

# Lesson 1: Idioms from Food

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## Introductory Quiz

*Guess the correct meaning of each idiom from the context. It's OK if you get a lot of answers incorrect - the important part is to do your best in trying to figure it out!*

### Question 1

My best friend dated my brother for five years. They just split up two weeks ago - it was a bad breakup, and now I'm **walking on eggshells** around both of them.

"Walking on eggshells" means:

- A being very cautious so as not to upset or offend someone
- B helping two people resolve a conflict
- C trying to make depressed people feel better

### Question 2

My cousin gave me a free plane ticket to Hawaii, and my boss gave me two weeks off to travel. I just found out my favorite band is doing a show in Hawaii at the same time I'll be there - that's just **the icing on the cake!**

If something is "the icing on the cake," it is...

- A a perfect opportunity to have fun
- B an unexpected coincidence
- C an additional benefit to something that is already good

### Question 3

The Yankees are the best baseball team of all time. **The proof is in the pudding** - they've won more championships than any sports franchise in history.

"The proof is in the pudding" means...

- A it is impossible to lose
- B they have a big advantage
- C you can be sure that something is true if it is tested

#### Question 4

I'm currently taking 6 college courses in addition to working full-time. That means I'm busy every day from 6 AM to 11 PM, and I'm getting behind on my schoolwork. I think I **bit off more than I could chew** this semester.

"I bit off more than I could chew" means...

- A I eat too much and don't exercise enough
- B I took on more responsibilities than I can handle
- C I don't have a good social life

#### Question 5

Changing a country's trajectory takes time - the economic policies enacted three years ago are just now beginning to **bear fruit**.

To "bear fruit" means...

- A become popular
- B finish
- C produce positive results

#### Question 6

When the salesman starts talking about how buying an expensive new car will make your life really great, you should **take it with a grain of salt**.

"Take it with a grain of salt" means...

- A bargain for a better price
- B not believe it to be completely true or correct
- C agree enthusiastically

#### Question 7

I don't trust that newspaper. Their reporting isn't very balanced; they tend to **cherry-pick** the information in favor of one particular political party.

To "cherry-pick" means...

- A to choose only specific items (the best parts) and ignore the rest
- B have a positive attitude
- C write about very recent events without considering the history

### Question 8

My friends went to the art museum, but I decided to come to the beach instead. Contemplating paintings for hours is **not really my cup of tea**.

If something is "not your cup of tea,"...

- A it makes your stomach hurt
- B you've never done it before
- C you don't like it very much

### Question 9

I was sick and couldn't go to the party. Don't **rub salt in the wound** by telling me how great it was.

To "rub salt in the wound" means...

- A to talk too much about one topic
- B to make a sad person feel even worse
- C to help a sick person feel better

### Question 10

My 3-year-old daughter already knows how to use the computer. She's one **sharp cookie!**

Describing someone as a "sharp cookie" means the person is...

- A enthusiastic
- B intelligent
- C very young

### Question 11

Did you hear about the grandmother who chased a robber out of her house with a kitchen knife? What a **tough cookie!**

Describing someone as a "tough cookie" means the person is...

- A courageous and strong
- B aggressive and violent
- C crazy

### Question 12

That math test was **a piece of cake**. I didn't even study and I bet I got every question right.

If something is "a piece of cake," it means...

- A it's very easy
- B it's enjoyable
- C it's delicious

### Question 13

Diana kept pressuring Bill to tell her how much he paid for the engagement ring, but he refused to **spill the beans**.

To "spill the beans" means...

- A to buy something
- B to reveal secret information
- C to help someone understand

### Question 14

Our company needs to pay back a loan from the bank, but business has been slow. If we don't get more customers by the end of the year, we'll really be **in a pickle**.

Being "in a pickle" means...

- A being in a difficult situation
- B earning no money
- C not having a good future

### Question 15

That book was written 50 years ago, but it's still very applicable today. You should read it - it definitely provides some **food for thought**.

"Food for thought" is...

- A historical data
- B information worth considering
- C strong evidence

# Explanation

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## Walking on eggshells

The hard exterior part of an egg is called the shell. Eggshells are very fragile - that means it's easy to break them. If you were going to "walk on eggshells," you would need to walk very carefully.



So "walking on eggshells" means **being extremely careful with your words and actions so that you don't upset or offend someone in a delicate situation.**

Politicians are often "walking on eggshells" during delicate negotiations that could easily go wrong. You could also be "walking on eggshells" when interacting with a person who is easily offended, or who gets angry easily.

## The icing on the cake

Many cakes are covered with a sweet, sugary paste called icing. The cake is already delicious, and the icing makes it even more delicious. So "the icing on the cake" is **an additional benefit to a situation that is already very good.**



This phrase is often used when you're having a really great day, and then one final thing happens to make the day perfect. For example:

"I finished work early and spent the afternoon relaxing in the park. When I came home to find that my husband had made a romantic dinner, it was the icing on the cake!"

Occasionally this idiom is used sarcastically in the opposite way - when there is a bad situation, and something happens to make it even worse. For example: "My car broke down in the rain and I was late for work. Then I discovered I'd lost my wallet - that was just the icing on the cake."

## The proof is in the pudding



pudding is a type of dessert. The only way to know if the pudding is good or not is to eat it. So when we say "the proof is in the pudding," it means that **you can be sure that something is true or good only if you have tested it or directly experienced it.**

## bite off more than you can chew

A bite is when you take a piece of food with your teeth, and "chewing" is the action of crushing food in your mouth with your teeth. If you put too much food in your mouth, then it's difficult to chew! That's why this idiom means to **take on too much responsibility, or to accept more commitments than you can handle.**



People often use this idiom as a warning. For example, if your son wants to sign up for piano lessons, Japanese class, and soccer training all at the same time, you could say, "Don't bite off more than you can chew."

## bear fruit

The word "bear" as a verb means to produce. When a tree bears fruit, it's a good thing - so if a project or action bears fruit, it **produces successful results.**

## take it with a grain of salt



This idiom comes from the fact that it's easier to eat food if the food has a little bit of salt. This idiom is used when talking about information that may not be completely true. It means you listen to or read the information, but you **don't accept or believe it completely** - you need to check the facts to be sure it's accurate.

## cherry-pick

This fruit is called a cherry. When you are picking cherries off the trees, you need to look for the small cherries among all the leaves. You select the cherries, and ignore the leaves. So cherry-picking is **selecting only a small amount of information or data - the best part - and ignoring the rest of the information.**



It's usually used with a negative connotation - for someone who chooses only specific pieces of information in support of their views, and ignores the bigger context.

## not my cup of tea

Tea is a very common drink, but not everybody likes it. If you say that something is "not my cup of tea," it's a polite and diplomatic way to say you **don't like it.**



For example, if your colleague invites you to go see a horror movie, and you don't enjoy horror movies, it's more polite to say, "No thanks - horror movies aren't my cup of tea" instead of "No - I don't like horror movies."

## rub salt in the wound

A wound is a type of injury - an open injury that is bleeding. If you put salt in a wound, it would be even more painful. The idiom "rub salt in the wound" means **to make a sad person feel even worse - usually deliberately.**

For example, "My sister is so insensitive. I just lost my job, and she's rubbing salt in the wound by constantly commenting about how great her own job is."

## sharp cookie / tough cookie

This is a cookie - but I'm not sure how it came to be part of these idioms!

Describing someone as a sharp cookie means the person is **smart, intelligent, or a very fast learner.**

Describing someone as a tough cookie means the person is **courageous, strong, and has lots of persistence and endurance especially under difficult circumstances.**



For example, a boy who started college at age 14 would be a **sharp cookie**. A man who had cancer, but survived while keeping positive attitude, would be a **tough cookie**.

## piece of cake

It's difficult to eat a food you don't like, but most people like cake - so it's easy to eat!

## spill the beans

The origin of this idiom is unknown, but it means **to reveal secret information**. It is used in both the positive and the negative:

- The woman spilled the beans about her romantic relationship with the famous actor.
- Don't worry - I won't spill the beans about the surprise party for John.

## in a pickle

A pickle is a cucumber that has been preserved in vinegar. Vinegar is strong and acidic, so it's probably not a very nice experience for the cucumber! The idiom "in a pickle" means **in trouble or in a difficult and unpleasant situation.**



It is often used when there is an obligation that will be difficult to complete, or two conflicting requirements:



"My boss wants me to work overtime on Friday, but I promised I'd have dinner with my mother on Friday night. Now I'm really in a pickle."

## food for thought

Food gives your body energy and nutrients. If a book, article, or idea is "food for thought," it means it provides **interesting information that is worth thinking about** - it's energy and nutrients for your mind.

### You've finished Lesson 1!

Now you can take the practice quiz and choose the best idiom to complete each sentence - and then try the writing exercises to use the idioms in your own English.

# Practice Quiz

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### Question 1

I bought my mother-in-law an expensive box of chocolates for her birthday, but I just found out she's on a diet. All the stores are closed and her birthday is tomorrow. I'm really \_\_\_\_\_.

- A cherry-picking
- B in a pickle
- C a sharp cookie

### Question 2

The first time I met my boyfriend's parents, I \_\_\_\_\_ because I knew their political views were very different from mine.

- A bit off more than I could chew
- B took it with a grain of salt
- C was walking on eggshells

### Question 3

Don't worry - you'll learn how to use this computer program in no time. It's \_\_\_\_\_.

- A a piece of cake
- B bearing fruit
- C proof is in the pudding

#### Question 4

I started college studying psychology, but then I discovered it \_\_\_\_\_ - so I switched to biology.

- A was food for thought
- B rubbed salt in the wound
- C wasn't my cup of tea

#### Question 5

My project was extremely successful - and getting interviewed on TV about it was \_\_\_\_\_.

- A in a pickle
- B my cup of tea
- C the icing on the cake

#### Question 6

How did the media find out about our company's secret new product?! One of our employees must have \_\_\_\_\_.

- A cherry-picked
- B spilled the beans
- C walked on eggshells

#### Question 7

I didn't think I would enjoy the poetry reading, but I'm glad I went. It gave me a lot of \_\_\_\_\_.

- A food for thought
- B pieces of cake
- C grains of salt

#### Question 8

You can't just \_\_\_\_\_ the statistics that are in line with your viewpoint. There are a lot of studies that support the opposite view.

- A cherry-pick
- B spill the beans
- C take it with a grain of salt

### Question 9

My efforts to eat healthier food are finally \_\_\_\_\_ - I lost eight pounds this month.

- A bearing fruit
- B icing on the cake
- C a tough cookie

### Question 10

I shouldn't have volunteered to help organize the company's Christmas party on top of all my other work. It's a big ordeal and I feel like \_\_\_\_\_.

- A I'm walking on eggshells
- B I've bitten off more than I can chew
- C I've spilled the beans

## Practice Quiz Answers

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- 1) B
- 2) C
- 3) A
- 4) C
- 5) C
- 6) B
- 7) A
- 8) A
- 9) A
- 10) B

# Speaking / Writing Exercises

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- 1) Describe a situation when you were "walking on eggshells"
- 2) Have you ever bitten off more than you could chew? What happened?
- 3) What are some things that are not your cup of tea?
- 4) Do you know someone who's a sharp cookie? How about a tough cookie? Describe these people.
- 5) When was the last time you were in a pickle?

If you want correction / feedback, you can either e-mail me your writing at [homework@espressoenglish.net](mailto:homework@espressoenglish.net) or leave me a voice mail message: [www.speakpipe.com/espressoenglish](http://www.speakpipe.com/espressoenglish)

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