is a "diamond in the rough," overlooked because that particular sector is often ignored by analysts and fund managers who prefer bigger companies... —Reuters (9/11/2011)

"Besides, you never know when you'll find a diamond in the rough, a piece [of clothing] that you spend $20 or $30 on and end up wearing for years." —The New York Times (6/15/2011)

A **diamond in the rough** has good qualities or potential, which may not be obvious to everyone. The phrase alludes to a valuable gem before it is polished.

In the past, diamond in the rough often described a person who was of good character but lacked sophistication, or or had questionable associates. Now, as the examples illustrate, it often means something with unrecognized potential.

Examples of diamond in the rough describing people have been found as early as the 1770's. This one is in a London theater review:

Mrs. Robinson has made her appearance at Drury-Lane theatre, in the character of Juliet, and was received with applause. If we may be allowed a comparison, she appears like a diamond in the rough; and, we think, when she has received the polish of time and stage knowledge, she will be a considerable ornament to the stage. —Town and Country Magazine (December, 1776)

(the) die is cast

Perhaps the die was cast when Rowling vetoed the idea of Spielberg directing the series; she made sure the series would never be mistaken for a work of art that meant anything to anybody—just ridiculously profitable cross-promotion for her books. —New York Press (7/13/2011)

Before they're even old enough to walk—let alone fill out a resume—experts say the die is cast on a baby's career success simply because of their name. —Fox Business (8/10/2012)

The band decides to honor Tommy's debt, but the die has been cast for their breakup. —Cape Cod Times (8/18/2012)

A **die** is a cube with numbers from one to six on its faces. In games, when the die is cast (thrown), the number facing up determines what happens next. In other contexts, when the **die is cast**, the future is determined.

Dice (plural of die) games are older than the English language. Variations of the die is cast have been found as early as the 1300's, and examples of its use as metaphor have been found from the 1600's.

different animal, no such animal

"Traditional game companies measure their audience in the millions," said John Taylor, managing director and games analyst at Arcadia Investments Corp. "Social game companies like Zynga measure theirs in the tens and hundreds of millions. It's a completely different animal." —Los Angeles Times (5/31/2011)

For example, while a small winery is allowed in the General Plan, "if you go to the current zoning ordinance, there's no such animal," he said. —Marysville, Calif. Appeal-Democrat (5/18/2011)

Facebook has announced its first real foray into online search—and tech enthusiast Rich Gorman explains how it is an entirely different animal than anything yet devised by Google, Yahoo, or Bing. —PRWeb (1/22/2013)

In the expressions **no such animal** and **different animal**, **animal** means a thing of a certain type.

No such animal has the same meaning as **no such thing**, but adds a little emphasis.

Similarly, "It's a different animal" is not far from the meaning of, "It's different," but adds a bit of colorful language and emphasis. In the Los Angeles Times example, the phrase "completely different animal" uses three words to do the job of one.

The use of animal to describe people of a certain type has been recorded as early as 1729, but the use of phrases similar to these news examples began in the 1900's.

dig in, dig in one's heels, dig oneself into

"At this point, it looks like both sides are digging in." —Maria Bartiromo, commentator, referring to negotiations between Republicans and Democrats on U.S. tax rates and spending (12/2/2012)

"Tens of thousands of people are here, these are the opposition factions...the president's supporters [are] a short drive away from here. They are holding a demonstration. So what you have...are these two sides digging in." —Reza Sayah, television news reporter, in Egypt (6/30/2013)

Time Warner Cable Inc. is digging in its heels in a dispute with several big media companies over whether it can beam live TV channels to Apple Inc. —The Wall Street Journal (3/25/2011)

Russ Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institute, said some states and districts have dug themselves into a hole by expecting greater gains in the final years. —Associated Press (3/9/2011)

In the first example and similar contexts, **dig in** means refuse to change or argue more stubbornly.

Similarly, if you **dig in your heels**, you resist doing something, like a horse or donkey that resists being pulled forward by keeping its legs and feet rigid. A seldom-used synonym is recalcitrate.

In the Wall Street Journal example, Time Warner, by digging in its heels, is refusing to change its position. (The action is more extreme than **dragging feet** but less extreme than **squaring off** for a fight.)

In other contexts, **dig in** may mean start an activity enthusiastically, such as working or eating. ("Ready to eat? Dig in!")

If you **dig yourself into** a hole, you create a problem for yourself.

"Dig into" usually means reach into. ("He dug into his pocket to find a coin. " Or, "The film digs into some difficult issues.")

An early example of digging in one's heels in the sense of refusing to change position:

Mr. Stimson's communication will be seen as a continuation of Geneva's pressure. Its first effect will be to make the Japanese dig in their heels. After all, Manchuria is a question of supreme importance to them. —The New York Times (11/6/1931)

dime a dozen

And while pumpkin beer is a dime a dozen this time of year, pumpkin-flavored booze can be tough to come by. —Fox News (10/20/2011)

The problem is that from the perspective of an elite school, booksmart high achievers with lots of extracurricular activities are a dime a dozen. —Forbes (10/20/2011)

Today, when I meet a guy with one lonely, dime-a-dozen tattoo on his body, I assume it showed up during his college days. —Bellingham Herald (10/11/2011)

Dime a dozen means plentiful, easy to find, or cheap. It sometimes suggests poor quality, as in the Bellingham Herald example.

The phrase was often used literally in the 1800's because the cost of a variety of things was a dime a dozen. An article in the December, 1886, "Popular Science" magazine suggested to snake owners that they procure a lot of rats, or good-sized mice, such as every mill-boy is ready to deliver for a dime a dozen.

An early example of the phrase used without a specific reference to cost is in a 1906 medical journal. It adds the word plugged, which refers to coins made less valuable by having holes filled with cheaper metal. (A once-common expression, "not worth a plugged nickel," is now seldom used.)

Thinking men in the profession could do much for science, by refusing to subscribe for these Journals that are not worth a plugged-dime a dozen to an honest physician. —Transactions of the Joint Session of the Oklahoma State Medical Association (May, 1906)

dip a toe in

After attending an event at the Sweet Auburn Curb Market near downtown Atlanta, Hinton began thinking about opening a shop. The curb market, he decided, was the perfect spot to start. He opened Bell Street Burritos at the market in September. "It's a good way of dipping one's toe in," Hinton said. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (12/16/2010)

The potential for growth is one reason why Hewlett Packard dipped a toe in the water with the introduction of the DesignJet 3D...—PC World (1/1/2011)

"This is the worst of all possible worlds. This is dipping a toe in...No one believes, including the president...that these small arms are going to change the balance of this war." —Jeffrey Goldberg, journalist, talking about U.S. involvement in Syria (6/16/2013)

If you're not sure if the water is warm enough to bathe or swim in, you **dip a toe in**, to check the temperature. When it does not refer to swimming or taking a bath, dip a toe in means try something without taking much risk.

See also, **test the waters**.

This example of dipping a toe used as a metaphor is the earliest I have found:

If ever an author hesitated and reflected, dipped his toe into the bath of publicity, and hastily withdrew it again, loitered on the brink and could not be induced to plunge, it was the Rev. Gilbert White. —"Gossip in a Library" by Edmund Gosse (1914)

dirt bag

Within a matter of moments, they refer to various lawmakers as "traitorous pigs," "con artist" and "Republican dirt bag." —Los Angeles Times (11/1/2011)

...a film starring actor Adam Sandler..."My character is kind of a dirtbag guy and he's in trouble," Sandler told Eisen. —Yahoo! Sports (11/4/2011)

Incarceration is a poor solution to these problems, he said, and can lead to further criminality. "We want to keep them from going down the dirtbag path." —The Atlantic (11/20/2011)

A **dirt bag** is a despicable person. Literally, it is a bag that collects dirt in a vacuum cleaner.

It is often spelled as one word, dirtbag.

An early example of the figurative dirt bag is in a news story about a policeman who was sent to a special sale open only to disabled people at an Alexander's store. The sale was an act of kindness and a holiday tradition, but the policeman had orders to give the store manager a summons for operating on a Sunday.

"I felt like a Communist doing what I did," said the patrolman when he returned to the station house. "Those people in the store must have thought I was some kind of dirt bag, I snuck out of there by a side door. I'm disgusted." —The New York Times (12/4/1972)

do a 180

A modest change is preferable to a 180 because the results tend to be more durable and can lay the foundation for confidence and future success. —Honolulu Star-Advertiser (1/1/2011)

Thomas Gibson did a 180 when he took the role of a hardened FBI behavioral analyst in the CBS drama Criminal Minds. His somber character Aaron Hotchner couldn't be more different from preppy newlywed Greg Montgomery in Dharma & Greg... —The Miami Herald (12/28/2011)

"It was really kind of interesting that this week, we have gone 180. Now he's...actually going to sit down and talk to members." —House Speaker John Boehner, talking about negotiations with President Obama on spending and taxes (3/7/2013)

In a literal sense, **do a 180** (a shortened version of **do a 180-degree turn**) means change to the opposite direction. Do a 180 is used figuratively to mean a complete change in action or thinking.

Without a verb, as in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser example, a **180** means a complete change. The expression has other forms, such as **take a 180-degree turn**, **turn 180 degrees**, and **pivot 180 degrees**. In the Boehner quotation, "gone 180" is unusual but has the same meaning.

An early example of the phrase used figuratively is in the Aug. 18, 1961 issue of LIFE Magazine: "...negotiations between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. suddenly did a 180-degree turnabout."

do a number on, do a job on

This winter really did a number on plants. I have seen plants that looked fine for several days after the freeze start to drop leaves that originally looked fine.—Corpus Christi Caller-Times (2/25/2011)

All that booze [alcohol] can do a number on your stomach lining too, irritating it and making you feel like you want to hurl [vomit]. —Los Angeles Times (12/29/2011)

Mulgrew appears right now ready and willing to damn the city's children to the loss of more than 6,000 teachers and support personnel—more than 4,500 through layoffs. He's certainly able to do a job on the kids. —New York Daily News (2/18/2011)

Do a number on and **do a job on** usually mean do harm or damage to.

Do a number on sometimes means attack or harshly criticize, even if the attack has no effect.

The origin is unknown. The earliest example I have found of **do a number on** used with its current meaning is in a 1965 sports story:

When they last met, the Edmonton Oilers did a number on the Chicago Black Hawks—a lot of numbers. The Oilers amassed 51 shots... —United Press International (1/15/1965)

do the trick

Over the decades, the film giant [Kodak] tried diversifying into pharmaceuticals, bathroom

cleaners and medical-testing devices. None did the trick. —The Wall Street Journal (8/11/2011)

For those whose only vision problem is presbyopia, cheap reading glasses may do the trick. —The New York Times (4/1/2011)

"None of them by themselves will do the trick but all of them working together will ensure we never have this problem again." —Senator Marco Rubio, talking about proposed changes in immigration laws (4/14/2013)

Do the trick means solve the problem. In some cases, as in the New York Times example, it means solve the problem easily and quickly. It suggests one meaning of trick as a noun: an act of magic or skill.

The phrase has been traced as far back as 1819.

dog and pony show

He called the hearing a "dog and pony show" and displayed a blown-up picture of a dog riding a pony, to underscore his argument that the hearing was just a chance for Democrats to score political points, without doing anything about high gas prices or a sensible energy policy. —The New York Times (5/12/2011)

Retiree Bob Gray, a lifelong resident of Youngstown, said regulators who attended the event didn't provide satisfactory answers. "I feel like my intelligence has been insulted," said Gray, 70. He described the forum as "a dog and pony show." —Associated Press (1/13/2012)

Every teacher knows the feeling of having to put on a "dog and pony show" for the yearly principal evaluation. —The Seattle Times (1/11/2012)

Now that the dog-and-pony-shows, er, conventions, are over, there's a certain feeling in the air. —Los Angeles Times (9/7/2012)

In business, a presentation may be called a **dog and pony show** by people who are not enthusiastic about being the presenters or the audience. Typically the presentation is elaborate, with a maximum effort to persuade the audience. Sometimes the phrase is shortened to "a dog-and-pony."

Calling an event a dog and pony show often suggests that the event is an unnecessary waste of time, done only to please high-ranking people.

In the past there were travelling shows with animals, like very small circuses, called dog and pony shows. Examples of the figurative use of the phrase, describing other kinds of events, have been found from as early as 1949.

dog in this fight

Though I don't have a dog in this fight, Microsoft also quoted me in its brief, since as chairman of the American Dialect Society's new-words committee I was responsible for making the announcement that "app" had been selected as the society's 2010 word of the year. —The New York Times (3/26/2011)

Two prominent atheists—popular philosopher Alain de Botton and popular science author Richard Dawkins—are sparring over the wisdom of erecting a "temple for atheists" in London...I'm not an atheist, so I don't have a dog in this fight. —The Washington Post (blog, 1/30/2012)

"You have a situation where people have a dog in this fight threatening to sue the city..." —Milpitas Post (1/18/2012)

"As passionate as I sound, I haven't had a dog in this fight for decades." —Lane Filler, in an opinion column in Newsday (8/20/2013)

If you have no **dog in this fight**, you are not taking sides in an argument. The expression is usually used in the negative but there are exceptions, such as the Milpitas Post example.

No dog in this fight does sound like "an old Southern expression," as some Web sites call it, but there is inconclusive support for it being Southern and no evidence that it is old, compared with most idiomatic phrases.

The earliest example in my searches is from 1982, in an article that may have marked the beginning of the expression's popularity. It is attributed to Tennessee Senator Howard Baker in a way that probably explains the assumption that the phrase came from the South, rather than Baker's imagination:

Last year, for example, when Senator Slade Gorton, Republican of Washington, wondered why the majority leader was sitting out a debate, Mr. Baker offered one of his down-home epigrams: "Ain't got no dog in this fight." —The New York Times (3/28/1982)

Another expression that is assumed to be Southern, perhaps incorrectly, is **that dog won't hunt**.

dog-eat-dog

"Be careful," Dan warned. "Some of the vendors are dog-eat-dog." —Business Insider (4/7/2011)

And yes, it's always been a dog-eat-dog world, but I was always told that an education would set you apart. —The Oregonian (4/15/2011)

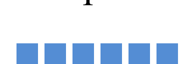
Washington is a hard-nosed, inhuman place. One of the most telling quips about this dog-eat-dog city is that if you want a friend, you should get a dog. —The Washington Times (1/12/2012)

"He [Obama] is basically trying to say 'If you want any security in your life stick with me. If you go with these Republicans they're going to feed you to the wolves. It's going to be a dog-eat-dog society.'" —Vice-Presidential candidate Paul Ryan (9/26/2012)

In a **dog-eat-dog** world, competition is brutal and people are willing to harm each other to get ahead.

"Dog-eat-dog world" is the most common expression, but in other recent news examples, the words dog-eat-dog have been followed by business, environment, industry, competition, morals, philosophy, and day. Sometimes the phrase is used by itself, as in the Business Insider example.

The phrase has been used since the early 1800's.



don't hold your breath, I won't hold my breath, hold one's breath

If you think gas prices will ever get back to below $3 a gallon, well, don't hold your breath while you wait. —Naples Daily News (5/9/2011)

"So, I wouldn't hold my breath that whatever Israeli government that emerges is going to be able to take major decisions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue." —Aaron David Miller, distinguished scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center (1/23/2013)

"I hope...that he apologizes for his choice of words," she said Thursday. "However, I won't hold my breath." —The Bergen Record (4/14/2011)

"Right now, 1.2 billion Catholics the world over are holding their breath." —Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, after Pope Benedict VXI announced his resignation (2/11/2013)

Don't hold your breath means don't wait for something that is unlikely to happen, or will take a very long time.

I won't hold my breath means, "I don't expect this to happen soon, and it probably won't happen at all."

The figurative use of **hold one's breath** means wait anxiously, as in the Cardinal Schoenborn quotation.

The expression don't hold your breath has been used at least since the 1850's.

don't get me wrong

Don't get me wrong—I enjoy German food and beverages as much as anybody, and I even have a high tolerance for oompah music. My problem with any Oktoberfest not held in Germany is that, well, it's not held in Germany. —The Columbus (Georgia) Ledger-Enquirer (10/1/2011)

Don't get us wrong. We love the Perkiomen Creek. But the old girl came too close as Hurricane Irene churned through the valley last weekend. —The Mercury (Pottstown, Pennsylvania, 9/9/2011)

"Don't get me wrong. The President, as I've said clearly now over the past half hour, is very closely evaluating options available to him. And we're fully aware about the worsening situation in Syria..." —Jay Carney, press secretary to President Barack Obama (6/13/2013)

Don't get me wrong means don't misunderstand me, or have no doubt about this. When expressed by or for a group, such as in a newspaper editorial, it's **don't get us wrong**.

The expression usually has the same meaning as **make no mistake**.

The earliest examples of don't get me wrong in my searches were published in 1911.

don't know jack

"People don't know jack" about the particulars of the agreement, "but what you heard about the process throughout was that it was horrible," says Joseph White, a political scientist at Case Western Reserve University who studies budget policy. —USA Today (8/3/2011)

If the school is trying to teach children to solve bully problems diplomatically, they obviously don’t know jack squat about how bullies operate. —DailyToreador.com (4/25/2012)

"Mary Gaitskill...makes the rest of us look like we don't know jack about the human soul." —Junot Díaz, quoted in The New York Times (8/30/2012)

If you **don't know jack** about something, you don't know anything about it. Jack in these contexts means anything. Jack sometimes has the same meaning in other phrases, such as, "You haven't done jack for this business, you incompetent buffoon."

An older, vulgar version of this informal, colloquial phrase is "don't know jack shit." The Daily Toreador example uses "squat" to sanitize the expression.

The earliest examples of the older phrase are from the 1970's.

Jack has been used in other contexts to express the idea of anything, or something generic: see **jack of all trades**.

double-cross

...Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and the union-front Working Families Party...are pressing the governor hard to double-cross the electorate. Specifically, they want him to reverse course and endorse renewing the "millionaires tax" before it expires on Dec. 31. —New York Post (11/3/2011)

A woman who wanted her ex's new girlfriend dead pleaded guilty today to a murder-for-hire plot in which she used stolen credit cards to pay for the services of a double-crossing, self-described hit man. —Philadelphia Inquirer (9/9/2011)

"He left a trail of bodies," said Tom Duffy, a retired state police major in Massachusetts. "You did not double-cross him. If you did, you were dead." —Associated Press (6/23/2011)

A **double-cross** is an act of betrayal. If you double-cross someone, you break a promise, harming a person who trusted you.

An old meaning of cross was an act of dishonesty. Double was also associated with treachery, and still is, in duplicitous (deceptive) and double dealing (being duplicitous;cheating). Combining them added emphasis, as do other phrases that express a similar thought twice, such as above and beyond, fair and square, and dribs and drabs.

The use of double-cross with its current meaning has been traced to the early 1800's.

double-dip, double-dipping

On Wall Street, there is renewed talk of a double-dip recession. —The New Yorker (8/15-22/2011)

There's been the massive crisis in Europe, and the attendant double dip. —Business Insider (8/18/2013)

The double-dipping by the police retirees is legal because they're getting their pensions from the Chicago Police pension fund, while their latest jobs are covered by a separate city pension plan...Altogether, the double-dipping cops are getting $2.5 million a year in pension payments on top of the $1.9 million in salary they're paid by the aviation department. —Chicago Sun-Times (8/22/2011)

A **double-dip** recession comes after a short economic recovery, so that two recessions—periods of negative economic growth—are close together. In the Business Insider example the phrase is shortened and the word recession is omitted, but the meaning is the same.

Double-dipping often refers to a government retiree taking another government job while receiving a pension. Sometimes the phrase refers to non-government jobs, and it may also describe a person having two jobs with separate salaries.

The origin of both phrases is the double-dip ice cream cone, featuring two scoops of ice cream. That became popular in the early 1900's. Double-dipping, referring to employees, has been traced to the 1960's, and the earliest example of double-dip recession in my searches is from 1975.

double-take

In the 1962 James Bond film "Dr. No," Sean Connery does a double-take when he sees the stolen Goya hanging in Dr. No's lair. —Los Angeles Times (8/20/2011)

It's not like I'm easily recognizable...When I'm traveling alone, I usually don't get that double-take from fellow passengers saying, "Oh my God, it's that 'Twilight' guy." —Peter Facinelli, actor (4/23/2012)

Today, it is a rarity to hear something original and interesting from a Hollywood A-lister. So political America did a double take last week when Ashton Kutcher gave an impromptu motivational pep talk to a young audience at the Teen Choice Awards. —The Washington Post (blog, 8/19/2013)

A **double-take** is a delayed, and often pronounced or exaggerated, reaction to something. In this phrase, take means reaction or expression of emotion. The first take is no reaction, and the second is a strong reaction. Double-takes can be funny and have been used many times in comedy.

Sometimes the idea of two "takes" is forgotten, and the expression simply means a surprised reaction.

This is the earliest example from my searches:

"The young lady said you would pay for her groceries, Mr. Herbert?" said the cashier accusingly. Hugh did a double-take, moaned and paid. He is convinced now he has never before seen the girl and will never see her again. —Pittsburgh Press (8/4/1937)

double whammy

Every summer, it seems, consumers are hit with a double whammy—a rise in gas prices just when they're most interested in taking road trips, and a rise in bacon prices just when they're most interested in taking bacon and combining it with lettuce and juicy, ultra-fresh tomatoes. —TIME (7/5/2011)

The Australian currency fell to a near six-week low against the U.S. dollar, hit by a double whammy of weak Chinese and poor domestic data. —Reuters (9/3/2012)

"Sequestration—the automatic spending cuts that kicked in this month—is a double whammy for the long-term unemployed. It takes money out of their pockets directly by cutting their federal emergency unemployment insurance benefits, but it also makes it harder for them to find a job by weakening the economy." —Chad Stone, chief economist, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (3/8/2013)

A **double whammy** means two bad or unlucky things happening at the same time.

In the 1940's, **putting the whammy** meant putting a jinx on someone or something, causing bad luck. Now the single whammy is nearly extinct. But the double whammy is common, the dreaded triple whammy is infrequent, and the terrible quadruple whammy is rare but alive in the White House, where President Barack Obama said:

"When you combine, what a lot of young people are going through, with college debt, and then you're trying to get your first home started, and then you immediately start saving for your kids' college education, and then you may have to also be helping out your parents with their retirement—that's a quadruple whammy if I'm not mistaken." —CNN (6/9/2011)

down a notch, up a notch

The chefs seemed to scramble a bit when they were told to take things down a notch and create something so basic and straightforward. —New York Daily News (12/8/2011)

It's been a process that brought us down a notch, made the notion of "working poor" real to a once-privileged middle-class bunch. —Los Angeles Times (11/26/2011)

...economists nudged their forecasts down a notch with high unemployment likely to stunt growth... —Reuters (7/14/2011)

His voice ratchets up a notch when discussing the company's training school... —The Washington Post (12/14/2011)

"We never ate out ever, if we did, it was McDonald's. If it was a birthday or special celebration and wanted to kick it up a notch and go a little bit more special, then it was Sizzler." —David Choe, artist (6/30/2013)

Down a notch means to a lower level. **Up a notch** means the opposite.

Notches, grooves or nicks in a surface such as wood or metal, have long been associated with measurement. Sometimes, as in the Los Angeles Times example, down a notch means a loss of status; it is used with the same meaning as **down a peg** (see entry below). But down a notch and up a notch are frequently used in ways that down a peg is not. In the other examples, it refers to adjusting the level of something.

Confusingly, the highest status or quality is **top-notch** but not top-peg.

The use of notch meaning to mean points on a scale of something measurable dates at least to the 1600's.

down a peg

With less than a month to go until the Iowa caucuses, Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney continued to battle this week for front-runner status, while some second-tier candidates took to the airwaves to try to knock them both down a peg or two. —Fox News (12/12/2011)

Today, a more confident China is the world's second largest economy with a rapidly modernising military, and has seen the United States taken down a peg as it struggles to turn its own economy around. —Reuters (9/18/2011)

Down a peg means lower in status.

People or groups or businesses or nations may be knocked or taken or brought or pulled down a peg, or down a peg or two.

Pegs have been associated with measurement and rank for centuries, but the precise origin of the phrase is unknown. It has been traced to the 1500's.

Notches are also associated with measurement, but the meaning of **down a notch** may be similar to or different from down a peg. It is not clear why people may be taken down a peg but not up, or why the highest status or quality is **top-notch**, but not top-peg.

down in the dumps

...surveys that show consumers feel very much down in the dumps. —Reuters (10/27/2011)

"I would say six months ago, people were a little down in the dumps. We do think there's a little bounce in our step around what happened last week," —Los Angeles Times (11/16/2011)

The reality TV star has been down in the dumps with the cancellation of her long-running TLC show "Kate Plus 8"... —Hollywoodlife.com (8/31/2011)

Down in the dumps means sad, gloomy or depressed.

The origin of the phrase is unknown. Variations, such as "in a dumpe," had the same meaning in the 1500's. The use of dump to mean a pile of garbage or a place to put garbage came much later, in the 1800's.

down pat, pat answer

They've got that routine down pat. It's a high-speed mixing and mashing of Christmas carols and holiday songs. —Kansas City Star (10/24/2011)

But the amount of money we must have to get us by in life depends on how much we spend or need each year. And there's just no way to give a pat answer that will be appropriate for all investors. —USA Today (8/3/2011)

With the physical part of the game down pat, Kreklow has been working with Rock Bridge Coach Tatum Anderson on the mental part. —Columbia Daily Tribune (10/14/2011)

If the core message communicated to one's offspring is that talent is what makes someone great, then they learn to accept that what they ultimately become is outside of their control...It is a pat answer for one's failure, an excuse for not trying harder. —chicagonow.com (8/26/2013)

If you have something **down pat** you have memorized or learned it so completely that you do it easily.

This meaning of **pat**—ready, prompt or rehearsed—is also used (but less frequently) in **pat answer**, a standard, planned statement.

Similar uses of pat have been traced to the 1500's; down pat to the 1800's.

down the tubes, down the drain

"They don't care if your family doesn't get fed or your credit goes down the tubes." —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (4/26/2011)

"If you win an election and the country goes down the tubes, what have you done? You've done nothing." —Reuters (11/9/2011)

The $95 million that BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] has already spent on the planned 3.5-mile line from the Coliseum Station to the airport would be money down the drain. —San Francisco Chronicle (5/11/2011)

"To say that someone makes a conscious decision to have her life go down the drain is preposterous." —Kevin Hill, a psychiatrist in charge of drug abuse treatment at Harvard Medical School's McLean Hospital, reacting to Rick Santorum's characterization of Whitney Houston's drug-overdose death as a moral failure (3/25/2012)

To go **down the tubes** is to fail, deteriorate or be discarded.

Down the drain is similar. It usually means wasted, like water that goes down a drain and into a sewer.

Both expressions developed during the 1900's, but based on examples I found, down the drain may have come first.

down to the wire

"The budget impasse is looking more and more like a train wreck. It looks like this will go right down to the wire." —Bloomberg News (7/14/2011)

"...this election was always going to be close and it will be close probably right down to the wire." —Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, head of the Democratic National Committee (5/27/2012)

"We're down to the wire now. In these next few days, Congress needs to make the right decisions to avoid the fiscal disaster that awaits us." —Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta (12/18/2012)

In a horse race, the wire is the finish line. If the race is **down to the wire**, the finish is very close.

In the Bloomberg example, the speaker meant that debate over raising the U.S. debt limit was likely to continue until the deadline, when the nation would have to stop paying some of its bills.

In the 1800's, the wire became understood to mean the finish line in horse racing. Now, many kinds of activity, especially involving negotiation and competition, are said to go down to the wire if they are not decided until the last possible time.

dragging feet, foot-dragging

France and Britain had been calling for a no-fly zone for two weeks, he said Wednesday, but other nations dragged their feet. —The New York Times (3/18/2011)

Both governments have persistently dragged their feet on reform commitments given to the euro zone in return for financial support, in Italy's case via European Central Bank purchases of its bonds. —The Wall Street Journal (11/7/2011)

Some legislators, furious that video gambling isn't yet producing revenue, blame the board for bureaucratic foot-dragging. —Chicago Tribune (3/17/2011)

Self-serving, foot-dragging politicians aren't protecting the interests of most Americans... —Lompoc Record (8/30/2013)

Foot-dragging, or **dragging one's feet**, is acting slowly or taking no action, to avoid cooperating or obeying an order.

The expression comes from an older, more literal meaning: walking like a very tired person who cannot lift his feet above the ground.

On April 5, 1914, The New York Times reported that rebels under Francisco ("Pancho") Villa entered Torreon, Mexico, "dragging their feet, many of them half-starved."

draw a blank

I'd love to know more about who chose this street name, when and why, and I tried to find out... Several people at the City Planning Department drew a blank. —Omaha World-Herald (4/21/2011)

His shaky grasp of foreign policy has astounded seasoned commentators...he drew a blank when asked about the Obama administration's actions in Libya. —Associated Press (11/26/2011)

...certain traits are sustained by the long-term memory that lasts longer in Alzheimer's patients than the short-term..."Show them a picture from two weeks ago and they draw a blank. But they can pick themselves out in a 20-year-old photo." —Courier-Post (Charry Hill, N.J., 1/13/2012)

A person who **draws a blank** tries to think of something and fails.

In other contexts, frequently in sports, draw a blank means achieve nothing or score zero.

The idea behind this expression comes from lottery games in England centuries ago, when pieces of paper were pulled from pots. Drawing a blank meant winning nothing.

Versions of draw a blank have been traced to the 1800's.

dribs and drabs

Rather than spill the beans [tell the secrets] all at once, the Times on Wednesday again released the "news" of its payment-model game plan in dribs and drabs. —Marketwatch (3/2/2011)

"With respect to the latest article that in part I gather is prompted by Mr. Snowden's leaks, we're still evaluating the article because the problem is that these things come out in dribs and drabs." —President Barack Obama, talking about a report that the U.S. spied on communications of European countries (7/1/2013)

But the funding for those improvements has come in dribs and drabs, meaning that some homeowners have been waiting for the improvements for more than five years. —The Buffalo News (8/27/2013)

Dribs and drabs means a little at a time.

An old meaning of **drib** was a small quantity, which survives today in dribble (fall or come out in small amounts). The usual current meaning of **drab**—dull, colorless—has no role in this idiom, which uses an older meaning: a small amount of money.

The use of dribs and drabs has been traced to the early 1800's.

drink the Kool-Aid

An outspoken Arizona sheriff has responded to a letter from the mayors of three border cities who asked him to tone down his comments on border security problems, saying, "feel free to drink the Kool-Aid of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, U.S. Attorney Dennis Burke and President Obama." —Fox News (2/16/2011)

"I'm not going to just drink the Kool-Aid," Lowenthal said. "They have to address these questions." —San Jose Mercury News (1/14/2012)

No wonder Steve is in a swoon...he's a true believer, he's drunk the Kool-Aid —The Washington Post (10/7/2011)

Drink the Kool-Aid refers to the tragic death of 913 cult members in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. When their leader ordered them to drink poison, many did, and those who resisted were murdered. Now, people who use the phrase usually aren't thinking about its origin. By drink the Kool-Aid they mean, "accept what someone says faithfully."

drop by, drop in

Sarah Palin did not visit Iowa or New Hampshire on Thursday, and she did not drop by South Carolina or Nevada. —The New York Times (2/17/2011)

And to make sure the owner isn't profiting from renting out the house without authorization, government inspectors can drop by... —The Washington Post (1/15/2012)

Wherever you go, drop in on a village. Residents will be surprised but hospitable... —The New York Times(1/6/2012)

...famous lodgers...have graced the hotel...presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant dropped in, too. —The Washington Post (1/13/2012)

In these contexts, **drop by** means visit informally, for a brief time, without a plan (and with or

without an invitation). Its meaning is the same as **drop in**, but drop by is more common when the place is mentioned: drop by Rick's Casino, or drop by my house.

Drop in or drop by may be used by themselves, without specifying a place: "I'll be home today. You are welcome to drop in." Or, "You are welcome to drop by."

Drop over (less frequently used) may have the same meaning.

Drop in has been used with this meaning at least since the 1600's; drop by is more recent, apparently not common before the 1900's.

drop the ball

Cisco dropped the ball, and didn't do enough to add editing and web sharing functions. —Business Insider (4/14/2011)

Basically, I've dropped the ball. I am 34 years old and only have about $40,000 in retirement savings. —Austin American-Statesman (4/19/2011)

"I don't think President Obama dropped the ball. He repeatedly came back and...talked about Mitt Romney's $5 trillion tax plan, kept mentioning it." —Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Democratic National Committee chairwoman (10/5/2012)

"Well, I want to know how the FBI or the system dropped the ball when he was identified as a potential terrorist." —Senator Lindsay Graham, referring to a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings (4/21/2013)

To **drop the ball**, an expression taken from sports, is to make a mistake or fail to do something. The ball-dropper can be a person, group, country or business.

The opposite of dropping balls is the basis for metaphorical expressions of success, such as be **on the ball** (competent, skillful or successful) and **take the ball and run with it** (take an idea or possibility and put it into practice).

dropping like flies

"Nintendo has done some pretty awful things - no software, poor pricing, poor PR, no sign of a sustainable turnaround, software support dropping like flies," said JP Morgan analyst Hiroshi Kamide of the failed 3DS launch. —Reuters (9/12/2011)

Cambodian factory workers at a plant that produces fashions for H&M are dropping like flies and management says it's baffled. —New York Daily News (8/29/2011)

...in the Cretaceous period, reptiles the size of construction cranes started dropping like flies... —The Philadelphia Inquirer (5/13/2011)

Dropping like flies means dying (or falling, or failing, or quitting) quickly, in large numbers.

Whether it means dying or something less dire depends on context. The H&M workers in the Daily News example were fainting.

The origin is unknown. Evidence that the phrase was used by the early 1800's is in an English-Spanish dictionary printed in 1809: "Caer como moscas, to drop like flies, when a distemper rages, or many men are killed in the fight."

dry run

"Clearly, the Republicans' best chance for the district are without an incumbent in there," Moore said, adding the special election to pick Wu's successor "could be seen as a dry run of the 2012 elections." —Tucson Citizen (7/26/2011)

In May, the launch pad had its first "dry run," a launch rehearsal that gave Russian and French engineers the chance to practice procedures before the rocket lifts off. —PBS Newshour (7/26/2011)

"And the likelihood is, these guys did sort of what we call operational surveillance. They did dry runs before." —Frances Townsend, expert on security and counter-terrorism, talking about suspects in the Boston Marathon bombings (4/19/2013)

A **dry run** is a test, to get experience. **Rehearsal**, used in the PBS example, has a similar meaning.

An older meaning of dry run is arroyo, a creek or stream that is at least temporarily without water. I have found no connection between that meaning, which has been documented back to the mid-1800's, and dry run as rehearsal, which began in the 1900's. There is speculation that dry run was first a theatrical expression, but the earliest example in my searches calls it an army term:

A combination dress and undress rehearsal—a "dry run," in Army parlance—was staged by officers here today. It demonstrated in detail what men of the first draft will face when they get here next week. —The New York Times (11/22/1940)

ducks in a row

"Apple...talked about a security problem before it had all its threat-response ducks in a row." —Paul Ducklin, executive at Sophos digital security company (4/11/2012)

"If you are one of those individuals who need some extra time to get all your ducks in a row, filing a tax extension is the best way to go." —Justin Bowen, head of CouponBuzz.com (4/14/2012)

"If this allows them to get their ducks in a row ...then I think it's a good thing. If this is another excuse of delaying what they should have done 23 years ago, that's a totally different story." —James Dale, a gay man who was expelled from Boy Scouts of America, after the organization delayed a decision on whether it would change its ban on homosexuals (2/6/2013)

If you **get**, or **have**, or **put**, or **keep all your ducks in a row**, you prepare well and attend to all the details.

The origin of ducks in a row is unknown.

An early example of the phrase used as a metaphor is in a 1911 novel, "Miss Gibbie Gault" by Kate Langley Bosher: "The work was done before to-night. You had your ducks in a row all right."

duke it out

And when these companies duke it out for market share, you know you'll be able to get a deal. So why would I buy now? —The Wall Street Journal (12/21/2010)

While Republican presidential nominees duke it out on endless debates... —Los Angeles Times (1/13/2012)

"Speaking of two TV heavyweights duking it out: For the past two weeks, Time Warner Cable has blocked CBS programs from its subscribers in Los Angeles, New York City and Dallas." —David Greene, radio journalist (8/16/2013)

Duke it out means fight.

Since the 1800's, **dukes** has been used as a synonym for fists. "Put up your dukes," meaning, "Get ready to fight with your hands," is an antiquated expression now used mostly in comedy, but duke it out is more frequent. It is sometimes literal, referring to fighting with fists, but often describes verbal arguments or business competition, as in the news examples.

ear to the ground

Kendra Harris said her son escaped from Camp Sweeney in San Leandro early February. Since then, she's had her ear to the ground to try and find him. —KTVU San Francisco (3/9/2011)

Longtime sport fishing advocate Frank Urabeck always has his ear to the ground when it comes to Lake Washington sockeye. —The Seattle Times (2/26/2011)

"He's got a good ear to the ground. He's done very well taking care of the town, I believe."—Waterville, Maine, Morning Sentinel (3/16/2011)

An ancient way of listening for the movement of animals was lying down with an ear touching the ground. Now, keeping, or having, an **ear to the ground** means listening or watching carefully for something. In the Morning Sentinel example, it also means being well-informed.

In 1856 this sentence used the phrase humorously, mid-way between its literal and figurative senses:

Its voice has penetrated even to the White House, and if you put your ear to the ground you may hear a sound, and thereby know that the knees of President Pierce and his cabinet are knocking together with fear and trembling. —The New York Times (Sept. 18, 1856)

early bird

Be the early bird. The first flight of the day is usually less likely to face delays, so if you're booking a last-minute flight, try to get an early one. —The Miami Herald (11/21/2011)

As if doorbusters, early-bird specials and earlier store hours aren't enough to lure customers, retailers are about to wave the magic wand that works almost every time: free stuff. That's free merchandise. Free entertainment. And free food. —USA Today (11/22/2011)

Down at the donut shop, Dude Pendergraft looked forward to another predawn Monday of rolling dough and making coffee for his early-bird pals. —The New York Times (5/28/2011)

The sock, which early bird backers can get for $159, features a four-sensors pulse oximeter, which measures skin temperature and heart rate...The sock wirelessly transmits all of the data to your smartphone, where an app helps you analyze the details and view your baby's current health status. —New York Daily News (8/28/2013)

An **early bird** is someone who arrives or starts as early as possible.

An "early bird special" is a low price or a gift offered to customers, usually at a specified time.

The phrase comes from a proverb (old saying), "The early bird gets the worm"—being early is

rewarded. The proverb has been traced to the 1600's.

Despite the proverb and its various positive associations, being an early bird is not always good. "No early birds, please" is often used in advertisements of private sales or other events, warning people not to arrive before the scheduled time.

eat someone's lunch

Once, New Jersey's Gov. Christie said that Pennsylvania was "eating our lunch" when it came to providing incentives to attract and keep companies. —Philadelphia Inquirer (4/5/2011)

Golfing with John Boehner is one thing, but trying to swim with a shark like Eric Cantor is something else. First, he eats your lunch... —The Philadelphia Inquirer (10/6/2011)

More lighthearted drama from the cablers [cable companies] who are starting to eat the broadcast networks' lunch. —Newsday (5/27/2011)

"While the U.S. dithers, other countries are eating our lunch. If we don't want to cede the twenty-first century to our economic and political rivals—China especially—we need to ensure that many more young Americans emerge from high school truly ready for college and a career that allows them to compete in the global marketplace." —Michael J. Petrilli, expert on education policy (7/23/2013)

Eat someone's lunch means take something away in competition, or take advantage of someone.

The expression often refers to a company taking away a share of another company's business, especially its most important business.

The origin is uncertain. Some people assume it is based on the idea of a bully at school taking another child's lunch, but when referring to business the expression implies aggressive behavior, but not usually illegal or bad.

eat your heart out

Union leaders take money from union dues and pass it to Democratic candidates. Once elected, the politicians "negotiate" with the unions that helped elect them. In essence, the unions hire their own bosses who face them across the bargaining table. Eat your heart out, Delta Air Lines union members. —Minneapolis Star Tribune (2/27/2011)

Eat your heart out. For the past quarter-century, Stan Heimowitz has made his living working with Marilyn and Elvis impersonators, cancan dancers, fire-eaters and a magician who can levitate audience members right off the stage. —San Jose Mercury News (1/13/2012)

"Eat your heart out, Martha Stewart. Oprah Winfrey is back in the spotlight..." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor (8/1/2013)

If you are told to **eat your heart out**, you are not being told to enact a scene from a horror movie. It means suffer envy (wanting something that someone else has), and it is usually used with a humorous tone.

In the past, the phrase also meant "torture yourself with your own emotions." This example is from 1863:

You may eat your heart out(figuratively), while waiting for the employment professional etiquette

will not permit you to seek. —Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature (7/4/1863)

egg on (one's) face

A South Dakota legislator proposed a law requiring everyone in his state to buy a firearm to show that government mandates are unconstitutional. He was left with egg on his face when it was revealed George Washington had done exactly that. —The (Wilkes Barre, Pa.) Times Leader (2/26/2011)

Real-estate guru Barbara Corcoran ended up with egg on her face when she got her Jacksons mixed up. "...Corcoran mistook La Toya for her sister, Janet. Barb was greatly embarrassed." —New York Post (3/5/2011)

"And obviously it puts egg on our face and we deserve any criticism we get." —J.P. Morgan Chase chief executive James Dimon, referring to the company's trading loss of more than $2 billion (5/11/2012)

"The debate has left egg on the face of the coauthor of one of the most influential papers on the subject, Ken Rogoff of Harvard." —Jim Boulden, television news reporter, talking about the argument over government spending (5/15/2013)

A person with **egg on his face** is embarrassed, exposed to ridicule.

This expression has been used since the 1930's, perhaps inspired by vaudeville shows.

A 1934 example is in the journal of the American Management Association: "If you try to **sweep it under the rug** [hide it], everyone ends up with egg on their faces."

elephant in the room, 800-pound gorilla

The condition of these banks, since 2008, has been the elephant in the room, the big issue that everyone is assiduously ignoring. —The New Yorker (10/10/2011)

"Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center's decision to forgo an expensive new cancer drug reflects a much-needed willingness to address the elephant in the room: unsustainable costs in cancer care." —Sandra Swain, president of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (10/16/2012)

"The obese elephant in the room is that health care increasingly costs the taxpayers money." —W. James Antle III, editor of the Daily Caller News Foundation (3/16/2013)

Starbucks Corp., the coffee market's 800-pound gorilla, just strolled into the kitchen, and it's making things a little tight for Green Mountain Coffee Roasters Inc." —Marketwatch (2/17/2011)

"I think whatever they do is going to be drastic because you just can't go up against the 800-pound gorilla, Apple." —Michael Decter, investment advisor, talking about Blackberry (8/12/2013)

The **elephant in the room** is a subject that is important or difficult, but no one wants to talk about it.

The **800-pound gorilla** is different: someone or something so big and strong that it gets what it wants.

The expressions are sometimes confused, as in this example:

"Pettitte used human growth hormone but the 800-pound elephant in the room is, where did it come

from?" —Assistant U.S. Attorney Steve Durham (4/18/2012)

Durham's meaning was clear enough—"the question no one wants to ask"—but 800 pounds is not large for an elephant. When former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee referred to the "800-pound elephant in the room" in a Feb. 23, 2011, interview with the Associated Press, his meaning was not clear. He may have been thinking about the gorilla.

When James Antle spoke of the "obese" elephant, he may also have been influenced by the heavy gorilla, or he embellished the phrase to make a point about health care.

Perhaps in an effort to avoid such confusion, The New Yorker example includes its own definition.

Another source of confusion is the **white elephant**, which some speakers and writers have mistakenly placed "in the room."

In my searches, the earliest example of elephant in the room with its current meaning is in a 1961 California court decision, which said that instructing a jury to ignore something might in some cases be like "warning jurors they should not think about the elephant in the room." But such examples are rare before the 1980's. Its precise origin is unknown.

800-pound gorilla probably comes from a children's riddle: "Q. Where does an 800-pound gorilla sleep? A. Wherever it wants to." The earliest example of the phrase in my searches is from 1956:

Any legislation must overcome the vehement objections of the insurance industry, which more than one congressional staffer has described as an "800-pound gorilla." —Congressional Quarterly

eleventh hour

Barbara Hershey describes herself as the "eleventh-hour actress" because she's often cast in a movie at the last minute. And that's exactly what happened with her latest film, "Black Swan." —Los Angeles Times (12/1/2010)

Late Friday, more than 2000 nurses at Montefiore Medical Center approved an eleventh-hour deal with the Bronx hospital. —New York Daily News (1/3/2012)

"Why didn't the Senate Democrats act? Where was the President's plan? Why didn't they pass something? And here we are, beyond the eleventh hour, looking at each other without having acted." —John Boehner, speaker of the House of Representatives (3/3/2013)

The **eleventh hour** means the latest time possible.

Sometimes the eleventh hour may refer to a minute—if it's the last possible minute that something could happen.

The expression is an allusion to the Biblical parable of the laborers, who received a denarius (coin) whether they started work at the beginning of the day or in the last hour.

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" —King James Bible (1616, Matthew 20:6)

exception that proves the rule

Like Tiger in his youth (and Johnny Miller and Tom Watson early in their careers), he makes a mighty swipe... Such swings demand a lot from the body ... generally, they don't last forever. (Watson may be the exception that proves the rule.) —The New Yorker (blog, 6/20/2011)

Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York, a Democrat, has adopted a different course and one can hope that he is a harbinger rather than the exception that proves the rule. —New York Post (2/23/2011)

Some analysts believe chances of lasting change are boosted if a country has at least some history of democracy...The exception that proves the rule among the European states of the former Soviet bloc is Belarus, a country with its own language but little history as an independent nation and long dominated by Moscow. —Reuters (2/13/2011)

There is a lot of confusion about **exception that proves the rule**. Those who use it may have one of three meanings in mind:

1) Assuming that every rule has an exception, this exception proves that the rule is valid. Even if the assumption is true, the conclusion is illogical.

2) The exception tests or challenges the rule. This is based on an old, rarely-used meaning of prove.

3) In legal argument, an exception to a rule can be proof that a rule exists. Example: If we know that a few kinds of consumer products are not subject to sales tax in New York, we may assume there is a rule saying that most products are subject to the tax. This is the origin of **exception that proves the rule** from the 1600's.

The New Yorker and Reuters examples seem to use the second meaning. The New York Post example seems to have the first meaning. Careful writers avoid the expression because it is a cliché, and its meaning is seldom clear.

eye on the ball, eyes on the ball, eye off the ball

The official said the White House wanted to use the drone program smartly to pick off al Qaeda leaders and the Haqqanis. "It's about keeping our eyes on the ball," the official said. —The Wall Street Journal (11/4/2011)

And central bankers are loath to seem to be responding to the latest ups and downs of financial markets. They're supposed to keep their eye on the ball—in this case, the performance of the underlying economy. —The Washington Post (8/9/2011)

"...the President's goal is that the Senate keep its eye on the ball and not allow those who clearly have no interest in passing comprehensive immigration reform...to derail this process." —Jay Carney, press secretary to President Barack Obama (6/13/2013)

"And that means there's still work to do and whenever we take the eye off the ball, then you get birther movements." —Ken Burns, filmmaker, saying that America needs more progress against racism (11/25/2012)

"You know, for most of the past two years, Washington has just taken its eye off the ball when it comes to the middle class." —President Barack Obama (7/30/2013)

If you have, or keep, your **eyes on the ball** (or **eye on the ball**), you are focusing on what is important.

The opposite, **eye off the ball**, means not focusing on what is important.

As millions of American children have been taught, you must "keep your eye on the ball" because if your attention wanders elsewhere, you will be much less likely to hit the ball with your bat. Similar advice has been given in golf and other sports. According to an 1891 guide, "Practical

Horsemanship and Riding for Ladies," even a polo horse "learns to keep an eye on the ball."

The expression was so widely used in sports during the late 1800's that people probably began to use it metaphorically then, but the earliest printed example in my searches is in a 1905 English technical journal about telephones: "It was found that people who did not "keep their eye on the ball," to use a golfing phrase, frequently jabbed the receiver downward so that a point of the switch-hook dented or bent the diaphragm."

(To be, or have a lot, **on the ball** has a different meaning.)

face the music, head in the sand

Now Andrew Cuomo is sitting in the governor's mansion, and he's threatening to shut the state down unless they face the music. —CNN (1/21/2011)

Last week the new coalition government in Athens faced the music...The lawmakers agreed to tough budget cuts viewed as necessary...—Houston Chronicle (12/13/2011)

"She stepped forward immediately...rather than releasing a statement, which a lot of celebrities do. She faced the music head on." —Marvet Britto, public relations expert, talking about Reese Witherspoon's apology after her argument with a policeman who charged her with disorderly conduct in Atlanta, Georgia (5/3/2013)

"It's...sticking our heads in the sand that we're going to...rely on our dependence on foreign oil..." —U.S. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, chair of the Democratic National Committee (4/8/2012)

But under no circumstances should you decide to walk away from the house; that's merely burying your head in the sand and will have serious financial consequences for you.—Chicago Tribune (1/13/2012)

"Now, there are people who will be critical...'Oh, you shouldn't make these changes.' But you cannot put your head in the sand and hope problems will go away." —Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe, talking about a plan to end most Saturday mail delivery (2/6/2013)

Face the music means deal directly with something difficult or bad.

To bury, or keep, one's **head in the sand** is the opposite: pretend something bad does not exist.

The origin of face the music, which has been traced to the 1800's, is uncertain and disputed. Head in the sand, also from the 1800's, is based on the idea that ostriches bury their heads when frightened. That isn't true but the legend persists, and someone who refuses to face the music may be called ostrich-like.

face time

Go for "face time" instead of just applying to online job ads, says Felix Claudio, 22, a Stony Brook University senior majoring in engineering science. He's accepted an offer from Morgan Stanley, where he interned last summer. —Newsday (4/3/2011)

"It's probably safe to say that Dennis Rodman, the American basketball player, has probably had more face time with Kim Jong-Un than the president of China." —Jon Huntsman, former ambassador to China (4/7/2013)

When you have **face time** with someone, you are both in the same place and can see each others' faces. It is the opposite of talking on the telephone or communicating online. In 2010, Apple introduced FaceTime, which lets people see video of each other when talking on their iPhones. If Apple's product is successful enough, the brand name may change the meaning of the idiom or discourage people from using it at all.

Another meaning of face time is time that a person is shown on television, as in this example:

The popular afternoon host on WFAN (and simulcast on the YES Network) has reduced his face time from 36 to 24 shows per year. —FishbowlNY.com (4/22/2011)

Printed examples of these phrases can be found from the late 1970's. They were in more frequent use by the 1980's.

See also, **face to face** (next entry).

face to face

"It's not easy to come and face so much pain and suffering, and come face to face with the people who you grew up thinking that they caused it." —Tyme Khleifi, a Palestinian violinist in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which includes Israelis, Palestinians and Arabs from other countries (2/5/2013)

...travelers who do not live in or near a city where an American consulate is located may have to spend hundreds of dollars in travel expenses for mandatory face-to-face interviews. —The New York Times (1/16/2012)

"A lot of students feel this overwhelming sense of disillusionment," said Sylvia Ellis, associate professor of history at Northumbria University. "This is the first time that many of them have come face to face with the fact that politicians will let them down."—The Washington Post (12/8/2010)

When she leaned down to look underneath the bed she came face-to-face with Lacroix. Lacroix had slipped into the house through a window... —The Berkshire Eagle (1/14/2012)

Going **toe-to-toe** or **head-to-head** means fighting or competition, but **face to face** means getting close. In its more literal uses, face to face means meeting in person, as in the Khleifi quotation and New York Times sentence, or being physically close to a person, as in the Berkshire Eagle example.

In the Washington Post example, come face to face means confront. If the sentence were written this way— "...many of them have faced the fact that politicians will let them down"— the meaning would be the same, but "come face to face with" adds a bit of emphasis.

Face to face comes from ancient Greek and Roman phrases translated into English. Examples in English have been found from as early as the 1300's.

face value

His statement to police, if taken by jurors at face value, contained enough admissions of gross negligence to amount to a manslaughter confession, prosecutors said. —Los Angeles Times (11/3/2011)

"At face value we applaud the decision, but we will be attempting to learn more about the impact

the new plan has for our residents." —William Cromie, town manager of Evesham, Pennsylvania, talking about an Environmental Protection Agency plan to clean up polluted land (7/16/2013)

"This might be the end of it because the veterans groups that we heard from seem to be accepting CBS' apology at face value." —Nischelle Turner, television news reporter, talking about the network's apology for a scene recorded in Vietnam for "The Amazing Race," an entertainment program (3/25/2013)

Literally, **face value** is the amount printed on something, like a bond or a ticket to an event.

Figuratively, if you take something at face value, you accept it without questioning it or considering other possibilities.

Printed examples of face value used figuratively appear in the 1880's. Here is one:

"Jean Monteith is a big woman," observed Mr. Tinsley... "about the biggest woman I know." Maud opened her eyes. "Why, she don't come up to my shoulder, father, anything like, and I don't believe she weighs a hundred pounds." Maud was a literal young woman; she took things at face value. —"Jean Monteith" by M.G. McClelland (1886)

fair game

Everything is fair game for the dirtiest political fighting. Any idea is twisted and shot down, just because it came from the other side. —Appleton Post-Crescent (9/11/2011)

Past presidents had long been considered fair game for moviemakers... —Politico (9/11/2011)

That means that most of Alaska will be spared the possibility of raining space debris, but the rest of North America is fair game. —cnet (9/8/2011)

"...the journalists are seen as fair game. In some cases, they're seen as lucrative kidnapping targets." —Rajiv Chandrasekaran, reporter for The Washington Post, talking about journalists working in places where there is conflict (8/18/2013)

Fair game usually means allowed, permitted, or accepted.

One literal meaning of the phrase is a game played fairly, by reasonable rules. But the figurative expression, as in all the examples, is based on the idea that some animals (game) may be hunted legally.

The earliest example in my searches, from a weekly publication in England, makes that idea explicit:

...when none but fools are contemptible, they may be hunted down as fair game. —The Literary Register (1773)

fall guy, take the fall

Connolly insists he was made the fall guy because he wouldn't falsely testify that other agents were taking bribes or feeding information to the Irish gang. —Associated Press (3/24/2011)

Every financial crisis requires a fall guy, but Fabrice Tourre didn't cause the housing bust. —Peggy Noonan, in an opinion column in The Wall Street Journal (8/2/2013)

"Biundo said Monday the financial problems were caused by other partners involved in his former restaurant ... He said that as president of the company, he took the fall for the unpaid bills." —The

(Allentown) Morning Call (3/22/2011)

...he was forced to apologize before Congress after a socialite couple, Tareq and Michaele Salahi, talked their way into a White House state dinner although they were not on the guest list...Sullivan was forced to take the fall alone. The Salahis refused to appear... —Chicago Tribune (4/17/2012)

A **fall guy** is someone who is blamed when others are guilty or at fault. The fall guy may be innocent, or guilty but not the only one who should be punished. The expression has also been used to describe a victim, someone others take advantage of.

Take the fall means be the one punished when others are guilty. The person may be blamed unfairly or take the fall deliberately for a purpose, such as protecting others or refusing to tell a secret.

Fall guy began as late-1800's American slang. The earliest example in my searches is an 1893 newspaper headline, and a 1917 example defines its meaning:

IS SONTAG A FALL GUY? The Renowned Bandit Spins a Yarn...Illinois Train Robber Captured. He Believes a Woman Gave Him Away —The Weekly Ledger (Tacoma, Washington 10/6/1893)

Fall guy! Ernie had heard the expression; he knew what it meant. Easy mark, simpleton and toy! —Munsey's Magazine (February, 1917)

Take the fall began later. An example is in a 1938 newspaper column by Westbrook Pegler:

Jim [Farley] took the fall for that, although the country knew that Jim wouldn't have ordered those boys into the air, unprepared as they were, on his own account. —The Toledo News-Bee (5/9/1938)

fall on deaf ears

Her pleas fell on deaf ears with the police as well, and she was tossed into a cell at the 94th Precinct station house. —New York Post (1/14/2012)

Iran's warning to its Gulf Arab neighbors not to raise oil output...appeared to have fallen on deaf ears. —Reuters (1/16/2012)

Rep. Charles Rangel's tears fell on deaf ears Thursday as a House panel recommended he be hit with a harsh censure for violating ... House ethics rules. —New York Daily News (11/18/2011)

When a statement or argument **falls on deaf ears**, no one will listen to it.

The Daily News example is unusual. It suggests that crying (tears) was part of Rangel's unsuccessful argument. Usually, words are what fall on deaf ears.

A related phrase, **turn a deaf ear**, means refuse to listen.

The deaf ear phrases have been traced to the 1800's. Using deaf to mean unwilling to hear, rather than unable to hear, has a longer history. Shakespeare wrote in "Timon of Athens" (1623): "Oh, that men's ears should be to counsel deaf, but not to flattery."

fall through the cracks

However, that plan seems to have fallen through the cracks as Long Beach officials dealt with massive budget deficits and saw unprecedented turnover among top department heads. —Long

Beach Press-Telegram (4/13/2011)

They came with expectations, and hopes of accessing earthquake related assistance. Instead, they fell between the cracks, forgotten or ignored. —The Miami Herald (1/17/2012)

"We have had a lot of violent act by loners, by people who have slipped through the cracks of society." —David Brooks, columnist and commentator (4/19/2013)

Something that (or someone who) **falls through the cracks** is forgotten, overlooked or neglected. **Fall between the cracks** and **slip through the cracks** have the same meaning.

The phrases often refer to the failure of a system or bureaucracy.

A centuries-old English expression, fall between two stools, is similar, but the origin of **through the cracks** is unknown. It came into use during the mid-1900's.

famous last words

Famous last words, but given the talent involved, this sounds like a can't-miss proposition. —Delaware News Journal (3/17/2011)

"This will never amount to anything," my dad pronounced, according to family lore. Famous last words. Whistler now is a world-class ski resort—with prices to match. —The Seattle Times (3/19/2011)

Famous last words, when not referring literally to a person's last statement before death, means "this may turn out to be completely wrong," as in the Delaware News Journal example; or "this turned out to be completely wrong," as in the Seattle Times example.

The expression is based on famous stories of people being spectacularly wrong, such as Civil War General John Sedgwick saying, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance," shortly before he was fatally wounded.

feeding frenzy, blood in the water

This is about a president whose opponents are flush from their victory in the deficit wars. They smell blood in the water. It's a feeding frenzy. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (8/19/2011)

This activity, with the understated name of "high-frequency trading", turns into a machine feeding frenzy every time stocks start to gain any momentum. —TheStreet.com (9/2/2011)

In addition, many entertainment giants are taking aim at Netflix, smelling blood in the water. They're making available cheaper or even free-of-charge services that cut into what Netflix has been marketing successfully for many years. —Marketwatch (9/2/2011)

As trading losses mounted, other Wall Street firms smelled blood in the water and made bets against JPMorgan's position. —Los Angeles Times (8/14/2013)

Feeding frenzy originally referred to fish, especially sharks, getting so excited while feeding in groups that they sometimes attack each other. Around the 1970's the phrase began to be used as a metaphor, describing news media activity and other topics.

Blood in the water, which attracts sharks, is part of a similar metaphor. It refers to a situation in which competitors (often in business or politics) see a weakness and prepare to take advantage.

The phrases gained popularity in and after the 1960's, reflecting public fascination with magazine articles and television programs about shark behavior. That fascination reached a peak with the 1975 movie "Jaws."

feet of clay

"Have all my gods got feet of clay? That is the question every Indian is asking," said marketing and branding guru Suhel Seth. "For the first time, you have a crestfallen India that doesn't have an inspirational icon to look up to." —The Washington Post (3/10/2011)

The search for heroes as role models can be disappointing sometimes when you discover they have feet of clay.—St. Augustine Underground (March 2011)

[Steve] Jobs' feet of clay extended well past his knees...His womanizing, his denial of his own daughter, his willingness to mix it up in the corporate snake pit—all on screen. —review of the movie "Jobs," Religion News Service (8/20/2013)

Someone who is worshipped or admired, and then found to have a weakness or defect of character, may be said to have **feet of clay**.

The expression, which has been in use at least since the 1800's, is based on a quotation from the Bible:

And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. —King James Bible (1611)

few and far between

"Applications from 16- to 19-year-olds are few and far between," said Ronald Johns, who owns seven McDonald's franchises around Bakersfield. —Bakersfield Californian (6/12/2011)

In this distant outpost, where only about 10 families live in the Indian village and 24 others were counted in the 2010 census for Furnace Creek, tutors are few and far between. —Los Angeles Times (1/19/2012)

Luckily, our disagreements were few and far between with no serious wounds. —Cody Enterprise (1/18/2012)

Few and far between means seldom, infrequent. When time is not involved, it may refer to small numbers, as in the Los Angeles Times example.

The earliest known examples of the phrase come from the 1700's, when the visits of angels were said to be few and far between.

field day

Insurance salespeople are having a field day with the fear of the common investor... —Reuters (12/21/2011)

"These websites [selling illegal guns] can be a 24-7 field day for felons, and, until today, nobody was paying any attention," Mr. Feinblatt said. —The Wall Street Journal (12/15/2011)

Tabloids [newspapers] have a field day with Kim Kardashian's 72-day marriage. —USA Today

(12/1/2011)

Field day means a time of opportunity, profit or advantage. The phrase suggests, often with a tone of criticism, that someone has something to celebrate.

In the 1700's, a field day was scheduled for military exercises. From the 1800's the phrase was also used to mean an organized day of outdoor events, or a day of celebrations.

An example of a figurative use is in a 1915 memoir:

Sunday afternoons repeated themselves, letter by letter, week by week, year by year. The bookcases were always locked, all traces of newspapers and magazines vanished, and the great Family Bible had a field day. —"My Own Past" by Maude M.C. Foulkes

fight fire with fire

Wolff tried to curb his natural instincts and not fight fire with fire, but instead to appease her. — New York Magazine (5/6/2011)

Mr. Paul is happy to fight fire with fire, however, calling Mr. Gingrich a "chicken-hawk"... — Financial Times (1/5/2012)

"The Zetas are trying to take over the country... It is a situation of fighting fire with fire and I think that you are going to see much more of that as the cartels engage them." —Mike Vigil, former Drug Enforcement Administration official, talking about gangs in Mexico (4/18/2012)

If you **fight fire with fire**, you use the same tactics that were used against you.

The expression may have been inspired by Shakespeare ("be fire with fire," from King John, 1595) and by the practice of setting "backfires" to stop forest fires.

In an 1837 Congressional debate, A.G. Harrison of Missouri may have been among the first to use backfires as a metaphor for using an opponent's tactics: "I am prompted by a principle of strict justice, and also by a principle which we set upon in the West, to fight fire with fire, when the fire has seized upon and is consuming our large and extensive prairies." The metaphorical fire he alluded to was government regulation of public land.

fight tooth and nail

"It is shocking that our little river is so polluted, and GE, which is responsible for the problem, has fought tooth and nail to avoid cleaning it up."—Litchfield County Times (1/18/2011)

Unions gave every sign they plan to fight Cuomo tooth and nail. —New York Post (1/17/2011)

"Instead of fighting tooth and nail to lock him up for the equivalent of several life sentences, the U.S. government should turn its attention to investigating and delivering justice for the serious human rights abuses committed by its officials in the name of countering terror." —Widney Brown, senior director of international law and policy for Amnesty International (8/21/2013)

Even "extreme fighting" events do not allow biting or scratching. If you **fight tooth and nail**, you do everything possible to win.

Examples of this expression have been found from as early as the 1500's.

filthy rich

They'll have to settle on being tall, handsome and only filthy rich. For most people, that would be a welcome fate but identical twins, Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss—along with college business partner Divya Narendra—thought they had a good shot at becoming insanely rich. —CBS News (4/11/2011)

Don't be greedy. Even if your goal is to get rich, you don't have to get filthy rich. —USA Today (4/26/2012)

But he's tough to love—filthy rich and scary stern... —Salon (3/30/2012)

Filthy rich means wealthy.

Filthy rich may have been inspired by the biblical filthy lucre, money made in dishonest ways. It usually has a negative connotation, but it often does not imply illegality, immorality or uncleanliness.

In the CBS News example, "only" filthy rich is a humorous allusion to the three men who sued Mark Zuckerberg for a share of Facebook but failed to become as rich as Zuckerberg.

The earliest examples are found at the beginning of the 1900's, and often use the phrase as a noun referring to wealthy people. From "A Certain Rich Man," 1909, by William Allen White: "He laughed viciously and went on, 'Sometimes I think we filthy rich are divided into two classes: those of us who keep mistresses, and those of us who have harmless entanglements with preachers and college presidents.'"

finest hour

"We learned a lot," Jobs said today. MobileMe "wasn't our finest hour." —Bloomberg News (6/6/2011)

But it was the ultimate victory of Martinez that proved to be "Dancing [With the Stars]'s" finest hour. —Buffalo News (11/29/2011)

Her detractors would argue that expectations had been so lowered that all Palin had to do was show up...She did more than that, articulating an anti-elitist line of attack against Barack Obama...It remains, arguably, her finest hour on the national stage. —Los Angeles Times (10/7/2011)

"This was not our finest hour." —Robert Greifeld, chief executive of Nasdaq OMX Group Inc., discussing problems with the start of trading in shares of Facebook (5/20/2012)

Finest hour means the best experience or achievement.

In this phrase **hour** means time, not a specific period of 60 minutes.

The expression refers to a 1940 speech by Sir Winston Churchill: "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

Later, when Churchill wrote the second book of his history of World War II, he named it "Their Finest Hour."

fingers crossed

People buy long-term care insurance crossing their fingers they'll never have to use it — Minneapolis Star Tribune (4/13/2011)

The river reached about 2.8 feet above flood stage Wednesday near Fountain City..."I think we're going to be OK," Kafer said. "Right now we've got our fingers crossed." —Winona Daily News (4/14/2011)

"Everyone keep their fingers crossed that I have a baby girl." —Danielle Cunningham, who was a subject of "16 and Pregnant," a reality TV program, referring to her second pregnancy (11/26/2012)

Some people cross two fingers of one hand for good luck. In the news examples, it's likely that nobody actually has **fingers crossed**, but they hope they will have good luck.

The idea that a cross may help avoid evil is very old, but the earliest example of the fingers expressions that my searches have found is from 1895.

A related practice—mostly by children—is keeping fingers crossed behind one's back, for the purpose of warding off punishment or guilt when telling a lie.

fire in the belly

Beckman said that "term limits actually limit choice," and said he felt people should be allowed to continue in office "if they continue to have the fire in the belly" to serve." —Naperville Sun (12/30/2010)

...he thought Carter was delivering a message that spoke to the fire-in-the-belly attitude students need to develop if they want to find a job. —USA Today (12/2/2011)

"He's been a good vice president...he's got the fire in the belly." —Bill Richardson, former governor of New Mexico, talking about the possibility of Joe Biden running for president in 2016 (4/8/2013)

People with **fire in the belly** have a strong desire to succeed.

They may be called hungry or driven or ambitious. They may be said to have motivation or gumption or spunk or get-up-and-go.

Fire in the belly has been traced as far back as the 1880's. Its origin is unknown.

fishing expedition

"We're not going to just open up the books and let people go on a fishing expedition." —Robert McNair, owner of the Houston Texans football team, after contract negotiators for the players demanded financial records from the National Football League (3/22/2011)

"The probe is a fishing expedition because no charges have been filed against my client." —Idrees Ashraf, lawyer for Husain Haqqani, former Pakistani ambassador to the United States (1/8/2012)

"The defendant wants the court to approve a fishing expedition. The court declines the invitation to do so." —Judge Carlos A. Samour Jr., in a written decision denying a request for the mental health records of prosecution witnesses in the case against James Holmes, accused of killing 12 people and injuring 70 in a Colorado movie theater in 2012 (8/16/2013)

Fishing expedition means a search for evidence of wrongdoing, without having specific questions

to answer or accusations to prove.

In a 1910 speech to the American Bankers Association, an expert on bankruptcy law told his audience that information requests were treated differently in bankruptcy court than in other courts. In other courts, said, "His Honor will gather about him his robes of ermine and sententiously declare, 'Fishing expeditions are forbidden.' But in bankruptcy the very first thing that happens is that we are all invited to go 'fishing,' to go fishing for the truth." —Harold Remington (Los Angeles, California, October, 1910)

fit as a fiddle

Fit as a fiddle at 82, Jelf loves to strum his guitar with his band, Ed and Friends. —St. Louis Suburban Journals (3/15/2011)

"He is completely healthy, happy and fit as a fiddle." —Hollywood Reporter (10/12/2011)

When you're turning 96 and still as fit as a fiddle, people are invariably going to ask your secret. —AOL News (9/23/2011)

Fit as a fiddle means healthy and vigorous.

What is healthy about a fiddle (a violin used for informal music)? No one is quite sure.

The phrase has been traced back to the 1600's, when it was also expressed as **fine as a fiddle**.

flash in the pan

Do you think America has turned the corner on its unemployment problem or is this a flash in the pan? —The Washington Post (blog, 12/19/2011)

So, does this make her a legitimate recording artist now, and not just a flash in the pan? Is this her "moment," or is Rebecca Black here to stay? —TIME (7/18/2011)

The goal is to highlight not just consumer flash-in-the-pan ideas, but actual developments that could impact your business. —inc.com (8/5/2013)

Flash in the pan means lasting a short time and not succeeding or having much effect.

The phrase originally described priming powder in a gun, when it ignited with a flash but failed to make the gun fire a shot. An early example of the expression used figuratively:

For if it be but an Emperor you meet with, then you are but to Salute with Breath; that is, to flash in the Pan only: But if a King, then Greet is the word, and you let off all the Thunder and Lightning; that is, you fire all your upper and lower Tier; for King is a more thundering Title than Emperor. —"Notes and Observations on the Empress of Morocco" by John Dryden (1674)

flesh and blood

And a somewhat embarrassed city began to realize in Frazier's death what it had not during his life—that he was a flesh-and-blood heavyweight champion who deserved as much respect and remembrance as the celluloid [cinema] hero named Rocky... —The New York Times (11/14/2011)

"Never dare to stand up for me, your own flesh and blood." —TIME (11/7/2011)

"To be wholly dependent on your employer for the welfare of your flesh and blood is to know fear like few wealthy people ever know it." —Dennis Lehane, fiction writer (5/17/2013)

"We cannot only have large-scale and state-owned enterprises. That is only the skeleton of the economy," Long told the conference, on the 10th anniversary of China's WTO entry. "We need thousands upon thousands of small and medium-sized private enterprises. They are the flesh and blood of the Chinese economy." —Reuters (11/13/2011)

Depending on context, **flesh and blood** may mean human, as in the New York Times example; or family, when it is one's own flesh and blood as in the TIME example and the Dennis Lehane quotation; or the essential, living part of something, as in the Reuters example.

The phrase is Biblical. It has been traced all the way back to Old English, in a translation of the Bible believed to have been written around the year 1000. The King James version of the Bible has numerous mentions of "own flesh and blood," meaning family, as well as examples such as this, meaning people:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. —Ephesians 6:12, King James Bible, Cambridge Edition (1611)

flesh out

"We've had a lot of fun with just trying to flesh out the characters in different ways," said actor James England. —WECT-TV (Wilmington, N.C., 12/8/2011)

Historians like to say that every war story helps flesh out the bigger picture, even the stories of clerks and truck drivers and cooks. —The Sacramento Bee (12/10/2011)

"There will be many difficult details to work out, and [Senator] Rubio's vision of some new legal status along the path to citizenship has to be fleshed out." —Tampa Bay Times editorial (1/15/2013)

When used literally, **flesh out** means add flesh; make fatter. More frequently, as in the news examples, flesh out means add details to—like putting flesh on a skeleton.

When people write, "flesh out the details," they may not realize that means, "add details to the details."

In past centuries flesh had different meanings when used as a verb. The meaning in flesh out, put flesh on a skeleton, has been traced to the 1600's. Back then, flesh was used by itself, without the preposition:

...the subject is but dull in itself...and therefore this bare skeleton of time, place, and person, must be fleshed with some pleasant passages. —"The History of the Worthies of England" by Thomas Fuller (1662)

flip out, wig out, freak out, flip one's lid, flip one's wig

It does no good to flip out every time someone does something that is illegal or just stupid. —The Coloradan (6/17/2011)

Our world is overrun by "dog whisperers" who believe they hold the secret to taming wigged-out

dogs. —Albuquerque Journal (6/24/2011)

"Don't freak out. It's not going to hit us. That's what we're told anyway." —Ashleigh Banfield, television news anchorwoman, referring to an asteroid approaching Earth (2/15/2012)

"I just don't like other people doing my laundry. It freaks me out." —Carrie Underwood (5/19/2012)

To **flip out** is to go crazy: have an emotional breakdown or act in that manner. A related expression with similar meaning is **flip one's lid**. Like **freak out**, flip out often is a vivid, exaggerated way to describe a situation that is not serious or life-threatening.

To **wig out** is to have an extreme emotional reaction, displaying anger, unhappiness or both. **Flip one's wig** has a similar meaning, and perhaps is the source of **wig out**, or it may be based on an old, mostly forgotten meaning of the verb wig, to scold severely.

To **freak out** is to have an emotional reaction. It sometimes refers to a positive emotion. ("She's freaked out about winning first prize.") The expression was widely used in the 1960's, meaning a mental breakdown in reaction to hallucinogenic drugs, but now refers to many more situations, most of them less extreme.

flip side

But sometimes the flip side of boat ownership seems daunting. The cost of purchasing a vessel. Finding storage space. The routine maintenance. —Charlotte Observer (5/27/2011)

Latin American rival Hochschild warned of the flip side of higher prices—double-digit cost increases. —Reuters (1/18/2012)

"Leaks related to national security can put people at risk...Now, the flip side of it is we also live in a democracy where a free press, free expression, and the open flow of information helps hold me accountable, helps hold our government accountable, and helps our democracy function." —President Barack Obama (5/16/2013)

The **flip side** is the other or opposite side of something.

The phrase alludes to two-sided things: coins and phonograph records. When vinyl records were made with one song on each side, the featured song was on one side and a secondary song was on the flip side.

Examples of flip side referring to phonograph records appear in the 1940's. Examples of the phrase used metaphorically begin appearing in the 1960's. It is sometimes, but not frequently, spelled as one word, flipside.

flotsam and jetsam

...the ship sank two miles from shore, forcing them to cling to life-jackets, life-rafts and other flotsam and jetsam for 16 hours until rescuers arrived. —New York Daily News (7/5/2011)

...millions of tons of plastic trash that somehow ends up in oceans around the world every year...the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life: picnic plates, bottles, cigarette lighters, toys, spoons, flip-flops, condoms. —The New York Times (5/22/2011)

...the people are smart enough and dedicated enough to sort through all the flotsam and jetsam

presented to them and make, often enough, the right decisions. —The Salt Lake Tribune (9/2/2011)

In the context of the Daily News and New York Times examples, **flotsam and jetsam** means assorted things discarded or lost, which float around in the sea. On land, flotsam and jetsam may be similar to **odds and ends**, different or not-matching things that come together accidentally.

Usually things called flotsam and jetsam are garbage or unwanted. Used figuratively in the Salt Lake Tribune example, the phrase refers to worthless ideas. It has a similarly uncomplimentary tone when referring to people.

Like other forgotten old words in idiomatic phrases (hunker, aback, gung, beck and shrift, for example) flotsam and jetsam had meanings of their own centuries ago, referring to things floating in the sea and things thrown off boats. They were used together by the early 1800's and in figurative uses by the later 1800's.

fly in the face of, in the face of

"But I think it really flies in the face of what Iowans expect and what our traditions are here," she said during a telephone conference call with reporters this morning. —Radio Iowa (7/27/2011)

The findings fly in the face of current recommendations... —Chicago Tribune (7/25/2012)

"To delay that in any fashion just seems to, you know, fly in the face of common sense." —Dan Simon, television news reporter, after an Asiana Airlines flight attendant said the pilot told her to wait before evacuating passengers after the plane crashed in San Francisco (7/9/2013)

"It is unfortunate Ambassador Rice had to make this decision in the face of such unfounded and unfair character attacks." —Representative Karen Bass of California after Susan Rice withdrew from consideration for secretary of state. (12/13/2012)

To **fly in the face of** something is to contradict or oppose it.

In the face of means against or exposed to something harsh, like a storm.

Centuries ago "fly" in the phrase meant attack, as a dog might jump to attack a person's face. But it has been used metaphorically, not referring to physical conflict, at least since the 1600's. In my searches, the earliest metaphorical example is from a sermon:

"For he that resisteth, saith the apostle, flies in the face of God." —"Two sermons [on Ps. xxi, 1] preach'd on the ninth of September 1683," by William Hughes

fly in the ointment

Vodafone finally will receive a ...$4.58 billion payment in January... One fly in the ointment is that Verizon Wireless has said nothing about a permanent resumption of payments, which were stopped in 2005. —The Wall Street Journal (7/30/2011)

Much of the change in sentiment is due to an improved U.S. economic outlook after a string of stronger data...The euro zone debt crisis remains a fly in the ointment... —Reuters (1/7/2011)

I can appreciate my children, home, job, friends and extended family more without the pressure of a miserable marriage on my back. I love my life. The fly in the ointment is extended family and close friends who keep pressuring me to ...try to meet men. —The Washington Post (1/22/2012)

A **fly in the ointment** is a small problem that can spoil or ruin something larger.

In the Wall Street Journal example, Verizon's payment was good news to Vodafone, but the uncertainty about future payments was a small problem that had the potential to become serious.

The metaphor comes from the Bible, which says that a person known for wisdom and honor can have his reputation spoiled by "a little folly," just as dead flies can make an ointment smell bad.

fold the tent

Deficit Panel Folds Its Tent —The Wall Street Journal (headline, 11/22/2011)

I asked him what he thinks the Supercommittee should do. "Go away," he said. "Just admit they don't know what they're doing and fold their tent." —The Washington Post (blog, 11/18/2011)

But the new cafe and the stage therein brought an infusion of fresh talent, and that fresh talent refused to let Hyder fold the tent. —Seattle Weekly (11/2/2011)

Fold the tent means put an end to an activity.

Originally the phrase meant end an activity and leave a place. Now, physical location may not be involved. A related metaphor, also based on leaving an encampment, is more frequently used when talking about places: **pull up stakes**.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used the phrase figuratively in the last stanza of a poem, and he may have been the first. I have found no earlier examples.

> And the night shall be filled with music,
> And the cares, that infest the day,
> Shall fold their tent, like the Arabs,
> And as silently steal away.
> —"The Day Is Done" (1844)

follow suit

"The Senate did their part. Now it's up to the House to follow suit—to put aside partisan posturing, end the gridlock, and do what's right for the American people." —President Barack Obama (3/24/2012)

"For more than 30 years, the Episcopal Church has prayed and studied to discern the evidence of God's blessing in the lives of same-sex couples. It is now only fitting that the National Cathedral follow suit." —The Very Rev. Gary Hall, dean of Washington National Cathedral, announcing that same-sex weddings would be celebrated at the Cathedral (1/9/2013)

"The markets largely had been expecting a downgrade and possibly other agencies may follow suit." —Charles Bean, Bank of England deputy governor, talking about Moody's agency reducing the U.K. bond rating (3/3/2013)

Follow suit means do what was done previously.

In a card game, following suit means playing a card of the same type as the one played before.

Examples of the phrase referring to card games have been found from the 1600's. A figurative example is in a letter dated Dec. 4, 1766: "The great duty of conversation is to follow suit, as you do at whist."

foot in one's mouth

After years of putting his foot in his mouth, Bob Baffert has come up with something he likes to call "The 10 Minute Rule." He'll talk to the media about whatever they want, but only for 10 minutes. After that, he says, he tends to say stuff he later regrets. —Los Angeles Times (5/5/2011)

The British comedian shoved his foot in his mouth moments after the curtain rose. "It's going to be a night of partying and heavy drinking," he said in his opening monologue. "Or, as Charlie Sheen calls it, breakfast."...he went on to offend the entire cast of The Tourist. —TIME (11/1/2011)

"I'm very excited, but slightly terrified as well," said Harry Lloyd, a British actor..."There are kind of a lot of opportunities to put your foot in your mouth tonight," Lloyd said. —USA Today (7/10/2011)

If you **put your foot in your mouth**, you say the wrong thing, which may embarrass you, insult someone or both.

The origin of this phrase is unknown. The earliest example in my searches is from 1854:

Lately it seems as if John Mitchel, every time he opens his mouth...puts his foot in it. But in to-day's Citizen he opens it to advantage, and puts his fist into the faces of some of his detractors very squarely. —The New York Times (2/18/1854)

foot in the door

Get your foot in the door and it will open wide. This is a good day to makes a sales presentation... —Daily horoscope, Tribune Media Services (1/11/2012)

Although Google got its foot in the door first in the U.S. with its payment platform Google Wallet, competition is coming. —CNBC (1/8/2012)

"We have found at St. Joseph Medical Center that once a person gets their foot in the door, they are hooked on health care." —Fritz Guthrie, vice president for marketing and public relations at St. Joseph Medical Center in Houston, talking about people who get entry-level jobs (8/23/2013)

A **foot in the door** prevents the door from closing, and gives someone a chance to succeed in getting in.

Here is an example of the literal meaning from an 1873 novel:

"Mr. Adrian insists upon seeing you, and refuses to leave without doing so. He has got his foot in the door, sir." —"Mad Dumaresq" by Florence Marryat

for a song

Atlanta is the feature city, where a nice home 20 minutes from downtown formerly selling for $242K is now going for a song at $52K. —Seeking Alpha (4/25/2011)

Favorite place to shop? "Inexpensive tailoring towns like Islamabad, where you can find talented craftspeople to make just about anything for a song." —The Washington Post (blog, 8/1/2013)

She is able to pick up fabrics and costumes for a song, like the pants worn by Jack Nicholson in "Batman," which she bought at an auction for $3. —Los Angeles Times (8/14/2013)

For a song means for a very small cost.

The phrase dates at least as far back as the 1600's; it is found in Shakepeare's All's Well That Ends Well.

One guess is that its origin is related to poor people singing in return for something to eat.

for all intents and purposes

There are more than one billion clams in Raritan Bay, but for all intents and purposes, oysters have been wiped out there, victims of overharvesting and pollution. —Associated Press (10/2/2011)

You probably don't recall such a situation because, for all intents and purposes, it doesn't exist in this state. —The Inter-Mountain (Elkins, West Virginia, 9/23/2011)

If by some miracle there were to be peace with Israel next week, it could only be with the Palestinians of the West Bank. Gaza to all intents is out of the equation. —Reuters (5/3/2010)

For all intents and purposes means in practical terms, or in reality.

An older version, **to all intents and purposes**, is still used and is sometimes shortened, as in **to all intents** in the Reuters example.

The first version of the phrase was published in 1546 in an act of British Parliament that (for all intents and purposes) gave King Henry VIII unlimited power to interpret laws. That version, **to all intents, constructions, and purposes**, appeared in many legal documents afterward. William Safire observed in his New York Times "On Language" column that "the synonyms were married in a phrase" to give lawyers "a comfortable feeling of nailing down a meaning."

for crying out loud

Who knows whether any of this portrayal is true -- it's an E! reality show, for crying out loud. — Newsday (11/22/2011)

As he has throughout the crisis, Adams went on Twitter after the eviction, part in frustration, part in hopes of inspiring. "For crying out loud, F-O-C-U-S!!!" he exclaimed—willing to waste tweet space on punctuation if it would help. —Los Angeles Times (11/19/2011)

"...there are some great pit bulls," he said. "It's all the way you raise them and what you do with them, for crying out loud. I could take a poodle and make it the terror of the neighborhood." — Chicago Tribune (8/27/2011

For crying out loud is an exclamation added for emphasis, such as for heaven's sake, gosh darn and many others.

Like many euphemisms (words changed to avoid offending people), for crying out loud is based on the sound of the word it avoids in the phrase "for Christ's sake."

An early example is in a 1924 novel by Harry Charles Witwer, "Love and Learn": "For crying out loud," butts in Hazel impatiently.

for keeps

Later, she delivers a puppy with the Rin Tin Tin pedigree to a family in Boston and imagines that it might remain with her for keeps. —Chicago Tribune (9/23/2011)

They said they would retire—for keeps this time—and possibly have a baby. —Reuters (2/17/2011)

...once he takes an interest in a cause, it's for keeps. —Tri-City Herald (4/29/2012)

If you play a game of marbles **for keeps**, the winner takes permanent possession of the marbles. The reference to the puppy in the Tribune example is similar: she would keep the dog permanently. In the more figurative Reuters and Tri-City Herald examples, there is no object to be kept; for keeps means permanently.

The earliest example in my searches is in a collection of stories published in 1854:

"Jim Billings, are you in downright earnest? and do you want to marry my Jule for keeps?" —"The Americans at Home" (1854)

forbidden fruit

"It used to be that rock was the forbidden fruit, you had to seek it out. Now music is everywhere, in everything you do." —USA Today (9/16/2011)

The first group of travellers have been to orphanages, medical facilities, art museums, music performances and tobacco farms and have walked the streets of Old Havana, in a first taste of the forbidden fruit that Cuba has been for five decades under the U.S. trade embargo against the country. —Reuters (8/17/2011)

Fisher and Forehand say they immediately noticed each other on their study-abroad trip -- and Fisher says she was hardly the only one who noticed Forehand. "Walker was the forbidden fruit," she says. —The Washington Post (4/2/2011)

Forbidden fruit means something that gives pleasure but is not allowed or is discouraged.

In the King James version of the Bible (1611) Adam and Eve received this warning: "But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die."

By the middle 1600's, forbidden fruit was used frequently in reference to the story of Adam and Eve, and as this example suggests, its use as a metaphor was hard to resist:

The first sin was committed by eating the forbidden fruit, and now every sin is the eating of some forbidden fruit. —"An exposition upon the Book of Job" by Joseph Caryl (1658)

foregone conclusion

A day after officials announced that they would begin clearing out the Occupy L.A. camp Monday morning, there was a sense at the City Hall camp Saturday that eviction was a foregone conclusion. —Los Angeles Times (11/26/2011)

Rep. Karl Allen, a state lawmaker and lawyer, told the teens about the effort that it takes to finish four years of college and three years of law school. Many teens assume that it's a foregone conclusion that they'll end up in jail, Allen said. —The Greenville News (11/25/2011)

Councilman Dan Deceder said closing the pool was "a foregone conclusion ... not completely because of economic reasons, but, more importantly, because of safety reasons." —Beaver County Times (11/23/2011)

A **foregone conclusion** is an inevitable event—something that happens, or will happen, no matter what else is said or done.

Foregone, infrequently used except in this phrase, means gone before, or happened before.

The earliest known example, in Shakespeare's Othello (c. 1616), has led to much discussion because its meaning is not clear. In examples from the 1700's and later, foregone conclusion means a decision made before, or a prejudice; that meaning is seldom used now. Here is an early example with meaning similar to the current usage:

A developed life, like an epic poem, has its beginning, its middle and its end; its opening scenes, its advancing conduct and its foregone conclusion. —Charleston Medical Journal and Review (January, 1860)

fork in the road

Mr. Keeshan said he found himself at a familiar fork in the road. "Should I be honest, or tell them what they want to hear?" —East Hampton Star (7/21/2011)

Everything I believe about the teachings of Jesus and the way he wanted us to treat people seems a complete contradiction to what I hear the Catholic Church leadership say about gay people. It's certainly not what I feel most Catholics believe or support. I guess this is where faith and religion meet a "fork in the road" and choices must be made... —Patriot-News (Harrisburg, Pa., 7/17/2011)

"It's a fork in the road...I'm 64 years old...I'm looking for a new career." —John Catsimatidis, billionaire and owner of a supermarket company, talking about running for mayor of New York City (2/12/2013)

A **fork in the road** is a time or place when it is necessary to make a decision. It alludes to what happens when a road splits and a traveler must choose a direction.

Fork has been used to mean the branch of a river or road since the 1700's. (It may also refer to land, as in the North and South Forks of Long Island, New York.) A connection between road forks and decisions was made in 1826, in heated U.S. Senate debate over a bill to establish a uniform system for bankruptcy. Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina said that even if it caused a permanent rift with another senator, he would vote for the bill "when we come to that fork in the road."

from scratch

In the long term, Miller said it would be more "efficient" and "economical" to start from scratch and build a new facility where the current parking lot is—similar to the way Citi Field was built to replace Shea Stadium. —New York Daily News (12/15/2011)

The U.S. military built the Anbar security forces almost from scratch after the Sunni Awakening movement in 2007 succeeded in defeating the al-Qaeda in Iraq insurgency. —The Washington Post (12/17/2011)

My Italian dad was a home cook who made bread and pasta from scratch by hand weekly.—Business Insider (12/17/2011)

"We started from scratch." —Daniel Graf, mobile director of Google Maps, referring to Google's

new maps application for iPhones. (12/13/2012)

From scratch means from the beginning, without some advantage or experience, or (in cooking) with basic ingredients.

From scratch was used in sports in the 1800's, meaning starting without a handicap or advantage. Scratch referred to a starting point, a line scratched in the ground. A handicap would be a line ahead of the starting point. An early example of starting from scratch is in a New Zealand newspaper:

Harris's next victories were at the Christmas sports, at Red House, Northcote, where he carried off [won] the 440 yards handicap hurdle race, and the 440 yards handicap flat race, starting from scratch, as he nearly always did from this time and forward... —Grey River Argus (3/17/1870)

from the get-go

In interviews, Peretz has been telling people that from the get-go, he and his screenwriters envisioned Rudd as the lead in Our Idiot Brother. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (8/21/2011)

It sounds like you have been more than accommodating to him from the get-go... —Buffalo News (8/20/2011)

"The real truth is, the people who were there in Tripoli and in Benghazi knew this was a terrorist attack from the get-go." —Congressman Darrell Issa (5/12/2013)

From the get-go means from the beginning. Although its precise origin is unknown, it seems related to get going—get started. (It is sometimes hyphenated, sometimes not.)

From the get-go comes from African-American speech, and most of the early printed examples are in African-American publications of the 1960's. The earliest example I found in a mass-circulation newspaper is a quotation from a WNET interview with the Latino writer Piri Thomas, whose autobiography about growing up in Harlem, "Down These Mean Streets," was a best-seller in 1967:

"Nobody tells a kid that you don't belong. Let our children share. Stop teaching them the petty stinking hates. Children know love from the get go, from the very beginning." —The New York Times (11/17/1968)

from the ground up, in on the ground floor

So, he opened K-Beach Small Engine Parts & Service in 1995 and began building a business from the ground up. —The Republic (Columbus, Indiana, 9/29/2011)

"I'm nominating Penny Pritzker to serve as my Secretary of Commerce. Penny is one of our country's most distinguished business leaders...She's built companies from the ground up." —President Barack Obama (5/2/2013)

McClure said he wanted to get in on the ground floor of video game production here and had an idea to develop a game... —Crain's Detroit Business (9/11/2011)

"It was a unique opportunity for me to grow and shape a newly created position, as well as be in on the ground floor of a dynamic, fee-based wealth management and financial planning firm." —The Daily News (Memphis, Tenn., 9/7/2011)

From the ground up means completely, from the beginning.

In on the ground floor means included in something from the beginning, especially when it will increase the chance of future success.

The earliest printed examples of these phrases are from the 1800's. One is in a short piece of magazine fiction, "The Founders of Globe City" by J.O. Culver:

"If the land don't advance a thousand per cent. in two years," said Chinny, "I'll eat a gopher...Land is land; that's one of the satisfactions o' comin' in on the ground-floor. —Putnam's magazine (November, 1868)

from the horse's mouth

Here is a diagnosis of what's wrong with health care in America, straight from the horse's mouth: There's too much. In a new poll of primary care physicians, nearly half of them said their patients received too much medical care and more than a quarter said they were practicing more aggressively than they'd like to. —Reuters (9/26/2011)

In a message coming straight from the horse's mouth...Motorola has promised to update its Android handsets to the newest version of the software... —TIME Techland (10/25/2011)

"I felt like I did enough, but to hear it from the horse's mouth was pretty satisfying." —Chicago Tribune (3/25/2011)

From the horse's mouth means from the best possible source of information, the source with the most knowledge or authority. **Straight from the horse's mouth** means directly from the authoritative source.

Unfortunately there is no authority or horse who can tell us the origin of this expression. An early example is in a 1913 novel:

"I got a tip yesterday, and if it wasn't straight from the horse's mouth it was jolly well the next thing to it." —"The Bishop's Purse" by Cleveland Moffett and Oliver Herford (1913)

fuddy-duddy

And Brian Reid, who had been hired as Google's director of operations in 2002 at age 52, filed suit against the company after he was fired in 2004, claiming he was commonly referred to as "old man" and an "old fuddy-duddy" and was told he was not a "cultural fit." —Computerworld (9/1/2011)

The new ambassador was the fuddy-duddy, the man whose favorite way to end an evening was with a glass of milk, a bowl of stewed peaches and a good book. —The New York Times (5/19/2011)

I don’t consider myself, at age 55, some fuddy-duddy. I have continued to listen to music throughout my life, trying to stay hip so I can relate to the youth of today. —McPherson Sentinel (4/9/2012)

In the late 19th Century, a fierce controversy raged... Either Brahms was the only real composer and Wagner was a raving lunatic, or Wagner was a visionary and Brahms an old fuddy-duddy. —The Grunnion Gazette (4/26/2012)

A **fuddy-duddy** is a person with old-fashioned ideas and habits, someone who might be likely to spoil the fun. (See also, stick-in-the-mud.)

The origin is unexplained. It may be related to an older expression, duddy fuddiel, a ragged fellow. In my searches, the earliest printed example appears in an 1871 American magazine, Overland Monthly, in which fuddy duddy is the name of a pair of horses. Another example, published in 1875, is closer to the modern meaning:

There was an old gentleman who lived in a house which sat upon the spot where Captain Cutter's house now stands. He went by the not very classical name of old "Fuddyduddy." His business was repairing carriages. —The New Gloucester Centennial by T.H. Haskell (1875)

funny farm, loony bin

Although the state has become the freeway-clogged, Hollywood-saturated, fiscally bankrupt funny farm that it is today, it's still home to some of America's most productive and fertile farmland. —The Atlantic (6/28/2011)

"It was something I had to do," he told The Times then. "I had this dream for 20 years, and if I hadn't done it, I would have ended up in the funny farm." —Los Angeles Times (11/4/2011)

It was, in essence, a product that seemed to be designed to drive editors right into the loony bin. —The Motley Fool (7/2/2011)

Police said they told Shaw to drop the knife, but he stepped towards them, holding the knife two to three feet away from an officer's chest. Police said Shaw eventually complied and dropped the knife and said, "Take me to the loony bin." —The Times Leader (1/18/2012)

Funny farm and **loony bin** are slang expressions meaning psychiatric institution.

The origin of funny farm, apparently during the 1950's, is unknown.

Loony bin, which has been traced as far back as 1919, may come from lunatic asylum, a phrase used rarely now except in historical articles.

game changer, game changing

"I think what Mitt Romney needs is a game-changer in the first debate." —David Gergen, political consultant and former presidential advisor (9/23/2012)

Google still makes gobs of money—nearly $30 billion a year—from its search advertising business and has some of the best minds in the industry working on game-changing technologies. —Los Angeles Times (4/1/2011)

"The real game changer in transportation is better fuel mileage." —Phiiladelphia Inquirer (blog, 1/19/2012)

"...once we establish the facts, I have made clear that the use of chemical weapons is a game changer." —President Barack Obama, talking about fighting in Syria (3/20/2013)

Game changer and **game changing** are used frequently to describe plays (or players) that change the outcome of sports events. In business, politics or other activities, game-changing means having an impact so powerful that the effects are wide and long-lasting.

The earliest example of game changer in my searches is in a 1989 sports story: "There isn't anyone

who could play defense, rebound and become a game-changer like him." The phrases spread beyond sports during the late 1990's.

See **sea change** and **paradigm shift**.

game of chicken

Throughout the day, members of both parties played a game of chicken, seeking to force the other to give in as the deadline of midnight Friday approached. —The New York Times (4/8/2011)

In fact, by turning dealmaking into a game of chicken, the debt ceiling favors fanaticism. —The New Yorker (7/25/2011)

"There is this political game of chicken taking place in D.C. between the various parties in Congress." —Lousiana State Senator J.P Morrell (2/21/2013)

A **game of chicken**, or **playing chicken**, means a dangerous test of who will yield (give in) first.

Calling someone **chicken** is accusing him of lacking courage; being a coward.

The phrase "game of chicken" was made popular by a scene in the 1955 movie "Rebel Without a Cause." In a game played by rebellious teenagers, they drive cars toward a cliff and jump out before the cars go off the cliff. The driver who jumps last wins the game.

gear up for

The National Republican Congressional Committee ended the month with $13.8 million in the bank, as the political parties gear up for the 2012 election.—(11/1/2011)

All 700 California school districts that operate elementary schools are gearing up for the change. —San Jose Mercury-News (11/27/2011)

Occupy D.C. protesters emerged from their makeshift homes in McPherson Square, hung their clothes out to dry and geared up for the days—or weeks or months—ahead. —The Washington Post (11/24/2011)

"Both sides in the gun debate are gearing up for a fight over tighter controls." —Chris Wallace, television news anchor (1/13/2013)

Gear up for means prepare for; get ready for.

Gear is most frequently used when talking about equipment, or machinery. An ancestor of that word is yare, an Old Germanic word that meant ready.

It was not until the 1880's and the popularity of bicycles that gear up was born. It meant using gears to make the driving wheel go faster than the pedals. An early example of the phrase used beyond that context is in a trade journal printed in Philadelphia:

It is reported that the small manufacturers of Brooklyn are making all the money today...[and bigger manufacturers are not], because of the systematic routine and inability to gear up for small orders... —American Review of Shoes and Leather (December, 1920)

get a handle on

Hope that Europe is getting a handle on its debt crisis has grown in recent days... —Reuters

(12/6/2011)

Four years ago, they figured out his real name; two years ago, they got a handle on where he lived. —USA Today (5/2/2011)

"We should start with spending and debt because, if we don't get a handle on that, nothing else matters." —Senator Mitch McConnell (1/22/2013)

To **get a handle on** a problem is to understand it and be able to solve it, or get the problem under control.

In sports, **getting the handle** or **finding the handle** means holding or catching the ball. If "he couldn't find the handle," he dropped the ball or failed to catch it.

In my searches, this is the earliest example of get a handle on used with its current meaning:

There you began to get a handle on the real cause. —The Implement Age (Philadelphia, 2/11/1909)

get hammered

"I kept telling the captain we're going to get hammered by this storm and he scoffed at me." —Santa Cruz Sentinel (12/24/2011)

The show's performance is especially crucial to NBC because virtually its entire new fall slate got hammered in the ratings. —Los Angeles Times (1/18/2012)

"The West Coast is getting hammered by its third storm inside one week." —Ashleigh Banfield, television news anchorwoman (12/3/2012)

The literal meaning of **hammered** is hit with a hammer. In the news examples, hammered means hit hard.

In sports **get hammered** often means lose by a large margin. A slang meaning, less often seen in the news, is get drunk or affected severely by drugs.

Some figurative uses of hammer have been traced to the 1400's. An early example of get hammered:

You don't know the work on deck, you get hammered by the mates... —The Northwestern Miller (Minneapolis, 10/24/1900)

get off the ground, get off the dime

Unlike the other pro-democracy movements, Algeria's demonstrations have yet to get off the ground. —Associated Press (3/4/2011)

The arena never got off the ground, but the new dorm and recreation center were completed in 2009 and 2010... —The Sacramento Bee (1/20/2012)

Relatively small changes in contributions and benefits would fix the problem, but the crisis is not imminent and nobody will get off the dime. —Columbia, Missouri, Daily Tribune (2/26/2011)

...public officials couldn't seem to get off the dime. The bathrooms should have been installed a long time ago... —Palm Beach Daily News (11/12/2011)

Get off the ground means get started. It is often used in the negative, as in the Sacramento Bee

example.

Get off the dime means stop delaying and do something.

One researcher traced **get off the dime** to 1920's dance halls, where couples were told to move around instead of standing in one spot. A related use of dime, the smallest American coin, is **stop on a dime**.

Airplanes first got off the ground in 1903, and by the following decade get off the ground had taken flight as a metaphor:

There were some verbal aviators at the caucus with speeches to fly who never got off the ground. —Collier's (6/7/1919)

get one's act together

"Do I think Washington, D.C. needs to get its act together and enact stricter gun control laws at the federal level? You bet I do." —Dan Malloy, governor of Connecticut (12/17/2012)

"People were losing patience with Greece. In the end they got their act together and it's definitely a positive." —Markus Huber, a financial trader, talking about passage of spending reduction by the Greek parliament (2/13/2012)

"The opposition, as it showed last time around during the election process, was terribly disorganized. Is there any indication that...they can get their act together...with one candidate who's going to represent that secular, liberal side of the society?" —Michael Holmes, television news anchor, talking about Egypt (7/4/2013)

If you **get your act together**, you prepare to work or perform competently. The phrase is often used negatively, implying that the work or other activity needs improvement.

This phrase probably began as slang in the entertainment business. An early printed example is in Billboard Magazine's review of an album by the Supremes published June 19, 1971: "The trio has really got its act together, and are sounding more exciting than ever."

get one's arms around, wrap one's arms around

Raycom's plan called for the Metro to expand to 16 football-playing schools with two eight-team divisions or four four-team divisions..."It would have changed the face of college athletics," said Dave Hart... "But the presidents just couldn't get their arms around it." —Sporting News (9/28/2011)

He added that what Europe hasn't done yet is "put in place the financial capacity to make that work." Geithner said Europe is going to move more quickly and with more force. "They're going do what they need to do to get their arms around this," Geithner said. —Bloomberg Businessweek (10/6/2011)

"No election [in Afghanistan]...is going to be something that Thomas Jefferson would wrap his arms around. This is Afghanistan and we've got to be very careful about not getting overly ambitious." —Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations (1/11/2013)

"It's a phenomenon that I don't think we have totally gotten our arms around, but we see it again and again." —Ray Kelly, New York City Police commissioner, talking about young Islamic men

becoming radical and violent. (4/21/2013)

If you get your arms around someone, you are giving a hug. But if you **get or wrap your arms around** something, you understand it well enough to be comfortable with it. You may get your arms around an idea, as in the Sporting News example, or a problem or challenge.

The connection between **arms around** and understanding is hundreds of years old and can be found in the word fathom. One meaning of fathom, since the 1600's, is understand: I can't fathom why they're doing this. Another meaning, which has been traced to the 1300's, is encircle with the arms. For hundreds of years, to wrap one's arms around something and to understand were represented by the same word, and easily associated in the minds of English speakers.

get one's head around, wrap one's head around

Zahau's ex-husband, Neil Nalepa, said he was still "trying to get my head around" his former wife's grisly death. —New York Post (7/19/2011)

It also happens to be the simplest mortgage to get your head around...Put simply, it's a 30-year term loan with a fixed rate. —Zillow.com (11/2/2011)

But even after the firm won some awards for the progressive arrangement, clients couldn't quite wrap their heads around the idea. —TIME (12/5/2011)

If you **get your head around** something you understand it. **Wrap your head around** has the same meaning.

It is often used in the negative, as in the TIME magazine example.

Originally British, the expression is now widespread in the United States. Examples have been found as early as the 1920's, but the earliest U.S. examples I have found are from 1980.

get someone's goat

If high gas prices get your goat, you are not alone. —KOMO, Seattle (6/25/2011)

"Here's what really gets my goat: dancing on the Devil Dog's coffin." —Bill Flanagan, author and television executive, after the announcement by bankrupt Hostess Brands, Inc., that it would stop making Twinkies, Devil Dogs and other well-known snacks (11/18/2012)

Bureaucratic political appointees are the scourge that really gets my goat. —News Herald (Panama City, Fla., 1/13/2012)

Get someone's goat means make them angry.

The origin of this expression is unknown.

The earliest example I could find is from October, 1905, in Public Opinion, an American weekly magazine: "Well, that gets my goat," gasped Alice when we recovered speech.

get the ball rolling, keep the ball rolling

If approved, the school district will get the ball rolling on those projects by requesting approval for planning and design from the School Facilities Commission.—Gillette, Wyoming, News Record (3/21/2011)

Now the Coliseum is back on the agenda because city leaders finally got the ball rolling on the Coliseum City plans. —Oakland Tribune (12/16/2011)

After the iPod, Apple kept the ball rolling with the iPhone. —Seeking Alpha (3/10/2011)

To **get the ball rolling** is to get something started. To **keep the ball rolling** is to make something continue happening.

Examples of this phrase have been found from as early as the 1700's.

get to the bottom

"I'm not going to stop until we get to the bottom of it." —Senator Lindsay Graham, saying he would block President Obama's appointments for the department of defense and Central Intelligence Agency until Obama answered questions about the September, 2012, attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya (2/10/2013)

...there were few genuine revelations or anything that would have allowed the committee to conclude that they had finally got to the bottom of the scandal. —TIME (7/19/2011)

"Investors need to feel that the people in charge are getting to the bottom of the problem and trying to resolve the problem, not just coming up with some convenient solution." —Reuters (11/15/2011)

Get to the bottom of something means get a complete explanation, a full understanding.

The meaning of **bottom** in **get to the bottom** is the essential nature. That meaning is also used in the phrases **at bottom** and **at the bottom**. Examples of bottom with that meaning have been found as early as the 1500's.

Get to the roots and **get the lowdown** have similar meanings. The bottom and the lowdown recall the time when people on boats lowered rope or long sticks into the water to learn how far down the bottom was.

get traction

Michele Dunne, an expert at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, noted that the Western-educated Saif Gadhifi has pushed such reforms previously, but they have not gotten much traction. —CNN (2/20/2011)

The new numbers suggest that California's economy is gaining traction as it steadily replaces more of the 1.3 million jobs lost in the 2007-2009 recession. —Los Angeles Times (1/20/2012)

Steven Spielberg's "War Horse" never really got the traction expected... —San Jose Mercury News (1/19/2012)

When the wheels of a car spin on ice or snow, the car does not have traction and it cannot move. When a plan or an idea **gets** or **gains traction**, it begins to move or have success.

An early example of get traction as a metaphor is in the Jan. 3, 1964, issue of LIFE Magazine: "the Alliance [for Progress] has, we believe, begun to get traction... "

get under (someone's) skin

When an American negotiator got under the skin of a North Korean military official, the military man calmly responded that he knew where the American diplomat lived. —Los Angeles Times (11/22/2010)

Unless you're somebody that I care about, it's pretty hard to get under my skin. —USA Today (12/8/2011)

...Santorum and Romney, two men who proved particularly adept at getting under Perry's skin. —Austin American-Statesman (1/19/2012)

If I **get under your skin**, I make you feel an emotion that you cannot ignore. I might make you angry (like the military official in the Los Angeles Times example) or make you fall in love.

The phrase inspired Cole Porter's popular song in 1936:

> I'd tried so not to give in
> I've got you under my skin.

Other examples of the phrase have been found from as early as the 1890's.

get wind of

But when Vanderbilt students got wind of the deal, some of them balked at the idea of their school partnering with a nation where homosexuality is a crime, pro-democracy activists have been jailed, foreign laborers have few rights and it is illegal to teach about the Holocaust in public schools. —The Tennessean (4/28/2011)

"When we get wind of missing cookies and empty milk jugs, we know Santa has been through our neck of the woods." —The Catskill Daily Mail (12/25/2011)

If people on Twitter or Google+ get wind of your special day, the chances of you receiving a few "Happy Birthdays" in your stream increases substantially. —Forbes (11/23/2011)

To **get wind of** something is to find out about it in an unofficial way.

In the Tennessean example, If Vanderbilt had made a public announcement about its deal with the government of Abu Dhabi, the newspaper would have reported that the students reacted to it, not that they got wind of it.

The expression has been used since the early 1800's. It also could mean "get a small amount of knowledge of something"; a hint, as an animal might gain knowledge by sniffing the air, but examples of that meaning are less common now.

get with the program

...peer pressure is used as a positive force so students pressure one another to get with the program and behave. —Austin American-Statesman (11/8/2011)

Since then, Harris has come under pressure from the Obama administration to get with the program and agree to a settlement. —Los Angeles Times (11/21/2011)

"As we're struggling to overcome the fiscal cliff, we're calling on Republicans to get with the program and get with what the majority of Americans believe." —Toledo, Ohio, City Council President Joe McNamara (12/8/2012)

Get with the program means accept the prevailing way of thinking; or participate fully in the

mission ordered by superiors.

If you are not acting like a **team player**, you may be told to get with the program.

Get with the program may be among the expressions that started in African-American communities. The earliest printed example in my searches is in a letter to Ebony Magazine in 1965.

...the sooner you people get with the program and realize this, the sooner we can get together and work out things. —Ebony (October, 1965)

give a piece of one's mind

I once got a phone call from a mom who was absolutely furious. She thought her daughter had been left out of a Girl Scout event I was involved with. This mom gave me more than just a small piece of her mind. I could picture her reaching through the phone lines to try to strangle me. —Napa Valley Register (3/7/2011)

But I sure as hell gave him a piece of my mind. I gestured. I honked. I combined swear words in new and creative ways. It was quite a display. —Yakima Herald (12/21/2011)

If you've ever wanted to give one of Bravo's "Real Housewives" a piece of your mind, your chance is coming up: The cabler is launching the Real Housewives Live Tour, bringing cast members from the show's various editions together for three live dates this fall. —Variety (8/15/2011)

If you **give someone a piece of your mind**, you are angry and telling the person why you are angry. **Scolding** often has the same meaning.

Examples of this expression have been found from as early as the 1500's.

give and take

"There may be some give and take. That's always fun and entertaining, I know." —Mitt Romney, before a debate among Republican candidates for president (1/25/2012)

"Any free trade agreement involves give and take." —Ed Fast, Canadian trade minister (5/17/2012)

"Now, of course, there will be rigorous debate about many of the details, and every stakeholder should engage in real give-and-take in the process." —President Barack Obama (1/29/2013)

Give and take may mean debate or exchange of ideas, as in the Romney quotation. It may mean compromise, as in the Fast quotation. Or, it may mean both, as in the Obama quotation.

Examples of variations of this phrase have been found from as early as the 1500's. In Shakespeare's Richard III (1597), the Duke of Norfolk says to Richard, referring to the coming battle, "We must both give, and take, my lord."

give in, give out, give up

"Hassan Rouhani has already said that he is willing to consider a change of tactics, a way of talking to the United States and other Western powers. But I don't think he is ready to really compromise or give in." —Thomas Erdbrink, Tehran bureau chief for The New York Times

(6/17/2013)

The workers became trapped 12 stories up for more than an hour above a street Friday afternoon after their scaffold gave out.— Associated Press (3/5/2011)

"There is an opportunity for North Korea to give up a path that has resulted in isolation and impoverishment for North Korea." —Jay Carney, press secretary to President Barack Obama (4/11/2013)

In these three expressions, prepositions change the meaning of **give**:

To **give in** is to say yes to a request or demand, reluctantly or after resisting.

If English followed logic, **give out** would be the opposite of give in, but it's not. Depending on the context, give out may mean distribute ("We give out $25 worth of candy on Halloween.") or it may mean break or collapse, as the scaffold did in the Associated Press example.

Give up means stopping an action, as in giving up the fight or giving up smoking. It can also describe allowing something to happen or be taken away: "The union will give up some of its benefits." Used alone it means stopping a struggle or an effort to do something: "I give up. Tell me the answer." See also, call it quits; throw in the towel.

glass ceiling

"And even though she worked hard and was good at what she did, she ultimately hit a glass ceiling and was passed over for promotions time and again because she was a woman." —Michelle Obama (e-mail to campaign supporters, 11/14/2011)

"There is a glass ceiling in politics. We only have seventeen percent...women in the House and the Senate." —Norah O'Donnell, CBS News Chief White House Correspondent (5/13/2012)

"...you look forward to the day when we will have a woman president and the glass ceiling is finally shattered...there will just be more and more opportunities..." —Steve Schmidt, political analyst and Republican campaign strategist (3/10/2013)

Glass ceiling means an invisible barrier that prevents the careers of some people from advancing. It most frequently refers to discrimination against women.

The phrase began to be used with that meaning in 1984. By 1986 it was widespread. A March 24, 1986, special report in The Wall Street Journal had this cover headline: "The Glass Ceiling: Why Women Can't Seem to Break The Invisible Barrier That Blocks Them From the Top Jobs."

gloom and doom

For all the gloom and doom about what happens if the United States defaults on its debt, you have to give the House Republicans credit for fighting hard for serious reductions in spending. —The Daytona Beach News-Journal (6/29/2011)

The story in New York is not all gloom and doom for the president. He has hosted a string of sold-out fundraisers with financiers in the city. —Los Angeles Times (9/30/2011)

McGahee said a number of deals fell through...leaving Duluth with lots of vacant space and few interested renters or buyers. "There was gloom and doom and despair everywhere." —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (1/5/2012)

"When I was there just a few weeks ago, everything was gloom and doom. The Taliban were exhibiting extraordinary ferocity and reach and going after international charities, even going after the International Red Cross..." —Pamela Constable, newspaper journalist, talking about Afghanistan and the Taliban's offer to negotiate for peace. (6/18/2013)

Gloom and doom means severe pessimism; warnings that things are going wrong or will go badly in the future.

We may guess that the phrase became popular because the words sound good together, but the origin is uncertain.

An early example from a poem published in London:

> Would we but be
> Unbowed and proud
> And choose to use
> Those powers in hours
> Of gloom and doom.
> —"The Heart's Hope" by Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley (1838)

gloves off

In the new issue of Us Weekly, she took the gloves off. "Eddie is a compulsive liar, cheater and a home wrecker," she told the magazine. "And he has been an absentee father." —Newsday (8/24/2011)

Though he opposed waterboarding, a report in Newsweek on Monday noted that he had been quoted as saying "we do have to take the gloves off in some areas." —Chicago Tribune (5/3/2011)

"During those last three weeks, Mitt [Romney] really took the gloves off. He put aside efforts to be likable." —Ben Coes, novelist and political strategist (4/5/2012)

This year, with one son going into the treacherous, teachers-take-the-gloves-off seventh grade... —The Washington Post (8/16/2013)

If you **take the gloves off**, you use the strongest tactics and act without restraint.

An earlier version of this phrase, **handle** (someone) **without gloves**, was in use at least as early as the beginning of the 1800's. A transcript from 1802 of hearings regarding cattle diseases in Nebraska refers to a demand that the U.S. secretary of agriculture "place this work in the hands of men who will handle the matter without gloves."

Today, the origin of "gloves off" phrases is presumed to be boxing: an allusion to old-style fighting with bare hands. But most boxing was not done with gloves until later in the 1800's, which casts doubt on that explanation. A more likely possibility is that the phrase referred to gentlemen in general—not boxers—removing their gloves to prepare for rough action.

go belly up

"We have one solar power company that went belly up for 2.1 billion." —Newt Gingrich (5/27/2012)

The firm went belly-up after Corzine decided to risk pretty much everything on European debt. —

New York Post (2/1/2012)

...more than 40% of first marriages go belly-up. —TIME (4/29/2011)

Go belly up means die. It alludes to fish and other creatures that turn on their backs when dead.

The phrase belly up was used as a verb with the same meaning but is rare today; more common is **belly up to** (the bar, the food table, etc.), meaning to get close so that one's belly is touching.

Examples of belly up used figuratively have been found as early as the 1920's.

go cold turkey

The Floyd County utilities administrator quit smoking Nov. 18, spurred by the free turkey the county was offering employees who participated in the American Cancer Society's Great American Smokeout. "I went cold turkey to win a turkey," Hulsey said. —Rome (Georgia) News-Tribune (11/24/2010)

Whether they quit "cold turkey" or with nicotine replacement therapy, smokers need to feel that their lives will be better smoke-free. —The New York Times (1/18/2012)

Nobody's saying we should go cold turkey, but we need to start taking serious steps to curb our dependence on unsustainable resources. —Barrie Examiner (1/19/2012)

If you **go** or **quit cold turkey**, you end an addiction completely and quickly, not gradually.

The phrase originally referred to drug addiction, and now is extended to figurative cases, as in the Barrie Examiner example.

How the expression was invented is unknown. The earliest examples appear around 1920.

A plan called by the addicts "cold turkey"—abrupt withdrawal (practiced in Kings County Hospital, and without a death)—is not only possible but practical. It does occasion some suffering... —monthly bulletin of the New York City Department of Health (February, 1920)

go down with the ship

"If the euro fails, then Europe fails," Merkel often says. She might add that she and Sarkozy would be likely to go down with the ship. —Reuters (10/3/2011)

But Syria's captains of industry are asking whether they must "go down with the ship", as one puts it. Some are taking their children out of private schools in Damascus to send them abroad. —The Economist (6/30/2011)

Sears shares are bouncing at nine-year lows, as bad news continues to surprise investors...But the magical thinking plays on, as shareholders are apparently determined to go down with the ship. —Townhall.com (8/23/2013)

Go down with the ship is a simple metaphor, which compares an event to the act of dying on a sinking boat.

As in the Reuters and Economist examples, it often refers to a person in a leadership position having a negative experience, sometimes by choice, and compares that to the demise of a ship's captain. In other uses, it may refer to victims of a bad situation.

An early example of **go down with the ship** as a metaphor is in "The History of Rationalism," an

1865 book by John Fletcher Hurst, which said the church should not be viewed as a "sort of a life-boat hanging round a wreck that may carry off a few women and selfishly-affrighted men, leaving the bolder, braver, larger portion to go down with the ship... "

go figure

On the one hand we talk about how our nation has fallen behind others in the proficiency of our students. Then we hear about cutting pre-kindergarten programs. Go figure. —The Moultrie (Georgia) Observer (3/2/2011)

...5,000 girls in 19 states who got pregnant unintentionally and subsequently gave birth between 2004 and 2008. Half had not used birth control and a third explained their reasoning by saying they didn't think they could get pregnant. Go figure. —TIME (1/20/2012)

Many diners are uneasy about the whole process. Yet, it is claimed, surveys indicate most Americans still prefer the tipping system rather than an assigned gratuity amount. Go figure. —Buffalo News (11/30/2011)

Go figure means try to explain that.

It usually refers to something the writer believes is contradictory or illogical.

Go figure is a shortened version of "go figure that one out." The earliest example in my searches is in a letter to Abigail Van Buren, author of the syndicated Dear Abby advice column:

He would like me to go to work (for the money) but wants me at home whenever he is home, and he works a rotating shift. (Go figure that one out!) —McNaught Syndicate (3/16/1962)

go for broke, go all out

Hundreds of Japanese-American veterans of World War II were honored Saturday with a parade in Honolulu...Those in the parade Saturday wore hats with the names of their units on them, and some included the saying "Go for Broke," which had been the motto of the 442nd Regimental Combat team. —Associated Press (12/17/2011)

"Nonetheless, we doubt that banks in the region's most troubled economies will go for broke and purchase vast quantities of their governments' debt..." —The New York Times (12/20/2011)

Occasionally it's a little too easy to get lost in the casual pace of the [rap music] album when some go-for-broke madness would be welcome. —The Washington Post (12/12/2011)

One TV pundit speculated Semenya didn't go all out for gold because she didn't want to create any controversy. —Associated Press (8/11/2012)

Go for broke means try with all one's effort, not worrying about risk.

Go all out has a similar meaning but **go for broke** puts more emphasis on disregarding risk.

The origin of go for broke is unknown. Judging from search results, its use in print began in the 1930's, and its adoption by Japanese-American soldiers in World War II gave it more prominence. This example, from 1944, suggests that go for broke was not well known enough by then to be printed without using another slang expression to explain it. (The other phrase, "shoot the works," is now seldom used.)

"Go for broke" is the motto of the loyal Japanese-Americans who compose the 442nd Combat

Team of the U.S. Army. The expression is the equivalent of "Shoot the works."—Popular Science (November, 1944)

go great guns

...Land Rover (and especially Range Rover) is going great guns and reporting record sales and profits... —Automotive News (6/23/2011)

...the price of key commodities like copper have been going great guns. —The Wall Street Journal (1/18/2012)

Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd College, says her institution is going great guns... —Forbes (11/15/2011)

Go great guns means advance quickly and successfully.

The origin is unknown. The earliest examples I have found are in English dog-racing reports from the 1860's, in which successful greyhounds were said to be going great guns. An older expression, blowing great guns, referred to violent storms.

go haywire

His trip to the moon in Apollo 13 went haywire 16 years ago, but Hanks is set to blast off into space once again - in a film based on a toy. —Columbus Dispatch (6/20/2011)

I am extremely appalled at even the thought of establishing a resort casino in our town...This is not economic development. This is development gone haywire. —Northwest Florida Daily News (1/19/2012)

The airline's loyal customers, however, were quick to jump on Facebook to complain last fall when its reservation system went haywire. —The Bend Bulletin (1/17/2012)

Boston's emergency departments have seen a recent increase in people with vomiting and diarrhea...So, what's making so many gastrointestinal systems go haywire? —WBUR-FM (Boston, 1/6/2012)

"Investors around the world will ask if the United States of America is in fact a safe bet. Markets could go haywire." —President Barack Obama, warning Republicans not to oppose an increase in the U.S. debt limit (1/14/2013)

Go haywire means go out of control, with unexpected and usually negative developments.

In the 1800's, the wire wrapped around bales of hay was widely available and used for many purposes, as duct tape is today. By around 1900, haywire (like duct tape) was associated with solutions that were cheap, easy and unsophisticated. It's not clear how go haywire was given its current meaning. It's been suggested that the phrase may have developed because haywire was easily tangled and hard to untangle. Maybe, but long strips of duct tape also can be hard to manage, and we don't say that things "go duct tape."

go in circles, run in circles, talk in circles

"It seems to be going in circles and is getting frustrating for the homeowners," she said. "We want to hear things taken into account that we've talked about in previous meetings." —Orange County

Register (7/6/2011)

Tensions are mounting tonight as talks between Republican and Democratic leaders seem to be running in circles. —KTNV-TV (Las Vegas, Nev., 7/24/2011)

Players and team executives, if they don't run from steroids questions, answer by talking in circles, so as not to say anything controversial. —The Washington Post (7/9/2011)

To **go in circles** or **run in circles** is to do something without making progress or accomplishing anything. These are shorter versions of **go around in circles** and **run around in circles**.

Similarly, **talking in circles** means talking without making a clear point or answering a question.

An early example of running around in circles:

They are aiming in no direction. They are running around in circles of transient thought and feeling. They are changing their purposes continually, and are never doing much... —Plymouth Pulpit: Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher (1872)

go overboard, go too far

Most brand-name laptops have 3 to 4 gigabytes of memory, which should be fine for most students. Don't go overboard trying to get more memory, advanced software and other top-level features. —Omaha World-Herald (8/30/2011)

The clouds from Hurricane Irene had barely dissipated before a chorus of critics began suggesting that television networks had gone overboard hyping the storm before and during its march up the East Coast. —Associated Press (8/29/2011)

"Do you think that the military and the police went overboard here, that they were excessive?" —Hala Gorani, television journalist, interviewing Hazem el-Beblawi, interim prime minister of Egypt (7/29/2013)

A number of advocates have questioned whether the NYPD's policies have gone too far as the [police] department put many innocent people under scrutiny while hunting for terrorists. —Associated Press (9/7/2011)

"Did he go too far in calling Jay Carney, the president's press secretary, a paid liar?" —Wolf Blitzer, television news anchor, asking Senator Lindsay Graham about a comment by Congressman Darrell Issa (6/4/2013)

If you **go overboard**, you do something too much, to an extreme. **Go too far** often is used with the same meaning.

Overboard—out of a ship and into the water—is found in some of the oldest English texts, but I have not found examples of go overboard, in the sense of going to extremes, earlier than the 1930's.

go that route, go there

Of course, many teams and head coaches will not take kindly to their employees joining a union, and it could set up a standoff..."We really don't want to go that route, but what we have said is we just want to be treated with respect and dignity like you have done for the last number of years," Kennan said. —Boston Globe (2/20/2011)

"I wouldn't suggest to anyone to go that route." —Jesse James, custom bike and car builder, talking about his troubled personal life (4/9/2012)

"If there is any thought being given to expanding oil drilling into the Everglades, my suggestion to the governor is quite simple: Don't go there."—Kirk Fordham, chief executive of the Everglades Foundation (1/1/2011)

"The court just, for whatever reason, doesn't want to go there at this point." —Pete Williams, television news correspondent, talking about the U.S. Supreme Court and allowing gay couples to marry (3/31/2013)

In the context of the news examples, **go that route** means take that action, and **go there** means take that action or discuss that topic.

Both expressions are often used in the negative, but go that route may be positive, as in, "If we're going that route, you have my support."

Route in these phrases means a way of doing something, a course of action. It has been used that way for hundreds of years. Go there expresses a similar idea in a more conversational, colloquial way. It may turn out to be a linguistic fad—popular for several years and then forgotten.

go-to

In today's tough employment market, one company has become the go-to option for the frustrated job seeker: Starbucks. That's a problem for McDonald's as it seeks to beef up its workforce for what's expected to be another year of sales growth. —Detroit Free Press (4/10/2011)

At this point in her young life—she is only 22—Julia Nunes' ré;sumé; could highlight her experience working as "the go-to baby sitter for all of Rochester"... —Rochester Democrat & Chronicle (1/22/2012)

[Senator Bob] Corker's strong position also has made him a go-to guy for congressional leaders and the White House alike, one of the few people in a deeply partisan Washington who can afford to bargain without seeming to compromise his political future. —USA Today (8/19/2013)

"True Blood" star Rutina Wesley...filed divorce docs to end her 8-year-marriage to actor Jacob Fishel ... citing the go-to reason—irreconcilable differences. —TMZ.com (8/20/2013)

Go-to, when used as an adjective, means best or most reliable. It is often used in **go-to guy (**or woman, person, etc.), a person who knows the most about something or is most likely to get something done.

Go-to has been used with this meaning since the 1980's.

go to bat for

"I've said before, I don't believe that any single party has a monopoly on good ideas. And I will go to bat for whatever works, no matter who or where it comes from." —President Barack Obama (White House transcript, 2/28/2011)

Iran, while not having many allies willing to go to bat for it in the region, can still put up a fight. eurasiareview.com (1/15/2012)

"...when I casually mentioned a week before that I was going to wear a tie, I was told by one of the

organizers that was not allowed. So my sponsor, Chee Pearlman, had to go to bat for me on that.—Chip Kidd, book jacket designer, talking about his appearance at the TED conference (4/5/2012)

Go to bat for someone or something means give active support.

The expression apparently comes from baseball (rather than cricket, since the earliest examples are American). In baseball, go to bat for can mean substitute for another player, or take a turn batting for the team. In either case, the player tries to hit the ball and score. How the figurative phrase began is not clear. An early example is in a 1917 magazine:

Do you suppose a man like Brockton is going to pick up a girl at a luncheon table and go to bat for her, and expect nothing in return? —Photoplay Magazine (Chicago, May, 1917)

Another expression that means give support is **put in a good word**.

go to the dogs

...the financial system that rules our economies is going to the dogs. —Business Insider (1/14/2011)

Stan and Dorothy Solomon of Albany, both retired teachers, attended the rally with their collie, Sir Lancelot, who was wearing a tie-dyed shirt with a peace sign. "He thinks this state and this country are going to the dogs," Stan Solomon said. —Manchester Union-Leader (4/3/2011)

If there's one thing most people can agree on these days it's that political reporting has gone to the dogs. —The New Yorker (blog, 1/10/2012)

Go to the dogs means become less valuable or desirable, like leftover food scraped off plates and fed to dogs.

Go to the dogs is frequently used when talking about dogs, in attempts at humorous wordplay.

The inferiority of dogs to humans is the basis of go to the dogs and other expressions, such as **treat like a dog**, **a dog's life** and **in the doghouse**.

A 1702 "Ecclesiastical History of New England" tells of a man feeling much guilt, who shouted, "That he was damn'd, and that he was a Dog, and that he was going to the Dogs for ever."

go viral, viral marketing

Authorities began frantically searching for Jimenez in November after two videos shot with cell phones went viral on the Internet. —Houston Chronicle (2/15/2011)

"The Kid President is Robby Novak. He is a 9-year-old boy from Tennessee...His video went viral." —Carol Costello, television news anchor (4/1/2013)

Viral marketing only works if you have something that people are willing to share with their friends. A funny video works only if you can tie it into your product, otherwise it's just a funny video. Social networks are a good platform for viral marketing. —Bangor Daily News (10/21/2011)

For cash-strapped startups, viral marketing campaigns deliver myriad benefits. They're cheap and hip. —Investor's Business Daily (8/16/2013)

When something is passed from person to person and spreads quickly, it **goes viral**, like the spreading of a virus.

In **viral marketing**, advertising is spread from one person to another, like a disease. Another expression that describes this process is **word of mouth**.

See also, **guerrilla marketing**.

It is not clear who coined **go viral** and **viral marketing**. These are early examples:

Yes, this style of grass-roots marketing is time-consuming. But when well executed, it results in "viral marketing," with consumers spreading the word among themselves. —Direct Marketing (7/3/1998)

Have the idea behind your online experience go viral, bringing you a large chunk of the group that you're targeting without your having to spend a fortune advertising your new service. —Fast Company (7/31/2000)

God is in the details, the devil is in the details

The devil is in the details, of course. There are troubling reports that the agreement may disproportionately cut defense spending. —The Washington Post (7/31/2011)

"The devil is in the details and the details are being worked out." Eduardo del Buey, United Nations spokesman (8/13/2013)

"You can't point to any one specific element. God is in the details," explains Leo. "A burrito has so many components, and any one recipe or technique being done incorrectly will throw off the whole thing." —New York Daily News (7/30/2011)

"God is in the details. We were rigorous about everything." —Mitch Glazer, executive producer for the television series Magic City (4/29/2012)

Odd as it may seem, **the devil is in the details** and **God is in the details** have the same meaning: Success or failure depends on small parts of the activity or thing.

The original sentence is attributed to the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*:

While emphasizing the fundamental principles of architecture, Mies reminds them [students] that "God is in the details." —LIFE (3/18/1957)

Sometime during the next decade, the devil found his way into the expression:

"The devil is in the details," says a senior French civil servant who has spent most or the past decade in fruitless haggling over various projects for British membership in the Common Market. —Hartford Courant (7/14/1969)

In my survey of recent examples, the devil appeared in the phrase 23 times more frequently than God. One might guess this means that the devil has been hard at work. A more serious explanation

is that many people prefer not to use God in everyday expressions. But that trend has not prevailed in other expressions: There was a move toward **Thank goodness it's Friday** in the 1950's but **thank God it's Friday** dominates now. More likely, the phrase usually refers to details that are troublesome, or involve difficult work, so it seems natural to associate them with the devil.

*Mies may have been translating "Le bon dieu est dans le detail" (the grace of god is in the details). That is widely attributed to Gustave Flaubert, but no one seems to have recorded where or when Flaubert said or wrote that.

going forward

"We need to...compete for new subscriber opportunities, and going forward we're really focused on customer profitability." —Peter Bissonnette, president, Shaw Communications, Inc. (4/13/2012)

"This is a good report. It is telling us that the housing market is improving and there is no reason to think that this will not continue going forward." —Patrick Newport, U.S. economist at HIS Global Insight (10/17/2012)

"I don't think the study is definitive, but it... is clearly something we need to pay attention to going forward."—USA Today (9/23/2011)

"He's encouraged by some of the progress that we've seen, on gun violence, on immigration reform, on Capitol Hill, and he hopes to build on that moving forward." —Jay Carney, President Obama's press secretary (5/7/2013)

Going (or **moving**) **forward** means in the future.

This phrase is hackneyed (used too much, uninspired) and often redundant: The extra words are unnecessary when it is clear that the speaker is talking about the future. Nevertheless, going forward became more frequent around the late 1990's and is especially common in business and politics. It is a variation of an older expression, **from this day forward** (or this moment, this time, this year, etc.) meaning from now on.

gold standard

But a digital driver's license—or a $24 non-driver ID from the Motor Vehicle Commission—is the gold standard for identification. —The (Bergen) Record (9/25/2011)

In many cases, one chemotherapy drug is the "gold standard," he said, so a shortage would be more critical. —Duluth News Tribune (9/24/2011)

"Well, our effort here is to distinguish ourselves by ensuring that our businesses, American businesses, as they enter the Burmese market, really set a gold standard for good practices in labor affairs, in human rights for workers, et cetera..." —Victoria Nuland, spokesperson for the U.S. State Department (11/30/2012)

"The people I work with are pretty much the gold standard of the industry." —Billy West, voice actor, talking about the Futurama television series (6/19/2013)

The **gold standard** is the best. It is the standard by which all other things in a category are measured or judged.

The phrase originated in the 1800's, referring to the use of gold to determine the value of money. An early example of the phrase used in other contexts is in a trade journal published Feb. 15, 1902, the Poultry Keeper, in which W.H. Mercer of Detroit described a variety of chicken "that must be the gold standard for business."

good riddance

Libya may be teetering. If this is the end of the despot Moammar Gadhafi's 40-year regime, good riddance. —Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (2/22/2011)

"There is a growing chorus of voices in Pakistan that this American alliance is not a good thing for the country," said Ayaz Amir, a political commentator and lawmaker. "There are a whole lot of Pakistanis who would say good riddance; we will manage on our own." —Los Angeles Times (7/12/2011)

Dear Year 2011: Goodbye and good riddance. Don't let the door hit you in the behind on your way out. Or, rather, let it hit you. You deserve it. —Tribune Media Services (1/1/2012)

Good riddance is an unfriendly way of expressing pleasure about the departure of something or someone.

Some idiomatic expressions are versions of longer phrases. This one was in use before the longer good riddance to bad rubbish.

Riddance, the act of getting rid of, has been traced to the 1500's. It is now used more frequently in good riddance than by itself. The earliest known example of good riddance used with its modern meaning is in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida (1606).

grain of salt

So while these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, some trends are worth celebrating. —Lexington Dispatch (3/4/2011)

Economists based in Buffalo say the report should be taken with a grain of salt, since some of Brookings' conclusions are based on forecasted or estimated data. —Buffalo News (1/22/2012)

"We should point out, in a situation like this, after a big story like this, oftentimes there are people who call in all sorts of threats...I think all of this...should be taken with a grain of salt." —Anderson Cooper, television news anchor (4/17/2013)

In ancient times a grain of salt was believed to protect against poison. Today, taking something with a **grain of salt** means intelligent skepticism: protection against information that may be wrong or misleading.

Examples of the figurative use of grain of salt have been found as early as the 1600's.

grease palm, grease the skids, grease the wheels

Getting caught, it seems, did not diminish his penchant for greasing palms: It is by paying off his jailers that he was able to buzz about Asia. He confessed to having left and re-entered prison this way 68 times. —The Wall Street Journal (1/12/2011)

"We contend our client didn't get paid because he wouldn't grease anybody's palm." —The Atlanta

Journal-Constitution (1/10/2012)

Democrats are hoping that a show of compromise on the 2011 budget will grease the skids for the looming painful vote on raising the debt ceiling. —TIME (2/14/2011)

"It's going to require a lot of coaxing effort, an enormous amount of Saudi money to grease the skids and American support to help make it happen." —Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst, talking about making peace in Yemen (2/22/2012)

...further intervention by the central bank is widely anticipated by analysts, as the bank moves to grease the wheels of a flagging economy. —Dow Jones Newswires (1/11/2012)

Michel Martin talks with reporter Ana Maria Salazar, who says even big companies have to grease the wheels in Mexico. —National Public Radio (4/26/2012)

Greasing palms may be illegal or not. It may mean paying bribes (as in the Wall Street Journal example) but in other contexts it can mean tipping generously—when the tip is intended to get something in return. When you are just showing appreciation for good service, you are tipping, not greasing palms.

Grease the skids means ease the way for a desired action or decision.

Grease the wheels means provide money or support so that things go smoothly. This is a metaphor for lubricating the wheels of a machine.

The meaning of grease the wheels and grease the skids is often similar.

Figurative expressions using grease have been traced to the 1400's.

grit one's teeth, through gritted teeth

Some Republicans gritted their teeth when Mrs. Bachmann gave her own televised rebuttal to President Obama's State of the Union address; the party had picked Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin to give the official response. —The New York Times (7/16/2011)

There was no Mrs. Weiner standing stoically by her man's side, enduring a humiliation not of her making, smiling weakly through gritted teeth, playing the good wife. —Anchorage Daily News (6/21/2011)

"In Iowa and Nebraska, the full House delegations did vote for the farm bill...in some cases, gritting their teeth and voting for a bill they didn't like." —Amy Mayer, radio reporter (6/27/2013)

People **grit their teeth** when they must endure something they do not like. Grit in this expression means grind, holding the teeth together and moving them. Someone who smiles **through gritted teeth** feels like frowning, not smiling.

Examples of these phrases can be found as early as the 1700's. Another expression involving unpleasant feelings and the teeth is **set teeth on edge**.

guerrilla marketing

...this generation likes to be wowed and is particularly receptive to outrageous guerrilla-marketing approaches... —Memphis Daily News (10/19/2011)

This weekend, Warren towed Shasta Cascade's airstream trailer to the Art and Pumpkin Festival in Half Moon Bay, the self-proclaimed world pumpkin capital. "We're getting into guerrilla

marketing," Warren said. "We're the only tourism destination there." —Redding Record Searchlight (10/16/2011)

Van Voast views her toplessness as a form of guerrilla marketing or, as she put it, "a human logo for marketing." —The Daily Beast (9/30/2011)

Guerrilla marketing uses inexpensive or creative methods to promote products or businesses.

The phrase is a metaphor alluding to guerrilla fighting—military tactics that small forces use against larger ones. Guerrilla comes from a Spanish word that literally means small war.

Phrases using guerrilla in military contexts have been used since the early 1800's. The earliest example of guerrilla marketing in my searches is a 1980 article in New York Magazine, which may have adopted the phrase from Modern Grocer, an industry newspaper.

Sloan's [supermarket chain] is a pioneer in urban-guerrilla marketing, the kind of marketing that, the study says, heralds the rise of the independent grocer across the land. —New York Magazine (3/17/1980)

See also, **viral marketing, go viral**.

gut check

Jefferson County got a gut check last week when the Alabama Supreme Court declared the county's occupational tax invalid.—The Birmingham News (blog, 3/21/2011)

As the 82nd Texas Legislature reaches its midpoint, lawmakers are facing a gut check moment: Do they push through the $10 billion in planned cuts to public schools, or do they protect classrooms? —The Austin Chronicle (3/11/2011)

"I do think we need to have a little bit of a gut check, and look at ourselves as an organization. Are we open? Are we open-minded? Are we open to feedback? Are we open to criticism?" —Jon Pike, city council member in St. George, Utah (8/1/2013)

A **gut check** may be an event that tests someone's courage or resolve (as in the Brimingham News example). Or, it may be a pause in an activity to think about what is happening, as in the Jon Pike quotation. The Austin Chronicle example includes both meanings.

This is the earliest example of gut check in my searches:

The Cowboys are fast drawing the reputation of the neighborhood bully who does ok against the weaker guys but failed the gut check when another team of equal ability toes the line. —Associated Press (12/27/1969)

See also, the phrases below.

gut reaction, gut feeling, gut call, go with one's gut

"Of course! They have more, so they should pay more." However, this gut reaction does not take into account some important facts of life that come into play whenever a state implements a "millionaire's tax."—Camden Courier-Post (3/27/2011)

How can Larry Page's opinion be so different than the market's gut response? —The Motley Fool (1/19/2012)

"Most people have a gut feeling that something has gone terribly wrong, but that doesn't mean that they understand what is happening." —Reuters Fool (1/21/2012)

"I think you sit there and talk about what's going to be wise, but sometimes you have to make a gut call." —The Plain Dealer (9/14/2011)

"I went with my gut and reconnected with the reasons I started in music: the love, the passion, the need to create." —USA Today (6/6/2011)

Gut reaction and **gut response** mean a response made without thinking. A variation with the same meaning is **gut-level response**.

These expressions also are based on gut as the center of emotion:

Gut feeling: idea or emotion formed without thinking; intuition. A variation is a feeling in one's gut.
Gut call: decision using instinct more than thinking.
Go with one's gut: take action or make a decision without thinking; act on instinct.

An early example of gut reaction:

Shortly before he died three years ago, Dr. O'Connor translated his "gut reaction" to the San Juan tragedies into a research project...—New York Times News Service / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (8/6/1963)

Also see: **gut check** (above), **hate one's guts.**

had it with, fed up with

Knoxville Force coach Derek Broadley has just about had it with some of his players. —Knoxville News Sentinel (6/19/2011)

"I think the American people have had it with calculations based on what's good for one party and what's bad for the other party. We need to solve this problem." —Congressman Steve Israel, referring to arguments about changes in immigration law (7/14/2013)

"The general public is reaching the point of being fed up, and I think this will push it over the edge." —Kristen Rand, legislative director for a group promoting gun control, referring to the killing of 20 children and six adults in Newtown, Connecticut. (12/15/2012)

"It was just one of those days when I was fed up with everything," Trevathan told the judge Wednesday. —Burlington Free Press (7/7/2011)

When you have **had it with** something, or you are **fed up** with it, you are tired of it and want it to change or stop.

When you have had it with or are fed up with someone, you want their behavior to change or you want to stop seeing them.

The meaning of **had enough of** is similar.

Fed up suggests having eaten too much of something. The phrase **fed up to the eyelids** was used in the 1800's.

half-baked

His character flaws—his impulsiveness, his grandiosity, his weakness for half-baked (and not especially conservative) ideas—made him a poor Speaker of the House. —National Review (12/14/2011)

A majority of Austin school trustees are...continuing to force a half-baked charter proposal on parents, students and taxpayers... —Austin American-Statesman (12/14/2011)

"We cannot allow a half-baked law administered by an agency embroiled in scandal to impact one of the most personal facets of our lives." —Congressman Jack Kingston, an opponent of the 2010 health care legislation (8/23/2013)

Half-baked means unfinished or not well thought out, like food rejected because it was not cooked enough.

It has been traced to the 1600's and also referred to people—calling them mentally defective or foolish—but the phrase is no longer used that way.

half-hearted, wholehearted

Investors are already skeptical of European leaders' ability to act after two years of half-hearted emergency measures to solve the sovereign debt crisis... —Reuters (11/15/2011)

Los Angeles has waged an intermittent and sometimes half-hearted campaign to lure the National Football League back to the city, by far the nation's largest without a football team. —Los Angeles Times (6/19/2011)

"They've apologized for their past and upsetting people, though people are seeing it as a half-hearted apology." —Nick Valencia, television news reporter, talking about a Christian group that said prayer could help people stop being homosexuals (6/20/2013)

South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley says she'll do whatever is right for the region on the proposed dredging of the Savannah River, which has whole-hearted support from Gov. Nathan Deal. —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (11/6/2011)

Since his election as Taiwan's president in 2008, Mr. Ma has pursued warmer relations with China, but not always with the wholehearted support of his own party. —The New York Times (11/1/2011)

Half-hearted means weak; lacking one's full dedication or enthusiasm.

Wholehearted (which may have a hyphen but more frequently is written as one word) means completely devoted or dedicated to something.

Earlier versions of wholehearted were familiar in the 1600's. The King James version of the Bible (1611) frequently refers to a perfect heart, which in later translations became wholehearted devotion. It says that God's servants walk before thee with all their hearts.

Half-hearted also has been traced back to a 1611 example—in an Italian-English dictionary—but its meaning is different: cowardly. (This meaning of heart, courage, is still in use, especially in sports.) In a 1683 example, half-hearted is more like the opposite of wholehearted.

And certainly, either he is but half headed to his own Principles, or he can be but half hearted to the House of David. —"An Impartial Collection of the Great Affairs of State" by John Nalson (1683)

Half-headed, meaning stupid or half-intelligent, is no longer in use.

hand over fist

What they're upset about, rather, is a Congress that spends the taxpayers' money hand over fist without fully thinking things through. —New York Post (12/11/2010)

You could have two hotels side by side, one of which makes money hand over fist, the other of which goes bankrupt,"—Reuters (11/4/2011)

Oil companies...are already making money "hand over fist," he said... —Los Angeles Times (6/29/2011)

Hand over fist means quickly. It usually refers to money in large amounts.

The expression may have come from fishing and boating. Sailors pulled in nets or ropes one hand over another, an activity that sometimes required speed. But if that is the origin, it is forgotten when people speak of losing or spending money hand over fist.

An early example of the phrase with its current meaning:

Are the money-catching, penny-saving, tin-peddling, notion-vending, never-idle Jonathans of the East to be forever making money, hand over fist, and getting rich as Croesus, while we, the highminded gentlemen of the South, who are above touching our fingers to anything in the way of labor or business, are daily becoming poorer and poorer, and hastening with the speed of lightning to the goal of ruin? —"A Yankee Among the Nullifiers" by Asa Greene (New York, 1833)

hands down

He's the best player on the market, hands down. —New York Daily News (12/13/2010)

"Hands down, 2010 has been the best year of my life so far," she said. —Los Angeles Times (12/15/2010)

Leah Rampy, 62, of McLean, Va., has learned to be extroverted at work, but "if I had my choice of an evening at home reading a book or partying, the book would win hands-down." —USA Today (1/23/2012)

Hands down means easily, without any doubt.

The phrase might seem to suggest that no one would raise a hand to question or disagree. But that is not its origin. In horse racing during the 1800's, a jockey whose horse was far ahead would relax his grip on the reins when crossing the finish line. This was called winning **hands down** or **with both hands down.**

People began using the expression as a metaphor around the 1880's. In this example, the writer made sure the allusion to horse racing was clear:

...in the article of Alderman he wins in a canter, and with both hands down. —Punch (London, 7/7/1883)

hang in there

Teach your children to hang in there when the going gets tough, but know when to let them throw in the towel [quit]. —msnbc.com (3/16/2011)

A dream job sweeps you off your feet. It starts to have ups and downs, but you hang in there. Then one day you realize you've driven home in tears every night for six months. —The Washington Post (12/29/2011)

I always keep telling myself, "Hang in there, what you're doing is important and it does make a big difference..." —The New York Times (1/25/2012)

Hang in there means keep trying or participating; persist. **Hang in** has the same meaning.

It is the opposite of **throw in the towel**, which means quit. The phrase **hang on** sometimes has a meaning similar to hang in. But in other contexts hang on may mean hold something, don't hang up the phone, or please wait.

Hanging in usually occurs in a difficult situation. In the msnbc example, "when the going gets tough" means when the activity becomes difficult.

The earliest example of hang in there in my searches is in a 1942 review of top-selling records:

Meanwhile, it manages to hang in there and remains within challenging distance. —The Billboard (Cincinnati, Ohio, 3/28/1942)

happy as a clam, happy as a lark

Now, that is exactly what I'm doing with this new business, and I am as happy as a clam. —The Coloradoan (5/11/2011)

But on Sunday she looked happy as a clam when she arrived in Nice Airport with her brother. —TMZ.com (9/3/2012)

"If I had no servers to worry about, I'd be as happy as a lark." —Greg Lush, chief information officer of a California facility management company (3/11/2009)

"It was frustrating for us, but he's happy as a lark." —The Virginian-Pilot (5/11/2011)

As **happy as a clam** means very happy. No one really knows if clams are happy, or exactly why this expression has been popular since the early 1800's, but it is believed to come from longer phrases, **happy as a clam at high tide** and **happy as a clam at high water**. At high tide it is harder to dig clams up and eat them. Another version, **happy as a clam in mud**, also makes sense: digging down into soft mud is a clam's main defense.

Happy as a lark also means very happy.

The origin is unknown; without specific evidence, it has been assumed to be an allusion to the lark's pleasant song. English literature is full of references to larks, mostly for other reasons, such as their habit of rising and singing early. "Stir with the lark tomorrow, gentle Norfolk," said Shakespeare's King Richard III.

happy camper

"I complained via both email and phone to Target customer service but got nothing other than a 'standard sorry' email back. Needless to say, I am not a happy camper, and my faith in Target has reached a new low." —San Jose Jose Mercury News (1/9/2012)

The deputy mayor who will replace publishing executive Cathie Black as head of New York City's public schools told cheering Department of Education staff members Thursday that he was a

"happy camper" who didn't plan to revamp his predecessor's plans. —Associated Press (4/8/2011)

Sprinkel won 65 percent of the vote to Jackson's 35 percent in the race for Seat 2. "I'm a very happy camper. I am thrilled..." said Sprinkel, a 62-year-old educator. —Orlando Sentinel (3/8/2011)

"He told her that, tomorrow morning, we're going to invade Grenada...She wasn't a happy camper." —James Baker, former secretary of state, talking about a 1983 phone call between President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (4/8/2013)

Happy camper means happy person.

The phrase is often used in the negative, as in the San Jose Mercury News example and the James Baker quotation.

Most camps are for the young, so happy camper and not a happy camper suggest a young person, likely to express happiness or unhappiness in a loud way.

Based on my searches, this expression began to gain popularity during the 1980's, after the October, 1980, issue of Boy's Life magazine observed: "a well-fed camper is a happy camper."

happy medium

The first two ticket holders, Andrea Sabino, 29, and Jon Tirpak, 28, opted for the Clearview since it was a happy medium between their own neighborhood and the chaos across the river. —The Jersey Journal (7/15/2011)

It was not that long ago that new homes came in three varieties: production (tract), semicustom and custom ... The semicustom builder was the happy medium, offering a greater range of floor plans and a host of product choices. —Chicago Tribune (7/15/2011)

...the ride quality hits a happy medium between comfort and handling that fits the character of the car perfectly. —review of the 2013 Chevrolet Malibu Eco, FoxNews.com (4/26/2012)

A **happy medium** is something (a place, amount or choice, for example) that is better than the two extremes it comes between. Similar ideas are in the golden mean of ancient Greece, the doctrine of the mean (middle) of Confucius, and the middle way of Buddhism, asserting the beauty of moderation.

Happy medium has been traced as far back as 1778. **Happy median** is a common mistake, which happens because median means middle and sounds like medium.

hard (tough, easy, etc.) to swallow

"There's a lot of loyal BlackBerry users, but outage problems like this that affect their entire customer base are hard to swallow." —KXII-TV (Ardmore, Oklahoma, 10/12/2011)

Bank of America announced plans Thursday to charge debit card users $5 a month...Consumers, already pummeled by a brutal economy, may find the fee tough to swallow, especially for those who don't have many banking options. —San Jose Mercury-News (9/29/2011)

The portion is heroic, which makes the $13 price tag a little easier to swallow. —The Washington Post (10/16/2011)

Something that is **hard to swallow** or **tough to swallow** is hard to accept.

In these and similar phrases swallow means accept—a meaning that has been traced to the 1500's. See also, **bitter pill to swallow**.

hard and fast

The Malloy administration and the unions are scheduled to continue negotiations through the Mother's Day weekend, but there is no hard-and-fast deadline if progress is being made. —The Hartford Courant (5/6/2011)

The hard and fast rule is never put your hands on another man's phone. —Los Angeles Times (1/25/2012)

Even if work schedules and after-school endeavors make it impossible to establish a hard-and-fast starting time, you're wise to tackle homework as early in the evening as possible. —Chicago Tribune (1/17/2012)

Hard and fast means fixed, unchanging or absolute.

Hard and fast originally referred to ships when they were on shore or beached. It was used in the 1800's to mean in a fixed position. From an English magazine in 1821: They've got me here "hard and fast."

hard feelings

That position has prompted hard feelings from the town board, which has protested the county approval in the past. —The Record-Courier (Gardnerville, Nevada, 12/9/2011)

...[In 1975] 90 percent of the Portuguese settlers fled. A bloody 27-year civil war followed...the Portuguese want to come back. The Portuguese or Portuguese-descended population in Angola increased to 91,900 in 2010 from 21,000 in 2003. Portuguese commentators insisted there were no hard feelings. —The New York Times (11/19/2011)

It seems like there are no hard feelings involved in the split, with band members writing that it was simply time to part ways. —TIME (9/21/2011)

Hard feelings means lingering anger or resentment.

This phrase uses an old meaning of hard—harsh, cruel, or severe—that has recently come back into colloquial fashion ("that's hard, man").

According to search results, the use of hard feelings began in printed publications around 1800. The earliest example of "no hard feelings" in my searches is from a letter dated Sept. 4, 1822:

He said that they entertained no doubt of my sincerity, and hoped that I would have no hard feelings towards them, for they were my friends. —The Christian Repository (1823)

hard line, hard-liner

Taking anything less than a hard line with Pakistan will only make us look weak...—New York Post (9/28/2011)

Faced with high public concerns over food and product safety, China has been taking a hard-line

approach to offenders of safety violations. —Reuters (9/6/2011)

He's a hard-liner on social issues and immigration and supports huge cuts to the federal government... —The Washignton Post (9/26/2011)

"When he first started, he had some political folks around him that could have mediated some of this. It's been replaced, his inner circle, with real hard-liners." —Congressman Mike Rogers, talking about Kim Jong-un, leader of North Korea (4/9/2013)

A **hard line** is an opinion, position or policy that refuses to compromise or make an exception. Someone who takes a hard line is a **hard-liner.**

Printed examples of hard line have been found starting in the early 1960's.

Stating the point beyond which one will not compromise is drawing a **line in the sand**.

hard sell

The Weather Channel, which turns 29 on Monday, was initially a hard sell. After all, who would tune in for something they could find out by looking out the window? —Los Angeles Times (4/28/2011)

As a result, Ford Country has minimized the "hard sell." There aren't hordes of salesmen circling a customer the second they step on site. There is no pressure or aggressive sales push. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (4/29/2011)

Paul and Julia became great mates in the OSS, but Paul was a hard sell for anything more. It was after the war, Conant said, that Paul began to understand what Julia meant to him. —Kansas City Star (4/28/2011)

"Aliriza says the Turkish prime minister will be making a hard sell." —Michele Kelemen, radio journalist, talking about Prime Minister Erdogan's meeting with President Obama to ask for more U.S. involvement in Syria (5/16/2013)

In the Los Angeles Times example, a **hard sell** is an idea that is difficult to persuade others to accept.

Another meaning is aggressive, high-pressure sales tactics, as in the Las Vegas review-Journal example, or arguing forcefully for something, as Erdogan did with Obama.

A third meaning is a person who is hard to convince, as in the Kansas City Star example.

Sell is an old word in English, but using it to mean persuade or convince has been traced only back to the early 1900's.

hardball, play hardball, softball question

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle is playing hardball with the unions: She wants to stop paying workers for holidays, lunch hours and personal days, and thinks they should work more hours. —Chicago Tribune (10/16/2011)

A judge is playing hardball with the Columbia University students rounded up in an alleged dorm- and fraternity-based drug ring last year. Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Michael Sonberg yesterday barred two of them...from applying for a program that would have kept them from having felony records. —New York Post (10/12/2011)

Insurers and hospitals are locked in hardball contract negotiations this year as hospitals look for ways to recover declining Medicare and Medicaid payouts. —Palm Beach Post (10/3/2011)

After the defense attorney had his chance to cross-examine Long, lead prosecutor Cherie Krigsman threw the witness a softball question. —Sarasota Herald-Tribune (10/14/2011)

Hardball means tough.

The board president in the Chicago Tribune example and the judge in the New York Post example were being tough, and the negotiations in the Palm Beach Post example were tough negotiations. The opposite, softball, is usually not used in the same way, with this notable exception: the opposite of a **hardball question** (a tough question) is a **softball question** (a question that is easy to answer).

Hardball and softball are among many popular metaphors based on American sports. (Confusingly, a softball is just as hard as a standard baseball or "hardball," but it is larger and less dense, making it somewhat less likely to cause injury.)

In my searches, the earliest examples of play hardball and softball question used as metaphors were published after 1970.

hate one's guts

Those of you who hate my guts, well, you're forgiven. —Los Angeles Daily News (9/25/2011)

Instead of being married, he's divorced. Instead of having nice kids, he has a couple of brats, most notably a teenage daughter who hates his guts. —San Francisco Chronicle (6/16/2011)

Both sides seem to be oblivious to the fact that most football fans hate their guts ... —Philadelphia Daily News (3/17/2011)

Hating someone's guts is not much different from hating, but expresses the idea with more emotion.

The gut, the part of the body containing digestive organs, is in several phrases that involve emotion. See gut reaction, gut feeling, go with one's gut, and gut check.

have a clue

As for those who may not have a clue just who Snooki is, well, her response is honest: "If you don't know me you must live under a rock." —The Journal News (10/25/2011)

"I was at a time in my life, I didn't have a clue of who I was or what I wanted to do." —Norton Juster, author (10/25/2011)

"Greenwald says that he's got it all and now is an expert on the program. He doesn't have a clue how this thing works." —Congressman Mike Rogers, talking about Glenn Greenwald, whose reports in The Guardian newspaper revealed U.S. government tracking of phone and Internet data (6/9/2013)

If you don't **have a clue** about something, you don't know anything about it.

Saying that a person doesn't have a clue or is **clueless** often means the person is incompetent.

When trying to solve a mystery or puzzle, having a clue usually comes before finding a solution. Not having a clue means making no progress at all. "I haven't a clue" is an emphatic way of saying,

"I don't know."

From the early to mid-1900's, these phrases usually referred to police investigations. Examples referring to other subjects can be found by the 1950's.

have a lock on

No political party should have a lock on the fastest-growing segment of the California electorate. —San Diego Union-Tribune (9/22/2011)

Democrats have long been thought to have a lock on Jewish voters. —CBS News (9/21/2011)

Some multivitamins are designed for bodybuilders and weightlifters. But that group does not have a lock on the need for vitamins. —El Paso Times (9/11/2011)

To **have a lock on** something is to have firm control of it (as in the Union-Tribune and CBS News examples), or to dominate it, excluding others (as in the El Paso Times example). These are figurative meanings based on the literal phrase: having a lock on a door establishes control over its use.

Locks—the kind that open with keys—have been in the language ever since Old English. But I could find no examples of the figurative locks before 1953, when Billboard Magazine said: "The redhead and his friends have a lock on Wednesday 8-9 p.m."—a reference to Arthur Godfrey's show on CBS television, when the show dominated audience ratings.

have someone's back

"It's great to know someone always has your back." —Miranda Lambert, country music artist, talking about her husband, singer Blake Shelton (8/22/2011)

"...we have your back...we consider Israel's security of extraordinary importance to us..." —President Barack Obama (3/20/2013)

"He has always had my back. There are times when I think of Rex more like a son." —Chad Lehman, a police officer in Columbus, Indiana, talking about his police dog (8/3/2013)

If someone **has your back**, you can depend on that person for the support or protection you need.

The expression comes from "watch someone's back," to protect a friend from an attack.

Printed examples have been found from as early as the 1970's, but are more numerous from the 1990's and later.

have teeth

It was an agreement with teeth... Facilities which fell short of the required standards risked losing their export licenses. —BBC News (9/14/2011)

Whether or not the new agency has teeth or ultimately does much to stem endemic corruption remains to be seen. —Los Angeles Times (8/28/2011)

Unfortunately, the ban lacks teeth because it is a directive issued by the city parks department—and not an ordinance passed the Austin City Council. Therefore, police officers can't issue citations for smoking... —Austin American-Statesman (9/15/2011)

If a law, group or agency **has teeth**, it has the power to punish, so that people will not ignore it.

This metaphor is among many that have been used over the centuries, based on the idea of biting and hostility. The **teeth of a storm**, referring to the fury or power of a storm, is an example.

Francis Osborn came close to the modern expressions in 1673 when his essay mentioned "fear of the Iron-teeth of the Law."

head over heels

Elaine Zubeck and Larry Zenga of Sound Beach in Suffolk County are head over heels over their little Coco. 'Dogs are children in fur coat,' Zubeck writes. —New York Daily News (12/2010)

After he's caught and sent to prison, he meets and falls in love—we're talking obsessive, head-over-heels love—with fellow convict Phillip Morris. —The Washington Post (12/10/2010)

The "Big Miracle" star is so head-over-heels with her fiance, art consultant Will Kopelman, that she's considering converting to his Jewish faith... —New York Daily News (1/26/2012)

Whether you're in love with a dog or a person, **head over heels** means infatuation, an extreme case of love.

This figurative meaning is used frequently. When used literally, head over heels means flipping over; tumbling.

The original expression, **heels over head**, has been traced to the 1400's. An early example of head over heels describing love is in a play performed in London in 1811:

...she was but a peasant like myself, and might have been a peasant still, if by good luck the Count had not rescued her from the giant Hacho, and instantly fallen head over heels in love with her himself. —"The Knight and the Wood Demon" by Matthew G. Lewis

heads I win, tails you lose

Opponents say this effectively ends collective bargaining, because the employer always is able to come out on top. Republican State Sen. Bill Seitz, who voted against the bill, called this a "heads I win, tails you lose" proposition. —Reuters (4/1/2011)

"Two Florida men cost broker-dealers $2 million, while snatching $600,000 in illicit profits for themselves...the SEC says...It was 'a classic heads I win, tails you lose scheme,' the SEC's New York regional director said in a statement." —Courthouse News Service (10/27/2011)

"...a blistering opinion handed down Feb. 29 by a Delaware judge makes a convincing case that Goldman Sachs's heads-I-win, tails-you-lose approach to business hasn't changed at all." —Bloomberg BusinessWeek (3/15/2012)

Heads or tails is the choice made before flipping a coin to make a decision. **Heads I win, tails you lose,** a children's joke since the 1800's, usually means setting rules so that one side always wins. This creative variation, describing General Electric's strategy for avoiding taxes, means that the company wins and the United States loses:

But its top tax executive, John Samuels, said at a conference last year that the ability to defer taxes on overseas profits gives companies an incentive to shift them abroad. It's "a heads-I-win, tails-I-break-even situation," Samuels said. —Pro Publica (4/4/2011)

Break even means finish without winning or losing.

heads up

In a heads-up that appears before you type in your credit card data, customers are alerted about "additional hotel specific service fees or incidental charges or fees that may be charged by the hotel to the customer at checkout." —The New York Times (9/10/2011)

"Our people are there. They are in position to move, but we've got to have good intelligence that gives us a heads-up that something is going to happen." —Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, talking about the response to the 2012 attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya (2/3/2013)

He now heads up 911 communications in Gaston County. —Gaston (N.C.) Gazette (9/10/2011)

But it was Parker Oliver and Dan Perse who produced the most heads-up plays of the evening —Broomfield (Colo.) Enterprise (9/9/2011)

"We weren't scoring enough points," said Miller, who started at quarterback the past three games. "When we got down 24-0, I just told the guys. 'Keep our heads up. I know we can do this. We have the will. We have the heart.' We just got it done." —Richmond (Ind.) Palladium-Item (9/10/2011)

In addition to its literal meaning, referring to the position of the head, **heads up** has several figurative meanings:

A warning, as in the New York Times sentence and Leon Panetta quotation. If someone shouts, "Heads up!" it means there is something to watch out for immediately, like a flying ball or falling object.

If you **head up** something, you are the leader or top executive, as in the Gaston Gazette example.

A **heads-up play** is alert and skillful, as in the Broomfield Enterprise example. The phrase, which may describe a person as well as an action, is used frequently in sports.

Keep our heads up in the Palladium-Item example means stay confident. If the players were discouraged, they might **hang their heads** (tilt their heads down).

Examples of the last meaning have been found in the early 1800's; the others in the 1900's. The first meaning—warning—did not become popular until the 1980's.

(the) heebie-jeebies

With President Obama's job-approval rating hitting a new low in the latest Gallup Poll, progressives have good reason to feel the heebie-jeebies. —Albany Times-Union (8/22/2011)

It's a creepy girl robot head. At first glance, she'll give you the heebie-jeebies. But once you find out what she can do, she's kind of cool (still creepy though). You see, this robot head can read music and sing. —CBS (8/15/2011)

Eerie whines and menacing thuds echo through the football field-sized chamber. Even a casual visit to the Houston Museum of Natural Science's under-construction Hall of Paleontology can bring on the heebie-jeebies. —Houston Chronicle (4/25/2012)

If something gives you the **heebie-jeebies**, it makes you feel anxious and uncomfortable.

The origin of the phrase is believed to be a 1923 newspaper cartoon, which spelled it "heeby jeebys" and did not make its meaning clear. I suspect that when more printed archives are digitized

and made searchable, an earlier origin will be discovered.

high off the hog, high on the hog

Paula Deen, the queen of down-home cooking, now runs a diverse culinary empire... But she didn't always live high off the hog. —Miami Herald (2/25/2011)

People do not need to live high off the hog with new high-end vehicles and name-brand clothes while our children suffer with lower-quality education. —Kennebec Journal (1/17/2011)

The Republican governors believe most Americans support their view that the public-sector unions are living too high on the hog, as they say down South. —Philadelphia Inquirer (3/20/2011)

They should be looking for ways to help the poor and middle-class Americans who are still struggling, not how to pamper those living high on the hog. —Tribune Media Services (9/15/2011)

"Those eligibility requirements are...something like a total income of $28,000 a year for a family of four. That is not people who are living high on the hog." —Lori Silverbush, documentary film producer, talking about the U.S. food stamp program (6/6/2013)

If your lifestyle costs a lot of money, you are living **high off the hog**. You are also living **high on the hog**, which has the same meaning.

In the news, examples of both appear in all regions of the United States.

The original expression was **high up on the hog,** referring to the fact that better pork came from the upper parts of the pig. This example was published one year later than the earliest in my searches:

Southern laborers who are "eating too high up on the hog" (pork chops and ham) and American housewives who "eat too far back on the beef" (porterhouse and round steak) are to blame for the continued high cost of living, the American Institute of Meat Packers announced today. —The New York Times (3/4/1920)

The logical opposite, living low off the hog, is rarely used.

high road

But Democrats, for all their internecine squabbles, have the discipline to take the high road rhetorically. —National Review Online (7/15/2011)

The former Utah governor was President Obama's ambassador to China, and now he's trying to take his former boss's job away. He says it's possible to do that and keep on the high road, and we encourage him to show how it's done. —The Providence Journal (7/15/2011)

Cobb [County, Georgia]has the opportunity to take the high road and show the rest of the country how it should be done. It remains to be seen if we do so. —The Marietta Daily Journal (7/30/2013)

Taking the **high road** is choosing to act in a way that is noble, virtuous, good or nice.

High road meant main road in the 1700's and is now echoed in the word highway. High road as a metaphor for better behavior was used in the U.S. presidential campaign of 1948. Now it is not limited to politics but still is used frequently in that context. In this example from 1956, there is a

coy reference to the opposite of the high road, **mudslinging**.

The Presidential campaign at the moment is moving along a level which in current parlance is called "the high road," with only short and occasional descents to where the mud is. —The New York Times (9/22/1956)

hissy fit

...the movie is most worthwhile as a portrait of a celebrity having a creative, self-aware hissy fit. —Boston Globe (8/23/2011)

She also came to a pricey settlement with an eBay employee who she allegedly shoved in a hissy fit. Hey, mood swings happen. —Dow Jones Newswires (8/31/2011)

"Karl Rove's hissy fit over the Chrysler ad underscores exactly how bleak his party's vision has become." —Salon (2/6/2012)

"Russell threatens Camille with a lawsuit, which sends the whole group into a hissy." —The Hollywood Reporter, referring to an episode of the television series, "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" (12/19/2011)

A **hissy fit** is a tantrum, an outburst of anger. The phrase is meant to ridicule, and usually suggests that the outburst lacks an important or justifiable cause.

An older version is **throw a hissy**, as in the Hollywood Reporter example. Hissy fit is now more common.

Throw a hissy was noted in books on American slang in the 1930's and 1940's, but I could find no examples in printed text during that time. Hissy fit became popular in the later 1900's. In a 1996 "On Language" column for the New York Times, William Safire suggested that hissy may have come from hysterical.

hit home

The tragic, devastating news from Japan hit home here on the High Desert Friday, with some struggling all day to get hold of loved ones and friends possibly affected by the devastation. —KTVZ, Bend, Oregon (3/11/2010)

It was just a firehouse chat with the guys of Engine 54 in lower Manhattan. But President Obama delivered a message he hopes will also hit home with every American in this week of national catharsis: "You're always going to have a president and an administration who's got your back." —Associated Press (5/9/2010)

"The changes have been here for us—not just now," Robert J. Stevens, Lockheed's chairman and chief executive, said Thursday in response to a reporter's question about whether budget changes are starting to hit home. "It's been very real for us for a while." —The Washington Post (1/26/2012)

If something **hits home**, you understand it or take it seriously because of your own experience; or, you understand it and agree with it.

This expression has been traced to the 1500's.

hit the ceiling

When Rand did find out about it, she hit the ceiling and summoned Branden to her apartment and fired him and called the spouses in for another group powwow and screamed and slapped Branden's face multiple times... —The Awl (4/12/2011)

"I hit the ceiling," she said. "I was so mad. I had to read it two or three times."—Treasure Coast Newspapers (1/21/2012)

Investors wondering when stocks' non-stop ascent would hit the ceiling are finally finding out. —USA Today (8/21/2013)

In the context of the first two news examples, **hit the ceiling** means have a fit of anger.

In other contexts, hit the ceiling may mean hit the limit, such as the legal limit on U.S. national debt, or hit a high point, as in the USA Today example.

(The phrase is also used literally, referring to the ceilings of structures.)

Hit the ceiling has been used figuratively to mean react in an extreme way, as in this early example:

The doctor says if my skin grafts take hold I will not be much disfigured. But every time anyone strikes a match near me I hit the ceiling. —Recreation / Journal of the American Canoe Association (January, 1901)

See also, Go **through the roof**.

hit the ground running

The building covers 80,000 square feet on a 17-acre site. The jobs are projected to pay an average of $42,000 a year. "We were just looking for the best location, and the site on Strasburg Road in Warren County is perfect for optimum operation," Ray said. "This building allows us to hit the ground running." —Northern Virginia Daily (11/4/2011)

Meyer hit the ground running at the start, meeting with dozens of regional business leaders to better understand the community and learn more about the issues that concern them. —Appleton Post-Crescent (11/4/2011)

I think students should work during their time at law school to volunteer, intern, do part-time work at various agencies, solo practitioners, small firms, and put themselves in a position where they can really hit the ground running coming out of law school. —U.S. News (11/3/2011)

To **hit the ground running** means to be active and productive from the start.

Candidates for political office often promise they will hit the ground running, and employers like to hire experienced people who can hit the ground running.

From the early 1900's (and perhaps 1800's but examples are rare) the phrase was used literally to describe people jumping or falling and beginning to run immediately when their feet reached the ground. The earliest example of the expression used figuratively, in my searches, is from 1937:

It is no secret that Major Dixon, like Bill Brandon after his defeat at the hands of Tom Kilby in 1918, "hit the ground running," and it is taken for granted, barring some development of a sensational nature, that he will be on the gubernatorial ballot again in 1938. —The Tuscaloosa News (5/25/1937)

hit the nail on the head, nail it

The Accuweather folks have been smug since they hit the nail on the head prophesying the Feb. 2 blizzard. —The Herald-News (Joliet, Illinois, 10/18/2011)

The reader hit the nail on the head with her comment about the rudeness of customers handing crumpled bills to salesclerks. —The Washington Post (11/2/2011)

With his watercolor Three Boys, Joe Hardesty hits the nail on the head, reminding us that the weight of ideas is induced by nothing but our minds. —The Cornell Daily Sun (10/25/2011)

Hit the nail on the head means get something exactly right. The phrase usually expresses agreement with a statement or idea.

This expression has been traced back as far as the 1400's.

When used as a verb, nail can have many different meanings. Sometimes, **nail it** has a meaning similar to hit the nail on the head. In these examples, nailed it means got it right:

"There's a sense of freeness to this ad; they really nailed it." —Adweek (10/13/2011)

Then there's the tried-and-true Valentine's Day combo -- flowers and candy..."Color and fragrance are important, then if you add chocolate in there, you've really nailed it for Valentine's." —Tri-City Herald (2/14/2012)

hit the sack, hit the hay

He was ready to put his feet up, watch the rest of the round on television, get something to eat and hit the sack. —The New York Times (2/18/2011)

And, despite her hectic schedule, she's more than happy to hit the sack early. —Denver Post (1/11/2012)

Researchers found that even after people hit the hay, late-night text messages or cell phone alerts can jolt them awake. —amNY (3/6/2011)

Last night, around 10 p.m., when MSNBC said Iowa was too close to call, I decided to hit the hay. Might as well get some sleep and greet the results in the morning —The Washington Post (blog, 1/4/2012)

Compared with past centuries, few people now sleep on sacks filled with hay, but some still refer to going to bed as **hitting the sack** or **hitting the hay**.

An 1891 collection of Harvard songs contains these lyrics:

> We would put fourteen away
> Just before we hit the hay—
> Those little old hot dogs that Rammy sold!

hold a candle to

As a tablet, though, the Fire can't hold a candle to the best tablets available today... —PC World (11/15/2011)

It's been an exhausting few weeks for this food reporter as she drove all over Long Island eating

fruit pies...One thing I gleaned from all my...research...is that most bakery pies can't hold a candle to homemade. —Newsday (10/20/2011)

Everybody knows Father's Day doesn't hold a candle to Mother's Day when it comes to dollars spent on flowers, brunches, candy, greeting cards, long-distance phone calls and all the rest. —Houston Chronicle (6/19/2011)

Hold a candle to means compare with or compete with. If something **can't hold a candle to** something else, it is inferior.

The phrase is always expressed in the negative, as in can't or doesn't hold a candle to.

Centuries ago, someone who "held the candle" for someone else was a servant. If John could not hold the candle for James, John was too inferior to be a servant to James.

Examples of hold the candle meaning unworthy of comparison have been found as early as the 1600's. A version of the modern idiom is part of a much-quoted poem written by John Byrom in the 1760's:

> Some say, compar'd to Bononcini,
> That Mynheer Handel's but a ninny;
> Others aver that he to Handel
> Is scarcely fit to hold a candle.

hold their own

Three weeks into their fitness makeover, four contestants are holding their own—though sticking to their plan can be a challenge on special occasions. —Miami Herald (2/4/2011)

"With gangs, we want to try to reduce that group influence...So the question is 'how well can you hold your own against the group?'" —Associated Press (1/7/2011)

"Tianlang Guan, he's the youngest player in Masters history, 14, in eighth grade, holding his own." —Brooke Baldwin, television news anchor, talking about the annual Masters golf tournament (4/11/2013)

When not used literally (such as when you hold your own birthday party), **hold one's own** means succeeding, or doing as well as others.

Similar phrases have been traced to the 1300's.

hole up

Gingrich, who suffered through his own bouts of scandal earlier in his career, said Cain needed to hole up somewhere and figure his way out of this mess. —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (11/2/2011)

Sa'aid...delayed proceedings by holing up on the French Comoros Islands in the Indian Ocean. —Reuters (1/10/2011)

"We had no information that the suspect was still holed up in this particular area. He managed to elude us by being just slightly outside of the perimeter that we set up." —Edward Davis, Boston police commissioner, after the capture of a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings (4/19/2013)

Hole up means hide in a safe place (like a hole).

It is reasonable to ask why we don't say "hole down." The answer is we don't know. The prepositions up and down are often confusing when used with various verbs. For example, when most things burn completely they burn up, but buildings burn down.

Hole, as a verb meaning make a hole, has been in use since Old English. It was used without up to mean go into a hole from the 1600's. Examples of hole up have been found as early as 1875.

home in, hone in

Police in Indonesia's most conservative province raided a punk-rock concert and detained 65 fans...It's not clear why police decided to hone in on punks. —Associated Press (12/14/2011)

Read the top journals and publications in your chosen field....Study the company's strategy and hone in on key aptitudes such as learning agility, motivating others and flexibility. —Newsday (12/7/2011)

The aim is to home in on cancer cells and minimize damage to other cells and tissues. —Reuters (12/10/2011)

"There are so many questions surrounding the investigation of the Boston bombings...they have homed in on a couple crucial images of two men who were hovering by the finish line." —Erin Burnett, television news anchor (4/18/2013)

Hone in means focus on, or move directly toward. **Home in** has the same meaning.

Hone in is a mistake, or, as the Oxford English Dictionary says diplomatically, apparently an alteration of home. Hone means sharpen, as in honing a knife edge.

Home in began as "home on" during the early 1900's. The earliest example of home in in my searches is in the November, 1951, Popular Mechanics magazine, in an article mentioning planes that could "home in and land on an aircraft carrier."

Was George Plimpton first to make the mistake, when "honing in" appeared in his 1965 book, "Paper Lion"? A one-letter error could be the fault of a typographer rather than Plimpton. But the popularity of "Paper Lion" may have influenced others. In my searches, the number of "hone in" examples increased steadily between 1965 and the present.

home run

Our first priority is quality patient care. If we can help in anyway to encourage people to go into this profession that is a home run for everybody. —The Baltimore Sun (9/9/2011)

Tullow Oil has hit a home run with this discovery, said Bank of America Merrill Lynch in a research note. —Dow Jones Newswires (9/9/2011)

"...he doesn't have to hit a home run, but Romney has to be at the end of the debate Wednesday night, a clear alternative who is considered as a potential President..." —former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (9/30/2012)

"It was supposed to be a home run, a can't-miss investment for the lucky few...Within days, the stock had sunk." —Zain Asher, television news reporter, talking about Facebook stock (7/31/2013)

A **home run** is a big success.

Home run, the best hit in baseball, is one of most frequently used among many American sports metaphors. But in the 1850's, home run was a version of home stretch, the last part of a horse race, and also meant the last part of other kinds of races or trips, especially of boats.

An early example of the modern use of home run is in the Sept. 27, 1893, Chicago Tribune: "Springer scored a home run today. He got Dr. JL Wilcox of Springfield nominated for Internal Revenue Collector of the Eighth District."

hop, skip and jump

A hop, skip and a jump away from Romney's Boston campaign headquarters, New Hampshire is where Romney announced his candidacy on June 2. —CBS News (11/3/2011)

In the president's mind, it's probably only a hop, skip and jump to blaming Netanyahu. —The New York Times (5/17/2011)

The opening-night party was held a happy hop-skip-and-jump across the street from the theatre at Copacabana, a convenience that overrode any press complaints about this being the third opening-night party to be held there this week. —PLAYBILL (4/26/2012)

A hop, skip and jump means not far.

Most people would not travel more than a few feet with one hop, skip and jump. When it refers to distance, as in the CBS News and PLAYBILL examples, the phrase is an inexact way of saying the distance is short. In the New York Times example, it meant that the President was not far from deciding that Netanyahu was to blame.

The phrase sometimes refers to the triple jump in athletic competitions, in which contestants try to go the longest distance with one hop, skip and jump. An older version, **hop, step and jump**, is sometimes still used in athletics but not in figurative contexts.

The expression has been traced back to 1713 in athletics, and in figurative uses later. In her 1897 memoir, Mary Ashton Rice Livermore wrote:

A Bible recitation followed, which was a veritable pot-pourri, the minister going on a "hop, skip, and jump" from Genesis to Revelation in his selections, and interlarding the whole with a vast deal of Scripture of his own manufacture. —"The Story of My Life" (1897)

horse trading

Mr. Maliki defended his political horse trading with rival factions, many of which are seen as far apart on several substantial policy issues. —The Wall Street Journal (12/28/2010)

...competing maps were filed and threats were made—before horse-trading and backroom deals led to the resolution. —Chicago Tribune (1/20/2011)

In recent weeks, however, there have been signs that parties are starting to horse-trade over policies. The Brotherhood is floating specific proposals for tax changes and other reforms. —Reuters (1/18/2012)

"This is about horse trading." —David Brooks, columnist and commentator, referring to negotiations about taxes and spending (11/13/2012)

When it does not refer to buying and selling horses, **horse trading** means difficult negotiation and

compromise.

It often implies hard bargaining in which morals or principles are not considered. But it may also be neutral or positive, when compromise is viewed as needed and helpful.

The phrase has been used figuratively since the 1800's.

hot commodity

"He's a hot commodity, and the candidates clearly think his endorsement would be significant." —The New York Times (5/17/2011)

I'm just going to go out and put on the best show that I can and be as entertaining as possible, and make myself known as a hot commodity that can make them a lot of money. —USA Today (11/14/2011)

Packers tickets have always been a hot commodity. The team has been sold out on season tickets since 1960, and a waiting list now stands at 93,000 names. —Reuters (12/20/2011)

A **hot commodity** is something or someone that people want and value highly.

The phrase is used figuratively in the news examples: sports tickets and people are not normally thought of as commodities, like oil or soybeans traded on a commodity exchange.

The earliest example of hot commodity found in my searches is from 1944:

I am trying to write a story about Lee Bowman, an actor who is now a very hot commodity in Hollywood. —Los Angeles Times (12/31/1944)

house of cards

Turbulent winds are blowing through the Arab world and American-backed houses of cards may fall. —Bloomberg News (2/8/2011)

In 2008, the house of cards collapsed. We learned that mortgages had been sold to people who couldn't afford or understand them. —President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address (1/25/2012)

"That's how the house of cards fell and Americans lost trillions of dollars." —Senator Al Franken, talking about the 2008 financial crisis (5/13/2013)

A **house of cards** is likely to fall down or fail, like a house made with playing cards.

Examples of this metaphor have been found from as early as the 1600's.

hunker down

Board of Elections and campaign workers in Suffolk and Nassau Counties hunkered down Friday morning for another day of ballot counting in two key races on Long Island with no clear winner yet. —Newsday (11/2010)

Tripoli was largely shut down Monday, with schools, government offices and most stores closed, except for a few bakeries, said residents, who hunkered down in their homes. —Associated Press (2/2011)

If hunkering down with a big fat bowl of ice cream and a side of Oreos sounds like the perfect way to end every day, you're half right. It could be the end. —Washington Examiner (3/12/2011)

"When you don't know, the best thing to do is hunker down." —Senator Lisa Murkowski, talking about businesses not investing because of political debates about government spending (2/25/2013)

Hunker is almost never used by itself, but is common in the expression **hunker down**, which means, take a defensive position, or stay in one place to focus on doing something.

A literal meaning of hunker down, to squat near the floor or ground, has been traced to the 1700's. Its current meaning was not common until the 1970's. An early example is in the Oct. 27, 1967 issue of LIFE Magazine: "The President is said to be subdued these days, inclined to "hunker down" and let the Vietnam criticism beat over him."

icing on the cake

"The government is really now bringing in a lot of fiscal discipline into the country. If this indeed happens, it would really be icing on the cake." —Bloomberg News (2/28/2011)

The icing on the cake has been unrest in the Middle East, which has pushed the price of oil up to worrisome levels. —The New York Times (blog, 2/25/2011)

The icing on the cake for many fans will be watching Moore accept the award from someone who played a pivotal role in her career: Dick Van Dyke —Buffalo News (1/29/2012)

Cake is sweet, and the icing on top makes it sweeter. That is the literal meaning of icing on the cake.

Figuratively, **icing on the cake** usually means something additional that makes a good thing even better. Sometimes, as in the New York Times example, it means one more similar thing, or one more event in a series. In such cases, sweetness is not involved.

Literal uses of icing have been traced to the 1700's. An early example of icing on the cake used as a metaphor is in a story in the weekly magazine edited by Charles Dickens:

He's merely an ornamental part of the business, like the icing on the cake. —All the Year Round (6/19/1886)

in a flash

A trip they won't forget in a flash [headline]...Thirty-two US Airways passengers emerged rattled but safe after a lightning strike diverted their plane to Long Island MacArthur Airport Friday afternoon. —Newsday (1/7/2011)

In court on Wednesday, Mr. Brownstein said, "In a flash, my horrendous judgment has taken everything from me." —The New York Times (1/11/2012)

What happened next seemed to unfold in a flash. —Associated Press (1/30/2012)

In a flash means very quickly; almost instantly, like a flash of lightning.

Using an expression in both its literal and figurative senses is common in newspaper headlines, as the Newsday example illustrates. The headline means the passengers won't quickly forget that trip.

In a flash of means in a sudden moment of—such as a flash of imagination, wit, comprehension,

rage, violence, etc.

The earliest example I have found of in a flash meaning quickly was published in 1806.

in a nutshell

In a nutshell, Mr. Obama will be offering a plan to invest and grow, and Republicans will counter with a plan to cut and grow. —The Wall Street Journal (1/25/2011)

"Carnage" is being billed as "a comedy of no manners," and that's it in a nutshell. —Milpitas Post (1/18/2012)

In a nutshell, that's the argument against Gingrich: He's loony. —The Washington Post (blog, 1/19/2012)

"in a nutshell: he's one of my biggest relationships, my life-long mentor. my best friend." —Amanda Palmer, the musician, in a blog post announcing the cancellation of her next year of appearances because of her friend's treatment for cancer (12/6/2012)

In a nutshell means in a few words; expressed in a simple, concise way.

Using nutshell to mean small goes back to William Shakespeare's Hamlet (1602): "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space."

The use of the phrase meaning in a few words has been traced to the early 1800's.

in a pickle

Democrats are in a pickle. They want to appeal to Latinos, who support a comprehensive approach that includes earned legal status for the undocumented. But Democrats cannot afford to be seen as wimps on the issue or they'll lose the votes of non-Latinos. —San Francisco Chronicle (4/13/2011)

Don't get in a pickle. Many buyers need to unload a home or car before they buy another. —San Jose Mercury News (11/11/2011)

The average yield on a savings account is 0.1%... "Savers are in a pickle," said Scott Brewster, a certified financial planner...—New York Daily News (1/30/2012)

"It just put everyone in a pickle." —Erica Weiss, parent of a 6-year-old, referring to a strike by Chicago teachers (9/19/2012)

In a pickle means in trouble or having a difficult problem.

In baseball, a runner caught between bases is often said to be in a pickle.

The phrase has been in use since the time of Shakespeare: "How camest thou in this pickle? " asks Alonso, in "The Tempest" (1611).

in league with, in one's league

The $50 billion valuation puts Facebook in league with publicly traded Tencent Holdings Ltd. —Bloomberg News (1/28/2011)

And he's generous in mentoring a checkers competitor who is clearly not in his league. —USA

Today (2/21/2011)

"...no offense to Governor Cuomo or Governor O'Malley or Governor Hickenlooper or anybody else out there, they're not in Hillary Clinton's league..." —John King, television news correspondent, talking about Clinton's status as a future contender for President (2/1/2013)

Meanwhile, Pakistan ... where terrorism runs rampant and the military is in league with the Taliban... —The Nation (1/26/2011)

In the first three examples, **in league with** means in the same category as. A related expression is **not in one's league**: not competitive with, or not to be compared with.

In The Nation example, **in league with** means working together or allied with.

The meaning of in league with is determined by context.

When the meaning is "working together," the phrase usually has a negative connotation. When the meaning is "in the same category," it may be positive, negative or neutral.

To be **in a league of one's own** is to be unmatched by anyone, which can be a good thing or not.

In league with meaning allied has been traced to the 1500's. Early examples of in league with and in one's league (meaning in the same category) have been found no earlier than the 1930's.

in one's sleep

I felt like a total fool because I could not do the basic hustle steps that many dancers perform in their sleep. —The Detroit News (9/29/2011)

It was a softball question that any amateur politician could have answered in their sleep. —CNN (9/19/2011)

Owen looks particularly uncomfortable barking orders...Statham, on the other hand, can do this stuff in his sleep. —Philadelphia Inquirer (9/23/2011)

If you can do something **in your sleep**, you can do it without trying or thinking hard about it.

Literally, there are few things one can do in one's sleep (while sleeping), such as snore, dream, talk, or die. The figurative expression suggests either that someone is skillful, as in the Detroit News and Philadelphia Inquirer examples, or that the activity is easy, as in the CNN example. (A softball question is one that is easy to answer.)

The literal usage of in one's sleep and its variations has been traced back to some of the earliest English writing, but it wasn't until the 1800's that the phrases were used in the way they are today:

He pulled the big oar as though it were no trouble at all to him, and he could do it in his sleep... —The Sunday Magazine (London, 1885)

in spades

"...this is entertainment that knows what its audience wants and delivers it in spades." —David Rooney, in a review of a Broadway show in New York (12/15/2010)

"So we've got to get the offer right, the sensitivity right, and ensure that the value is there. When it's there, and it's easy to acquire, they purchase it in spades." —John G. Bruno, chief technology officer for NCR Corporation, in a conference call with financial analysts (7/31/2013)

"What Franco has in spades is consistency." —Kevin Joubert, a coach in Towson, Maryland, talking about Franco Prezioso, a long-distance swimmer (8/17/2013)

In spades means a lot; in great quantity.

The phrase is believed to come from the card game bridge, in which spades rank higher than the other three suits.

An example of this expression in the Oxford English Dictionary quotes a 1929 magazine article by Damon Runyon, but the meaning Runyon intended is not clear. I found no other printed examples in the first half of the 1900's, but there is much evidence that the expression was well-known by the 1960's.

in store (for)

The day after Citigroup became his new boss, Faxon spoke to The Times about what's in store for the music business... —Los Angeles Times (2/12/2011)

And officials tonight hinted more changes could be in store for Highland Park High School. —Detroit Free Press (1/31/2012)

More unrest may soon be in store. On Tuesday, a Danish court will rule on whether to shut down Roj TV, the Kurds' biggest television station...—TIME (1/9/2012)

In store means in the future.

The phrase extends the meaning of of the verb store, keep things for the future.

In store has been in use at least since 1386, when Geoffery Chaucer used it the Clerk's Prologue of the Canterbury Tales.

in the ballpark

He declined to give an exact figure but said $8 million to $10 million was in the "ballpark." —Associated Press (7/22/2011)

He said the utility's all-time peak record for instantaneous demand is 512 megawatts. At peak consumption on Thursday, which took place around 5 p.m., demand hit 457 megawatts, he said. "We're not even in the ballpark of peak demand at this point," Costello said. —Bennington (Vermont) Banner (7/22/2011)

When is the last time you used hand-drawn directions to navigate from one location to another? In the age of Google Maps and smartphone GPS, we can't blame you if your answer is somewhere in the ballpark of "never" to "not since I bought a first generation iPhone." —The Huffington Post (8/20/2013)

A ballpark is a stadium for baseball, a large, enclosed area. If a number or a guess **is in the ballpark**, it is within a range that is reasonably accurate or acceptable, but does not necessarily meet a strict requirement. The Associated Press example means that $8 million to $10 million was approximately correct. In the Bennington Banner example, Costello meant that the demand for power was not close to the maximum. In the Huffington Post example, the ballpark was an abstract range of possibilities.

A related phrase, **in the same ballpark**, means comparable to. Other phrases based on the same

idea are ballpark estimate and ballpark figure.

in the black, in the red, out of the red, red ink, Black Friday

The classic repertory company, which has operated in the black for its entire 19 years, is now just $500,000 short of the $13.3 million fundraising goal, Elliott said. —Pasadena Star-News (9/26/2011)

The results initially buoyed the shares, but by late morning the stock was in the red, falling 5.5% to $19.25. —Barron's (9/27/2011)

Postal employees are rallying today in support of Congressional action to help get the U.S. Postal Service get out of the red. —WWWL radio, New Orleans (9/27/2011)

"Even if we did exactly what the President wants, we would see red ink for as far as the eye can see." —Speaker of the House John Boehner (12/11/2012)

In June Groupon...revealed that it had lost $413 million last year. In fact, the company had been swimming through red ink for several years. —Business Insider (9/27/2011)

The console will reportedly be based on Android, much like Amazon's Kindle Fire tablets, and could arrive by Black Friday. —TIME (8/9/2013)

The Hawkeyes and Cornhuskers will continue to meet on Black Friday though 2017, but Big Ten officials have been non-committal beyond that. —The Des Moines Register (8/22/2013)

In financial contexts, **in the black** means a positive number or profitable, and **in the red** means a number below zero or losing money.

Get out of the red means change from losing money to making money, or move from negative to positive numbers. **Swimming through red ink** means losing a lot of money. There are many phrases in which red ink is a synonym for losses: drowning in red ink, the flow of red ink, $4 million in red ink, etc.

The phrases refer to the financial accounting practice of writing positive numbers in black ink and negative numbers in red. The Underwood Typewriter Company introduced a model that printed both black and red ink in 1910. The earliest examples of the idiomatic phrases have been found in the 1920's.

A related term is **Black Friday**, the day after Thanksgiving, a busy shopping day that helps retail businesses finish the year **in the black**. In the past the phrase was used only in financial contexts, but now is sometimes just a shorter way to say "the Friday after Thinksgiving," as in the Des Moines Register example.

in the dark, shot in the dark

"...you can neither perform your oversight function nor support the mission of CIA if you are kept in the dark." —John Brennan, speaking to the Senate Intelligence Committee about his nomination for director of the Central Intelligence Agency (2/7/2013)

...many customers are still in the dark about their money. —The New York Times (11/16/2011)

...the Oct. 29 snowstorm that left hundreds of thousands in the dark for nearly two weeks. —The Wall Street Journal (11/18/2011)

We don't really know where the economy stands in the short term," the official said. "It's more or less a shot in the dark." —Reuters (8/26/2011)

In other words, investing in ad tech is often a shot in the dark. —digiday.com (8/20/2013)

People who do not have information or knowledge may be said to be **in the dark**.

In the Journal example, "in the dark" means the electric power was off. People were literally in the dark at night, but not during the day when the sun was shining.

A **shot in the dark** is a guess, or a desperate attempt.

In the dark meaning lack of knowledge has been traced to the 1600's. Referring to customers in power outages as in the dark came in the later 1900's, after large-scale failures began to occur. This is an early example of shot in the dark used as a metaphor:

Not against your majesty only, but against many of your loyal subjects, are arrows shot in the dark, by lurking villains who wound the reputations of the innocent in sport. —"Second Thoughts Are Best" by Daniel Defoe (1729)

in the doghouse

He's turning to the courts to get Sasha out of the doghouse. "They know the dog's not dangerous," he said. "She was caught chasing a duck." —Dallas Morning News (11/18/2010)

Congress may be in the doghouse with the American public, but a new poll suggests that the broader government—especially the military—gets high marks for keeping the nation safe and secure. —Associated Press (9/13/2011)

An MSNBC commentator is in the doghouse over a mildly obscene on-air criticism of President Barack Obama. —Chicago Tribune (7/3/2011)

If you are **in the doghouse**, someone is not pleased with you, perhaps because of something you did. The phrase suggests that someone thinks you should sleep outside with the dog.

In the Dallas Morning News example, the City of Plano, Texas, had placed Sasha on a list of dangerous dogs. Usually, from a dog's point of view, only the figurative doghouse is bad.

The expression comes from American slang around the beginning of the 1900's. An early example of the idea is in a humor magazine published in New York:

> Uncle Si— "Here's your room, mister."
> Country Boarder— "Um—yes. If it's all the same to you could I sleep in the doghouse instead?"
> —Judge's Library (October, 1905)

in the flesh

Jenny Maguire, 28, drove for 10 hours with her two best friends from their home in Ohio [to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York]...She said it was worth it to see Kanye West in the flesh. —New York Daily News (11/25/2010)

In central Gaza...the Ghoul family of a village called Mughraga said they had been told by Hamas officials that one of their imprisoned family members would be released..."I will not believe anything until I see Abu Imran in the flesh," said Suhair al-Ghoul of her husband...—The New

York Times (10/14/2011)

So a doctor might casually ask, Do you have a cell phone? A Facebook account? How many friends—virtual ones, not in-the-flesh pals—do you have? —TIME (3/28/2011)

In the flesh means here, in real life—not on television, on the phone, on the Internet, or far away. **In person** usually has the same meaning.

In the flesh comes from the Bible. The phrase appears many times, and in some contexts it means in sin. The phrase is closer to the modern expression when it means in the human world, not the spirit world. For example:

For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. —King James Bible, John 1:7(1611)

One way of expressing that in modern English: "There are many deceivers, who don't admit that Jesus Christ became human."

in the heat of the moment

The pediatricians' statement against the practice includes advice on what parents should do if they strike a child in the heat of the moment: apologize and explain why the spanking occurred. —Los Angeles Times (12/26/2011)

Second-degree murder often constitutes an intentional killing, that is not planned or committed in the heat of the moment... —The Tennessean (12/20/2011)

The real issue is how do we make sure that we have an effective police force in which officers have the training and support and oversight to make good choices in the heat of the moment." —KUOW News (Seattle, 12/20/2011)

In the heat of the moment means during a brief time of intense emotion.

Using heat to mean strong emotion has been traced to the 1500's. The earliest example of the phrase in my searches is in "The Critical Review" of London, in which a letter dated September, 1792, says that "accounts transmitted in the heat of the moment are always exaggerated."

in the loop, in the know

The mayor wants to pretend that he was not in the loop with regard to those incidents. —Hartford Courant (2/3/2011)

"Obviously I've not been in the loop on classified information since I left the White House." —former Vice President Dick Cheney (6/16/2013)

Mr. Grossman has been regularly briefing the Afghan government but Afghan officials have complained that they were being kept out of the loop. —The New York Times (1/28/2012)

The wide variety of topics covered in talks and the Q-and-A period afterward can be as valuable to those in the know as to those merely interested in learning something new. —The Washington Post (2/28/2011)

For those not in the know, "cowpea" is the general name for the crowder pea, black-eyed pea, cream pea, silver-hull and other field pea varieties. —Cleveland Daily Banner (8/25/2013)

If you are **in the loop**, you are in a group that receives information. If you do not get that

information, you are **out of the loop**.

Being **in the know** is knowing something that other people don't know.

As in the Cleveland Daily Banner example, the negative form is "not in the know."

In the loop comes from aviation and engineering. It originally meant part of the process, as in this example:

It usually involves driving displays with computer inputs which are coupled to actual controls so that the operator can be placed in the loop. —Human Engineering Guide for Equipment Manufacturers (1964)

An early example of in the know is in a racing magazine published in London. "He" refers to a horse.

...although he was backed by those in the know many times during the past month, he seems scarcely good enough...—Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes (March, 1872)

in the nick of time

She sometimes pays her bills "in the nick of time"... —USA Today (12/6/2011)

She refused to accept a reward as she merely encouraged me to hurry so that I could catch my flight (which I did, just in the nick of time). —Chicago Tribune (12/5/2011)

It's the third time this year a government budget crisis has been averted just in the nick of time. —Associated Press (9/28/2011)

In the nick of time means at the exact time it is needed or required.

In the nick of time and **just in time** have the same meaning. They are sometimes combined ("just in the nick of time") as in the Chicago Tribune and Associated Press examples.

The phrase comes from the use of nicks—cuts or marks in wood or metal—to help make precise measurements. It began as **in the nick**, with nick meaning at the crucial moment. In the nick of time has been traced to the 1600's.

in the same breath, in one breath...in the next breath

When discussing the Silicon Valley's lasting contributions to humanity, he mentioned in the same breath the invention of the microchip and "The Whole Earth Catalog," a 1960s counterculture publication. —The New York Times (10/5/2011)

We often mention T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden in the same breath, though this pairing presents us not with a simple union but a choice between two very different approaches to art. —The Cornell Daily Sun (9/28/2011)

When he called to report the glitch, the Discover saleswoman said "sorry" in one breath, then tried to sell Larry a student card in the next. —Knoxville News Sentinel (9/24/2011)

In one breath, Gene says perhaps it was time to go. In the next breath, he says the band wants to come back. Like I said, it's complicated. —The State Journal-Register (Springfield, Illinois, 9/8/2011)

In the same breath means at the same time. It usually calls attention to a contradiction or contrast

between two things expressed at the same time.

The combination of **in one breath...and in the next breath** has a similar meaning, emphasizing something contradictory or unexpected. The Knoxville News Sentinel example says the woman apologized, but then did not act as if she were really sorry. The Journal-Register example means that Gene said something, but the next thing he said contradicted it.

My searches found examples of both expressions as early as the 1600's, used with similar meaning.

in the worst way

Air traffic control needs updating in the worst way.—Houston Chronicle (3/23/2011)

"Daniel, one of these days, is going to do Shakespeare," McCann says. "He wants to play Puck in the worst way. —Newsday (3/24/2011)

"The kid wants to be good in the worst way. She'll do whatever it takes to be good." —The Morning Call (1/26/2012)

"In the worst way" is usually used literally: "The job was done in the worst way possible." But when something is wanted or needed **in the worst way**, it is wanted or needed very much. In such contexts, as in the news examples, in the worst way means to an extreme degree.

In the 1800's, **of the worst kind** had a similar meaning. In the worst way developed later. An early example:

"Well, sir, I wanted somebody to kiss me for my mother just then, and shake hands and say good-bye, in the worst way; but I could not stop!" —"A Fast Life on the Modern Highway" by Joseph Taylor (1874)

IOU

When the State of California began handing out i.o.u.'s in 2009 because of a cash shortage, taxpayers were predictably aghast. —The New York Times (4/21/2011)

Other environmentally-smart gifts include homemade ones: home baked cookies, bread or jams, a plant or tree. Purchase gifts that don't create any waste at all: concert or movie tickets, dinner at a restaurant, or an IOU to help rake leaves or repair a leaky faucet... —Utica Observer Dispatch (12/16/2011)

Essentially, the jobs plan is an IOU from a president and lawmakers who may not even be in office...when the bills come due. —Associated Press (9/9/2011)

An **IOU** (I owe you) is an agreement to pay in the future.

The agreement may be informal or even unwritten, when used in conversation ("I'll pay for lunch next time. Make it an IOU. ")

The use of IOU has been traced to the 1600's.

ivory tower

"I don't think that English scholars are in this kind of ivory tower anymore," she said. "They are

very much a part of the world around them." —Associated Press (11/21/2011)

There is good news, though, for the ivory tower. College does pay off for most, and just completing a year or two boosts future income. —The Wall Street Journal (11/19/2011)

The policy of LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton, the parent company of Kenzo, is to look for modern approaches to brand management. Increasingly, designers are being asked to step out of an ivory tower—or even a streamlined studio—and take on other roles. —The New York Times (9/9/2011)

Ivory tower means a protected place, separate from most of the world.

It frequently refers to academia, and sometimes, as in the Wall Street Journal example, specifically means colleges and universities. In other contexts it conveys a vague suggestion of comfortable seclusion, as in the Times example.

An early example of the phrase in its figurative use (not referring to tall, white buildings) is in a magazine published in London in 1889:

Haunted by metaphysical phantoms, and cherishing devotedly all that was vague and mysterious, he endeavoured, as he says, to construct his life like a romance, and to isolate himself from the busy crowd within the ivory tower of the poet, there to breathe the rare air of solitude... —The Gentleman's Magazine (March, 1889)

jack of all trades

There is no longer any value in being a jack of all trades. The new world of work demands highly specialised masters. —Financial Times (5/18/2011)

The officer of today is expected to be many things and would be considered a "jack of all trades"—a social worker, a diplomat, priest, friend and, sometimes, a tough dude. —Pacific Daily News (5/14/2011)

Jabas, a former grand knight, called him a jack-of-all-trades who helped plan and run nearly every chapter function for years. "You always knew every detail would be covered if Jerry was involved," Jabas said. —Associated Press (9/9/2011)

A **jack of all trades** (usually a person, but sometimes a service or tool) does several or more things.

Although it comes from **jack of all trades, master of none**, the shorter phrase most frequently expresses a positive thought. In my survey of 50 news examples, 70 percent used jack of all trades in a positive sense, 14 percent negative and 16 percent neither positive nor negative.

The longer version has been traced to the 1700's.

joined at the hip

These two areas of agreement are joined at the hip. Our economic strength is the foundation of our security. —Philadelphia Inquirer (11/14/2011)

The two networks are joined at the hip and sold to cable operators only in a package. —Variety (11/10/2011)

Normally, German and French bond yields rise or fall in tandem [together], reflecting the

countries' sort of joined-at-the-hip status as the core economies of Europe. —Los Angeles Times (11/9/2011)

Joined at the hip means inseparable; always together.

The expression is a metaphor for conjoined twins, whose bodies are joined before birth.

In my searches, the earliest figurative use of the phrase—"so pally it's like they were joined at the hip"—is in a 1961 book, "The Purveyor" by John Starr. ("Pally" in that example is slang for friendly to each other.)

jump on the bandwagon

Governor Pat Quinn jumps on the Twitter bandwagon as a new way to reach out to people in Illinois. —WREX-TV (6/29/2011)

The latest trend in fashion is to create discount collections with department stores, but don't expect to see famed shoe designer Stuart Weitzman jumping on that bandwagon. —Associated Press (1/31/2012)

Later in the week, Newt Gingrich jumped on the Romney-mocking bandwagon, calling the plan "fantasy"... —New York Post (1/29/2012)

"Hillary Clinton says she has not made her mind up about 2016, but that hasn't stopped her friends from jumping on the bandwagon." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor (4/4/2013)

Those who **jump on the bandwagon** do something that is popular or part of a trend. They hope to share in the success of others, or take part in something popular.

In the 1800's, a typical circus included a wagon carrying a band, playing music to attract attention and crowds. When politicians used bandwagons in their campaign events, jumping on a bandwagon became associated with trying to be on the winning side.

jump ship

Baldwin has repeatedly maintained his intention to jump ship when his contract expires next year... —Salon (4/6/2011)

Now that LTE has proven to be faster and easier to deploy, Sprint has to jump ship from WiMax. —The Washington Post (1/9/2012)

"I think right now Samsung is in the lead and I think it is that wow factor that's going to cause a lot more people to jump ship." —Mark Spoonauer, editor-in-chief of laptopmag.com, talking about phones (3/17/2013)

Jump ship means quit and leave.

It alludes to sailors jumping from a vessel to escape their service.

In Mark Spoonauer's quotation, the phrase means leave Apple's iPhone and buy Samsung's Galaxy phone instead.

Jump a train was early 1900's slang for get on or off a moving train, but jump ship endured as the metaphor for quitting and leaving.

The original phrase was **jump the ship**, as in this example from a British government document:

...the men are so [abusively] treated during the voyage that they "jump" the ship as soon as she is made fast. These are the questionable desertions. —Reports to The House of Commons (London, 1877)

jump the gun

On the Thursday before your designated week, you are allowed to start piling up the bulky trash and brush. If you jump the gun, you may be fined up to $2,000. —The Dallas Morning News (blog, 3/24/2011)

The Corn Refiners Association has asked federal regulators to allow HFCS to be called "corn sugar." But the lawsuit says the defendants "jumped the gun" and started using the term before receiving approval. —Reuters (4/28/2011)

Philip Glass's friends had a reasonable excuse for jumping the gun and throwing him a 75th-birthday party two days early at Le Poisson Rouge on Sunday evening. On the actual day, Tuesday, Mr. Glass will be at Carnegie Hall to hear the American premiere of his Ninth Symphony. —The New York Times (1/30/2012)

Jump the gun means start too early, before one should or before preparations have been made.

The expression alludes to a runner starting a race early, before a shot is fired to signal the official start.

In this early example, the phrase has the same meaning as it does today:

Germany is already planning to jump the gun at the close of hostilities and capture the foreign trade of the world. —Printer's Ink (1917)

jump the shark

The show needs to end because it has jumped the shark. It's still funny, at some points, but it needs to end before it goes too far overboard. —Entertainment Weekly (4/28/2011)

Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey prides himself on his bluster and relishes the attention it garners in conservative circles beyond the state. He jumped the shark last month, suggesting he might defy the State Supreme Court if it orders him to make up a $1.6 billion shortfall of education financing that disproportionately punishes poorer districts and their students. —The New York Times (5/10/2011)

In Florida, he jumped the shark, promising the Space Coast a major investment in colonizing the Moon. Making such a ridiculous promise backfired on Gingrich, and Romney took advantage of it. —The Nation (2/1/2012)

Jump the shark means do something questionable in a desperate effort to get attention.

The expression originated in the 1970's, when the TV series "Happy Days" had passed the high point of its quality and popularity. Its writers struggled to come up with good ideas. They won widespread ridicule when a scene showed the character Fonzie water skiing over a shark.

jump through hoops

To the employer who said people on unemployment want to stay on it: I would jump through hoops

of fire and snakes to get a job at your company. —Orlando Sentinel (7/22/2011)

People complain—as they do in many counties—that planning officials make them jump through hoops to get projects done. —Sacramento Bee (7/1/2011)

"The other big story that we saw toward the end of the week was about the IRS...trying to make these conservative groups, like Tea Party groups, jump through hoops to get tax exempt status." —Brianna Keilar, television news anchor (5/12/2013)

To **jump through hoops** is to satisfy bureaucratic requirements or overcome other obstacles—like an animal doing tricks in a circus.

The hoops are not usually described specifically, as in the Orlando Sentinel example (the idea of a hoop with snakes is most unusual).

An early example, in which the expression omits hoops but conveys a similar idea:

Those who submit to be ruled by their wives are called "Barnaby," and are spoken of as having to "jump through." This expression refers to the manner in which trained animals are compelled to jump through hoops and other objects at the command of the master. —The Toledo Bee (1/19/1902)

(the) jury is out

Online pinboard sites Pinterest, Polyvore, and Svpply let users share stuff they love...The jury is out on effectiveness, since ultimately the sites are home to content, not commerce. —Adweek (11/22/2011)

"It's really too early to say," Reyes said of the commute and whether it would consistently save time. "The jury is out." —Chicago Tribune (11/14/2011)

Will bears become habituated to human spaces and food in places like Durango and stay around even as seasons and precipitation patterns improve? "The jury is out," she said. —The New York Times (7/27/2011)

"But the jury's out...it's not what somebody says; it's what they do." —Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, talking about Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi (1/29/2013)

If the **jury is out**, the question has not been answered, or the issue has not been decided.

The phrase is a metaphor for legal cases: a jury is out until it makes its decision and comes back to the courtroom and reports to the judge.

An 1888 advertisement, "In the Witness Box for Drs. Starkey and Palen's Treatment by Inhalation," carried on the metaphor for a full page. "To continue our metaphor, we will say the jury is out," the ad said. The phrase became more common in the mid-1900's.

just deserts

It's difficult to have honest conversations about revenge. Seeing someone receive his just deserts often feels righteous and richly deserved, and yet society regards vengeance as primitive and barbaric. —The New York Times (7/25/2011)

Just deserts would be dispensed if the ridiculous NBA players had to declare bankruptcy and work as janitors, dishwashers or fast-food employees. —New York Post (11/18/2011)

But it's far less guilt-inducing when the victim is an enemy like Osama bin Laden, who has gotten his just deserts. —TIME (5/3/2011)

Someone who gets his **just deserts** gets what he deserves—good or bad—but more frequently bad, when this phrase is used.

The expression takes two of the most confusing words in English and makes them even more confusing. Are you ready? As they say in the doctor's office, this may hurt a little:

Dessert (deZERT), noun: sweet food at the end of a meal.
Desert (DEZert), noun: place with very little rain.
Desert (deZERT), verb: abandon.
Just deserts (just deZERTS): the thing deserved.

So, in **just deserts**, deserts is spelled like the verb and the place with little rain but pronounced like the sweet food at the end of a meal.

The explanation is that in just deserts, deserts has an old meaning that is rarely used except in this expression. Written examples with that meaning, the thing deserved, have been found as far back as 1297.

The confusion affects native speakers as well as English learners, and misspellings are frequent. My advice: pay close attention to context, rather than spelling, or there may be no dessert for you.

kangaroo court

The system, they say, throws due process out the window. "It was a kangaroo court," motorist Todd Andrews said of his experience fighting the $175 citation. —Los Angeles Times (8/21/2011)

Ralph Scopo charged he was stripped of his position in Concrete Workers Local 6A by a "kangaroo court"... —New York Post (8/20/2011)

In the late 1970s and early '80s, he [Qaddafi] eliminated even mild critics through public trials and executions. Kangaroo courts were staged on football fields or basketball courts, where each of the accused was subjected to intense interrogation, often begging for mercy while a crowd howled for death. —The New York Times (8/25/2011)

A **kangaroo court** is a group without proper legal basis, which judges people unfairly. In the Los Angeles Times example, Andrews complained about a traffic-camera system that fined drivers for stop-sign violations. He said the system had no formal legal procedures and rights. In the Daily News example, Scopo complained about a group that fired him from his job in a labor union.

The precise origin of kangaroo court has not been explained. The earliest known printed example is in a humorous account of life in the southwestern United States. An 1850 article in a New York magazine describes "the special court of Kangaroo County" created by a group of Texans for their amusement. The Australian kangaroo was regarded by Americans as exotic and comical. ("Mestang" in this excerpt presumably meant mustang, a horse.)

By an unanimous vote, Judge G.—the fattest and funniest of the assembly—was elected to the bench, and the "Mestang" or "Kangaroo Court" regularly organized. —The Literary World (7/20/1850)

keel over

...the burning plastic materials gave off toxic smoke, and when firefighters removed their masks to work there, many began to "keel over," fire officials said at the time. —Rochester Democrat and Chronicle (7/8/2011)

...Pheidippides sprinted from Marathon to Athens before keeling over... —The Wall Street Journal (8/6/2011)

..."The Revenant," an often hilarious living-dead comedy [film] that just had to happen, given the current hunger for zombies, vampires and other things that refuse to keel over. —Variety (8/25/2012)

Keel over means faint or fall down. It originally referred to ships turning over, so that the keel at the bottom of the ship was on top.

In my searches, this is the earliest example of keel over that did not refer to a ship:

What we gave him, so "destroyed the vitality of the system," that he was compelled...to keel over. —Botanico-Medical Recorder (Columbus, Ohio, 7/27/1839)

keep (someone) posted

On Sept. 16, the city provided the governor's office with a financial progress report titled "First 100 Days into Recovery." "Keep up the good work and please keep us posted on your progress," replied Kim Mills, director of auditing in the governor's Office of the Chief Inspector General. —South Florida Sun-Sentinel (9/30/2011)

The families told us, the Scott County Sheriff is not keeping them posted on the case or suspects. —WLBT (10/11/2011)

"But as we receive more information, as the FBI has more information, as our counterterrorism teams have more information, we will make sure to keep you and the American people posted." —President Barack Obama, one day after bombings at the Boston Marathon (4/16/2013)

If someone **keeps you posted**, he or she gives you the latest information about what happens.

In the 1500's, post meant to ride in relays of horses, which later made the word a natural choice when speaking about mail delivery. By the 1800's, to **be posted up** meant to be given information.

An early example of keep me posted is in a letter to a friend written by John Brown, the anti-slavery activist, a few months before he was hanged for trying to start a rebellion in Virginia.

"You may be assured that what you say to me will reach those who may be benefited...so don't fail to keep me posted..." —letter of 9/8/1859 published in The New York Times (10/31/1859)

keep one's nose clean

If she does community service, donates to charity and otherwise keeps her nose clean, she'll end up with no criminal record, retain her $83,000 per year pension -- and even have a chance at a political comeback in two years. —The Washington Post (1/8/2010)

"I'm a free market guy, but in our industry you just have to expect that you're going to have audits. But if you keep your nose clean, a lot of these regulations are just good business requirements"...—Jeff Hynes, president of Composites Horizons Inc., a California manufacturing company

(10/14/2011)

"When you worked for a company, if you stayed productive and kept your nose clean, you were with that company for life." —Austin Burke, president of the Scranton, Pennsylvania, Chamber of Commerce (3/17/2013)

If you **keep your nose clean**, you stay out of trouble.

The origin of this peculiar phrase is unknown. An older, British expression, **keep one's hands clean**, was used with a similar meaning. An early example is in a news article from 1862:

They held the throng long after the other stands were deserted, and when he informed one enthusiastic questioner that if he would keep his nose clean he'd bring him home an Octoroon, the clocks were striking seven. —The New York Times (8/20/1862)

keep your powder dry

So while we can understand why President Obama would warn Gadhafi's regime, as he did this week, and that NATO is reviewing "potential military options," we think this country should keep its powder dry and resist the temptation to intervene in what could turn out to be a prolonged civil war. —San Gabriel Valley Tribune (3/11/2011)

"Right now everybody's kind of keeping their powder dry, being cautious, and that is not the kind of environment that leads to strong job growth." —CNBC (11/4/2011)

For now, he said, Syria's Kurds were keeping their powder dry, awaiting the outcome of the uprising, but were ready to fight to defend their rights when needed. —Reuters (1/11/2012)

A 19th-Century proverb, "trust in God and keep your powder dry," referred to gunpowder—and soldiers' need to be ready.

Now, **keep your powder dry**, in addition to be ready, means don't take action. Or, don't take action too soon.

kick in

"Unless the Republicans are willing to compromise and do a balanced approach, I think it will kick in." —Senator Claire McCaskill, talking about cuts in government spending. (2/24/2013)

That's because more of them start out with unhealthy conditions like high blood pressure even before the hormonal changes kick in. —Associated Press (1/31/2012)

In the McCaskill quotation and the Associated Press sentence, **kick in** means start or begin. In the examples below, kick in has a different meaning—contribute:

You get twenty friends to each kick in $20 for the Super Bowl party. —Philadelphia Daily News (2/2/2011)

Nursing homes would kick in $5 million." —East Valley, Arizona, Tribune (3/11/2011)

"...that's not the way we operate our tax system...It's not about volunteerism. We all kick in according to the system." —David Axelrod, campaign advisor to President Barack Obama (4/15/2012)

In addition to its many literal uses, **kick in** is also part of the figurative **kick in the pants** (scolding or reprimand to motivate someone), and **kick in the teeth** (sudden or surprisingly harsh negative

experience).

kick the can down the road

"For years now, Washington has kicked the can down the road without facing up to its spending addiction." —Rep. Martha Roby of Alabama, weekly Republican address (5/14/2011)

"The American people are tired of kicking things down the road. We've got to get this done and done the right way." —Senator John Kerry, referring to the budget debate in Congress (5/15/2012)

"I certainly hope we don't kick the can down the road. We all know what the issues are...We've had two dry runs already and nothing has changed." —Senator Bob Corker, discussing negotiations about taxes and spending (11/11/2012)

"I've watched leaders from both parties kick this can down the road, kick it down the road and they kick it down the road. We're out of road to kick the can down." —John Boehner, speaker of the House of Representatives (3/3/2013)

Kick the can down the road means solve a problem temporarily, with the likelihood that it will have to be solved later.

The expression comes from a children's game, Kick the Can. The earliest examples of its use were printed in the 1980's.

The Reagan administration is delaying its test of an anti-satellite missile from March until June...the delay "kicks the can down the road" in terms of making it a less pressing problem with the Soviets. —Associated Press (2/26/1985)

kick upstairs

The most difficult decisions are sure to get kicked upstairs to President Barack Obama and House Speaker John Boehner. —San Jose Mercury-News (6/14/2011)

Vigano complained of corruption within the church and protested orders to remove him from his post and send him to be the papal nuncio, or ambassador, to Washington...By being kicked upstairs, Vigano wrote, his efforts to clean up the Vatican would be stopped... —National Public Radio (3/29/2012)

If a decision, question, problem or task is **kicked upstairs**, it is sent to a higher-ranking person or department. The phrase is used that way in the San Jose Mercury-News example.

If you are **kicked upstairs**, you are forced to take a higher-level job, usually with less responsibility or power. That is the meaning in the National Public Radio example.

Kick upstairs, which has been traced back to the 1700's, probably originated as the opposite of an older expression, to be **kicked downstairs**, to be forced out roughly or without respect.

kid gloves

The fair has also long been known as a demarcation for campaigns, the point at which candidates take off the kid gloves and sling a little mud at their opponents, or make major announcements. —Sun Herald (Biloxi, Miss., 7/16/2011)

"Business was seen as an exploiter of workers. So we treated labor with kid gloves." —The Washington Post (7/3/2011)

"We had much, much worse terrorists in this country called the Weathermen...We treated them with kid gloves." —Alan Dershowitz, Harvard Law School professor, talking about treatment of the Boston Marathon bombing suspect (4/23/2013)

Kid gloves are made from the skin of a kid—a lamb or young goat—and are very soft. Phrases that include **kid glove** describe acting gently or being lenient. **Kid-glove treatment** and **treating with kid gloves** are among the most common of these phrases. In the Sun Herald example, **taking kid gloves off** means the candidates stop being nice or civil to each other. (See also, gloves off.) In the Washington Post example, the speaker was explaining India's strong laws protecting workers.

Examples of this idiom can be found in the 1800's. Now it may confuse people because of the different but more frequently-used meaning of kid—child—and its derivatives such as **kidflick** (a movie for children), **kidvid** (a video for children) and **kid stuff** (suitable for children or trivial).

kill two birds with one stone

If you're sending photos from your computer to a frame, you can also send photos at the same time to places like Facebook or Twitter to kill two birds with one stone. —The Wall Street Journal (blog, 7/1/2011)

"I figured I could kill two birds with one stone," she said. "I can have the fish and I could have vegetables as well." —dvidshub.net (4/29/2012)

Nonetheless, they begin to inflate their perception of their competence at problem solving. This kills two birds with one stone. They don't feel guilty for having cheated, and since they've forgotten about the cheating, they feel better about their performance. —The Washington Post (8/10/2012)

Killing two birds with one stone means accomplishing two goals with one action. The expression is so well known that it is sometimes shortened to **kill two birds**.

Killing birds with stones was an ancient activity, and English is not the only language in which this idiom exists.

In 1656, Thomas Hobbes wrote: "to kill two birds with one stone, and satisfy two arguments with one answer."

kiss up to, suck up to, kiss ass, brown nose, brownie points

Instead of raising taxes on the rich, they see him kissing up to corporate interests. —Sacramento Bee (4/11/2011)

But it just feels unseemly for the Fed, the world's most powerful central bank...to be trying to kiss up to the public. —The Washington Post (3/31/2011)

"When you're an auditor who's trying to protect a long-term relationship, you have to suck up to the client, and the client knows it." —The Wall Street Journal (1/14/2012)

...surrounded by brown-nose courtiers whose well-being hinges on presidential favor, he must have succumbed to megalomania... —American Thinker (8/19/2013)

Sprint and Kyocera deserve brownie points for coming up with an innovative design. The device

feels sturdy. —USA Today (4/12/2011)

Kiss up means flatter; be excessively nice to gain favor, as in "kiss up to the boss."

The expression came into use sometime after 1950, perhaps as a more polite version of **kiss ass**.

An older phrase with a similar meaning is **suck up to**, which has been traced to the 1860's.

Another expression with the same meaning is **brown nose**. The phrase is widely considered acceptable because its vulgar origin is mostly forgotten. It is used as an adjective in the American Thinker example. The noun form, referring to a person, is **brown noser**.

A related phrase is **brownie points**: imaginary credit earned by a person who does something to win favor. Some people now use brownie points simply as a synonym for praise, as in the USA Today example.

kitchen sink

Dudchik's strength is his kitchen-sink approach, not his insistence on high quality. —The Hartford Courant (10/23/2011)

Traders "tend to think that they're going to throw the kitchen sink [at the problem]"... —Dow Jones Newswires (10/21/2011)

Typical of Ives' everything-and-the-kitchen-sink style of composing, he weaves into his sonatas various snippets of Americana, little quotes from old hymn tunes and folk songs... —NPR (10/21/2011)

A variety of phrases that include **kitchen sink** are based on the expression **everything but the kitchen sink**, which means almost everything you can imagine.

A common form of the expression is "throw everything but the kitchen sink," meaning attack in an unrestrained way. This was often changed to "everything including the kitchen sink." These and similar phrases were used so frequently that kitchen sink became an adjective, as in the Hartford Courant example.

The earliest example in my searches is in a 1926 news story:

...the wealthy 52-year-old real estate man...ironed out some of his difficulties with "Peaches," who fled his sumptuous apartment taking with her everything but the kitchen sink... —Dubuque Telegraph-Herald (10/31/1926)

knee-jerk

Remember, when someone upsets you, the first response that comes to mind is usually a bad one. Self-defense instructors call this a "knee-jerk response." —Silver City Sun-News (8/10/2011)

"One of the things I hope we don't see from our federal government is this knee-jerk reaction from Washington, D.C." —Texas Governor Rick Perry, referring to new gun-control legislation. (12/18/2012)

"You shouldn't have a knee-jerk reaction to anything that comes across Twitter." —Keith Bliss, a brokerage executive, after a false news report caused a sudden drop in stock prices (4/23/2013)

"The sort of knee-jerk reaction to anything that President Obama proposes...is not reflective of all Republicans on Capitol Hill." —Jay Carney, press secretary to President Obama (7/31/2013)

A **knee-jerk reaction** or **response** means doing or thinking something automatically, without thinking about it carefully.

The phrases are metaphors based on a familiar medical test: a doctor taps the front of a patient's knee with a soft hammer, causing the leg to jerk forward if the patient has normal reflexes.

During the 1960's and 1970's, **knee-jerk liberal** was a common expression among conservatives. Liberals sometimes retaliated with **knee-jerk conservative**.

Knee-jerk is sometimes used with other words to indicate lack of thinking, or automatic action:

The stock markets have gone down, but they have been looking more solid after an initial knee-jerk plunge. —Knowledge@Wharton Today (8/10/2011)

Knee-jerk, referring to the medical test, has been used since the 1870's. Isolated examples of knee-jerk used metaphorically have been found as early as the 1920's, but the idiom doesn't appear to have become common until after the 1950's.

knock (someone's) socks off

"I think there's a chance that Huntsman is going to be a sort of Republican version of Obama with all the positives and negatives that entails... He can give you an analysis of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party that will knock your socks off." —The Wall Street Journal (6/30/2011)

The Albondigas ($12), plump lamb meatballs served in a lovely, complex gravy with shaved Manchego, knocked our socks off. —reataurant review, The Palm Beach Post (4/22/2012)

Russia wants to knock your socks off. Denmark is stylish and sophisticated. Ireland is up for a party—on a budget. There are more than 200 countries at the Olympics, and they have two ways to stand out. One is on the medal podium—the other is by partying. —Associated Press (8/2/2012)

If something **knocks your socks off**, it is unusually impressive or exciting or amazing.

An 1845 example cited by the Oxford English Dictionary refers to fighting ("You must knock the socks off those Old School folks! ") but I could find nothing to explain the origin.

knock on wood

"It's a formula that has, knock wood, stood the test of time." —Zap2It (4/28/2011)

And so far, knock on wood, there hasn't yet been a massive downdraft for the whole market quite like that event last year.—(8/2/2011)

"[The Occupy Orlando protest is] catching people's imagination and also, knock on wood, nothing sort of negative or discrediting has happened." —Associated Press (10/19/2011)

"For my career, I hope, knock on wood, that it happens but... I'm not going to cry myself to sleep if it doesn't..." —Jennifer Lawrence, when asked if she thought about winning an Academy Award (2/24/2013, before she won the award)

Some people believe that knocking on wood will prevent bad luck.

Even when there is no wood nearby to knock one's knuckles against, people may say **knock on wood** when talking about the future optimistically. It is a non-religious equivalent of "God willing."

Sometimes **on** is omitted: **knock wood**, as in the Zap2It example.

The origin is unknown, but some people have guessed that it is related to the religious significance of wood and the Christian cross.

know inside and out, know inside out

Dick was a journalistic pioneer: he was always at the heart of the story; he saw angles nobody else saw and he knew the Capitol inside and out. —WQOW-TV (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 11/11/2011)

Hicks said the coaches know the game of football inside and out, and the kids have a respect for the game. —Houston Chronicle (11/1/2011)

"We know all these deals inside out and we know their default rates," he said. —The Wall Street Journal (11/11/2011)

If you **know something inside and out**, you know it completely. To **know something inside out** has the same meaning.

These phrases are based on the meaning of inside out—turned so that the inside is exposed, and the outside is inside—which can be helpful in seeing and learning about something completely.

Know inside and out has been in use at least since the 1700's. The earliest example in my searches is in a footnote of a translation of The Satires of Juvenal published in 1789: "I know you intimately and thoroughly: Inside and out, as we say; therefore you can't deceive me."

know the ropes, learn the ropes, show (someone) the ropes

So Romney knows the ropes and routines of campaigns and has looked the most comfortable on the pressurized stages of the two most recent GOP debates where competitors display that forced camaraderie. —Los Angeles Times (8/16/2011)

"My experience with being on the city council is still very new," she said. "I have been learning the ropes." —Killeen, Texas, Daily Herald (9/4/2011)

"They're still emerging. They're still new faces here...And so they're still learning the ropes here." —John Gramlich, legal affairs reporter in Washington, D.C., talking about proponents of gun control (4/26/2013)

"It was not her job to teach interns, but she took the time to show me the ropes and I was always grateful for that." —Newsday (9/6/2011)

MCA was a great artist, visionary and a selfless humanitarian. He and his bandmates were especially kind to me and we became good friends. They took Tribe out on tour a couple of times and showed us the ropes. —Q-Tip, rapper and entertainer (5/4/2012)

If you **know the ropes**, you know how things are done and how to succeed. If you do not know the ropes, you may have to **learn the ropes** or have an experienced person **show** you **the ropes**.

Examples of know the ropes date from the early 1800's. Some refer to ships, but whether the expression originated on ships is unknown.

knuckle under

In any event, the prosecutor said, victims in successful extortions "knuckle under and make payments, and that's what happened in this case." —Philadelphia Daily News (6/30/2011)

Many Egyptians are demanding an end to what they see as too cozy a relationship under Mubarak, who they feel knuckled under to Israel and the U.S... —Associated Press (9/9/2011)

MSNBC's Matt Miller offered "a public service" to journalists talking about Obama—a list of synonyms for cave: "Buckle, fold, concede, bend, defer, submit, give in, knuckle under, kowtow, surrender, yield, comply, capitulate." —The New York Times (9/3/2011)

Both he and Kinsella expect the penalties to increase and believe most people will ultimately knuckle under and pay the tax. —Bloomberg Businessweek (4/3/2012)

Knuckle under means give in to pressure and stop resisting.

The expression has been traced to the similar meaning of knuckle and knuckle down in the 1700's. The origin may be related to the position people took when crouching down in front of a king or authority—leaning on their knuckles—or perhaps simply that the function of the knuckle is bending. Someone who knuckles under bends to pressure.

labor of love

Pfaff's labor of love, a 1959 four-door Imperial sedan converted into a two-seat sports car, got a lot of attention and a second place award in the radical customized convertibles category. —Oakland County, Mich., Daily Tribune (3/2/2011)

"Teachers in rural schools don't make a lot of money," she said, "It is a labor of love in many respects." —The New York Times (1/29/2012)

The weekend event with its many components is, Marciano says, "a labor of love. You don't count the hours. You do it because you're part of this community." —MercuryNews.com (1/26/2012)

"It's not work. It's a labor of love. I wouldn't trade this for any experience in the world." —Jerry Stones, talking about caring for a baby gorilla at a zoo in Ohio. (2/18/2013)

If your work is a **labor of love**, it is work you do to please yourself or someone else, not for money or a tangible reward.

This phrase appears in the Bible, referring to those who do God's work.

laid-back, gung-ho

The laid-back, soft-spoken Midwesterner [Governor Tim Pawlenty] also has been dogged by voter concerns that he isn't gung-ho enough to take on Obama. —Associated Press (7/8/2011)

Located about 15 minutes from the laid-back towns of Woodstock and Phoenicia, the Emerson Resort & Spa offers two housing choices for visitors... —Newsday (8/21/2012)

"We need to stop spending money we don't have," Ryan said to roars of approval from a gung-ho crowd gathered around the tiny "soapbox" stage at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines. —New York Post (8/14/2012)

"I was so gung-ho. I was ripping up my trailer, trashing my hotel room, walking on set and insulting everyone. It was the way I was for getting into a part..." —actor Nicolas Cage, talking about the beginning of his career (7/30/2013)

Laid-back means relaxed, informal. I have found no conclusive information about its origin.

Gung-ho means enthusiastic, excited. A Chinese expression meaning working together, it was adapted by American soldiers during World War II.

lame duck

Facing intense public criticism for his handling of the triple disaster, Mr. Kan has promised to step down once the bills are passed, effectively making himself a lame duck. —The New York Times (7/5/2011)

Despite an expectation that a lame-duck Congress will get around to doing the smart thing to keep wind power competitively priced, however, there's uncertainty. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (9/3/2012)

We're at a point on the fiscal issues where we absolutely have to reach an agreement. And perhaps when we do so, whether it's in this lame-duck session or early in the [next] session, then maybe that will set the stage [open the way] for other areas as well.—Jeff Flake, congressman and senator-elect from Arizona (11/29/2012)

A **lame duck** usually means someone who will not continue to hold an office or job for much longer. It may also be an adjective: The **lame duck Congress** or **lame-duck session of Congress** refer to a period after an election, before the newly-elected representatives take office.

In the 1700's a lame duck was a financial investor who could not pay debts after suffering losses. Its origin is unknown. When lame duck was used in reference to politics in the 1800's, it meant "weak." This early example is from remarks by Senator John P. Hale of New Hampshire in January, 1863:

"It is well known to everybody who knows anything of its history, that this court was made a sort of retreat for lame duck politicians that got wounded and had to retreat before the face of popular condemnation." —The Congressional Globe (1/12/1863)

lap of luxury

High-pedigree guests are offered the chance to live in the lap of luxury at the Riverside Hotel. —Bloomberg News (6/29/2011)

"Amelia [Earhart] knew rough times; she didn't live in the lap of luxury. Amelia, as well as the people around her, came through the Great Depression." —Ken Tschan, theater director (4/13/2012)

But he is not staying in the lap of luxury. The once globe-trotting WikiLeaks founder is confined to several hundred square feet of space inside Ecuador's London embassy. —Associated Press (8/17/2012)

The **lap of luxury** is a life made easy and soft by wealth. The guests mentioned in the Bloomberg story were dogs that joined their owners having expensive restaurant meals.

One meaning of lap is the part of the body from the waist to the knees, when a person is sitting. Lap has been used in other metaphors, such as **in the lap of the gods** (beyond human control) and **in nature's lap** (in an unspoiled, scenic place).

From a 1760 pamphlet on Scottish history published in London: "For the disasters of that shameful year, awaked the nation that had been laid to sleep so long in the lap of luxury... "

last but not least

Last but not least, a recruiter is looking for "a strong sense of values and ethics." —Fortune (cnn.com, 3/31/2011)

Romney's comeback in Florida is attributable less to his message than to sharpened debate skills, good organization and, last but not least, a blizzard of attack ads... —Los Angeles Times (2/4/2011)

Android users can now access their voicemail offline, there's improved text message notifications, and last but not least, group messaging. —TIME (11/16/2011)

"Last but not least, I would like to thank the World Bank for partnering with the G-8 to host the conference." —Tom Vilsack, secretary of agriculture, speaking to the G-8 International Conference on Open Data for Agriculture (4/29/2013)

Last but not least means last of the things mentioned, but not the least important.

The origin of the phrase, which has been used for centuries, is unknown. Shakespeare used a version of it in King Lear. It is now a cliché that American students are taught to avoid, but there are still prominent people who say it, and writers and editors who allow it to appear in the news.

last-ditch

The Democrats plan to make a last-ditch attempt to approve the nomination, but the Senate Republicans seem determined to block it. —The New York Times (1/18/2011)

Kakizaki said officials have confirmed that the emergency cooling system - the last-ditch cooling measure to prevent the reactor from the meltdown - is intact and could kick in if needed. —Associated Press (3/11/2011)

Naso, who is representing himself, filed last-ditch motions to challenge the police searches and suppress evidence, but Judge Andrew Sweet denied them. —Marin Independent Journal (1/1/2011)

"It is a last-ditch effort because we believe the two-state solution is in jeopardy." —Hanan Ashrawi, a senior Palestinian official, referring to the move for a United Nations vote on recognizing Palestine as a nation. (11/28/2012)

A **last-ditch** effort, attempt or action is a final try when failure is imminent.

At least as early as the 1700's, to die in the last ditch meant to fight to the end without surrendering. The last ditch was the last line of defense.

laughingstock

During Mr. Apotheker's brief tenure, once-proud H.P. has become a laughingstock in Silicon Valley. —The New York Times (9/21/2011)

Last week, she raised the tone significantly, complaining bitterly that Italian business was sick of

being an "international laughing stock" and saying that the government must either adopt tough reforms immediately or resign. —Reuters (9/30/2011)

Until a few months ago, Perry was seen as a successful longtime governor of the nation's second-biggest state. By the end of Wednesday, he was verging on becoming a laughing stock. —The Washington Post (blog, 11/10/2011)

A **laughingstock** is someone or something ridiculed; laughed at with contempt.

It is printed more frequently as one word, but for centuries it was mostly hyphenated as laughing-stock or written as two words.

The phrase has been traced to the 1500's, when stock meant a tree stump or post of wood. The origin is unknown.

law of averages

"You live here 15 years, it's the law of averages this will happen once or twice," said George Paramithis, a resident of Jackson Township, New Jersey, after a baboon escaped from a nearby exhibit and ran through his neighborhood (7/1/2011)

"It was a law of averages that that accident was going to happen." —Reuters (10/14/2011)

"According to the law of averages, if Iran continues to aspire to commit these acts of terror, at some point they're going to be successful." —Karim Sadjadpour, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2/19/2012)

The law of averages means that things will happen in a way consistent with the way they happened in the past; or, that a statistical relationship or pattern exists.

The man quoted by the Star-Ledger was talking about the escape of a baboon from a nearby exhibit.

The **law of averages** often is based on the mistaken idea that if something fails to happen—baboons fail to escape, for example—it will be more likely to happen in the future. (This is the Monte Carlo or gambler's fallacy.)

The phrase became popular during the late 1800's; before that it referred to the study of large numbers.

lay an egg

In the biggest game of Jay Cutler's life, he laid an egg big enough to feed most of the people at Soldier Field. —Chicago Tribune (6/13/2011)

"It's embarrassing," defensive end Dave Tollefson said. "As good as we've been playing the last couple of weeks, to come out here and lay an egg, embarrassing is the only way I can think of it." —Newsday (10/9/2011)

Unemployed Canadians continued to struggle with a tough job market last month as the slow-moving economy laid an egg in February, unexpectedly shedding 2,800 jobs. —Canadian Press (3/9/2012)

Lay an egg means fail in public, often in an embarrassing way.

This odd expression is believed to have come from the game of cricket, in which failing to score became known during the mid-1800's as getting a duck's egg. Why? Presumably because a duck's egg has the shape of a zero.

It's not clear when "lay an egg" migrated to America, or when it spread from sports to the rest of life. Variety, the newspaper of theater and entertainment, published this headline on Oct. 30, 1929, after the stock market crashed:

> "Wall St. Lays an Egg"

At the time, the expression was not widely known: In 1932, Will Rogers felt the need to explain it to the general public:

In the theatrical business when a thing don't go, or it is a flop, we say that "it laid an egg." Well, the Republican convention "laid an egg" here today. The house wasn't near sold out. The loud-speaking system didn't work and half of 'em couldn't hear the "keynote" speech. —Will Rogers in The New York Times (6/15/1932)

lay it on thick

Proximity to the sea is what Esperanza Resort sells, and they lay it on thick. The resort is perched at the tip of the Baja Peninsula overlooking the Sea of Cortez, and each of the hotel's 57 rooms and 60 villas overlooks the ocean. —CNN (7/6/2011)

Prosecutors gave a different take, saying Black's crimes were real and that his lawyers had "laid it on thick" while describing Black's mentoring and tutoring of inmates in prison. —Chicago Sun-Times (7/11/2011)

The political crosswinds surrounding the Martin case were tricky. Tread too cautiously, and the ministers—the moral force of a black community up in arms—could pounce. Lay it on too thick about ethnic identity, and critics could accuse the attorney general of race hustling. —thedailybeast.com (4/2/2012)

Laying it on thick is doing something to excess, like using too much paint on a brush. It may have a neutral or positive connotation, as in the CNN example, or negative, as in the Sun-Times example.

An early version of the phrase is in a book by Henry Fielding, giving advice on how to lie successfully:

You may lay on Honour and Beauty, and all Manner of Virtues as thick as you please, you are not to consider what he is, but what he should be, or what he would be thought. —The Champion (1741)

lead balloon

And in 2002, Mercedes-Benz launched the 192-hp C230 sports coupe...the C230 sank like a lead

balloon. —Esquire (11/25/2011)

Bob King told his wife he was going to become a full-time chainsaw carver. "That went over like a lead balloon," he said. —KOMO-TV (11/24/2011)

I believe it was Linda Edstrom who suggested, before Proposition 1 was born, to have each of the legislators take a salary cut. What a novel idea. Of course, this went over like a lead balloon. —Olean Times Herald (11/16/2011)

Something that sinks or goes over like a **lead balloon** falls down or fails decisively. Something that is called a lead balloon is a failure.

The earliest example in my searches is in an article in the July, 1904, issue of Pearson's Magazine, published in New York. It said there was weak demand for a stock because its rate of increase "was little better than a lead balloon."

The phrase was not used frequently until later in the 1900's, but the Sept. 30, 1944, issue of Billboard Magazine reviewed "While the Sun Shines," a Broadway play, and said, "The third act is a lead balloon. Even George Kaufman's canny direction can't stave off a dull thud."

leave a bad taste in (one's) mouth

The company's previous decision to relocate hurt residents, other businesses and the city's tax base. "Now that this other center has decided to move there, it just exacerbates the issue," Eggers said. "And it leaves a bad taste in our mouths." —St. Petersburg Times (7/8/2011)

"I was personally disappointed and a lot of members were, too. That left a bad taste in our mouths." —Greg Deckelman, talking about Little Rock, Arkansas forcing Occupy Little Rock protesters to leave a parking lot where they had been allowed to camp (4/26/2012)

Corporate money in politics isn't illegal but it does leave a bad taste in the mouths of some. —Reuters (8/3/2012)

When something happens and **leaves a bad taste in our mouths**, we continue to have a negative or unpleasant feeling about it.

Sometimes this well-known expression is shortened to "leave a bad taste."

Early printed examples are found in the 1800's. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell wrote:

I remember the good expression of disgust which Miss [Charlottte] Bronte made use of in speaking to me of some of Balzac's novels: 'They leave such a bad taste in my mouth.' —"The Life and Works of the Sisters Bronte" (1857)

leave holding the bag

Real estate barons have reaped fortunes, and taxpayers are left holding the bag. —The Washington Post (7/14/2011)

"...some on Wall Street...treated our financial system like a casino. Not only did that behavior nearly destroy the financial system, it cost our economy millions of jobs, hurt middle-class families, and left taxpayers holding the bag." —President Barack Obama (5/19/2012)

"We are willing to try to work with the Republicans to find an agreement that... doesn't leave seniors holding the bag, and that asks, as the President made clear he thought was the right thing to

do, asks those who can most afford it to pay a little bit more." —Jay Carney, press secretary to President Barack Obama (12/12/2012)

If you **leave** someone **holding the bag**, he is responsible for the costs or consequences of something you did. A similar expression is **leave in the lurch**, below.

As early as the 1500's, to **give the bag** (to someone) meant to leave them quickly. An early example that is close to the modern phrase was written In 1793 by Thomas Jefferson: "...if the bankruptcies of England proceed...she will leave Spain the bag to hold..."

leave in the lurch

Without a budget agreement, the city of Duluth could be left in the lurch as well. —Duluth News-Tribune (6/23/2011)

Are these landlords getting some kind of tax write-off that benefits them but leaves our community in the lurch? —Pacifica Tribune (8/14/2012)

"...the whole nation really, not just New York and New Jersey, was just sort of outraged that we were leaving these people in the lurch..." —Senator Charles Schumer, referring to an argument in Congress over aid to victims of Hurricane Sandy (1/2/2013)

Leave someone **in the lurch** means place someone in a difficult situation, perhaps abandoning them instead of helping.

The expression, which has been traced back to 1596, comes from lourche, a French board game. It is not related to the most common meaning of lurch, a sudden movement (or as a verb, to move suddenly).

leave no stone unturned

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday said that the government would "leave no stone unturned" to bring in fresh money, in an allusion to tax measures that scared foreign investors earlier this year. —Reuters (8/16/2011)

...the campaigns and other groups will be coming at Hampton Roads voters—if they haven't already—with phone calls, mailings, emails, Twitter feeds, Facebook, television spots and old-fashioned door knocking. Both parties say they'll leave no stone unturned. —The Virginian-Pilot (4/30/2012)

"We will turn every stone and tap every market in order to help businesses succeed." —Francisco J. Sánchez, under secretary of commerce for international trade (3/15/2013)

If you leave **no stone unturned**, you check every possibility or do everything possible to accomplish a task.

Examples of this idiom have been traced as far back as 1555. It is based on the act of moving stones to see what is under them. A bird known for doing that is called the turnstone.

leave well enough alone

It [the jury system] is a model of egalitarianism, so, of course, a few lawmakers who just can't leave well enough alone want to tamper with it. —Boston Herald (7/8/2011)

Of course, there are some who want to leave American capitalism well enough alone. —The Washington Post (7/8/2011)

The man has probably...made me laugh more than any coach I've ever talked to. I only wish I could share some of those conversations, but I better leave well enough alone. —Dyersburg State Gazette (4/29/2012)

Leave well enough alone means don't change something that does not need to be changed. A related expression is let sleeping dogs lie. Another popular expression with a similar meaning is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. "

In the 1700's and 1800's, **let well alone** and **leave well alone** had the same meaning. It is not clear precisely when **enough** was added to the phrase. It added more emphasis to the idea that things did not need to be perfect. An 1871 magazine published in Boston offered this advice:

> Among the sayings of the wise
> In which so much of wisdom lies,
> For solid truth, I'm sure there's none
> Like this: "Let well enough alone."
> —"Our Boys and Girls" (August, 1871)

left and right

With TLC's new Extreme Couponing show and countless couponing sites popping up left and right, it's apparent that this is becoming a trend. —KSPR-TV (6/14/2011)

[Facebook] has been "very deliberate" about how it displays ads. There are no splashy banners plastered across users' home pages and no intrusive video ads popping up left and right. —Associated Press (2/1/2012)

"There were all these bakeries opening left and right..." —New York Daily News (1/30/2012)

He has one of these...phones that takes photographs and he's been going around town, shooting pictures left and right. —Houston Chronicle (1/23/2012)

Left and right is often used literally, referring to sides or politics. In the news examples it means in different places, a lot, or indiscriminately.

Like the phrase **more and more**, left and right adds emphasis while avoiding numbers or other specifics.

An early example, in a play:

> Walpole: We must carry this bill, or the nation is lost.
> Veasey: Will not Tory and Roundhead against it unite?
> Walpole: Every man has his price; I must bribe left and right.
> —"Walpole" by Edward Bulwer Lytton (1869)

left to (one's) own devices

The story of Pandora and her magical box is, in the Greek myth, pretty distasteful. Women, it reminds us, are nosy and don't know what's best and, when left to their own devices, will ruin everything. —The Washington Post (7/10/2011)

Left to their own devices, zebra mussels will continue to spread, littering beaches with their sharp shells. —Minneapolis StarTribune (7/6/2011)

"...you don't just leave everybody to their own devices, say, 'OK, you've got the tools now to go out and sue if you're not being paid equally for equal work.' We need good enforcement by those in government..." —Rocky Anderson, Justice Party candidate for President (10/17/2012)

"[The Seinfeld show] was a singular vision. We were left alone to our own devices. People didn't get in our way...And it was good casting." —Julia Louis-Dreyfus (4/20/2012)

"Conservatives make this argument that...big government left to its own devices goes off and does crazy things." —John Dickerson, television news commentator (5/19/2013)

If you are **left to your own devices** no one stops you from doing whatever you want to do (that is bad if you are Pandora or a zebra mussel) and no one helps you, either..

The origins of this phrase have been traced back to around 1300. It is based on the verb devise, "think of something," and the meaning is similar to "think for oneself." Today we tend to think of a device as a tool, machine or gadget, which makes left to one's own devices seem related to a phrase with a different meaning, automatic pilot.

leg up

"Twenty to thirty years ago, there was no such thing as retail investors as we know it, so we still have rules that allow the large player in the market to have a leg up." —Christopher J. Keller, partner in the Labaton Sucharow law firm. (5/23/2012)

"It's an area where businesses can gain a leg up on their competitors," Newton said, "if they just know what tools are out there." —Richmond Times-Dispatch (5/30/2011)

Public schools students in Detroit will get a leg up on learning as part of the district's collaboration with the prestigious Cranbrook Institute of Science —Associated Press (1/26/2012)

"Macy's was really important in giving her a leg up and, you know, giving her a helping hand." —Pamela Danziger, president of Unity Marketing, a consulting firm, talking about Martha Stewart's legal dispute with Macy's (3/5/2013)

A **leg up** is a lead, advantage, or helpful assistance.

The expression alludes to having a leg up on a horse (being mounted on a horse) and giving someone a leg up (giving a person a boost to get on a horse).

Giving a leg up—support—dates back to the 1800's, but leg up meaning advantage apparently began during the mid-1900's.

less is more

Director Martin Scorsese's "Hugo," a family movie based on the children's book, "The Invention of Hugo Cabret," is going with a less-is-more approach to distribution. Rather than go big, the movie premiered in just under 1,300 screens. —Los Angeles Times (12/1/2011)

The beef itself is so full of flavor that less is more when it comes to the seasonings. —Associated Press (11/23/2011)

Explaining Armani Hotel Milano's less-is-more aesthetic, Giorgio Armani said, "In my house, in

the morning, I remove everything around me...objects, gifts that people gave me. And I've done the same thing here." —The Wall Street Journal (11/19/2011)

Less is more means less (or fewer) is better.

In the past the phrase usually referred to design and style, but in recent decades has been used in other contexts, such as in the Los Angeles Times and Associated Press examples.

Less is more is in an 1855 poem by Robert Browning, but it was not common until the 1950's when it became a motto for minimalism in the arts. This widely quoted excerpt from an article by Ad Reinhardt shows that the artist's dedication to minimalism extended to English prose:

The more stuff in it, the busier the work of art, the worse it is. More is less. Less is more. —"Twelve Rules for a New Academy," Art News (New York, May 1957)

less than meets the eye

There's less than meets the eye in the much-ballyhooed Buffett Rule that President Obama touts as a centerpiece of a program to cut the national debt. —New York Daily News (9/29/2011)

However, the trailer encampment has been a political eyesore -- a reminder that promises of "relocating" settlers are less than meets the eye. —The Washington Post (2/21/2011)

Former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton says the European Union's decision to impose an embargo on oil shipments from Iran is "less than meets the eye" as it will be up to each individual nation whether to comply with the edict. —Newsmax.com (1/24/2012)

Less than meets the eye means less significant or interesting than it appears.

The phrase is based on the older, and still more frequently used, more than meets the eye.

let (someone) have it, read (someone) the riot act

"I have an aggressive approach. I try to make them accountable for what they do. I let them have it when they don't do something right. Sometimes I yell too much, and I apologize a lot." —Billy DeVito, Little League baseball coach in Stamford, Connecticut (7/12/2011)

In response to Kentucky Republican Sen. Rand Paul's outburst, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie let him have it. —The Washington Post (blog, 7/30/2013)

An Orange County District Court judge received a rare public reprimand from the state judicial standards commission after she called the chief public defender into a courtroom, closed it to the public and read him the riot act. —The (Raleigh) News & Observer (7/6/2011)

"I also want to ask you about this extraordinary hearing when the members of the joint chiefs of staff were hauled before the senate last week and really read the riot act about sexual assaults in the military." —Bob Schieffer, television news anchor, interviewing Senator Kelly Ayotte (6/9/2013)

Let someone have it and **read someone the riot act** often have a similar meaning: scold and criticize them severely. That is the meaning used in the two news examples. But the two phrases often have slightly different meanings. **Let someone have it means** attack someone. It is usually assumed that the attack is done with words unless the sentence says otherwise: "She let him have it with her heavy purse" means she hit him with the purse. **Reading the riot act** is both a scolding

and a warning that certain behavior will not be tolerated.

Read the riot act comes from the English Riot Act of 1714, which imposed severe punishment on group protests.

A sentence written by the poet Lord Byron makes us wonder if the idea of letting someone have it originated with the Roman gladiators:

When one gladiator wounded another, he shouted "he has it," "hoc habet," or "habet." —Childe Harold's pilgrimage (1816)

let sleeping dogs lie

Barbara Miller...told how she'd encountered moonshiners [makers of illegal liquor] when she was a girl. "I'd be with my grandfather in the woods," she recalled, "and he'd say, 'We're not going in that direction.' In a few minutes, somebody would walk out of the laurel thicket," coming from his still. "We'd just pass the time of day with him and let sleeping dogs lie." —The News-Messenger (Ohio, 6/26/2011)

So the new bureau could be locked out of the very cases where it's needed most -- those where prosecutors are determined to let sleeping dogs lie. —Newsday (4/17/2012)

Let sleeping dogs lie means don't risk starting trouble if you don't have to. A related expression is leave well enough alone.

Examples of let sleeping dogs lie have been found from as early as the 1820's.

let the cat out of the bag

"I guess the cat's out of the bag," Kelly Ryan, a spokeswoman for American Ballet Theater, said in an e-mail message on Wednesday, confirming that the company would be returning for a week's engagement this fall. —The New York Times (blog, 3/2/2011)

Lt. Andy Neiman, a spokesman for the department, said police had hoped to keep the operation a secret, but admitted, "the cat's out of the bag." —Los Angeles Times (11/29/2012)

"We're still in negotiations, but Arthur...let the cat out of the bag."—USA Today (2/9/2011)

If you **let the cat out of the bag**, you reveal information and it is no longer a secret. If **the cat's out of the bag**, a secret has been revealed.

Why would a cat be in a bag? A person trying to cheat someone might have claimed that the animal for sale in a bag was a pig when it was really a cat. (See **pig in a poke**.)

Let the cat out of the bag has been traced to the 1700's.

An expression with a similar meaning is **spill the beans**.

let them eat cake

It is a tax plan with a major element of "let them eat cake." It is in almost every respect un-American. —The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (10/14/2011)

In his utopia, the rich should have pretty much everything and the poor should have nothing...Perhaps he'd let them eat cake. —USA Today (10/14/2011)

As long as Republicans in Congress allow themselves to be held hostages of the "let them eat cake" crowd, the middle class and the American dream are doomed to extinction. —Orlando Sentinel (9/24/2011)

Let them eat cake refers to an unsympathetic, dismissive attitude toward poor people.

The story that Marie Antoinette said such a heartless thing about people starving for lack of bread is widely assumed to be untrue. But it remains a legend of the French Revolution and a symbol of disregard for the poor. Now the phrase is used to accuse someone of not knowing or caring about poverty.

An early example is in a transcript of debate in the British House of Commons in 1898:

I must say that a speech like that only ranks with such an historical statement as that made by Marie Antoinette in 1797, who, when told that the people had no bread to eat, said, "Let them eat cake!"

let's roll

Armed with information from calls about hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the passengers and crew voted to storm the cockpit. An operator heard passenger Todd Beamer famously say the words: "Let's roll." —CBS News (8/20/2011)

"Let's get Washington out of the way to save and preserve the American way. Let's do it. Let's roll." —Texas Governor Rick Perry (10/19/2011)

Let's Roll! Two Out of Three New Yorkers Like Bike Lanes —New York Observer (headline, 8/21/2011)

Let's roll means let's get moving—let's get started.

Roll can have many meanings. In this phrase it means move, like a rolling log or car. A different but related expression is **on a roll**, referring to a series of successes.

The earliest example of let's roll in my searches is from 1931:

At his [Al Capone's] trial for tax evasion, the judge happened to mention that the Lexington was his headquarters. "Hurrah, let's roll," said those patient and long-seeking cops. Without even stopping to thank the judge, they swarmed down Michigan Avenue and with pistols drawn they entered the Lexington. —The Milwaukee Journal (10/30/1931)

letter of the law

Iowa Democratic Party chairwoman Sue Dvorsky admits the 2012 candidates are following the letter of the law, which does not require disclosure. —Radio Iowa (7/27/2011)

"I'm glad to see the governor appoint so many new faces and hope they will be able to implement not only the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law..." —Clinton (Illinois) Journal (7/26/2011)

Of 346 public school districts in Iowa, 10 follow the letter of the law in starting school on time. —Sioux City Journal (8/25/2013)

The **letter of the law** means the words in the law, interpreted literally. The "spirit of the law" is what the law was intended to do. People may circumvent (go around) a law, doing things contrary to its spirit, while obeying the letter of the law.

The phrase is not always used in a negative context. Police may be praised for "working hard to enforce the letter of the law," which suggests an effort to be strict, not to evade the spirit of the law.

Letter of the law has been traced back to the 1600's.

level the playing field

"We've also set up a task force for trade that goes after anybody who is taking advantage of American workers or businesses and not creating a level playing field." —President Barack Obama, during a presidential debate (10/16/2010)

"A good library levels the playing field for Iowans who can't afford to buy books or to pay for a computer or Internet access at home." —Des Moines Register (11/30/2010)

"Let me say, we are not for sugary drinks...But as the ban stands now, there is not a level playing field." —Hazel Dukes, leader of the New York conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, saying that New York City's ban on sugar-filled drinks larger than 16 ounces was unfair to owners of small stores (1/25/2013)

Level the playing field means make changes so that everyone has an equal chance.

If a playing field isn't level, it's not fair to the team that has to go uphill. That's the thought behind the expression, but the origin is not clear. The earliest example in my searches is in a news story about banking deregulation:

"Our basic concern is the 'level playing field' condition. We are very strongly supportive of letting everybody compete." —Associated Press (5/23/1963)

lie low

[Warren] Buffett won't lie low. He's not getting any more shy as he gets older. Especially since it is an election year, expect to hear more from him... —CNBC (12/1/2011)

Tarhouni, a lieutenant in Gaddafi's Revolutionary Guard...called again. He had made it to a city 100 miles south of the capital. "I will lie low here for now," he told the relative. —The Washington Post (8/28/2011)

In fact, China's response was to remove the word "Egypt" from its Internet search engines and lie low, hoping the storm passes. —The Washington Post (2/10/2011)

Lie low means keep quiet, avoid publicity, or avoid being seen.

It is a metaphor for literally lying low, staying in a position close to the ground. The literal meanings of lie low and **hunker down** are the same; figuratively they are sometimes the same, when the meaning is keep out of sight, for safety.

The literal use of lie low has been traced to the 1200's. When Shakespeare used the phrase in "Much Ado About Nothing" (1599), it probably had a different meaning: be humbled, diminished. (Antonio: "If he could right himself with quarrelling, Some of us would lie low.")

The modern meaning was used in the 1800's, as shown by this dictionary entry:

To lie low. To keep quiet and reticent till all occasion for so doing has passed. —"Dictionary of Americanisms" by John Russell Bartlett (1877)

lie through one's teeth

Goodenough says he even contacted Jones personally last year to confront him about the identity theft. "He basically just lied through his teeth about the whole thing," says Goodenough. KTNV—(Las Vegas, 7/27/2011)

Rose added that he suspected that the investigation would be hindered by a lack of cooperation... "because nobody is going to tell us anything and most people that say something to us are just going to lie through their teeth all day long." —Binghamton University Pipe Dream (4/17/2012)

Khamenei has declared that nuclear weapons are immoral and Iran will never acquire them. Is Islamic Iran's supreme religious leader lying through his teeth?—(Miami Herald, 8/20/2012)

To **lie through one's teeth** is to say things that are not true, deliberately and with a bad purpose. If a person tells a lie in an effort to be kind, he is not lying through his teeth. So, accusing people of lying through their teeth is more serious and challenging than simply accusing them of lying.

I have found no good explanation for the origin of this phrase. An older expression, "lying in one's teeth," had the same meaning. An example of that was written by Washington Irving:

...and declaring, that as to the treacherous and bloody plot alleged against him, whoever affirmed it to be true, lied in his teeth! —"History of New York" (1812)

The earliest example of lie through one's teeth in my searches is from a novel later in the century:

"He is not dead...and whoever told you so lied through his teeth." —"Love Me, or Love Me Not" by Mrs. Francis G. Faithfull (1875)

lift a finger

"We are harmed by the Kurds, and the officials responsible for Baghdad and Kirkuk will not lift a finger," says a prominent Sunni leader in Kirkuk. —Agence France-Presse (1/31/2011)

If we are too frightened and selfish to lift a finger to stop a bully or a tyrant, let us acknowledge our small-minded cowardice for what it is, instead of pretending that refusing to fight is always the more moral choice. —The Edmonton Journal (10/27/2011)

Dear Mr. Dad: A few months ago you answered a question from a reader whose teenager was refusing to do chores. My situation is similar, except that it's my husband who won't lift a finger. —McClatchy-Tribune News Service (10/25/2011)

If you will not **lift a finger**, you will not make any effort to do something or help.

This idea appears in the King James Bible (1611), which says in Luke 11:46: "And he [Jesus] said, 'Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers. '"

Let's put that in modern English: "And he said, 'Bad luck to you, lawyers! You burden people with things they can hardly carry, and you yourselves won't lift a finger to help.' "

An early example of the exact phrase is in a play by Richard Brome, "The Queen," published in 1650: "I will not lift a finger against thee."

light at the end of the tunnel

"The problems in Europe are still not being dealt with, at least to the extent that we can see light at the end of the tunnel..." —Jim Bianco, an investment analyst based in Chicago (9/13/2011)

"I'm thanking them and letting them know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Telling them 'Hey, I know you have this injury, this disability...but you can work through this because the mind is stronger than the body.'" —Chris Braman, U.S. Army veteran who was injured in the 9/11 attack, talking about his visits with wounded soldiers (Orange County Register , 9/7/2011)

"...it felt for the first time in a long time like there might be a light at the end of the tunnel regarding how we do business up here." —Congressman Tom Rooney of Florida, referring to negotiations on U.S. taxes and spending (12/17/2012)

"Because there is no vision, there is no light at the end of this tunnel...that makes it more frustrating for everybody, especially the young adults." —Jack Saade, a cafe owner in Ramallah, in the West Bank north of Jerusalem (2/2/2013)

Light at the end of the tunnel means a way to see or hope for the end of something difficult or unhappy.

The earliest example in my searches is in an 1882 book of religious essays published in London:

We can only fix our eyes on the bright light at the end of the tunnel, and we comfort ourselves with the thought that every step we take brings us nearer to the joy and the rest that lie at the end of the way. —"God's light on dark clouds" by Theodore Ledyard Cutler (1882)

The phrase became infamous during the Vietnam war. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson and General William C. Westmoreland used it in expressions of optimism before the Communist Tet offensive, which turned American public opinion against the war. Sarcastic jokes followed, such as, "The light at the end of the tunnel is the oncoming train."

In 1977, a cartoon by Jack Ziegler in The New Yorker magazine showed a discouraged-looking man in a tunnel, "discovering that the light at the end of the tunnel is New Jersey."

lightning rod

The initial shortfall seemed to be coming from Republicans, whose concerns were not only about signing onto a compromise with Democrats, Mr. McCarthy said, but also about being on record supporting the debt ceiling, a lightning-rod issue among conservatives. —The New York Times (8/1/2011)

George Soros...has become a lightning rod for conservative critics because some of his donations involved causes such as climate change and legalized recreational use of marijuana. —Associated Press (7/26/2011)

"I am aware that my role as chairman could become a lightning rod for BSkyB and I believe that my resignation will help to ensure that there is no false conflation with events at a separate organization." —James Murdoch (4/3/2012)

"She is an academic. She is not a lawyer, as Donilon was...She is much more of a lightning rod and someone who likes to be out in the media." —Jane Mayer, journalist, talking about Susan Rice after Rice was appointed national security advisor to President Barack Obama (6/7/2013)

Literally, a **lightning rod** is a metal cable that conducts electricity. It prevents electrical charges

between the sky and the ground from harming buildings or people.

A **lightning-rod issue** is controversial; it attracts the attention of people who have strong feelings about it.

If someone says you are a lightning rod, it means you attract attention in a controversy.

The literal use of lightning rod began in the 1700's, and the metaphorical use has been traced to the 1800's.

like a bat out of hell

"These guys were driving 50 or 60 miles an hour, going like a bat out of hell," Dreyer said. —The Missoulian (8/31/2011)

Your best bet is to call your local gadget shop and check for stock and pricing, then run like a bat out of hell to get yours before they're gone. —techcrunch.com (8/19/2011)

"We used to do two shows. They were before a live audience. We pretty much did them live because Carol came from live TV, so she liked to work like a bat out of hell." —Vicki Lawrence, actress and singer, talking about the Carol Burnett Show (4/28/2012)

Like a bat out of hell means very fast. This vivid metaphor is used to suggest wildness, but although the flying bat comes from hell, the phrase not usually used to imply evil.

The origin is unknown. The earliest printed example in my searches is in a 1903 Texas appeals court decision involving a railroad that was ordered to pay $75 to the owner of a mule killed by a train:

Appellee testified that "the train came through like a bat out of hell," and while this language is probably highly figurative, it nevertheless might tend to indicate that the train was running at a very high speed. —Southern Kansas Railway Company of Texas v. J. R. Cooper (6/6/1903)

like a ton of bricks, come down like a ton of bricks

Instead of a frothy beverage, the butterscotch sank like a ton of bricks. —Houston Chronicle (10/25/2011)

"It [the idea] hit me like a ton of bricks," Marcantel said. "He won't stop drinking." —Detroit Free Press (10/15/2011)

"Flu can hit you like a ton of bricks," said Dr. Ann Avery, an infectious-disease specialist at MetroHealth System. —Cleveland Plain Dealer (10/10/2011)

Like a ton of bricks means like a very heavy weight, with great force.

Unless it refers literally to something bulky that weighs 2,000 pounds, this expression uses exaggeration for emphasis. It may be used in a variety of contexts, as the news examples illustrate.

To come down (on someone) **like a ton of bricks** means to punish someone or subject them to harsh treatment, as in this example:

And if she were to get into the race, all of the media would come down on her like a ton of bricks because that's what they do for a living. —Fox News (8/25/2011)

Similar phrases—"like a hundred of bricks" and "like a thousand of bricks"—were used with the

same meaning in the 1800's. Examples of like a ton of bricks have been found as early as the 1920's.

like clockwork

Hough notes that while strong quakes have hit the region about 400 years apart, they don't happen like clockwork. —Associated Press (12/16/2011)

A new study suggests that investing your retirement money half in bonds and half in stocks will produce 5% annual returns like clockwork, despite bumps in the economy. —TIME (11/29/2011)

It used to be like clockwork in the book business: first the hardcover edition was released, then, about one year later, the paperback. —The New York Times (7/26/2011)

Like clockwork means regularly, predictably or exactly on schedule.

Clockwork means the mechanisms inside a clock. An older meaning of the phrase was like a machine. In 1679, John Goodman used that meaning in an uncomplimentary description of Pharisees, "the most eminent" class of Jews:

Their Religion was a kind of Clock-work drawn up by the hand, and moving in a certain order, but without Life or Sense. In short, they had all the outward shews of admirable Men, but nothing else...—The Penitent Pardoned (London, 1679)

In the next century we have an example of a meaning similar to today's:

The king's last years passed regularly as clock work. —"Reminiscences" by Horatio Walpole (1788)

like gangbusters

Still, a patio does not necessarily guarantee business will grow like gangbusters. —St. Paul Pioneer Press (7/20/2011)

"And with drilling going like gangbusters here in Pennsylvania, that same kind of pollution from all the operations would create serious public health problems..." —Business Wire (7/21/2011)

"We see the economy picking up like gangbusters now. In San Antonio our unemployment rate has dropped by more than a percentage point in the last nine months." —Julian Castro, mayor of San Antonio, Texas (1/20/2013)

Like gangbusters means successfully or vigorously, with energy or excitement.

The word gangbuster became popular in the 1930's, describing a law-enforcement officer who battled organized crime. An early example was New York City Police Captain Cornelius W. Willemse, who became known as "the Gang Buster" and published an autobiography in 1930.

In a 1931 movie, "The Gang Buster," the hero "Cyclone" Case, whose only weapon is a wrench, overwhelms several bad guys and rescues Sylvia, their lovely hostage. Gangbusters in the movies and in radio series operated with plenty of gunfire, sirens and other excitement, which led to the modern meaning of like gangbusters.

like hot cakes

"I'm a developer. That's what I do. We had plans to build three towers on that site that we thought would sell like hot cakes," Mr. Perez said. —The Wall Street Journal (10/19/2011)

The comic book went live on the CDC's website on Friday..."They went like hot cakes," David Daigle of the preparedness office says. —USA Today (10/19/2011)

But when HP dropped the price down to $100 for the base TouchPad, it sold like hot cakes. —San Jose Mercury News (8/29/2011)

Something that **sells** (or **goes**) **like hot cakes** sells very quickly. Demand for it is strong.

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, wrote in 1683 that American Indians "enjoyed hot cakes of new corn, both wheat and beans, which they make up in a square form, in the leaves of the stem, and bake them in the ashes, and after that they fall to dance."

By the 1800's hot cakes fried in grease, often sold outdoors at fairs, were so popular that they became symbolic of things that everyone wanted.

The earliest known example of like hot cakes is in a humorous novel published in 1839:

"You had better buy 'em, Colonel," said Mr. Lummucks; "they will sell like hot cakes." —"The Adventures of Harry Franco" by Charles Frederick Briggs

like pulling teeth

"On typical days when I would ask Tim about his day, it would be like pulling teeth trying to get some information from him," Lovelace joked. —Contra Costa Times (7/13/2011)

Rachel Riebow suspects the social networking site is one reason getting her classmates to attend their 10-year reunion at Armwood High School in Seffner, Fla., has been like pulling teeth. Why bother when you already know what everyone's up to, and can so easily connect with the people you wish to see? —Detroit Free Press (7/10/2011)

"And it was disappointing to many that he would not answer the question and it was like pulling teeth and took 13 hours of filibuster for him to finally to say, no we won't kill noncombatants in America." —Senator Rand Paul, talking about President Barack Obama and the use of drones against terrorists (3/24/2013)

If something is **like pulling teeth**, it is difficult and often unpleasant.

When the metaphoric use of this expression became popular in the 1800's, pulling a decayed tooth was much more painful than it is today. But the experience still will have to get much easier before people stop using the idiom.

An example from "A School Master's Diary" published in 1836:

And for this service to the sons, what did I get from the sires? the pittance of a few dollars, which came like pulling so many teeth. —"The Knickerbocker, New-York Monthly Magazine" (September, 1836)

like white on rice

If you come here and commit a crime, the Guadalupe police will be on you like white on rice... —Santa Maria Times (1/3/2012)

My mom and aunt like to clean when they come here... X-ray vision enables my aunt to tell where I

keep the disinfectant wipes, and she's on the kitchen table like white on rice. —Savannah Morning News (1/7/2012)

Indonesia Is All Over This Problem Like White on Rice —The Wall Street Journal (headline, 4/12/2011)

"We in the CNN Money Newsroom will be on this fiscal cliff thing like white on rice. If anything happens, we'll be here." —Ali Velshi, television business news reporter (12/28/2012)

Like white on rice means very close to, like two things that can't be separated.

I'm **on it like white on rice** means I'll do my best, staying close to the task. The Wall Street Journal's headline was a bit of wordplay: It referred to the Indonesian government trying to persuade people to eat less rice and more fruits and vegetables. "All over" is part of an expression with a similar meaning: all over (it, or someone) like a cheap suit—clinging closely.

Like white on rice has been used at least since the 1930's. This is from a 1954 book by Louis Armstrong:

That's where she did the wrong thing, to try to continue running the house with the law on her like white on rice, taking all the loot she'd made over the years along with her diamonds and jewelry and all. —"Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans"

Popular metaphors with a similar meaning are "like flies to honey," "like a duck on a junebug," and the vulgar "like stink on shit."

line one's pockets

Like the North Korean diplomats who lined their pockets by running a liquor smuggling business out of the embassy in Islamabad, Kang's motives may not have been simply nationalistic. —NPR (7/8/2011)

"There really is no dispute that Allen Stanford lied, lining his pockets with billions of dollars of other people's money." —William Stellmach, federal prosecutor, in a closing argument to a jury (2/29/2012)

Today, many [drug smuggling] groups have been weakened, but rely on methods such as kidnapping and extortion to line their pockets. —The Christian Science Monitor (4/18/2012)

Lining one's pockets is making money, usually by illegal or questionable methods.

To line a pocket in the 1600's was to put a lining, or extra layer of cloth, inside it. Lining a pocket with money was a colorful way to say "filling a pocket with money." A pamphlet dated Sept. 20, 1692, said that a man named Robert Young by these frauds had "lined his Pockets with a competent Sum, both of Gold and Silver..."

Examples of the shortened phrase, line (one's) pockets, are found in the 1700's.

line in the sand

Many Democrats think President Barack Obama compromised too much with House Republicans in August over extending the debt limit, and the auto program has become a "line in the sand" for Senate Democrats.—The Detroit News (9/26/2011)

Rogoff said Greece will have to write off much of its debt, but the question for euro-zone policy

makers is where to insist that default isn't an option. "I'm concerned that there isn't a realistic, comprehensive plan," he said. "Europe needs to draw a line in the sand." —Dow Jones News Service (9/27/2011)

"This is Boehner saying he was drawing a line in the sand, saying, no new tax, we're going to demand real spending cuts." —David Brooks, commentator (5/18/2012)

"Using the debt ceiling, I think, is the wrong place to draw the line in the sand." —Erskine Bowles, co-leader of The Campaign to Fix the Debt (1/4/2013)

If you **draw a line in the sand**, you state a clear position and declare that you will not compromise on it.

This expression was not common before the 1970's. An early example:

"My own feeling," Kidwell said, "is that this is the time and the place to draw a line in the sand and challenge the corps." —Spokane Daily Chronicle (10/22/1975)

An uncompromising position or approach is called a **hard line**.

lip service

The Constitution frequently gets lip service in Congress, but House Republicans next year will make sure it gets a lot more than that—the new rules the incoming majority party proposed this week call for a full reading of the country's founding document on the floor of the House on Jan. 6. —Washington Times (12/23/2010)

But there's a tremendous gap between the payments by companies that treat dividends as a part of attracting investors and those that only pay them lip service. —USA Today (12/21/2011)

Despite endless lip-service about keeping customers happy, far too many companies still make them angry, creating the unfortunate phenomenon of customer rage, says Harvard Business Review. —Reuters (11/12/2011)

"There has to be a real—not lip service—a real, serious order and interior security component...Part of it is border security. Part of it is interior security." —Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, talking about changing U.S. immigration laws (4/7/2013)

Lip service means supporting something with words but not doing anything about it or being firmly committed to it.

The phrase is often used with the verbs **give** or **pay**, as in the USA Today example.

Examples of lip service have been found from as early as 1644. In this one, from several decades later, the meaning of the phrase is the same as the current meaning:

Their Religion is made up of lip-service, for they think to content God by heavenly talk... —"The Measures of Christian Obediance" by John Kettlewell (1681)

lips sealed

Kate Middleton's lips remain firmly sealed about which designer she'll wear at her April 29 wedding to Prince William. —Us Magazine (4/18/2011)

The new approach demanded he fight his natural instinct to speak out, so he sealed his lips as he fought through a phalanx of photographers outside the Royal Courts of Justice. —The Guardian

(7/12/2011)

Starck said his lips were sealed because of what he called the Cupertino tech giant's infamous "secrecy cult." —San Jose Mercury-News (4/13/2012)

Mr Brooks's lips are sealed about what these machines will be like, although his views about the future of robotics provides a clue. —The Economist (4/21/2012)

If your lips are sealed, you are saying nothing, or refusing to reveal a secret—as if your lips were sealed (closed) with sticky tape.

The phrase has been traced to the 1700's, when lips were said to be sealed up:

...I think him quite obnoxious. I make it quite a principle to seal up my lips the moment I perceive him. —"Cecilia, Memoirs of an Heiress," by Frances Burney, 1782

live a lie, look over shoulder

Gerhartsreiter, 50, later assumed the name Clark Rockefeller and married a woman on the East Coast with whom he had a daughter. She divorced him when she learned he was living a lie. —New York Daily News (1/24/2012)

"I've endured years of misery and gone to enormous lengths to live a lie." —Jason Collins, basketball player, the first active male player in the four major American professional sports to say publicly that he is homosexual (4/29/2013)

"You can move on with your life without the court looking over your shoulder and return to life as business as usual." —Reuters (12/2/2010)

"You were looking over your shoulder to make sure you were safe," Desalos said. "It's almost surreal how much it changed. It's such a nice place now." —Houston Chronicle (1/31/2012)

To **live a lie** is to hide something so important that a person is constantly forced to pretend to be someone or something he is not.

In the literal sense, looking over your shoulder is turning your head to look to the side or behind you. Figuratively, **look over your shoulder** means watch for danger, real or imagined.

In other contexts, someone looking over your shoulder may be supervising you, as in the Reuters example.

President Barack Obama combined the two phrases when he said a new policy would allow gay people to serve in the military without hiding their sexuality or worrying that they might be punished:

"No longer will tens of thousands of Americans in uniform be asked to live a lie or look over their shoulder." (12/22/2010)

live it up

"I'd had a big hit, and I was living it up." —Blake Shelton, country music singer (4/25/2011)

There are even more tears, fights, sex, drama and laughs in this new season as the crew lives it up in Italy... —description of the "Jersey Shore" television series in Newsday (7/19/2011)

"While couples are living it up on this, the most romantic day of the year, Momentum by Iron will

turn its attention to singles with an evening of flirting, fun and fitness." —Jennifer Cohen, fitness instructor, promoting a Valentine's Day exercise event in Santa Monica, California. (2/10/2013)

Live it up means celebrate or do something enjoyable, often in a lavish or expensive way.

An early example is in the April 10, 1943, issue of The Billboard magazine: "Some troupers [actors] lives remind one of artists who sell a picture, live it up, and then starve for six months waiting to sell another."

live up to

"If a charter school doesn't live up to the goals in its charter, that school is closed. That is accountability, folks." —Representative Austin Knudsen of Culbertson, Montana (2/11/2013)

"It's really tough to live up to a weekend like we had last year." —Paul Dergarabedian, movie industry analyst, comparing the number of theater tickets sold (2/10/2013)

"It would be my intention to make sure I did everything possible to live up to the trust, confidence that this Congress, this Senate and this president might place in me." —John Brennan, speaking to the Senate Intelligence Committee about his nomination for director of the Central Intelligence Agency (2/7/2013)

Live up to means meet a standard or expectation. The meaning of **measure up to** is often similar.

Live up to has been recorded from the 1600's.

living daylights

At least two of the top billings at the Venice Film Festival this year are calculated to scare the living daylights out of us... —The New York Times (8/30/2011)

"The leading cause of death in women is heart disease, by a long shot," Ochsner's Milani says. "It beats the living daylights out of all forms of cancer. —USA Today (4/2/2011)

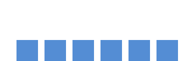
Instead of helping, this eager little question just annoys the living daylights out of the recipient. —CNN (9/14/2011)

Living daylights does not a have a specific meaning. The phrase adds emphasis without using a vulgarity. (Try substituting a vulgar word for living daylights in all the news examples and the meaning will be the same.) Other euphemisms, such as stuffing, are used with the same purpose ("I beat the stuffing out of him.")

In 1700's and 1800's, beat the daylights out meant beat the eyes out, and probably led to a more general meaning, beat severely. This early example of living daylights is similar to current usage.

They, with a few San Antonio fellows of the 15th, could do all the round dancing, while we grass-fed North Texas fellows were knocking the living daylights out of an old Virginia reel. —"Chapters From the Unwritten History of the War Between the States" by R.M. Collins (1898)

In 1898, knocking the living daylights was a more acceptable way to say beating the hell out of, and a colorful way to express the idea of doing the Virginia reel (dance) with enthusiasm and skill.



living large

Mr. White, 34, won't say what he earns ... "I am not living large, but I am living well," he said. —The Wall Street Journal (7/9/2011)

His latest home [in prison] is less than 2 miles north of the $30 million Fifth Avenue residence where he lived large during his Tyco days—decorating the costly apartment with a now notorious $6,000 shower curtain, a $15,000 umbrella stand and art by Monet and others. —USA Today (4/6/2012)

Now, every single purchase... must be reported. And if the totals show people are living large while claiming to be paupers, they could get in big trouble. —Associated Press (8/31/2012)

Living large is spending a lot on visible luxuries, or having a lifestyle that is conspicuous, drawing attention.

Examples of living large have been found from as early as 1834, but my searches suggest it was not in widespread use until the later 1900's.

lo and behold

Recently, I came home from a water aerobics class and, as usual, hung my swimsuit and swim jacket on the back of a chair on the deck to dry. That day was rather busy, and I did not go out to retrieve the items until after dark. Lo and behold, my swimsuit was gone! —Contra Costa Times (11/29/2011)

What it ["Breaking Bad"] does do, she said, is get more people excited about chemistry..."For decades, chemists have been wringing our hands about how we could reach the general public," Nelson said. "Lo and behold, we get a prime-time television show." —Reuters (7/16/2011)

"Lo and behold, yet again, there was no virus to be detected." —Rowena Johnston, director of research at the Foundation for AIDS Research, talking about tests finding that a baby born with human immunodeficiency virus had been cured (3/4/2013)

"Lo and behold, when he returned to Washington, the Senate Republican leader came out against the common-sense reforms we've proposed. " —President Barack Obama (4/16/2010)

Lo and behold means Look! (at something amazing or surprising).

When used sarcastically, as in President Obama's quotation, it means the opposite: Look—just what you would expect.

Lo and behold are very old words, sometimes used in modern conversation to mock very old language. Lo is a shortened version of look; literally, lo and behold means look and look. The words appear frequently in the King James Bible (1611), but when they appear near each other behold usually comes first: "behold, Saul leaned upon his spear; and, lo, the chariots and horsemen followed..."

Evidence that lo and behold was in use by the 1700's is in an English translation of letters written in German by Baron Johann Riesbeck, published in London:

The day came; the young men went cheerfully to the field; all Lintz had no doubt but a pardon would meet them there, when lo, and behold! General Brown found out, that this was the reserved case of extreme necessity, and the men were executed. —Travels Through Germany (1787)

long shot, by a long shot

"We just couldn't have asked for anything more. It was a long shot." —Shane Smith, who arranged a visit to North Korea by former basketball star Dennis Rodman (3/1/2013)

He was interviewed to be Angelo's successor, but always was treated as a long shot for the job. —Chicago Tribune (1/30/2012)

But the 47-year-old singer hasn't been forgotten, not by a long shot. —Reuters (2/10/2011)

A **long shot** is something (or someone, as in the Chicago Tribune example) with little chance of succeeding.

By a long shot means by a large amount. It is often used in the negative, following not.

A long shot may have originated as a metaphor for a hunter's attempt to shoot something from far away. The use of shot meaning attempt has been traced to the 1700's. But the earliest examples of long shot used as a metaphor are from the late 1800's. It's possible those writers had betting in mind rather than shooting. Today, long shots are attempted in most basketball and hockey games, which perhaps helps to keep the figurative uses popular.

I could find no explanation for the origin of **by a long shot**. An early example:

"Did not you tell him what you have?" "Yes," said he chuckling, "I told him I had so much, but I wa'n't so green as to tell him all, by a long shot." —The Military and Naval Magazine of the United States (November, 1834)

long-winded

That's why when school board members talk of a change in the academic calendar, everyone is all ears [listening closely]. Usually the conversations are long-winded, and I assume this is because board members want certain holidays to be observed for the sake of their constituents. —The Tennessean (3/4/2011)

—The main order of business was Anton Bruckner's gargantuan and magisterial and perhaps long-winded Symphony No. 7 in E." —Orange County Register (3/6/2011)

At a press conference last night in LA to talk up her new Oprah Winfrey Network, the talk-show queen shocked reporters with her aimless, long-winded answers... —New York Post (1/7/2011)

Long-winded usually means speaking for longer than necessary or using too many words.

In the Orange County Register example it refers to music and means too long.

The original, literal meaning was being able to speak or do something for a long time without becoming winded (out of breath). Examples of the figurative use have been found from as early as the 1500's.

look a gift horse in the mouth

The sudden possibility that one or more full-scale gambling resorts may be coming to South Florida is an exciting prospect, but also a challenging one...Yet, at the risk of appearing to look a gift horse in the mouth, the question must be asked: What's the rush? —The Miami Herald (11/19/2011)

"I think everybody is so grateful to get the money, you don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth." —Edward Gotgart, business director of schools in Framingham, Massachusetts, talking about government-reimbursed school lunches (3/18/2012)

It was obvious that Heejun knew he looked a gift horse in the mouth last week with his almost disrespectful antics. —The Christian Science Monitor, referring to a contestant on the American Idol television series (3/29/2012)

Look a gift horse in the mouth means be ungrateful for, or suspicious of, a gift.

The expression alludes to calculating the value of a horse by examining its teeth.

The proverb (old saying), "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," has been traced back to the 1500's.

look down one's nose

Conniption. Jamboree. Flunk. Pub. Wallop. Awfully, in the sense of "very." Bogus, in the sense of "fake." Today they're English, but if you'd used them a century ago, you'd have found educated people looking down their noses at you. —Boston Globe (12/12/2010)

Too many Americans look down their noses at Mexico, saying it is incapable of controlling the violence that stems from its illegal drug trade. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (6/15/2011)

"Just as movie stars look down their noses at film actors who look down on television actors, a senator looks down on a congressman, and so on." —USA Today (10/6/2011)

"...in the beginning, when Twitter was young, journalists kind of looked down their nose. 'Well, anybody can post anything. How do we know it's true?' And often things were not true." —Howard Kurtz, journalist (4/16/2013)

If you **look down your nose**, you view someone or something as inferior. **Look down on** has a similar meaning.

In the Boston Globe example, the phrase was used in an article about how slang "sneaks" into standard language.

Related expressions are **turn up one's nose** and **thumb one's nose**.

An early example of look down one's nose used with the modern meaning is in a novel published in 1899:

Why, if you ventured to offer any observation outside the province of wine, or foxes, they—they looked down their noses! —"The Minx" by Mrs. Mannington Caffyn (1899)

look the other way

Then, about five years ago, school officials inexplicably decided they would look the other way and allow an extreme version of dirty dancing called grinding, right in the school gym. —Kennebec Journal (10/23/2011)

We also have to know, unless you chose to look the other way, that sugar, is one of the worse culprits contributing to health problems in our country. —WDIV (Detroit, 10/21/2011)

"I believe that there were other people involved domestically, either as active conspirators or as facilitators who knew what was going on and said nothing and looked the other way." —

Congressman Peter King, talking about the Boston Marathon bombing (4/25/2013)

If you **look the other way**, you ignore something that you know is wrong.

An early example, used with humor:

...whenever you ask a lady to take wine, you should fill her glass to the brim in despite of protestations, and look the other way till she has emptied it. —The Quarterly Review (London, 1837)

loose cannon

Retired Gen. David Petraeus was sworn in by Vice President Joe Biden on Tuesday as the director of the CIA at a small ceremony amid concerns in the administration that he could be a loose cannon, according to a report. —Politico (9/6/2011)

"But NATO and the West increasingly see Turkey as a loose cannon," he said. —Reuters (9/8/2011)

He now describes himself...as a family man who went from being a "loose cannon" to someone who enjoys the quiet life... —scnow.com (4/29/2012)

A **loose cannon** is someone or something that is supposed to be helpful, but is out of control and threatens to cause damage instead.

The phrase suggests a heavy gun rolling on a ship, causing terrible injuries to sailors instead of firing at the enemy. Such a scene was described in Victor Hugo's last novel, "Quatrevingt-treize" (Ninety-three), published in 1874. The scene captured public imagination. In 1915, a New York Times account of an 800-pound safe sliding on a ship that was caught in a hurricane said the "terrifying experience suggested Hugo's dramatic episode."

lose face, save face

The efficient-market hypothesis, which argued that smart investors would be on their own guard against undue risk, lost face during the subprime mortgage crisis. —The Washington Post (3/7/2011)

Since neither company is willing to back down and lose face, analysts see a stalemate as most likely. —Reuters (9/30/2011)

"Rugby scrums confuse anyone who doesn't know the game. So do U.N. debates," he [U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon] said. "And sometimes they can look very similar! In rugby, you lose teeth. In diplomacy, you lose face." —Foreign Policy (12/16/2011)

"The women who rent a boyfriend to bring home for the Lunar New Year are wealthy women around the age of 25. Their parents fear losing face and worry that no one wants to marry their old single daughters." —Mr. Gao, owner of a boyfriend rental service in Beijing (2/8/2013)

It helps Pakistan "save face" at home by addressing concerns over sovereignty... —TIME (5/18/2011)

Dying and in excruciating pain, the famously driven Steve Jobs needed to complete one last task: to cement his legacy and save face with his kids. Jobs agreed to a series of interviews...he said, so his children would understand him. —New York Post (10/9/2011)

"It's clearly a way for Morsi to preserve what he really wanted, plus to save face." —Nathan J. Brown, professor at George Washington University (11/27/2012)

Lose face means suffer public embarrassment. **Save face** means avoid public embarrassment.

Lose face is an early-1800's translation of a Chinese phrase. It suggests embarrassment so deep that a person cannot show his or her face in public. Save face came later in the 1800's as a way of expressing the opposite.

Robert Morrison's English and Chinese Dictionary, published in 1822, gave this definition: "to lose face, i.e. reputation and respectability."

lose one's cool

"He said something that was disrespectful toward me, and I lost my cool." —Chicago Tribune (5/23/2011)

Herman Cain, who has been under intense pressure for the past week to explain 12-year-old charges of sexual harassment, lost his cool with reporters... —Los Angeles Times (11/6/2011)

At times, the president sounded angry, noteworthy since he is famous for rarely losing his cool. —The New York Times (8/11/2011)

Then the bidding began. Bainbridge, whose big gest sale to that point had been $160,000, kept his cool as bids pushed the price past $10 million, then $30 million, then $50 million, to finally close at $69.5 million after 30 minutes of in tense bidding. —New York Post (11/13/2010)

Lose one's cool is similar to **get bent out of shape**, and also suggests losing control and speaking or acting in a way one regrets later.

The opposite, meaning stay calm, is **keep one's cool**. A variation of lose one's cool with the same meaning is **blow one's cool**.

Lose one's cool is believed to have originated during the later 1900's.

lose one's marbles, have all of one's marbles

I sat down with Rich Davey this week. It was a good long chat, but I still can't tell if he has all his marbles. —The Boston Globe (9/1/2011)

...Mr. Sheen, then an alcoholic, was losing his marbles making "Apocalypse Now" in the Philippines... —The New York Times (9/16/2011)

On the other windowsill is a jar of marbles..."I joke with everybody that I may have lost my marbles, but I was able to buy them back on eBay," Mikolite said. —Chicago Tribune (8/28/2011)

If you **lose your marbles**, you go crazy—lose your mind.

If you **don't have all your marbles**, at least part of your mental ability is missing; you are not competent or normal.

I could find no persuasive explanation for the origin of these phrases, which began to appear in print in the early 1900's. The joke quoted in the Tribune example reminds us that connecting children's playthings to mental capacity requires a long intellectual leap. Such leaps have been attempted and all have fallen short. Efforts to attribute the phrases to other kinds of marbles, such as the Elgin Marbles, are similarly inconclusive.

lose steam, run out of steam, run out of gas

By Friday, though, the storm began losing steam. —Associated Press (8/18/2011)

But technical analysts said Mexican and Brazilian stocks would likely lose steam in the coming sessions. —Reuters (9/1/2011)

After a few minutes, Mike found a legal-sized lobster. When he tried to net it, it got away and made a rapid, backward dash to safety. But when it stopped, the lights caught it again, and this time, Mike scooped it up. "Poor guy; he ran out of steam," Mike said. —The Miami Herald (8/31/2011)

"Well, if you spend a couple years saying the IRS is out to get us, and then it turns out the IRS is out to get you, it is going to help you with your fund-raising. So I think it looks like they're not losing steam." —David Brooks, columnist and commentator, talking about Tea Party Republicans (5/31/2013)

With the Hong Kong stock exchange losing almost 15 percent of its value in the last month, fears are growing among global law firms that the Asian capital markets boom may be running out of gas. —LAW.com (8/25/2011)

To **lose steam** is to weaken, lose energy. In the Associated Press example, the storm, Hurricane Irene, became less powerful. In the Reuters example, analysts predicted that stocks would not continue to increase in value. Similarly, if something (or someone) has **run out of steam**, it has used all its energy or power.

Run out of gas has a similar meaning (but no one speaks of losing gas).

Phrases that use steam engines as a metaphor have been in use at least since the 1830's. Run out of steam appeared repeatedly in an "address to the ladies and gentleman of Baltimore," including this excerpt:

Whenever I see a man, who professes religion, but whether he is young or old, has something to say about everybody's business, while he does not mind his own, I say—Ah, poor man! your meanness will be detected, and your criminality exposed—you will certainly run out of steam! —"Harmonies of Creation" by John C. Newman (1836)

love triangle

"There was something special and unique about the love triangle that existed between Clark Kent, Superman and Lois Lane," Lee says. —USA Today (7/18/2011)

And the Wilee/ Dania/ Manny love triangle doesn't hold much interest - though it is the spark for one of the movie's best chase scenes. —Fort Worth Star-Telegram (8/24/2012)

Five former employees of Bernard Madoff responded Thursday to government assertions that all but one of them and Madoff were involved "in romantic and/or sexual relationships" with one another and that Madoff himself was ensnared in a "love triangle." —New York Post (8/24/2013)

In a **love triangle**, one of three people is involved romantically or sexually with the other two.

Love triangle is different from threesome, which means three people doing something together at the same time (sex, a lunch date, a card game, etc.)

For decades in the Superman comic book series, Lois Lane was in love with Superman but she didn't know that Superman and her friend Clark Kent were the same person. The quotation in the USA Today example is complicated, and perhaps tongue-in-cheek [joking], because there were three characters in the relationship but only two people.

Love triangle has been traced back to the early 1900's, when it was also called the eternal triangle.

low-hanging fruit

..."many countries are arguing that we should capture the so-called low-hanging fruit—the 'easier' issues on which there is less discord." —USA Today (11/23/2010)

"It's important to note that we're beyond the easy, low-hanging fruit," Lew said. "We're reducing programs that are important programs that we care about." —The Washington Post (2/13/2011)

"You know, most of the low-hanging fruit is picked in the first term." —Evan Bayh, former senator and governor, talking about political opposition to Barack Obama in his second term as President (1/13/2013)

Pick the **low-hanging fruit** means do the easiest things, before the work becomes more difficult.

The earliest examples of low-hanging fruit used as a metaphor are from the 1970's.

make a dent

"If Africa could sell the world chocolate...it wouldn't solve all the continent's problems, but it could make a big dent," said Mr. McCollum. —The Wall Street Journal (9/24/2011)

But the spirit of unity that rose from 9/11 barely made a dent in the political discourse of our country. Today we're angrier, ruder, and far less willing to listen to opposing views. —Des Moines Register (9/11/2011)

"It's the city's job to board up and tear down dangerous, abandoned buildings. But there are almost 40,000 of them, and the city just doesn't have the money to put much of a dent in the problem..." —Sarah Hulett, radio journalist, talking about Detroit (7/30/2013)

To **make a dent** is to have a substantial, or noticeable, effect on something.

The expression is a metaphor based on the literal use of dent: If an object hits a car and does not leave a dent (indentation), it is likely that no one will care.

The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest example of make a dent as a metaphor is from 1942, but this example suggests it began before the 1900's:

...the only way to acquire it is by hard knocks and determination to succeed. Then, boy, it lies with you whether you dig in and make a dent in the world or poke along in a slipshod manner.—American Printer and Lithographer (November, 1896)

make a mountain out of a molehill

Children go through growth spurts, and often put on a bit of extra weight before shooting up in height. There's also a chance—albeit a pretty slim one—that you're wrong about your son and making a mountain out of a molehill. —San Jose Mercury-News (4/20/2011)

"It's baloney. They're making a mountain out of a molehill," said Michael Liso, 65, who said he worked as a firefighter with Maturo..."It's over and done with. Now let's move forward." —Associated Press (1/27/2012)

The current crisis will subside soon, so don't turn a molehill into a mountain. —Tribune Media Services (2/8/2012)

Make a mountain out of a molehill means exaggerate or make a fuss over something that is not important.

Mountain and molehill are used in a variety of phrases that allude to this expression. A molehill is a mound of earth made by a small mammal.

Examples of this metaphor have been found from as early as 1570.

make do

"With the increasing...move toward a strategy that involved local security forces, I think that the U.S. can make do with a smaller force," said Jones, who was an advisor to special operations units in Afghanistan until earlier this year. —Los Angeles Times (6/21/2011)

About 1,000 firefighters working on Father's Day had to make do without aircraft that had been grounded by winds blowing steadily at about 30 mph with gusts on the ridges of about 50 mph. —Associated Press (6/20/2011)

I bought a pair of discontinued wall fixtures at a deep discount—something that would make do. —The Baltimore Sun (6/17/2011)

Make do means manage; get along in the absence of something better.

In Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte (1847), when Miss Temple says, "We must make it do, Barbara, I suppose," she means they must accept an amount of food that is too small. Perhaps the popular novel influenced the development of make do; the first known examples are from the early 1900's.

make heads or tails of

I called the store and spoke to the manager. He asked me to come back in, as he could not make heads or tails of the situation. —Chicago Sun-Times (9/9/2011)

"It takes time for current events to have deeper understanding and wisdom, but it's imperative to dig right in...and do our best to make heads or tails of it all." —Chicago Tribune (9/7/2011)

Martens warned jurors that the defense team is underestimating them, betting that they can't make heads or tails of a jargon-filled case that tossed around terms like "synthetic collateralized-debt obligation." —New York Post (7/30/2013)

If you can't **make heads or tails of** something, you can't understand it at all. Without a head or tail, a top or bottom, a beginning or end, it is hard to make any sense of it.

The phrase was originally **make head or tail of**, and that's what Groucho Marx said in his 1933 film, "Duck Soup": "Why, a 4-year-old child could understand this report...Now run out and find me a 4-year-old child. I can't make head or tail of it."

But the phrase **heads or tails**, used in flipping a coin to make a choice, became so common that for most Americans, "make head or tail of" became "make heads or tails of."

An early version is in "The tickler tickled" by Margery Mason in 1679: "Their Tale...had neither head nor taile." That meant their story had neither a beginning nor an end, and so could not be understood.

make no mistake

"Make no mistake: our efforts will fail in Afghanistan and Pakistan if we don't invest in their future." —President Barack Obama (6/25/2011)

Make no mistake: These kids are shooting real guns. —The Boston Globe (7/9/2011)

"And make no mistake about it ... the American people are going to blame the Republican Party." —Senator Charles Schumer, talking about negotiations on spending and taxes (12/23/2012)

Make no mistake means don't misunderstand me, or have no doubt about this, or make sure you listen to what I'm going say now.

Sometimes the phrase serves to add emphasis when used after the word "but," as in, "I am usually a nice person but make no mistake, it is not a good idea to make me angry."

In all the examples, the warning is about understanding the statement: President Obama was not warning us to avoid a mistake in foreign policy, he was saying we should not make a mistake about what he was saying.

An expression with a similar meaning is **don't get me wrong**.

An early example in my searches comes from a fictional story in a Halifax, Nova Scotia, newspaper, in which a rich woman offers to marry a poor man, but only under strict conditions:

"Deliberate on the advantages offered—an opportunity of fortune which few would reject in your circumstances. But make no mistake: you will be bound down strictly..."—The Morning Journal (7/4/1855)

make the grade

...students must achieve a score of 80 or better in math on the state Regents exam and 75 or higher in English. A mere 21% made the grade... —New York Daily News (6/15/2011)

You can't watch the news or open a newspaper without reading about how American students are failing to make the grade compared to students around the world, and how that is the fault of public schools and teachers. —Charleston Gazette-Mail (3/6/2011)

In firing trainees—people who have been with the firm for up to 36 months—Morgan Stanley is moving quickly to identify people who it thinks won't make the grade.— Reuters (3/9/2011)

Make the grade means meet the requirements.

It may be used when success depends on passing a test, as in the New York Daily News example. Or, it may describe the difference between failure and success without referring to a specific test, as in the Charleston Gazette-Mail and Reuters examples.

Examples of the figurative use have been found from the 1920's. This is an earlier example of the literal use:

I learned that on one occasion the merciless majority passed a measure compelling one of the members either to make the highest grade in his French class or not to see his best girl on Sunday

nights for seventeen consecutive weeks. The fellow made the grade! —"A Ferrago" by Max Ehrmann (Boston, 1898)

me neither

It turns out Citibank was hacked in early May. Wait, you hadn't heard? Me neither. —TIME (6/9/2011)

Yes, our schools and infrastructure need attention, but is there any other place you would rather live and choose to start and run a business? Nope, me neither. —USA Today (11/25/2011)

Never given or gotten an astrology birthday card? Me neither. —Chicago Tribune (1/16/2011)

Me neither is an informal, conversational way to express agreement with a negative statement.

In the TIME example, it means "I didn't know either." The USA Today example means "I wouldn't, either." The Chicago Tribune example means "I haven't, either," or, "Neither have I."

Another informal phrase, **same here**, sometimes has the same meaning, but is frequently used to agree with a positive statement. Me neither only follows a negative statement.

Me neither has been traced as far back as 1882.

meet one's match

DeMiro, who had been stealing millions of dollars from his customers for three years, in 2010 finally met his match in Miller. It was Miller, just eight months into her job as the county's treasurer, who triggered the investigation... —The Muskegon Chronicle (7/16/2011)

Ron Wallen met the person that he says completed his life in 1953. At 19, he met his match in 23-year-old Tom Carrollo. The pair spent the next 58 years together. —CNN (7/20/2011)

Even my strange shaped ears seem to have met their match, with the Flex headphones staying in place for the majority of my 10K runs. —Wired (7/21//2011)

When DeMiro **met his match** in the Muskegon Chronicle example, he was opposed by someone as capable, or more capable, than himself. In similar contexts, meet one's match means to come up against someone who is equal or better in ability.

In the CNN example, when Wallen met his match he met his life-long lover. In similar contexts, match means someone or something that perfectly complements the other, forming a matching set. The meaning in the Wired example is similar; the writer meant that the headphones fit well on her strange ears.

Similar phrases have been used with the same meaning since the 1300's.

mess around, monkey around

White didn't mess around with cops who, in his view, crossed the line. In his eight years in Louisville, White fired 28 officers, and in 25 other cases the cops retired or resigned while under investigation, according to an investigation by the Louisville Courier-Journal. —The Denver Post (10/29/2011)

"You get the course credit if you have a good, strong work ethic and don't mess around," Parrish

said. —Times Daily (Florence, Alabama, 10/22/2011)

"Lauren Bacall was responsible for bringing him out to Hollywood and...he just started messing around so much that my mother said, 'I'm out of here.'" —Michael Douglas, the actor, talking about his father, Kirk Douglas (6/2/2013)

On their lunch breaks Tuesday, the students signed a banner pledging not to "monkey around with drugs" as part of the school's Red Ribbon Week observance. —Times Herald (Port Huron, Michigan, 10/26/2011)

They'd much rather monkey around with moralistic posturing than face real issues. —The (Memphis) Daily News (4/27/2012)

Mess around and **monkey around** mean play, or behave a way that is not serious.

The phrases may be Americanizations of the British **mess about** and **monkey about**.

Examples of mess about have been found from as early as the 1850's and monkey about from the 1880's. Here are early examples of mess around and monkey around, both from the 1890's:

I oftentimes wondered why she didn't complain; for he would serve anybody and everybody before "the Comet," and mess around ostentatiously with something unimportant for five or ten minutes if there happened to be no other customer on hand he could give preference to. —Lippincott's Monthly Magazine (March, 1892)

"The latest excitement in Uppertown is a haunted house. In the lonely hours of the night, clumsy ghosts monkey around in the catloft, fall over chairs and smash dishes when there are not any chairs and dishes there." —The Daily Astorian-Budget (3/29/1894)

micromanage

President Lee Myung-bak has pledged to scale back government involvement in business, but the pressure on the oil refiners shows how policymakers still like to micro-manage in the name of the greater economic good. —Dow Jones Newswires (4/4/2011)

"I also walk around the office and just start talking to people about what they're working on. I'm not trying to micromanage what they're doing, but I am trying to find out what they're working on and talk to them about it." —David Sacks, founder of Yammer, in an interview with The New York Times (7/16/2011)

But they do have issues with how the city is run, including a feeling that the Common Council was trying to micro-manage individual departments. —The Sheboygan Press (11/5/2011)

Micromanage means try to control every detail. It is often a criticism, similar in meaning to over-manage.

Micromanage is often hyphenated, as in two of the news examples, but it is an unhyphenated word in prominent dictionaries. It did not exist until well into the second half of the 1900's. Here is a news example from 1976:

The current micro-management of development programs by Government employees without practical industrial experience was unknown. —The New York Times (12/19/1976)

mind-blowing

"I didn't expect to have the full houses we had. It blows my mind." —Jimmy Osmond, referring to large audiences his group attracted. (10/17/2012)

"I played football, 15 great years. And then I`m on Fox and now all of a sudden I have an opportunity for this. It blows my mind, too." —Michael Strahan, talking about being co-host of the "Live! with Kelly" morning television show (6/1/2012)

The supporting-actress frontrunner has taken some hits for self-funding an unconventional Oscar campaign that betrays some level of insecurity. Will a sudden loss blow her mind? —Winston-Salem Journal (2/26/2011)

One highlight of many Pi Day events is a competitive recitation of the numerous digits of pi, which modern computers have calculated to a trillion decimal places. At Morgan Park, the record is 312 digits, while the DuPage Science Fiction and Fantasy Society has had someone recite more than 100 digits, and a Payton student who's now at Yale University remembered a mind-blowing 500 digits. —Chicago Tribune (3/13/2011)

When City Councilman Darrell L. Clarke was campaigning door to door before the last election, people wanted to talk about crime, to be sure. And jobs, of course. But what blew his mind was how many complaints he got about raccoons. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (11/2/2011)

When the Beatles sang, "He blew his mind out in a car" in 1967, the song referred to the use of drugs that caused hallucinations and other mind-changing effects. The meaning of the phrase gradually changed after the 1960's. It now usually describes amazement, which may be associated with any strong emotion.

In the Chicago Tribune example, remembering 500 numbers was **mind-blowing** because it astonished people, not because it did any harm to the student's mind.

Monday morning quarterback

Orr said he's not trying to "Monday morning quarterback" the experts hired to operate the Retirement Systems of Alabama and he doesn't believe the Legislature should do so. —TimesDaily (Florence, Ala., 7/17/2011)

"Anytime you have these emergency situations, it's easy to go back and Monday morning quarterback..." —USA Today (8/7/2012)

"I don't want to run Monday morning quarterback. They did a great job of resolving the case. But as far as getting information in advance and not seeming to take proper action, this is the fifth case I'm aware of where the FBI has failed to stop someone who ultimately became a terrorist murderer." —Congressman Peter King, talking about the Boston Marathon bombing (4/21/2013)

The quarterback plays the most important, decision-making position on a football team. **Monday morning quarterbacking** means second-guessing—questioning something that someone else did. A Monday morning quarterback shares his wisdom and analysis after the game has been played. That is easy because **hindsight is 20-20** (the past is always clearer than the present or the future). Also, it is easier to talk about things than do them, which is why there are arm-chair generals (people who are not involved or responsible but want to give orders or opinions from a distance).

The earliest example of Monday morning quarterback in my searches is from 1931:

Barry Wood, Harvard's all-America quarterback...said that football coaches who strive for winning teams are forced to do so by the alumni and the spectators...The answer to overemphasis

was to be found not on the field, but in the stands, where sit what Wood called "the Monday morning quarterbacks." —The New York Times (12/4/1931)

more than meets the eye

But it now appears that in the case of Germany, at least, the slow response was more than meets the eye...The country has dramatically boosted its exports thanks to a weak euro... —Los Angeles Times (3/15/2010)

There is more than meets the eye to the split at the Federal Reserve. There must be. —The New York Times (8/9/2011)

.As is usually the case, there is far more than meets the eye to the Labor Department's report that the economy added 117,000 jobs last month and the unemployment rate fell to 9.1%. Let's start with the reality that fewer people actually were working in July than in June. —CNBC (8/5/2011)

More than meets the eye means more information than is known or can be seen.

This idiom usually suggests that something appears to be simpler than it really is. The earliest example I found is from 1750.

Also, see less than meets the eye.

more than one way to skin a cat

However, Flinn said the petition route would end the need for any council approval and could speed up the process..."When we saw the long, drawn-out potential (of having the council involved), we thought there was more than one way to skin a cat," said Flinn. —The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal (1/7/2011)

When I got into the workplace working with a bunch of smart people, I realized that there are lots of ways to skin a cat, and it takes a full spectrum of people to be successful. —Worcester Business Journal (8/29/2011)

"...there's money to be gained by closing some of these loopholes and applying them to deficit reduction. So I think there are a lot of ways to skin this cat, so long as everybody comes with a positive, constructive attitude..." —David Axelrod, campaign adviser to President Obama (11/11/2012)

More than one way to skin a cat means more than one way to accomplish something or achieve success.

Variations in recent years have changed the phrase from more than one to larger numbers, such as lots of ways in the Worcester Business Journal example. Other enthusiastic writers have inflated the phrase to thousands and millions of ways to skin a cat.

Examples of more than one way to skin a cat and its variations have been found as early as 1840, but how it originated is unknown. The skins of lions and tigers were made into rugs or hung on walls—the prizes of proud hunters—so it would make sense that skin a cat alluded to having success. But I could find no evidence to support that or any other theory.

This is a money digging world of ours; and, as it is said, "there are more ways than one to skin a cat," so are there more ways than one of digging for money. —"The Money Diggers, a Down-East

Story" by Seba Smith (1840)

mother country

Born in Italy, she grew up in an Italian household, and has three older brothers who were raised in the mother country. —Greenpoint Gazette (11/30/2011)

That effort by the United States to support Greenland during the Nazi occupation of its mother country, Denmark, relied heavily upon private and non-military vessels. —Associated Press (11/28/2011)

Mexicans are well known for having so much pride when it comes to supporting anything having to do with their mother country. —The Brownsville Herald (11/23/2011)

Mother country means the country where immigrants were born. It sometimes means the country where an immigrant group's ancestors were born.

When it refers to nations (rather than people or groups of people), it means the country where most of the original immigrants came from. The United States has immigrants from many countries but England is sometimes still called its mother country, especially in historical contexts.

The phrase has been traced to the 1500's in English translations of Latin. In 1616, Captain John Smith wrote it in his "Description of New England" (spelling changed to modern):

What so truly suits with honor and honesty as the discovering things unknown, erecting towns, peopling countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things unjust, teaching virtue, and gain to our native mother country a kingdom to attend her...

motley crew

Small business owners in Lower Manhattan are planning a counter-protest Monday against the "Occupy Wall Street" demonstrators. The owners say that the motley crew of protesters hanging around Zuccotti Park are destroying their livelihoods. —New York Post (11/14/2011)

Tens of thousands of people have massed across the impoverished Arabian Peninsula state for six months—a motley crew of secularists and Islamists, separatists and nationalists, tribesmen and urbanites, protesting at 33 years of Saleh rule seen as scarred by repression, corruption and joblessness. —Reuters (7/28/2011)

Finally, we met the other cast of characters at Brandi's soiree, and they were a motley crew of intriguing beauties. —New York Magazine (12/6/2011)

A group may be called a **motley crew** because it is unorganized, or diverse, or includes questionable characters.

In past centuries motley has had different meanings. The earliest known meaning is a cloth made from thread of different colors. Examples of motley crew have been found from as early as the 1700's.

movers and shakers

But the rest of the makeover appeared to go over well with the 250-plus movers and shakers who packed the preview party on the 17th floor of the downtown Fairmont Plaza building. —San Jose

Mercury News (12/3/2011)

Among the hundreds of mourners in the church were first lady Michelle Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, dozens of other officials and many of the city's movers and shakers. —Chicago Tribune (11/28/2011)

He has also been the prime mover and shaker on the...state takeover bill for Harrisburg's troubled city finances. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (11/11/2011)

A **mover and shaker** is a person with influence who gets things done.

The first known example of the phrase is in "Ode," an 1874 poem by Arthur O'Shaughnessy:

> World losers and world forsakers
> On whom the pale moon gleams:
> Yet we are the movers and shakers
> Of the world forever, it seems.

The next example in my searches is from 1900:

Laforgue...wore the top-hat and carried the umbrella of a blameless life, and what is more he was the author of a very brilliant poem...not...like the productions of his fellow movers and shakers of the world of literature. —The Saturday Review (5/12/1900)

moving target

Yet we still pride ourselves on speaking and writing "well"—even when the definition of "well" is a moving target. —National Public Radio (4/13/2011)

"For instance, we have projected insurance costs, but we've seen several changes with those this year. It gets to be mind boggling when you start doing budget amendments. It's a moving target." —Gainesville Times (4/11/2011)

The exam also changes every few years, Wilson said. The moving target makes it difficult for educators to prepare students adequately for these exams, he said. —Las Vegas Sun (4/26/2012)

Literally, a moving target is something that does not stay in one place when a hunter or soldier aims at it. Figuratively, a **moving target** is something that changes, usually making an activity or goal more difficult.

Examples of the figurative use have been found from as early as 1947.

muddle through

The revised schedule...is expected to stay in effect indefinitely, at least until engineers can muddle through a steep backlog of repairs on the railroad's aging, exhausted fleet. —The New York Times (2/1/2011)

The correct solution is to muddle through the crisis as best we can. —Knoxville News Sentinel (3/1/2011)

The cause for all this optimism is the growing body of evidence pointing to a solid American economic recovery...and the signals from Europe that the continent may muddle through its sovereign debt crisis. —Los Angeles Times (2/8/2012)

Muddle through means continue and finish doing something, or survive, despite unfavorable

circumstances. Something muddled is mixed-up, confused or messy.

In the 1944 movie "Meet Me in St. Louis," Judy Garland sang the still-popular "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," including:

> Someday soon we all will be together
> If the fates allow
> Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow.

This is the earliest example of muddle through I have found:

Select one family, or one individual, or a dozen or a hundred such, give them these facilities for a few years, and what different individuals they will be at the end of that time from what they would have been if left, without aid or encouragement, to muddle through life without any refining or elevating influence to meet and hold them up! —Friends' Intelligencer (Philadelphia, 9/3/1859)

mumbo jumbo

Dohrn, who teaches writing at Northwestern University...has a lot of fun with all this self-improvement mumbo jumbo. —Chicago Tribune (11/7/2011)

I had started talking late as a child, and when I finally did, it was an indecipherable mumbo-jumbo. —The New York Times (10/7/2011)

The higher-level executive keeps saying..."Speak to me in plain English," but the characters never quite succeed in explaining the financial mumbo jumbo in concise terms that laymen can grasp. —Reuters (1/26/2011)

Mumbo jumbo is language that is meaningless or impossible to understand.

Mumbo jumbo originated as an English interpretation of West African language.

The earliest known printed example is in a journal by Francis Moore, who was sent by the Royal African Company in 1730 to work on the Gambia River as a clerk. When the journal was published in 1738, Moore wrote, apologetically: "I was then very young and had neither Time nor Capacity to make those Observations which the Learned World might desire. Indeed, if linguists and anthropologists had been the explorers and interpreters of Africa, mumbo jumbo almost certainly would not exist."

mum's the word

Mum's the word on the company's Web site, so we'll all just have to wait and see. —TheStreet.com (2/14/2011)

So will he come back to re-shoot some scenes, or will Lee redo them in Hollywood? Mum's the word, for now. —Reuters (11/18/2011)

If LEGO has concerns about Hungary's solvency and policy uncertainty, mum's the word. "We are very hesitant to comment on the political situation," said Ms. Simonsen. —Forbes (2/10/2012)

In the news examples, **mum's the word** means no one is saying anything or releasing information.

If someone tells you a secret and says, "Mum's the word," it means, "Don't say anything about it to anyone."

If someone tells you a secret and you say, "Mum's the word," it means, "I won't tell anyone."

Examples of the phrase have been found from as early as the 1600's.

Murphy's Law

Keep in mind Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong." Always backup all your "Irreplaceable Stuff" before doing anything that involves configuring your Windows system. —Fort Myers News-Press (11/20/2011)

Ashton said in the book that law enforcement and volunteers never examined that area until Roy Kronk reported seeing the remains there in December 2008. "In the end, Murphy's Law prevailed: everyone assumed that someone else had searched there, but in fact no one actually had," Ashton writes. —Associated Press (11/15/2011)

Thanksgiving is...time for Murphy's Law in the kitchen, especially when neophyte cooks come out of the pantry to try their hand at preparing a homemade feast. —Del Mar Times (11/17/2011)

The definition of **Murphy's Law** is in the Fort Myers News-Press example: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong. But this expression of humorous pessimism is so well known that it is not usually explained when used.

Many people have wondered about the origin of Murphy's Law. Nick T. Spark researched the question for his 2003 book, "A History of Murphy's Law." He found some entertaining stories but not a conclusive answer. Widespread use of the phrase developed during the 1950's.

musical chairs

First, in the game of musical chairs, one recipient of tax money will likely lose out. Which should it be, if not redevelopment agencies? —Los Angeles Times (1/20/2011)

Picture an anxious round of musical chairs...with New York due to lose two of its 29 congressional seats this year...It involves the prospect that Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Mineola) would end up forced into the same district as Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-Roslyn Heights). —Newsday (2/9/2012)

"This is nothing more than musical chairs," said Maribeth Roman Schmidt, spokeswoman for the group. "It's the same folks, on the same board, sitting in different seats," she said... —Reuters (1/20/2012)

Musical chairs means that someone, or group or organization, loses because there isn't enough of something. It alludes to a game.

When kids play musical chairs, they walk around a line of chairs and sit down when the music stops playing. There is always one more person than there are chairs, so someone doesn't get a seat and has to drop out of the game.

Often the idiom is stretched beyond the original metaphor and refers to people changing jobs or positions, as in the Reuters example.

The game dates to the 1800's. In my searches, the earliest examples of the figurative use are in the 1940's.

nail in the coffin

Closing the Valentine [Texas]Post Office would save $603,191 over 10 years, according to Sam Bolen, a U.S. Postal Service spokesman...For Valentine, which has been in decline for almost a century, it would be one more nail in the coffin. —San Antonio Express-News (2/12/2011)

"For some moderate- to small-size farms, this could be the last nail in the coffin. Some could close." —The Philadelphia Inquirer (2/9/2011)

Schumer "is the decider. If he says resign, then that's the nail in the coffin for Weiner," said Christina Greer, political science professor at Fordham University. —amNewYork (6/12/2011)

Nail in the coffin means a cause of the end of something.

In the amNewYork example, it was the end of Anthony Weiner's membership in the U.S. House of Representatives.

It is often the **final** or the **last** nail, as in the Philadelphia Inquirer example. But in this early example, it was the **first** nail, and meant the beginning of the end:

In electing Mr. Rippon to represent you in parliament, you will have placed the first nail in the coffin of toryism... —"Proceedings Connected With the Election for the Southern Division of the County of Northumberland" (1832)

See also, **the last straw**.

neck and neck, nip and tuck

Newsweek, the 77-year-old magazine that fought neck and neck for decades with Time magazine for dominance in the once-lucrative news-weekly magazine market, has struggled financially in recent years along with many other once-dominant publications. —ABC News (3/6/2011)

"Well, there was a diary leaked in 2005 which suggested he was the runner-up and they were neck and neck." —Raymond Arroyo, television journalist, talking about reports that Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio finished second to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the 2005 papal election (3/13/2013)

A Quinnipiac poll released June 30 found Messrs. Kaine and Allen running neck-and-neck this year, with 43% supporting Mr. Kaine and 42% backing Mr. Allen, who is expected to win the Republican primary. —The Wall Street Journal (7/19/2011)

CCC did have as much as a four-point lead, but it was nip-and-tuck the entire second half. —McPherson Sentinel (2/22/2011)

When horses run **neck and neck**, the race is very close. The phrase describes a close competition with no dominant leader.

Nip and tuck also refers to a close competition, but implies more strongly that the lead changed frequently.

A different, more recent meaning of nip and tuck is cosmetic surgery to tighten loose skin, which inspired the TV series "Nip/Tuck."

neither fish nor fowl

The committee's recommendation that the AHC deans continue reporting to multiple people was

"strange," wrote an anonymous commenter. "This neither fish nor fowl arrangement will lead to duplication of authority and confusion," the comment said. —Minnesota Daily (12/5/2011)

Like other families in the area, they are, as Alther writes, "neither fish nor fowl, neither white nor Indian nor African, most probably all three at once." —Knoxville News Sentinel (11/25/2011)

"He's neither fish nor fowl. He's not a high-profile outside hire with a very definitive and visible track record. And he's not a long-term staffer who knows the inside and out of the firm very well." —Bloomberg News (11/15/2011)

Neither fish nor fowl means not one thing or the other.

This expression has been traced to the 1500's in different versions, beginning with "neither flesh nor fish." An early example of the modern version is in an English translation of a German novel:

"I well know who was the ill-mannered horseman; he is neither fish nor fowl, he is a mixture of every thing—he is at once a noble, a student, an imperial servant and taster, astrologer, and so forth." —The Natural Son (London, 1835)

neither here nor there

"Even drug dealers and convicted felons have rights under the Constitution," said Harris..."Whether you like them or don't like them, that's neither here nor there." —Associated Press (8/27/2011)

They are looking to atone for their 2007 NFC championship game overtime loss to Tuck's "Road Warrior" Giants. "We're close," Woodson said. "That 2007 game is neither here nor there. That was then. This is a totally different team now... —USA Today (1/16/2011)

"I think he [President Obama] wants to be Roosevelt in his second term. But that's neither here nor there." —former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (1/20/2013)

In these contexts, **neither here nor there** means not important to the topic being discussed. The phrase has been used this way at least since the 1500's.

In other contexts, **neither here nor there** can mean a state of uncertainty—in limbo:

"Initially we had a bullish updraft [increase in prices]...but we've pared back those gains...leaving us neither here nor there." —Reuters (1/25/2011)

...some are in admissions purgatory, neither here nor there. For those students on a waiting list, there will likely be several weeks (at least) left before resolution. —The New York Times (4/8/2011)

nest egg

In the last two years, lawmakers have cut education spending by $300 million. But the state also has been able to build a $1.2 billion nest egg... —Associated Press (12/6/2011)

Vanguard offers the example of a saver who has roughly $191,000 socked away [saved] at age 65. If this individual begins withdrawing 4% annually from that nest egg, he will see his savings shrink within three years to about $169,000, Vanguard estimates. —The Wall Street Journal (12/4/2011)

If you're near retirement, you don't have a lot of time to increase the size of your nest egg. —USA Today (12/1/2011)

"It's their nest egg. It's really their life savings." —Steve Kreisberg, union officer, talking about Detroit workers whose pensions were in doubt after the city declared bankruptcy (7/19/2013)

Nest egg means savings: things of value kept for later use. It most frequently refers to a person's or family's savings for retirement, but groups or companies or governments—as in the Associated Press example—may also have nest eggs.

This phrase has been traced to the 1600's. An older meaning was an egg left in a hen's nest to encourage it lay more eggs. How the modern meaning came about is unknown.

new blood, young blood, fresh blood

Wells Fargo Advisors believes training newcomers to become brokers is critical to building a successful wealth management business and attracting new blood that can bring in a new generation of clients. —Reuters (4/8/2011)

Seriously, they were looking for young blood, said Lori Bean of Somerville, 45, next year's president..."Most of our members have passed," she said, giving cookies to the kids for free. —Boston Globe (4/8/2011)

"I think adding fresh blood at the top will certainly be good," Ms. Berg said, adding that changing the leadership would not solve the company's problems. —The New York Times (1/27/2012)

Adding **new blood** or **young blood** to a company or group means adding different or younger people. The phrase **fresh blood** can have a similar meaning, if the example is not in a horror movie or otherwise used literally.

The phrases have been in use at least since the mid-1800's. An early example:

On the whole, there is considerable change in the... new [British] parliament, without any great infusion of new blood, since many of those who are freshly chosen have solicited the sweet voices of constituencies on previous occasions. —The New York Times (8/10/1852)

new kid on the block

With 11 million users, Instagram is far from being the new kid on the block. —KDAF-TV (Dallas, Texas, 12/9/2011)

The single-gender model for girls has been around for more than 100 years, mostly in parochial and private schools...They are a novelty in public education. And an all-girls school is the new kid on the block in the Austin school district... —Austin American-Statesman (12/4/2011)

"I'm the new kid on the block," Mr. Dodd said in an interview by phone on Friday, acknowledging that both his relative inexperience and the need to stay out of business decisions made by individual studios had kept him largely out of the battle. —The New York Times (4/24/2011)

Used literally, new kid on the block means a young person who recently moved to a neighborhood. In its more frequent, figurative use, **new kid on the block** means someone or something newly arrived or begun.

As the news examples show, new kid on the block is used in a wide variety of situations. In the KDAF example, it refers to a photo application for smart phones. The phrase often has the same meaning as new, but adds a conversational tone.

Literal examples have been found from as early as the 1940's. The earliest example of a figurative use in my searches is a news story about Mike Burke's first interview after he was named president of the New York Yankees in 1966:

[Burke] said that "as a new kid on the block" he couldn't yet announce any concrete plan to return the last-place Yankees to the head of the class in the American League. —Associated Press (9/21/1966)

nickel and dime

Why nickel and dime it? Get something that's good. —The Boston Globe (4/20/2011)

"The defendant is not some nickel and dime drug dealer," said [County Attorney] Hogan. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (2/7/2012)

"It's not just rich people who are kind of getting nickeled and dimed at the federal level, the state level and the local level. A lot of middle class people are feeling the same sort of pinch." —Rick Newman, business news reporter (1/24/2013)

Nickel and dime, used as a verb, means charge small amounts of money (as in the third example) or try to get an advantage by saving small amounts, as in The Boston Globe example. It often conveys a negative opinion, as in both examples.

When used as an adjective, as in the Philadelphia Inquirer example, it means involving small amounts of money.

(In American football, the words nickel and dime refer to the position of defensive players. If a player is used in nickel and dime packages, he is the fifth or sixth player in a group assigned to defend against passes.)

Around the start of the 1900's, when people shopped in nickel and dime stores and went to nickel and dime shows, the phrase became associated with cheapness.

New studies show how most school children at some periods of their lives have a veritable passion for cheap shows, of which there are fifteen hundred of the nickel and dime order in New York alone. —National Education Association Proceedings (1908)

nip in the bud

"They've got to nip this thing in the bud before it really gets out of hand." —Minneapolis Star Tribune (3/4/2011)

To nip the crises in the bud and make things run smoothly, act as a mediator and don't take sides. —Tribune Media Services (Horoscope, 2/5/2012)

"The more we can nip unethical behavior in the bud, the better," said Andrew Ainslie, a senior associate dean at UCLA Anderson. —Los Angeles Times (1/29/2012)

Nip (something) **in the bud** means stop it early, before it gets worse or makes something bad happen.

The phrase originated as "nipped in the bloom," based on the idea of stopping the growth of plants at an early stage.

The poet John Milton wrote in 1671: "the first-born bloom of spring Nipt with the lagging rear of

winters frost."

nitty gritty

The other force that has hardly been heard from yet is the remainder of Mubarak's regime, which was accused of widespread corruption and authoritarianism but also has the experience in the nitty gritty of running the country, unlike the military. —Associated Press (2/12/2011)

"Too many in the current Bucharest hierarchy are too far divorced from the nitty-gritty of life here." —Reuters (1/1/2011)

People who think big rarely have time to do the nitty gritty stuff that makes things work. —Cornell Daily Sun (1/24/2012)

Depending on context, **nitty gritty** may mean small details, as in the Associated Press example; unpleasant realities, as in the Reuters example; or important details, as in the Cornell Sun example.

A hand-cleaning powder called Nitty Gritty existed in the 1920's, and a song called "That Nitty Gritty Dance" was copyrighted in 1937, but neither explains the origin. The phrase was not in frequent use before the 1950's. The earliest examples are in African American publications.

Subsequently, Jake got down to the nitty-gritty. —Jet Magazine (10/2/1952)

no dice

Everyone waited and waited for the bank's approval and finally, four months later, the bank said no dice. The deal was off. —Chicago Tribune (7/19/2011)

Last week, Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner flew to China to try to convince oil-hungry Beijing to join the ban. As of yet, China’s answer is no dice. —New York Post (1/17/2012)

The meaning of **no dice** is the same as no, but often adds emphasis. **No way** and **nothing doing** are similar. Sometimes the meaning is nothing, no solution, or hopeless. ("I searched everywhere. No dice.")

The phrase came into frequent use around the 1930's. One theory of its origin is that prosecutors could not convict defendants of illegal gambling if no dice were seized as evidence, but it is not clear how that law enforcement problem became prominent enough in the public consciousness to spawn a popular idiom. (Nor is it easy to imagine police in the 1920's allowing many cases to fail for lack of a pair of dice.)

"Don Juan" by Lord Byron, written in the 1820's and widely read in the early 1900's, contains these lines:

> Then there were billiards; cards, too, but no dice;
> Save in the Clubs no man of honour plays...

Perhaps Byron's popularity helped put the phrase in the public mind, but no evidence supports that speculation, either.

no holds barred

Personal-finance guru Suze Orman is famous for her no-holds-barred advice. —TIME (3/10/2011)

Jodi Picoult's new novel "Sing You Home"—which makes a no-holds-barred case for gay rights and gay marriage—truly hits home for this best-selling author. —USA Today (3/8/2010)

What had started out as a friendly food drive at the North Austin biotechnology company had morphed into a free-for-all, no-holds-barred competition among 10 teams. Employees were hiding canned vegetables, ramen noodles, crackers and bottled water in cubicles, under desks and even in car trunks to fake out their co-workers about how much they had collected. —Austin American-Statesman (2/12/2012)

In books and on some Web sites, you can find **no holds barred** defined as no rules or restrictions, but it usually means unrestrained or forceful.

No holds barred originated as a description of old forms of wrestling. If a hold (a move or tactic, such as attacking the eyes) was barred, it was illegal. Today, some forms of extreme fighting are advertised as no holds barred but thankfully there are still exceptions, so even in its literal use the phrase is a slight exaggeration.

In the news examples, no rules or restrictions were taken away or broken. The TIME and USA Today examples describe writers giving their opinions forcefully.

An early example of no holds barred used figuratively, not referring to fighting, is in a magazine article about swimming at Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York:

Father Neptune is the originator and general manager of the greatest public hugging matches in the world, no holds barred and many of the young men were very busy picking girls out of the waves. —Putnam's Magazine (March, 1909)

no-brainer

This conference realignment decision is a no-brainer. I didn't have to huddle with a $200,000 marketing consultant to produce a solution. —Louisville Courier-Journal (10/27/2011)

It should be a no-brainer—but the Times Record News has received calls from readers asking when Halloween is. —Times Record News (Wichita Falls, Texas, 10/26/2011)

"Our typical package is...a no-brainer for our clients." —Craig Ulliot, CEO of SocialKaty, a social media consulting company (4/12/2012)

"My hope is, is that we can see a different course taken by Congress. This should be a no-brainer." —President Barack Obama, warning against automatic cuts in government spending (2/22/2013)

A **no-brainer** is an action or decision that requires no thought.

No-brainer has been in use at least since the 1950's. An early example is in a 1956 edition of Congressional Quarterly: "Of course, the vote will be a philosophical 'no brainer' for members who have long supported—or opposed—a compromise along the lines proposed."

north star

"As a husband, father and grandfather he was our north star," the statement said. "We are deeply grateful for his love and lessons throughout our lives." —statement by the family of Bruce Sundlun, former governor of Rhode Island, after his death (7/22/2011)

"Tash would say you were her North Star, guiding us all on our journey to doing great work." —

Joely Richardson, telling her mother, Vanessa Redgrave, what her late sister would have said at an awards ceremony for Redgrave (11/14/2011)

"Those principles will be our North Star as we work to end wasteful tax loopholes and balance thoughtful spending reductions with revenue from the wealthiest among us." —Senator Harry Reid (1/22/2013)

When the subject is not astronomy, **North Star** means guide.

In centuries past, the North Star was a primary tool for navigation. The phrase was used as a metaphor from at least as early as the 1600's.

nose to the grindstone

I knew the years of putting my nose to the grindstone and working hard would lead me to a job at the top.—SmartMoney (9/15/2011)

Today, his team, as part of Walmart Labs, is nose to the grindstone in an office in Silicon Valley figuring out how retail works in a more mobile and social world. —Ad Age (9/20/2011)

"The most important thing we can do as a bureau is keep our nose to the grindstone and keep doing our work." —Richard Cordray, director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (1/5/2012)

If you have, put or keep your **nose to the grindstone**, you work hard and are not distracted.

A grindstone is a wheel with a rough edge, used for sharpening or polishing. As long as a worker keeps his nose near the grindstone, it is difficult to do anything besides work.

The phrase was used by John Frith in 1533, but with a different meaning: a painful, disfiguring punishment in which the nose was held against the grindstone. That meaning persisted until the 1800's. This is an early example with a meaning closer to the current one:

...we are now advancing in years, and the work sets harder on us...and this keeps my nose to the grindstone perpetually, and my poor wife is sometimes so fatigued, that she can scarce stir about. —The Evening Fire-side, or Literary Miscellany (Philadelphia, 5/31//1806)

nothing to sneeze at

There is no guarantee that the hospital industry will rebound this year. With roughly 50% of its revenue dependent on Medicare and Medicaid, big government-funding cuts could prove devastating. Still, double-digit earnings growth is nothing to sneeze at. —Barron's (2/9/2011)

Although rider fares do not even come close to covering costs, they are nothing to sneeze at. —The Washington Post (3/2/2011)

Pressure in the Earth surely isn't anything to sneeze at. That's perhaps one of the lessons of the oil spill caused by the Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico... —San Angelo Standard-Times (2/11/2012)

"Superman just conquered the weekend box office with $125 million in U.S. sales, nothing to sneeze at." —Don Lemon, television news anchor (6/17/2013)

Nothing to sneeze at means not to be disregarded or downplayed or minimized. Variations using **anything** have the same meaning, as in the San Angelo Standard-Times example.

In the 1700's, men in high social circles would sneeze to show their disapproval of something. By

the beginning of the 1800's, "sneeze at" came to mean "regard something as having little value." Things to be taken seriously were not to be sneezed at.

nothing to write home about, something to write home about

"We're sort of back to where we were at the beginning of the year, which is, you know, moderate slow growth, nothing to write home about, but not a recession." —Jim Zarroli, radio journalist (11/4/2011)

"It's now been 35 straight months above eight percent, and by the way, eight percent is nothing to write home about. That's an exceptionally high level of unemployment." —Mitt Romney, campaigning to be elected President (1/7/2012)

"Sorry to say I don't really party anymore...Now I have kids and I've mellowed with age. I still have the powers of rock deep within my soul, and I enjoy a party, but nothing to write home about." —Jack Black, actor (5/27/2012)

"Test Scores in New York City Are Nothing to Write Home About" —headline, Mother Jones magazine (8/5/2013)

"That gave pencil manufacturers something to write home about on March 30—National Pencil Day. —Ned Smith, writing in TechNewsDaily(3/31/2012)

Nothing to write home about means not important, significant or interesting; or, not something to be proud of.

The expression is usually negative. A variation, "not something to write home about," has the same meaning but lets people use two words instead of one. When used in the positive, as in the Ned Smith example, the phrase is often a play on words, when the subject involves writing.

Printed examples of nothing to write home about have been found from as early as the mid-1800's.

odds and ends

They started out buying cheap toys, hosiery and other odds and ends in downtown Los Angeles and reselling the goods at swap meets and flea markets. —Los Angeles Times (10/30/2011)

Evans started gathering together odds and ends that evoke the spirit of the fair—things like popcorn, simple carnival games and funny sunglasses. —Associated Press (10/14/2011)

During the mission the shuttle crew installed a large cargo container -- nicknamed Leonardo -- which will give the station a place to store odds and ends and remove some of the clutter from its laboratories. —Houston Chronicle (3/4/2011)

Odds and ends are miscellaneous things: of different kinds or from different places, or parts of what used to be a set.

Examples of odds and ends have been found from as early as the 1740's. It may have come from "odd ends," an earlier expression with similar meaning.

of course

"Of course some suspicions linger, and some differences persist, which is only natural. Of course

we have a great deal more work to do." —William J. Burns, deputy secretary of state (10/26/2012)

"Of course, change of this magnitude does not come easily." —President Barack Obama (5/19/2011)

"It is, of course, a constitutional requirement that the President be sworn in on January 20th." —Soledad O'Brien, television news anchor (1/21/2013)

"But, of course the NRA is a very strong lobby and, I think the issue here is, who is going to represent the voices of the American people in this debate?" —Neera Tanden, Center for American Progress (1/13/2013)

"One way is to change the availability of problem food and that's what I'm talking about. But will that fix everything? Will that fix a one-parent household on food stamps having to feed seven kids? No, of course not. That's a disaster." —Dr. Robert Lustig (1/17/2013)

In the Burns and Obama quotations, **of course** means naturally: "as you would expect."

In the O'Brien and Tanden quotations, of course means obviously, or "as you probably know already." This meaning is often used by broadcast commentators.

When answering a question, of course means yes, without hesitation or doubt. The phrase conveys emphasis and certainty, as does its opposite, **of course not**, as in the Lustig example.

off one's rocker

"It's emotionally stressful," she said. "Just extremely stressful. He's your dad. Sometimes, he's pretty much the way he used to be. And some days he's completely off his rocker." —Sacramento Bee (7/22/2011)

"Don't think that I've gone off my rocker, because I haven't," he [George Harrison] wrote to his mother Louise during the Beatles' 1968 transcendental-meditation trip. —TIME (10/5/2011)

"I would like to think he just went off his rocker because of the war," Cinkovich said. —Associated Press (3/16/2012)

Someone who is **off his rocker** is behaving in a crazy, irrational way.

American English has many informal phrases that mean a person is crazy, eccentric or mentally deficient. For example, it may be said that a person:

has **lost his marbles** or **does not have all his marbles**
is **a few bricks short of a full load**
is **a few beers short of a six-pack**
is **nutty as a fruitcake**
is **not playing with a full deck**
has **bats in his belfry** or has **bats in the belfry**

Those are among the most common, and there are other expressions with similar meaning.

Off one's rocker appeared in an 1890 dictionary of English and American slang, but my searches found no printed examples before the 1900's.

off the record

None of the accused teachers contacted by The Times were willing to be identified...But in off-the-record comments or reports filed with school districts, the accused have spoken of their motivations, their errors or their innocence. —Los Angeles Times (11/6/2011)

"We've spent over a year with some sources trying to get them to go on the record with us, because if they're off the record, all that does is help us understand what happened, but we can't use anything from a confidential source to support a charge," Lach said. —The Miami Herald (11/2/2011)

"The Justice Department wants these meetings to be off the record. Several media organizations...have said, if it's not on the record, we don't want to do it." —Phil Mattingly, reporter for Bloomberg News (5/30/2013)

In these contexts, **off-the-record** means in private, not part of an official record, or not for publication or broadcast.

The phrase was used in reference to legal proceedings, meaning not part of the legal record, apparently from the early 1900's. By the 1930's it was used in other contexts. From a book published in 1932:

...for each dollar of war debts we forgive our debtors they will forgive Germany 66 2/3 cents. How that interesting division was arrived at or what bargains off the record underlie this one, we do not know. —"A Bubble That Broke the World" by Garet Garrett (June, 1932)

off to the races

Foreclosures statewide came to a near halt during the early part of 2011, but that doesn't mean the housing market, or South Florida's economy, is off to the races. —Palm Beach Post (4/14/2011)

Just take the ring to a reputable jeweler for appraisal, and you're off to the races. —The New York Times (11/25/2011)

The drop surprised some market participants who figured stocks would be off to the races... —The Wall Street Journal (1/26/2012)

Off to the races means having a strong start, moving ahead quickly. It can also mean, "Let's go!" or "There they go!"

The origin of the expression, which has been in use at least since 1950, is unknown.

In 1984, Vice President George H.W. Bush was asked whether he had any differences with President Reagan about plans for new taxes. He did not want to answer, and he ended the questioning with this: "No more nit-picking. It's Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, off to the races."

old hat

Directories began to seem old hat: Why bother compiling lists of lawyers in New Hampshire or plumbers in Nashua when a Web search might find them? —Nashua Telegraph (12/11/2011)

An all-male jury was old hat, and Mr. Berger said using all women went too far the other way. —Chicago Tribune (12/7/2011)

But the innovations of Daly and his imitators soon became old hat, as innovations will. —Los Angeles Times (11/1/2011)

When not referring to something worn on the head, **old hat** means out of date; no longer in fashion.

The origin is unknown. An older, vulgar meaning of the phrase is no longer used and seems unrelated. An early example of old hat in its current meaning:

Do you believe, for example, that an unchristened infant goes wailing forth from the threshold of life into an eternity of punishment? ...Nobody does. And the difference is not that religion has ceased to teach it—for it hasn't—but that men have grown decent and put it, with like doctrines, silently aside in disgust. So it has happened to Satan and his fork: they have become 'old hat.' —"Brother Copas" by Arthur Quiller-Couch (1911)

on a roll

"Downtown Buffalo is on a roll. We have some great restoration going on," McCartney said during a news conference Wednesday. —Buffalo News (8/24/2011)

Last year, at this time Caroline Wozniacki cruised into New Haven on a roll. She had just won the Rogers Cup in Toronto, was No. 2 in the WTA rankings (on her way to No. 1) and poised to make a serious run at the U.S. Open title. —Hartford Courant (8/24/2011)

Actor Deepika Padukone is on a roll with two back-to-back super hits this year. —New York Daily News (8/31/2013) (see also, **back-to-back**)

Someone who says you are **on a roll** does not mean you are like a hamburger. On a roll means having a series of successes. You are doing very well.

Roll can have many meanings. In these examples it means move with momentum, like a rolling log. A related expression, **let's roll**, means let's get started. Context tells us whether the meaning of on a roll is literal: a hamburger on a roll and images on a roll of film are unrelated to movement or success.

The earliest example of the figurative use of on a roll in my searches was published in 1963:

Domestic automakers announced eight straight periods of sales increases—including a 6 percent improvement during the first 10 days of May. "We're on a roll," a Chrysler vice president said Friday. —United Press International (5/10/1963)

on all cylinders

"It is fair to say that Chrysler is firing on all cylinders. I really have no bad news to tell you." —Sergio Marchionne, chief executive of Fiat and Chrysler (4/26/2012)

I believe that if we're serious about meeting our energy challenge, we need to operate on all cylinders, and that means pursuing a broad range of energy policies, including safe and responsible oil production here at home. —President Barack Obama's weekly address (4/30/2011)

Downton Abbey is firing on all cylinders. It is so deeply satisfying, in the way that cheesecake is so deeply satisfying. —TIME (2/13/2012)

"Taylor Swift definitely has a high-production value show with sponsors' messages, lots of merchandising. It's definitely a high-gear, firing-on-all-cylinders global tour." —James Taylor (April, 2012)

An engine cannot produce as much power as it should if not all of its cylinders are working. Firing

(or operating, working, etc.) **on all cylinders** means using all resources, doing as well as possible.

On all cylinders has been used as a metaphor since the first half of the 1900's. An early example is in a magazine about chickens:

The John C. Cox pen at the Selma egg laying contest is still hitting on all cylinders... —National Barred Rock Journal (10/20/1929)

on cloud nine

Albert Santalo, CEO of Miami-based CareCloud, is practically on cloud nine as his company tripled its number of employees and posted rapid revenue growth. —South Florida Business Journal (9/9/2011)

"I was floating on cloud nine. To play with that caliber of musicians, it really opened my eyes and made my play better." —Chicago Sun-Times (8/25/2011)

"The night I won, I was on cloud nine..." —Cindy Wood, who won a beauty contest and was named Ms. Senior Georgia (8/31/2013)

To be **on cloud nine** is to be euphoric; blissful; extremely happy.

The origin is unknown. In the mid-1900's, when the earliest examples of cloud nine are found, its meaning was different: slightly disoriented, not clear-thinking. In this example, the glamorous actress Marilyn Maxwell was talking about her date with Cary Grant:

"He was the soul of thoughtfulness, doing things a girl loves like sending flowers the morning after a date. But his head was in the middle of Cloud Nine. He met Betsy Drake afterward and maybe he'll come down to earth. I wouldn't know." —The Ottawa Citizen (10/28/1949)

on cue

"Right on cue. Right at this time of year they show up," he said. —Newsday (6/2/2011)

Right on cue, camp guides rally the group to finish up and head to the park's Lower Falls area. —Austin American-Statesman (2/10/2012)

"There's not a weekend that there aren't people driving by," Mr. Jaworski said as a car slowly rolled by, as if on cue. —The New York Times 2/4/2012)

A cue in a play tells someone when to do something or speak. If something happens **on cue**, it happens when it should, or when it is expected.

In the Newsday example, sharks were seen near a beach, and an expert said their appearance was not a surprise.

Examples of cue used with similar meaning have been found as early as the 1500's, but the earliest examples I found of right on cue, meaning exactly at the appropriate or expected time, are from the 1950's.

on its face, in and of itself

"Versus an adjustable rate mortgage, the interest rate you're going to get on that is significantly less. It's 3.41 percent. So, the fixed rate is looking, on its face, more expensive than the adjustable

rate." —CBS News (3/24/2011)

"On its face, it would look like a case that...the government would seriously consider and maybe ultimately recommend the death penalty." —David Kelley, former U.S. attorney, talking about the Boston Marathon bombing (5/2/2013)

On its face, the premise of the play is simple... —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (2/3/2012)

"...it is the Afghans themselves, and the Afghan women, and Afghan men who are going to have to ensure the progress that has been made. Military presence doesn't ensure the rights of women in and of itself." —United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice (4/5/2013)

"Syria isn't the crisis in and of itself, but if we do take military action, there could be repercussions that will hurt us. You never know, with military action, the kind of consequences you'll see. It's always very risky." —John Carey, an investment manager in Boston (8/30/2013)

On its face means on the surface; without considering more information. It is a figurative use of one of the meanings of face: the part that can be seen, such as the face of a watch.

In and of itself is similar. It means without considering other facts. Shorter phrases, **in itself** and **by itself**, often have the same meaning.

Early examples:

Besides, the greatest part of that pretended history appears, on the face of it, to be a mere romance... —"Modern History" by Thomas Salmon (London, 1746)

...invented by the mere arbitrary Will and Pleasure of Men, and imposed upon Others, as in and of itself necessary... —"Popery Truly Stated and Briefly Confuted" by Joseph Trapp (London, 1727)

See also, at face value.

on one's plate

This silliness ends now because it is distracting him from all those important things he has on his plate. —The Morning Call (5/3/2011)

"If you take a look at what's on her plate as compared with what's on the plates of previous secretary of states -- there's more going on now at this particular moment, and it's like playing sports with a bunch of amateurs," he said. —New York Post (3/18/2011)

He turned aside a question whether he expected to serve a second term at the helm of Treasury if President Obama is re-elected in 2012. "I've got a lot on my plate. I enjoy these challenges, I believe in them," Geithner replied. —Reuters (4/17/2011)

"Exxon Mobil...over the next five years expects to spend $185 billion pursuing the development of oil and gas that will meet part of the needs of the world and that keeps us plenty busy. So we have a lot on our plate and so we are really not looking at changing our business model in any way." —William Colton, Exxon Mobil vice president for corporate strategic planning (12/11/2012)

On his plate means on his list of things to do.

"A lot" and "too much" often go before this phrase.

The origin is unknown. There are other metaphors based on eating, such as **all you can eat** and **hard to swallow**. Why a lot on one's plate means having a lot to do and not, say, fortunate or greedy, is unexplained.

Examples have been found from as early as 1928; it became widespread in the later 1900's.

on one's watch, under one's watch

"...we need to intercede to make sure that a disaster doesn't happen on our watch as has happened in the past when the international community stood idly by." —President Barack Obama (3/23/2011)

"On my watch, we fought hard and prevented Massachusetts from becoming the Las Vegas of gay marriage." —Mitt Romney, campaigning for President (2/10/2012)

"Speaking as a grandparent, about the worst thing that could happen is one of your grandchildren getting hurt on your watch, and trying to communicate that to your children," —USA Today (7/18/2011)

"He [Obama] got those things -- the health care bill, for example, and stimulus, and things keep getting worse under his watch. He is accountable for that. —Senator Marco Rubio (5/6/2012)

"Nearly every single one of them has gotten a makeover under his watch." —Dan Simon, television news correspondent, referring to Apple's products and Tim Cook, Apple's chief executive officer (1/29/2013)

If something happens **on your watch** or **under your watch**, it happens when you are on duty and have responsibility.

In the Obama speech example, the President meant that if a disaster happened we would share responsibility for it.

The phrase originated with ships that assigned their crews to 12-hour watches. Its earliest form was "on the watch." An early example:

I resolved, if possible, to get one of those savages into my hands...so I resolved to put myself upon the watch, to see them when they came on shore. —"Robinson Crusoe" by Daniel Defoe (1719)

on the ball

We need to get on the ball and to do our best to purchase right and feed ourselves right. —Houston Chronicle (11/2/2011)

As part of the same push to prove she's on the ball, [Long Island Rail Road President] Williams also unveiled an eight-point pledge to LIRR customers. —New York Daily News (10/27/2011)

She recently graduated from Harvard and she must have a lot on the ball because she won a coveted internship at the White House. —Sun Sentinel (1/27/2011)

To be **on the ball**, or have a lot **on the ball** means to be skillful, competent or engaged in successful activity.

In baseball, where the phrase most likely originated, having something or a lot on the ball means pitching the ball in a way that makes it hard to hit.

An early example of the phrase used figuratively is in a 1919 magazine:

...she was O.K. too, had a lot on the ball for looks, style and disposition, but when Steve got home after his graduation he found she'd been married a month. —"Treasure Trove" by Ronald A. Davidson, in The Overland Monthly (July, 1919)

on the bubble

It's not surprising that the shows with the most devoted, savviest online audiences are the ones that are sometimes on the bubble of network acceptance... —The New York Times (12/9/2011)

The blastoff of the space shuttle Atlantis, the last launch planned in America's manned shuttle program, is on the bubble. NASA on Wednesday put the chance of a Friday launch from Florida's Kennedy Space Center at just 30%, blaming a possible delay on forecast storms and rain. —Los Angeles Times (7/6/2011)

There were an additional 140 or so stores "on the bubble" of being viable, said Borders spokeswoman Rosalind Thompson, at the company's Ann Arbor, Mich., headquarters. —Contra Costa Times (3/17/2011)

On the bubble means on (or near) the line between two outcomes—often, between successful and unsuccessful, such as being chosen or not chosen.

The expression comes from another expression, **burst one's bubble** (disappoint someone), and was first used in car racing. A 1961 article about the Indianapolis 500 race explains the origin:

A qualified car can be eliminated by a better subsequent performance...In racing parlance, the qualified driver with the lowest speed is "sitting on the bubble"—waiting for it to burst when somebody turns in a better 10-mile run. —Associated Press (5/19/1961)

on the heels of, hot on the heels

Shares in Wells Fargo & Company and Fifth Third Bancorp rose more than 1 percent, on the heels of a rally by European lenders. —Bloomberg News (9/13/2011)

"It would represent the latest and most egregious violation of Lebanon's sovereignty, coming just on the heels of the regime's March rocket attacks into border areas of al-Qasr, Wadi Al- Khayel." —Victoria Nuland, State Department spokesperson, after a Syrian jet fired a missile into a house in Lebanon (4/3/2013)

Then he walked out of the room and toward the media center, with the news crews hot on his heels. It was there that he addressed the world, announcing that the U.S. was under attack. —WWSB-TV (Sarasota, Fla., 9/9/2011)

Hot on the heels of the Democratic loss of the congressional seat in New York's heavily Jewish 9th district, comes a new poll from Gallup showing President Obama's approval rating heading south among American Jews. —Commentary (9/16/2011)

On the heels of means soon after or following closely. The phrase alludes to walking closely behind someone. If you follow very closely, you may step on the person's heels.

Hot on the heels of or **hot on one's heels** means in close pursuit of someone or something. However, the phrase is often used with the same meaning as **on the heels**, attempting to add emphasis, as in the Commentary example.

Hot on the heels has been traced to the 1800's. On the heels of has been used at least since the 1600's. From Samuel Carrington's 1659 history of Oliver Cromwell: "On the one side, General Cromwells Army marched on the Heels of the Scots to their Terrour..."

on the make

In Mamet's cutthroat universe, everyone is a hustler on the make. —San Jose Mercury-News (10/28/2011)

The deteriorating condition of the rural poor and urban workers go largely unreported in the business press in both India and China, which specialize in adoring accounts of successful or on-the-make corporate moguls. —Bloomberg News (10/24/2011)

Justine Campbell, 23, an Internet marketing specialist from White Plains, N.Y., sometimes sends texts in which she fibs in order to weed out the guys who are just on the make. —The Wall Street Journal (11/1/2011)

On the make means seeking advantage or trying to get something.

It is often, but not always, negative. In the Mercury-News example, a hustler on the make is a criminal or cheater, trying to take advantage of someone to make money. In the Journal example, the guys on the make just want sex. In the Bloomberg News example, on-the-make moguls (rich business owners) are trying to enlarge their holdings and wealth.

The earliest printed examples of on the make are from the 1860's. I could find no explanation for its origin.

on the money

Back in 2003, Buffett shrewdly called derivatives "financial weapons of mass destruction." Warren Buffett also wisely predicted a huge bubble forming in residential real estate back in 2005. Both of those calls were on the money... —Investopedia (8/4/2011)

I'm more interested in two of Palin's bigger points, one of which is disingenuous, the other right on the money. —Los Angeles Times (1/30/2012)

On the money means accurate. In the Investopedia example, Buffett's two statements were correct.

On the money is most frequently used in its literal sense, as in, "You will not owe income tax on the money you inherit."

The use of on the money referring to things other than money began around the 1940's. One theory of its origin is that it refers to bets on horse racing, which makes sense for another phrase, "in the money," but is questionable for this expression. Another is that it refers to a surveying technique in which a shiny coin was used and an accurate measurement was "on the money." I have found no conclusive evidence in support of either explanation.

on the other hand

Generating that much hot water with a gas heater would cost about $266. A solar water heater operating at optimal efficiency, on the other hand, might eliminate the bill entirely. —Slate (2/1/2011)

"It's bold on the one hand and on the other hand how are you going to do it?" a Security Council diplomat asked. "We don't have details yet." —The Wall Street Journal (2/13/2012)

The new study's encouraging results seem to confirm the findings of another small study of heart stem cells...On the other hand, a third study found no benefit from stem cells created from patients' own bone marrow. —USA Today (2/13/2012)

"He was able to speak for folks that hadn't been respected in Venezuela before. On the other hand, there's the autocratic leadership." —Carl Meacham, director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, after the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (3/5/2013)

"So on the one hand, you hear people say, 'Oh, we've disrupted 50 terrorist plots,' and on the other hand Boston happens. We were warned about this person twice, and yet somehow that occurred." —Carly Fiorina, television commentator, talking about government tracking of phone and Internet data (6/23/2013)

On the other hand usually has the same meaning as "however": looking at something in a contrasting way, or taking an opposite view.

Sometimes it is paired with **on the one hand** to express opposing or contrasting ideas, as in the Wall Street Journal example and Carly Fiorina quotation.

Because economists used the phrase to be cautious in their predictions ("On the one hand, the economy may improve, but on the other hand, it may not.") President Harry S Truman said he wanted to find a one-handed economist.

Versions of the expression have been found from as early as the 1600's.

on the radar, under the radar

Before Fernando filed for asylum, he was not on the radar of immigration authorities. —Des Moines Register (9/12/2011)

"If he wasn't charged with anything sexually related, they probably wouldn't have done a sex offender assessment," Kennedy said. "It wouldn't have been on their radar." —Las Vegas Review-Journal (9/9/2011)

Drug dealers, pimps and gun-toting thugs are using rental cars to fly under the radar—and sometimes escape their crimes—prompting one Boston lawmaker to call on companies to regularly report drivers' names to authorities. —Boston Herald (9/13/2011)

Although nominated for a Tony back in 1996 for his lead role in a revival of Philip Barry's "Holiday," Rogers has remained curiously below the radar for the wider public. —Los Angeles Times (9/11/2011)

"If you really have somebody that's determined to stay under the radar until the very last minute and launch the attack, this is the biggest challenge for law enforcement." —Don Borelli, an expert on terrorism, talking about bombings at the Boston Marathon (4/16/2013)

If you are **on someone's radar**, they are aware of you or your location. **Off the radar** is the

opposite: you are not visible, or they are not aware of you. If you are doing something **below** or **under someone's radar**, you are doing it in a way that will not get their attention, or will not be detected. Sometimes under or below the radar means little noticed or publicized, as in the Los Angeles Times example.

Many phrases use radar as a metaphor for the electronic systems that find objects and calculate their location or motion. The technology was first used in the early 1900's, but the word radar was invented in 1940, from the phrase "radio detection and ranging."

on the right foot, on the wrong foot

Gov. Bill Haslam is starting on the right foot, working with his Democratic predecessor to shape his first state budget. —Paris, Tenn., Post-Intelligencer (3/15/2011)

"I started off on the wrong foot, with no sleep," Anderson said, noting she slept just three hours the night before her journey and four hours the first four days on the trail.—Nelson County, Va., Times (3/16/2011)

Hedge funds started the year on the right foot, with a 2.63% gain in January... —Dow Jones Newswires (2/7/2011)

Human rights activists have warned that the new Libya could get off on the wrong foot if vigilante justice is condoned. —Associated Press (10/25/2011)

Start, start off, or get off **on the right foot** means have a good beginning. **On the wrong foot**, a bad beginning.

Phrases associated with right or wrong feet have a long history but the origin is unknown. An obsolete expression, "walk on the right foot"—remain true or faithful—has roots in ancient Greek. "Put down the wrong foot" meant make a mistake.

Early examples of the modern expressions:

It appeared to him that the Senate was about to step off on the wrong foot when the bill was introduced. —The Congressional Globe (1/24/1844)

"Well begun is half done." "A good beginning makes a good ending." "To start well is to run well." These are popular sayings that emphasize the importance of starting off on the right foot in any sort of undertaking. —Indiana School Journal (September, 1885)

on the same page

Writing down the agenda and circulating it helps keep everyone on the same page. —The Wall Street Journal (1/13/2012)

"I've seen marriages break up over this because the partners were not on the same page." —Amy Schoen, a life coach in Rockville, Md., quoted by The New York Times (2/10/2012)

"I think Occupy Wall Street's agenda and the agenda of my campaign have really been pretty much on the same page." —Jill Stein, Green Party presidential candidate (10/24/2012)

"...when it comes to the main issues, either ideologically or politically, Pope Francis and Pope Benedict would be on the same page. The difference more has to do with priorities and style." —John Allen, journalist and author of books about the Catholic Church (3/13/2013)

On the same page means cooperating, working together, or in agreement.

The phrase is also used frequently in sports, referring to team members playing well together (or not).

On the same page is a metaphor for coordinated activities such as people looking at the same page of a hymn book when singing in church. Its use developed in the late 1900's, but related expressions come from the 1800's and early 1900's: "singing the same tune" and "singing from the same hymn sheet."

on the spot, Johnny on the spot

But they did put Rick Perry, the race's most prominent anti-science candidate, on the spot over his insistence that man-made climate change was merely a hoax. —New York Magazine (9/8/2011)

A job fair promising to hire dozens of workers "on the spot" today attracted more than 30 hopefuls in the first hour, and many more are expected throughout the day. —Downers Grove, Illinois, Reporter (9/8/2011)

"We want him to be questioned. We want him to be put on the spot...And that's what a trial allows a society to do." —Leon Nekfakh, journalist, talking about the accused Boston Marathon bomber (5/8/2013)

Treynor volleyball coach Janet Fiene said Floerchinger had the perfect personality to handle all of her responsibilities. "She is so meticulous about being organized, being Johnny-on-the-spot with things," she said. —The Daily Nonpareil (Council Bluffs, Iowa, 8/28/2011)

"You don't appreciate these guys until you need them. They were Johnny-on-the-spot." —Don Reynolds, a farmer in Columbia County, Georgia, talking about firefighters who saved his barn (7/15/2013)

If you put someone **on the spot**, you create a difficult or embarrassing situation for that person. Reporters put Texas Governor Rick Perry was on the spot by asking him questions that might force him to give embarrassing answers.

If you are hired on the spot, you are hired immediately. Doing something on the spot means doing it before leaving that place, usually making a quick decision or action.

If you are a **Johnny on the spot**, you are perfect for the task, ready to do something that is needed and appreciated.

On the spot referring to immediate action has been traced to the 1600's, but putting someone on the spot apparently began in the early 1900's. Johnny on the spot is an American invention, sometime during the 1890's; its precise origin is unexplained.

on the table, off the table

"I think the military option has to be on the table, and both candidates have said that." —Senator Marco Rubio (10/21/2012)

"The Ryan budget...ends up giving a tax break to the wealthiest people in America of $150,000 a year. Governor Kasich, we can't do that. We have got to use that money to reduce the deficit. We've got to cut spending and put everything on the table." —Senator Dick Durbin (4/8/2012)

...the contract offer now on the table: a 1 percent increase in base salaries each of the next three years, a 15 percent contribution by teachers for health insurance, no retroactive pay, and elimination of the early-retirement incentive. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (2/6/2012)

"The President made clear just yesterday that all options are on the table when it comes to his policy actions with regard to Syria." —Jay Carney, President Barack Obama's press secretary (5/1/2013)

The deal...would take the payroll tax fight...off the table for the fall election campaign. "The mood is to get it off the table," freshman Rep. Dennis Ross, R-Fla., said. "We've got to move on to another issue." —Associated Press (2/14/2012)

"As you all know, President Obama has made it clear, very clear, that our policy is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and he's taken no option off the table to ensure that outcome." —Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel (5/9/2013)

If you are negotiating and put something **on the table**, you want to discuss it. Taking it **off the table** means you are refusing to discuss it. The statement by Senator Durbin, a Democrat, meant that all methods of reducing the deficit should be actively considered, including methods that Republicans opposed.

In similar contexts, on the table means actively considered or negotiated.

This can be confusing because table can also be a verb meaning remove from consideration ("The City Council tabled the resolution.")

From the 1600's, "lay upon the table" referred to formal action in the British House of Commons. Versions of on the table referring to other negotiations have been in use since the 1800's.

A phrase that includes the same words but has a different meaning is put one's cards on the table.

on the warpath

So how does [Charlie] Sheen merit a service usually reserved for heads of state? Burton's on the warpath, trying to find out. The department's IA division is investigating. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (4/26/2011)

"If they strike down the law, Obama is going to be on the warpath," Powe said. —Bloomberg News (10/3/2011)

An exterminator went on the warpath against bedbugs in the Trott Access Center on Thursday night, trying to kill the bugs in several first-floor areas of the Niagara County office building. —The Buffalo News (8/2/2013)

On the warpath usually means angry and seeking a confrontation. In the Buffalo News example it means "went to war."

The first mentions of war path, in the 1700's, refer to the routes American Indians used on their way to battles. The use of on the warpath as a metaphor for Indian warfare has been traced to the 1800's.

one fell swoop

"The German government has made it clear that the European crisis will not be solved in one fell

swoop," Merkel told Parliament in Berlin. "It's a process, and that process will take years." —The Washington Post (12/2/2011)

...he expects to buy the entire property in one fell swoop... —New York Post (12/2/2011)

"In one fell swoop this puts the Met at the forefront of early-20th-century art." —Thomas P. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, talking about Leonard A. Lauder's gift of art works worth $1 billion (4/9/2013)

In **one fell swoop** means all at one time, the result of a single action. It has the same meaning when it follows the prepositions at or with.

The phrase began as a metaphor for a bird of prey diving and seizing its food—"at one swoop."

Shakespeare added fell, meaning fierce, in MacBeth (1605). After Ross tells MacDuff: "Your castle is surprised; your wife, and babes, savagely slaughtered," MacDuff's anguished response mentions a hell-kite, meaning a bird of prey from hell:

> All my pretty ones?
> Did you say, all? O, hell-kite!...All?
> What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam,
> At one fell swoop?

one size fits all

Rep. Paul Ryan's proposal to transform Medicare from a "one size fits all" program into a "consumer-choice" system, in which multiple sellers compete to offer buyers better value, is much closer to my original concept of a health insurance exchange. —USA Today (4/10/2011)

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ... said America strongly supports democratization in the region, but rejected what she called a "one size fits all" approach. —Voice of America (4/15/2011)

If more candidates would customize their resumés to the needs of the position, they would get more interviews. Too often candidates make a one-size-fits-all generic resumé. —The Orange County Register (2/14/2012)

"Ladies and gentlemen, there's no national one size fits all solution to protecting our children." —Wayne LaPierre, vice president of the National Rifle Association (12/21/2012)

One size fits all is a familiar phrase used in selling clothing and other goods. As a metaphor, it means one thing serving multiple purposes.

In the USA Today example it refers to one medical insurance program for everyone. The Voice of America example is about making U.S. policy the same for every country. In the Orange County register example, it means the identical resumé sent to every prospective employer.

The phrase was used in advertising from the beginning of the 1900's. It has been used as a metaphor at least since the 1970's. An early example:

Are you tired of one-size-fits-all diets that tell you what to eat and when—whether you want them to or not? —The Toledo Blade (1/2/1979)

open season

Since Secure Communities was introduced, several states have declared open season on illegal immigrants. —Newsday (6/23/2011)

He said that violence by authorities against youths seemed to be reaching a crescendo, referencing the beating of another Bronx teen recently caught on tape. "It appears to be open season on minority teens," he said. —New York Post (2/4/2011)

Sanfilippo and other Diamond rivals have been trying to increase their share of the California walnut market..."It's open season right now," said Don Barton, president of GoldRiver Orchards in Oakdale, California, which buys and grows walnuts. "I know that we're heavily recruiting growers right now, and we're not the only ones." —Reuters (2/10/2012)

When used literally, open season refers to the period of time when hunting and fishing is allowed. When used as a metaphor, not referring to hunting or fishing, **open season** often has a negative meaning, suggesting that people are being treated like hunted animals. In the Newsday example, the writer means that some states aggressively looked for immigrants to be deported.

But the phrase is not always used in that disapproving way. In the Reuters example, the metaphor refers to searching for business partners, and means the search is active and unrestrained.

The earliest example I could find that is not related to hunting or fishing is in the June 28, 1870 issue of All the Year Round, a weekly publication owned and edited by Charles Dickens. It referred to "the present open season for military adventures."

out of context

Stephen Friedman, another Volt owner, said a member of GM's "Volt Advisor Team" said in an email that media reports quoting GM CEO Dan Akerson on the buyback offer were "out of context" and the company would decide "on a case by case basis" whether a buyback was warranted. —The Wall Street Journal (11/1/2011)

The ads differ sharply from Romney's first New Hampshire ad, which took a quote from Democratic President Barack Obama out of context, prompting sharp criticism from Democrats. —Associated Press (12/1/2011)

"Jennifer Carter says her teenaged son, Justin, has spent nearly five months behind bars for a sarcastic comment he made on Facebook, a comment she says was taken out of context." —Alina Machado, television news reporter (7/2/2013)

When a statement is quoted or taken **out of context**, it is repeated briefly or without enough detail, so that its original meaning cannot be understood.

An early example of the phrase is in a Boston scholarly journal from 1835:

Not having all the original authors at hand, and many of the passages quoted being taken out of context important to its illustration, I do not feel quite certain that I have in all cases given the exact shade of meaning as to every word... —The Biblical Repository and Quarterly Observer (January, 1835)

out of left field, out in left field

...for all the plausibility that Iran might be willing to blow up a Saudi ambassador, it's not at all apparent what they would gain from it. They've made serious, ideology-driven mistakes before—

as governments often do—but this plot comes so far out of left field that it should raise more questions than accusations. —The Atlantic (10/11/2011)

"(Karagodsky) was relaxed and easygoing but would then come out of left field with a random joke, and you would ask yourself, 'Where did this guy come from?'" —The Daily Californian (10/5/2011)

The inventor who gave the world the Segway - you know, that upright-riding, personal-transportation thing - is now seeking a patent for an inflatable wind turbine...Although obscure, this isn't a completely out-of-left-field idea. —Reuters (10/4/2011)

"I'm talking about the Alawi. They run everything and although you and I would call them Muslims, most orthodox Muslims think they're so weird they're kind of not. You know, they are as far out in left field as far as Islam is concerned as Mormons are to Christianity." —Toledo Blade (10/9/2011)

Something or someone that comes **out of left field** or is **out in left field** is strange, unexpected, crazy, or a combination of those adjectives.

Unlike many other idioms that come from baseball, this metaphor is not clear. Various theories have been suggested. The most entertaining theory is that a mental institution was located just beyond the left field wall of an old ballpark where the Chicago Cubs played. But the Cubs moved to what is now Wrigley Field in 1916.

A plausible explanation is that a runner between third base and home plate may be surprised by a ball thrown from left field. If the throw is from right field, the runner can see it coming. But from the 1920's, Major League teams had coaches behind third base to help runners. Examples of the phrases are not found until the 1940's, and were not common until the later 1900's.

An example from The Billboard weekly magazine in 1947 suggests that out of left field meant similar to out of nowhere—never imagined or heard of before:

Corey's reception was mixed. The customers yowled; the pros, on the other hand, apparently resented a comic who came out of left field without a name and got himself a Copa date. —The Billboard (2/8/1947)

out of line

Cassidy said he'd had some beers but wasn't drunk or out of line. —Associated Press (11/2/2011)

"The police were completely out of line," said protest leader Ray Lutz. "This insidious show of force has only energized our movement. —Los Angeles Times (10/28/2011)

Lindsay [Lohan]'s friend choices are questionable at best. "If someone disagrees with her, or tells her she's out of line, she cuts them dead," the acquaintance says. —New York Post (10/23/2011)

"I think that to beat up on this woman and to make judgments about whether she should or should not stay in her marriage is completely out of line. That is her decision to make..." —Danine Manette, an expert on marital infidelity, talking about Huma Abedin, wife of mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner (7/24/2013)

In these contexts, to be **out of line** is to behave badly or unacceptably.

Variations of this phrase, such as step out of line, meaning behave unexpectedly or unconventionally, were more frequent in the mid-1900's and may have led to the current use of out

of line.

An example of out of line meaning unacceptable behavior is in a 1966 news story about Frank Sinatra's involvement in a fight:

Sinatra said he was about to leave when Weisman approached and said, "You and your friends are loud mouthed..." I thought he was kidding," the singer said, "and then I realized he wasn't." He said he told Weisman: "You're out of line, buddy." —Associated Press (6/11/1966)

out of one's system

He said he may volunteer for Obama's reelection campaign but otherwise Penn seems to have worked public service out of his system.—(11/1/2011)

I told his mom, but she's ignoring the problem. She said: "He's just experimenting. I want him to get it out of his system before he enters college." —"Dear Abby", Universal Press Syndicate (10/6/2011)

"I went into business for myself and failed. I learned a lot. I got it out of my system. I have no plans to do it again." —Tribune Media Services (11/1/2011)

If you do something until it is **out of your system**, you no longer feel a need to do it.

The phrase alludes to a literal event such as getting caffeine or alcohol out of one's circulatory system.

The literal usage has been traced to the 1600's. Early figurative uses often criticized something by comparing it to a disease, as in this example from a monthly journal in 1852:

It seems to spoil a man to become a Mormon; even if he renounces it, he can never get it out of his system. —The Home Missionary (June, 1852)

out of the blue, bolt from the blue, lightning out of a clear sky

"I sympathize with Trayvon walking home, minding his own business, and then all of a sudden, out of the blue, you have someone there and then this incident occurs." —Congressman Cedric Richmond, referring to the killing of Trayvon Martin (7/21/2013)

The first iPad was a bolt from the blue, a device that defined an entire category... —Macworld (3/9/2011)

Thilo Mueller of MB Fund Advisory said there was no obvious news to send the market down so suddenly and that the drop came "like lightning out of a clear sky." —ABC News (8/25/2011)

Out of the blue, **a bolt from the blue**, and like **lightning out of a clear sky** all mean startling, unexpected or without warning. The first of the three expressions is the most frequently used.

An early example comes from Thomas Carlisle, writing in 1837 about the French Revolution: "...what, therefore, on the 15th day of March 1794, is this ? Arrestment, sudden really as a bolt out of the Blue, has hit strange victims... "

Ten years earlier, a more literal example was in the October, 1827 issue of Blackwood's Magazine: "I carry this umbrella as a thunder-screen to keep off any bolt out of the blue heaven."

out of the question

Many experts believe that with Congress deeply divided along partisan lines, reaching consensus on a thorough overhaul is out of the question. —The New York Times (9/13/2011)

But again what once would have seemed out of the question is reality: In the New York City area, the World Series cannot clearly be heard on AM or FM radio. —New York Post (10/24/2011)

Joe Biden for President in 2016? It's not out of the question. —New York Daily News (10/22/2011)

If something is **out of the question**, it is impossible or will not be considered.

Printed examples of this phrase have been found from as early as 1607.

out of the woods

Though Sony might have hoped it was out of the woods following the PlayStation Network breach, the company still faces attacks from hackers. —CNET (6/3/2011)

"The slow, steady and consistent improvement in the market continues to provide strong evidence that the New York City residential sales market has made it out of the woods and should only continue to improve." —Steven Spinola, president of the Real Estate Board of New York (10/11/2012)."

"To be sure, the housing sector is far from being out of the woods. Construction activity, sales, and prices remain much lower than they were before the crisis." —Ben Bernanke, chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve (11/15/2012)

But city officials warn that San Francisco is not out of the woods yet. The city is still facing a $229 million deficit for the fiscal year that starts July 1. —Associated Press (2/14/2012)

Many recurrences occur eight to 12 years after the initial diagnosis, when women think they are out of the woods. —Reuters (2/8/2012)

Out of the woods means no longer in trouble or difficulty.

The expression may be used in the negative, as in the Associated Press example.

Out of the woods is the opposite of "in a wood" (forest), a metaphor meaning in difficulty. That has been traced to the 1600's but is rare or nonexistent now.

out of the woodwork

Remember those painful weeks in 2009, when women were popping out of the woodwork and the golf bag to accuse Tiger Woods of all manner of illicit entanglements? —The Miami Herald (11/12/2011)

"Yes, by showing that you don't have to get $400,000 worth of funding behind you to get a brewery started. That somebody with a home-brewing background can actually make that work. I think that will help bring other people out of the woodwork." —Buffalo News (11/16/2011)

Businesses take their cues from the world's marketplace. They are unlikely to crawl out of the woodwork and increase risk until the international situation has calmed. —The Daily Beacon (11/16/2011)

"Everybody sort of coming out of the woodwork to say the things they're saying today makes me feel like we're actually doing pretty well here in Wisconsin." —Rick Santorum (4/1/2012)

"One of the many challenges for law enforcement as they try to retrace the steps of the Tsarnaev brothers is to assess all of the witness accounts that have been coming out of the woodwork." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor (4/25/2013)

Out of the woodwork means from obscure or unknown places.

When used after verbs like crawl or slither, the phrase has a negative connotation, suggesting insects or other unpleasant creatures in their hiding places. But it is often neutral or positive, as in the Buffalo News example.

The origin is unknown. The earliest example I found, from 1929, is a negative characterization but does not include any crawling or slithering. Nor do later examples from the 1930's.

This [Los Angeles] is the American paradise for the realtor...You meet him along the street, in public parks, the hotel lobby, and often he seems to pop out of the woodwork. —The Miami Daily News and Metropolis (7/25/1929)

out on a limb

"They don't want to go out on a limb given the economic backdrop which we have right now." —Michael Koskuba, a financial manager in New York, talking about Amazon's revenue predictions (10/21/2010)

"It is very typical of Toyota to not go out on a limb when it comes to styling. Styling is not the reason why people buy the car." —Michelle Krebs, an expert on the car industry (8/24/2011)

"I think my designs have an edge to them. You can wear my pieces and feel glamorous. I go out on a limb." —Lauren Craft, who sells jewelry to celebrities (3/27/2012)

"The high-speed-rail authority went way out on a limb, and now that limb has broken off." —Stuart Flashman, an attorney who won a court order against a new rail project in California (8/16/2013)

Out on limb means in a risky position; or stranded, like being on a tree branch and having no way to climb down the tree.

Printed examples of this phrase, used figuratively, have been found from as early as the 1890's.

outside the box

"We need to think outside the box, be creative and resourceful in improving our inner city." —Gloria Rodriguez, a candidate for San Antonio City Council (5/9/2011)

"I think we're all ultimately afraid of thinking outside the box...We still consider ideas that are very challenging to the norm to be very frightening." —Alexander Strain , actor (2/13/2012)

"...Be bold. Think outside the box. Take risks." —New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (2/11/2012)

"In 2008, John McCain's camp felt that while they were ahead after a better-than-expected summer, they needed to shake things up with an out-of-the-box pick. This thinking produced Sarah Palin." —Karl Rove, political columnist and former advisor to President George W. Bush (4/25/2012)

"I think it's something that we should consider, some kind of outside-the-box diplomacy." —Bill

Richardson, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, talking about relations with North Korea (3/12/2013)

If you think **outside the box**, you think creatively, without restricting your thoughts to the way things have been done before, or what people expect.

The phrase comes from the nine dots puzzle, which can be solved by drawing lines outside the box formed by the dots. A 1969 newspaper column by Norman Vincent Peale helped bring the puzzle to public attention. The expression has been used so much since the 1970's, especially in business, that some people consider it to be a cliché and avoid using it.

over a barrel

At the same time, college degrees have become increasingly necessary for people to pursue decent jobs. Colleges have students and parents over a barrel - and they know it. So they have raised prices without mercy. —New York Daily News (12/7/2011)

Republicans believe they have the president over a barrel. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (7/8/2011)

China, India and South Korea have set up bank accounts in their countries to pay Iran for oil. But Iran must spend that money there on goods and services it often doesn't need. It's unable to transfer the cash home. "These Asian countries have the Iranians both literally and figuratively over a barrel," said Dubowitz. "They're able to buy Iranian oil at a significant discount and they're paying in their local currency." —CBS News (4/20/2012)

If someone has you **over a barrel**, you are at a disadvantage, in a weaker position.

In the 1800's the phrase was used to describe people being placed over barrels to help them recover from drowning, or to receive punishment, but I have found no evidence that either of those was the origin of the current meaning.

The earliest examples in my searches are from 1900 and 1901, and the casual way they were used suggests that the phrase was known to American readers by then.

I was unhitching when Nolan came along, and I said to him, "Nolan, how are you making it?" "Oh, well," he says; "I've got them over a barrel." —Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections (1900)

"The way he looks I sees that I has him over a barrel an' I knows that he ain't game enough to put up a bluff." —The Horse Review (Chicago, April 2, 1901)

over the hill

Tony Sheldon plays the clear-headed but over-the-hill showgirl, Bernadette... —New York Daily News (3/21/2011)

If you don't know the latest software and other technologies, such as social media, that creates the perception that you're over the hill. —Newsday (11/22/2011)

Young people do care about feminism. It is not dead (or "over the hill" as your article put it) and is still very relevant. —USA Today (10/31/2011)

"I keep my ear fresh. I'm afraid of going over the hill." —Clive Davis, chief creative officer of

Sony Entertainment (3/29/2013)

Over the hill means aging, past one's prime of life. This expression usually refers to people who cannot do things as well as they could in the past. But it may also refer to things, such as a political movement, as in the USA Today example.

A related expression is **going downhill**, which can mean declining in condition or ability.

Examples of over the hill meaning past one's prime have been found from as early as 1950.

over the top

Schlesinger contends that problems with the new optical scan voting machines were severe enough to warrant a hand count that would reveal enough missed votes to put his candidate over the top. —Newsday (11/30/2010)

"To me, the best kind of Valentine's gift is giving someone their favorite things, not going over the top with something extravagant that is impractical and they might not even like." —Reuters (2/9/2012)

...the Grammys are always the craziest and most over-the-top of the big award shows... —New York Daily News (2/10/2012)

When not used literally, as in "looking over the top of his glasses," **over the top** may have different figurative meanings:

In the Newsday example, it means beyond a requirement or goal.

In the Reuters and New York Daily News examples, it means excessive or crazy.

In World War I, going over the top meant leaving the protection of a trench to begin an attack. Examples of the phrase in metaphors alluding to that grave risk have been found from as early as 1925.

pain in the ass, pain in the neck

And they are also a monumental pain in the ass. Because they rarely behave as expected. —Slate (12/10/2010)

If the consumer-review Web sites are any indication, the American consumer has become a pain in the neck. —The New York Times (12/17/2011)

"Between my student loans, working part-time, and going to school part-time, paying a lot for gas is kind of a pain in the butt." —Chicago Tribune (2/21/2012)

Their literal meanings are different but when used figuratively, **pain in the ass** and **pain in the neck** both refer to something that is repeatedly or persistently annoying.

Pain in the butt is a euphemism, which avoids ass, although that word has lost much of its vulgar taint.

Examples of pain in the neck have been found in print as early as 1911.

pan out

"We were thinking of doing theater, music, art, and dance, with a charter school, and that didn't really pan out." —The Philadelphia Inquirer (6/16/2011)

"It's the...[films] that sneak up on you that become the big hits, the expensive projects rarely pan out." —Variety (2/10/2011)

"We will see in a year or so how things will pan out." —Dow Jones Newswires (2/10/2012)

"I don't know how to not be a gangster...so I have applied that to every aspect of my life. I applied it to going to college: that didn't work, I got kicked out. I applied it to going into the military...It didn't pan out. I applied it to rap, and somehow it's working." —Freddie Gibbs, rap musician (7/17/2013)

Pan out usually means succeed or happen as planned. Sometimes it means happen or develop, as in the Dow Jones Newswires example.

The phrase comes from the 1800's, when gold miners dipped pans into streams and rivers, and hoped their dreams of wealth would pan out.

pants off

Forget for a moment who deserves to be crowned the bond king. For the past year and more, Jeffrey Gundlach has beaten the pants off Bill Gross. —Reuters (8/31/2011)

...praising a minor, secret vanity can charm the pants off a big shot. —The Wall Street Journal (11/21/2011)

The former child prostitute who claimed she was forced to engage in sexual activity with Lawrence Taylor wants payback—and now she's teaming up with Gloria Allred to sue the pants off the NFL Hall of Famer. —TMZ (11/28/2011)

At first the left thought it was only about Elizabeth Warren, the outspoken interim director who had...scared the pants off Wall Street. —TIME (12/6/2011)

"If I wanted to charm the pants off you, I could." —Actress Mila Kunis (10/6/2012)

The use of **pants off** in these contexts means that the action is complete or extreme.

It is an expression of emphasis: Something that **scares your pants off** is more frightening than something that simply scares you.

But the idea of pants flying off is comical, so the phrase almost always conveys lightness or humor. Beat the pants off may refer to bond fund managers competing (as in the Reuters example), or to a decisive victory in sports, but it would not be used in a report about a serious crime that involved a beating.

The earliest example I have found is in a book of humorous songs published in 1881:

> I'm the man who took a car,
> And walked across the sea,
> I kicked the pants off Gladstone
> To set old Ireland free.

—"Maloney Is the Man / Billy Burke's Barnum and Great London Circus Songster" (New York, 1881)

paper over

Rice tried to paper over fundamental policy differences and once "tearfully" apologized to Cheney for not taking his advice, Cheney says. —USA Today (8/31/2011)

Perry, in the meantime, tried to paper over remarks made last month during a debate on foreign policy in South Carolina where he said that every nation that received aid from the United States would have to start at "zero" and make a case for U.S. support, including Israel. On Wednesday, Perry said he would increase U.S. assistance to Israel, not reduce it. —Los Angeles Times (12/8/2011)

Declaring 2012 a year of "India-China Friendship" cannot paper over an unresolved border dispute, Beijing's role as a supplier of weapons technology to Pakistan, or the stark imbalance of trade that threatens India's domestic manufacturing base. —The New York Times (3/26/2012)

"...whether that was something that they were trying to paper over or whether it was just confusion given the uncertain intelligence reports, time will tell." —Mitt Romney, referring to U.S. response to the attack on a consulate in Libya (9/28/2012)

Paper over means hide a flaw or problem, as wallpaper hides a hole in a wall.

Examples of paper over not referring literally to paper have been found from as early as 1910.

par for the course

It was par for the course from [Governor] Scott, who has taken his war on the federal government, and Obama in particular, from the campaign trail straight into the state's most powerful political office. —Miami Herald (2/17/2011)

Crystal has avoided interviews and pre-Oscar appearances...This is par for the course for Crystal..."Everything Billy does before the show is sort of shrouded in secrecy." —USA Today (2/21/2012)

"...that is par for the course. OSHA cuts fines about 60 percent of the time in these cases when workers die." —Howard Berkes, radio reporter, talking about accidents in grain storage facilities (3/26/2013)

Golfers try to get the ball in the hole with as few strokes (hits) as possible. Each hole is given a number, called par, and players try to keep their number of strokes at or below par. Outside of golf, **par for the course** means typical, or as expected.

A related expression is **up to par**.

An early example of par for the course used outside golf is in a publication for accountants:

A really useful system of accounts first should enable an executive to pre-determine what should be accomplished, or in golf language, should enable him to establish a "par" for the course. —Yearbook of the National Association of Cost Accountants (1921)

paradigm shift

In that time, I've seen a paradigm shift in the educational system from a truly developmental perspective to one that stresses greater competition and test-taking skills. —Los Angeles Times (4/17/2011)

A number of cities have been fostering more collaboration between traditional school districts and charters. A new report by the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education noted "a paradigm shift" taking hold in cities such as New York, Baltimore, Denver and Boston, "from two decades of animosity and winner-take-all competition toward strategic collaboration and partnership." —The Washington Post (2/5/2012)

On his website, Robinson describes himself as a savvy investor who's part of a "paradigm shift" in which people have taken over abandoned homes. —Associated Press (2/6/2012)

"The film promises to be a paradigm shifting experience..." —Tim Gorski, director of "How I Became an Elephant" (4/11/2012)

A paradigm is a model, or a typical example of something. A **paradigm shift** is a major change.

Beginning in the mid-1900's, the phrase was used in science and technology, and was extended to business and other fields in the late 1900's.

An early example:

The sorts of discoveries considered in the last section were not, at least singly, responsible for such paradigm shifts as the Copernican, Newtonian, chemical, and Einsteinian revolutions. —"The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" by Thomas S. Kuhn (1962)

See **game changer** and **sea change**.

parting shot

"There is no such thing in America as 99%," Gingrich shouted in a parting shot that drew applause from others. "We are 100% American." —USA Today (11/21/2011)

Perry offered a final parting shot. Asked by Ingraham to pledge that he would never vacation on Martha's Vineyard, Perry replied, "I'm not even sure where it is." Ingraham laughed and concluded, "That's good enough for me." —The Washington Post (8/25/2011)

Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered a sharp parting shot at European allies on Friday...In a final policy address before retiring at the end of the month, Gates said NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and Libya had exposed significant shortcomings in military capabilities and political will among the allies. —Reuters (6/10/2011)

"President Obama, on his way out the door for a vacation, delivers a parting shot at those Republicans who are threatening to defund Obamacare even at the cost of a government shutdown." —Chris Wallace, television news anchor (8/11/2013)

A **parting shot** may be a final remark in an argument (made as a person is leaving), or a final statement or joke in a performance, or an action at or near the end of an event (as in sports—"his ninth-inning home run was a parting shot").

The phrase alludes to weapons fired in battle. It may, or may not, be related to "Parthian shot," now seldom used, which had the same meaning. That was a reference to Parthian fighters shooting back at their pursuers during a retreat.

Both phrases have been traced to the early to mid-1800's.

pass the buck

If there is something in your community that needs to be addressed, do it. Don't wait. Don't whine. Don't complain. Don't pass the buck. —CNN (8/27/2011)

Although there are, no doubt, some good and principled members of Congress, mostly what the people who elect them see is a pass-the-buck mentality. —Jacksonville, N.C., Daily News (9/15/2011)

Residents of Palo Alto's Crescent Park neighborhood are lining up on both sides of a proposed temporary ban on overnight parking, with some arguing that it will only pass the buck and others maintaining it's better than nothing. —San Jose Mercury News (8/6/2013)

Pass the buck means shift responsibility to someone else. It is a negative expression, suggesting that the responsibility should not be avoided, but it did not originate that way.

In the 1800's, the person who dealt cards in a poker game passed a marker, called a buck, to next player, who would become the next dealer. In a way, this was passing responsibility, since the dealer had to distribute the cards fairly.

A book published by the Freemasons in 1874 contains an early example of the phrase used as a metaphor, not referring to poker: "We were called the Grand Chapter of numerous Convocations; now we will pass the buck."

The expression owes much of its later popularity to President Harry S Truman, who wrote in 1952: "When the decision is up before you—and on my desk I have a motto which says 'The buck stops here'—the decision has to be made."

pat on the back

...what veterans need more than a pat on the back is a chance to earn a living. —Times Herald Record (Middletown, N.Y., 11/2/2011)

Still, pro bono work gives staff attorneys a chance to handle challenging cases, gain trial experience, and pat themselves on the back for doing good while still earning handsome wages. —Fortune (11/28/2011)

Owner Steve Frey doesn't seek the pat on the back that a story like this one supplies. He wants to inspire other Central Texas businesses to give as well. —Austin American-Statesman (11/29/2011)

A **pat on the back** means praise.

A **pat on the head** can have the same meaning but usually is meant literally and applied to children and dogs.

A pat on the back usually has a positive connotation, as modest but pleasant praise. Sometimes it refers to modest praise that leaves the recipient disappointed, as in the Times Herald Record example.

Examples of pat on the back used figuratively have been found as early as the late 1800's.

pay the piper

The truly wealthy will continue to enjoy a free ride while the rest of us pay the piper. —Myrtle Beach Sun-News (4/29/2011)

"I wasn't smart enough to see any of this coming," he said of the epic collapse of the Nevada economy. "A lot of folks didn't think you'd ever have to pay the piper." —The New York Times (blog, 2/2/2012)

Former State Comptroller Alan Hevesi finally paid the piper yesterday, netting a one-to-four-year sentence for his craven pension-kickback scheme. —New York Post (4/16/2011)

Pay the piper means pay a debt or suffer the consequences of a past event.

It refers to the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Germany, which told of villagers who failed to pay what they had agreed to, and lost their children as a result.

The event that inspired Pied Piper stories is believed to have occurred in 1376, although not much else about it is known. The stories that led to the idiomatic phrase were written in the 1700's and 1800's.

pay the price, price to pay

Peter Fitzgerald paid the price. The Illinois Republican Party refused to endorse him for re-election... —Chicago Tribune (9/9/2011)

"Who would invest in North Korea, in a place that shows such flagrant disregard for agreements...? So I think in this regard, they're actually paying the price for their own misdeeds." —President Barack Obama (5/7/2013)

"Politicians have to understand that there's a price to pay for voting to redefine marriage - it is not what the people of Washington want," Plante said. —Reuters (2/3/2011)

A person who **pays the price** suffers a consequence. It may be a result of his own behavior, or the actions of someone else.

A **price to pay**, when not referring literally to money, means a cost or consequence.

The use of price meaning cost or consequence has been traced to the 1500's.

pay through the nose

When rich collectors pay through the nose for a single shadow painting, as though it were a Rembrandt, they aren't understanding what Warhol's products mean. —Newsweek (9/25/2011)

I pay through the nose for the privilege of having a TV. —The Telegraph (9/26/2011)

College...was usually your last chance to immerse yourself in learning, just for the sake of learning. Parents paying through the nose for their kids' college today probably don't think that way. —Los Angeles Times (8/22/2013)

Pay through the nose means pay a high price.

Printed examples have been found as early as 1666, but the origin is unknown.

PDA

Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez put the breakup rumors on hold Sunday night, displaying several PDAs during the Teen Choice Awards, Us Weekly reports. —Newsday (8/8/2011)

In 1994, IBM and BellSouth introduced the Simon Personal Communicator, a combination phone and PDA. —Richmond County Daily Journal (8/6/2011)

If you are reading celebrity gossip, a **PDA** is a Public Display of Affection, such as holding hands or kissing. If you hear **PDA** mentioned in a business meeting, it may mean Personal Digital Assistant, a small computing device or electronic organizer.

The abbreviation for public displays of affection may be a passing fad, along with many other acronyms used in texting. But the world of small electronic devices may be no more permanent. And perhaps because PDA is so frequently used to mean kissing or holding hands, it is being replaced by "handheld" (used as a noun) when referring to electronics.

Most texting abbreviations are outside the scope of this book. PDA is included so that English learners may understand why people in a business meeting may laugh if someone says, "We would now like to demonstrate our new PDA's."

peas in a pod

We were two peas in a pod. We grew up together. Our moms grew up together. —Albuquerque Journal (7/14/2011)

Streisand said that she and Hamlisch were like two peas in a pod from the moment they met nearly 50 years ago. —Los Angeles Times (8/10/2011)

"Mr. Thompson is a decent, good man. I like him. I like hanging out with him on the campaign trail...we're always sitting next to each other like peas in a pod." —Anthony Weiner, during his campaign for Mayor of New York (8/7/2013)

People or things are called **peas in a pod** or **like two peas in a pod** when they are identical or very similar.

The simple metaphor has been traced as far back as 1580. Here are two later examples:

Rebellion and Witchcraft are as like as two Pease. —Thomas Brown, "Heraclitus ridens redivivus" (1688)

Damon and Pythias Wadleigh were twin brothers, as like as two peas in a pod... —The Lyons Mirror (Lyons, Iowa, 7/30/1887)

penny pincher

Penny pinchers have a lot to be thankful for in the information age... —Buffalo News (9/26/2011)

On Staten Island, where Shen and Fan own a pair of pricey rental properties, neighbors recalled their trouble in tracking down the pair to kick in [contribute] $400 for snow removal and upkeep on their block. "It was ridiculous," said one neighbor. "They were penny-pinchers." —New York Daily News (9/17/2011)

"We raised these funds while incurring no debt and pinching pennies the entire way. … Our campaign's level of support clearly indicates voters are looking for a penny pincher who will go to Washington to cut government waste, eliminate senseless regulations and reduce federal spending." —Detroit News (10/5/2011)

If you are a **penny pincher**, you try hard not to spend money.

The phrase is used in neutral or positive sense, as in the Buffalo News and Detroit News examples, or as a criticism. In the New York Daily News example, "cheapskate" would have the same meaning—a person whose refusal to spend is annoying.

An early printed example is in a magazine published in Buffalo, New York, in 1893:

Don't pinch pennies in buying and call it economy. True economy consists in getting the best and so avoiding waste. —The Roller Mill (July, 1893)

penny wise and pound foolish

Brown should cancel this penny-wise, pound-foolish gimmick. California deserves thrifty, efficient government, but selling off trophy buildings for onetime reward isn't the way to go. —San Francisco Chronicle (12/29/2010)

Not paying for any of these options today could be penny-wise and pound-foolish. —Newsday (2/16/2012)

And the Republican proposal would wipe out funding for early childhood and mental health programs—a penny-wise, pound-foolish approach with ugly long-term consequences for schools, hospitals and prisons. —Los Angeles Times (5/22/2011)

Penny-wise and pound foolish (or **penny wise, pound foolish**) usually means an unwise action that saves a small amount of money but loses or wastes a larger amount.

When this expression originated centuries ago, an English pound was equal to 240 pennies. Examples of the phrase have been found from as early as the 1500's.

pent-up

There's a lot of pent-up demand to go see Cuba," he said. The country has been off-limits to the everyday American for decades because of a trade embargo that doesn't allow U.S. citizens without family members on the island to spend money in Cuba. —USA TODAY (8/10/2011)

...former London mayor Ken Livingstone believed the unrest in that city was the result of pent-up resentment "over the weak economy, high unemployment rates and historically deep budget cuts that are decreasing government funding for poor communities and grass-roots charities." —The Washington Post (8/9/2011)

"...the idea of having an hour and 20 minutes with a Pope to put any question you want, all those pent-up curiosities you have always had...this was sort of a dream come true." —John Allen, journalist, referring to Pope Francis talking to reporters during a flight to the Vatican from Brazil (7/29/2013)

If something is **pent-up**, it has increased in quantity or volume and has become harder to contain. Something pent-up, such as energy or an emotion, may be held back under pressure and may be forceful when released.

Pent means penned: kept in an enclosure. Like other forgotten words—hunker, aback, gung and beck—pent is rarely used by itself but is common in one phrase, pent-up.

Examples of pent-up with the same meaning have been found as early as the 1500's.

people person

"The key, for any judge, is that you have to be a people person," he said. "You have to have a desire and a real knack for dealing with people." —Peoria Journal Star (7/26/2011)

In my first year of teaching in New Orleans, I saw the love I got in return. It made me realize what a fabulous profession teaching is to be in. I'm a people person. I love people of all ages, but you get back love quicker in return with children." —Nashville Tennessean (7/25/2011)

"Dominic is a people person, but I think he understood that that was exceptionally special." —Christiana Gondreau, mother of an 8-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who was kissed by Pope Francis (4/2/2013)

A **people person** is someone who likes people and works with them effectively. The phrase is frequently used when talking about work and jobs.

The earliest example in my searches comes from the April 29, 1966 edition of the St. Petersburg Times and other newspapers that published a syndicated column by Samuel Lubell: "I'm a people person, so I want a people job." The phrase was in more frequent use by the 1980's.

perfect storm, worst-case scenario

"It's a rare thing for a brand to be the focus of such a wave of revulsion around the country," he told CNN, predicting a "perfect storm" of trouble for the paper following the recent "skin-crawling" revelations. —CNN (7/7/2011)

"When you've got one big problem, it's a big problem. When you've got two, it's like ten. And when you have three, it's a problem and it's a perfect storm in there right now and those jobs are very difficult." —Donald Rumsfeld, former secretary of defense, talking about how diffiuclt it is to be President of the United States (5/19/2013)

"The worst-case scenario is that the storm hits in the mid-Jersey area." —Jerome Hauer, homeland security commissioner of New York State (10/26/2012)

Watercraft also could be needed if floodwaters inundate northeast Omaha—a worst-case scenario. —Omaha World-Herald (7/6/2011)

"The **Perfect Storm**," a 1997 book by Sebastian Junger, described a rare combination of three weather events that in 1991 caused a powerful storm in the Atlantic Ocean. Since a movie based on the book was released in 2000, the phrase has been used to describe an increasing variety of situations—some of which hardly compare with the original event.

Worst-case scenario often describes something that might happen in the future, but may also be used to describe a past event. Unlike a perfect storm, a worst-case scenario may have only one cause, but the some of the uses of "perfect storm" blur that distinction.

The earliest example of worst-case scenario in my searches comes from a 1974 edition of New York Magazine, which called Perry Duryea's gain in power Nelson Rockefeller's "worst-case" scenario.

peter out

Growth will then slow to 1.6 percent in 2013 as reconstruction spending peters out... —Reuters

(11/28/2011)

The battery life leaves quite a bit to be desired—especially if you're used to bigger 10-inch tablets—as it peters out at around four hours or so... —TIME (8/12/2011)

Their sparkling white BMW is an electric model they say can go about 80 miles before petering out. —The Bergen Record (4/15/2012)

Peter out means decrease toward zero.

In the mining industry during the 1800's, peter was a verb meaning to dwindle or decrease. Examples of peter out have been found from as early as 1854.

pick (someone's) brain

...Chris Van Allsburg, author and illustrator of the books "The Polar Express," "Jumanji" and "The Chronicles of Harris Burdick" will let local art students pick his brain as part of the Artist Lecture Series at the New Hampshire Institute of Art in Manchester. —New Hampshire Union Leader (12/1/2011)

Your parents are one of the best resources for job-search advice, and it's wise to pick their brains on occasion. —Careerbuilder.com (11/25/2011)

According to the Hewlett-Packard website, at 12 years old, Steve Jobs thumbed through the phone book for William Hewlett's number to pick his brain about a school project he was working on. —Bakersfield Californian (11/9/2011)

"I assume the President just wants to pick her brain a little bit." —Wolf Blitzer, television news anchor, talking about President Obama having lunch with Hillary Clinton (7/29/2013)

If you **pick my brain**, you ask me questions and try to learn things that will be useful.

In this phrase the meaning of pick is somewhat like "steal from," as in "pick someone's pocket." But it usually does not have any negative connotation. When the plural brains is used instead of brain in the expression, the meaning is the same.

Printed examples of "pick his brains" have been found from as early as the 1700's.

pick up

Sure, mergers-and-acquisitions activity seems to have picked up at the Fortune 500 level. That's cold comfor to small businesses that are simply looking for their sales to pick up. —Philadelphia Inquirer (4/11/2011)

Frank Nothaft, Freddie Mac's chief economist, said the housing market is gradually starting to pick up. —Associated Press (2/23/2012)

Santorum was picking up momentum even before Tuesday's surprise victories in Colorado, Minnesota and Missouri. —Philadelphia Daily News (2/10/2012)

In the Inquirer and Associated Press examples, **pick up** means become healthier or stronger. Activities, organizations, people and plants may be said to be picking up when they are improving or increasing.

In the Philadelphia Daily News example, "picking up momentum" means gaining power. A phrase with similar meaning is **picking up steam** (next entry).

Pick up has been used in this way since the 1700's. The phrase can have many other meanings, depending on context.

pick up steam

"Recently, there have been signs that the economy is picking up steam." —President Barack Obama, weekly address (5/14/2011)

The flu season that got a slow start in Iowa and Illinois has picked up steam in the past few weeks. —Quad-City Times (2/10/2012)

"As 2013 goes on the job market is predicted to pick up steam, setting the stage for better days in the next new year." —Tom Foreman, television business news reporter (1/4/2013)

Santorum said he believed he would pick up steam in the race as it moves beyond the first five contests and broadened to states where Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, has not spent as much time organizing and campaigning. —Reuters (2/5/2012)

Pick up steam means gain strength, like a steam engine increasing power.

Examples in print have been found from as early as 1930. **Pick up** (see above), which can have the same meaning, is much older.

pie in the sky

We now we see reports of a possible vaccine against Alzheimer's; if we had such a vaccine, we could all think about working longer, thus increasing the national output. And perhaps we could also raise the retirement age—that would make the Medicare fiscal crisis go away. But are such hopes for a medical breakthrough pie in the sky? —James P. Pinkerton, FoxNews.com (4/27/2011)

Newt Gingrich's promise to colonize the moon isn't pie-in-the-sky in Florida. It illustrates an adage: All politics is local. —Associated Press (1/28/2012)

"The idea of 13 percent is pie in the sky, and even getting to 10 percent is a long way away." —Reuters (2/10/2012)

Pie in the sky means a wish or prediction that is unrealistic and too optimistic.

The phrase comes from a 1911 song by the union organizer Joe Hill. The song satirized the religious promises of the Salvation Army.

piece of cake, easy as pie, cakewalk, walk in the park

Some political observers expected it would be a piece of cake for Perry, an early supporter of the Tea Party. Instead, Perry's conservative credentials were seriously questioned by his fellow Republicans. —The Texas Tribune (9/13/2011)

"Putting it all together is a job, but being here in this moment is as easy as pie," she said on her way into the ceremony. —Associated Press (9/19/2011)

"It will take at least 13 years before the vast majority of these individuals are able to even apply for citizenship. So this is no cakewalk." —President Barack Obama, talking about proposed changes in immigration law (6/11/2013)

"None of us thought it would be a walk in the park, but I suspect none of us predicted just how tough it would turn out to be," he said. —The Wall Street Journal (9/22/2011)

"As a comedian, I hate him because he was great...I do this for a living. And this guy steps in and makes it look like it's just a walk in the park, that it's so easy." —Chuck Nice, comedian, talking about President Barack Obama's performance at the annual dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association (4/28/2013)

If it is not a literal reference to food, **a piece of cake** means easy.The earliest known example is from "The Primrose Path," a collection of poetry by Ogden Nash printed in 1935:

> Her picture's in the papers now
> And life's a piece of cake.

As easy as pie means very easy. The phrase probably originated as a variation of **as easy as eating pie**. An early example is in an 1884 novel, "Jock O'Hazelgreen," by Helen Mathers: "...says Tom, quite unimpressed; 'why, it's as easy as pie.'"

A **cakewalk** means something easy. It comes from African-American competitions in walking or dancing in which the prizes were cakes. Printed references to cakewalk competitions can be found from the 1860's on. Examples of the use of cakewalk to mean something easy are found in the late 1800's.

Another way to say something is easy is to call it a **walk in the park**. An Oxford English Dictionary entry from 1937 suggests that a walk in the park could have begun as a golf caddy's way of describing an easy assignment. But proving such theories is neither a walk in the park nor a piece of cake.

There are other "as easy as" phrases: **as easy as 1-2-3**, **as easy as A-B-C**, **as easy as falling off a log**. Other phrases with similar meaning are **like shooting fish in a barrel**, and **like shooting ducks on a pond**. See also, **slam-dunk**.

pig in a poke

Isn't it about time we stop buying a pig in a poke? If these candidates are really concerned with leading La Porte into a better future, shouldn't we be allowed to see the road map they intend to use? —La Porte, Indiana, Herald Argus (3/7/2011)

"We do find ourselves in a position of buying a pig in a poke. There are too many unanswered questions," —Reuters (2/16/2012)

An informed public is the best protection against buying a pig in a poke. —Los Angeles Times (2/16/2011)

Buying a **pig in a poke** is buying something without seeing it.

Long ago, poke meant bag, and people learned they should not buy a pig in a bag before they opened the bag. Today, the idiom is used frequently in politics. As in the news examples, it refers to people not having enough information to make wise decisions.

Wikipedia has a list of similar expressions in other languages. In many languages the animal in the bag is a cat, perhaps to fool someone who wants to buy a pig. The idiom may be related to **let the cat out of the bag**, which means reveal a secret.

piggy bank

Sick leave is meant to cover you when you're really sick: It's not intended as a piggy bank. —San Jose Mercury-News (2/16/2011)

Espada, who was voted out of office in 2010, and his son Pedro Gautier Espada, are charged with using Soundview as a personal piggy bank for their expenses. —New York Daily News (2/17/2011)

...increasing new federal employees' pension contributions...was controversial. "Federal employees are not a piggy bank," protested Rep. Elijah Cummings, R-Md. —McClatchy Newspapers (2/17/2012)

Piggy banks are containers for money, often given to children to teach them how to save. When used figuratively, **piggy bank** may mean a way to save money, as in the San Jose Mercury-News and New York Daily News examples, or a place to get money, as in the McClatchy Newspapers example.

The Mercury-News example referred to city employees who earned credit every year for not being absent. When they retired, some collected more than $200,000—more than would fit in most real piggy banks.

The phrase existed before people started making money containers in the shape of pigs. An earlier meaning of piggy, traced to the 1700's, was an earthenware container.

pinch hit, pinch hitter

Left-sided stroke victims are often left with a debilitating speech disorder. Yet many can sing entire pieces of text fluently. Singing is thought to activate areas of the right hemisphere which can pinch hit for the stroke-damaged left side of the brain. —Scientific American (9/29/2011)

"Archbishop Dolan asked me to pinch-hit for him. I said, 'Sure, I'd be delighted. '" —Edward Egan, former Archbishop of New York, celebrating mass in Rome (2/17/2012)

Trawick was the pinch-hitter for the Memphis-based customer-service representative invited to update Power Board members on TVA's vision for the future at the September meeting. —Dyersburg State Gazette (9/22/2011)

To **pinch hit** is to substitute; a **pinch hitter** takes the place of something or someone.

The phrases come from baseball, in which a pinch-hitter takes another player's turn at bat. This adapted one of the many meanings of pinch: a critical moment or emergency.

Turning baseball phrases into metaphors has long been a popular American sport. Here is an example from 1920:

If, at home, when mother has had a hard day, with a cross baby or an extra lot of work, a girl says to herself, "Mother has had a hard day. I can see that she is tired. Now instead of running off to play after school I will stay home and mind the baby or help with the work," that girl becomes a pinch hitter at home. She helps the home to score a success. —Story Sermons for Children by Rev. Howard J. Chidley (1920)

pitch in, help out

The whole point of a broad-based tax is that we all pitch in for services that benefit the city. —Philadelphia Daily News (12/14/2011)

The research shows that though fathers certainly are pitching in, mothers spend about 10 additional hours a week juggling multiple activities and driving up stress compared with their husbands. —Chicago Tribune (12/7/2011)

The new name for the 607 West Gray location is Bibas KitBar, a tribute to Bibas, who says he will drop in to help out in the kitchen at KitBar between his travels to the East Coast and Houston. —Houston Chronicle (12/14/2011)

"They have gone home to Kate's parents' house this weekend. So Grandma Middleton, I'm sure, is helping out." —Victoria Arbiter, expert on the British royal family, talking about Kate Middleton's baby (7/24/2013)

"The President is not someone who has ever believed that problems just solve themselves. He's a 'pitch in and help out' person." —Daniel Russel, senior director for Asia at the White House National Security Council (11/15/2012)

Pitch in means join in an effort to do something. **Help out** often has a similar meaning, but pitch in emphasizes joining a group effort. (Pitch in may be used in other contexts, such as pitch in a baseball game. And help out is often used with the same meaning as help, as in help out a friend.)

The origin of pitch in, which has been traced to the 1830's, may be related to another meaning used at that time: join in a song. Pitch is used in other phrases with the meaning "place oneself or something," as in "pitch a tent" (set up a tent) or "pitch a battle" (fight in a specified place—see below).

Help out has been traced to the 1600's, usually in the context of helping a person or group. A poem published in 1600 contains an early version:

> But let us work as valiant men behooves,
> For boldest hearts good fortune helpeth out

—"Godfrey of Bulloigne" by Edward Fairfax

pitched battle

The deal [to remove trade barriers between the U.S. and South Korea] will have to win ratification from the incoming Congress in January, in what promises to be a pitched battle amid eroding public support for free-trade agreements of any kind. —The Wall Street Journal (12/3/2010)

This was the first pitched battle over spending and taxes after Republicans won control of the House of Representatives the previous November. —Reuters (12/19/2011)

The pitched battle between Amazon.com and the state of California over taxes is threatening to turn into a draw. —The New York Times (9/8/2011)

Battles fought in the 16th Century were pitched if they were planned for a specific place. If a battle wasn't pitched, it was just a skirmish. Today the difference between a battle and a **pitched battle** isn't as well defined. A pitched battle is a big one, but it's often fought with words, not weapons.

Printed examples of the phrase have been cited from as early as the 1600's.

play (one's) cards right

Before the search begins, homebuyers who want to play their cards right should know the benefits and drawbacks of buying either type of "distressed" property: foreclosures and short sales... —Tulsa World (7/3/2011)

If you play your cards right (making payments on time for 25 years, for starters), your remaining balance may eventually be canceled. —Buffalo News (11/14/2011)

"I think if you play your cards right and do the work you can find a role that will separate you from your past." —USA Today (4/16/2012)

"And I do believe we have many cards to play. And we are investing here in Europe." —Paul Buicke, chief executive of Nestlé (6/6/2013)

If you **play your cards right**, you use every advantage available to achieve success.

An early example of the phrase used as a metaphor is in "The English Rogue," published in 1671: "I had gained some experience in the world, and had learned how to play my Cards to the best advantage."

play ball (with)

Members of the public and especially the park's neighbors, however, were not ready to play ball with the city's plan. —Orange County Register (10/5/2011)

Dan Frommer of SplatF is mad at Google News for declining to index his solo news operation. Seems that Google refuses to play ball with news sites that don't qualify as an "organization," meaning you have to have more than just some guy or gal banging out copy on the laptop in the kitchen. —The Washington Post (blog, 10/21/2011)

Its [Hungary's] authoritarian populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban is refusing to play ball with the International Monetary Fund. —MarketWatch (1/11/2012)

To **play ball** is to cooperate.

The phrase is one of many that probably come from baseball.

An early example of a variation of the expression is in a novel published in 1902:

Early the next morning I broke camp and took the trail to town, determined never to come back alive unless Bunch agreed to sell the plantation to Uncle Peter...Well, if Bunch should refuse to play ball I could send the check back to Uncle Peter... —"Back to the Woods" by Hugh McHugh (1902)

play fast and loose

Clearly, with kids returning to school, America's teachers are going to have their work cut out for them undoing the damage from a summer full of movies that play fast and loose with the facts. —Reuters (8/31/2011)

The writers also play fast and loose with the basics, like plot construction and character development. As a result, some of the bits are nonsensical fun... —Los Angeles Times (4/8/2011)

And what if the landlord takes the whole deposit because the tenant had an additional occupant?

Any landlord who claims that his damages from such a violation "just happen" to equal the entire deposit amount is playing fast and loose with the law. —Chicago Tribune (12/8/2011)

Someone who **plays fast and loose** acts irresponsibly or unreliably (as in the Reuters example), or does not follow rules (as in the Los Angeles Times example), or cheats (as in the Chicago Tribune example).

The phrase appears in Shakespeare's "King John" and has been traced to the 1300's, when it referred to a game that was designed to cheat people.

play it by ear

"With this new expansion we'll see what happens," said Bell. "We'll play it by ear. We have to grow with our customers, with demand." —WWMT-TV (Kalamazoo, Mich., 9/15/2011)

District leaders are assessing the situation every 12 hours to decide how long schools will be closed, but with fires still ravaging areas of Bastrop, it's likely closures will go beyond today. "We're just playing it by ear like everybody else," said Bastrop Superintendent Steve Murray. —Austin American Statesman (9/5/2011)

"You get a little accustomed to it living here and you just play it by ear." —Bill Charbonneau, a resident of Naples, Florida, talking about the threat of hurricanes (8/21/2013)

When musicians play by ear, they play without reading music. When the subject is not music, **play it by ear** means proceed without a definite plan, making changes according to events.

The phrase has been used in reference to music since the 1800's. The use of figurative meanings came later. An early example:

It is inspiring to know that there are men who have taken up the study of matrimony in a serious way, instead of expecting to play it by ear... —The Baltimore Sun (4/9/1924)

play second fiddle

France has played second fiddle in recent euro zone politics, with the more economically powerful Germany calling the shots...—Reuters (8/17/2011)

My focus on the budget, though, has played second fiddle to what I believe is even more important —creating jobs. —Jack Markell, in an opinion column in The Washington Post (3/10/2011)

Though Danielle Mitterrand may have hated the well-lit center stage her powerful husband occupied, she refused to play second fiddle to anyone in the darker margins she occupied—including her presidential spouse. —TIME (12/14/2011)

Play second fiddle means be less important or successful than someone else.

Its origin is assumed to be a reference to second violin in an orchestra or string ensemble. Examples have been recorded from as early as 1809.

pleased as punch

The first X-37B returned to Earth in December after finishing its 225-day journey. That mission, too, was classified and the military said little other than that it was pleased as punch with the

results. —CBS News (3/3/2011)

Now he's working with the king of computer culture, Google, and as pleased as punch. —TIME (6/21/2011)

Some older workers are pleased as punch with their younger superiors, even giddy about their mutual admiration and respect for each others' differences. —USA Today (11/27/2011)

Pleased as punch means very happy.

Originally it was "as pleased as Punch" but now people usually omit the first as and write punch in lower-case. The phrase dates to the 1700's and refers to Punch, a character in English puppet shows.

plug away

"I wasn't sure that it could be done," Thorp said. "But it was super interesting..." So he plugged away, trying various bits of computer programming and slowly adding in more complexity... —PBS Newshour (9/11/2011)

One thing that Rita Moreno has done throughout her long, illustrious career—which she describes in her new Berkeley Repertory Theatre production—is to continue to plug away, even when life gets difficult. —San Francisco Examiner (8/31/2011)

"...keep plugging away, keep fighting, we'll build an even better America than we've got right now." —President Barack Obama (5/17/2013)

To **plug away** is keep doing something, even if it is difficult or unsuccessful.

An older expression, "peg away," had a similar meaning. One reference book asserts that the phrases allude to the difficult work of driving pegs (or plugs), but I could find no supporting evidence for that theory. The use of plug instead of peg seems to have started in the late 1800's. An early example:

Is he going to plug away at that piece of cast-iron with a hammer and chisel, and chaw away on it with a bastard file until he is sick of the very sight of it? —The Mechanical Engineer (New York, 11/25/1882)

point fingers

"There are five, six major problems that we have in United States, and they need to be fixed, and they should stop bickering around and pointing fingers at each other because that is not going to build any roads and that's not going to make our air clean." —Arnold Schwarzenegger, former governor of California (10/7/2012)

"Instead of finger-pointing and name-calling, on the Senate side we have a bipartisan approach." —Senator Dick Durbin. (5/20/2012)

"Sadly when a tragedy occurs, people want to point fingers and try to sensationalize the disaster." —Associated Press (2/21/2012)

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, quickly pointed the finger at Gainesville pastor Terry Jones, who presided at a March 20 mock trial during which the Quran was set ablaze. —USA Today (4/2/2011)

Point fingers and **point the finger** mean blame someone. In the USA Today example, Kerry blamed Jones for causing deadly riots in Afghanistan.

The phrases date at least to the 1600's, when variations often included "the finger of scorn."

polish off

He had a bottle of Champagne Kola to polish off. —WNYC.org (2/1/2011)

You'll need to polish off a four-pound burger on a custom made roll. —The Journal News (6/11/2012)

Ohio State needed a breathless finish to polish off Northwestern. —Yahoo! Sports (1/31/2011)

In the Battle of Midway, the Nautilus polished off the crippled Soryu. —Time.com (12/7/2011)

In the WNYC and Journal-News examples, **polish off** means to finish drinking or eating. In other contexts it may mean do the last part of a process and complete something. In the Yahoo! and TIME examples, polish off means defeat an opponent.

Examples of polish off have been found from as early as the 1800's.

pork barrel

...[Japan's] government...should reject the pork-barrel politics that lead to ever more numerous recipients of subsidies and preferential treatment, like farmers and the construction industry. —The Wall Street Journal (12/1/2011)

These trying times cry out for term limits, and for Congress to give up its health and pension benefits, and end pork-barrel spending. —Newsday (11/22/2011)

Iowa House Republicans are taking a stand against pork-barrel projects, despite some in their party joining Senate Democrats in wanting to carve out state money for a project back home. —IowaPolitics.com (3/28/2012)

Pork-barrel refers to wasteful government spending influenced by local politics. It is sometimes shortened to **pork**.

Examples of pork barrel with its current meaning have been found as early as the 1870's. The pre-Civil War practice of giving slaves barrels of salt pork has been cited as a possible origin, but I found nothing to explain when or how that may have led to the later meaning. It is possible that the phrase was a more general allusion to fat.

poster boy, poster girl, poster person

The Oklahoma Republican, who's become the poster boy for the cut-spending crowd, recently targeted what he deems wasteful spending in an "Oklahoma Waste Report." —Tulsa World (7/27/2011)

"I've sort of become the poster girl for ovarian cancer, but I'm finding that meeting people one-on-one has given me the chance to make a difference," Sommermann said. —Associated Press (7/31/2011)

She [Whitney Houston in 1991] became the poster person for U.S. patriotism. —Workers World

(2/27/2012)

A **poster boy**, **girl or person**, when used with "for" as in the news examples, is a person associated with something by the public.

In the past, a poster boy or poster girl was usually a glamorous person who appeared on posters, called pinups. Poster children, who might be good-looking or sad-looking or even shocking, would help raise money for charities. Now, a **poster child** is usually part of a charity campaign, while a poster boy or poster girl may be an adult, associated with an idea, a political cause or other topic that interests the public.

A newspaper advertisement for Lucky Strike cigarettes in January, 1929, featured Rosalie Adele Nelson, "the original Lucky Strike poster girl." In a newspaper advertisement she said, "I'm a Lucky Strike girl because I've found a new way to keep my figure trim. Whenever the desire for a sweet tempts me, I light up a Lucky Strike...I certainly am lucky to be "The Lucky Girl." (1/29/1929)

powder keg

"We cannot under any circumstances allow Iran to have nuclear weapons. You would have a powder keg in that region." —Senator Mark Warner (4/3/2012)

"This is not only a humanitarian crisis; it is a powder keg that the international community cannot afford to ignore." —Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, referring to violence in Mali (9/26/2012)

...tensions over Taiwan have cooled, defusing the powder keg that has driven much Chinese and U.S. military planning in East Asia since the mid-1990s. —Foreign Affairs (September, 2013)

A **powder keg** is a dangerous situation that may explode and become much worse.

Originally a powder keg was a container for gunpowder. Used figuratively, the phrase once referred to volatile people, but now usually refers to situations.

preach to the choir, preach to the converted

I listened to everyone and then said, "Look, you're all doing great work here, but you're preaching to the choir. You're never going to get the change you want unless you bring law enforcement to the table as well." —The Nation (10/11/2011)

"When I came here, there were a lot of people just occupying the park. We're like preaching to the choir out here. We're all talking to each other about every problem that we have, but we need to hit the streets," said Ashton Phillips, a former Wall Street demonstrator from San Diego. —NY1 (10/29/2011)

"Now, I know I may be preaching a little bit to the choir, but I want you to know I'm going to need you to then go out and preach to the unconverted." —President Barack Obama (9/9/2012)

The past several years have seen an explosion of truly fine documentary films exposing the hypocrisies and deceptions responsible for deflating the American Dream. Alas, most of them were weighed down by a heavy-handed liberalism and screened only for audiences in New York City and Los Angeles, what we call preaching to the converted. —Mansfield News Journal (10/23/2011)

Someone who **preaches to the choir** is probably wasting time, trying to persuade people who are already persuaded. **Preach to the converted** has the same meaning.

Addressing a crowd of supporters during his re-election campaign, President Obama gave the familiar phrase an unusual twist.

Examples of preach to the converted have been found as early as 1857, but preach to the choir may be more than a century younger—the earliest example cited in my searches is from 1970—and is believed to have originated in the United States.

pretty penny

According to widespread media reports, Simpson will reveal her big news, but only if a magazine pays her a pretty penny. —The Miami Herald (10/24/2011)

If you ever wanted to spend a night at the "Jersey Shore" house, now you can, but it will cost you a pretty penny. —CBSNewYork/Associated Press (10/24/2011)

Invitations, programs, escort cards: it all adds up. Fortunately, pretty paper doesn't have to cost a pretty penny. —Albany Times Union (10/18/2011)

A **pretty penny** means a high price or a lot of money.

This expression uses one meaning of pretty—a considerable or large amount. Examples have been found as early as the 1700's.

pull off

"1Q84" takes things several levels deeper, aspiring to more density, more depth of emotion, and for the most part pulling it off. —Los Angeles Times (10/23/2011)

Wolff tried to curb his natural instincts and not fight fire with fire, but instead to appease her. Unfortunately, he couldn't quite pull it off. —New York Magazine (5/6/2011)

He's one of only a few that could have pulled it off under the pressure." —The New York Times (2/7/2012)

Figuratively speaking, to **pull off** something is to accomplish it successfully; to make it happen.

Examples of this expression have been found from as early as 1860. How it originated is unknown.

Bring off, which can have the same meaning, is used less in the United States than in other English-speaking countries.

pull out all the stops

If the governor were proposing to slash benefits, it might make sense for the unions to pull out all the stops to defend their members and retirees against his plan. —Los Angeles Times (11/2/2011)

"It's been such a challenging time for the restaurant industry, I think they're trying to pull out all the stops and try different ways of getting consumers to the restaurant." —The New York Times (9/26/2011)

Prairie Ridge...outscored the Golden Eagles 28-0 to take sole possession of first place in the Fox Valley Valley. "We knew they were going to pull out all their plays, all their tricks," Getzelman

said. "This was a huge game for them and a huge game for us. They pulled out all the stops and we came through in the end." —Chicago Tribune (10/7/2011)

"The Pentagon pulled out all the stops in welcoming Afghan President Hamid Karzai to meetings with Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta here today." —American Forces Press Service (1/10/2013)

In a church organ, pulling out a stop allows air to pass through a pipe, making sound. To get the most sound from an organ, you can pull out all the stops. As a metaphor, **pull out all the stops** means do everything possible or make the greatest effort.

Variations of this phrase have been found as early as the 1800's, but examples don't appear frequently until around the 1930's. In April, 1948, a Hartford Courant account of a rowing race said Harvard and Princeton "made the most of the smooth stretch of water before the finish line by pulling out all the stops in the last quarter mile."

pull strings

The committee is seeking to show that Mr. Kaiser, an Oklahoma oil billionaire, pulled strings at the White House to get the original loan guarantee. —The New York Times (11/9/2011)

The film follows the ultimately successful struggle of Jessica's sister Sabrina Lall to get justice in a system where the well-connected can easily pull strings when they are involved in a crime. —The Wall Street Journal (1/7/2011)

Saleh used his decades in office to put relatives, confidantes and fellow tribesmen in key places in the government and security apparatus. They remain, meaning that Saleh could continue to pull strings in Yemen without being president. —Associated Press (2/21/2012)

Pull strings means use a personal connection; use one's influence to affect other people.

The phrase alludes to the strings that control puppets. Examples have been found from as early as the 1860's.

pull the plug

The first is Senate Bill 126, which would pull the plug on public service announcements starring statewide officeholders during the 60 days before a primary or general election when they're going to be on the ballot. —Wichita Eagle (2/26/2011)

Independent Publishers Group has found itself in a struggle with the world's largest online retailer over terms of its contract. Failing to reach an agreement, Amazon on Monday pulled the plug on 5,000 of the company's titles —Chicago Tribune (2/23/2011)

After 15 years of marriage Marcia Gay Harden is pulling the plug...filing for divorce from Thaddaeus Scheel...—The Miami Herald (2/17/2011)

"They have been terrified that the day will come when the Fed will pull the plug on all this stimulus, and they don't want to be in the market when that happens." —Brit Hume, television commentator, talking about the Federal Reserve buying bonds to stimulate the economy (6/23/2013)

To **pull the plug** on something is to stop it completely, as if stopping a machine by pulling an

electrical plug from a wall outlet. In health care, it means allowing a person's life to end by turning off support systems.

The expression is based on the idea that pulling a plug is a final action, more definite than using a switch to turn off a machine.

pull the wool over (someone's eyes)

There's no way of knowing yet whether the Russian yeti enthusiasts are out to pull the wool over anyone's eyes, or whether they genuinely believe their yeti evidence is real. —CBS News (10/19/2011)

"I have a great job. Everybody thinks I'm funny. I'm fooling everybody. They think I'm talented. I'm pulling the wool over everybody's eyes and they're paying me for it." —Alec Baldwin, actor (10/13/2011)

"Congressman Ryan is held out to be this guru who understands things so well. What he understands is gimmickry. And that's what he's done so well. He's pulled the wool over the eyes of those people in the House. And they continue following him." —Senator Harry Reid (3/11/2013)

To **pull the wool over someone's eyes** is to deceive or trick them.

No one has found the origin of this expression. One guess is that when people wore wigs made of wool, the wigs could be pulled down over their eyes. Another guess it that the phrase referred to throwing a wool blanket over someone's head. Still another guess, perhaps more plausible than the first two, is that deceiving someone is like pulling wool over a sheep's eyes to deprive it of sight. Thus, when a person said, "You can't pull the wool over my eyes," it meant, "You cannot fool me as easily as you fool a sheep." So far, language historians have provided no conclusive evidence for any of these theories.

The earliest examples in my searches are from the same month in 1838, one in a London journal (which uses draw, a synonym for pull), the other in a Washington, D.C., weekly newspaper. These suggest that the phrase was known to readers by then.

I have but a few minutes to stay with you, and if you think to draw the wool over my eyes, it might perhaps take you a longer time than you are athinking on, or than I have to spare... —The Literary Gazette (London, July 7, 1838)

What will Fletcher, Everett, Prentiss, Wise, Graves, and other great guns of the invincible Whig army, say to this insult to Federalism? What will the great army itself say to this impotent attempt to "pull wool over the eyes" of the people, by pretending to praise what they abhor, to embrace what is to them so highly obnoxions? —Extra Globe (July 24, 1838)

pump adrenaline, adrenaline rush

The music industry traditionally counts on the Grammy Awards show to pump adrenaline into ever-sliding sales. —Los Angeles Times (2/14/2011)

The bus tour, the highest-profile event Palin has done for months, could be key to building an early wave of support to ride through the presidential primaries—especially in New Hampshire, where a stronger than expected finish would pump adrenaline into her campaign and fear into her rivals. —Politico.com (5/29/2011)

Chris Martin, a Federal Way police officer who says he was Walsh's best friend, compared the adrenaline rush that police officers experience to riding "the scariest roller coaster you've ever been on" and then sprinting a mile. —Seattle Times (2/15/2011)

Adrenaline is the powerful hormone that mammals produce in response to stress. In the Los Angeles Times example, **pump adrenaline** means to add energy and excitement.

A feeling of excitement and stress may be described as an **adrenaline rush**, as in the Seattle Times example.

Examples of these phrases used figuratively have been found from as early as the 1960's.

punch up

I spent maybe 10 minutes cutting them into chunks and pulverizing them in a food processor. Then I added a secret ingredient to punch it up. —Rochester Democrat and Chronicle (8/29/2011)

There's bad acting all around, but you can't fully blame the performers. The dialogue needed a writer to come in and punch it up—the lines sound like placeholders. —New York Magazine (8/25/2011)

...the iPad 2's cameras leave much to be desired...So why not punch up those cameras on the iPad 3? —PC World (2/29/2012)

When something has more punch, it has more strength, so to **punch up** something is to give it more strength.

(Punch-up, a noun meaning a fistfight, is rarely used in the United States.)

In the 1800's punch up often meant to prod someone to do something by punching or poking. By the mid-1850's, pillows were punched up to make them look better. That meaning is closer to the modern one.

A story called "Box and Cox" in Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine, published in Boston in July, 1857, contained this: "And Mrs. Bouncer proceeded to flounce over the bed-tick, and punch up the pillows in the most scientific manner imaginable... "

push comes to shove

So we run with scissors. We've been doing it since 1776. We've taken some falls. We've lost some blood. But when push comes to shove, we wouldn't have it any other way. —Houston Chronicle (7/5/2011)

"There's a lot of goofing off, but when push comes to shove, we all do our best." —The Miami Herald (8/27/2012)

If push comes to shove with North Korea, the biggest danger right now is not necessarily a nuclear conflict. —Wolf Blitzer, television news anchor, referring to the threat of war with non-nuclear weapons (4/2/2013)

When **push comes to shove**, a decision or action can no longer be delayed; events force something to be done.

The phrase may have been inspired by the famous preacher Thomas DeWitt Talmage:

The proposed improvement is about to fail, when Push comes up behind it and gives it a shove,

and Pull goes on in front and lays into the traces; and lo! the enterprise advances, the goal is reached! —United Methodist Free Churches' Magazine (January, 1873)

Examples of push comes to shove have been found from as early as 1897, but in my news and book searches, the phrase and its variations did not appear frequently until after 1960.

See also, **chips are down**.

push the envelope

But sometimes the Farrellys push the envelope too far, such as when someone uses a golf course sand trap as a litter box. —Providence Journal (2/25/2011)

Such leaders may not block Internet sites outright, but they may well intimidate or threaten bloggers and Internet journalists "if they push the envelope too far." —The Wall Street Journal (2/15/2011)

"She's always full of ideas and always wants to push the envelope a little bit." —USA Today (2/9/2012)

"People who make a lot of money and have very complicated returns, there's a lot more places where...people have the opportunity to push the envelope." —IRS Commissioner Douglas Shulman (4/15/2012)

"This is a product of the FTC wanting to push the envelope of antitrust enforcement without risking the danger of losing a case in in court." —David Wales, attorney and former Federal Trade Commission official, referring to the FTC's antitrust settlement with Google (1/3/2013)

Push the envelope usually means go outside the limits of what is normal, acceptable or expected. In the last example, it means go beyond what has been accepted in the past.

The phrase was used in aeronautics, referring to the envelope, or limit, of performance. It spread to other contexts during the 1980's, after Tom Wolfe used a variation of it in his popular 1979 book about the space program.

put a damper on

Early Sunday morning, the storm hit North Carolina straight on and then spread northeast, causing slick roads and putting a damper on post-Christmas bargain-hunting. —The Washington Post (12/27/2010)

I know it could put a damper on our relationship if I told him I loved him so soon. He may not feel the same way yet —Chicago Tribune (2/21/2012)

And even a more gradual decline in Europe could put a damper on the U.S. recovery. —The Washington Post (2/22/2012)

Putting a damper on something makes it weaker. The expression is most often used when something diminishes or stops enthusiasm or excitement. The verb dampen, as in dampen enthusiasm, has the same meaning.

The use of damp and dampen with similar meaning has been traced as far back as the 1600's. An early example of put a damper on:

The hard struggle in the New Lebanon Convention to unite ministers in the Hopkinsian interest, has

put a damper on the Arminian Congregationalists...—"A History of Defection in New-England" (1832)

put a stake in the ground, pull up stakes

"We've put a stake in the ground to cut the number of high school dropouts in the U.S. by half, and we know that boosting reading proficiency by the end of third grade is critical to meeting our goal," said Brian A. Gallagher, president and CEO of United Way Worldwide. —El Dorado Times (10/27/2011)

Glenn Beck has decided to thrust a stake in the ground...Beck instructed his assistant: "I fire the person who starts to purchase fluorescent lightbulbs." —cnet.com (8/28/2013)

Sink said she liked the notion of trying to build on businesses already in the area, rather than trying to lure large corporations that may be chasing cheap labor, and could easily pull up stakes in a few years. —Bradenton Herald (10/28/2011)

Each spring, Bishop Patrick McGrath formulates a list of priests who will be assigned to different churches in the Diocese of San Jose. Then in July these priests must pull up stakes and move to a new parish. —Morgan Hill Times (8/14/2013)

Put a stake in the ground means take decisive action that shows a commitment to doing more.

Stake in this usage has a meaning similar to that in "stake a claim"—do something to indicate that one owns, has, or dominates something. Both phrases allude to the 1800's practice of placing stakes (sticks) in the ground to claim mining rights.

Pull up stakes has almost an opposite meaning—to leave a place—but it alludes to a different kind of stakes: large wooden poles, sharpened at the top, that were used to keep enemies out. Examples of similar phrases have been found as early as the 1600's.

An related expression with a similar but slightly different meaning is **fold the tent**.

put (one's) best foot forward

"Every day that goes by where America is...unwilling to put our best foot forward and win, unwilling to demonstrate our resolve to lead, is a day in which we weaken our nation itself." —Senator John Kerry, at a Senate hearing on his confirmation as Secretary of State (1/24/20113)

We understand there's competition, so we've put our best foot forward and we'll see what happens. —New York Daily News (12/8/2010)

The point, Bailey said, is to make sure his young litigators put their best foot forward in court. —The Wall Street Journal (blog, 2/23/2012)

As for the men, it appears they are wanting to put their best foot forward—especially those who are returning to the workforce after a period of unemployment—and are purchasing more formal business attire. —CNBC.com (2/16/2012)

Put your best foot forward means do or look your best. If English were logical and consistent, this expression would be "put your better foot forward." Strictly speaking, only dogs, horses or other creatures with more than two feet can have a best foot.

The precise origin of the expression is unknown. Examples of variations have been found from as

early as the 1500's, when "put the better foot before" had a similar meaning and "put the wrong foot before" meant "make a mistake."

put in a good word

He or she may be able to mentor you and put in a good word for you and your commitment. —Minneapolis Star Tribune (2/21/2011)

Egyptian Finance Minister Samir Mohamed Radwan...urged the business leaders to put in a good word with multilateral lending institutions. "We need cash," Radwan said. —Reuters (4/14/2011)

So he proposes a deal: forget about therapy and he'll put in a good word for Declan to get into her private school. —Hollywood.com (2/16/2012)

To **put in a good word** for someone (or something) is to say something positive in an influential way. The expression often comes before "with," naming the person to whom the good word is directed, as in the Reuters example.

A phrase that expresses stronger support is **go to bat for**.

Good word, meaning a friendly or positive statement, has been traced back to the 1200's and has been used in various phrases. The earliest example of "put in a good word" I could find is in a comedy performed in London:

...shall I put in a good Word for you? Yes, I think, I must... —"The Connoisseur" by Mr. Conolly (1736)

put one's mind to

My heroines are definitely influenced by the notion that women can do most anything they put their minds to. —USA Today (12/13/2011)

I am a determined individual and put my mind to finishing school." —Associated Press (12/20/2011)

As individuals you just have to put your mind to it that you're going to talk to each other and help each other out." —Buffalo News (9/11/2011)

If you **put your mind to** something, you focus on a goal and put maximum effort into accomplishing it.

The older expressions **set one's mind on** and **set one's mind to**, not often used now, had a similar meaning. Around 1578, Robert Lindsay wrote in his "History and Chronicles of Scotland" that the kingis maiestie sett his...mynd to invaide Ingland (the king's majesty set his mind to invade England).

According to my search results, put one's mind to did not appear until the early 1800's. An 1840 novel published in Dublin, Ireland, has an example with the modern meaning:

"You can do it well, Tom, if you only put your mind to the business." —"The Election" by George Brittain (1840)

put one's money on

Hillary, perhaps? Don't count her out. My money is on her being ready and willing to be drafted. —The Hill (9/22/2011)

So if you had to put your money on a Republican candidate today, it would be Mitt Romney? —NPR (10/5/2011)

It's anyone's guess how long the legal appeals are going to take and which cases are likely to reach the Supreme Court first. Some put their money on the DOMA cases, which would offer the court a sort of intermediate step to consider same-sex marriage. —The Washington Post (9/25/2011)

Put money on something means bet on it.

When the phrase is used figuratively, neither betting nor money is involved, but someone takes action or forms an opinion based on a belief about the future. "My money is on that happening" and "I bet that will happen" mean "I strongly believe that will happen."

Examples of this usage have been found as early as the 1840's.

put words in someone's mouth, take the words out of someone's mouth

"I always hesitate to say what Teddy would think about anything or to put words in his mouth, but I do have an image of him," she said. —Boston Globe (4/8/2011)

"I don't want to put words in their mouth," the governor said, "but several of them have indicated to me that they could work with a multiyear commitment." —Omaha World-Herald (2/20/2011)

... please do not put words in my mouth or act as if I am an operative working for the O'Malley administration. —Cumberland Times-News (2/16/2011)

"I don't want to put words in their mouth, but it was a statement that they were encouraged." —Jen Psaki, spokesperson for the State Department, when asked whether Syrian opposition groups would participate in an international meeting (5/13/2013)

Camacho said calling the moment bittersweet was appropriate. "You took the words out of my mouth," Camacho said. —The New Mexican (7/24/2013)

Put words in someone's mouth means guess or anticipate what someone said or is about to say; or speak for someone without that person's approval. In the Boston Globe example, the person quoted was Victoria Kennedy, wife of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who died in 2009. She meant that she would not try to guess what Kennedy would say if he were alive.

A related phrase, "You **took the words out of my mouth**," means, "You said the same thing I was going to say."

A variation of put words in someone's mouth in the Bible has a different meaning." Joab put the words in her mouth" (from the King James translation, 1611) means Joab told her what to say.

But the modern meaning is in other variations, including Shakespeare's Henry V (1600): "'Tis not well done to take the tale out of a man's mouth, ere it is made an end."

quality time

Just when Kate has promised her husband and children that she will devote more quality time to them...she must shuttle off to New York City on weekends... —Boston Herald (9/16/2011)

Anderson Cooper, Diane Sawyer and a slew of international TV networks each got quality time

with the fortunate feline, who is now scheduled to undergo tests at the city's Center for Animal Care and Control. —New York Daily News (9/16/2011)

"I hope they spend quality time doing a very thorough analysis of the ferry option and a no-road option," she said. —Anchorage Daily News (9/15/2011)

"We encourage everyone to let HoneyBaked do the work so you can enjoy quality time with loved ones rather than spending hours in the kitchen." —Maggie DeCan, chief operating officer of The Original HoneyBaked Ham Company, in a public relations statement (12/29/2012)

Quality time with someone, such as family members or a friend, is spent doing something that is good for the relationship and the people. Quality time may also mean time spent doing something productive or beneficial, as in the New York Daily News and Anchorage Daily News examples.

The earliest example of quality time in my searches is from 1971:

But few mothers are able to find quality time or energy for a young child after a full working day, especially if they must cook dinner and do dishes...—Chicago Tribune (1/12/1971)

quantum leap

No matter how bright your star was at baseball's lower levels, big league pitching is a quantum leap forward, and there are no shortcuts to mastering major-league talent. —Florida Today (3/1/2011)

...each leap in technology has brought a quantum leap in expense. —Associated Press (2/25/2012)

[The new Porche 911's] extended wheelbase—about 4 inches longer than last year—results in an overall exterior lengthening of less than 2 inches but results in a quantum leap in handling dynamics...—Chatanooga Times Free Press (2/25/2012)

A **quantum leap** is a sudden or extreme change.

As in the news examples, the phrase is often an attempt to add emphasis, when quantum is thought to be more impressive than big.

Quantum leap comes from physics, which describes sudden changes in electrons as "quantum leaps" or "quantum jumps." The earliest examples of the phrase used outside of scientific contexts are found in the 1950's. "Quantum Leap" was also the title of a science fiction series on television from 1989 to 1993, in which a time machine sent a physicist "leaping" into the past.

raise eyebrows

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association raised eyebrows this week by nominating the widely panned thriller The Tourist for best comedy and nominating stars Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie in the comedy/musical acting categories. —The Hollywood Reporter (12/17/2010)

The sheriff is accused of having an affair with a prominent attorney's wife, then hiring her as an organizer in his office with a salary that exceeded $80,000 a year. She did the job well, but was often seen riding in close company with the sheriff, raising eyebrows. —Monroe (Louisiana) Free Press (2/25/2012)

...commissioners reviewed an eyebrow-raising report of threats to nature preserves and other protected sites. —The State Journal-Register (2/20/2011)

It's also striking that Egyptians triumphed over their police state without Western help or even moral support. During rigged parliamentary elections, the West barely raised an eyebrow. —The New York Times (2/11/2011)

Something that **raises eyebrows** attracts attention, is surprising, or causes disapproval—or all three.

As the news examples illustrate, the phrase has many variations. All allude to the facial expression, which may reflect interest, surprise or disapproval. "Raise an eyebrow," as in the New York Times example, sometimes means "show a little interest."

In some cases it is not clear whether the phrase is used figuratively, or literally describes someone's facial expressions, as in this early example:

He spent his summers in Scotland, and his old friends there raised their eyebrows at his generous American fashion of presenting various towns with Public Libraries, and were still more open in their displeasure when he announced his views upon the education of the lower classes. —Among the Palms by Nina Larre Duryea (New York, 1903)

read between the lines, between the lines

Anyone who can read between the lines can see where this is going. —Sacramento News & Review (8/4/2011)

Reading between the lines reveals a clear message: El-Sissi stands ready and willing to betray Egypt's alliance with the United States if doing so will benefit him. —Patrick Hilsman, in an opinion column in Newsday (8/21/2013)

"When you step between the lines, that's your job to lead the football team and work hard and practice like you want everybody else to," he said. —Associated Press (8/5/2011)

When you **read between the lines** you get information, or draw conclusions, that are not stated explicitly in the text. The news examples, which did not refer to specific texts, meant analyzing the available information.

In sports, **between the lines** means on the field, in contrast with athletes' other activities.

The origin of read between the lines is the practice (dating at least to the 1600's) of hiding secret messages between lines of printed text, using ink that would become visible when a chemical was applied to it, or placing tiny dots between the lines.

The earliest example in my searches was published May 15, 1858, by a weekly magazine in Boston. Another example is from the following year:

...it has been stated by high authority that the works of Humboldt show to everyone who can "read between the lines," an endeavor to present nature in her totality... —The New York Times (6/3/1859)

read (the) tea leaves

The City Hall gang...keeps reading the tea leaves or interpreting polling that always gives the mayor a great deal more negatives than positives. —The Jersey Journal (12/17/2011)

Corn, a former prosecutor and defense attorney, said there's no way to tell what those notes mean

or what the jury is discussing at that point. He compared the guessing game to trying to read tea leaves. —Beaumont Enterprise (12/15/2011)

Expecting something from Apple can be a dangerous game, but that doesn't mean it's not fun to try and read the tea leaves every once in a while. —CNET (12/13/2011)

Read the tea leaves means try to predict the future (or understand something) by interpreting small pieces of information.

Through the centuries, people have tried to predict the future by reading (interpreting) tea leaves, coffee grounds, the palms of hands, the entrails (inside parts) of animals and the sky. Comparing an activity to reading tea leaves usually implies that the effort to predict or understand something does not have a great chance of succeeding.

Tea-leaf reading may be an old practice, but references to it in English begin in the early 1900's. This one is in a novel published in 1907:

Well-known in every kitchen, Mrs. Kebby hobbled from one to the other, gossiping about the various affairs of her various employers; and when absolute knowledge failed she took to inventing details which did no small credit to her imagination. Also, she could tell fortunes by reading tea leaves and shuffling cards...—"The Silent House" by Fergus Hume

The figurative expression came later:

Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews in a speech here last night attacked "shortsighted analysts who have been reading the tea leaves of their own misunderstanding...of the National Security Act." —The New York Times (4/19/1950)

ready for prime time

Mazurek will be taking this band into the recording studio on Tuesday. After a weekend's worth of sets, the Exploding Star Orchestra should be ready for prime time. —Chicago Tribune (1/8/2011)

David A. Harris...said Mr. Gingrich's views reversed decades of American policy by both Democratic and Republican administrations. "This is as clear a demonstration as one needs that he's not ready for prime time," Mr. Harris said. —The New York Times (12/9/2011)

Crutchfield didn't say when the ongoing review would be completed, but said it was "not ready for prime time this morning." —Dow Jones Newswires (2/24/2012)

"I'm not sure any of them are ready for prime time." —Edward Ryan, Harvard University professor of immunology and infectious diseases, referring to systems that use weather data to predict flu outbreaks. (1/8/2013)

Prime time refers to the hours when the most people are watching television—for example, 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. on weekdays. Something that is **ready for prime time** is good enough for a large audience or an important event.

The phrase is sometimes applied to a person rather than an event. The quotation in the New York Times example meant Gingrich should not be considered ready to be President.

The "Not Ready For Prime Time Players," comedians on the TV program "Saturday Night Live," helped make the expression popular beginning around 1975. The title was a parody of "Prime Time Players" on another show featuring Howard Cosell.

(the) real McCoy

Bangkok Governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra has vowed to replace the city's dummy cameras with the real McCoy. —The Wall Street Journal (12/13/2011)

...bonefishing here is the real McCoy, with enough camps, guides and boats to get fly fishermen within reach of these consummately seductive fish. —McClatchy News Service (12/18/2011)

Police in Juneau, Alaska, called it a symptom of the ongoing recession when 13 fake $1 bills showed up in a tip jar at a local bar in April. The bar owner...turned the bills over to police and reimbursed his employees with the real McCoy. —Palm Beach Daily News (11/28/2011)

The real McCoy means the real thing, not a phony.

Many stories claim to explain the origin. A similar expression, "the real MacKay," has been found as early as 1856. It refers to genuine MacKay whiskey.

Whether that expression is connected with the McCoy phrase is an unsolved mystery. An early example of the real McCoy is in a fictional story published in 1881:

"But even if we get up the Club, where'll we have it, Ned?"
"Where? Why over behind our place of course; you couldn't find a better place..."
"By jingo! Yes, so it will be. It's the 'real McCoy,' as Jim Hicks says. Nobody but a devil can find us there."
—"The Rise and Fall of the Union Club" by James S. Bond

red herring

It is common knowledge across the region that the charges are a red herring and that Belyatsky's sentencing was politically motivated. —Forbes (12/15/2011)

The claim that the gondola will reduce canyon traffic is an obvious red herring. —Salt Lake Tribune (12/13/2011)

I say the entire super committee façade and all the similar discussions are nothing but a red herring—a political device designed to keep our focus off the real problem: too much spending. —The Gazette (Colorado Springs, 11/30/2011)

"Privacy is a red herring...That should be no reason for exclusionary policies." —retired Colonel Martha McSally, arguing that women should be allowed in infantry and special operations fighting groups (1/27/2013)

A **red herring** is a distraction, an effort to call attention to something that is not important or relevant.

A red herring is a fish that turns red when smoked or salted. The figurative phrase may have come from the idea that dragging a smelly fish on the ground could confuse tracking dogs, which might be useful to someone being pursued. Perhaps that never actually happened, but an early example of the phrase implies such a metaphor:

Alas! it was a mere transitory effect of the political red-herring; for, on the Saturday, the scent became as cold as a stone. —Corbett's Weekly Political Register (2/14/1807)

In finance, a **red-herring document** or **filing** has nothing to do with diversions or fish. It refers to warnings, printed in red at the top, that no guarantees are being made in a preliminary offering.

red tape

"The red tape and the bureaucracy continue to pile up from this Administration." —speech by Senator Mike Johanns (4/23/2011)

But red tape has held up his $2.8 million payment—money he said he needs to pay off bills and invest in a new business. —New York Daily News (2/23/2012)

"To make America a magnet for good jobs, we'll invest in high-tech manufacturing and homegrown American energy, put people to work building new roads, bridges, and schools, and cut red tape to help businesses grow." —President Barack Obama (4/6/2013)

Red tape means annoying, burdensome or unnecessary rules and regulations.

In use since the 1700's, the expression comes from references to the red ribbon (tape) that legal documents were tied with. From a 1798 book, "Around the tea-table" by Thomas Talmadge: "Do not hang the Church until dead by the neck with 'red-tape.'"

red-handed

Jenner further explained that she got caught red-handed with her secret lover at a restaurant after Kardashian had her followed. —New York Post (11/9/2011)

Soon after, he was caught red-handed while receiving a bribe and arrested. —The New York Times (11/3/2011)

A 2003 raid on Whittamore's home appeared to catch the British press red-handed, with his client list containing the names of about 305 journalists from 32 media outlets. —The Washington Post (8/15/2011)

Red-handed means in the act of committing a crime, like a criminal with blood on his hands.

An older meaning of the phrase was bloody or violent. Here is an early example of red-handed used with the same meaning it has today:

...the attention of those who now ruled in Ghent was called to the case of the ruffians taken red-handed in the crime they had committed. —"Mary of Burgundy" by George Payne R. James (London, 1833)

reel off, rattle off

No band did more to remind listeners just how strange the Beach Boys could be, and its lyrics have always been liable to reel off allusions to William S. Burroughs and Gertrude Stein. —The Wall Street Journal (9/21/2011)

She knew many of the players and managers personally, and could recite the history of the team and reel off statistics. —Philadelphia Daily News (9/14/2011)

Texas opened the season by thumping California 28-3 and proceeded to reel off a 10-1 season... —Austin American-Statesman (9/22/2011)

In a 10-minute conversation, Fire Lt. Annmarie Pickett can rattle off dozens of ways to keep people safe from fires. —Worcester Telegram & Gazette (9/26/2011)

"So Benedict's contributions I think are going to be voluminous, but it may take us a while to discover them. I can rattle a few off if you're interested." —Cardinal Timothy Dolan (2/28/2013)

Reel off has several different meanings, depending on context. In the most literal use of the phrase it means unwind from a reel or cylinder. The news examples show figurative meanings:

In the Wall Street Journal and Daily News examples, reel off means recite (say) things, or a list of things, easily or quickly.

In the American-Statesman example, reel off means do a series of actions quickly or without difficulty. In sports, reel off is frequently used to describe consecutive actions, as in reel off 20 straight points.

Rattle off is used with similar figurative meanings. It is related to one meaning of rattle as a verb, to talk too much or chatter, in the phrases "rattle on" and "rattle away." In the news examples it means recite: say something that has been practiced or said many times before.

Literal examples of reel off have been found as early as the 1700's. The figurative meanings began in the 1800's. An early example:

Nothing vexed the righteous spirit of our immortal Luther at Rome more than the rapidity of the Italian priests, who reeled off seven masses before he had finished one... —Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (July, 1840)

rhyme or reason

Sgt. David Moore of the Coppell Police Department said this spike in criminal mischief in the city is very unusual. "I have been at the department for 11 years and I have not seen this type of destruction before," he said. "There is no rhyme or reason to it, and the acts have been completely random." —Coppell (Texas) Gazette (9/16/2011)

In the forex world, it means violent currency movements up and down with seemingly little rhyme or reason. —The Wall Street Journal (8/3/2012)

"[The question of why I survived] ran through my mind a million times. You know, there's just no rhyme or reason to it." —Craig Potts, runner in the Boston Marathon, who doesn't know why he went to the safer side of the street before the bomb went off (4/24/2013)

If there is no **rhyme or reason**, there is no understandable pattern or explanation. There is no poetry or logic.

The phrase has been traced back to the 1400's. In Shakespeare it has sparkled with wit:

ROSALIND: But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?
ORLANDO: Neither rhyme nor reason can express how much.
—"As You Like It"(1600)

Today it is often used thoughtlessly, when there is no reason to allude to poetry: "He changed quarterbacks five times Saturday with no apparent rhyme or reason."

ride shotgun

[In the video game "Duty"] you will be called upon to clear a building with your sniper rifle, infiltrate a German battleship, and ride shotgun on a jeep... —The New York Times (11/1/2011)

Those who know him well said Chernoff wanted to hang on to an important role in what would surely be the biggest case of his career. "He would've been happy to give up the reins to the stagecoach, but he sure as hell was going to ride shotgun. He wasn't going to sit in the buggy," said Matt Alford, a law firm partner. —Los Angeles Times (9/12/2011)

Like many enforcers interviewed in the film, Nilan admits he didn't enjoy fighting, but did so to protect his teammates. After the film's premiere, he noted the number of players sidelined by concussions was lower in his era than in recent years..."I truly believe it was because they had guys riding shotgun for them like me," he said. —Reuters (9/15/2011)

In the earliest use of this phrase, the person who rode shotgun sat next to the driver and carried a gun for protection. The New York Times example has a meaning close to that.

Later the meaning of **ride shotgun** was extended to sit next to the driver (not carrying a gun, but perhaps acting as the driver's second-in-command or helper). Ride shotgun is used figuratively in the Los Angeles Times example: If Chernoff was not going to be in charge of the case, he wanted to have an important role in it.

The phrase also can mean "protect someone," as in the Reuters example—even though guns or vehicles may not be involved.

The metaphor behind ride shotgun is a stagecoach, on which a mean-looking man, carrying a mean-looking gun, sits next to the driver. An early example is in a story published in Cosmopolitan Magazine in 1912:

That's why, when the stage is stopped, the driver's never downed. Which if thar's money aboard, an' the express outfit wants it defended, they slams on some sport to ride shotgun that trip. —"Old Monte, Official Drunkard" by Alfred Henry Lewis (Cosmopolitan, September, 1912)

right off the bat

He said he thinks West End Wednesdays might have more luck. "Right off the bat, it's likely to be successful because there is a concentration of really good businesses. —Napa Valley Register (10/22/2011)

As freshmen two years ago, the girls said they were looking for a way to combine fun and service and become leaders right off the bat. —Lynchburg News & Advance (10/23/2011)

...refiners have a major problem with details in the plan because it requires them to either cut pollution by 10 percent or buy credits in 2013. The industry expected a more gradual approach..."That amounts to a potential multibillion-dollar tax on the industry right off the bat," said Western States Petroleum Association spokesman Tupper Hull. —Contra Costa Times (10/21/2011)

"Our vascular surgeons did an excellent, amazing job right off the bat...to restore blood flow to her foot so that limb salvage would be an option, because without blood flow, you can't save a limb." —Dr. Eric Bluman, talking about Heather Abbott, who was hurt in the Boston Marathon bombing (4/25/2013)

Right off the bat means from the start; immediately.

There is wide agreement that right off the bat comes from baseball, but connecting its meaning with a baseball hitting a bat is a matter of guesswork. A plausible theory is that a ball, if hit hard and caught right off the bat, is caught almost instantly. Similarly, skilled fielders begin running toward

the ball right off the bat—immediately after it is hit.

The earliest example in my searches is evidence that the phrase was known to the public by the 1890's:

Gov. Roosevelt said this afternoon that there need be no longer any doubt that the organization was backing up the bill "right off the bat." —The New York Times (3/30/1899)

ring in

"There are plenty of parties going on Monday night for those who are looking to stay local and ring in the new year in Beverly Hills." —Beverly Hills Courier (12/31/2012)

Hundreds of gay and lesbian couples across New York State began marrying on Sunday...After a bell tolled 12 times to ring in the new day, Ms. Lambert, 54, and Ms. Rudd, 53, held hands and kissed in front of more than 100 friends and family members. —The New York Times (7/23/2011)

Gun shops rang in the holiday shopping season with a bang. Black Friday 2011 set the biggest one-day record of background check requests for hopeful gun buyers...—TIME (12/4/2011)

Ring in the new year is an expression brought to America from England, where church bells would ring out the old year and **ring in** (welcome) the new year.

In 1850, Alfred Tennyson wrote :

> Ring out the old, ring in the new,
> Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
> The year is going, let him go;
> Ring out the false, ring in the true.

rip off

Nor does anyone need to be told that "The Feet" is a complete rip-off of "The Voice." —The Wall Street Journal (6/11/2011)

The tickets look just like the real thing, but people are getting ripped off left and right," he said, adding customers need a "highly trained eye" to distinguish fraudulent tickets. —Boston Herald (6/11/2011)

"Somebody used to be able to commit consumer fraud and they would do it in their own neighborhood or their own town. Now, they can rip off people in 45 states because they go up on the Internet." —Mike Dewine, Ohio attorney general (3/19/2013)

Rip off, which literally means to tear something away from something else, has several idiomatic meanings and may be used as a noun (rip-off) or verb.

In the Wall Street Journal example, a **rip-off** is a copy. The phrase is strongly negative, saying the makers of the TV program "The Feet" copied another program instead of thinking of something new. It is similar to an accusation of plagiarism (copying someone else's work) but does not mean any formal rule was broken.

In the Boston Herald example, **ripped off** means cheated.

In the Mike Dewine quotation, **rip off** means steal from.

In other contexts, rip off can mean do something easily. (The team ripped off three victories in a row.)

road kill

I realized the world really had changed and you can either roll with it [adjust] or be road kill. —The Washington Post/Bloomberg (12/4/2011)

When you're done, you feel like road kill. You're exhausted. —USA Today (9/21/2011)

"He [President Obama] has to focus on college completion. Because if they don't get a college degree, they are road kill in the global economy." —Jonathan Alter, political commentator (6/2/2013)

Literally, **road kill** means animals killed on the highway. Used figuratively, as in the news examples, it means a victim of something extreme or ruthless.

Examples of literal uses of road kill have been found in the 1940's. The first figurative examples appear in the 1980's. A story about the Texas Rangers baseball team in the Sept. 24, 1987, edition of the Dallas Morning News said "the Rangers were just another piece of road kill on the West roads," which meant the team was losing.

roll (or turn) over in one's grave

George Eastman would roll over in his grave to see what has become of his beloved company. —Rochester Business journal (10/7/2011)

...the envelope was marked "Photograph, do not bend." You guessed it. It was bent. Benjamin Franklin must be rolling over in his grave. —Stamford Advocate (10/24/2011)

FDR, would roll over in his grave if he could see what the political administration has done to the Social Security Fund. —The Gazette (Colorado Springs, Colo., 10/1/2011)

I know my father is turning over in his grave, knowing I use gas heat instead of wood. My father wouldn't use anything but dried locust wood, because it burned slow and put out a lot of heat. —Delmarva Daily Times (10/16/2011)

Someone who **rolls over in his grave** is disturbed by an event among the living—an event that goes against something he considered important when he was alive.

Roll in one's grave (omitting over) and **turn in one's grave** are variations used frequently.

The phrases have been used at least since the 1820's. From Cobbett's Weekly Register, published in London Aug. 20, 1825: "Poor Oracle! Your ratting must, surely, make him turn in his grave."

roll the dice, roll of the dice

District Judge Kimberly Small, who has a reputation as the toughest sentencing judge in metro Detroit on drunken-driving cases, will choose his punishment..."Either we're serious about this or we're not," Small said. "I don't believe people have the right to roll the dice with other people's lives." —Detroit Free Press (7/24/2011)

This is why law schools have decided to trim their class sizes and, at the same time, offer more

financial aid to those who choose to roll the dice and attend. —abovethelaw.com (8/20/2013)

Here's a way to create lots of jobs and revenue for the state: Build three new $2 billion "destination resort" gambling casinos in Florida, and limit future expansion of gambling. But opponents say more casino gambling is a dangerous roll of the dice that would harm the state's family friendly tourism image. —Bradenton Herald (1/9/2012)

"Higher education shouldn't be a luxury, or a roll of the dice. It's an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford." —President Barack Obama (8/24/2013)

Both expressions are based on games with dice, cubes with numbers from one to six. **Roll the dice** means take a chance or risk. A **roll of the dice** is an action that involves chance or risk and the outcome is unknown.

Dice have been used in games since ancient times, and variations of the words die and dice appear in Old English. It is not clear when the metaphorical uses of roll the dice and roll of the dice began. Another related phrase, traced to the 1600's, is **the die is cast**—something has been determined or decided.

roll up one's sleeves

Scores of volunteers rolled up their sleeves yesterday and moved nearly 20 tons of farm-fresh produce destined to feed people in need for Thanksgiving. —Milford Daily News (11/20/2011)

There's a saying, "You can't wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time." You also can't pat yourself on the back and roll up your sleeves. —Occidental (College) Weekly (11/21/2011)

"We know what needs to be done. And so I think that we should just roll up our sleeves and get it done." —Senator Harry Reid (11/8/2012)

I've already rolled up my sleeves and jumped into the trenches because when it comes to weathering the storm, a little preparation can go a long, long way. —Denny Rehberg, in an opinion column in the Great Falls Tribune (11/24/2011)

If you **roll up your sleeves**, you prepare to work enthusiastically or meet a challenge.

It is likely that some of the people in the Milford Daily News example literally rolled up the sleeves of their shirts or sweaters as they began to work, but the phrase applies to all the volunteers, no matter what they wore.

The quotation from the Occidental Weekly combines phrases in a way that uses both their literal and figurative meanings: You can't wring your hands (worry or agonize about something too much) and roll up your sleeves (get down to work) or pat yourself on the back (give yourself praise) at the same time.

The cliché-packed sentence in the Great Falls (Montana) Tribune can be explained only by the fact that it was written by a U.S. Congressman who was planning to run for the Senate.

Variations of roll up one's sleeves used figuratively have been found as early as the 1800's.

roll with it, roll with the punches

Have fun, and know that the crazy, unexpected things make the best memories. So if it seems

outrageous at the time, just roll with it. —Charlotte Observer (8/18/2011)

The weather always has an impact on what goes on. It's just something you know you can't control so you just roll with it. —WBNG (Bingamton, N.Y., 8/14/2011)

The people who are able to have long and prosperous careers aren't just the smart and hard-working. It's also the people who can roll with the punches, be comfortable with change, and adapt what they do to changing technology and circumstance. —Neil Irwin, blogging in The Washington Post (8/7/2013)

"I think they're going to be ready. We've been able to roll with the punches." —Elizabeth Calhoun, who created a training program for workers helping people enroll in a new health insurance program in Illinois (8/26/2013)

To **roll with it** is to accept existing circumstances and go ahead or keep going.

Roll with the punches has a similar meaning and emphasizes that the circumstances are bad.

Both phrases are based on the idea of going in the same direction as something rolling—moving with momentum.

Roll with it may be used in a positive context and sometimes is combined with another expression, **let's roll**, as in, "That's a good idea, let's roll with it."

Roll with it was not in common use until the mid-1900's, but this literal example, in a 1909 book about ocean voyages, comes close to the modern meaning, giving advice about how to avoid seasickness: "When the boat rolls, roll with it."

Another early example of roll with it refers to a punch in a boxing match:

He didn't expect my punch would be anything so he didn't roll with it or anything. I saw his eyes glaze and I knew I'd really hit him. —LIFE Magazine (5/17/1943)

rope-a-dope

And there's nothing dumb about Cain playing rope-a-dope while Mitt Romney and Rick Perry duke it out. —The Washington Post (10/28/2011)

Meanwhile, Obama and Congress are rope-a-doping over the debt and the deficit. —New York Daily News (6/5/2011)

"I'm going to be very open and available. He's going to try to be laid back and do a rope-a-dope and live off his cult status." —Steve Lonegan, talking about Cory Booker, his opponent in the race for U.S. senator in New Jersey (8/14/2013)

Rope-a-dope comes from the 1970's, when boxer Muhammad Ali popularized a name for the strategy in which he leaned against the ropes and let his opponents tire themselves out trying to punch him.

Now rope-a-dope means doing little or nothing while hoping that things will go badly for an opponent.

Usually the phrase acts like a noun or adjective, as when someone does a rope-a-dope or uses a rope-a-dope strategy. The Daily News version, turning it into a verb, is unusual.

rubber stamp

"I have said this is going to be a new partnership. They cannot be a rubber stamp." —Rahm Emanuel, after his election as mayor of Chicago, talking about the City Council (2/23/2011)

"It's not a rubber stamp. If the risk is felt to be too high by this outside review, they will recommend it won't be done and we won't fund it." —Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, talking about controls on research using deadly viruses (8/7/2013)

"...whoever the governor nominates is a done deal. The Republican majority in the Senate is going to rubber-stamp his appointee." —Anthony Hensley, a state senator in Kansas (8/18/2013)

Rubber stamp means approve something automatically, without discussing it or thinking about it. Used as a noun, as in the first two examples, it means someone or something that approves proposals automatically.

During the 1880's, when rubber stamping tools were first used to mark documents, they were considered a cheap, quick and inferior alternative to older methods.

The similarly negative, figurative uses of "rubber stamp" began in the early 1900's. This example comes from the February, 1909, record of an investigation ordered by the Wisconsin State Senate: "Well, there were a good many reasons why I opposed Mr. Ekern. In the first place I regarded him as a sort of a political vassal of La Follette, a sort of La Follette rubber stamp..."

rule of thumb

When analyzing how much in retirement savings you will need, it's a good rule of thumb to use 5% as a safe withdrawal rate from a typical 60% stock and 40% bond investment portfolio. —TheStreet.com (6/21/2011)

"A general rule of thumb is if it is too cold for you outside, it is too cold for your dog." —Susan Nelson, a veterinary professor at Kansas State University (12/10/2012)

Rule of thumb for bringing in a huge fish is if you let the fish go deep, you'll lose it. —Bernie Parent, fisherman, in Philly.com (8/19/2013)

A **rule of thumb** is a method that is not based on science or exact numbers. It is a practical, easy way to calculate or decide something.

The expression has been in use at least since the 1600's. Its origin is unknown.

rule out, rule in

"I can rule out a 2014 run." —former Congressman Patrick Kennedy, when asked about running for the U.S. Senate (2/15/2013)

The White House press secretary, Jay Carney, released a statement responding to a report of a presidential finding authorizing covert support for the rebels. It said: "No decision has been made about providing arms to the opposition or to any group in Libya. We're not ruling it out or ruling it in." —The New York Times (3/30/2011)

The president must have lived in Syria for 10 years, a requirement which would rule out many of Assad's opponents who have lived in exile for years. —Reuters (2/25/2012)

In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner flatly ruled out any prisoner exchange. —Associated Press (2/25/2011)

If we **rule out** a choice or possibility, we mean it will not happen.

Rule out is a frequently used expression, but **rule in** usually is used in combination with rule out, to emphasize that no decision exists, as in the New York Times example.

Before the 1850's, rule out was used in legal opinions, meaning exclude an argument from consideration. Now it may describe any situation with possibilities or choices.

rules of the road

"It is in America's national interest to participate in that because nobody has a bigger stake in making sure that there are basic rules of the road that are observed..." —President Barack Obama (3/23/2011)

"Consumers can't wait any longer for clear rules of the road that ensure their personal information is safe online," —President Barack Obama (2/24/2012)

"The fact is that Europe freestanding alone is the largest economy in the world. And when you join that together with the United States of America, we have a powerful ability to be able to affect the rules of the road and to be able to raise standards and, most importantly, create jobs for all of our people." —Secretary of State John Kerry (2/25/2013)

Literally, **rules of the road** are accepted (but not always written) practices that prevent confusion or accidents in transportation. As a metaphor, it means generally accepted standards.

Sometimes the word "rules" alone would have almost the same meaning, but rules of the road conveys a sense of cooperation for the benefit of all.

Rules of the road was in use long before there were cars. Books written in the 18th Century refer to the rules of the road at sea.

run a tight ship

"Mark Hurd ran a very tight ship and managed through a recession, which required the company to be extremely lean," he said. —CNN (6/14/2011)

The company is known for running an extremely tight ship. —New York Post (10/14/2011)

Jacky Grimshaw...remembers watching Robinson drive the girls to dance class. "She was always on them about getting them out of the house, shooing them in the car. She ran kind of a tight ship." —Chicago Tribune (7/3/2011)

Run a tight ship means keep strict discipline. It usually has a positive connotation.

The expression is assumed to come from the belief that a well-run ship had ropes that were kept tight. But I could not find anything more specific about its origin.

The earliest example in my searches comes from a March 29, 1954, LIFE Magazine article commenting about Earl Warren before he was appointed to the Supreme Court: "Warren, though the soul of geniality in public, ran a tight ship; his underlings made as little noise as possible around him and spoke only when spoken to."

run amok

Congress's inaction has let the states run amok with their own destructive ideas. —The New York Times (7/3/2011)

Nearly two dozen states are considering plans this session that would make drug testing mandatory for welfare recipients...In Wyoming, Republican Rep. Frank Peasley, a co-sponsor of the testing bill, said the measure is an effort to rein in a welfare system run amok. —Associated Press (2/24/2011)

Forty years of capitalism run amok means our economy destroys the environment, but can't provide many folks with a decent living. —USA Today (2/9/2012)

Run amok means act wildly and irresponsibly.

The expression has been traced to the 1500's, when it referred to reports of Javanese warriors killing people in the streets. It is now used in less bloody situations, when the writer or speaker wants to criticize with strong and colorful language.

run of the mill

Giving this killer a reduced sentence is outrageous. Khan is no run-of-the-mill terrorist. He was directly subordinate to KSM and was selected by the 9/11 mastermind to conduct terrorist operations inside the United States. —The Washington Post (2/23/2012)

"This was a run-of-the-mill, routine arrest," Kwiatkowski said on the stand during questioning from Pendergrass. "You turned it into a circus." —Buffalo News (2/6/2012)

"We've allowed killing to become not simply mundane, but run of the mill—and more than that, filler." —Walt Williams, a video game writer who said that imaginary killing does not harm society, but having too much of it is a problem for game producers (3/28/2013)

Run of the mill means average, ordinary, unexceptional, undistinguished. Originally, the phrase referred to things manufactured in large numbers, without special attention or extra work.

An 1876 report by the State of Tennessee said, "Lumber is cheap. Ten dollars per thousand is the price for inch lumber, the run of the mill."

run rings around

He called solar energy inefficient and noted that gas and coal runs rings around it in terms of price. —The New York Times (blog, 5/25/2011)

Though President Obama has run rings around the Republican Party in the debt-ceiling debate, that party can yet emerge victorious if it will stick to its guns. —Manchester Union-Leader (7/20/2011)

The Galaxy S II is certainly powerful enough to please with Samsung's 1.2 GHz dual-core processor; early benchmarks from the overseas model show it to run rings around most other smartphones. —Reuters (7/26/2011)

To **run rings around** is to do much better than; to outperform. It suggests the idea of a runner in a race who can run in circles around an opponent and still win the race.

Run rings around has been traced as far back as 1875. It was used more frequently by the 1920's.

run the gauntlet (or gantlet), throw down the gauntlet, run the gamut

With Gov. Corbett about to throw down the gauntlet over state spending by presenting a budget with likely deep cuts, there's even less time to waste on ideological battles over the right to collective bargaining. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (3/4/2011)

Galileo, Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein all had to run the gauntlet of conventional wisdom in the scientific establishment. —The Wall Street Journal (11/12/2011)

"Specialist Carter reinforced a forward battle position, ran twice through a 100-meter gauntlet of enemy fire to resupply ammunition, and voluntarily remained there to defend the isolated position." —President Barack Obama, awarding the Medal of Honor to Army Specialist Ty M. Carter for heroism in a battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan (8/26/2013)

The plans run the gamut from increasing income taxes on most Californians to targeting only the rich. —Associated Press (12/3/2011)

Throw down the gauntlet means challenge an opponent. In the 1500's, a man could challenge others to fight by throwing his armored glove to the ground. The glove was a gauntlet.

Run the gauntlet refers to a punishment dating back at least to the 1600's: forcing someone to run between two lines of people, who would hit or whip the person as he passed. Today, it may mean run between attackers, as in President Obama's quotation, or, in more figurative contexts, endure a period of harsh treatment or criticism, as in the Wall Street Journal example.

Run the gamut means do or include the whole range of something. As in the Associated Press example, it is usually followed by a from...to phrase, defining the extremes of the range. Gamut, which has been traced back to the 1500's, originally referred to a scale of musical notes, and run the gamut meant play all the notes.

In a cherished book of mine, "The Careful Writer" (1965), Theodore Bernstein maintained that a gantlet is what you run, and gauntlet is the glove you throw down as a challenge. He wrote: "The practice in this country has been to keep the distinct spellings of gauntlet and gantlet, which have entirely different derivations, and the practice seems to be a good one." Poor Ted Bernstein must be turning over in his grave. The use of gantlet is now so seldom that if you search for phrases containing it, Google asks if you meant gauntlet. But there are still diehard followers of Bernstein, including Wil Haygood, who wrote this example in a book review:

Belafonte, who has been in analysis for much of his adult life and credits it with helping him run the gantlet of fame and race in mid-20th-century America, found new causes almost yearly. —The Washington Post (11/25/2011)

sacred cow

Congressional Republicans, hungry for billions of dollars in savings from the federal budget, are expressing new willingness to touch what has previously been a sacred cow: taxpayer subsidies for corn-based ethanol. —ABC News (4/18/2011)

And Obama dramatically upped the political cost for Democrats Friday by putting Social Security and Medicare -- his party's sacred cows -- on the table. —Newsday (7/12/2011)

The health system is the closest thing to a sacred cow in Canadian politics. Provincial spending on health care across Canada has grown at an average of 6.9% a year over the last decade, or a pace that far exceeds revenue growth. —Dow Jones Newswires (12/15/2011)

"The two sides won't give up their sacred cows and reach some conclusion. The Republicans have to get serious on revenue...the President has to begin talking about significant entitlement reform." —former Congressman Steve LaTourette (3/1/2013)

A **sacred cow** is something that is too popular to be questioned or criticized.

The phrase is widely assumed to refer to cows protected by Hinduism in India, although cows were also revered in ancient Greece and Egypt, and in other cultures.

In the 1800's, when ancient mythologies were a staple of American higher education, allusions to sacred cows could be made without explaining what sacred cows were. For example:

In Mr. Lowe's eyes the Revised Code is a sort of sacred cow, not to be touched by profane or sacrilegious hands, or, as he puts it more curtly, "not to be tinkered." —The Saturday Review (4/13/1867)

sacrificial lamb

While there are some turkeys remaining in the GOP field, it is also unlikely that Mr. Obama will face a sacrificial lamb like Kansas Gov. Alf Landon in 1936 or a Republican as overconfident as Dewey was in 1948. —The Wall Street Journal (12/1/2011)

Hyundai built this car with an eye on a 40-mile-per-gallon fuel economy rating and a competitive price tag...But the sacrificial lamb in that equation was horsepower and acceleration. This Hyundai lacks both... —Los Angeles Times (11/24/2011)

...the prime minister may seek to replace Papaconstantinou, the main architect of hugely unpopular budget cuts demanded by the EU and the IMF as part of Greece's 110 billion euro bailout last year. "He might need to give up his finance minister as a sacrificial lamb"... —Reuters (6/16/2011)

Something or someone called a **sacrificial lamb** is considered expendable.

In politics (as in the Wall Street Journal example), it is a candidate who is certain to lose, but runs for election because his party asks him to.

In the Los Angeles Times example, it means the things sacrificed—purposely lost. In the Reuters example, Papaconstantinou may lose his job so that prime minister can stay in power.

The expression is a metaphor, alluding to lambs killed for religious reasons.

It is an important metaphor in Christianity: Jesus Christ was called Lamb of God (Agnus Dei in Latin) in reference to his sacrifice. In a poem by William Dunbar, written in the 1500's, perhaps half a century or more before the King James Bible, these lines refer to the crucifixion and resurrection (some words changed to modern English):

> He for our sake that suffered to be slain,
> And like a lamb in sacrifice was prepared,
> Is like a lion risen up again...

saddled with

There are 33 city departments saddled with at least 1,300 political appointees. —Chicago Sun-Times (5/7/2011)

The museum is saddled with debt totaling about $7 million. —Associated Press (2/29/2011)

... think of those days before we were saddled with the burdens of parenthood... —Chicago Tribune (2/16/2012)

Saddled with means made to carry, like a horse that must carry a saddle on its back.

The phrase has been used with this sense at least since the 1700's.

salad days

"It was absolutely marvelous," he said of his salad days in Hollywood. "You got paid 40 weeks a year. You had three months when you were not working and you were very well looked after..." —Los Angeles Times (12/3/2011)

Back in the salad days of the 1990s—long before anyone had dreamed of a phone that ran "apps"—Apple decided it could manufacture its own hardware, produce its own operating system and license that system to third parties at the same time. —The Washington Post/Bloomberg (8/15/2011)

More than half of people in Connecticut believe America's salad days are over, according to a new survey. The next generation will have to accept a lower standard of living and the country's best economic days are behind us, 52 percent of state residents said... —The Hartford Courant (12/9/2011)

"...Juilliard is more selective than Harvard. Yet, gone are the salad days, when its students could graduate, sign with an agent and expect the gigs to just roll in." —Paul Solman, television journalist (7/9/2013)

Salad days means the time of youth and inexperience, but now is also used to mean the better times in the past.

The origin is Shakespeare: In "Antony and Cleopatra" (1606), Cleopatra says, "My salad days, when I was green in judgment...", meaning when I was young and inexperienced.

salt of the earth

"She's a good, solid, salt-of-the-earth person. She's been chosen to do really great things because she is really great." —Daily Press (Hampton Roads, Virginia, 10/2/2011)

Why anyone would attack the couple baffles many who call the couple the salt of the earth. —KPSR-TV (Springfield, Missouri, 9/26/2011)

...more people than ever are driving around the crossing gate. It's just not a matter of inconvenience; there are poor working people in this community—the salt of the earth types who do the dirty jobs that keep the economy running—who need to get to work on time, who are afraid of losing their jobs if they are late, and who will do that it takes to get where they are going. —The Mount Pleasant, Texas, Daily Tribune (8/13/2013)

The **salt of the earth** are the best people, simple and uncorruptible.

The metaphor is based on the value of salt as a seasoning and a preservative, preventing food from spoiling.

Salt of the earth is in Matthew 5-13 of the Bible, and Geoffrey Chaucer's "Summoner's Tale" (1386).

sea change

While Richards says additional changes are needed to improve controllers' quality of life—particularly those that could help reduce high stress levels among air traffic controllers—he says the new changes are a "step in the right direction," and represent a sea change in the culture of the FAA. —National Public Radio (4/18/2011)

But the rise of the German shepherd, here or anywhere, marks a gradual sea change in the attitude toward that breed in this nation. —Buffalo News (2/29/2012)

What's most interesting about this, though, has been the sea change in attitude among Americans about cars and safety. —Los Angeles Times (2/28/2012)

"I think there's a sea change in our politics...Our Republican colleagues are coming to the middle to meet us." —Senator Charles Schumer (2/18/2013)

A **sea change** is a major change—very large, like a change caused by movement of the ocean.

The phrase was written in 1623 by William Shakespeare in The Tempest: "Nothing of him that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich, and strange." Today it frequently appears in headlines and articles about climate change.

See **game changer** and **paradigm shift**.

see eye to eye

The candidates seeking election to the San Carlos School District board may not see eye-to-eye on everything, but they all agree something needs to be done about overcrowded classrooms. —San Jose Mercury-News (10/25/2011)

Of course, the coach and player don't always see eye to eye. —Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (10/25/2011)

Although the chances of the Fed being abolished any time soon hover between slim and remote, it is encouraging to see that at least on this one issue anyway, the Zuccotti Park crowd and the conservative Republicans see eye-to-eye. —Bloomberg News (10/23/2011)

"I don't think the United States and Israel quite see eye-to-eye yet on Iran." —Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations (3/21/2013)

To **see eye to eye** is to agree, or think in the same way.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the expression is a "misapplication" of a phrase in the Bible. This refers to the King James version, Isaiah 52:8, in which "they shall see eye to eye" does not mean they will agree. (Later versions of the Bible replace the phrase with "see with their own eyes" and variations of that.) But it is not clear who began making this mistake, or when.

see the forest for the trees

"It's much better to use pragmatic common sense than be so rigidly tied to one ideology you can't see the forest for the trees." —Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel (9/18/2011)

His decision to roll out an electronic suggestion box - city staffers will submit suggestions online - at a time when there are some rather obvious and glaring problems to be fixed is symbolic of his inability to see the forest for the trees.—Arizona Daily Star (9/1/2011)

Some people are so blinded by ideology, they can't see the forest for the trees. —Tammerlin Drummond, in an opinion column in the Oakland Tribune (2/6/2012)

If you can't **see the forest for the trees**, you are missing something important because you are too concerned with its parts or details.

If you can see the forest, you may be a **big-picture person**.

The earliest example I have found is in a London magazine published in 1820: "We are occupied by the parts, instead of the whole. We cannot see the forest for the trees."

seize the moment, seize the time

Still, it takes money and manpower to seize the moment. Santorum is raising money, but far less than Romney, and he has virtually no organization. —Associated Press (3/17/2012)

"My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment and we will seize it, so long as we seize it together." —President Barack Obama, in his second inaugural speech (1/21/2013)

Organizations like Jane Doe Inc. are missing a moment. I'm not seeing them or other domestic abuse organizations reacting to Martel's alleged stabbing murder...These organizations must seize the moment to strengthen the message. —Jaclyn Cashman, BostonHerald.com (8/20/2013)

So when I learned last week that Bobby Seale would be the keynote speaker for the Black Panther Party's 45th anniversary in Philadelphia, I knew I had to seize the time. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (11/1/2011)

Seize the moment and **seize the time** mean take action immediately when an opportunity exists.

Seize has been used with similar meaning at least since the 1400's, and examples of seize the moment have been found from as early as the 1800's.

sell short

How do you tell people that you are not a candidate to be sold short? —Politico.com (6/27/2011)

Melvoin was always quick to defend the skills and the versatility of the players who performed, as he did, on recordings, films, television shows and beyond, bringing life to every style and genre of music. "Studio guys get sold short," he told the Boston Herald in 2004. —Los Angeles Times (2/24/2012)

"As for Kim Jong-un, a lot of outside observers seem to be selling him short. That might not be so wise." —IHT (blog, 2/21/2012)

In financial investing, selling short is selling a security that the investor does not own, betting that its price will go down. Used figuratively when investing is not involved, **sell short** means

underestimate, or place too low a value on something.

In the Politico example, the question was asked of Newt Gingrich, a candidate for president, after his popularity had fallen in opinion surveys.

Examples of sell short in investing have been found from as early as the mid-1800's. Its first examples in figurative use are from the 1900's.

set sights on

The Senate seat is one Republicans have set their sights on picking up in 2012. —Reuters (2/29/2011)

I set my sights on the Harvard Business School and miraculously, I got in. —Dave Ramos, in The Washington Post (11/6/2011)

“This is a remarkably hopeful time for MDA and our mission to find new treatments and cures as we set our sights on pursuing muscle health." —Steven M. Derks, president of the Muscular Dystrophy Association (8/31/2013)

The part of a gun that helps aim it is a sight. Literally, to **set sights on** something is to aim one or more weapons at it. In figurative use, the phrase means aim at.

It may refer to focusing attention, as in the Steven Derks quotation. Or, it may mean thinking of something as a specific goal, as in the Reuters and Washington Post examples.

A related expression, **raise one's sights**, means adopt a more ambitious goal.

set teeth on edge

The light bulb ban may not be the biggest issue on the nation's agenda. But it's intrusive and obnoxious and it sets many teeth on edge. —The Boston Globe (7/17/2011)

Last week, I wrote a column describing my plans to get revenge on my kids when I'm a doddering old lady living in their house, for all the things they do now that set my teeth on edge. —Orange County Register (6/30/2011)

His [New York Mayor Michael Bloombergs "stop and frisk" policy has set liberal teeth on edge. —The Christian Science Monitor (8/30/2013)

If something **sets your teeth on edge** it gives you an unpleasant feeling, making you nervous or uncomfortable. (Feeling **on edge** is feeling tense, even if you have no teeth.)

This expression has been traced back to The Wycliffite Bible of 1382.

An idiom based on a similar idea is **grit one's teeth**.

set up shop

Phone maker Samsung Electronics Co. of South Korea and Spain-based retail chain Mango are among the foreign companies to set up shop in Africa... —The Wall Street Journal (6/28/2011)

He was gunned down in 1909 while in Italy investigating the gangsters who had set up shop on America's East Coast. —Chicago Tribune (2/28/2011)

Facebook has rolled out new pages for businesses, brands and celebrities who set up shop on the

social network. —Los Angeles Times (2/29/2012)

"We can start by modernizing our roads, bridges, and ports. These upgrades would allow American companies to ship their goods faster and cheaper, and they would encourage businesses worldwide to set up shop here..." —President Barack Obama (5/17/2013)

Set up shop means start doing business.

A translation of Lucian from Greek in 1634 shows that set up shop was understood the same way then: "...but since Apollo erected his oracle in Delphus, and Esculapius set up shop in Pergamus, Bendis had her temple in Thrace, Anubis in Egypt, and Diana in Ephesus..." —"Certain select dialogues of Lucian, together with his true history," translated by Francis Hickes

shake out, shake-out

The online daily-deals space has attracted millions of dollars in venture capital and spurred dozens of clones of market leaders Groupon and LivingSocial. Now the industry is starting to shake out. —The Wall Street Journal (9/19/2011)

...how it will all shake out is largely between Roth and his family...—Newsday (8/3/2012)

As such, the two refineries could be less vulnerable to an industry shake-out if AB32 hurts California's refining industry.—Reuters (8/13/2012)

The literal meaning of shake out is to clean off or cast away parts of something by shaking it. In business, **shake out** means get rid of (discard, throw out) something, such as employees or weaker businesses. The noun **shake-out** can mean a management reorganization or business contraction.

In other contexts, "how things **shake out**" means how events develop and changes occur. The Newsday example uses this meaning.

The literal use of shake out is very old. It has been traced back to the 1200's. Examples of the figurative use of the phrase have been found as early as the 1880's.

shakedown cruise

"Having students try out the product - at a price cheaper than buying a laptop for school - amounts to a shakedown cruise for the eventual product." —New York Daily News (5/12/2011)

The Gem Diner, which closed its doors early on its grand opening day Friday, will reopen for business at 7 a.m. Sunday... The iconic metal-sided diner at 832 Spencer St., formerly Doc's Little Gem until it closed about 14 months ago, began opening day with a water problem in the basement. Then a gas line went down and cut the cooking space on the grill in half. LaLone said the diner's shakedown cruise turned into "a comedy of errors after that." —Syracuse Post-Standard (7/1/2011)

Any program as large and complex as Obamacare...is going to encounter some turbulence on its shakedown cruise. —McClatchy-Tribune News Service (9/1/2013)

On a boat's **shakedown cruise**, the crew tests everything to make sure it all works properly. For something that is not a boat or airplane (such as the new restaurant in the Post-Standard example) a shakedown cruise is the first time its operations are tested.

This phrase may be related to the oldest meaning of shake-down: a crude or temporary bed of

straw, or as a verb, shake down, to settle into (get used to) a new place. It is not related to another, now more common, meaning of shake down: get money in a dishonest or illegal way.

I have found examples of shakedown cruise from as early as 1906. Its use as a metaphor came later, as in this example:

Significant shifts of strategy have resulted from the rough shakedown cruise of President Truman and organized labor in the House last week. —St. Petersburg Times (5/11/1949)

shape up

Even now, 18 months into this euro mess, only the recent jump in sovereign bond yields has caused Italy and France to realize they have to shape up. —The Wall Street Journal (11/30/2011)

...the nation's truckers are in pretty bad shape...Now transportation carriers, industry organizations and even truck stops are unrolling initiatives to help truckers slim down, shape up and improve their health. —The New York Times (11/21/2011)

Strong Santa Ana winds could create dangerous fire conditions in Southern California over the next several days...The winds, which could shape up to be the strongest offshore event the region has seen in years, are expected to reach their highest intensity Wednesday night through Friday morning... —Los Angeles Times (11/30/2011)

Shape up can mean:
—improve or meet a higher standard, as in the Wall Street Journal example;
—improve physical fitness, as in the New York Times example;
—become (when used with "to be" or "as"), when referring to something that will be better seen or understood in the future, as in the Los Angeles Times example.

The first meaning is part of a mid-1900's military expression, "Shape up or ship out!"—meet a higher standard or go away, or face punitive action.

In previous centuries, shape up was heard frequently in less figurative uses, such as making things or forming ideas. An early example of a figurative use:

We were certainly called some very bad names, and often threatened... if we "did not act sensibly," and shape up like sane men... —The Single Tax Review (New York, September-October 1910)

shell out

For a daily commuter who already shells out $104 to buy a monthly MetroCard, the $140 monthly rate for the ferry would more than double the cost of getting to work... —The Wall Street Journal (2/21/2011)

Discounts dwindled as dealers ran short of some models last month, forcing buyers to shell out more for new vehicles. —The Detroit News (4/30/2011)

She selected a caterer, florist and DJ for the September wedding, and her father, Stephen Williams, shelled out nearly $10,000 for the facility. —USA Today (2/13/2012)

"Just how many Americans will have to shell out more in taxes next year if we go over the fiscal cliff?" —Alison Kosik, television news anchor (12/29/2012)

To **shell out** is to pay—reluctantly, a large amount, or both.

Examples of the phrase have been found from the early 1800's, when the literal meaning of both shell and shell out was to remove a seed from its shell.

shoo-in

Despite the clamoring for fresh action on job creation, Obama's bill is no shoo-in. —FoxNews.com (9/13/2011)

Tang, the son of Hong Kong's tycoon, was widely considered a shoo-in as Hong Kong's next leader, with key backing from Beijing. Then came the scandals...—Associated Press (3/9/2012)

Jimmy Choo is considered a shoe-in for her heels. —The Wall Street Journal, writing about designers who compete to get Michelle Obama to wear their clothing to the President's Inaugural celebration. (1/18/2013)

A **shoo-in** is something or someone expected to win easily.

The expression is sometimes misspelled as "shoe-in" but it has nothing to do with shoes.

The Journal's misspelling was intentional, to make a pun about "heels"—high-heeled shoes. A clearer (but duller) way to express the same idea is: "Most people think she will wear shoes designed by Jimmy Choo."

Shoo-in originated in horse racing. It described a horse that won only because the race was fixed, and had to be "shooed in"—urged—to finish ahead of the others. That meaning was forgotten, and the current phrase does not imply cheating.

From Cosmopolitan Magazine in October, 1922: "Once the wealthy sapolio signs his name on the dotted line, the rest is a shoo-in."

shoot down

Eva Longoria filed court papers Wednesday to divorce her basketball star husband, Tony Parker... a day after her publicist shot down multiple divorce rumors. —Contra Costa Times (11/16/2010)

Hatzolah leaders shot down Freier's request last fall to let women into its 1,300 all-male corps, the city's largest volunteer ambulance crew...—New York Daily News (2/27/2012)

"...plenty of times you shoot down reports. So if this one isn't true, why can't you say whether it's true?" —Elise Labott, television news producer, during a State Department news conference (7/15/2013)

An airplane can be shot down during a war. When a rumor, idea, or suggestion is **shot down**, it is denied, killed or refused.

Examples of shoot down used literally have been found from as early as the 1800's. Examples of shoot down referring to ideas have been found from the middle of the 1900's.

shoot from the hip

Engineers employed a lot of guesswork, adopting a standard that structures inside nuclear plants should have three times the quake resistance of general buildings. "There was no basis in deciding

on three times," said Mr. Aoyama, an emeritus professor of structural engineering at the University of Tokyo. "They were shooting from the hip," he added, making a sign of a pistol with his right thumb and index finger. —The New York Times (3/26/2011)

"An inexperienced attorney is apt to shoot from the hip rather than give a cogent, well-researched answer," Jarret said —Knoxville News Sentinel(2/21/2012)

"Even when they didn't agree with him, they at least knew he wasn't shooting from the hip," Thompson said. —Omaha World-Herald (2/28/2012)

Shoot from the hip originally meant shoot a gun quickly (after pulling it out of a holster, worn on the hip), without taking time to aim carefully. Since the early 20th Century, the phrase has been used to mean doing something quickly, or making a decision quickly.

Also, see **trigger happy**.

short end of the stick

Unfortunately, once again, it is the consumer who gets the short end of the stick. —San Jose Mercury-News (11/12/2011)

"The middle child will always come out on the short end of the stick because he'll never be the only one in the house." —Contra Cost Times (11/13/2011)

"...imagine a world where the peacemakers are getting the short end of the stick. It's happening at the United Nations..." —Christine Amanpour, television news anchor, talking about UN workers who want better chances of getting assignments in less dangerous places (7/11/2013)

Short end of the stick means the worse side of a deal, or the inferior position. If you get the short end of the stick you are treated badly or unfairly.

The origin is unknown. An older and similar expression, "worse end of the staff," has been traced to the 1500's and was used with the same meaning. The opposite, "better end of the staff," was also common, and **better end of the stick** (meaning better deal or situation), is used today, although not as frequently as the negative short end.

Other versions, from the 1800's, are the dirty, crappy and shit ends of the stick, giving rise to a plausible theory that the current phrase was created by changing the most vulgar word to short. Many other expressions have resulted from efforts to avoid vulgar or religious words. But their origins are particularly resistant to research because they were more common in conversation than in print.

short shrift

The Bronx always gets the short shrift in the New York Marathon...from race organizers who mapped out this five-borough course 35 years ago. —New York Daily News (11/6/2011)

...green vegetables get short shrift on America's day of giving thanks. —USA Today (11/9/2011)

Despite country [music]'s ongoing sales potency, it received short shrift in this year's major nominations. —Variety (11/30/2011)

"Everywhere I looked—in Ghana, in nearby West Africa, and globally—the IFC [International Finance Corporation] still seems to be giving its mandate to fight poverty short shrift." —Cheryl

Strauss Einhorn, in an article in Pro Publica and Foreign Policy (1/2/2013)

Something given **short shrift** is given little attention, time, or praise. The phrase usually means the small amount was unfair or questionable.

Shrift is one of those forgotten words no longer used by themselves, but only in idiomatic phrases. (Other examples are hunker, aback, gung, beck, shebang and derring.) In its long history, shrift was associated with confession and forgiveness. An early meaning of short shrift was the brief time given to a convict to confess before execution.

As a metaphor perhaps beginning in the 1800's, the phrase meant to make short work of—get something done or dispose of it quickly.

An example of the phrase used in a way similar to the news examples is in a 1910 journal published in Detroit. It refers to physicians complaining that a committee had too few of them, and too many pharmacists:

A few of the medical delegates were inclined to complain at Washington that they had been given short shrift. —Bulletin of Pharmacy (June, 1910)

shot across the bow

Standard & Poor's warned that many of the sovereign credit ratings within the 17-nation currency bloc were being jeopardized by mounting financial and political turmoil..."S&P is trying to take a shot across the bow and get them to deliver," said Brian Kim, currency strategist at RBS Securities. —Dow Jones Newswires (12/6/2011)

..."We Are the 99 Percent"—a shot across the bow of the wealthiest 1 percent of the country... —The New York Times (10/8/2011)

Mayor Michael Bloomberg is firing a shot across the bow of Silicon Valley, saying New York City's efforts to attract a new science and engineering campus will help the metropolis surpass the California region as the world capital of technology start-up businesses. —Associated Press (7/19/2011)

"So this is really a shot across our bow." —Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, talking about the possibility of more meteors like the one that injured thousands of people in Russia (2/15/2013)

A **shot across the bow** means an aggressive warning, a signal that one is ready to fight.

In the literal sense, firing across the bow (front of a boat) does no damage; the goal of the warning is to avoid fighting. The Dow Jones example uses that metaphor.

But the phrase is often extended to other aggressive acts, which are not primarily warnings, as in the New York Times and Associated Press examples. The Tyson quotation suggests that the event should be understood as a warning of danger.

In my searches, the earliest literal example of firing across the bow is from 1840. In some examples later in the 1800's, such shots were friendly signals. The metaphor for warnings wasn't used until the 1930's. An early example, using the plural of bow (which used to be common, describing the two curved sides near the front of a boat) is in a 1936 edition of The Round Table, a British journal: "The despatch of the Panther to Agadir was a 'shot across the bows,' an intimation that France must parley or fight."

shot in the arm

The city plans to build about 18 miles of new sidewalk starting this year—more than four times what has normally been built in the past several years of tight budgets..."It's a huge shot in the arm for our sidewalk program," Mayor Buddy Dyer said.—Orlando Sentinel (4/21/2011)

We see this as a new life for Lambert and an economic shot in the arm for the St. Louis region and the entire state of Missouri." —Associated Press (2/28/2012)

Adelson's recent donation gives a shot in the arm to Gingrich's flagging presidential bid and boosts his ability to compete in the 10 states going to the polls on Super Tuesday, March 6...—New York Post (2/21/2012)

A **shot in the arm** is a helpful stimulus. The phrase alludes to the injection of a drug. (Another literal meaning of shot in the arm is the opposite of helpful: a bullet wound.)

The use of shot in the arm as a metaphor received a boost from Sinclair Lewis in 1922. His popular novel, "Babbitt," contains this: "He had a number of titillations out of concealing the ginbottle under his coat and out of hiding it in his desk. All afternoon he snorted and chuckled and gurgled over his ability to 'give the Boys a real shot in the arm to-night.'"

shy away

"We're a nation of doers and a nation of builders. And we've never shied away from competition. We thrive on competition." —President Barack Obama (4/13/2012)

"...we were very clear about our position and will not shy away from making very clear our public position." —Patrick Ventrell, spokesman for the State Department, talking about human rights in Sri Lanka (5/9/2013)

"[Tracy] McGrady was never one to shy away from theatrics and certainly put on a some dazzling shows during his seven appearances in the All-Star Game." —SBNation (8/26/2013)

To **shy way** from something is to avoid it, often because of fear.

In previous centuries, the verb shy was used by itself with a similar meaning: to be frightened and move away. It is seldom used that way now, except when talking about horses.

Shy off, a variation no longer used, had the same meaning. It has been traced back to the 1700's.

silver bullet, magic bullet

"For a Republican to put revenues on the table [agree to discuss them] is significant. For a Democrat to put entitlements on the table is significant," he says. "The only way we're going to solve this problem is to have a dialogue about all these issues because there is no silver bullet." —National Public Radio (4/4/2011)

"...does it provide a resilient enough solution to call it the silver bullet for food security for a country? I think we're kidding ourselves if we think any single technology is going to do that. It's going to take a mix of things." —Jonathan Smith, spokesman for Qatar's food security program, which has an experimental system to produce food, water and energy in an environmentally friendly way (6/11/2013)

"Radioactive iodine gives us a magic bullet that goes only to the thyroid, affecting both normal and cancerous cells," Farwell said.—HealthDay News (4/8/2011)

After three days of taking only one-third of the prescribed dose of herbal pills, the pain had vanished, making her wonder if she'd found "the magic bullet of all time." —TIME (2/29/2012)

A **silver bullet** is a sudden and complete solution to a problem.

Magic bullet has a similar meaning. It is often used in medicine and technology, as in the HealthDay and TIME examples.

Both expressions are often used in the negative, as in the National Public Radio example.

Silver bullet is believed to have originated as an allusion to stories about silver bullets having the power to kill scary monsters.

Magic bullet has been traced to Paul Ehrlich, a German scientist who discovered a treatment for syphilis. His phrase, first translated in 1907 as **charmed bullet** and later changed to magic bullet, described substances "which strike only those objects for whose destruction they have been produced by the organism."

silver lining

Her husband has found one more silver lining from this experience. "I have young ones and if they see me give up, then that's about the worst thing I could do," Gerhardt said. "Maybe they can use me for an inspiration when they get older." —Buffalo News (12/25/2011)

There may be one silver lining to the economic cloud hanging over the United States this holiday season: The odds of having to put in an appearance at the sometimes-awkward company party are at a record low. —Reuters (11/17/2011)

A corporate tax break for buyers of computers, engines and other equipment is proving surprisingly popular, depriving the federal government of tens of billions of dollars in expected revenue...But there may be a silver lining. The tax break aims to stimulate investment, and it seems to be working. —The New York Times (2/3/2012)

"It's the silver lining to this cloud. The extreme weather is like slapping someone in the face and saying you have to start paying attention." —Jennifer Francis, climate scientist at Rutgers University (2/25/2013)

Silver lining means something good in a bad situation.

The phrase refers to a popular proverb: "There is a silver lining behind every cloud." It means that no matter how bad a situation is, something good can be found, or that if something bad is happening now, something good will follow.

The phrase silver lining was first written by the poet John Milton in 1634, and the idiom based on it became well-known during the 1800's.

single out

Some reports said journalists had been singled out by police who used batons to beat and charge protesters. —The New York Times (1/28/2011)

He [Christian Bale] singled out his co-stars, including Melissa Leo, who earlier had won for

supporting actress for playing his mother in the film. —Los Angeles Times (2/28/2011)

"But to single out one segment of our diverse religious community for surveillance without cause raises questions of fairness and equal justice." —The Wall Street Journal (2/25/2012)

"I want to single out and thank our colleagues in our respective customs and border protection agencies for their outstanding leadership and collaboration." —Michael C. Camuñez, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, speaking in Ottawa, Canada, about trade relations between the U.S. and Canada (3/29/2013)

Single out means select one person, group or thing for a purpose.

The phrase has been used with this meaning since the 1600's, when it also referred to hunters separating an animal from its herd or group.

(the) sky is falling

He added that Long Islanders have to start thinking seriously about consolidating school districts if they want to save money in the long run..."In the eyes of school unions and administrators, the sky is falling," said Koppelman, "...but the time has come when really serious examination has to take place." —Newsday (9/5/2011)

It's time for politicians and others to put aside extreme political views...Taking the negative attitude that "the sky is falling" never served Chicken Little very well either. —Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (8/31/2011)

"And over the course of six months to a year, as people sign up, and it works...and the 'sky is falling' predictions that come from the other side do not happen, then health care will become more popular." —President Barack Obama (7/24/2013)

The **sky is falling** refers to a mistaken or exaggerated belief that something bad is happening or will happen.

The expression comes from an English version of an ancient story about panic. An acorn falls on the head of Chicken Little (named Chicken Licken or Henny Penny in some versions), who concludes that the sky is falling and the world will soon end. Chicken Little makes a journey to warn the king and persuades other animals to go along.

The earliest printed example in my searches comes from 1832:

To hear their harangues on the eve of an election, one would suppose that the fable of Chicken Little was about to become a truth, and that the sky was actually falling; and so from the statements in party newspapers we often seem to be on the eve of a revolution; but the great mass of the people in reality take very little interest in the matter. —"Discourse delivered at Plymouth, Mass." by Convers Francis (12/22/1832)

sky is the limit

While Google Offers is generating a fraction of the revenue that Groupon handles, it is growing..."The sky's the limit from here," Eric Rosenblum, a Google Offers executive, wrote on the company blog yesterday. —New York Post (11/4/2011)

His [Cain's] rhetorical, evanescent, only-in-our-times burst of fame will likely prove his greatest

obstacle to actual political success. But a future in entertainment? There, the sky's the limit. —The New Republic (11/7/2011)

When asked if the Chinese market could one day equal the U.S. market in terms of sales, he said, "The sky is the limit." —San Jose Mercury-News (10/18/2011)

"I want to get back on the field and keep ascending, keep rising. The sky's the limit for me." —Will Beatty, after signing a five-year, $38.75-million contract with the New York Giants football team (2/27/2013)

The **sky is the limit** means there is no limit. It is frequently spoken or written as the **sky's the limit**.

The earliest example in my searches is from Oct. 15, 1908, in an account of a 1908 meeting in Atlantic City, N.J., of the American Street and Interurban Railway Engineering Association: "Theoretically, as to possibilities, 'the sky's the limit. '"

slam-dunk

It is essential to distinguish between hard facts and what is an assessment or judgment. The so-called slam-dunk case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction illustrates the failure. —The Washington Post (9/11/2011)

The case was not a slam dunk for prosecutors: It took three trials to convict him.—Associated Press (8/29/2011)

It's not quite a slam dunk, but smokers in Florida have won about 70 percent of the 100 or so suits filed against tobacco companies since the Supreme Court's decision. —The Miami Herald (8/30/2013)

A **slam dunk** is absolutely certain. It may be something accomplished without difficulty or resistance. The phrase alludes to a shot in basketball when the player is next to the basket and throws the ball down through it.

Dunk shots became possible in basketball when players could reach high enough to drop or push the ball into the basket. In the 1960's and 1970's, when they began to throw the ball down through the basket with force—sometimes violent force—the dunk shot became the slam dunk.

In an Aug. 16, 2002, obituary for Chick Hearn, announcer for the Los Angeles Lakers, the Associated Press credited him with inventing slam dunk as well as other familiar phrases such as **no harm, no foul** and **air ball**.

slap on the wrist

In addition to home confinement, [Barry] Bonds, 47, was sentenced to two years' probation, ordered to perform 250 hours community service in youth-related activities and pay a $4,000 fine. Assistant U.S. Atty. Matthew A. Parrella called the sentence "a slap on the wrist" and derided the fine as "almost laughable." —Los Angeles Times (12/19/2011)

"Any driver who allows their rage to control their actions behind the wheel essentially turns their vehicle into a deadly weapon," DeAngelo said. "A simple slap on the wrist or ticket can no longer do." —The Times of Trenton (12/20/2011)

If the allegations are true, the settlement lets Citi get away with cheating customers in exchange for a slap on the wrist...Rakoff said. —New York Post (11/29/2011)

A **slap on the wrist** means a weak punishment.

Beginning around 1900, the figurative use of the phrase usually meant a mild rebuke. An example is in a limerick printed in a 1901 journal:

> There was likewise A Maid of the Mist
> Who never as yet had been kissed
> If you tried to embrace her
> She murmured Nay nay sir
> And gave you a slap on the wrist

—Noon (November, 1901)

An early example of the phrase meaning a weak punishment is in a Lawrence, Kansas, newspaper:

...Senator Lodge, who is so cautious that he requires a report of the weather bureau before he will venture an assertion that it is a fine day; and who is of that fine flower of New England refinement that considers a slap on the wrist an adequate punishment for most offenses. —The Jeffersonian Gazette (2/2/1910)

sleep in, veg out

You'd think people would use their weekends out in the Hamptons to slow down, sleep in and stare at the wall, to grill some kebabs out under the stars with family; to veg out at the beach... —The Wall Street Journal (6/27/2011)

Superintendent Terry Grier's administration proposes starting high schools later, at 8:45 a.m., responding to parents' concerns and brain research that teenagers do better if they sleep in. —Houston Chronicle (blog, 2/24/2011)

After Orlando-based attorney Jason Johnson comes home, spends time with his newborn and puts her to bed, he likes to retreat to the bedroom, be alone and "veg out"...—The Miami Herald (2/14/2012)

Sleep in means sleep late, staying in rather than getting out of bed and going out.

Veg out means relax and do something that requires no thinking. It is based on a slang meaning of vegetable: someone with no mental capacity.

Printed examples of sleep in have been found from the early 1800's.

The precise origin of veg out is unknown, but it must have been relatively new in 1980, when William Safire wrote in his Oct. 26 "On Language" column in The New York Times about a proliferation of phrases ending with the preposition "out." Safire warned: "'To veg out' does not mean to eat your vegetables. It means to turn into a vegetable."

sleep on it

At one point, he told a group of New York reporters at President Obama's inaugural weekend that he had made up his mind, but wanted a few days to sleep on it. —New York Daily News (blog, 4/12/2011)

Maybe after he watches the video and sleeps on it, Larry Drew will regret the choice of words. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (1/20/2011)

"I thought about making my decision last night, but I decided to sleep on it. I got up this morning and knew I wanted to commit." —Chicago Tribune (2/18/2012)

Sleep on it means wait before making a decision.

It usually implies waiting until the next day, but in the Daily News example, the person postponing the decision—former New York Governor David Paterson—wanted more than one night's sleep.

Printed examples of this expression have been found from as early as the 1500's. In earlier times, dreams and their interpretation often were considered an important part of decision-making. Today, someone who sleeps on it before making a decision usually just wants to be thinking clearly.

sleight of hand

With a hillside view of Hollywood, the building has numerous theaters, bars and dining rooms that offer everything from sleight of hand to elaborate grand illusions. —Associated Press (10/31/2011)

Technology enables this sleight of hand, which lets gas stations cut their payrolls, having co-opted their patrons into doing these jobs without pay. —The New York Times (10/29/2011)

Lawmakers use sleight-of-hand accounting to make laws appear affordable when in reality they aren't. —Bloomberg (8/29/2012)

Sleight of hand is trickery, like the methods used by a magician.

The Associated Press example is literal, referring to magic tricks. New York Times example means that using technology to put consumers to work and cut costs for gas-station owners was like a magic trick.

Literal uses of sleight of hand have been traced to the 1400's. A figurative example was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1851:

> To-day I come for another reason;
> To foster and ripen an evil thought
> In a heart that is almost to madness wrought,
> And to make a murderer out of a prince,
> A sleight of hand I learned long since!

—"Golden Legend"

sling mud

The fair has also long been known as a demarcation for campaigns, the point at which candidates ...sling a little mud at their opponents, or make major announcements. —Sun Herald (Biloxi, Miss., 7/16/2011)

Not everyone was pleased with state Sen. Harriette L. Chandler for suing her mudslinging opponent after she crushed him in last year's election. —Worcester Telegram (6/26/2011)

"It's clear that New Yorkers are not responding to his candidacy and we have full faith they will

also reject his mudslinging." —Jessica Proud, spokesperson for Joe Lhota, referring to advertising for John Catsimatidis, Lhota's opponent for the Republican nomination for New York City mayor (8/26/2013)

To **sling mud** is to make nasty accusations, with the intent of damaging someone's reputation. If you do that, you are a **mudslinger** (or mud-slinger, with a hyphen). The allusion is to throwing mud at people and getting them dirty.

This idiom, which has been traced back to the 1800's, is used mostly in politics. A phrase that is approximately the opposite of slinging mud is **taking the high road**.

slip of the tongue, Freudian slip

"I think it might have been a slip of the tongue," a family friend said. "He's not a racist. He is the nicest guy in the world. He'll help anybody. —WPIX-TV (New York, 10/18/2011)

We do, these days, exert an unrealistically high standard on public figures' oratorical abilities. Few, speaking almost around the clock and often unrehearsed, would be able to avoid the occasional slip of the tongue. —The New Republic (10/1/2011)

There was a fascinating Freudian slip on Thursday afternoon when Secretary of State Clinton, referring to Libya now being awash with weapons, described a U.S. "concern as to how we disarm" the country, only then catching herself and correcting her statement to "or how the Libyans disarm everybody who has weapons." —Salon (10/20/2011)

More than halfway through a panel discussion before Republican rainmakers in Aspen, Texas Gov. Rick Perry, while extolling his own foreign policy credentials, referred to himself "as the president."...After the Freudian slip in which Perry imagined he already was president, Isaacson sounded convinced of it. —The New Mexico Independent (7/26/2011)

A **slip of the tongue** is a mistake while speaking, an accidental statement of a word or phrase.

A **Freudian slip** is a mistake that reveals what a person really thinks.

Slip of the tongue uses one of many meanings of slip—an accident. The phrase has been traced to the early 1700's, and a related expression, **slip of the pen**—a mistake in writing—dates to the 1600's.

An early example of Freudian slip is in a news article from 1959:

Tallulah [Bankhead] played the starring role for Actors Equity Association and performed with gusto despite a tendency to pronounce "course" as "curse," which she confided was "a freudian slip if I ever heard it, dahlings." —Associated Press (4/15/1959)

slippery slope

Based on feedback so far, Manning believes principals and others welcome more direction from the archdiocese "but there is a slippery slope. They don't want the diocese micromanaging our schools." —Dayton Daily News (10/2/2011)

When asked if the drone attack against a U.S. citizen—in effect, execution without trial—sets a precedent, Zarate said, "It's a good question. You run the risk of a slippery slope here." —CBS News (10/1/2011)

Threatening boycotts because of political contributions is anti-business and a very slippery slope. —LaCrosse Tribune (10/2/2011)

"When you start this racial profiling, it's a slippery slope, and it's so bad for so many in the community." —Benjamin Crump, attorney for the family of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old student killed in Florida (8/18/2013)

If you take one step down a **slippery slope**, you may slide all the way to the bottom. This metaphor is applied to many situations, warning that doing something once risks doing it permanently or too much.

A similar but less frequently used metaphor is **the camel's nose in the tent**. Once you let the camel get that far, it is hard to keep the whole animal from coming in.

Metaphors based on slippery ground have been used at least since the 1500's. Slippery slope, used literally, gained in frequency during the mid-1800's. An example of the phrase used figuratively is in a London magazine published in 1906:

We do not want the circus element to intrude itself into the sacred domains of golf. But if we are not very careful we shall soon find ourselves on the slippery slope... —The Bystander (12/12/1906)

slush fund

A spiraling corruption probe into allegations of a slush fund to funnel money to political parties has been one of the first emergencies for Italian Premier Mario Monti's fledgling government. —Associated Press (12/1/2011)

Tim Day...charged that Team Thomas, a nonprofit...to help D.C. youth, was a "slush fund" that was neither registered with the IRS nor in good standing with the city government. —The Washington Post (12/2/2011)

He also is facing 19 fraud and tax counts and is accused of turning the Kilpatrick Civic Fund charity into a personal slush fund. —The Detroit News (11/30/2011)

A **slush fund** may be a separate, sometimes secret place to keep money for bribes or politics. That definition is consistent with the Associated Press example. But slush fund is often used with a broader meaning: money controlled by an individual (the phrase implies it should not be) and spent in questionable ways.

In its original meaning slush fund was not as negative. In the 1700's and 1800's, a ship's crew was allowed to sell the fat they collected when cooking meat. The fat was slush and the money went into a slush fund controlled by the crew. During the 1800's the phrase described similar funds on land, small amounts raised by selling waste or unwanted things. Using slush fund to describe money spent in questionable ways began in the later 1800's.

small potatoes

The lines they draw will last for the decade, so they'll influence who gets elected to Congress and the Statehouse. No small potatoes. —Dallas Morning News (1/3/2011)

The 2001 collapse of Enron may look like small potatoes by post-2008 standards of corporate malfeasance and disaster. —Reuters (11/11/2011)

"We actually need to be willing to offer a good Egyptian government more help than we've been offering... This is small potatoes compared to the size of our economy or any war budget that we ultimately have to account for if a place like that falls apart." —Michael O'Hanlon, an expert on defense and foreign policy issues at the Brookings Institution (7/7/2013)

Small potatoes means not important, or a small, insignificant amount. **No small potatoes** means important, something that deserves attention.

Printed examples of small potatoes used with a similar meaning have been found from as early as the middle 1800's.

smell a rat

"We kind of smelled a rat. I did, anyway, she said." "You can tell when trouble is coming, and it looked like trouble." —The Hartford Courant (12/19/2011)

It wasn't just Harry Markopolos who smelled a rat. As Mr. Markopolos explained in his letter, Goldman Sachs was refusing to do business with Mr. Madoff... —The New York Times (5/27/2011)

GOP Reps. Fred Upton of Michigan and Cliff Stearns of Florida issued a joint statement Wednesday saying it was clear that Solyndra was a dubious investment. "We smelled a rat from the onset," the two lawmakers said. —Associated Press (9/1/2011)

Smell a rat means be suspicious.

Rats had a bad reputation long before people knew they were a source of bubonic plague. Since the 1500's, calling someone a rat has meant a variety of negative things: dishonest, disloyal, worthless, etc. Figurative uses of smell a rat, referring to suspicion, have been found as early as the 1600's.

In this 1708 verse, the meaning is similar to the modern examples:

> Yet with such Caution managed all their Chat
> That he should hear no Noise nor smell a Rat

—"Truth in Fiction / Select Fables of Aesop and Other Authors" by Edmund Arwaker (1708)

smoke and mirrors

Critics say the accounting practice is mostly smoke and mirrors, and doesn't lead to real deficit reduction as lawmakers have promised the American public. —ABC News (4/15/2011)

As tension rises over Iran's disputed nuclear program, chatter indicating a potential Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear targets has never been higher. But in the smoke-and-mirrors world of Middle East geopolitics, such talk can often be a diplomatic weapon in its own right and sometimes an alternative to genuine action. —Reuters (3/2/2012)

"That's why I'm so grateful for the great work that Jeff Zients and his team have done in shaping this budget. The numbers work. There's not a lot of smoke and mirrors in here." —President Barack Obama (4/10/2013)

Smoke and mirrors means deceiving the public or audience.

The metaphor, which recalls the use of smoke and mirrors to create illusions in magic shows or

theatrical productions, was used by Jimmy Breslin in a 1975 essay about politics.

smoking gun

"Improper payments" is a polite way of saying bribes—which are a violation of Foreign Corrupt Practices Act—and the magazine has an internal Koch Industries letter to back up the charge, which a law professor says is a "smoking gun" that should attract the attention of the Justice Department. —New York Magazine (10/3/2011)

Just because American intelligence does not have phone intercepts of ISI officers ordering the attack does not mean that the ISI didn't order it. It only means that the U.S. doesn't have a smoking gun. —Forbes (10/2/2011)

"I certainly do think that it's a distraction for this White House and it's a distraction for the President, but the fact remains that there's no real smoking gun yet on this IRS story." —Ron Christie, Republican strategy expert (5/16/2013)

A **smoking gun** is conclusive evidence of wrongdoing.

It alludes to a criminal caught holding the still-smoking murder weapon. A. Conan Doyle helped make this image popular in one of his Sherlock Holmes detective stories:

Then we rushed on into the captain's cabin, but as we pushed open the door there was an explosion from within, and there he lay with his head on the chart of the Atlantic, which was pinned upon the table, while the chaplain stood, with a smoking pistol in his hand, at his elbow. —"The Adventure of the Gloria Scott" (1893)

When smoking gun became a metaphor, the incriminating evidence could be a piece of paper. The phrase was frequently used during the 1970's Watergate scandal, referring to evidence that would prove a political crime had been committed.

Some are still searching for what has come to be termed 'the murder weapon'—or 'the smoking gun'—the definitive piece of evidence that the President committed a crime. —The New Yorker (10/21/1974)

snap up

Marathon Oil will spend $3.5 billion in cash to snap up oil and natural gas fields in Texas as the company boosts exploration and production in a highly targeted and energy rich region. —Associated Press (6/1/2011)

It sets up a situation eerily similar to last year's, when prices hit a record $4.6230 a pound in February on hopes China would snap up the metal. —The Wall Street Journal (2/29/2012)

Private equity firms stand to benefit from the misfortunes of Europe's major telecom operators as they snap up mobile assets...—Reuters (2/28/2012)

Snap up something means get or buy something quickly.

An early example of this phrase was published in 1550 by Miles Coverdale, a Bible translator and bishop. Covedale's sentence, translated into modern English: "When we are idle and full of lust and pleasure, the devil snaps us up."

sneak preview

It is a small country of about 4.5 million on the edge of Europe. But the Irish [election] results are a sneak preview of greater turmoil ahead. —Bloomberg News (3/1/2011)

A new $27 million regional transplant and kidney care center will open Monday at Erie County Medical Center, but hospital officials offered a sneak preview Friday. —Buffalo News (12/10/2011)

"...the export numbers for November will be awful and they may have had a sneak preview of that." —The Wall Street Journal (11/30/2011)

A **sneak preview** is a performance or showing of a play or movie before the official opening or release. Sneak originally was used because the events had little or no advertising. In figurative uses, sneak preview (in contrast with just preview), suggests that few people are aware of it. If you are given a sneak preview of something, such as your friend's wedding dress, you are getting to see it before most other people.

The use of sneak preview referring to movies and theater began during the 1930's. Examples of its extended use, referring to other things, have been found from the 1950's.

sob story

Michail Paunwar, a senior in Westfield, Ind., excluded [from his essay] the painful hospital scenes about his father's colon cancer, figuring admissions officers could do without "a sob story." —The New York Times (10/28/2011)

Lonely and panicked, he has summoned Byron...to keep him company and listen to his sob story. —The Miami Herald (6/8/2011)

Madonna's precipitous sales drop isn't some sob story of the perils of growing older in the entertainment industry and being supplanted by newer models...This year alone, she's managed to win a Golden Globe and launch a fragrance, and she's set to embark on a six-month-long world tour. —Salon.com (4/11/2012)

A **sob story** is an emotional account that tries to gain sympathy. It is a pejorative (negative) phrase. If you say someone told you a sob story, the story failed to make you sympathetic.

The earliest printed examples I found are from 1912:

So I pulled a sob story on the manager an' he let me off. —Milwaukee Sentinel (7/17/1912)

The "Daily Statesman" jumped into the breach and opened a fund for the heroine of the sob story. —Collier's (9/28/1912)

song and dance

Thus mediation now is a song and dance, ritualistic, done to satisfy Judge Susan Nelson and football fans eager for both sides to reach a compromise. —CBS Sports (4/17/2011)

...calling kids' films liberal is a familiar song-and-dance for conservative hosts—other films that have recently been criticized include "Cars 2" and "Happy Feet 2." —The Washington Post (blog, 2/23/2011)

Even in this era of indicted politicians like Blagojevich and DeLay appearing on TV shows (the

latter competed on "Dancing With the Stars" while awaiting his trial and corruption conviction), Blagojevich's jurors showed a refreshing ability to see through the old song and dance. —Chicago Tribune (6/29/2011)

"If they had some better ideas, I've already told them I'm happy to hear them. But I haven't heard any so far. What I've heard is just the same old song and dance." —President Barack Obama, talking about opponents of the 2010 health care law (7/18/2013)

When not referring literally to people singing and dancing, a **song and dance** can mean a distracting or evasive argument, as in the Chicago Tribune example. It can mean a presentation or argument made many times, as in the Washington Post example and Obama quotation. Or, it can mean an elaborate presentation or proceeding, as in the CBS Sports example (see also **dog and pony show**).

Examples of figurative uses of song and dance have been found from as early as the late 1800's.

soup to nuts

Price said her business offers virtually any service "from soup to nuts" in terms of marketing services, which include Web or graphic design, online Internet options or regular print material. —Naperville Sun (4/17/2011)

The groups have been part of fractious public discussions with the conservation department, which has undertaken a soup to nuts evaluation of the sprawling wooded site. —Boston Globe (4/11/2011)

"We're going to do a thorough review, from soup to nuts." —Howard Steinberg, chairman of the Long Island Power Authority (11/10/2012)

Soup to nuts means from beginning to end; complete. It is based on the idea of a meal with many dishes, starting with soup and ending with nuts.

It is often positive, but can be a negative description of something that is too long or elaborate, as in the Boston Globe's review of "Elizabeth I," which said the novel "does, at times, get bogged down in state dinners and a soup-to-nuts account of the reign." (4/15/2011)

In the Roman Empire (where some lengthy dinners took place), the expression was "from the egg to the apples" (ab ovo usque ad mala). An early example of the current idiom was published in a London magazine:

American Dinners. The rapidity with which dinner and dessert are eaten by our go-a-head friends is illustrated by the boast of a veteran in the art of speedy mastication, who could get "from soup to nuts" in ten minutes.—The Working Man's Friend (1833)

sour grapes

...pro-democracy politicians noted several cases of voters registering in closely contested constituencies under false or suspicious addresses...Chief Executive Donald Tsang suggested that losing candidates were suffering from a case of sour grapes. —The Wall Street Journal (12/13/2011)

A spokeswoman for AvMed said the bid protest is simply a case of sour grapes. "The protests are coming from plans that did not have a favorable result." —The Miami Herald (9/7/2011)

Perry worked on his father's ranch and began a stupendously successful political career...The word his former opponents use most frequently to describe him is "lucky." Really, "lucky" comes up all the time. It may be sour grapes... —The New York Times (9/17/2011)

Cromley noted the building's preservation came with a cost..."What I had designed there was cutting-edge architecture with cutting-edge environmental technology. I'll never get that opportunity again, nor will the city get that opportunity again to get that type of building. I certainly don't want to sound like sour grapes, but it should be mentioned." —Alexandria Times (8/28/2013)

Sour grapes means criticizing something one cannot have. It alludes to an ancient fable, "The Fox and the Grapes," in which the fox cannot reach some delicious-looking fruit and deals with its disappointment by saying they are sour.

But wait! In the first three news examples, the meaning is different. Instead, the phrase describes disappointed people who criticized an opponent or authority, not the thing they couldn't get. The Alexandria Times example comes closer to the original metaphor, but examples like it are hard to find. At some point our understanding of sour grapes went awry.

When Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) used the expression, he had no problem remembering what the fable meant:

His heart was heavy, and he said with a disdain which he did not feel, that it wasn't anything to spit like Tom Sawyer; but another boy said "Sour grapes!" and he wandered away a dismantled hero. —The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876)

spick and span

Cemetery officials and Wilde's descendants hope that this time the glass enclosure will keep the grave spick and span. —Reuters (12/1/2011)

"I'm so nervous, I can't talk," said John Donovan, a shopkeeper, funeral director and farmer who owns Obama's ancestral home. "We have the place spick-and-span." —USA Today (5/23/2011)

Nondoorman buildings, however, often seemed dowdy. "They weren't spick-and-span enough to make me comfortable running a professional business," Mr. Murray said. —The New York Times (3/10/2011)

Spick and span means perfectly maintained and cleaned—as if new.

In the past the expression meant new, but it is seldom used with that meaning now.

An older phrase, "span new" (very new), was used as early as the 1300's and was also an ancestor of the modern "brand new." So far, no one has come up with a conclusive explanation of how or when "spick" was added. It is among the all-but-forgotten words (like hunker, aback, gung, beck, shebang, derring and shrift) now used only in an idiomatic phrase.

spill the beans

Rather than spill the beans all at once, the Times on Wednesday again released the "news" of its payment-model game plan in dribs and drabs. —Marketwatch (3/2/2011)

Libya's former justice minister, Abdel Jalil, has said in recent days he has "proof" that the bombing was ordered by Gadhafi and that al-Megrahi, a former Libyan intelligence agent, threatened to

"spill the beans" if the Libyan leader did not arrange his release from prison. —NBC News (2/28/2011)

Rengan Rajaratnam told his brother that the former McKinsey partner was "a little dirty," and alleged that he freely offered him information on AMD. "He's like, 'buy it, buy as much as you can as soon as you can,'" Rengan said and laughs on the call. "He finally spilled his beans."—The Wall Street Journal (3/24/2011)

One meaning of spill—tell everything— may sound like 21st-Century slang but has been used that way for centuries. **Spill the beans**, in use for only about 100 years, means tell a secret.

In the Wall Street Journal's quotation, **spill his beans**, rather than spill the beans, is unusual.

See also, let the cat out of the bag.

split the difference

It was a report that appeared to split the difference between the university's offer and the union demands. —Foster's Daily Democrat (4/18/2011)

It was 1960 when Dick Katte and his college sweetheart, the woman who had become his wife after taking the initiative to ask him out on a date, decided to split the difference between their home states of Wisconsin and Washington and settle in Colorado. —Denver Post (3/3/2012)

"This is an incredibly cautious White House...they're very good at making sort of clear decisions on clear issues. The really, really difficult decisions, they tend to split the difference." —David Rohde, journalist (7/7/2013)

Split the difference means compromise by finding the midpoint between two positions in a negotiation.

The expression may be literal, referring to numbers: I offer $100 and you want $200; we split the difference by compromising at $150. But it is often used to mean compromise in situations that have no specific numbers. It may mean "choose something that is between two other choices," as in the Denver Post example.

Split the difference has been in use at least since the 1700's.

spread the word

"We need you to spread the word," said Canning, who knows the value of networking. —Chicago Tribune (2/9/2011)

...her mom wants to spread the word about service dogs for diabetics. —KMTR.com (3/5/2011)

Some launched a website, savethefloor.com, to spread the word about the proposal. —Reuters (3/5/2011)

Spread the word means make something known to other people. In the Chicago Tribune example it means tell everyone you can.

Early examples of this phrase are religious:

After St. Francis Xaverius had in the Year 1542 spread the Word of God through the remotest Parts of the World... —"A Voyage Round the World" by Dr. John Francis Gemelli Careri (London, 1704)

spring in one's step

An upbeat attitude can do more than put a spring in your step; it can also improve medical outcomes. —Scientific American (July 2011)

"I love a news headline that will brighten a day. That will put a spring in my step." —Brian L. Thompson, newspaper columnist (8/10/2011)

"After those positive jobs numbers came out, White House officials certainly have a spring in their step... " —Jim Acosta, television news correspondent (3/9/2013)

If it refers only to the way you walk, having a **spring in your step** means you are walking with energy, bouncing up and down a little.

The Scientific American example means, "Having a positive attitude can do more than make you look energetic and confident."

Brian L. Thompson's statement means, "Tthat will make me act happy and energetic."

An early example of the phrase is in an English novel:

He had a little cluster of fresh spring primroses, pulled last morning in the Ayr garden, gracing his button-hole, and there was a spring in his step, and an elastic grace in his manner as he went away, that made glad the heart of the little wife. —Harry Muir, by Margaret Oliphant (1853)

spruce up

Cory Booker spruced up Newark's parks and public-housing projects. —The Wall Street Journal (12/14/2011)

...the Obamas have signed their 2011 holiday card, an artist's rendering of the White House library, all spruced up for Christmas and its fireplace roaring. —Los Angeles Times (11/1/2011)

From the chic "French Cat" to Martha Stewart's sumptuous "Entertaining," these photo-rich books will spruce up any coffee table. —New York Post (12/20/2011)

Spruce up means improve the appearance of something or someone.

Spruce was used as a verb meaning make clean or neat at least as early as the 1500's. That became spruce up in the 1600's. An early example is in a popular novel of 1665, "The English Rogue":

...I could hear my Landlord rise and go out of the house, wherefore I also arose and made myself ready, and indeed I spruced myself up in the best manner I could... —"The English Rogue" by Richard Head (1665)

square deal, fair and square

He also must continue with anger management treatment and mental health counseling...He said he now has a wealth of resources and people he can call when upset, and added that he thinks this is "a very square deal." —Tri-City Herald (Kennewick, Wash., 7/23/2011)

Jobs said he wouldn't be upset if the quarry left town, though he acknowledged that its owners bought the land fair and square. —San Jose Mercury-News (7/23/2011)

"President Obama won. He won fair and square. We won the House. We won it fair and square.

Democrats still control the Senate. Slight edge to the Democrats. Bottom line, it's over." —Congressman Peter King (11/25/2012)

In both **square deal** and **fair and square**, the meaning of square is fair (honest, honorable, reasonable, equitable). So fair and square really means fair and fair. People like phrases with words that rhyme, like **snug as a bug in a rug**, which means very comfortable.

Square deal and fair and square have been in use at least since the 1600's.

square meal

...Captain Flotsam is pleased. "Mmm. Me favorite!" he growls happily. "A fine square meal for any seadog!" But the crew is dissatisfied. Sick of nothing but sardines to eat morning, noon and night, they want to go ashore...—Wilkes-Barre Times-Leader (7/22/2011)

"Twenty-three hours a day he might be by himself in a small cell, but one hour a day he will be allowed to go outside, see the sunshine, have a little exercise, get three square meals a day." —Wolf Blitzer, television news anchor, after Ariel Castro, the kidnaper of three women in Detroit, was sentenced to life in prison (8/1/2013)

A square meal does not mean the meal is square-shaped. As in the expressions **square deal** and **fair and square** (see above), square in square meal means good, fair, proper, nourishing. "Three squares a day" is a colloquial expression that means three good meals a day.

Square meal has been traced to the mid-1800's and originated in the United States, as this example from an English novel reflects:

Now, Joseph Chacomb, who was not at all times—owing to pecuniary conditions—accustomed to what the Americans call a square meal, was making the most of his stay... —"With Harp and Crown: a novel" by Sir Walter Besant and James Rice (1890)

square off

The powerful Tunisian trade union squared off against the interim government on Friday as thousands of protesters demanding the complete eradication of the old ruling party stormed into the streets. —The New York Times (1/21/2011)

With the referendum over the constitutional amendments that will shape Egypt's immediate political future just days away, the country's nascent political forces were squaring off on Sunday, scrambling to influence a choice that leaves many confused. —The New York Times (3/14/2011)

It's time to turn a sharp eye to the Republicans vying to become president as they square off in tonight's debate. —Newsday (9/6/2011)

Square off means get ready for a fight, argument or competition.

The expression is assumed to have come from the square that designated an area for fighting. It is now used frequently in all kinds of sports, referring to contests between individuals or teams.

The area boxers fight in is a square, which is confusingly called a ring. Why? Centuries ago, boxing was done within circles. That changed during the 1800's but people went on using the word ring.

Examples of square off used in situations other than fighting have been found from as early as the

1870's.

square peg in a round hole

But that doesn't satisfy the consumer demand for salmon or tuna or cod. "With aquaculture it's a bit like we're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole," says Paul Greenberg, the author of Four Fish, one of the best books on global seafood. —TIME (7/12/2011)

"I think in our society there does still seem to be a great insistence on fitting in and I think that maybe our study is one piece of evidence that shows that you don't have to fit in and sometimes you can get good things out of being a square peg in a round hole." —Chicago Tribune (8/28/2012)

Amid the political talk shows on KABC, their ribald humor and lifestyle-oriented chat were "like a square peg in a round hole." —Los Angeles Times (8/31/2012)

A **square peg in a round hole** may be something not good for its intended purpose, or a person not well suited for a role or situation, as in the Chicago Tribune example.

The peg may be "forced" or "fit" into the hole, and sometimes it is a **round peg in a square hole**. An example from 1837 uses both:

Jeremy Taylor says that the world is a board with peg-holes, some square and some round, and that certain men, fitted for one state of things and not for another, are square pegs which get into round holes, and round pegs which get into square holes. —"England under seven administrations" by Albany Fonblanque

square the circle

The internet has to be paid for somehow, even though its founding mythology has created the expectation that everything ought to be free. Businesses have found inventive ways to square the circle. But the result has been a strangely dishonest kind of commerce...—The Boston Globe (7/12/2011)

"We think there's no reason here that we can't square the circle here and have a significant deal," the president said. —Bloomberg (7/6/2011)

"Distrust is created when people can't square the circle." —Carly Fiorina, television commentator, talking about government tracking of phone and Internet data (6/23/2013)

To **square the circle** (change a circle into a square) means to do something difficult or impossible.

The phrase alludes to very old mathematical problems in measuring squares and circles.

The following excerpt, from a sermon by John Dunne, means, "Don't try to solve this problem yourself, let God do it." It also uses the metaphor of returning to a starting point (see **come full circle**).

God is a circle himself, and he will make thee one; Go not thou about to square either circle... This then is the course of God's mercy. He proceeds as he begun... —The Sermons of John Dunne (~1631)

square with

For example, the claim made by the [Tennessee State University] president that she is just eliminating low-producing programs does not square with the facts. —The Tennessean (7/25/2011)

But how does that square with the Ryan budget, which dramatically cuts social programs for just those people? —The Washington Post (8/30/2012)

Pitney noted that public support for same-sex marriage has been steadily increasing despite Catholic Church opposition to it. "The notion a priest can deliver many changes in public opinion doesn’t square with recent history," he said. —The Riverside Press-Enterprise (8/30/2013)

To be **square with** is to fit together well. In carpentry, pieces of wood must be square (have accurate 90-degree angles) to fit well. If a statement does not square with the facts, the statement is not true.

This meaning of square with has been traced to the 1500's. In my searches the earliest examples of square with the facts are from the 1830's.

squirrel away

Whether for wedding gifts or as a way to squirrel away savings, Iranians have a long history of buying gold coins, widely available from dealers in high street shops and bazaars. —Reuters (7/6/2011)

And don't squirrel away all those must-haves in your suitcase—on embarkation days you may be separated from your luggage for hours... —Huffington Post (8/8/2013)

They also put away money for emergencies: Tim Sadowski, the father, earned about $160,000 a year and managed to squirrel away $80,000 in savings. —NBC News (8/30/2013)

Squirrel away means save for the future, like a squirrel burying nuts for the winter.

From John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath," 1939: "I been squirrelin' money away. Hol' out your han', Tom. I got seven dollars here."

stack the deck

But for decades now, Americans have...seen the deck too often stacked against them. And they know that Washington hasn't always put their interests first. —President Barack Obama (speech to Congress, 9/8/2011)

As an American female diplomat on a military-led, all male British Provincial Reconstruction Team [in Iraq], she has the deck stacked against her and must spend much of her time just trying to fit in. —The Washington Times (9/2/2011)

"The deck seems to be stacked against them and the moment seems to have shifted in favor of the president..." —Reza Sayah, television news correspondent, referring to protesters in Cairo (12/4/2012)

If the **deck is stacked** against someone, that person has an unfair disadvantage.

Literally, stacking the deck is cheating in a card game by arranging (stacking) the pile (deck) of cards.

The phrase referring to card games has been used since the early 1800's. An early example of its

figurative use is in a magazine in 1906:

We are reliably informed that the Czar feels toward the Duma as a hen does toward her brood when she discovers that someone has stacked the deck on her by giving her duck eggs. —The Pacific Monthly (July, 1906)

stand down

The scenario unfolded underneath Nevada last week, when rescue teams were told to stand down in their bid to reach 28-year-old Devin Westenskow, even as they had evidence he was still alive. —Associated Press (3/6/2011)

Mr. Netanyahu stressed that Israel's and America's leaders wouldn't stand down in the face of what he described as Tehran's growing threat to global security. —The Wall Street Journal (3/6/2012)

"I think you're actually going to hear some testimony that says we did have some military options. We could have gotten some people there, and they were told to stand down." —Congressman Jason Chaffetz, talking about the 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya (5/5/2013)

Leading Egyptian opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei has joined thousands of protesters in Cairo defying a curfew to demand President Mubarak stand down. —BBC News (1/30/2011)

In military contexts, **stand down** means relax, no longer preparing for conflict or action. Three of the news examples extend that concept to other subjects.

In the BBC example, stand down means resign as president. The more common American phrase in this context is **step down**.

In the courts, witnesses or jurors may stand down when their participation is complete. This use has been recorded as early as the 1600's. Examples of other uses have been found from the early 1900's.

stand in good stead

He may be from an indebted nation, but his international experience with bank mergers would stand him in good stead at the ECB. —Bloomberg News (1/4/2011)

"...the company has a diversified business that should stand it in good stead against the new competitive framework." —Dow Jones Newswires (2/15/2011)

"His living wage stand puts him in good stead with liberals." —New York Daily News (2/23/2012)

If something **stands you in good stead** it is useful to you. If you are **in good stead** with someone, you have their approval or good feelings.

Stead (rhymes with "dead") had a variety of meanings in past centuries but now is seldom used except in these expressions. In good stead has been traced to the 1400's, meaning in good circumstances.

stand pat

"The Bank of Japan will likely stand pat this week. If it were to ease [monetary policy], it would be in response to sharp yen rises." —Reuters (10/23/2011)

Unable to attract...a deal that made more strategic sense than holding on, Hulu's owners have decided to stand pat...instead of selling it. —paidContent.org (10/13/2011)

Many BlackBerry users openly express frustration with their device, but tend to point to one specific reason or another as a reason to stand pat for another generation. —Beatweek Magazine (9/29/2011)

"...if we stand pat, if we don't do anything, then growth will be slower than it should be." —President Barack Obama (7/24/2013)

To **stand pat** means to make no changes.

The expression comes from poker. If you like the cards you have been dealt and don't want to replace any of them, you stand pat.

An early reference to poker:

When one is in (as he ought seldom to be) without even so much as a pair, his choice must be either to discard four cards, or three cards, and draw to the highest or two highest in the hand; or throw away the whole hand, and draw five; or look content and serious, stand pat, and bet high. —Hoyle's Games (1875)

And this is an early example of using poker as a metaphor:

His ten-year-old boy was at the table, and as paterfamilias handed him the bread-platter the youthful scion of the house remarked, as he grabbed the loaf, "I cut." The estimable lady of the house smiled, and observed as she refused the proffered platter, "I stand pat." —Ballou's Monthly Magazine (Boston, April, 1883)

state of the art

"NBC's $100 million project adding office space and more state-of-the-art facilities demonstrates a significant investment in the state of Connecticut." —Greenwich Time (10/25/2011)

Work was done to establish state-of-the-art playgrounds to provide safe, physical exercise children need. —Mason City Globe Gazette (10/25/2011)

"We're trying to push the state-of-the-art technology. So, if we use suppliers that are just producing the old technology, then we're not going to have a revolutionary rocket."—Elon Musk, chief executive of SpaceX (5/3/2012)

"From dams and power plants to state-of-the-art air traffic management, intelligent highways, high-tech desalination plants, they are developing systems that promote sustainable growth." —Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (9/20/2012)

State of the art means most advanced.

It often refers to buildings and technology, and frequently is used in news releases seeking positive publicity.

The phrase can be traced back at least as far as the 1700's. A London magazine in July, 1764, referred to the present state of the art of war, and by the 1800's the phrase frequently referred to buildings and architecture, as it often does today.

See also, **cutting edge**.

stay afloat

The ranks of America's poor are greater than previously known, reaching a new level of 49.1 million - or 16 percent - due to rising medical costs and other expenses that make it harder for people to stay afloat, according to new census estimates. —Associated Press (11/7/2011)

The contest cooked up by the creators of the popular TV series Glee, Fox Network and the National Association for Music Education is aimed to help school music programs stay afloat in these tough economic times. —The Palm Beach Post (11/7/2011)

"The emerging markets are keeping us all afloat." —Bono, lead singer of U2 and activist (11/14/2012)

Stay afloat (literally, to stay on top of the water) means to keep from running out of money.

In a letter dated Dec. 24, 1538, Hugh Latimer wrote to Thomas Cromwell: "And shortly cometh on my half-year's rent; and then I shall be afloat again, and come clean out of debt."

steal thunder

His [Governor Perry's] Saturday speech comes on the same day as a closely watched ... [Republican] poll in Ames, Iowa... His name won't be on that ballot, and his speech seems designed to steal thunder from the event. —The Wall Street Journal (8/13/2011)

The release of the jam in June violated an exclusivity agreement Babygrande has with GZA and also stole thunder from the rapper's upcoming album, "Dark Matter," court papers charge. —New York Daily News (8/21/2013)

A big worry is that some of the solid buying earlier in November could steal thunder from the rest of the season and leave a deeper lull between Thanksgiving weekend and the few days before Christmas. —Associated Press (11/26/2010)

Steal thunder usually means draw attention away from something, as in the Wall Street Journal and New York Daily News examples.

In the Associated Press example the phrase means take away something.

In all three examples, the meaning is different from the original, "use another person's idea for one's own advantage." That was based on an incident in the early 1700's in which a playwright complained that his new method for making the sound of thunder had been stolen and used in another play.

step up to the plate

The judicial branch should step up to the plate and do its job. —Los Angeles Times (12/28/2011)

"I wish Rob would step up to the plate more and be a little more romantic." —New York Post (12/27/2011)

For only the second time in half a century, there are no holiday lights along Morris Park Ave. and Williamsbridge Road..."There was too much apathy," fumed the owner of F. Ruggiero and Sons

Funeral Home on Morris Park Ave. "The shopkeepers just failed to step up to the plate. They had a million excuses - and now we have no lights." —New York Daily News (12/22/2011)

"There are countries that continue to step up." —Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank, referring to nations increasing their investments in developing countries (11/14/2012)

Leadership is critical to the solution. Our political and business leaders need to step up. —CNN (12/28/2011)

Step up to the plate means do something, taking initiative or responsibility.

Step up is sometimes used with the same meaning, as in the CNN example. (In other contexts step up has different meanings, such as move from a lower place to a higher one, or raise the level of something like sound or electrical current).

In baseball, you step up to the plate when it is your turn to try to hit the ball. The metaphor is so common that someone who "steps up to the plate for the team" might be a player in a sport with no plate, such as basketball, football or hockey. A cricket equivalent, "step up to the crease," is sometimes used in the United Kingdom.

An early example of step up to the plate as a metaphor is in a newspaper published by the Concord, Massachusetts Reformatory in 1916:

Develop this will power, and make it so strong so that the next time we step up to the plate of life, and grab the bat of determination we will knock the ball of misery so far that failure will never be able to find it. —Our Paper (8/12/1916)

stepping stone

One of the Republican leaders of the Missouri House launched his campaign yesterday for secretary of state, a high-profile post that oversees the state's elections and has often served as a stepping stone for higher office. —Associated Press (10/25/2011)

"Profanity is kind of like a stepping stone," study author Dr. Sarah Coyne, family professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, said in a written statement. "You don't go to a movie, hear a bad word, and then go shoot somebody. But when youth both hear and then try profanity out for themselves it can start a downward slide toward more aggressive behavior." —CBS News (10/17/2011)

"...what matters most is resilience: the ability to quickly rebound from failures; indeed, to see failure as a stepping stone to success." —Arianna Huffington (3/20/2013)

Literally, a stepping stone is a flat stone placed in water or on wet ground to help people walk and keep their feet dry. Used figuratively, a **stepping stone** helps someone get somewhere or achieve something.

Usually the phrase refers to progress or advancement, as in the Associated Press example and Arianna Huffington quotation. But as the CBS example shows, a stepping stone may also be part of a negative process. And in business or politics, saying that a person regards a job as a stepping stone may be criticizing the person as too ambitious.

The literal stepping stone has been traced to the 1300's, the figurative use to the 1600's. In 1855, Thomas Macaulay wrote this about King William:

Obstacles apparently insurmountable had been interposed between him and the ends on which he

was intent; and those obstacles his genius had turned into stepping stones.— "The History of England" by Thomas Macaulay (1855)

stick to your guns

...stick to your guns and say, "No." Your resolve will be tested, but being firm helps others respect you. —Vancouver Sun (3/4/2011)

Among Republican voters, more than half wanted their members of Congress to stick to their guns, even if it meant risking a government shutdown, and not to compromise. —Los Angeles Times (4/10/2011)

Told that Madoff might be a thief, Katz got "visibly angry," Harrington recalled. But she stuck to her guns. She said she could not be a party to investing in Madoff.—The New York Times (2/10/2012)

If you **stick to your guns**, you keep your opinion, or you keep trying to do something, despite opposition.

Originally military, this phrase may refer to anyone with a belief or argument to defend. Even pacifists may stick to their guns and refuse to fight.

In this early example the phrase is combined with another 19-Century expression, "Never say die while there's a shot in the locker" (Never give up if there's anything more you can do, however small):

A very few hours sufficed to show the sea-captain to be a most capital electioneer for a small and not very enlightened borough...he threw open all the public-houses, asked a numerous committee every day to dinner, and, chucking his purse up in the air, declared "he would stick to his guns while there was a shot in the locker." —Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (October, 1850)

stick-in-the-mud

"Delray will never be a stick-in-the-mud city. They embrace change and new ideas... —South Florida Sun-Sentinel (12/11/2011)

With one of the most common questions on this side of the river being, "Why is Niagara Falls, Ont., so much more happening than Niagara Falls, N.Y.?" one not need look much further than the contrast between a forward-thinking visionary like Diodati compared to a stick in the mud like Dyster. —Niagara Falls Reporter (7/5/2011)

Lebanese-Assyrian beauty Larsa is considered a "stick in the mud" by fellow Housewives Cristy Rice and Adriana DeMoura-Sidi because she prefers spending time with her NBA All-Star hubby and four kids over dancing at the country club with middle-aged women.—E! Online (2/22/2011)

A **stick-in-the-mud** is someone who is unwilling try something new, take risks or have fun. The phrase suggests someone whose feet are stuck and cannot move forward. (See also, **fuddy duddy**.)

(The phrase may be written with or without hyphens when used as a noun, but should have hyphens when used as an adjective, as in the Sun-Sentinel example.)

Two examples have been cited from the 1700's, but they may not have had the current meaning. The earliest example in my searches of stick-in-the-mud close to its modern sense was written in

the next century:

"Isn't he a priest of the real old stick-in-the-mud religion, that was established in Ireland before Orangemen were heard of, and will flourish when they're all drowned in the Dead Sea?" —The Metropolitan (London, 1832; letter dated September, 1831)

stone's throw

When he's not working, he collects wine, contemporary art and antique French pastry molds, and cooks in the orderly kitchen of his apartment, a stone's throw from the United Nations. —The Wall Street Journal (12/17/2011)

Osama bin Laden was living for at least five years in a specially built compound within a stone's throw from Pakistan's major military academy. —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (5/23/2011)

The euro skidded 0.6 percent against the yen, changing hands at 102.57, a stone's throw from a decade low of 102.211 yen. —Reuters (9/25/2011)

A **stone's throw** means a short distance. It usually refers to physical distance, but when it does not, as in the Reuters example, it means a small amount.

The length of a stone's throw varies, so the phrase is a useful way of being vague. "She stunk so, nobody durst come within a stone's throw of her," John Arbuthnot wrote in "The History of John Bull" (1712).

At least as early as the 1500's, a **stone's cast** had the same meaning in the Bible. This is in the King James version (1616, Luke 22:41): "And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed."

Stone's throw was used during the same period. This example is in a history book published in London:

Description of Waharan...This is a City of very great Antiquity, founded by the natural Africans, in the same Ground it now stands on, about a Stone's Throw from the Mediterranean. —"A Compleat History of the Present Seat of War in Africa" (1632)

stop on a dime, turn on a dime

"It implicitly acknowledges the chaos that would be released if the government were to slam on the brakes," he says. "There's so many wheels in motion right now that you can't just stop on a dime." —PBS Newshour (3/3/2011)

"Will it [pepper spray] stop a charge if a bear's coming right after you and you blast him in the face? Maybe, but then again the bear has a high pain threshold and a bear that is moving at 35 miles an hour is not going to stop on a dime." —KTVA Alaska (3/7/2012)

When large vessels lose engine power, they don't stop on a dime. —The Santa Barbara Independent (2/25/2012)

"The Republican Party nationally is trying to turn on a dime on the issue of immigration." —Susan Page, newspaper reporter and television commentator (3/19/2013)

If someone or something can **stop on a dime**, it can stop suddenly.

Turn on a dime means turn, or change, suddenly.

The PBS Newshour quotation comes from an article about a Florida judge who ruled that new health care legislation was unconstitutional, but would not order the government to stop acting on it immediately.

The expressions probably are related to the fact that a dime is the smallest U.S. coin, but their origin is uncertain.

An early example is in a magazine's warning to motorists:

Remember, you can't stop on a dime. Don't follow another vehicle too closely. —The Au Sable News (November, 1920)

See also, **get off the dime**.

strike a chord

"I think it [Words With Friends] has struck a chord because it's not just a game, it's a way for people to connect and keep in touch with each other." —Travis Boatman, an executive at Zynga Inc. (9/26/2012)

"It's fairly obvious that last night some things [I said] really struck a chord with the American people." —Newt Gingrich, after his debate with other Republican candidates for president (1/17/2012)

"Don [Cornelius]...was able to strike a chord with consumers of all colors and give them an opportunity to not only see their favorite artists, but see what the latest dances were." —Kenard Gibbs, chief executive of Soul Train Holdings (2/1/2012)

Strike a chord means connect with an emotion or opinion.

This phrase is a metaphor based on one meaning of chord: a group of musical notes that are in harmony.

Examples of variations of the phrase have been found from as early as the 1700's. An encyclopedia published in 1867 included this example: "The attempt to subvert civil liberty struck a chord in all hearts which vibrated throughout the land."

strung out

A man who robbed a Niagara Falls drugstore ...was "strung out" at the time of the April 21 theft of hundreds of painkiller pills... —The Buffalo News (12/17/2011)

More than a decade ago, he slept on the streets, he said, strung out on crack and oblivious to his surroundings. —Associated Press (12/9/2011)

Add to it that this year, in particular, there's extra pressure for parents to work longer hours and to stretch more limited resources. Many of us are entering the season already feeling strung-out. —The Washington Post (blog, 12/5/2011)

Strung out means weakened and unhealthy because of drug addiction, or exhausted from lack of rest or too much activity.

In other contexts, it means extended over a distance, such as lights strung out around a Christmas tree or stations strung out along a railway. That sense may also be used figuratively to mean extended over time, as in this example, which quotes Woody Allen about making films:

"That's when you realize that all those things that were delightful in themselves, when strung out for two hours they're not so charming, and they're tedious and not so funny." —Los Angeles Times (12/2/2011)

The earliest figurative use in my searches is in an undated (probably 1890's) U.S. history book, "Queen of Republics," which refers to ships at sea: "They were strung out in the form of a crescent with the heavy fighting ships in the center...." This is a metaphor for things strung together, like beads, a use of strung that has been traced to the 1600's.

Examples of strung out referring to drug use or exhaustion have been found as early as 1959. The expression became more widely used as recreational drug use expanded in the late 1960's.

suffer fools gladly

You also have to remember I've now reached the point in my life where I no longer suffer fools gladly, most especially when the fool turns out to be me. —Chattanoogan.com (2/7/2011)

Carney does not suffer fools gladly and finds it hard to hide his annoyance if he dislikes a question. —Reuters (10/24/2011)

He was a feisty, gruff fellow who did not suffer fools gladly—including the ZANU-PF politicians arriving at his door to beg for donations. He'd send them away with contempt. —The Washington Post (4/8/2011)

Someone who **suffers fools gladly** is patient and kind with people who are not so smart. The phrase is most often used in the negative. If someone says you do not suffer fools gladly, he means you may be intelligent but you are not always nice.

This expression goes back to the Bible, which says a wise person does suffer fools gladly.

sweat the small stuff

"Life is too short and too precious to let this get you down—hit it head-on, and don't sweat the small stuff," she said. —Idaho Press-Tribune (10/25/2011)

"If we don't sweat the small stuff like littering and loitering, it has a big effect on the city's livability. That's when we start going downhill." —The Portland Press Herald (10/25/2011)

Though Sue tends to panic whenever Dennis doesn't feel well, the couple say the heart attack helped them both put things in perspective. They don't sweat the small stuff. —Rochester Democrat & Chronicle (10/18/2011)

Sweat the small stuff means worry about, or devote time and effort to, small details.

Printed examples from as early as 1960 indicate that the phrase probably came into use during the 1950's, but I could find no clue to its precise origin. Variations of this joke have been used at least since the 1970's: "First, don't sweat the small stuff. Second, remember that it's all small stuff."

sweep it under the rug

It's also about whether to remember Blair Mountain or to sweep it under the rug. —National Public Radio (3/5/2011)

What is happening with the Troy Logsdon murder investigation in Beardstown? Anything? Or have they swept it under the rug like they do other things that involve the taverns? —Jacksonville, Illinois, Journal Courier (3/5/2011)

"I have been willing to stand for issues that some believe are controversial and would prefer to sweep under the rug." —Rick Santorum (4/10/2012)

"If you go back three or four years ago, people were a lot more harsh, and this issue really wasn't talked about and it was a little bit swept under the rug. Now we're trying to bring this issue to the forefront." —Brendon Ayanbadejo, a player in the National Football League who supports gay rights (3/24/2013)

Sweep something under the rug means try to hide something embarrassing, unpleasant or incriminating.

Sweeping something **under the carpet** has the same meaning.

Sweeping dirt under a rug may solve a problem temporarily. If you later have to move the rug, you may have **egg on your face**.

An early example:

Educators and government officials have known these truths for some time, and have tried to publicize them. Here they are—all the latest facts—swept together for you. But, instead of now sweeping them under the rug, let's look at the dirt. —Kiplinger's Personal Finance (September, 1948)

sweet spot

Still, the decision to replace old aircraft is a tricky one, said Mr. Baxt, given the volatility of oil prices. "Oil at $115 a barrel is the sweet spot. Any cheaper and airlines feel they can put it off, any more expensive and carriers won't have the money to do it." —Financial Times (6/20/2011)

"The sweet spot is around $1,000 where you can get a bicycle that is fun to ride, yet reliable," Drake said. —Denver Post (6/19/2011)

"We have Democrats and Republicans...sitting down trying to negotiate the sweet spot where we can get something done." —Senator Charles Schumer (2/18/2013)

Sweet spot usually means the best in a range of something: not too much or too little, not too high or too low, not too far or too near, etc.

The sweet spot of a tennis racket is the best place for the ball to hit the strings of the racket. In the Financial Times and Denver Post examples, the sweet spot is the best number in a range of numbers. In the Schumer quotation, it is the point at which compromise may be found.

Before the 1980's, the sweet spot was used literally, describing a very nice place.

tag along

"I didn't do anything. I was eight years old, and I tagged along." —Actress Mila Kunis (10/6/2012)

...it became clear that Ms. Giffords wanted to come anyway. In the morning, she tagged along with her husband, an astronaut, who had already planned a trip to Washington. —The New York Times (8/1/2011)

Their self-made, 3D documentary allows us to tag along as they fly around the country doing stunts no mother would ever allow. —New York Daily News (8/9/2012)

My doctor isn't fazed at all when I ask if I can bring a camera crew to my endoscopy... I figured, as long as I was having a camera on a tube stuck down my gullet, they might as well tag along. —USA Today (8/25/2012)

Tag along means follow, or go with.

The phrase sometimes refers to an uninvited, or even unwanted, companion, but frequently the person who tags along is welcome.

The Daily News example means that the movie makes its audience feel like they are tagging along with a group of motorcycle riders. Older versions of this expression (tag on, tag at, tag after) have been traced back to the 1600's. An early example of tag along is from 1872:

I would saunter on a considerable distance ahead of the wagons...and she would tag along after me... —"Afoot and Alone," by Stephen Powers (1872)

tail wags the dog

"I think the Republican Party's been taken over by the Tea Party...This is the tail wagging the dog." —Vice President Joe Biden (5/6/2012)

Now we are faced with a case of the "tail wagging the dog." In our American culture, the government serves the people, not the other way around. —Orange County Register (3/29/2011)

Any surpassing of personal computers by tablets will be a case of the computer industry's tail wagging the dog. —The New York Times (3/5/2012)

"Yes, the Academy should open itself up a bit, but isn't that really the tail wagging the dog? You are complaining about the lack of diversity in the organization representing the elite of Hollywood but not the lack of diversity in Hollywood's elite itself?" —Reuters (2/25/2012)

"I think a lot of Republicans have to recognize, if you control one house of the Congress, you can't really wag the dog from that position." —Brit Hume, television political analyst (1/6/2013)

When the **tail wags the dog** something smaller or less important is in control.

The likely origin of this idiom is an 1858 play, "Our American Cousin," which includes these lines:

> Lord Dundreary: Now I've got another. Why does a dog waggle his tail?
> Florence Trenchard: Upon my word, I never inquired.
> Lord Dundreary: Because the tail can't waggle the dog. Ha! ha!

This became known as "Lord Dundreary's conundrum," familiar enough to the public to be used in an 1868 political attack on President Ulysses S. Grant and Vice President Schuyler Colfax:

"We now have a living example which justifies the wisdom of the conundrum. It is to be found in the Grant and Colfax nomination; and the wagging business is faithfully illustrated in Grant's and Colfax's letters of acceptance. Supposing Grant to represent the body and brain of the animal, and Colfax the animal's tail, we have a tail bigger than the dog; and, by reading the documents, it will be discovered that the tail palpably wags the dog." —Democratic Speaker's Handbook (Cincinnati, 1868)

take a bite out of

Analysts estimate Verizon could sell as many as 13 million iPhones this year, which would take a bite out of AT&T... —New York Daily News (1/12/2011)

Eni SpA...one of Europe's biggest oil companies by market value, Wednesday said the continent's economic slowdown took a bite out of 2011 profits... —Dow Jones Newswires (1/1/2011)

Rush Limbaugh's mouth is taking a bite out of his wallet. Nine advertisers and a radio station in Hawaii dropped his show after he called a law student a "slut" and a "prostitute." —Associated Press (3/5/2011)

When it does not refer to the use of teeth, **take a bite out of** can mean take part of something away from, as in the New York Daily News example referring to a company taking market share away from another company.

It can also mean reduce or have a negative effect on something, as in the Dow Jones and Associated Press examples.

A campaign by the National Crime Prevention Council, featuring a dog named McGruff, is called "Take a Bite Out of Crime."

take a crack at, take a shot at

Mr. Barnier's proposals are still in draft form, and may change before their formal unveiling in November. After that, the EU's Council of Ministers as well as the European Parliament will take a crack at modifying them. —The Economist (1/1/2011)

Comedian Erik Stolhanske didn't know what he was getting himself into when he let a cybersecurity expert at SecureState take a crack at hacking him. —CBS News (8/27/2013)

She was willing to take a shot at EMS, believing a job there would at least let her help others experience the outdoors. —The Eagle Tribune (New Hampshire, 10/14/2011)

"I'm always willing to take a shot at improving my financial situation..." —Joe Soraghan in The Conway, New Hampshire, Daily Sun (8/30/2013)

Did "The Butler" rewrite history to take a shot at Reagan? —Fox News (8/19/2013)

Take a crack at and **take a shot at** mean try.

In other contexts, take a shot at can mean shoot at or attack intellectually, as in the Fox News example.

In the 1800's, take a crack at usually referred to firing a rifle at something or someone. In my searches, the earliest example of take a crack at which does not refer to shooting is in a transcript from Kentucky's state constitutional convention in 1890:

...we all came to the conclusion that perhaps it would be best to report the old section just as it was...and call the attention of the Convention to the imperfections of the section, and let every man take a crack at it. —Proceedings and Debates (9/8/1890)

take in stride

Leno took it all in stride, even responding to reporters' questions about late night talk show wars and being raked over the coals. —New England Cable News (2/4/2011)

When her first two applications for academy membership were rejected, Beach says she took it in stride. —Los Angeles Times (2/20/2011)

Investors took the Greek news largely in stride because the event was widely expected. —Reuters (3/9/2011)

"I think everyone's taking it in stride." —Kris Anderson, passenger on a Carnival cruise ship stuck in St. Maarten because of equipment problems (3/15/2013)

If you **take something in stride**, you are not affected by an experience or you don't react to it strongly.

In the New England Cable News example, Comedian Jay Leno's experience was being chosen "Hasty Pudding Man of the Year" at Harvard, which included being raked over the coals—having people make jokes about him. (In other contexts, rake over the coals means criticize harshly.)

"Take in his stride" in the 1800's referred to horseback riders clearing obstacles (such as fences) without slowing down. Examples of the phrase used figuratively have been found from as early as the beginning of the 1900's.

take it or leave it

Germany's new European order is clear: If you wish to live like a German, then you must work and save like a German. Take it or leave it. —Philadelphia Inquirer (12/15/2011)

Democrats were worried that House Republicans would adjourn...and thereby leave the Senate a take-it-or-leave-it choice to pass the GOP version of the payroll tax bill. —The Wall Street Journal (12/16/2011)

For a performer Mr. Merchant has an unusual attitude toward performing, he says: he can take it or leave it. —The New York Times (12/14/2011)

"Here's the information. Take it or leave it. If you like it, great. If you don't, great." —Danya Devon, one of the stars of "Plastic Wives," a television show about four wives of plastic surgeons (1/24/2013)

Take it or leave it may mean accept it or reject it; there will be no compromise. The Philadelphia Inquirer and Wall Street Journal examples have that meaning.

In other contexts, take it or leave it means indifference; not caring strongly about something. In the New York Times example, Mr. Merchant meant that he was equally willing to continue performing or quit. Danya Devon's meaning was similar: it does not matter to me whether you take the advice or not.

Versions of this phrase have been traced to the 1500's. An early example of take it or leave it is in an English-French phrase book printed in Paris in 1775: "that cloth is eighteen livers take it or leave it."

take lightly

"We endeavor on an ongoing basis to make our vehicles as reliable as possible," says BMW

spokesman Dave Buchko. "I don't think our engineers take it lightly."—The Wall Street Journal (3/2/2011)

But stress is nothing to take lightly. Strained minds and bodies can aggravate family tensions, deepen depression and lead to illness. —Chicago Tribune (12/14/2011)

"It is very harsh that Schlecker's employees, some of whom have been with the company for a long time, are losing their jobs, and it is a decision that we did not take lightly." —Reuters (2/29/2012)

Take something lightly means consider it unimportant or humorous. The phrase is often used in the negative, when something is taken seriously.

One meaning of lightly is gaily, happily, cheerfully—having a light mood. Examples of that usage have been found from as early as the 1400's.

take no prisoners

Unlike most citrus growers, however, Graham was once a Melbourne trial lawyer known for his take-no-prisoners style in the Florida Supreme Court. —Florida Today (9/19/2011)

Tech companies that battle hard in the marketplace are taking no prisoners when to comes to the procurement battle...Google, for example, sued the federal government, alleging the bidding process for a $59 million contract to move 88,000 Department of Interior users to the cloud favored rival Microsoft. —Politico (9/18/2011)

Rolling Stone's exhaustive investigation into Aaron Hernandez's twisted reality hit the Internet on Wednesday and took no prisoners. —Fox News (8/28/2013)

Someone who **takes no prisoners** shows no mercy or hesitation; competes or fights with only the strongest tactics.

From as long ago as the 1500's, the expression referred to military forces that killed everyone and took no prisoners. An early adaptation of the phrase as a metaphor is in a book of sermons published in 1872:

He has conquered every land and besieged every city; and to-day, Paris, London, St. Petersburg, New York, and Brooklyn are going down under his fierce and long-continued assault. That conqueror is Death. He carries a black flag and takes no prisoners. —Sermons by Thomas DeWitt Talmadge (1872)

take stock of

"We took stock of ourselves," Douglas said. "We looked at how we practice, the tempo and our mindset throughout the week." —The Daily Breeze (9/8/2011)

As Long Island residents take stock of damage from last month's storm, officials are measuring Irene's footprint across Nassau and Suffolk counties— just how high storm tides swelled and just how far inland they swept—with an eye to improving future flood predictions. —Newsday (9/12/2011)

"...it was imperative that all of the leaders there take stock of where we were economically and what more could be done." —Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (10/16/2012)

"We're here today for the fourth meeting of the EU-US Energy Council. Mr. Oettinger and I are

very much looking forward to taking stock of what has been a very productive year in the work of the Council and to look ahead to setting priorities for the future." —Lady Catherine Ashton, high representative for the European Union (12/5/2012)

Literally, **taking stock** is counting or making an inventory. When used as a metaphor the phrase means review and evaluate something. One may take stock of almost anything: an event, a situation, an organization, a person.

Examples of **take stock of** have been found from the mid-1800's.

take the cake

This has led, over the years, to some rather dazzling displays of the arrogance of power. But, surely, these pay raises take the cake. —The Providence Journal (4/12/2011)

When it comes to inventiveness, boys really take the cake. —Siskiyou Daily News (4/19/2011)

In the world of low turnout votes, the Alaska primary may take the cake. —The Washington Post (3/2/2012)

Take the cake means be the most extreme example of something. It often means be the worst example, as in the Providence journal and Washington Post examples. But may also be used in a positive way, as in the Siskiyou Daily News example.

Take the cake alludes to winning the prize for something. How and when the expression began is disputed, but it has been in use in the United States since the 1800's.

take to

In 1994, as the economic and human rights conditions in Cuba alarmingly worsened, Cubans began taking to the sea in makeshift rafts. —Miami Herald (3/11/2012)

"This was a situation in which the vast majority of Egyptians took to the streets." —Mohamed Tawfik, Egyptian ambassador to the United States (7/5/2013)

"She took to bowling like a fish takes to water," her husband said. —Chicago Tribune (3/8/2012)

Fox is taking an expensive gamble that viewers will take a shine to the Shannons, a 22nd-century family that time-travels to a dinosaur-age colony designed to give errant mankind a second chance on Earth. —USA Today (9/26/2011)

Take to can mean go to, with enthusiasm, as in the Tawfik quotation and Miami Herald example.

It can also mean be attracted to or feel positively about something, as in the Chicago Tribune example. The meaning of **take a liking to** and **take a shine to** (as in the USA Today example) is similar.

Examples of take a shine to have been found from as early as the 1830's.

take to task, call to task

The CR-Z, Honda's two-seat hybrid, has been roundly taken to task since its debut last summer for looking more sporty than it behaves. —The New York Times (blog, 3/18/2011)

Media Matters takes pundit Pat Buchanan to task for finding a "silver lining" in segregation. —

Atlanta Journal-Constitution (8/23/2013)

It was the first time former generals were called to task for their behavior, and it set a new standard for the supremacy of civilian rule. —Time (3/6/2011)

McDonald's did something wrong. When it was called to task for it, the punishment had to fit the defendant. Fining McDonalds $1,000 just wasn't going to do it. Hitting McDonalds with a huge multimillion-dollar settlement? That did it. —CNN.com (8/30/2013)

To be **taken to task** is to be criticized.

To be **called to task** is to be criticized, reprimanded or punished.

Take to task has been traced to the 1500's. Phrases with similar meaning are **call to account** and **call on the carpet**.

taken aback

If you were shocked by Friday's job report, if you thought we were doing well and were taken aback by the bad news, you haven't been paying attention. —The New York Times (7/10/2011)

Initially, Hu sought to make up for his decision to crush riots in Tibet in 1989 by issuing a decree to "protect Tibetan culture" in the early 2000s, but was taken aback when the Dalai Lama accused China of "cultural genocide."—Reuters (8/31/2012)

By the end, the crowd was applauding his [Eastwood's] jokes...But Romney aides had serious faces as they watched the lengthy, unscripted moment, clearly a bit taken aback. —Associated Press (8/31/2012)

To be **taken aback** is to be surprised. Usually, although not always, the surprise is unpleasant or unwelcome.

Aback is one of the forgotten words, like hunker, gung and beck, rarely used except in an idiomatic phrase.

Aback meant toward the back, and taken aback was used by sailors to describe a change a wind direction that happened too fast for a ship to change position and adjust its sails. If the wind blew against the front of the sails, pushing the ship backward, accidents could happen—especially during storms.

This account of debate in the British House of Commons in August, 1807, shows that the phrase was by then being used metaphorically, not talking about ships: "The honorable gentlemen said that he was taken aback with regard to his statement...he did not pretend to understand the phrase 'taken aback', not being a naval man, as the honorable gentlemen probably was."

talk about

Daytime highs in the 70s are forecast Saturday through Thursday, an unseasonably splendid string of days...Talk about pleasant weather for viewing fall colors, doing fall yard work... —Grand Forks Herald (9/30/2011)

Yet comparing an office assistant's income tax to Buffet's capital gains tax is patently deceptive. Talk about apples and oranges. —The Phoenix (Swarthmore, Penn., 9/29/2011)

Now, Monterey and Carmel, wow. Talk about beautiful. If you live out here, I am clapping my

hands for you. —USA Today (blog, 9/12/2012)

Usually, when talk about is at the beginning of a sentence, it means, "this is a perfect example of."

The phrase is often used for emphasis, to call attention to the example. English! Talk about a confusing language!

Examples of this usage have been found as early as the 1860's.

talk someone's ear off

But he'll talk your ear off about eliminating the Federal Reserve, ending the embargo with Cuba or the United States' insistence on meddling in foreign conflicts. —Miami Herald (4/21/2011)

His plays -- "Talley's Folly," "The Hot L Baltimore," "Burn This" -- are funny and poetic, filled with eccentric characters who can talk your ear off. —New York Post (4/22/2011)

"What I heard from my wife is that my dad and my brother-in-law wouldn't quit chewing his ear off." —Houston Chronicle (7/21/2011)

Someone who **talks your ear off** has talked a long time. Your ear hasn't really fallen off your head, but you might imagine the possibility.

The less common **chew someone's ear off** has the same meaning.

Examples have been found from as early as 1892. An older, and just as colorful, expression is **talk the hind leg off a donkey** (or **horse**, or **dog**), which means talk a lot, but can also mean convince someone of anything by talking in a clever way. That expression is not common now.

talk turkey, get down to business

Speaking at the White House, he said there is potential for bipartisan consensus on reducing the deficit and urged congressional leaders to "talk turkey" on a plan that can pass both chambers of Congress. —Marketwatch (7/19/2011)

"President Obama and Congress had better start talking turkey." —Jay Gabler, writing in the Twin Cities Daily Planet (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 11/21/2012)

The House will pass the deal, the Senate won't, and President Obama won't even have to veto the package. Then, maybe, Washington will get down to business. —San Francisco Chronicle (7/19/2011)

...he said very rarely is he able to keep his stops at the store at under 20 minutes because it's the kind of place where you can stop in and have some friendly catching up before you get down to business. —Odessa, Texas, American (8/31/2013)

Talk turkey means speak honestly, openly and directly about the most important things. It often happens when people **get down to business**—focus on doing important work. (See also **brass tacks** and **nitty gritty**.)

Examples from the 1800's suggest that talk turkey may have come from negotiating decisions about how to divide birds killed in a hunt. The earliest reference to down to business in my searches is in the diary of Samuel Pepys, 1662.

talk up

Mr. Cooperman, who runs Omega Advisors Inc., also talked up energy stocks such as Transocean Ltd. —The Wall Street Journal (5/12/2011)

...Facebook and marketing executives came onstage to talk up the new features. —Reuters (2/29/2012)

Next month, he's headed to Brussels to talk up Florida grouper at the world's largest seafood expo. —Associated Press (2/14/2012)

To **talk up** something is to say positive things about it in an effort to influence others. The verb promote often has the same meaning.

The expression has been used since the 1800's and is common in business and politics.

tall tale, tall story

He has always been full of tall tales about his exploits and celebrity encounters. —Universal Press Syndicate (9/26/2011)

At the Bridge Inn, Mr. Boylan was competing in the World's Biggest Liar competition, the village's annual celebration of dishonesty. Competitors' tall tales are judged on imagination, presentation and sheer chutzpah. —The Wall Street Journal (11/25/2011)

Fishermen, fisherwomen, hunters, hard drinkers, tall-story tellers struggle with the wilderness and themselves in "Bear Down, Bear North." —Kalamazoo Gazette (11/25/2011)

One time a man built a house from catalpa wood...he discovered his "dream home"...had sprouted numerous branches inside and out... Is that a tall story? Some think so. —The Harrisburg, Illinois, Daily Register (3/29/2012)

A **tall tale** is a story that is not true or is wildly exaggerated.

Tall story has the same meaning but is not used as frequently as tall tale.

In both phrases, tall means grand, one of several meanings of tall that are no longer used.

Tall tale may mean a traditional form of American entertainment, as in the Wall Street Journal example, or it may describe something by alluding to that kind of entertainment, as in the Universal Press example.

An early example of tall tale is in an 1879 magazine article in which an English visitor marvels at the weather in Canada:

One ages in this dry air very rapidly. I mentioned recently that the temperature would change 40 degrees in one day. As this might to many seem a "tall tale," I may say that last month it fell from 85 degrees in Toronto to 39 degrees in one day...equivalent to a change in England from summer to winter at once. The effect on the constitution is most serious. —The British Farmer's Magazine (London, November, 1879)

taste (or dose) of one's own medicine

"Some people have described the situation as a character being 'punished' by being turned black," Hope says. "But that's a complete misinterpretation of the story. The point is to show a bigot

getting a taste of his own medicine." —Houston Chronicle (9/4/2011)

Miyamae allegedly grabbed the left breast of a TSA agent with both hands...Critics who loathe "enhanced" security screenings are applauding Miyamae online for giving the TSA a taste of its own medicine. —TIME (7/18/2011)

"It was a little taste of my own medicine—which is kind of funny. I've done that before, and he did that to me. Credit to him. That [blocked shot in a basketball game] was a great, great play." —Louisville Courier-Journal (12/4/2011)

It's difficult to take style advice from someone selling you clothes who looks like they need a good dose of their own medicine. If her pants are a mess, how can she tell you what pants to buy? —Richmond Times-Dispatch (12/4/2011)

If you are given a **taste** (or **dose**) **of your own medicine**, a tactic you have used before is used against you, or something you have done to someone else is done to you.

The origin may have been public reaction to sellers of patent medicine, whose abuses were rampant by the mid-1800's, when examples of the figurative phrases begin to appear. But beyond the timing, I have not found evidence for this plausible theory.

An example of the phrase is in a book about the Civil War:

The brutality of the [mule] drivers is terrible...There would be pleasure in snatching a whip from the hands of these savages and giving them a dose of their own medicine. —"Four Years of Fighting" by Charles Carleton Coffin (Boston, 1866)

team player

The designer Alexandre Herchcovitch says he is a team player—somebody who enjoys a communal creative process and delights in partnerships... —The New York Times (11/9/2011)

"Breaking away from America's posture during the Bush administration, President Obama is a team player at a time when the global economy needs to work together," said Sabina Dewan, director of Globalization and International Employment at the Center for American Progress. —Los Angeles Times (11/5/2011)

Menlo Park Mayor Rich Cline, who worked with Boesch in 2006 when he was that city's manager, agreed that Boesch didn't always come across as a team player..."He came and did his job and he didn't spend a lot of time making friends," Cline said. —San Mateo County Times (11/4/2011)

"She [Elizabeth Warren] has a national voice before coming to the Senate, but she will be very respectful of her colleagues. She can be a strong voice and, at the same time, be a team player." —Senator Charles Schumer (11/11/2012)

A **team player** is willing to sacrifice his own interests or achievement to help the team succeed. Sometimes team player has a less specific meaning: easy to work with.

The expression originated in sports—examples have been found as early as the 1880's—and is still used frequently in sports. This is the earliest example I found of team player used outside sports:

[Hubert] Humphrey sees himself not as Lyndon Johnson's tamed tiger but as "a trained reserve and a team player." —LIFE Magazine (7/30/1965)

tempest in a teapot, much ado about nothing

Is the recent market upheaval the growling of a new, prolonged bear market or a tempest in a teapot? —Reuters (8/11/2011)

"The evidence is so substantial that it probably doesn't matter whether or not anything he would say now to interrogators would be used against him. He's already the focus of so much hard evidence that the business about Miranda warnings is probably a tempest in a teapot here." —John Ashcroft, former U.S. attorney general, talking about the accused Boston Marathon bomber (4/22/2013)

It could be that this whole thing is an evil plot by the school districts to shame parents into buying hot lunches for their kids. It also could be much ado about nothing.—Ventura County Star (8/27/2011)

A **tempest in a teapot** is too much fuss or excitement over something of little importance. **Much ado about nothing** is similar; **ado** means activity.

Although tempest in a teapot is considered to be American and storm in a teacup is preferred by the British, the earliest printed example of tempest in a teapot in my searches is in a British women's magazine published in 1818:

In the Isle of Man!" repeated the vociferous Chancellor. "A tempest in a teapot!" —La Belle Assembleé (February, 1818)

Much ado about nothing has been a familiar phrase in English since 1600, when William Shakespeare made it the title of a comedy. Henry Fielding wrote this heading for Chapter 3 of "Tom Jones," published in 1749: "Which all, who have no Heart, will think to contain much ado about nothing."

tempt fate

Defying orders and tempting fate, Marine corporal Dakota Meyer charged five times in a Humvee into heavy gunfire in the darkness of an Afghanistan valley to rescue comrades under attack from Taliban insurgents. —Associated Press (9/15/2011)

Daring to tempt fate, Snooki and Deena decide to take a tiny raft out on the water - just the two of them - when it's so windy out... —New York Daily News (2/24/2012)

"Now is not the time to tempt fate, now is not the time to dismiss official warnings," Obama said. "You need to take this seriously." —USA Today (8/29/2012)

Tempt fate means take a risk.

An older expression, **tempt God**, was used with a similar meaning. It is now used mostly in religious contexts.

An early example of tempt fate is in John Dryden's 1693 translation of the Satires of Juvenal: "Thy Perjur'd Friend will quickly tempt his Fate."

test the waters

Gingrich is testing the waters for a White House bid but has said he expects he will run. —Associated Press (4/1/2011)

When employers finally are ready to hire, they typically test the waters by offering temporary and part-time positions. —The Tennessean (12/16/2011)

Johnson and his team have a reputation for being the first to test the waters in mining regions avoided by foreign operators. —Reuters (3/6/2012)

Test the waters means try something before taking a larger risk.

In the Associated Press example, the phrase means that Gingrich wanted to learn how much support he would get before starting an expensive, large-scale campaign.

Before putting a baby in bath water, you may dip an elbow in to make sure it's not too hot or too cold. Before taking a swim, we may **dip a toe in**, a phrase used in other contexts with a meaning similar to test the waters.

Test the water is sometimes used with the same meaning, but **waters** is much more common. I could not find any explanation of why the plural is preferred. The analogy seems like one that could be many centuries old, but examples of test the waters aren't found before the 1900's.

TGIF

Around him... the hum of happy conversation rises and the band strikes up another TGIF tune. —USA TODAY (7/8/2011)

And she has instituted weekly "FYI" meetings—similar to Google's "TGIF" meetings—every Friday at Yahoo headquarters, where people can ask her questions and where new hires are announced, among other things. —The Wall Street Journal (8/9/2012)

Remember TGIF? It has been replaced with SWIIF, or So What If It’s Friday? —the Spokesman-Review (3/23/2012)

TGIF stands for Thank God It's Friday. It expresses relief that the week is ending for workers or students.

The abbreviation became popular on college campuses in the 1930's, as documented in this United Press story:

The "Thank-God-It's-Friday" Club, organized by students at the University of Missouri three years ago, has spread to other colleges... —The Telegraph-Herald (Dubuque, Iowa, 12/7/1937)

By World War II, it had spread further:

A group of about 10 Waves [Navy women] have organized to save enough money (about $2.50 apiece from 25 cents weekly dues) to go somewhere nice for dinner. Every 10 weeks they disband and start under another name. They have just disbanded the "Thank God It's Friday" club and started the "Oh, Hell, It's Monday" club. —Palm Beach Post (2/18/1945)

People who preferred to leave God out of this lighthearted expression changed it to Thank Goodness It's Friday, a variation that was prevalent in the 1950's and is still used, but is not as common.

that dog won't hunt

Let's put this notion to rest immediately because, as we say in Texas, that dog won't hunt... —Fort Worth Star-Telegram (10/4/2011)

Cain even took his first slap at one of the frontrunners, as Herman zinged Romney's economic plans, drawing big applause by saying "That dog won't hunt." —WOKV in Jacksonville, Florida (9/23/2011)

"When the liberal pundits - when they start trashing Texas to score some political points, I want you all just to stand up and say, 'That dog won't hunt.'" —Houston Chronicle (8/21/2011)

Romney pollster Neil Newhouse disputes the idea that turnout in primaries signals anything about turnout in general elections..."That dog won't hunt," Newhouse says. —USA Today (2/8/2012)

That dog won't hunt means that is not correct, or that won't work.

The expression has been attributed to President Lyndon Johnson, and it does sound like something that Texans would say. But in the earliest example in my searches, Johnson himself attributes the phrase to his ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, a native of Yonkers, New York.

On the Goldberg proposal to stop all the bombing, Bunker "came back and said, 'I just can't. That dog won't hunt...'" —Associated Press (2/7/1970)

the birds and the bees

Council Member Fernando Cabrera, a Bronx Democrat, and Conservative Party Chairman Michael Long...said they believe the school system should focus on reading and math, rather than the birds and the bees. —The Wall Street Journal (8/13/2011)

If you had a choice, which conversation would you rather have with your children? The one about the birds and the bees? The one about saying no to drugs? Or the one about them needing to lose weight? —Newsday (9/23/2011)

Pelosi added that Republicans miss how family planning services can prevent abortions..."And perhaps we have to have a lesson in the birds and the bees around here for them to understand that." —Politico (2/18/2011)

The **birds and the bees** is a euphemism (a way of avoiding direct mention) for sex or sex education. It refers to an antiquated way of explaining sex to children.

In the 1800's, the phrase was frequently used when talking about nature, as in this example:

The garden has three times slept beneath the rains and the snows of winter, and has awakened in spring with the birds and the bees. —"Days and Hours in a Garden" by Eleanor Vere Gordon Boyle (1890)

Sometime in the early 1900's, birds and bees became a popular subject for parents who were nervous about explaining sex to their children. The idea became part of a humorous song by Cole Porter in 1928, "Let's Do It":

And that's why birds do it
Bees do it
Even educated fleas do it
Let's do it
Let's fall in love

the game is up, the jig is up

Woodford has repeatedly said that the entire board should step down to take responsibility and make way for new management. "I just hope that they understand that the game is up...Have some shame, have some dignity, that's what I want to tell them."—Dow Jones Newswires (11/24/2011)

Our government has borrowed and spent massively, but the economy has barely responded. The game is up, but no one knows what to do next. —Universal Press Syndicate (9/27/2011)

"[Gbagbo] hasn't shown any signs of giving up. I don't think he will see the game is up, because he really believes God will save him." —Reuters (3/31/2011)

They managed to make it through the health-care debate without offering serious solutions of their own...But the jig is up. They need a health-care plan—and quickly." —The Washington Post (3/19/2011)

There comes a time when even the proudest people realize the jig is up - that for the fighter, it's time to throw in the towel. Paterno just couldn't bring himself to do it. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (11/13/2011)

The game is up means the competition, or struggle, or act of deception, is over. There is no hope of success.

The jig is up has the same meaning. The origin of this phrase is a meaning of jig that is no longer used: a trick, or act of cheating. It is sometimes used with a contraction: **the jig's up**.

Shakespeare included the game is up in "Cymbeline" (1611). The jig is over has been found as early as 1777, and the jig's up was in print by 1800.

the last straw

For a group of women at Yale, the last straw came in October, when fraternity pledges marched on campus shouting a sexually offensive slogan. —USA Today (4/26/2011)

Schimminger said the additional three-year surcharge will end up pushing other small businesses out of the state. He pointed to Science First, a Buffalo company that, citing it as the "last straw," moved to Florida after the surcharge was enacted in 2009. —Buffalo News (12/19/2011)

Many children injured by vaccination have an immune or metabolic problem that is simply made apparent by vaccines. "In some metabolically vulnerable children, receiving vaccines may be the largely nonspecific 'last straw' that leads these children to reveal their underlying" problems, the report stated. —The New York Times (8/25/2011)

"In addition to poor operational performance and inadequate communications with investors, the Company's hoarding of cash stands as the last straw for most investors." —BeaconLight investors group, in a news release criticizing Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, Inc. (8/13/2013)

The last straw refers to a proverb: "It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back," meaning that one small annoyance or event can have a large effect when it comes after a series of small events.

The origin of the proverb is not clear. The earliest example in my searches is in a 19th-Century encyclopedia:

This monstrous immunity, with its yet more monstrous abuses, was like the last straw that broke the camel's back. —"The Popular Educator" (1867?)

See also, **nail in the coffin**.

the name of the game

Inflation remains the name of the game, with its [China's] economy still humming along at a nearly 10 percent growth rate. —CNBC (4/17/2011)

Cured meats and craft beer are the name of the game at this restaurant... —Chicago Tribune (3/11/2012)

Wearable is the name of the game at Belgian designer Glenn Martens' gothic-tinged off-calendar debut in Paris. —Associated Press (3/2/2012)

"Democracy should be the name of the game. Any change should be through democratic means. Egypt needs real change in the way Egypt is managed." —Amr Moussa, Egyptian politician (6/27/2013)

The **name of the game** means the most important activity or attribute.

The expression is often heard in sports commentary.

"Winning is still the name of the game," Arthur Daley wrote in The New York Times (9/1/1961), referring to a game that was in fact named baseball and still is.

Examples of this hackneyed phrase have been found from as early as 1910, but I have found no clues to its origin.

the whole shebang...nine yards, enchilada, ball of wax, shooting match, kit and kaboodle, megillah

Florida has tiptoed toward Las Vegas-style casinos, first with slots, then expanding poker, then blackjack... Genting's blueprints are the first that go for the whole shebang—including craps and roulette for the first time in Florida. —South Florida Sun-Sentinel (9/14/2011)

The whole shebang means everything, including all the parts or aspects.

More than a century ago, shebang was used to mean a crude house, such as a hut or shed. Shebang is among old and forgotten words used only in idioms, like hunker, aback, gung and beck.

The whole shebang dates back to the 1860's, and is now one of the most frequently used of many expressions with similar meaning. In order of search-result popularity, they are:

the whole nine yards (origin unknown; 1960's)
the whole enchilada (an enchilada wraps different foods inside a tortilla; 1950's)
the whole ball of wax (from ball of wax meaning a topic or subject; 1800's)
the whole shooting match (origin unknown; 1800's)

the whole kit and caboodle, often spelled kaboodle (from kit and boodle, a collection of things; 1800's)
the whole megillah (from megillah, scroll or book of the Hebrew Scriptures; a Yiddish expression meaning the whole, long story; in English from the 1940's)

Examples in the news:

That's why he should check out his potential renter/buyers thoroughly—credit checks, background checks, employment and income verifications, the whole nine yards, just like a bank would. —Marketwatch (9/16/2011)

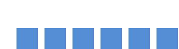
Curiously, the Segerstrom Center will present only the second through fifth of the six symphonies over two nights (New York and San Francisco boast the whole enchilada). —Los Angeles Times (9/16/2011)

"Surely, if we can't get the whole ball of wax, I hope that...we're able to demonstrate to the American people that this problem is being taken seriously." —former Secretary of State Colin Powell, advocating restrictions on possession of assault weapons (1/13/2013)

"One thing about this league, if you get to where you aren't very big up front and people can pound you running the football, it affects the whole shooting match." —Green Bay Press-Gazette (8/22/2011)

"We were approached by KingWorld and pretty soon we were all around the country. KingWorld was running the whole kit and kaboodle. —The Flint Journal (9/1/2011)

Back to the situation at Ohio State: once the whole megillah was exposed, Tressell went into full damage control mode. —The Daily Caller (9/9/2011)



thick and thin

"China and South Asian countries have been long linked through a common destiny and stood together through thick and thin," he said. —Public Radio International (12/15/2011)

"Staten Island is a very close-knit community, and I think the business community, in all the thick and thin, really do support our community, our neighbors, our not-for-profits," said Chamber CEO Linda Baran. —Staten Island Advance (12/16/2011)

Maggie has been with me through thick and thin, and when my boyfriend left me, she climbed up on my lap as I cried. Animals sense when something's wrong. —Chicago Sun-Times (12/13/2011)

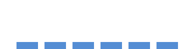
Thick and thin means life's experiences, good and bad, easy and difficult.

This old expression comes from **thicket and thin wood**—dense brush that is hard to pass through, and more open ground that is easier.

In the 1380's, Geoffrey Chaucer used the expression in "The Canterbury Tales," writing it as "thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne" (through thick and through thin). And in 1590, Edmund Spenser wrote:

> His tyreling iade [tiring horse] he fiercely forth did push
> Through thicke and thin both over banke and bush

—The Faerie Queene



think on one's feet

"When there are no specific facts or studies available, I have to think fast on my feet." —Bernard Beck, a sociology professor who is often quoted by news media (10/7/2010)

"Norah [O'Donnell] is an accomplished reporter...she can think on her feet on live television." Jeff Fager, chairman of CBS News (7/26/2012)

"We want to make sure our students can think on their feet." —Jeff Kudisch, director of a career placement program at the University of Maryland (9/6/2012)

If you can **think on your feet**, you can react quickly and effectively.

This expression is based on the image of a person who does not have the time to sit down and consider a question before answering.

This early printed example, in an 1847 educational journal, may have intentionally used both literal and figurative meanings: "One great advantage of a black-board was, that it taught the student to think on his feet."

third rail

In real life angry women at work cry, with tears and blubbering as the unintended, rechannelled byproducts of anger. The third rail for the expression of emotion at work—and much more for women than for men. —CNN (3/31/2011)

"Ryan isn't touching the third rail," Mr. Cole said, employing the expression used to suggest that 2messing with Social Security and Medicare can be politically fatal. "He is wrapping both hands around it." —The New York Times (4/2/2011)

Indeed, since 1982, the state of Alaska has given an annual cash grant of between $800 and $2000 to each man, woman, and child in the state...It is hugely popular in Alaska. In 1999, residents voted 84 percent against an initiative to curtail it. It has become the third rail of Alaskan politics. —San Jose Mercury News (8/23/2013)

On some railroads, electricity is carried in the third rail. Touching it can cause death. In politics, if a subject is so sensitive that talking about it can end a politician's career, it is called a **third rail**.

The phrase is sometimes used outside of politics, as in the CNN example. which means that crying openly may be dangerous to a person's career.

Social Security was first called "the third rail of American politics" during the early 1980's, when the expression originated. New York Times columnist William Safire traced it to Kirk O'Donnell, an aide to Speaker of the House Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill. That seems to be the last word on what Safire called an issue "of great import to phrasedicks and other etymologists."

(Phrasedick, a word Safire coined, means phrase detective. The word never became popular, probably because the slang use of dick for detective was already becoming antiquated.)

thorn in (someone's) side

"It is becoming very clear that my repayment will just be a thorn in my side until I'm 50." —Jessica Verhotz, a graduate student at Ohio State University, talking about a tuition increase (7/16/2009)

"He has been a menace to us for damn near 30 years now, the thorn in our side, the cloud in our

coffee, the bee in our bonnet, the fly in our ointment, the clouds on our sunny day. He has been our nemesis, our arch-enemy, our tormentor, our antagonist and our antagonizer." —Mike Vaccaro, New York Post sports columnist, writing about Mike Scioscia, a baseball player who had success against New York teams (10/13/2009)

"He's been a thorn in our side. Unfortunately, he's got a drug abuse problem. To feed his habit, he's breaking into homes and businesses." —Doug Noblet, a police sergeant in Mansfield, Ohio (8/17/2013)

"She wants answers and becomes the thorn in Big Jim's side." —Rachelle LeFevre, talking about the character she plays in the television series "Under the Dome" (8/18/2013)

A **thorn in a person's side** is something irritating or painful. The phrase usually refers to an irritant that exists for a long time.

"Thorn in the flesh" is used in the United Kingdom but seldom in the United States except as a Biblical reference.

Thorn was used in English texts as a metaphor for other things that cause pain at least as early as the 1200's. From the 1600's, this passage helped make "thorn in the flesh" part of everyday English language:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. —King James Bible (1611)

through the roof

"And the problem with our economy isn't that the American people aren't productive enough -- you're working harder than ever. Productivity is through the roof." —President Barack Obama (5/24/2012)

"It's exciting, you know. Jeremy Siegel will tell you the market's going to go through the roof." —Christine Romans, television business news anchor, talking about the stock market (5/18/2013)

Yet, national television ratings went through the roof because everyone wanted to see LeBron James and the Heat in good times and bad. —Bergen Record (4/28/2011)

Oil prices are through the roof and that will find its way through the economy. —Financial Times (4/28/2011)

"It's violating every rule in our privacy policy. We went through the roof about this." —Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, Inc. (6/1/2010)

Through the roof means higher than ever or more than expected, as in the first four news examples.

A person who goes **through the roof** has a fit of anger. A similar expression is **hit the ceiling**.

Examples of these figurative uses of through the roof have been found from the mid-1900's.

throw a bone

"They have learned over the years that throwing a bone to the Americans is a pretty good way to shut them up," said Charles Freeman, a China expert at the Center for Strategic and International

Studies. —Associated Press (1/19/2011)

For every concession to the Northern League, which backs Mr. Tremonti and is intent on keeping tax revenue local, Mr. Berlusconi also had to throw a bone to the poorer south. —The New York Times (8/10/2011)

Apple has continued a trend of throwing a bone to the late adopters who may not have the cash to throw at the latest, greatest thing. The iPad 2 will remain in the lineup with a $100 discount relative to the new model. —Popular Mechanics (3/7/2012)

Throw someone a bone means do something small to make them happy, like throwing a dog a bone to make it stop barking.

An early example is in a 19th-Century religious text:

"...unless we throw a bone to the priests that come over, I am afraid I shall convert no more of them." —"Sermons of the Rev. Richard Hayes" (Dublin, 1822)

throw a wet blanket

But that's stifled, when the federal government spends more than it takes in, throwing a very cold, wet blanket on the entire process. —Senator Mike Johanns (Republican weekly address, 4/28/2011)

The Justice Department has thrown a wet blanket on Apple's iPad announcement week, warning Apple and the five biggest publishers that it will sue them for e-book pricing collusion. —PC World (3/8/2012)

When I do go out socially, some people I know may ask me, "How are you?" and I have no idea how to reply. If I smile and say I'm fine, it's lying. I don't want to say something negative or otherwise be a wet blanket to the social occasion. —Universal Features Syndicate (2/29/2012)

To **throw a wet blanket** on something is to discourage or stifle it, like a wet blanket thrown on a fire.

Similar expressions are **throw cold water** and **pour cold water** (see below).

A person who discourages something may be called a **wet blanket**. That person might be someone who does or says something to make a party less fun or a group of people less enthusiastic, as in the the Universal Features example.

The earliest example I have found of wet blanket used as a metaphor is in an 18th-Century English comedy:

...as tedious as a Lapland winter, and as melancholy too; his crotchets and his humours damp all mirth and merriment, as a wet blanket does a fire: he is the very nightmare of society. —"The Fashionable Lover" (London, 1772)

throw cold water, pour cold water

Christie's approval rating is down since February and a solid majority throw cold water on his claim that he could beat President Obama. —Los Angeles Times (4/20/2011)

Top state lawmakers...threw cold water on Gov. Cuomo's proposed pension overhaul yesterday. —New York Post (3/6/2012)

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke threw cold water on the improving economic outlook Wednesday, saying further significant declines in unemployment are not likely without stronger economic growth. —USA Today (2/29/2012)

Marchionne poured cold water on a media report earlier this week that said Fiat was mulling a closure of its Mirafiori and Pomigliano factories in Italy. —Reuters (3/6/2012)

To **throw cold water** on something—usually an idea or plan—is to discourage it or subject it to severe doubt and criticism. The expression is a metaphor for putting water on a fire.

Pour cold water is used with the same meaning.

Examples have been found from the early 1800's.

Another phrase with the same meaning is **throw a wet blanket** (see above).

throw in the towel

"It's more of a surrender," said David Lochbaum, a nuclear engineer who now heads the nuclear safety program for the Union of Concerned Scientists, an activist group. "It's not like you wait 10 days and the radiation goes away. In that 10 days things are going to get worse. It's basically a sign that there's nothing left to do but throw in the towel." —Associated Press (3/16/2011)

Teach your children to hang in there [keep trying] when the going gets tough, but know when to let them throw in the towel. —msnbc.com (3/16/2011)

Google hasn't had much luck in the social networking genre. After all, last August Google did throw in the towel on its first social networking effort—Google Wave. —Computer World (3/14/2011)

To **throw in the towel** is to quit, admitting defeat.

It comes from boxing: When it was clear that a fighter could not win, his helpers would throw a towel into the ring as a signal to stop the fight and keep him from being hurt more.

The earliest printed example in my searches is in a New Zealand newspaper, the Wanganui Chronicle, in 1909: "A powerful blow to the mark and a left to the 'point' caused Welsh to 'throw in the towel, ' and Wenand was declared the winner."

An early example of the phrase used outside of boxing is in an Arizona newspaper from 1923, describing a competition at a banquet, in which speakers tried to get the most applause for the group they represented:

Before the evening was over, Mr. Sullivan suggested that his own organization "throw in the towel" and declare the affair a draw. —The Prescott (Arizona) Evening Courier (4/23/1923)

See also, call it quits.

throw one's hat in the ring

Palin will, quite obviously, be running her own type of campaign if she does decide to throw her hat in the ring. —Business Insider (6/28/2011)

Everyone thinks they can find a better way to offer cable television. The latest to throw its hat in the ring...is computer giant Intel, which has been meeting with programmers to discuss building a system that would deliver content via the Internet. —Los Angeles Times (3/13/2012)

"I hear that when Jay Leno retires that 'The Tonight Show' position is going to open and I'm thinking about putting my hat in the ring." —Michelle Obama (2/22/2013)

"I urge you to throw your hats in the ring, to seize the opportunity to get in on the ground floor, making connections with the future policymakers, lawyers, scientists, and researchers of a dynamic and influential country whose impact on the world stage will only grow in the decades to come." —Assistant Secretary of State Robert O. Blake, Jr., encouraging Americans to study in India (5/10/2013)

Throw one's hat in the ring means enter a competition, such as a race for elective office.

The phrase comes from boxing in the 1800's. A man who wanted to fight would throw his hat into the boxing ring. An expression from boxing with an almost opposite meaning is **throw in the towel** (see above).

throw out the baby with the bathwater

"Our concern is that if you tighten regulations too much, you run the risk of cutting off the ability of funds to effectively use derivatives, which could hurt investors. You don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater." —Financial Times (9/1/2011)

"These are things that were made possible by Obamacare and we are not going to throw out the baby with the bathwater...We ought to get serious about fixing it and...get it right rather than just to repeal." —Congressman James Clyburn (8/11/2013)

Throw out the baby with the bathwater means discard what is essential or valuable along with what should be discarded.

A German saying, "das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten," dates back to the 1500's. It was translated and became popular in English during the mid-1800's.

throw under the bus, throw to the wolves

While President Obama bragged about "standing by American workers" at a rowdy United Auto Workers meeting yesterday, he failed to acknowledge how the Chicago-style deal threw tens of thousands of nonunion auto-workers under the bus. —New York Post (2/29/2012)

"They just absolutely threw the three traders and managers in London completely under the bus, the three who couldn't or didn't or wouldn't speak today." —Dawn Kopecki, business journalist, referring to Senate testimony about trading losses at J.P. Morgan Chase (3/15/2013)

Ford may be about to throw limping Jaguar and Land Rover to the wolves. —Detroit News (5/11/2011)

Sun employees, many hired after the phone-hacking offenses, said they feel that they have been thrown to the wolves by their employer. —The New York Times (blog, 3/7/2012)

Someone **thrown under the bus** may be a scapegoat: blamed for something and abandoned by those who could have defended the person (against criticism, for example). Or, it may be someone whose interests are sacrificed or disregarded.

One theory, favored by the late New York Times columnist William Safire, linked the expression to baseball players being told sternly that the team bus was leaving—"Be on it or under it." But

how that evolved into the current expression (apparently during the late 1900's) remains unexplained.

The meaning of **throw to the wolves** is similar to that of **throw under the bus**: sacrifice someone or something to save oneself. The idea is that if we give the wolves something to eat they may be less interested in eating us.

This expression dates back at least to the 1930's, and is typically used in politics or business.

thumbs up, thumbs down

New Yorkers gave the NYPD a thumbs-up for its handling of the Occupy Wall Street protests, a survey released yesterday found. —New York Post (12/15/2011)

Hardly three months into the job, and with a contentious tax increase to push through parliament, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda finds himself getting more thumbs-down than thumbs-up from voters. —The Wall Street Journal (12/13/2011)

When the Jasmine Revolution roiled North Africa this spring, the traditional ballad "Jasmine Flower" was banned in China. A friend of mine who had used the song in a just-completed TV program was told to remove it, and a substitute song about peonies got the thumbs down too. In the end, he learned that no song involving flowers of any description would be permitted. —Los Angeles Times (12/11/2011)

"There are people still nowadays who say, 'I give it two thumbs up,' even if it's their own thumbs." —David Edelstein, film critic, after the death of Roger Ebert (4/4/2013)

Thumbs up means a positive opinion or decision or vote; **thumbs down** means the opposite.

The frequency of these expressions grew with the popularity of At the Movies (1986-1999), a television show in which Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel summarized their opinions of new movies with a show of thumbs. "Two thumbs up!" from Siskel and Ebert became a familiar part of advertising for films.

tide (someone) over

In past downturns, the unemployed who were also homeowners could generally tap into their home equity to tide them over. —Zacks Investment Research (7/8/2011)

The Finance Ministry also has plenty of tricks to play before it needs to miss social-security payments or bond redemptions. It can shuffle money around to tide the government over for some time... —The Wall Street Journal (8/28/2012)

She also said donor milk goes to mothers with delayed lactation who use donor milk to tide them over until Mom is ready. —USA Today (9/1/2012)

Tide over means help get through a difficult period of time.

Centuries ago it referred to ships drifting with the tide, waiting for wind. Using the expression to mean help with a temporary difficulty became popular during the mid-1800's.

tie one's hands, tie one's tongue

Judge Randy Crane said he was surprised the punishment for this crime was so lenient. His hands were tied by federal law. —KRGV-TV (Weslaco, Texas (7/21/2011)

While the mayor appointed school board members before 1995, his hands were largely tied: He could select only from a list of candidates compiled by a nominating commission. —Chicago Tribune (1/4/2011)

Emma Watson was tongue tied Monday night when asked about her drinking habits on "The Late Show With David Letterman." —Newsday (7/12/2011)

"Honestly, I don't get tongue-tied much. I've interviewed Barack Obama for God's sake! But I do when I'm around Bill Petersen." —Sharon Barrett, writer and documentary film maker (8/17/2013)

A person whose **hands are tied** lacks the power to do something, or a stronger power prevents him from doing it. A group or organization may have its hands tied.

A person whose **tongue is tied**, or **is tongued-tied**, temporarily cannot speak.

Tie one's tongue comes from Shakespeare. In Romeo and Juliet (1599) Capulet says: "Death, that hath ta'en her hence to make me wail, Ties up my tongue, and will not let me speak."

An early version of tie one's hands is in Thomas Burton's diary, 1658-9: "Equity is as much justice as law, and will hold very well by God's laws, and man's laws, and all laws, as justice. I would have you not to tie up your hands from consideration of either."

tie the knot

Quinn, the council's first openly lesbian speaker, said...that she and Catullo, an attorney, wouldn't tie the knot until they could do it legally here. —New York Daily News (blog, 3/12/2012)

It sounds like Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel are wasting no time in tying the knot. —New York Post (2/24/2012)

"When Edie Windsor and Thea Spire tied the knot, they had no idea their union would someday lead to a Supreme Court challenge, one that if successful could open the door to federal benefits for same-sex couples for generations." —Jason Carroll, television news reporter (3/27/2013)

They [Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton] were divorced by a Swiss court on June 26, 1974. The next year they retied the knot before an African tribal chief in Botswana. Less than a year later, in 1976, they severed the tie in a Haitian divorce, but their love for each other continued. —Los Angeles Times (3/23/2011)

Many couples **tie the knot**—get married.

Not so many retie the knot—get married again after a divorce, as Taylor and Burton did in the Los Angeles Times example.

The knot has been a symbol of marriage for many centuries, and tie the knot has been traced back to the 1700's.

tie up, tie up loose ends

Hopkins showed up too late Friday to join Walters... In town to help promote the Amir Khan-Zab Judah fight Saturday at Mandalay Bay, Hopkins apologized and explained he got tied up at the weigh-in. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (7/27/2011)

Kathryn Hall's attempt to close a mobile home park near the Hall St. Helena winery is still tied up in court. —St. Helena Star (7/28/2011)

The movie certainly lived up to expectations, inciting laughter and tears at all the right places. All loose ends are tied up and the motivations of all the main characters are explained during the two hour, 10 minutes of pure magic. —Mt. Shasta Herald (7/15/2011)

"The main message that I have is that the United States recognizes our fates are tied up with your success." —President Barack Obama in Costa Rica (5/4/2013)

Tie up can be confusing because it is used literally in many contexts, and also has different figurative meanings. Some common examples of literal meanings:

tie up a package with string, cord, etc.
tie up a person, in a crime
tie up a horse, to keep it from walking away

Each of the examples has a different figurative meaning.

In the Las Vegas Review-Journal example, the boxer was **tied up**—occupied or made busy—so he could not leave (which made him late). A person who is "tied up at the office" is required to work and cannot leave.

In the St. Helena Star example, action cannot occur because a legal case is unfinished. "Tied up in court" means that until the court makes a decision, other activity must wait.

When loose ends are tied up, unfinished details are completed. In the Mt. Shasta Herald example, questions about details in the plot of a movie are answered. "Tie up loose ends" often refers to work or other activity: "We have basic agreement on the contract. It will be signed as soon as we tie up the loose ends." Another example: "Before we move, we have a few loose ends to tie up."

In President Obama's quotation, tied up means closely connected.

tighten belts

"Municipalities are going to be doing belt tightening, but there's only so much belt tightening they can do," said MDE's Mr. Longo. —The Wall Street Journal (12/19/2010)

If your assets have taken a hit [decreased], you might prefer to tighten your belt and spend less for a year or two. —Reuters (3/7/2012)

Oil prices dropped Friday as investors acknowledged that Europe needs to tighten its belt for years to work through a credit crisis... —Associated Press (10/29/2012)

"...it makes it hard for families. They are having to tighten their belts. And we need the federal government to tighten its belt." —Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers (4/10/2013)

Belt-tightening, when not referring to preventing pants from falling down, usually means making changes to reduce spending. Governments, companies and other institutions may **tighten their belts** to save money. When the phrase is applied to people, context determines whether it's about losing weight or saving money.

In the 1800's, the phrase meant enduring hunger.

till the cows come home

I'm not going to pitch Justin Verlander. You can argue till the cows come home, I'm not going to do it. —Detroit Tigers Manager Jim Leyland, quoted in the Columbus, Indiana, Republic (10/6/2011)

"I always eat the spiciest food when I go to a Thai or Indian restaurant," said Luis Barroso before the contest. "I can eat habaneros till the cows come home." —Winston-Salem Journal (10/7/2011)

Politicians can wrangle till the cows come home, but soon enough we'll run out of other things to cut—and then we'll have to get medical spending under control. —Newsday (8/5/2011)

Till the cows come home means a very long time, maybe forever.

We may easily imagine cows taking a long time to come home, but the origin of till the cows come home is unknown.

This example is evidence that the expression was known to American readers at the beginning of the 1800's:

Now, to use a rustick phrase, a man may make lines like these "till the cows come home." —The Boston Review (October, 1805)

tip one's hand, close to the vest

Corbett, a Republican, has not tipped his hand as to which of those recommendations, if any, he'll support, even though there is broad support for them in the business community, perhaps Corbett's biggest ally. —Houston Chronicle (9/3/2011)

Cadillac tipped its hand on future plans Thursday night in Carmel, Calif., revealing a dramatic full-size coupe concept called the Elmiraj. —Los Angeles Times (8/16/2013)

"I think what happened during the end of the year was they just ran things very, very close to the vest." —Joel Naroff, economist, talking about the decline in American business activity during the last quarter of 2012 (1/30/2013)

"I kept nothing close to the vest. I am not a political operator. It's my greatest strength and my biggest weakness." —The Brownsville Herald (8/29/2011)

Most tech companies like to keep their cards close to their vests, but Amazon, like Apple, strives to render the whole deck invisible. —The New York Times (9/26/2011)

If you **tip your hand**, you reveal information to those who may use it against you in competition.

If you keep something **close to the vest**, you reveal nothing, or as little as you can. Or, as in the Naroff quotation, you are cautious.

The phrases come from card games, especially poker. If you let your cards tip forward—tipping your hand—other people may read what is on them. The opposite, keeping your cards close to your vest, means no one else can read them. **Close to the chest** is a variation with the same meaning.

In the New York Times example, the metaphor is extended. Keeping the whole deck [of cards] invisible means an extra level of secrecy.

The expressions have been in use since the early 1900's:

Attorney Heney "tipped his hand" to a slight extent tonight when he told Judge Coffey that Halsey, who has been in Manila for months, was under close watch. —Chicago Tribune (3/21/1907)

To borrow a phrase from ... draw poker, the trade "is playing them close to the vest." Nobody is buying a dime's worth more of merchandise than he has to, and the turnover must be in plain view

before even that much is purchased. —Magazine of the Pottery, Glass and Brass Salesmen's Association of America (4/7/1921)

tit for tat

"The American people aren't looking for this tit-for-tat sort of political argument. They are tired of that." —President Barack Obama (2/16/2011)

Tit-for-tat exchanges between Israel and Palestinians have been routine since the 2009 war, but a flare-up of this intensity is rare. —Associated Press (3/10/2011)

Nor can one safely dismiss the potential for tit-for-tat escalation that leads in unpredictable directions, including all-out war. —USA Today (3/4/2011)

"You can approach it as a tit for tat...or you can approach it as a grownup...If Israel and the Palestinians want a two-state solution, they both should do nothing on the ground to preclude the two-state solution." —Ghaith Al-Omari, director of the advocacy group American Task Force on Palestine (12/4/2012)

Tit for tat means one hit in retaliation for another. It usually refers to an argument or fight, and sometimes implies that the exchange is childish or irresponsible, as in the WWBT example.

The phrase has been traced to the 1500's. It may have been a variation of "tip for tap," which had a similar meaning.

to come by

And while pumpkin beer is a dime a dozen [cheap] this time of year, pumpkin-flavored booze can be tough to come by. —Fox News (10/20/2011)

The grant...is a bold philanthropic gesture for the Valley, which lags behind most other areas of the state in nonprofit giving. For cash-strapped organizations, the timing couldn't be better – unemployment is high, donations are hard to come by and grants are competitive. —Fresno Bee (10/25/2011)

"The items needed to build these bombs are said to be easy to come by..." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor (4/16/2013)

To come by in these contexts means to get, or to find.

This can be confusing to English learners, because in other contexts come by can mean come near, come to, or visit— "Let's talk about that when you come by."

Similar uses of come by have been found as early as the 1500's.

to death

His teammates love him to death. He doesn't view himself as anything special. —USA Today (1/18/2012)

How can any Rollins fan not be tickled to death to know that Hillary Clinton might have a favorite Sonny Rollins record? —Buffalo News (12/6/2011)

"Chess makes my life," the 69-year-old Clear Lake-area resident said. "What would I be doing? I

would be bored to death." —Houston Chronicle (11/22/2011)

"I'm thrilled to death that we're going to have some time, scared to death that because we don't know what's going to happen." —WOWT-TV (Omaha, Nebraska, 1/24/2012)

When it does not refer literally to killing or dying, **to death** adds emphasis to words of emotion or action. In the news examples:

Love him to death means love him a lot.
Tickled to death: amused and delighted; very happy.
Bored to death: extremely bored; suffering from a severe lack of interest.
Thrilled to death: very excited and happy.
Scared to death: severely frightened.

Similar uses of to death have been traced back to the 1400's. An early example of the phrase serving the purpose of humorous exaggeration is in Shakespeare's "Merry Wives of Windsor" (1602): "...now if you will let us tell our husbands of it. For mine I'm sure that almost fretted himself to death. "

to the core

"This was a bad deal, rotten to the core. This bill does nothing to create jobs while at the same time providing tax cuts for the wealthiest two percent of Americans." —Congressman John Lewis (12/16/2010)

This guy is...likeable to the core and has a natural voice mixing pop, soul and rock. —Contra Costa Times (3/14/2012)

"This is rotten to the core. This is arrogance. This is big government cronyism." —Congressman Paul Ryan, after the Internal Revenue Service apologized for its treatment of political groups (5/19/2013)

The core is the center of something, such as an apple. If an apple is rotten to the core it is completely rotten. Used figuratively, **to the core** means completely; all the way to the center.

Examples of this phrase have been found from the early 1800's.

to the tune of

But I do have a problem with the unwarranted taxpayer subsidies we've been handing out to oil and gas companies—to the tune of $4 billion a year. —President Barack Obama's weekly address (4/30/2011) [see video]

...crude [oil] has been shipped to Asia to the tune of around 4 million barrels a month —Reuters (3/6/2012)

Resoundingly rejected by his colleagues to the tune of 71 to 31 votes... —TIME (2/26/2011)

To the tune of means in the amount of, or to the extent of, and usually suggests that the amount or extent is large.

This expression has been traced back to the 1700's but it is not clear how tune, a sequence of musical notes, came to be used this way.

toe to toe, head to head

Google eBooks, formerly called Google Editions, represents another opportunity for the Web giant to go toe-to-toe with two of its powerful rivals, Apple Inc. and Amazon.com Inc., and to open up a new stream of revenue outside of online advertising. —The Wall Street Journal (12/6/2010)

Gingrich makes his case that he's the one who can go "toe-to-toe" with Obama in the general election debates. —USA Today (3/13/2012)

The stations will have to alter the time periods of newscasts so they will not compete head to head. —New York Daily News (3/15/2012)

McDonald's...is rolling out a line of breakfast pastries in New England, going head-to-head with Massachusetts-based rival Dunkin' Donuts. —TIME (3/13/2012)

Go toe-to-toe means compete directly, one against one.

Go head-to-head has the same meaning.

In boxing, opponents may first move around, being cautious and waiting for an opportunity before they go toe-to-toe. That means they stand and fight so close that their toes are almost touching. Their heads are also close, so close that they often do touch.

That is the essential metaphor of both phrases, although their roots are in phrases used long before modern boxing. In the early 1600's, William Shakespeare wrote in "Antony and Cleopatra" of fighting **foot to foot**.

Head-to-head has also been used with a meaning similar to **face to face** in some contexts that do not involve fighting or competition, such as in a head-to-head meeting, but face to face is more common in such usage.

tone deaf

"Tone deaf politicians are going to be fired, and they're going to be replaced in the next election cycle." —Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska (2/20/2011)

"Any new judge or district magistrate is not tone deaf. I'm sure they're reading things in the news media and watching things on TV like everybody else." —Gerald Grimaud, an attorney, talking about the case against former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, who was convicted of sexual crimes against children (11/23/2011)

"You don't want to have a security policy that is tone deaf to your business needs, or not tailored to the specific cases of how the company plans to use mobile." —Gary Alterson, security expert (7/31/2013)

When used figuratively (not talking about an inability to hear sounds at certain levels) **tone deaf** means disregarding something or insensitive to something. Frequently the phrase refers to politics. A tone deaf person or policy fails to consider the opinions of others.

Printed examples of the phrase used figuratively exist as least as far back as the 1930's.

tongue-in-cheek

...the opening tongue-in-cheek "Jingle Bells Forever," which pits John Phillip Sousa, Handel and the seasonal gang against "Jingle Bells" in a clever and good-natured orchestral parody. —The

Portland (Maine) Press-Herald (12/13/2010)

Tea Party favorite Sarah Palin got a tongue in cheek worst actress nod, for playing herself in her political documentary film "The Undefeated." —Reuters (2/25/2012)

One editor wrote a tongue-in-cheek "open letter" to Lloyd Blankfein, nominating himself for the job vacated by the Goldman exec. —New York Daily News (3/14/2011)

Tongue-in-cheek means joking or not entirely serious. It often refers to humor that may be sarcastic or ironic, when the literal meaning is the opposite of the real meaning or emotion.

In the 1800's, pushing your tongue into the side of your mouth was a gesture of disrespect. To "have your tongue in your cheek" meant you were being insincere, or making an unfriendly joke. The phrase was not often condensed to tongue-in-cheek and used as an adjective or adverb until the early 1900's. But in this early example, it has a meaning similar to that of today:

...one may be equally sure that those among them who were gifted with a sense of humour entered the hall tongue in cheek, and in the proper spirit of cynicism.—The Nineteenth Century (London, 1894)

top dog

But Heller won't get to make that call—ultimately, in the Senate, that seems to be up to Nevada's top-dog Democrat Harry Reid, and Republican Whip Jon Kyl of Arizona. —Las Vegas Sun (6/30/2011)

The deal would give Carrefour a 50% stake in the undisputed top dog in one of the world's biggest food markets while depriving Casino of its growth strategy. —The Wall Street Journal (6/29/2011)

Both companies for now have indicated they a willingness to take a hit to profits in order to grow their business and end up top dog. —Variety (5/11/2011)

A **top dog** is a leader, ranking first in something.

The metaphor may seem simple and ancient, but the phrase was not in use before the late 1800's. In my searches, the earliest clear example of top dog that does not refer to a four-legged animal is an 1897 short story magazine, coincidentally named "The Black Cat":

"I am top dog of this here county." —The Black Cat (Boston, April, 1897)

top drawer

A political standoff over the federal borrowing limit brought the United States to the brink of default and cost the nation its top-drawer credit rating. —Associated Press (12/21/2011)

It's great news that Cornell University and Technion-Israel Institute of Technology will spend more than $2 billion to build a big new top-drawer science campus on Roosevelt Island... —Newsday (12/20/2011)

In addition to benefitting from a "top drawer" management team, Tourmaline is poised to increase production by 35% if not more this year... —Dow Jones Newswires (1/11/2011)

Top drawer means best quality. In the past it usually referred to people of the highest social standing, but is now less frequently used that way. See also, **top notch**, below.

Examples of top drawer used figuratively have been found from as early as 1905. This one is from two years later:

In those days it was no disgrace to be in the tobacco business but the beer business was looked down upon. It used to annoy me that the Walkers who made whiskey were top drawer socially but that most brewers were not. —"Fitz Randolph Traditions by L.V.F. Randolph (New York, 1907)

top-notch

Britain, which has embarked on tough austerity policies to curb a big budget deficit, retains a top-notch credit rating. —Reuters (12/16/2011)

...our kids only get one shot at a top-notch education and they cannot afford to wait. —Atlanta Journal-Constitution (12/16/2011)

... the new county executive is fulfilling his pledge to put top-notch individuals in key posts. —Buffalo News (12/14/2011)

Top-notch means the highest quality or status.

Notches, grooves or nicks in a surface such as wood or metal, have long been associated with measurement. (See also, **down a notch** and **up a notch**.)

An early example is in "Aunt Jerusia's Gold Necklace," a short story by Caroline Orne:

"Well, it is amazing," said Aunt Jerusia, "how genteel people do grow. In my young days, when the boys and girls met together, we called it having a frolic. After a while they began to tell of having a party—and now, in order to be at the top notch of gentility you must call it having a sworry." "You mean a soirée, aunt," said Lucy.—The Ladies Companion and Literary Expositor (New York, 1844)

touch base, touch all bases

Still, "no one from the Obama campaign has gotten in touch with our organization to see what's up," said Randy Parraz, a Latino activist... "You'd think they would at least touch base with us if they want to connect with Latinos," Parraz said of the Obama campaign. —The Daily Beast (10/11/2011)

Besides continually touching base with her co-teacher and meeting with the staff, Hayes has a lot of administrative meetings to attend on both the district and site levels. —The Salinas Californian (10/15/2011)

"He's spending a lot of time touching all the bases around the commonwealth." —The Washington Post (9/7/2011)

To **touch base** is make contact—to communicate with a person or group.

This alludes to baseball, in which runners and fielders must touch the bases in various situations. Thus, when used metaphorically, touch base and **touch all bases** often imply that the communication fulfills a duty or meets a requirement.

Examples of these expressions have been found as early as 1918. A related expression is **cover all bases**.

touchy-feely

On Thursday, the long-awaited (by someone, right?) musical episode of "Grey's Anatomy" premieres with the Seattle Grace doctors singing stale, touchy-feely pop songs... —Redeye (3/29/2011)

...his [Mayor Bloomberg's] pragmatic approach seems unchanged, he said..."He's not a touchy-feely kind of guy." —Associated Press (9/6/2011)

"She was very considerate, and, surprisingly, touchy-feely. She would tap you on the arm and say, 'Everything OK?' I hadn't expected that touch of tenderness." —Salman Rushdie, the novelist, remembering Margaret Thatcher (4/8/2013)

My supervisor is very touchy-feely. She gives us hugs, pats on the back (literally) and occasional shoulder rubs. —The New York Times (4/1/2011).

Touchy-feely became well-known during the 1960's, when people at retreats in California were encouraged to get in touch with their feelings.

The phrase was used in a derisive, ridiculing way then and still is. The Redeye sentence means that the songs are affectionate in an exaggerated, silly way. But the expression also may be used in a neutral or even positive sense, and sometimes it is more literal, describing people who touch others, as in the New York Times example.

See also, **warm and fuzzy**.

trade down, trade up

Their parents, the Baby Boomers who fell in love with the Beetle 50 years ago, are also looking to trade down in size. —Associated Press (4/18/2011)

...McDonald's tends to do well when the economy weakens because cash-strapped consumers trade down to cheaper food. —Reuters (8/4/2013)

Even if you live where prices are still falling, now is a good time to buy if you're trading up to a larger or more expensive home. —Chicago Tribune (4/15/2011)

... image-conscious buyers of new premium cars tend to frequently trade up to the latest model... —Los Angeles Times (8/15/2013)

Trade up means buy something larger or more expensive and sell something smaller or less expensive. **Trade down** means the opposite.

When describing market activity, these phrases are used differently: "Banking stocks are trading down today" means that the stock prices are falling.

The expressions have been in use since the mid-1900's.

train of thought

He seemed to get so wrapped up in the anxiety of his IRS debt that he ended up losing his train of thought. —Miami New Times (9/26/2011)

"Michael Jordan was the greatest of all time. His focus...was legendary. There was very little that could disrupt his train of thought." —Urban Meyer, coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes football

team (8/30/2013)

There's a train of thought that sees smartphones as disconnection machines—devices that keep us staring at the screen instead of looking around at the rest of the world. —The Charlotte Observer (10/16/2011)

When something distracts a person from thinking, his **train of thought** is said to be broken, interrupted, disrupted or lost, as in the Miami New Times example and Urban Meyer quotation.

In other cases, including the Charlotte Observer example, train of thought means an idea, or way of thinking, or line of reasoning.

In "Leviathan," (1651), Thomas Hobbes defined train of thought as "the succession of one thought to another," a conversation in the mind rather than in spoken words.

train wreck

And then we're going to see whether enough Democrats and Republicans in the House can come together to pass something in time for us to avoid a train wreck on Tuesday. —PBS Nightly Business Report (7/29/2011)

Perpetual train wreck Lindsay Lohan was reamed out yesterday by an annoyed judge who told her to get back on track—or else. —New York Post (7/22/2011)

"This was a train wreck for the Obama administration. This law looks like it's going to be struck down." —CNN Legal Analyst Jeffrey Toobin (3/27/2012)

"The American people dislike it even more now than they did when it was passed. And they hope that the Congress will respond to their desire to stop this train wreck before it happens." —Senator Mitch McConnell, talking about health care legislation (7/14/2013)

When **train wreck** does not refer to a real accident involving a train, it means a bad or disastrous event. The phrase is often used when talking about the future. A longer phrase, **like watching a train wreck in slow motion**, means feeling that a disaster is about to happen.

The train wreck in the PBS example was a failure to compromise in Congress, threatening economic problems for the United States and the world.

The phrase is also used in much less prominent situations, in the same way that disaster is used for exaggeration and emphasis. Disaster would have the same meaning as train wreck in this example: "We're unprepared. The meeting will be a train wreck." Similarly, calling a person "a perpetual train wreck," as in the New York Post example, means that her life is a disaster.

(Four idioms are packed into the Post's short sentence, which means: Troubled Lindsay Lohan was scolded yesterday by an annoyed judge, who told her to obey her orders or face unspecified punishment.)

It is not clear how, or precisely when, the metaphorical use of train wreck began, but this example hints that it may have been during the late 1980's or early 1990's:

The metaphor favored by Texas legislators to describe a political catastrophe is the train wreck...In the halls of the Capitol, a train wreck refers to something more than a difficult problem. It means a head-on collision between opposing forces that can explode in a spectacular burst of ill feeling, ruining relationships and even careers...—Texas Monthly (July, 1991)

This does not explain the origin. And it is not clear why Americans may say, "That presentation

was a train wreck," but we never say that the presentation was a plane crash or a car wreck.

trigger happy

It gets harder and harder to succeed and find audiences with the 500-channel universe, the remote control, and people being so trigger happy with that remote control. —New York Magazine (3/21/2011)

In Maui, trigger-happy Terrence Jones took 41 shots in three games. In the NCAA Tournament, the more measured freshman has taken just 33 shots in four games. —Lexington Herald-Leader (3/29/2011)

I object to Maureen Dowd's characterization of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel as "trigger-happy"... —The New York Times (3/9/2012)

Someone who is **trigger-happy** is too quick or eager to do something—like a person who is too willing to fire a gun.

After the mid-20th Century, people began using the expression in situations without weapons, such as "shooting" sports like basketball and hockey (as in the Lexington Herald-Leader example).

In the New York Magazine example, it means that people change TV channels often. In the New York Times example, it refers to ordering military action.

See also, **shoot from the hip**.

trot out

Entertainers trot out new looks to complement the mood of the song they're performing. —Daily Herald (Provo, Utah, 8/7/2011)

Central planners love to trot out the Great Depression as evidence of market failure, but massive tax hikes by Herbert Hoover (including new tariffs) and a central bank veering erratically from easy money to tight conspired to doom the economy. —Minneapolis Star-Tribune (8/6/2011)

...it's easy to trot out the old observation that says if these mounds of rubble were in most any other neighborhood in the city, they would have been cleaned up long ago. —Salisbury, North Carolina, Post (9/1/2013)

To **trot out** means to bring something out and show it—like bringing out a horse for people to look at.

When an idea or piece of information is trotted out in a statement or argument, it is being used to make a point, as in the Star-Tribune example. Frequently there is a negative connotation: "As usual, they're trotting out that old horse again."

The Daily Herald example may be neutral, not negative. It means the entertainers wear different clothing for each song they perform.

Here is an early example of trot out that does not refer to a horse. It describes Mr. Hobbs' happiness in having a guest he can show off to his other guests.

A peer—a minister—a stranger to the county,—to come all this way to consult him!—to be his guest!—to be shown off, and patted, and trotted out before all the rest of the company! Mr. Hobbs was a made man! —"Alice" by Edward Bulwer Lytton (1838)

tunnel vision

Firefighters can't get tunnel vision in a burning home. They must watch for falling debris and monitor the fire's speed as they brave the flames. —The Shelby (N.C.) Star (10/5/2011)

"...this was a case where the state had focused with tunnel vision on my client, Al Thomas, and excluded other evidence." —The Times News (Burlington, N.C., 10/5/2011)

"We've had a tough couple of weeks and our main goal was to come out with a victory. We've had tunnel vision all week—we wanted to get six." —HawkeyeSports.com (10/1/2011)

"So there's not a lot of time to think. And you actually get tunnel vision in a situation like this. He did what he had to do. And it's a tragic, tragic thing that took place." —Wallace Zeins, former hostage negotiator for the New York City police, after a policeman in Uniondale, N.Y., killed a robber and his hostage, a 21-year-old college student (5/20/2013)

Literally, as in the Shelby Star example, **tunnel vision** means limited vision, as if looking through a tunnel. Figuratively, as in the Times News example, it means focusing too narrowly; not being able or willing to consider more than one idea.

Tunnel vision is frequently a criticism or has negative connotation. But sometimes it is positive, especially in sports. In the HawkeyeSports.com example, the Iowa football coach expressed happiness that his team was completely focused on winning.

The earliest printed example of tunnel vision I have found is in a 1912 medical journal published in Omaha, Nebraska:

Again, as we said before, the physician's lot is much that of a recluse. He must get out and should get out and meet his fellow practitioners. He must get away from the ideas that are narrowed down to his routine and gain vision. A physician is too likely to obtain a tunnel vision rather than a Stereoscopic vision. His perspective narrows down and it is this association, this exchange of ideas with his fellows, that tends to counteract the tunnel vision. —Western Medical Review (June, 1912)

turn a blind eye to, turn a deaf ear to

"Party leaders were so keen to win the support of newspapers that we turned a blind eye to the need to sort this issue." —British Prime Minister David Cameron (7/8/2011)

"At a time when too many others turned a blind eye to murder and injustice, it would have been extraordinary if Raoul Wallenberg had saved just one life. Wallenberg saved 100,000 lives." —Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew (5/10/2013)

Her colleagues soon discovered that she didn't mind getting sweaty and dirty, could turn a deaf ear to construction language, was good at math and already had a hands-on knowledge of electricity. —The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (7/6/2011)

"You know someone is embellishing the truth, but there may be a benefit to turning a deaf ear." —Omarr's astrological forecast (1/8/2013)

"But I turned a deaf ear to the song's message as surely as I turned a blind eye to the arboretum beside the campus planetarium..."—Frank Bruni, writing in The New York Times (12/12/2011)

Turn a blind eye to something means pretend not to see it, or not to know it exists.

In the David Cameron quotation, he referred to politicians failing to take strong enough action after newspapers gained illegal access to private phone messages and bribed police for information.

Turn a blind eye to has been traced to an 1809 account of a naval battle, which said British Admiral Horatio Nelson used his blindness in one eye as an excuse to disobey an order to retreat, claiming that he could not see the signal.

The expression is similar in meaning to **turn a deaf ear to**. That phrase wasn't used until the 1800's, but citations in the Oxford English Dictionary show that the idea existed long before, in such expressions as "Make deef ere to hem as though thou herde hem not" (pretend to be deaf, as though you didn't hear him), from approximately 1440.

turn back the clock

His [Mubarak's] words were a blow to the protesters. They also suggest that authorities want to turn back the clock to the tight state control enforced before the protests began. —Associated Press (2/2/2011)

Unlike a science experiment, in which variables can be changed and the experiment repeated, we can't turn back the clock, let the auto companies go bankrupt and compare the results with what we have today... —The New York Times (3/9/2012)

"So the fact is, after decades of progress, there's still those who want to turn back the clock to policies more suited to the 1950s than the 21st century." —President Barack Obama, talking about new state laws restricting abortion and contraception (4/26/2013)

Turn back the clock means go back in time, changing things back to the way they were.

The expression, "You can't turn back the clock" is not true literally. You can change the time on a clock. But figuratively, it means that when time has passed and things have changed, you can't change them back.

An early example:

Reader! if you could turn back the clock of time about 160 years, and place yourself at Tyburn, near London, you would see a pious woman chained to a stake... —The Church (London, May, 1846)

turn of phrase

While their research focused on attitudes about crime, their findings can be used to understand the implications of how a casual or calculated turn of phrase can influence debates and change minds. —Stanford University news release (2/23/2011)

US President Barack Obama needs something more than a powerful turn of phrase if he wants to ensure that Iran doesn't enter the vacuum. —Jerusalem Post (2/23/2011)

Mr. Zacks's criterion for inclusion seems to have been the ability to make a vigorous turn of phrase, and he lets them talk. —The Wall Street Journal (3/16/2011)

A **turn of phrase** is a distinctive use of words. It often means a clever or graceful use of language, as in the Jerusalem Post example.

The earliest known example was written by Benjamin Franklin in a letter in 1779. He said that since "our common common English Bible" was then more than 170 years old, it was time someone wrote a new translation, "in which, preserving the sense, the turn of phrase and manner of expression should be modern."

turn over a new leaf, turn the page

More than a year ago, the Delaware River Port Authority vowed to turn over a new leaf and stop borrowing money to fund economic-development projects. —Philadelphia Daily News (12/16/2011)

The government announced that we hadn't been detained but had "sought police protection." That was a flat lie, and it was a reminder to be wary of Bahrain assurances as the country claims to be turning a new leaf. —The New York Times (12/14/2011)

Smokers are being invited to turn over a new leaf with a Cuban-inspired electronic cigar. —promotional news release (8/8/2013)

"However, we concluded that turning the page on this legacy legal issue through the positive steps we are taking is in the best interests of the company, our employees, our dealers and, most of all, our customers." —Christopher Reynolds, general counsel for Toyota Motor Sales, USA, referring to Toyota's $1.1 billion agreement to settle claims that its vehicles accelerated accidentally. (12/26/2012)

Harris, who spent most of his career with the Philadelphia Eagles and Green Bay Packers, said his injury was "God's way of telling me it's time for me to turn the page." —Sports Network (12/28/2011)

"I hope that your visit along with the visit of Secretary of State Kerry will help us turn a page in our relations with the Palestinians." —Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking to President Barack Obama (3/20/2013)

"It seems that extremists on both sides are determined to maintain the state of hostility and hatred between the two states, but logic says that there should be a change of direction in order to turn a new page in this unstable relationship and minimize the state of hostility and mistrust between the two countries." —Hassan Rouhani, before his election as president of Iran, talking about relations between Iran and the United States (6/13/2013)

Turn over a new leaf means change to a better way of behaving, making a new start.

Turn the page, (or **turn a page**) when used figuratively, means move on to the next stage of life or development.

Both phrases are metaphors for turning the page of a book, but turn over a new leaf often has a stronger focus on morality.

In the Miller's Prologue of The Canterbury Tales (approximately 1405), Geoffrey Chaucer warned that the Miller "tolde his cherles tale in his manere"—told his churlish [bad] story in his own way. And if a reader might be offended, Chaucer's advice was to "Turne ouer the leef, and chese another tale"—turn over the leaf (page) and choose another story. In that context, "Turne ouer the leef" was both a physical act and a moral decision.

A 1775 play, "Cleonice" by John Hoole, provides this example of "turns the page" used figuratively:

The warmer sallies of ungovern'd youth,
Ere long experience turns the page of life...

turn the tables

PBS, known as the American television outlet for many British programs produced by the BBC and others, is looking to turn the tables by starting a digital channel in Britain. —The New York Times (7/31/2011)

Boeing Co. vowed to turn the tables on Airbus next year by winning well over 1,000 orders... —Reuters (12/13/2011)

Clinton used it [the shutdown of the government] to turn the tables on the fairly new Republican Congress, and he ended up humbling the GOP en route to winning reelection. —Philadelphia Inquirer (4/7/2011)

"A...report reveals a secret White House campaign to increase cyber attacks against potential enemies abroad, but could the tables turn on the United States? We're looking at the dangers the country may face in an escalating global cyber war." —Wolf Blitzer, CNN News Anchor (6/1/2012)

Turn the tables means reverse positions, often with the weaker side becoming the stronger one.

The phrase compares situations involving competition or struggle to games such as chess, where opponents can rotate the table and switch sides during a game.

In "New Testament Vindicated" (1619), John Richardson began a very long sentence in a complicated religious argument with, "Now, let's turn the Tables, and we shall find the whole Christian world agreed..." Richardson's meaning was: "Let's turn this argument around and approach the question from another side."

turn the tide

Despite rebel setbacks and an increasingly public rift with NATO allies, the U.S. will stick to its plan to remain in the back seat of the Libya air campaign, the Obama administration insisted Tuesday after three weeks of air missions that have failed to turn the tide against Moammar Gadhafi. —Associated Press (4/12/2011)

But over the last three years, the tide has turned. We broke the Taliban's momentum. —President Barack Obama (5/1/2012)

"The Syrian government may be turning the tide against rebel forces." —Pauline Chiou, television news anchor (5/17/2013)

Turn the tide means change the direction of something, such as shifting the advantage from one team to another in sports, or in military struggles, as in the news examples.

Turn the tide has been in use since the 1600's.

turn up one's nose, thumb one's nose

"I love good food, but I'm not a food snob. I like fried Spam too. I'm Puerto Rican and grew up

eating it, so I don't turn my nose up at Spam." —Chicago Tribune (3/1/2011)

...I've never seen anyone turn their nose up at an Entertainment Book. —Buffalo News (11/28/2011)

However, we believe the legislature is moving in the right direction in making sure that those who thumb their noses at the law, find out there are consequences. —WLOX Mississippi (3/10/2011)

"President Obama thumbs his nose at Republicans, elevating Susan Rice to national security adviser. It's a position that does not require congressional approval." —Erin Burnett, television news anchor (6/5/2013)

If you **turn your nose up** (or **turn up your nose**) you are avoiding something or someone because you do not think the thing or person meets your standards.

Thumb your nose means show disrespect.

Both are usually followed by the preposition "at."

Examples of these expressions can be found as early as the mid-19th Century. Harper's Magazine explained in 1858: "To turn up the nose at a thing suggests contempt too small for indignation; to lay one's finger on the nose, or gyrate all four with the thumb for a pivot, are vulgar comic gestures."

twist arms, arm-twisting

Mr. Bloomberg's style is to give aides great latitude and, as needed, to charm, twist arms and seal deals. —The New York Times (10/14/2011)

But after some arm-twisting from plastic surgeons and other doctors, Senate Democrats relented on the Botox levy. —Las Vegas Review-Journal (10/1/2011)

"He also happens to be my brother, so I didn't have much trouble twisting his arm to join us on the midday show." —WJBC radio (Illinois, 9/21/2011)

"I think I have talents as a politician, but arm-twisting isn't one of mine." —Senator John McCain (1/28/2013)

Literally, arm twisting is turning someone's arm, painfully. When used as a metaphor, **arm twisting** means persuading by using pressure. The pressure is often political, or it may be social, as in the WJBC example.

An early example of arm-twisting used as a metaphor is in a 1940 news article about the threat of an invasion of Greece by Italy:

The whole area of the eastern Mediterranean is passing an unhappy week-end as the diplomatic arm-twisting of the moment risks a blunder...which might send several Balkan countries reeling into war...—The Pittsburgh Press (8/25/1940)

two cents

Rail enthusiasts will have to wait a while longer to put in their two cents on the state Department of Transportation's plan for rail service in the state. —Nashua Telegraph (10/12/2011)

Monday's forum was the first of three public input sessions Mayor Frank Cownie, City Council members and City Manager Rick Clark will host so taxpayers can give their two cents' worth about

what municipal services should be protected —Des Moines Register (10/18/2011)

Harvey said he's seeking office to help the township through tough economic times. "I've run my own business for 31 years, and I've been on finance committees, and it's time to put my two cents in," he said. —Springfield (Ohio) News-Sun (10/1/2011)

Everybody just tosses in their two cents and decides what the Bible means for themselves. —Stephen Colbert (5/1/2012)

In these and similar contexts, **two cents** means opinion.

Two cents may come from British uses of twopence, a coin of small value, in phrases referring to a small or modest opinion. The most frequently used forms are variations of **put in one's two cents** and **two cents' worth**.

An early example is in a letter to the editor of a magazine for nurses in 1908:

As a trained nurse...may I put in my two cents on the subject of what a nurse should charge for her services? —The Trained Nurse and Hospital Review (March, 1908)

two strikes against, three strikes, etc.

Still, when Tinley Park police brought the injured stray to Peoples Animal Welfare Society in mid-July, staffers knew he already had two strikes against him. One, he's a St. Bernard. It can be hard to find homes for big dogs. Two, he had a bum left leg that had to be amputated immediately after he was brought to the shelter. —Post Tribune (Indiana, 10/16/2011)

This woman had three strikes against her in those days: she was a woman, a widow and poor. —The Courier (Houma, Louisiana, 9/23/2011)

Since the smoking ban went into effect, the city has received 38 complaints. Of those, not one company has been issued a violation, which would happen only if it's the third strike against the business. —KY3-TV (Springfield, Missouri, 9/20/2011)

"It's three strikes...and I'll be voting no on this bill." —Representative Tim Huelskamp of Kansas (1/1/2013)

Three strikes (swings and misses with the bat) and you're out, a central rule of baseball, is the basis for a variety of phrases. With **two strikes**, you have only one chance left to succeed.

Variations of **three strikes and you're out** are sometimes used in reference to laws that call for a severe penalty after three violations, as in the KY3-TV example.

An early example of the metaphor is in an unsigned editorial (probably written by Roy Wilkins) in the monthly newsletter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People:

For to date, Governor Dewey, to use good baseball language, has two strikes against him in the minds of thinking Negro voters. —The Crisis (April, 1944)

two-way street

Obama responded sharply to Karzai's recent criticism of some U.S. military actions in Afghanistan. Partnership, he said, was a "two-way street." —The Washington Post (11/21/2010)

Internet service providers and other companies have long complained that they give information to the U.S. government about potential cyber threats but often do not find it a two-way street. They

say the government is reluctant to reciprocate because the information is either classified or part of an investigation linked to a potential prosecution. —Reuters (11/30/2011)

With a friend like this, what has Pakistan gained? Nothing but violence and pariah status. Friendship is a two-way street. —The New York Times (11/3/2011)

"In South Africa...more than 600 U.S. companies are doing business...it's also a two-way street. A major South African energy company is planning to build a multibillion-dollar plant in Louisiana..." —Secretary of State John Kerry (2/20/2013)

Using **two-way street** as a metaphor means that two people or groups must both do something, and often implies that one of them isn't doing enough.

An early example:

Mayor LaGuardia said: "Foreign trade can only move on a two way street...there are many in this country who believe that we could continue to export without buying from other countries. That cannot be done." —The New York Times (11/1/1934)

uncharted territory, uncharted waters

"We are in uncharted territory with bringing this system back because of the amount of damage and saltwater in our system." —Joseph Lhota, chairman of New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (11/5/2012)

"But it is something that will be difficult," he added. "There is no model and no blueprint. It is uncharted territory. We have to be very smart about this." —San Jose Mercury News (10/14/2011)

"The problem with the case is that you're really asking, particularly because of the sociological evidence you cite, for us to go into uncharted waters." —Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, during arguments about same-sex marriage (3/26/2013)

Uncharted territory means a situation that has not existed before. **Uncharted waters** has the same meaning.

It is hard to find any place in the world that has not been "charted," or mapped, so uncharted territory is rarely used literally. But the phrase is frequently used as a metaphor in many kinds of situations. A common misspelling is "unchartered" territory.

The earliest example I have found of uncharted territory used literally is in a technical journal published in Michigan in 1900. An early example of the metaphorical expression was published four years later:

...the melody that pilots the imagination across uncharted territory into a land overflowing with feeling, intellect, tenderness, and sublimity, with irony, ugliness, humor, and humanity; a land not lacking in milk and honey, the land of Richard Strauss! —Overtones, a Book of Temperaments by James Huneker (1904)

under the hood

In other words, virtually all of the changes in the MacBook Pro family are under the hood. —Computerworld (3/19/2011)

But before even more taxpayer dollars flow into subsidies for these PEVs [plug-in electric

vehicles], we should look under the hood to see if continued support is warranted. —The Wall Street Journal (3/24/2011)

"But when they get under the hood and see what he [Romney] is actually proposing...I think people are going to say, 'Hey, we've seen this movie before.'" —David Axelrod, campaign advisor to President Obama (4/22/2012)

"What I'm going to do is...look under the hood...You got to look at Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security. But there's a lot of inefficiency out there." —Mark Sanford, talking about what he would do in Congress to cut government spending (5/12/2013)

Under the hood is most often used when talking about cars. It means the place where the engine is. When the phrase refers to something that does not have a hood, such as a computer, it means inside, suggesting a metaphor that compares important parts inside a computer to a car's engine.

In the Wall Street Journal example, the writer playfully used "look under the hood" in an article about cars, but, as in David Axelrod's quotation, the phrase meant look into this subject in more detail.

The use of hood meaning part of a car began in the early 1900's (before that, railroad machinery also was covered by hoods).

under the weather

If I had health insurance, my approach would be different: I would feel a sense of entitlement and would try to get my money's worth from my policy every time I felt under the weather. —Baltimore Sun (1/18/2011)

Eric Fehrnstrom, one of Romney's top strategists, said Romney was feeling "under the weather." But he was still keeping a brisk pace here in Ohio... —Los Angeles Times (3/5/2012)

"The [China's] property market looks a little bit under the weather but it doesn't look like it's tipping over. —Reuters (7/21/2011)

Under the weather means sick, but not with a serious or long-lasting illness.

The phrase may have originated on ships, where staying "under the weather bow" in the front could cause seasickness.

Examples of under the weather meaning mildly ill have been found from as early as the 1820's.

under water, keeping one's head above water

Beyond that, there are almost 11 million Americans—close to 23 percent of homeowners—who are under water on their mortgage, meaning they owe more than the house is now worth. —Suburban Life Publications (Downers Grove, Ill., 7/27/2011)

Japan's...private sector was minimizing debt, not maximizing profit, because its balance sheets were under water, just like the U.S. today. —CNN (7/28/2011)

...since February, he's gotten an extra $73 in every paycheck from the Social Security tax cut. "I guess I didn't notice it," he said. "...It's probably helping me keep my head above water." —The Hartford Courant (7/27/2011)

"...the wealthy elite have had their way, while low and middle-income workers struggle just to

keep their head above water." —Bill de Blasio, campaigning for Mayor of New York City (8/31/2013)

If a homeowner owes more on a mortgage (loan) than the house is worth, the mortgage or the homeowner is said to be **under water**. The phrase has been used frequently in that way since the Great Recession of 2007-2008. The CNN example uses an older, less specific meaning: in debt or unsuccessful.

Keeping one's head above water, based on a similar metaphor, means struggling to succeed or survive.

under wraps

And often, Jenkins said, people meeting with community groups will use aliases so the whole process is kept under wraps. —Topeka Capitol-Journal (7/2/2011)

Thanks to privacy protections, the 1940 census was kept under wraps for 72 years. —TIME (3/19/2012)

The first Evolution Fresh store, which Starbucks has kept under wraps, will be like an upscale health food store. —USA Today (3/18/2012)

"The governor was somehow able to keep this under wraps for three months. He checked into the facility under a false name and the whole procedure took about 40 minutes." —Jake Tapper, television news anchor, talking about New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's surgery to reduce his appetite for food (5/7/2013)

Under wraps means secret, or not made public.

The idiom came into use during the early 1900's (the earliest example I found is from 1913). Before that, people kept warm under wraps of fabric and fur, and things were transported or stored under wraps to keep them safe.

up in arms

"We're going to have a catastrophic failure somewhere in this country and then everybody is going to be up in arms." —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (3/18/2012)

Broadcasters are up in arms over a proposal from the Federal Communications Commission to require local television stations to publish online the amounts they charge for political ads. —Los Angeles Times (3/15/2012)

"And we've had, for example, since 2010, 200,000 parents of American citizens being deported for minor offenses. This is a real tragedy. And if this was being done under George Bush, Democrats would have been up in arms." —Arianna Huffington, political commentator (6/2/2013)

Up in arms means angry and ready to fight.

In Shakespeare's plays (late 1550's to early 1600's), up in arms meant carrying weapons, wearing armor and ready to fight. Now the phrase is rarely used literally. People who are up in arms are ready to fight with words.

up to (one's) old tricks

It's impossible to know whether Occupy Wall Street will coalesce into a political movement, but there's little question Wall Street is still up to its old tricks. —San Francisco Chronicle (10/16/2011)

The whole community was screaming for you to go to state prison, but I put you on probation. Within 48 hours, you were up to your old tricks. The community was right and I was wrong," [Judge] Sperrazza said. —Buffalo News (10/7/2011)

Dream Theater, a five-piece progressive metal band known for musical grandiosity and instrumental virtuosity, is up to its old tricks again. —Massachusetts Daily Collegian (10/7/2011)

Someone who is **up to his old tricks** is behaving as he has in the past, using the same, familiar methods.

The phrase often refers to bad behavior, but sometimes is used in a positive, complimentary context, as in the Collegian example.

This early version of the phrase has a meaning close to the one used now:

...and Simon Magus who was there playing his old Tricks in bewitching the People, Peter thereupon rebuked him, and deliver'd him over to Satan...—Considerations on the Present State of Great Britain (1717)

up to one's ears

They just started college but Lehigh University freshmen Amy Wohlschlegel and Marisa Suarez are already up to their ears in debt. —WFMZ-TV (Pennsylvania, 10/26/2011)

The Humane Society of Polk County is up to its ears in cats. —Grand Forks Herald (10/25/2011)

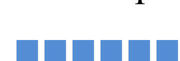
It certainly wasn't business as usual for volunteer Larry Gass, 55, a banker at Bank of America. Instead of being up to his ears in financial figures, he was busy figuring out the assembly of a shiny red swing set. —Detroit Free Press (10/21/2011)

If you are **up to your ears** in something, you are immersed in it, very involved in it, or have too much of it.

A similar expression is in "Ralph Roister Doister," a play sometimes called the first English comedy:

> If any woman smyle or cast on hym an eye,
> Up is he to the harde eares in loue.

[If any woman smiles or looks at him, he is up to his ears in love.]
—"Ralph Roister Doister" by Nicholas Udall (ca. 1551-1556)



up to par

Some homeowners say a Fayetteville-area builder is cutting corners and selling homes that are not up to par with county inspection standards. But the county building inspectors aren't catching the problems until it's too late. —NBC17 News (2/17/2011)

Lin warmly greeted the teen, admitted his Chinese wasn't up to par and then sent Yu away beaming after saying, "It was really nice to meet you." —Chicago Tribune (3/10/2012)

Herb Wetanson, who owns several Dallas BBQ restaurants, said he has spent thousands of dollars

on lawyers to contest fines and on consultants to keep his establishments up to par. —New York Daily News (3/7/2012)

Up to par means meeting a standard, or acceptable.

Another expression, **par for the course**, comes from golf, in which players try to meet or beat a standard called par. But up to par is older. Since the 1700's, par has been used to mean a standard of health. If a person says she does not feel up to par, she does not feel as healthy as usual. (See also, **under the weather** and **up to snuff**, below.

up to snuff

To all of you scholars out there, I apologize if the translation isn't up to snuff. —Kansas City Star (1/8/2011)

Scott O'Malia, one of two Republican commissioners at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, doesn't believe that his agency's standards are up to snuff when it comes to Wall Street reform. —The Washington post (blog, 3/17/2012)

...the company inspects its villas twice a year to ensure they're up to snuff... —Newsday (2/24/2012)

And with Mozart's sometimes-steep vocal demands...few in the July 6 cast...were fully up to snuff. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (7/8/2011)

Up to snuff means good enough; meeting an acceptable standard.

It may refer to things or to people, as in the Philadelphia Inquirer example.

Two centuries ago, up to snuff meant very intelligent. The stimulating effect of snuff—powdered tobacco—made people associate it with having a quick mind.

See also, **up to par**, above.

up to speed

Once she got in the door, the real learning began. Getting up to speed on a new product, understanding its value, and teaching customers to apply it took time. —The Boston Globe (5/8/2011)

...companies based overseas can take their sweet time in bringing investors up to speed. —The Wall Street Journal (3/19/2012)

...a delay of this length isn't unexpected given the legal issues involved, the amount of time it can take a new attorney to get up to speed... —Buffalo News (3/18/2012)

"...it's up to the workers to go out and bring themselves up to speed and do it in an aggressive way, do it as quickly as possible." —Nick Corcodilos, job recruiter and author, talking about older workers who lost their jobs (5/3/2013)

If you get **up to speed** on something, you learn what you need to know about it. In an organization or business, you may be kept up to speed if you are **in the loop**.

An older, more literal meaning of up to speed is going at the full, normal operating speed.

An early example of the phrase used figuratively: "After they picked seven other guys, I figured I

just wasn't up to speed." —LIFE Magazine (9/27/1963)

up-and-coming

In his Houston Symphony debut Thursday night at Jones Hall, up-and-coming Dresden-born conductor Christoph Koenig certainly demonstrated that quality... —Houston Chronicle (11/11/2011)

"Los Angeles was a little bit of an enigma," Neumann said. "It's not easy to understand where the right location is, not like New York," where offices are in fashionable neighborhoods, including SoHo and the Meatpacking district. Hollywood, he decided, is up and coming... —Los Angeles Times (11/13/2011)

Rather than seeking office herself, she felt she could accomplish more...by helping up-and-coming Chinese-Americans get appointments in city agencies and, increasingly, win elections. —The New York Times (11/11/2011)

Up-and-coming means improving, starting to have success, and showing signs of greater success in the future. The phrase may also suggest its older meaning, active and energetic.

The phrase is used most frequently to describe people and neighborhoods. An up-and-coming person may be called an **up-and-comer**.

Examples of the phrase meaning energetic have been found from as early as the 1880's, and used with the current meaning from the 1920's.

upper hand

In a year when airlines seem to have the upper hand, you may wonder why airfares on U.S. routes aren't creeping higher as the holidays inch closer. —The Washington Post (11/8/2011)

"I think that choosing to go part time in the military would be a good idea...A lot of people graduate from college and still don't find jobs or know what they want to do, so having that experience would give me an upper hand." —The Post and Courier (Charleston, S.C., 11/10/2011)

"And we've seen, like in Libya and Egypt and elsewhere, the Islamists tend to get the upper hand if they get in there." —Senator Patrick Leahy, talking about Syria (5/5/2013)

Having the **upper hand** means having an advantage or stronger position.

Printed examples of this expression have been found as early as the 1400's. In "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens, published in 1838, the evil Bill Sikes says, "I've got the upper hand over you, Fagin; and, d— me, I'll keep it."

upset the apple cart

"The Pentagon goes by 'don't upset the apple cart, don't upset the bureaucracy,' and as a result, things go at a snail's pace," he said. —The Washington Post (8/31/2011)

Hey, who wants to upset the apple cart?...Especially when there is money and prestige involved. —The Miami Herald (11/1/2011)

Courier says he reached out quickly to build rapport and "not upset the apple cart" of camaraderie

developed under McEnroe. —USA Today (3/3/2011)

Upset the apple cart means cause trouble by forcing something to change. Spilling a cartload of apples is a metaphor for the loss of order and things of value.

Reluctance to upset the apple cart may be viewed as negative (as in the Washington Post and Miami Herald examples) or positive (as in the USA Today example).

The expression has been traced to the 1700's. A no-longer used form is **upsetting someone's apple cart**, which meant hurting someone or knocking a person down.

vicious circle, virtuous circle

"Going around in a vicious circle in a transitional period has to end." —Yasser Ali, spokesman for Mohamed Morsi, president of Egypt (11/22/2012)

Bank of Korea Governor Choongsoo Kim said Friday that the likelihood of a new financial crisis occurring has increased as regulators struggle to keep up with innovations in financial markets ... "We may fall into a vicious circle in which the imposition of one regulation itself gives birth to another and so ad infinitum." —The Wall Street Journal (3/4/2011)

And as those sanctions become ever more crippling, the Iranians conclude that they have no choice but to press ahead in acquiring the ultimate means of assuring the regime's survival. That alarms the Israelis, and the vicious circle spins again. —The New York Times (1/1/2011)

...it is looking as if the economy may have at last entered a virtuous circle, where job growth and increased spending feed off each other. —The Wall Street Journal (3/5/2012)

In a **vicious circle**, bad events cause more bad events, ad infinitum—without end.

A newer expression, which means the opposite, is **virtuous circle**, in which good things cause more good things to happen.

Vicious circle was first used in the science of logic, and was extended to other contexts during the 1800's. Before the 1900's virtuous circle usually meant a group of people with good morals. Then it was adapted as the opposite of vicious circle. This early example comes from a British Parliamentary record:

Many children were in a vicious circle of environment, and this [Education] Bill broke that and replaced it by a virtuous circle... —Parliamentary Debates (4/1/1908)

vote with one's feet

"People vote with their feet. We understand that. It's up to us to do a better job of getting them back in the ballpark." —Sandy Alderson, general manager of the New York Mets baseball team (12/5/2011)

"They have chosen to vote with their feet." —Kurt Metzger, director of a research company, talking about Detroit's loss of population (3/24/2011)

"If citizens find the corporation's views distasteful, they can vote with their feet." —Brendan Reilly, alderman in Chicago, talking about opposition to the opening of a Chick-fil-A restaurant because of the company president's opposition to gay marriage (7/25/2012)

People who **vote with their feet** show their opinion by going somewhere or doing something.

The earliest printed examples of this expression are in African-American publications of the 1960's. The November, 1961, issue of Ebony Magazine includes this statement about Haitians and other blacks traveling to fight on the side of the Americans during their revolution against England: "Aptheker believes at least 100,000 voted with their feet."

wake-up call

"Last year's disaster in the Gulf of Mexico was supposed to be a wake-up call about the dangers of offshore drilling. But it looks like President Obama hit the snooze button and slept right through it."—Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity (11/8/2011)

Last year's killing of the 28-year-old Said was a wake-up call for many Egyptians who complained about unchecked excessive force by police. —Associated Press (10/26/2011)

"That [food shortage] was a real wake-up call. We are the richest country in the world, and we couldn't even buy rice." —Fahad Bin Mohammed Al-Attiya, chairman of the National Food Security Programme in Qatar (11/19/2012)

"Overall, for terrorist organizations and other hostile actors, leaks of this nature serve as a wake-up call to look more closely at how they're operating and improve their security." —Ben Venzke, expert on terrorist groups (6/26/2013)

In these examples, a **wake-up call** is an event that alerts someone to the need for action or change.

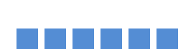
Wake-up call was used in the 1800's referring to sounds made by birds, and later meant a call to action, as in this example from 1917:

Mr. Davison then spoke of the necessity for a nation-wide campaign to raise money for the work of the Red Cross. "It is not yet the time," he added," to emphasize the financial details. It is the time, however, to sound the wake-up call." —Munsey's Magazine (August, 1917)

Decades later, wake-up call became a common way of describing a way of waking people, especially arrangements with hotel desks to call guests and make sure they got up on time. But that was not, as some people have written, the origin of wake-up call in its current figurative use.

An early example of wake-up call used figuratively, the way it is used today, is in a 1977 news story about the golfer Johnny Miller:

The worst slump of his career served as the wake-up call and sent Miller on a search through basic fundamentals to find the swing that once made him the hottest property in golf. —Associated Press (4/15/1977)



walk the plank

There are plenty of strictly political reasons why Anthony Weiner was forced to walk the plank while others whose behavior was more morally reprehensible were not... —The New Yorker (blog, 6/17/2011)

"He needs to go," Huckabee said of Geithner. "President Obama needs to have him walk the plank..." —New York Daily News (8/8/2011)

The app includes Digg Reader, one of the better RSS readers to emerge after Google Reader walked the plank. —venturebeat.com (8/29/2013)

A person who literally **walks the plank** is killed, but in typical use the phrase refers to people losing their jobs or status, not their lives. (Google Reader did lose its life, but it was not a person. It was a service that Google stopped offering because not enough people used it.)

The phrase originated with executions on ships, when people were blindfolded and forced to walk on a plank of wood over the water until they fell off and drowned.

Walking the plank as a form of execution has been traced to the 1700's; the metaphorical idiom to the 1920's.

walk the walk, talk the talk

"I walk the walk—not just talk the talk. I get involved and I get things done." —Buffalo News (4/28/2011)

Doing the show forced her to walk the walk, you could say. —USA Today (5/12/2011)

If you talk the talk, you'd better walk the walk. Practice what you preach through action and not just through flowery words. —Tribune Media Services (3/12/2012)

"I still have a love for the game and I still feel that I can offer an NBA ball club, you know, that veteran leadership that I think I have proven by doing this, that, you know, not only will I talk the talk but I will walk the walk." —Jason Collins, basketball player, the first active male player in the four major American professional sports to say publicly that he is homosexual (4/30/2013)

When **walk the walk** and **talk the talk** are used together, as in the Buffalo News example, the meaning is easy enough to understand. An old saying, "actions speak louder than words," expresses a similar idea.

Walk the walk and talk the talk are also used separately, because they are so familiar that when one is used, the other is understood. The USA Today example is from an article about Shania Twain doing a TV program on Oprah Winfrey's network (rather than just talking about it).

It is not known when or how the expression got started. A 1921 newspaper example is cited in the Oxford English Dictionary, but it appears to be an outlier: my searches found no other examples for decades after that. The phrases apparently came into popular use during the 1980's, led by African-American publications. For example:

"A lot of people in society are going to church speaking the language of the word of God only on Sundays," assures Darryl Lumpkins. "We not only must talk the talk, we must also walk the walk."—Ebony (April, 1983)

warm and fuzzy

There really aren't any bad factories anymore. These plants are now warm and fuzzy." —Los Angeles Times (3/29/2011)

So aloof and cerebral so much of the time, Obama got warm and fuzzy with Sandra Fluke, calling her up to say her parents should be proud. —The New York Times (3/5/2012)

Sean Payton and the New Orleans Saints arrived on the national stage three years ago with a Super Bowl victory straight out of children's storybook, lifting up a city ravaged by Katrina and standing as a warm and fuzzy testament to the power of the human spirit. —New York Daily News

(3/3/2012)

Warm and fuzzy means soft, friendly and comforting.

The phrase became popular during the 1980's.

William Safire (1929-2009, who wrote the "On Language" column in The New York Times Magazine) observed that when the second adjective was turned into a noun, warm fuzzies were "compliments intended to reassure and motivate" if used in business, and "lovable, squeezable, cuddly items or ideas" if used in more general situations. Safire's column "Invasion of the Cuddlies" linked the phrase to **touchy-feely**.

waste one's breath, save one's breath

But don't waste your breath telling that to the governor. —Las Vegas Sun (5/8/2011)

He knew one thing: he would not waste his breath on unhelpful bitterness. —The New York Times (3/28/2011)

On past boards, she said, there were times she saved her breath when she knew her view wouldn't prevail. —Bakersfield Californian (4/30/2011)

If you're an older job hunter who complains that people are deciding you're "too old" in the first 7 seconds they see you, save your breath. They're probably doing it without realizing it. —USA Today (11/5/2011)

Waste your breath means speak when no one will listen or agree.

Save your breath means do not talk because no one will listen.

Thus, "Don't waste your breath" and "Save your breath" usually have the same meaning. **Don't waste words** is a similar expression describing talk that accomplishes nothing.

The use of breath referring to talking dates back at least to the 1500's. Examples are in the Coverdale Bible (1535) and King James Bible (1611) versions of Psalm 135: "They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths."

way up there, right up there

"Cats are way up there in terms of threats to birds—they are a formidable force in driving out native species," said Peter Marra of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, one of the authors of the study. —The New York Times (3/20/2011)

In the '50s, gum chewing, running in the hall and tardiness were right up there. Today, it's drugs, sex, unwanted pregnancies, STDs, gang fights, assaults on teachers, bullying and all-around violence. —The Daily Caller.com (3/19/2011)

If they win here, that would be right up there with landing on the moon for the Hartford kids. —Manchester, Conn., Journal Inquirer (3/19/2011)

"...George Bush left office quite unpopular and now is right up there with President Obama." —Congressman Bennie Thompson, referring to surveys of public opinion (4/28/2013)

A cat is literally way up there if it climbs a tree, but in the New York Times example, cats are **way up there**—very high—on the list of threats to birds.

Right up there may have the same meaning, as in the Daily Caller example. Or, it may be used to make a comparison, adding the preposition **with**, as in the Journal Inquirer example and Bennie Thompson quotation.

The expressions gained popularity during the early part of the 20th Century.

wear many hats

William Franklin Mitchell wears many hats this year: president of G.W. Mitchell Construction, Fiesta San Antonio commissioner and 89th King Antonio for the Texas Cavaliers. —San Antonio Express (4/10/2011)

Gil Cates, who died Monday at the age of 77, wore many hats during his long career in Hollywood. —Los Angeles Times (11/1/2011)

Auto journalists have to wear many hats these days—write, shoot photos and video and more... —USA Today (3/25/2011)

Wearing many hats means having many job titles (as in the Express and Times examples) or doing many jobs (as in the USA Today example).

Use of the idiom apparently began around the 1930's. In 1951 it appeared in an article about General Douglas MacArthur a few days before MacArthur was fired by President Truman. The article quoted Senator Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma, who turned the phrase into a rhetorical flourish:

"As the Big Chief in the Far East, General MacArthur is said to wear many hats to represent his many titles. But he isn't satisfied with all that big brass on his head. Now, he is trying to grab the high silk topper of the diplomat. I must say it looks inappropriate with his military uniform." —The New York Times (April 8, 1951)

wear one's heart on one's sleeve

"I wore my heart on my sleeve and my emotions were always written on my face." —People (10/27/2009)

Perhaps it was Tchaikovsky's heart-on-sleeve emotionalism that carried the performance forward. —Toronto Globe and Mail (2/14/2011)

"Jorgie has always been a guy who wore his emotions on his sleeve, plays with a lot of passion and a lot of fire." —The New York Times (5/15/2011)

That's because Tebow wears his religious beliefs on his sleeve so they're more identifiable than the No. 15 on his Broncos jersey. —Chicago Tribune (12/7/2011)

"He [Lyndon Johnson] knew what the presidency was for: to get to people—to members of Congress, often with tricks up his sleeve, to the American people, by wearing his heart on his sleeve." —former President Bill Clinton (5/6/2012)

If you **wear your heart on your sleeve**, you show your emotions openly.

In variations such as the Chicago Tribune example, **wear on one's sleeve** means display prominently.

The phrase was first written by William Shakespeare, in "Othello" (1622). Iago said, "I will wear

my heart upon my sleeve for daws [birds] to peck at," meaning he will reveal his true motives and make himself vulnerable.

wear the jacket

He also didn't bristle at the notion of being responsible for raising the debt ceiling. "If Senator McConnell wants me to wear the jacket for that, I'm happy to wear the jacket," Mr. Obama said, according to the Democratic officials. —The Wall Street Journal (7/14/2011)

Idioms in the News generally focuses on the most frequently used American phrases, but **wear the jacket** is an exception. I had never heard or read it used this way before seeing the Journal example. (Sometimes a phrase becomes a popular idiom after it is used by a prominent person. **Finest hour** was born in a 1940 speech by Winston Churchill.)

We may presume that President Obama meant he would be happy to take responsibility for and be identified with raising the U.S. debt limit. Did he invent this meaning "wear the jacket" himself, and if not, where did it come from? My friends offered these possibilities:

—A reference to the Master's golf tournament, where the winner "wears the green jacket." At the end of the tournament, the previous year's winner puts a green sports jacket on his successor. —Arnold Carter, journalist

—In law enforcement, "having a jacket" means having a record of previous criminal accusations or convictions. —Ronald Brinn, state Human Rights Division executive

—In St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, the saying, "Give Jack his jacket" means give someone what he or she deserves. —Sarah Otis, teacher

A fourth idea comes from a Scottish dictionary written almost two centuries ago. This is unlikely to have influenced President Obama, but seems appropriate, since Obama was suggesting that wearing the jacket would be a privilege:

Wear the jacket. This phrase alludes to a custom, now, we believe, obsolete, by which, on paying a certain fee, or otherwise making interest with the huntsman of the Caledonian Hunt, any citizen aspirant, whose rank does not entitle him to become a member of that highly-born society, might become entitled to the field privileges of the Hunt, and among others, was tolerated to wear the jacket of the order. —"An etymological dictionary of the Scottish language" (1825)

weather the storm

While all stocks tend to go down during an economic slowdown or recession, "the higher yielding dividend stocks weather the storm better," he says. —The Wall Street Journal (10/2/2011)

...newspapers are offering buyouts or forcing layoffs of critics at several high-profile publications, such as Newsweek and the Village Voice. Yet even during this tumultuous time, some have been able to weather the storm. —The Marquette Tribune (9/29/2011)

"It helps to be young and resilient to weather that storm." —Dr. Jonathan Fellus, referring to the brain injury suffered by Malala Yousufzai, 14, who was shot in the head by the Taliban in Pakistan (10/16/2012)

Weather the storm means survive or avoid serious damage when something bad happens.

Storm has been used as a metaphor for various kinds of disturbances since the earliest English texts, and later in Shakespeare ("I will stir up in England some black storm," said Henry VI). And at least from the 1600's, weather was used as a verb meaning to get through trouble without disaster.

An early example of weather the storm used as a metaphor is in a history published in 1689:

...and the King proceeded to strengthen the Sea-Ports, and all places of Advantage, raising Forces, and using much diligence, that he might be able to weather the Storm he foresaw breaking in upon him...—Englands Chronicle: Or, the Lives and Reigns of the Kins and Queens From the Time of Julius Caesar to the Present Reign of K. William and Q. Mary, by James Heath (1689)

weigh in

Johnston County Commissioners want to hear what residents think of a proposed county budget that would shrink spending for schools, increase water and sewer rates and hold the property-tax rate steady. The public can weigh in at 6 p.m. Thursday, June 23, in the commissioners' meeting room in the Johnston County Courthouse in Smithfield. —Johnston County, N.C. Herald (6/19/2011)

But if the big banks weigh in against it, look for it to have a much tougher time getting through the Senate. —Los Angeles Times (6/19/2011)

"...here in Washington [State] you'll have the chance to make your voice heard on the issue of making sure that everybody, regardless of sexual orientation, is treated fairly. You'll have a chance to weigh in on this." —President Barack Obama, referring to an expected vote on Washington State's same-sex marriage law (5/10/2012)

"...the domestic politics in other countries is something I'm hesitant to weigh in on." —Josh Earnest, principal deputy press secretary to President Barack Obama (3/29/2013)

In these examples, **weigh in** means express an opinion. Weigh usually means measure the weight of something, and weigh in can mean have one's weight measured, as when boxers or jockeys weigh in. The idiom in the news examples comes from another meaning of weigh: to consider (think about).

Weighing in with an opinion usually means trying to use one's power to influence something. Examples of that use of the phrase have been recorded since the early 1900's.

well-heeled

While Walmart's lower-income customers have been scrimping amid soaring unemployment and high gas prices, Neiman Marcus' well-heeled clientele has been splurging on Gucci bags and Prada shoes. —New York Post (3/3/2012)

The $100 million conversion of the NoMad Hotel is expected to bring well-heeled tourists... —The Wall Street Journal (3/25/2012)

"Now, the NFL is well-heeled, but these lawsuits are a serious thing with more than 4,000 former players involved and probably more to come." —Bob Costas, television sports commentator, talking about head injuries and the National Football League (2/3/2013)

With its $500 million infusion from Goldman Sachs and other investors, Facebook is now flush with cash, and a market value of about $50 billion, giving it the financial muscle it needs to

compete with better-heeled rivals like Google. —The New York Times (1/3/2011)

Well-heeled means having a lot of money.

In the New York Times example, the variation **better heeled** is used to express a comparison because Facebook and Google are both well heeled. That is clever writing, not common usage.

In the 1800's, well-heeled could mean having a lot of money or carrying a powerful weapon. Or, it could describe a good pair of shoes. This early example refers to shoes, and suggests that wealth and good shoes were closely associated:

It might be a refined way of telling her lover that she was well 'heeled,' and asking if he was. —"Buffalo Land" (1872)

What gives?

Some Action News viewers are fired up over their water bills. They've spiked, but they say their water habits haven't changed. So what gives? —KTNV Las Vegas (11/1/2011)

...there are signs that economic growth is up a bit and yet interest rates are at levels suggesting we are in a recession, if not worse. What gives? —Marketwatch (11/2/2011)

Cory Booker has President Barack Obama's endorsement for the U.S. Senate seat...but it doesn't look like Obama will be coming to New Jersey to do any work for him...So, what gives? —Cherry Hill, New Jersey, Courier-Post (8/29/2013)

What gives? means What is happening? or What is the explanation for this?

The phrase is often followed by **with** [something or someone], meaning, What is happening with... or What is the explanation for...

Examples have been found as early as 1940, but the origin of this colloquial expression is unknown.

See also, **What's the deal?**

what goes around comes around

The banks are rightly terrified by the prospect of competition from a company with the retail expertise and customer base of Wal-Mart. But reliance on government regulation to thwart competition is to take the road to serfdom; and what goes around comes around. —The Tennessean (10/9/2011)

What Rogoff recognized then, and seems to have forgotten now, is that what goes around comes around. When debtors pay less, creditors get less back. —Palisades Hudson Financial Group (10/12/2011)

There is another reason for the majority to handle that power with a little more humility: what goes around comes around. —Corpus Christi Caller Times (10/2/2011)

What goes around comes around means that the effects, or consequences of actions will be felt by those who do them.

A similar idea is expressed in **the chickens come home to roost**.

An early example is in "Pimp: The Story of My Life," an autobiographical novel by Iceberg Slim

(Robert Beck) published in 1969: "I took a bootlegging rap for a pal. 'What goes around comes around, ' old hustlers had said."

what's the deal

Apple's saying you'll wait anywhere from a week to a month [for an iPhone 4S]...What's the deal? Didn't Apple realize demand was this high? —TIME (10/18/2011)

Wherever you see them, though, in fact, fat bikes are big. Quite literally..."Everyone who comes into the store comments on it: You know, 'What's the deal with these fat tires? I've never seen anything so big,'" says Jeff Clark of Revolution Cycles... —Yakima Herald (10/24/2011)

You're thinking what's the deal with the Austin Planning Commission refusing to allow a developer to chop down one tree, while the city its own self is looking at taking out about 30 trees in favor of a proposed concrete bike path not all that far away. —Austin American-Statesman (10/20/2011)

In these contexts, **What's the deal?** means, What is the explanation?

This expression departs from more literal uses, in which What's the deal? means What's the agreement or arrangement or plan?

Sometime in the mid-1900's, the question became a way to ask for an explanation when there was no plan or arrangement. This early example comes close to the meaning of the expression used today:

What's the deal when flying in these zones? Well, unless you plan to fly over 4,000 feet or cross a border into Canada, keep on flying as usual when under visual flight rules without a flight plan and radio equipment. —Flying Magazine (January, 1952)

See also, **What gives?**

when all is said and done, at the end of the day

"We thought it was just politics, people going back and forth. At the end of the day it never trickled down to where we lived." —Jay-Z, in a TV commercial backing President Obama (October, 2012)

"Remember, at the end of the day campaigns are about the candidates." —New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (9/30/2012)

"At the end of the day, it's all about raising money and trying to help." —Jay Jay French, guitarist for the group Twisted Sister, talking about a concert to benefit victims of Hurricane Sandy (5/8/2013)

When all is said and done, what has really changed in Europe? Not enough. —Jerusalem Post (8/19/2011)

"When all is said and done, I'm a better doctor, we are all better doctors, because of the fact that we teach residents." —Laura Koenigs, a doctor in Springfield, Massachusetts (8/14/2013)

When all is said and done and **at the end of the day** have similar meaning: considering everything, and regardless of what has happened. The phrase **after all** often is used with the same meaning, as is **when the dust settles** (see below).

Examples of "when all is said and done" have been found as early as the 1500's. The earliest

figurative use of "at the end of the day" found in my searches was in 1955.

when the dust settles

"When the dust settles, there will be five carriers on the East Coast." —Congressman Scott Rigell, talking about the U.S. Navy changing where aircraft carriers are based (4/17/2012)

"You never know, when the dust settles at the end of our final eight episodes, where everybody's going to be and who's going to be left standing." —Vince Gilligan, creator of the "Breaking Bad" television series (7/3/2013)

When the dust settled, 347.9 million Facebook shares changed hands on Thursday... —The Wall Street Journal (7/25/2013)

When the dust settles means when most of an activity is finished, and facts can be seen clearly.

The expression alludes to a storm or war or explosion, when the air must clear before anyone can see what happened.

This is an early printed example of the phrase used figuratively:

"When the dust settles, the gentlemen at the top will discover that they have been trying themselves, not Mitchell." —editorial in the Rochester Evening Journal and Post Express (10/14/1925)

See also, **when all is said and done** and **at the end of the day**, above.

whipping boy

In response, Arpaio has played the victim, saying he is being used as "a whipping boy for a national and international problem."—Boulder, Colo. Daily Camera (12/27/2011)

But the S.E.C. has become a favorite whipping boy of those hostile to market reforms. —The New York Times (7/15/2011)

Ever since it became known that the plug-in hybrid car's batteries had burst into flames after government crash tests, the Volt has become the whipping boy of Republican politicians. —Bloomberg News (3/6/2012)

A **whipping boy** is someone selected for punishment, often unfairly.

In the Bloomberg News example, the oil industry would be a whipping boy if Congress decided to increase taxes on the companies' profits.

In centuries past, whipping was an accepted punishment for children but not for the king's son. The job of whipping boy was taking the punishment when the prince did wrong. (If the prince was sensitive, he felt the pain psychologically.)

The phrase was used metaphorically in the 1800's. An article in the Nov. 22, 1873, Saturday Review about "The Master of Greylands" by Ellen Wood said, "All her novels have their specialized whipping-boy; and Flora Castlemaine, 'an indulged, selfish, ill-bred girl of twelve'...is the whipping-boy in this."

whistle past the graveyard, whistle in the dark

He dismissed the idea that "the tea party is a problem for Republicans" as "the left whistling past

the graveyard." —Los Angeles Times (2/12/2011)

"We need to have a vote to lift the debt ceiling, because the consequences of not doing so would be quite serious indeed," White House press secretary Jay Carney said Monday. "And those who suggest otherwise are whistling past the graveyard." —Philadelphia Inquirer (5/17/2011)

Those who say that taxing "the rich" will pay for generous advantages for public employees are whistling in the dark, for the wealthy can move out of state and don't have to face public wrath. —Barstow, Calif., Desert Dispatch (2/22/2011)

Western talk of success in building up the Afghan state seems little more than whistling in the dark. Not only is that state incorrigibly corrupt, in much of the country it barely exists. —The New York Times (3/14/2012)

To **whistle past the graveyard** is to pretend to be happy or unconcerned when you are worried or should be worried. The meaning of **whistle in the dark** is similar: pretend to be brave when you are afraid.

Whistling sometimes is associated with pretending not to be frightened. The first song in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, The King and I (1951), begins:

> Whenever I feel afraid
> I hold my head erect
> And whistle a happy tune
> So no one will suspect I'm afraid

The earliest example in my searches is from the 18th Century:

...fellows who...bluster and vapour to hide the trembling limb...as children whistle in the dark to brave the ghosts they dread! —"A Journey Over Land to India" by Donald Campbell (London, 1796)

white collar, blue collar

Mark Bradford said he'd like to see "taller buildings downtown," attracting more white-collar jobs to the area. —Bowling Green Daily News (10/21/2011)

The union representing municipal blue-collar workers has sued its employer, saying City Council had no right to alter the...pension program. —The Philadelphia Inquirer (9/30/2011)

The blue collar worker versus the white collar worker. What's the difference? Is there a real difference or just perception? —Naples Daily News (10/18/2011)

"So what's been happening to blue collar jobs...automation, outsourcing and digitization, is now coming after white collar jobs as well." —Tom Friedman, opinion columnist and commentator (6/2/2013)

White collar work is non-manual, referring to jobs that require the mind more than the hands. The phrase is often used in **white collar crime** and **white collar criminal**, referring to non-violent (such as financial) crime or to crime committed by white collar employees.

Blue collar refers to manual or industrial work or workers, but rarely to crime.

The phrases are based on the colors of typical shirts and uniforms worn in offices and factories in the first half of the 1900's, but the phrase white collar was popular decades before blue collar. An early example of white collar...

Manufacturers of all kinds of merchandise which requires a high grade of mechanical skill to produce have been wondering for some time how, in the face of the desire of the average American boy to do only "white collar" work, they are going to keep their shop organizations complete without drawing too heavily upon the skilled labor of Europe. —The New York Times (8/8/1920)

...and the earliest example I could find of blue collar:

Blacks are slowly but determinedly moving into white and blue collar jobs in the United States, and at the same time, efforts are emanating from the black community to encourage that movement. —Baltimore Afro-American (1/16/1943)

white elephant

Critics counter that the effort to clean Fukushima Prefecture could end up as perhaps the biggest of Japan's white-elephant public works projects—and yet another example of post-disaster Japan reverting to the wasteful ways that have crippled economic growth for two decades. —The New York Times (12/6/2011)

"Although some projects are white elephant buildings without any cash flow, China has a very healthy fiscal position and is able to address the risks," the official said. —Reuters (6/13/2011)

"...when the baby boomers vacate their homes in the suburbs there's not going to be a market..." The answer for some subdivisions—especially white elephant bank owned properties—has already been the bulldozer. —The Sag Harbor Express (8/30/2013)

Rocha said she received the hat recently at a white elephant party, and her husband dared her to put it on. —Contra Costa Times (12/18/2011)

A **white elephant** may be:
—Something that is costly but not productive, like the project in the New York Times example;
—An unprofitable commercial building (as in the Reuters example) or a house that is hard to sell or costly to maintain (as in the Sag Harbor Express example);
—An unwanted gift. At a white elephant party, people bring objects they don't want and exchange them as gifts, as in the Contra Costa Times example.

White elephant comes from popular stories about kings of Thailand who took revenge on people they didn't like by giving them albino (white) elephants, which were expensive to keep. Examples of the phrase used figuratively have been found as early as the 1850's.

In recent years white elephant sometimes has been confused with another expression and written as "the white elephant in the room." But I have found one case in which that phrase made sense: It referred to an unprofitable building that no one wanted to talk about:

"What to do with that building, it's still a white elephant in the room," said Council Chairman Edward Pocock III. —Southington (Conn.) Patch (12/13/2011)

See also, **elephant in the room**.

whittle away

The scope of Moammar Gadhafi's control was whittled away Wednesday as major Libyan cities and towns closer to the capital fell to the rebellion against his rule. —Associated Press

(2/24/2011)

...Americans simply can't respond to higher gas prices by reducing the amount of gasoline they use, and are caught in an energy trap as gasoline whittles away disposable income. —The New York Times (11/6/2011)

U.S. gross domestic product grew 2.9 percent, the biggest gain since 2005 but an advance too weak to whittle away at the unemployment rate... —Reuters (1/28/2011)

Lee school officials are working to whittle down the 3.9 percent proposed budget increase to 3 percent in an effort to ease the burden on taxpayers. —The Berkshire Eagle (3/19/2012)

Whittle away and **whittle down** mean reduce slowly, one piece or small amount at a time.

The phrases are used as metaphors for whittling, shaping something solid such as wood or soap by cutting off small pieces with a knife. Printed examples have been found from as early as the 1700's.

wiggle room

"Sell by" is for grocers to aid their stocking. It does not mean the food is spoiled after that date. "Sell by" dates contain some wiggle room on that. —GateHouse News Service (4/26/2012)

Minnesota Legislature's calendar as the final day. Now Republican leaders are giving themselves more wiggle room. House Speaker Kurt Zellers said Saturday that he's willing to hold the session open into May... —KSTP-TV (4/29/2012)

"The politics might be a little bit different than the last time they addressed this issue. They're not facing re-election this time, which might give them a bit more wiggle room." —Sarah Kliff, news reporter, talking about the Obama administration's position on making "morning-after" birth control pills easier to buy (4/5/2013)

Wiggle room means the ability to change position; to maneuver.

Wiggle room originally described shoes or gloves that left enough space for toes or fingers to move around inside. An early example is a March 16, 1914 advertisement in the Hartford Courant: plenty of "wiggle" room for your fingers. In my searches, the earliest example of wiggle room used as a metaphor was published in 1958:

"Sending the marines into Lebanon was not necessarily a matter of wisdom, but of necessity," remarked Leland E. Becraft, executive director of the Community Chest. "As they sometimes say at business meetings, I think President Eisenhower had to have some 'wiggle room.'" —St. Joseph (Missouri) Gazette (7/22/1958)

wild goose chase

Is he leading them truly or just on a wild-goose chase, waiting for them to drop off one by one, from hunger and thirst and the elements, as the Kansas Indians did to the Spanish conquistadors? —Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (7/15/2011)

The announcement of the move almost a year ago underscored concerns in New Jersey about the cost of doing business there and drew criticism from public officials who said they were led on a wild-goose chase to find ways to keep Ocean Spray in the state. —Associated Press (4/17/2012

House Speaker Jase Bolger sent a letter Monday to all nine judges of the Ingham County Circuit Court, telling them a proposal from Democrats to launch a grand jury investigation into the fake candidate controversy in Grand Rapids is a politically motivated "wild goose chase." —Detroit Free Press (8/28/2012

A **wild goose chase** is a search for something that will never be found, or a race to catch something that cannot be caught. The thing may be impossible to find or catch, or, as in the Post-Gazette example, the goal is imaginary and its purpose is tricking someone.

The phrase has been traced back to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, 1597. The original meaning was an event in horseback riding, in which riders followed the leader in a V formation—similar to the pattern in which geese fly.

window dressing

John Coyle, a Washington lawyer hired by [the City of] New Bern, dismissed the utilities' proposed fixes as a "joke" and "window dressing." —Charlotte Observer (10/18/2011)

Mangano says the bill will allow him to reopen contracts so he can get millions of dollars in union concessions. But the proposed legislation...will do no such thing. It's window dressing... —Newsday (10/17/2011)

Colleges should also invite speakers who reflect diverse viewpoints—and not merely as academic window dressing. —Chronicle of Higher Education (10/16/2011)

The main purpose of **window dressing** is to improve the appearance or public image of something or someone. Literally, window dressing is a display that a store makes to attract customers. Used figuratively, the phrase usually is a criticism for pretending to take an action rather than doing something meaningful.

"The Coming Democracy" by George Harwood, published in London in 1882, includes an early example of the phrase used as a metaphor: "We live in an age which understands the art of intellectual window-dressing."

wishy washy

"Fireflies in the Garden" is a complicated family drama that resolves in a way that's not wishy-washy, not ambiguous, not inconsistent and not in any way inartistic, and yet that strikes me as wrong, presenting defeat masquerading as victory. —San Francisco Chronicle (10/14/2011)

...the town board's perceived wishy-washy response to calls for its commitment to public beach access is causing concern... —The East Hampton Star (10/13/2011)

"...he really is so wishy washy on the issues that it's like trying to nail down Jell-O, getting him to commit to any one position..." —Politico (10/12/2011)

Wishy washy means weak or ambiguous.

"Swish swash," no longer in use, has been traced to the 1500's and means a poor or watery drink. Wishy washy also referred to weak drinks through the 1800's.

witch hunt

In a surprising series of events, Turkey's top commander, Gen. Isik Kosaner, together with the leaders of the navy, army and air force, simultaneously resigned to protest the sweeping arrests of dozens of military generals over the past year as suspects in conspiracy investigations that many people in Turkey have come to see as a witch hunt. —Seattle Times (7/29/2011)

Lee County is investigating its own transportation department for payroll fraud and misuse of county vehicles...Lee County Manager Karen Hawes says she's not on a witch-hunt; she just wants to get to the bottom of complaints involving Lee County's Department of Transportation. —WBBH-TV (Ft. Myers, Fla., 7/26/2011)

I think it's turning into a witch-hunt." —Congressman Elijah Cummings, Democrat of Maryland, referring to congressional hearings about the attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Libya (10/14/2012)

A **witch hunt** is persecution, a move to find and punish people who are believed to be enemies. Sometimes the phrase is used to mean an unfair, or improperly motivated, accusation against an individual.

The metaphor refers to trials of witches, who from the 1400's to 1700's were tortured and killed because they were thought to be evil and have special powers.

George Orwell may have been among first to use the phrase to refer to people other than witches:

And meanwhile there is no possible doubt about the hatred and dissension that the ‘Trotsky-Fascist' accusation is causing. Rank-and-file Communists everywhere are led away on a senseless witch-hunt after 'Trotskyists'... —Homage to Catalonia (1938)

word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth has been a big source for securing early customers, which they have encouraged through the use of social media. —Christian Science Monitor (2/14/2011)

Young adults, in particular, said they get more information about community events from word of mouth than from any journalistic source. —Albany Times Union (3/24/2011)

As word of mouth grows, some readers report downloading or pre-ordering the book simply because others have - and they don't want to miss out on the phenomenon. —The Boston Globe (3/28/2011)

Word of mouth is person-to-person communication, the opposite of communication by mass media such as newspapers and television.

The phrase has been traced as far back as the 1400's. Until the last century, it meant by speaking, not by writing. Now, in addition to speaking, word of mouth may include activities in which the mouth stays closed, such as "texting" and other personal messages sent electronically.

Buzz is often synonymous with word-of-mouth. Word of mouth and buzz are important to **viral marketing**.

work one's tail off (butt off, ass off)

"Bethani had to work her tail off just to get a ‘B' and she did." —Chicago (DuPage) Daily Herald (10/13/2011)

"I'm damn proud of our code enforcement folks because they work their butts off." —South Bend Tribune (10/10/2011)

"She's worked her ass off. She's been working since she was 15. When someone's a hard worker, I like and appreciate that." —Denton Record-Chronicle (10/6/2011)

If you **work your tail off**, you work very hard.

Tail and butt are substitutes for the mildly vulgar ass. All three expressions have the same meaning.

Many other verbs are combined in similar slang expressions with "tail off" or "butt off" or "ass off" to mean a lot or severely. For example, "I laughed my butt off" (I laughed hard or loudly), or "I froze my butt off" (I was very cold).

Examples have been found as early as the 1940's, but these phrases did not appear frequently in print until the 1970's.

worth one's salt

"No lawyer worth his salt can't fight a subpoena for a year." —Josh Rosner, managing director of Graham Fisher & Co., a New York financial research firm (2/2/2011)

"You know, if you're a conservative and you haven't taken on a New York Times reporter, you're not worth your salt as far as I'm concerned." —Rick Santorum, two weeks before he withdrew from the race for the Republican nomination for President (3/27/2012)

"I wouldn't be a gossip columnist worth my salt without a little red-carpet coverage, so I hopped down to South Philly on Sunday to attend the glamorous opening of the Phillie Phanatic's first film..." —Molly Eichel, in a Philadelphia Inquirer blog (4/23/2013)

If you are **worth your salt**, you are competent; worth the money you are paid.

The origin of the phrase may involve the ancient connection between the words salt and salary, but I could find no precise explanation.

Printed examples exist from the beginning of the 1800's. This one is in a novel:

At present she might be ornamental but she was of no use to any one in the whole wide world. As a nurse she might be worth her salt and help to alleviate other people's sufferings. She had an iron nerve... —"Miss Balmaine's Past" by B.M. Croker (1808)

wring hands, hand-wringing

"What was striking about what happened on Friday was how quick the leaders of Congress were out there wringing their hands. These are the architects of obstruction, and now they're complaining about the pace of the recovery." —David Axelrod, campaign advisor to President Barack Obama (6/3/2012)

Private investors and government wealth managers around the world wring their hands about the trajectory of deficits and debt in the United States—and then buy more of that debt. —The New York Times (7/7/2011)

"These public incidents—acute, dramatic—instigate and inspire people to say, look, enough with the hand-wringing. Let's get to some public policy that can reflect our moral consciousness about

what we need to do." —Michael Eric Dyson, professor of sociology at Georgetown University (12/16/2012)

Let the annual hand-wringing begin, when we once again fret over what drinks to serve at Thanksgiving. —The Washington post (11/18/2011)

The big news in Washington last week was the failure of the congressional "supercommittee" to compromise on a plan to reduce projected deficits over the next 10 years. Despite all the hand-wringing about the panel's failure, few really expected it to succeed. Our hands went unwrung. —Austin American-Statesman (11/27/2011)

If you **wring your hands** over, or about, something, you worry or agonize about it. **Hand-wringing** means excessive or unnecessary worrying or sorrowing.

It is usually an unfriendly, critical allusion to someone who wrings hands (holds them together, twisting and turning them).

The earliest examples of people wringing their hands (as early as 1603) referred to grieving widows. An early example of hand-wringing used figuratively is in a poem published in 1835:

Then the weak door is barr'd, and the soul all sore,
And hand-wringing helplessness paceth the floor
—"Captain Sword and Captain Pen" by Leigh Hunt (London, 1835)

writing on the wall, handwriting on the wall

Indeed, most of the world's advanced nations—and in this category I'll include China and India—have seen the writing on the wall and have embraced policies that seek to aggressively develop and deploy solar, wind and other renewable-energy resources. —The Arizona Republic (5/9/2011)

"We were hoping they would come back, but that was just wishful thinking, I guess," Chandler said. "We could pretty well see the handwriting on the wall." —The Asheville Citizen-Times (8/30/2012)

The handwriting on the wall is clear. By allowing race-day medications, North American racing is out of step with a world that no longer views our competition as the best and our horses as being the highest quality. —The Lexington Herald-Leader (9/2/2012)

"Well, they are clearly open to some of these reforms...and that's been a shift in the military. They see the writing on the wall." —Julian Barnes, news reporter (5/17/2013)

Seeing the **writing** (or **handwriting**) **on the wall** means recognizing warnings that something is ending or will end soon.

The expression comes from the Book of Daniel in the Bible, in which only Daniel could recognize that words on a wall predicted the end of the rule of King Belshazzar of Babylon.

you bet, you betcha

"...when these sleaze peddlers try to make money with disgusting lies about his relationship with his child, you bet he's going to sue." —Bert Fields, attorney for Tom Cruise (10/24/2012)

Was the medicine painful and politically unpopular? You bet. Ford's opposition to spending and

his pardon of Richard Nixon cost him re-election in 1976. —Sun Sentinel (8/6/2011)

Las Vegas regularly finds itself atop various Top Ten lists, and for good reason. Hottest New Year's Eve spots? Absolutely. Top airport approaches? But of course. Greatest late night bars? You betcha. —Las Vegas Weekly (8/3/2011)

You bet and **you betcha** are an emphatic way of saying, "Yes, that is correct" or "it is certain."

Both are short versions of **you can bet on it** and its colloquial variations such as, **you (can) bet your life**, **you (can) bet your bottom dollar** and **you (can) bet your bippy**. All the phrases express certainty about something. They may answer a question, as in the Las Vegas Weekly example.

Betcha is a spelling based on informal pronunciation, like wanna (want to) and gonna (going to). Betcha was further popularized by Sarah Palin, the Republican politician, who used it frequently.

You bet as an expression of certainty has been traced to the 1800's; you betcha to the early 1900's.

zero in on

Romney addressed a crowd of delegates and party officials and sought to zero in on his economic message... —Bloomberg News (8/31/2012)

Smart Meters...are designed to help customers manage energy use and help ComEd zero in on outages. —Chicago Tribune (8/31/2012)

"This discussion really zeroed in on the fact that Alabama...has had a long history of discrimination." —Joe Johns, television news correspondent, talking about the U.S. Supreme Court (2/27/2013)

Zero in on originally meant "aim a gun at a target" but now usually means, "focus attention on."

The use of zero in on began during the mid-1900's.

Beware of Bad Advice

Some language references advertise that using idiomatic phrases will make you speak or write better English. This book will help you understand the phrases. I do not urge you to use them.

Unless the speaker is very fluent, in many situations using these phrases will call attention to the speaker's non-native English. (A skillful businessperson may do so deliberately, to create a moment of humor during a meeting.)

Teachers of writing generally advise against using idiomatic phrases, many of which are clichés—phrases used too frequently. They call attention to the writer's lack of originality or careful thought.

About the Author

Peter Bengelsdorf is a former newspaper executive. He began this project in 2010, after 40 years working for newspapers and three years teaching English to immigrants.