

**The Lion's Share: Animal Idioms**  
**(A Multicultural Book)**  
**Language Lizard Supplemental Teaching Material**  
[www.LanguageLizard.com](http://www.LanguageLizard.com)

**WHAT IS AN IDIOM?**

An idiom is a phrase which says one thing but means something different. An idiom can be a quick way of saying something complicated. Languages throughout the world have their own idioms. There are thousands of idioms in English. Knowing some of them will help you to understand what people mean.

Below is background information about the idioms portrayed in the book, *A Lion's Share: Animal Idioms*. Additional animal idioms, their meanings, and their history, are also listed below. Finally, more resources about Animal Idioms are noted at the end of this document.

**ANIMAL IDIOMS**

**Ants in your pants** - Not being able to stay still

This idiom became popular in the USA in the 1930s and is still commonly used. The word 'antsy' can be used to mean the same as the idiom.

<https://www.theidioms.com/ants-in-pants/>

[https://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin\\_board/24/messages/200.html](https://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/24/messages/200.html)

**Gets my goat** - Feeling annoyed

First recorded in the USA in the early 1900s, this idiom uses the word 'goat' as slang for 'anger'. So instead of saying "That makes me angry" people can say "That gets my goat."

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/get-your-goat.html>

**Busy as a bee** - To work hard and quickly at a job

If you watch bees, you won't see them relaxing. Bees work hard and fast to collect pollen from flowers. This idiom dates back to the 1400s in England.

<https://knowyourphrase.com/as-busy-as-a-bee>

**Raining cats and dogs** - Heavy rain that makes you very wet

This idiom may have started in the 1600s. City streets did not have proper drains. In heavy rain, the streets flooded. Any cats or dogs caught in the flood could drown. After the storm, the animals' bodies looked as if they had fallen with the rain.

<https://www idioms online/raining-cats-and-dogs/>

**Hold your horses** - Be patient and don't be hasty

This idiom was first used in the USA in the 1800s. When horses were used for riding or pulling buggies, a person might have to hold tight to their horses so they didn't gallop away fast.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/184400.html>

**Get my ducks in a row** - To be well prepared for something that is going to happen

There are different beliefs about how this idiom began. One theory is about mother ducks. When a mother duck swims or walks from place to place, she gets all her ducklings in a row so they will follow her and stay safe.

<https://www.wisegeek.com/where-did-the-term-get-your-ducks-in-a-row-come-from.htm>

**Butterflies in my stomach** - Feeling nervous or excited

Used since the early 1900s, this idiom describes the fluttering people feel in their stomachs when they are anxious or excited.

<https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/butterflies-in-my-stomach>

**Take the bull by the horns** - Being brave, facing up to a challenge

This idiom is from when bulls were tied up in barnyards. A farmer could then hold it by its horns.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/take+the+bull+by+the+horns>

**As the crow flies** - The straight, direct route

This idiom started in Scotland in the 1700s. Scottish people say ‘take the crow road’ to mean taking a short route. A straight Scottish road is called a ‘crow road’ because you can travel faster on it than on a winding road.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/as-the-crow-flies.html>

**Until the cows come home** - Doing something for a very long time

This idiom started in the 1800s because cows wandered slowly home to their barn in the evening. They came whenever they were ready, not at a time set by the clock.

<https://www.gingersoftware.com/content/phrases/till-the-cows-come-home/#.XhyKdv5KiM8>

**At a snail's pace** - Doing something very slowly

Snails slide along very slowly! This idiom has been used since the 1400s in England.

**Smell a rat** - Feeling that something is wrong

This idiom, first written down in 1550 by John Skelton, refers to a cat sniffing to find a rat. Farmers did not want rats in their barns. It might also refer to the horrible smell of a rat that has died in a hidden place.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/smell+a+rat>

<https://www.theidioms.com/smell-a-rat/>

**Let the cat out of the bag** - Giving away a secret

This idiom started to be used in the 1400s. People bought piglets and other livestock in sacks. Sometimes, a dishonest seller would trick the buyer by putting a cat into the sack instead. The buyer would have a surprise when they opened the sack at home!

<https://www.theidioms.com/let-the-cat-out-of-the-bag/>

**The lion's share** - Having the most of something

This idiom comes from a fable by Aesop, called *The Lion and His Fellow Hunters*. In the tale, the lion and other animals hunt together, but then the lion doesn't share the catch but keeps it for himself.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/lion%27s+share>

**Open a can of worms** - You do one thing which causes many problems

This idiom may have started in the USA in the 1950s. People used worms for bait on fishing hooks. They bought the worms alive in cans. When someone opened the can to get one worm, the other worms would wiggle out.

<https://knowyourphrase.com/open-a-can-of-worms>

**Wild goose chase** - Looking in many places, and trying hard to find something without success

This idiom was used to describe horses running a race in the 1500s. William Shakespeare used it in the play *Romeo and Juliet*. The meaning of the idiom changed. It began to mean that it is hard to catch wild geese, which are shy birds and fly fast.

<https://knowyourphrase.com/wild-goose-chase>

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/wild-goose-chase.html>

**The world is your oyster** - You feel as if you can successfully do anything or go anywhere

This idiom was used by the playwright, William Shakespeare. It describes the world as an oyster, and success as the pearl that might be hidden inside.

<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/21713/what-is-the-meaning-and-origin-of-the-common-phrase-the-world-is-your-oyster>

**When pigs fly** - Something that will never happen

This idiom was perhaps used for the first time in England in the 1600s.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/when+pigs+fly>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Fuller](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Fuller)

**Let sleeping dogs lie** - Don't make trouble for yourself

This idiom was first written in England in 1380 by Geoffrey Chaucer, in *Troilus and Criseyde*. It probably started because, if you suddenly wake a dog from a deep sleep, it might bite you.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/let-sleeping-dogs-lie.html>

**A little bird told me** - Someone tells you something but doesn't explain how they know about it. They share the information but keep the source of the information a secret.

This very old idiom started in different cultures. In a Norse legend, the hero Sigurd could talk to the birds and they warned him of danger. A verse in the Bible warns that if you curse the king, birds will carry the message to him.

<https://www.theidioms.com/a-little-bird-told-me/>

**Bull in a china shop** - Being clumsy, dropping or breaking things, or tripping over them. It can also mean you behaved badly in a situation with another person.

A bull is a large animal that can be hard to control, while china is fragile and easy to break. So if a bull got loose in a store selling china, it would do a lot of damage! This idiom was first used in America in the 1800s.

<https://www.theidioms.com/bull-in-a-china-shop/>

**Wolf in sheep's clothing** - Someone who pretends to be kind but cannot be trusted

This ancient idiom is the title of a story in Aesop's Fables. Aesop was Greek and lived from 620-560 BC. The idiom is also used in the Bible.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/wolf-in-sheeps-clothing.html>

**The elephant in the room** - Refusing to talk about a large, important problem

This idiom was first used in the USA in the 1950s to mean a large problem which everyone was choosing to ignore.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/elephant-in-the-room.html>

**Like a fish out of water** - The feeling that you don't fit in, and are in the wrong place.

This ancient idiom, from a.d. 37, is based on the fact that fish cannot survive when taken out of the water.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/a+fish+out+of+water>

### **Additional websites to learn more about animal idioms**

<https://www.espressoenglish.net/20-animal-idioms-in-english/>

<https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/idioms-animal.htm>

<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/english/english-animal-idioms/>

<https://www.easypacelearning.com/english-books/animal-idioms-from-a-to-z/973-a-list-of-animal-idioms-from-a-to-z-with-meanings>

<https://www.english-at-home.com/idioms/animal-idioms/>

