ESL LAB

Idiom Games Pack

24 everyday idioms that adults use at work and at home, and six printable games to practice them. Every game works in pairs or small groups, and the answers are upside down on each page.

LEVEL	STUDENTS	GROUPING	TIME
B1 to B2	Adults and older teens	Pairs or groups of 3-4	10 to 20 minutes each

The 24 idioms

At work

1. **get the ball rolling** start something, like a project or a discussion
2. **cut corners** do something badly or cheaply to save time or money
3. **go the extra mile** make more effort than people expect
4. **call it a day** stop working for today
5. **back to square one** back at the start, because the plan failed
6. **the ball is in your court** it's your turn to act or decide

Talking

7. **spill the beans** tell a secret
8. **beat around the bush** avoid saying the important thing
9. **cut to the chase** talk about the important part straight away
10. **hit the nail on the head** say exactly what the problem is
11. **pull a person's leg** joke by telling a person something that isn't true
12. **the elephant in the room** a big problem that everyone sees but nobody talks about

Decisions

13. **bite the bullet** do something hard or unpleasant that you can't avoid
14. **on the fence** not able to decide
15. **sleep on it** wait until tomorrow to decide
16. **play it by ear** decide what to do as things happen, without a plan
17. **a long shot** something that will probably not work, but you try
18. **miss the boat** lose a chance because you were too slow

Life and money

19. **cost an arm and a leg** be very expensive
20. **once in a blue moon** almost never
21. **a blessing in disguise** a bad thing that brings something good later
22. **the last straw** the final problem that makes you lose patience
23. **in the same boat** in the same difficult situation as other people
24. **kill two birds with one stone** do two things with one action

INSIDE, IN THE ORDER OF THE BLOG POST

1 Bluff Page 2 | **2** Draw it or act it Page 3 | **3** Idiom dominoes Page 4 | **4** Idiom bingo Pages 5-6 | **5** Idiom auction Page 7 | **6** Idiom tic-tac-toe Page 8 | **7** Story chain Page 3 cards

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ACTIVITY 1

Bluff

Play this before you look at page 1. Cut out the cards and put them face down. Student A takes a card and reads the idiom and all three meanings in a serious voice. Student B chooses the real meaning. The answer is upside down on the card: one point for the right meaning, then swap.

CARD 1 Real: B

pull a person's leg

A ask a person for a big favor
B joke by telling a person something untrue
C slow a person down on purpose

CARD 2 Real: A

spill the beans

A tell a secret
B make a mess in the office kitchen
C spend money faster than you earn it

CARD 3 Real: C

the elephant in the room

A the loudest person at a meeting
B the most expensive thing in a house
C a big problem that nobody talks about

CARD 4 Real: A

bite the bullet

A do something hard that you can't avoid
B say something you regret later
C eat very fast because you are late

CARD 5 Real: C

once in a blue moon

A only at night
B when you feel sad
C almost never

CARD 6 Real: B

cost an arm and a leg

A be dangerous to use
B be very expensive
C be very hard to carry

CARD 7 Real: B

a blessing in disguise

A a gift you don't like
B a bad thing that brings something good later
C a person who helps you in secret

CARD 8 Real: A

the last straw

A the final problem that makes you lose patience
B the cheapest choice on the menu
C your very last chance to win

CARD 9 Real: C

kill two birds with one stone

A make two people angry at once
B be very lucky
C do two things with one action

CARD 10 Real: B

beat around the bush

A work in a garden
B avoid saying the important thing
C win an argument easily

CARD 11 Real: C

miss the boat

A miss your family when you travel
B feel sick on a journey
C lose a chance because you were too slow

CARD 12 Real: A

on the fence

A not able to decide
B in trouble with your boss
C living far from the city

Round 2. Take a card from page 3. Write two fake meanings for its idiom, then read your partner all three. Can you bluff them?

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ACTIVITY 2

Draw it or act it

Cut out the cards and put them face down. Take a card and draw or act out the **literal** picture, with no words. Your partner guesses the idiom, then says what it really means. Check the meaning on page 1. Keep the cards for activity 7.

get the ball rolling **Picture:** push a huge ball	**cut corners** **Picture:** cut the corners off a sheet of paper	**go the extra mile** **Picture:** run past a sign that says +1 mile	**call it a day** **Picture:** make a phone call to the sun
back to square one **Picture:** move a game piece back to square 1	**the ball is in your court** **Picture:** a tennis ball on your side of the net	**spill the beans** **Picture:** knock over a can of beans	**beat around the bush** **Picture:** hit a bush with a stick
cut to the chase **Picture:** scissors cutting a film to a car chase	**hit the nail on the head** **Picture:** hit a nail with a hammer	**pull a person's leg** **Picture:** pull your partner's leg	**the elephant in the room** **Picture:** an elephant on the sofa
bite the bullet **Picture:** bite a bullet, very bravely	**on the fence** **Picture:** sit on top of a fence	**sleep on it** **Picture:** sleep on top of a letter	**play it by ear** **Picture:** play the piano with your ear
a long shot **Picture:** throw a ball from very far away	**miss the boat** **Picture:** run to a boat that is leaving	**cost an arm and a leg** **Picture:** pay for a coffee with your arm and leg	**once in a blue moon** **Picture:** look up at a blue moon
a blessing in disguise **Picture:** an angel in sunglasses and a hat	**the last straw** **Picture:** a camel with one straw too many on its back	**in the same boat** **Picture:** two people in one tiny boat	**kill two birds with one stone** **Picture:** one stone, two surprised birds

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ACTIVITY 3

Idiom dominoes

Cut out the 24 tiles and share them between you. Put one tile in the middle of the table. Take turns to add a tile to either end of the line, so that the two halves make an idiom. Say the full idiom aloud as you put the tile down. If you can't go, miss a turn. The first player with no tiles wins.

... straw	once in a ...	... on it	play it ...	... with one stone	go the extra ...
... blue moon	pull a person's ...	... bullet	hit the nail ...	... mile	back to ...
... in your court	beat around ...	... the chase	the elephant ...	... on the head	in the same ...
... and a leg	the last ...	... rolling	on the ...	... in disguise	kill two birds ...
... in the room	spill the ...	... the boat	a blessing ...	... boat	cost an arm ...
... the bush	cut to ...	... corners	get the ball ...	... fence	sleep ...
... leg	call it ...	... by ear	a long ...	... beans	bite the ...
... a day	cut ...	... square one	the ball is ...	... shot	miss ...

The idioms in the loop, in order: spill the beans, bite the bullet, hit the nail on the head, in the same boat, cost an arm and a leg, the last straw, once in a blue moon, pull a person's leg, call it a day, cut corners, get the ball rolling, on the fence, sleep on it, play it by ear, a long shot, miss the boat, a blessing in disguise, kill two birds with one stone, go the extra mile, back to square one, the ball is in your court, beat around the bush, cut to the chase, the elephant in the room. The last one joins the first.

ACTIVITY 4

Idiom bingo

Groups of 3 to 4. Each player takes one bingo card. Shuffle the call cards on page 6 and put them face down. Take turns to be the caller: take a card and read the situation aloud. Every player who has the idiom for that situation crosses it out. Three in a line wins, but only if the player can say each idiom in a full sentence about its situation.

BINGO CARD 1

cost an arm and a leg	beat around the bush	in the same boat
play it by ear	on the fence	get the ball rolling
miss the boat	back to square one	cut to the chase

BINGO CARD 2

bite the bullet	sleep on it	go the extra mile
back to square one	the last straw	a blessing in disguise
in the same boat	a long shot	pull a person's leg

BINGO CARD 3

once in a blue moon	kill two birds with one stone	sleep on it
the ball is in your court	pull a person's leg	cut corners
cut to the chase	call it a day	cost an arm and a leg

BINGO CARD 4

go the extra mile	cut to the chase	miss the boat
pull a person's leg	hit the nail on the head	a blessing in disguise
call it a day	the elephant in the room	on the fence

BINGO CARD 5

back to square one	beat around the bush	the last straw
spill the beans	hit the nail on the head	the elephant in the room
the ball is in your court	once in a blue moon	kill two birds with one stone

BINGO CARD 6

once in a blue moon	call it a day	a long shot
spill the beans	get the ball rolling	cut corners
bite the bullet	hit the nail on the head	play it by ear

ACTIVITY 4 · CALL CARDS

Idiom bingo: the call cards

Cut out the cards. The caller reads the situation, not the answer. The idiom is upside down at the foot of each card, so the caller can check it after the round.

CALL 1
Marco cycles to work, so he gets exercise and saves money.

kill two birds with one stone

CALL 2
Your friend tells you the office is closing forever, then starts laughing.

pull a person's leg

CALL 3
Eva lost her job, started her own business and now loves her work.

a blessing in disguise

CALL 4
The salesman wants an answer today, but Lucia says she will answer tomorrow.

sleep on it

CALL 5
Everyone at the meeting knows the project is late, but nobody mentions it.

the elephant in the room

CALL 6
The builders finished early because they skipped some safety checks.

cut corners

CALL 7
Nadia applies to a famous company with no experience. She will probably not get the job.

a long shot

CALL 8
Your manager has made you an offer. Now you have to decide.

the ball is in your court

CALL 9
Your colleague says, "I haven't finished my report either."

in the same boat

CALL 10
Ivan can't decide: take the new job or stay where he is.

on the fence

CALL 11
Leo's train was late all month. Today it was canceled, so he bought a bike.

the last straw

CALL 12
Pablo goes to the cinema about once every two years.

once in a blue moon

CALL 13
The concert tickets were 400 euros each.

cost an arm and a leg

CALL 14
The director says, "We have five minutes. Tell me the main problem."

cut to the chase

CALL 15
Ana knew about the surprise party, and she told Marta everything the day before.

spill the beans

CALL 16
Nobody speaks at the start of the meeting, so Kim asks the first question.

get the ball rolling

CALL 17
The flat was perfect, but Jonas waited a week to call, and it was gone.

miss the boat

CALL 18
The hotel receptionist drove a guest to the airport at 5 a.m.

go the extra mile

CALL 19
The client said no to the whole design, so the team starts again.

back to square one

CALL 20
Zoe and her friends have no plan for Saturday. They will decide on the day.

play it by ear

CALL 21
Tom hates the dentist, but his tooth hurts, so he finally books an appointment.

bite the bullet

CALL 22
It's 7 p.m. and the team is tired, so the manager says, "Let's stop here."

call it a day

CALL 23
In the meeting, Sara explains the real problem in one sentence, and everyone agrees.

hit the nail on the head

CALL 24
Dan talks about the weather for ten minutes before he asks for a pay raise.

beat around the bush

ACTIVITY 5

Idiom auction

Six of these sentences are correct, and six have a mistake in the idiom. Two pairs play against each other, and each pair has 1,000 euros. First, tick yes or no for every sentence. Then take turns to read a sentence aloud. Both pairs write a secret bid for it, from 0 to 300 euros, and show it at the same time. The higher bid buys the sentence.

#	SENTENCE	CORRECT?	OUR BID	BOUGHT?
1	Don't worry about the deadline. We're all in one boat.	☐ yes ☐ no		
2	That new laptop cost an arm and a leg.	☐ yes ☐ no		
3	It's late. Let's call it a day and finish tomorrow.	☐ yes ☐ no		
4	Come on, stop beating around the bushes.	☐ yes ☐ no		
5	I'm still on the fence about the new job.	☐ yes ☐ no		
6	The server crashed, and we were back to the square one.	☐ yes ☐ no		
7	Losing that client was a blessing in disguise.	☐ yes ☐ no		
8	If we meet at the airport, we can kill two birds with one shot.	☐ yes ☐ no		
9	Relax, I'm only pulling your foot.	☐ yes ☐ no		
10	Maya hit the nail on the head in the meeting.	☐ yes ☐ no		
11	Who spilled the bean about the party?	☐ yes ☐ no		
12	I only see my cousins once in a blue moon.	☐ yes ☐ no		

Money spent: _____ euros **Money won: _____ euros**

Scoring. Check the answers at the foot of the page. A correct sentence you bought pays you double your bid. A wrong one pays nothing. The pair with more money at the end wins. Then correct the six wrong sentences together.

Correct sentences: 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12. Wrong: **1** in the same boat **4** beating around the bush **6** back to square one **8** with one stone **9** pulling your leg **11** spilled the beans

ACTIVITY 6

Idiom tic-tac-toe

Play in pairs, one grid per game: one player is X and one is O. To win a square, answer its question about your own life in a full sentence with the idiom, for example: *Rent in my city costs an arm and a leg.* If the idiom is right, mark the square. Three in a line wins.

AT WORK

get the ball rolling How do you get the ball rolling on a Monday morning?	**cut corners** A job where people must never cut corners	**go the extra mile** A shop or company that went the extra mile for you
call it a day What time do you usually call it a day?	**back to square one** A plan at work or school that went back to square one	**the ball is in your court** A decision where the ball is in your court right now
the last straw The last straw on a really bad day	**bite the bullet** A boring job you must bite the bullet and do this week	**kill two birds with one stone** A way you kill two birds with one stone in your day

TALKING AND DECIDING

spill the beans A surprise you spilled the beans about, or almost did	**beat around the bush** A situation where people often beat around the bush	**cut to the chase** A person you know who always cuts to the chase
hit the nail on the head A film, book or post that hit the nail on the head	**pull a person's leg** A time a friend pulled your leg	**the elephant in the room** A topic that is the elephant in the room at big family dinners
on the fence Something you're on the fence about right now	**sleep on it** A decision you should always sleep on	**play it by ear** Plans you prefer to play by ear

LIFE AND MONEY

cost an arm and a leg Something that costs an arm and a leg in your city	**once in a blue moon** Something you do once in a blue moon	**a blessing in disguise** A problem that was a blessing in disguise
in the same boat People who are in the same boat as you this year	**a long shot** A dream that is a long shot, but worth a try	**miss the boat** A chance you missed the boat on, or nearly did
cut corners Something at home you cut corners on, like cooking or cleaning	**go the extra mile** A friend or teacher who went the extra mile for you	**back to square one** A hobby, diet or home project that went back to square one