

With Flying Colors: Color Idioms
(A Multicultural Book)
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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, *With Flying Colors: Color Idioms*. Additional animal idioms, their meanings, and their history, are also listed below. Finally, more resources about Food Idioms are noted at the end of this document.

COLOR IDIOMS

Show your true colors - Showing what you really like or really believe.

Sailing ships used to fly colored flags on their masts. These flags showed which nation the ship belonged to. A flag could be used to show peace to ships from allied nations. Flags could also be used to trick ships from enemy nations. In the 1600s, this was called “flying under false colors”.

<https://www.idioms.online/show-your-true-colors-to/>

Tickled pink - To be delighted.

When a person is tickled or is laughing, their face may turn pink. This idiom is from 1922.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/tickled+pink>

Green thumb - Having a talent for growing plants.

This idiom is based on the fact that handling plants can give a person green fingers. King Edward I of England awarded prizes to the servant who could shell peas the fastest. The winner’s fingers would be stained green by the peapods. In America, pinching flowers out of tobacco plants in the fields would give farmers green fingers.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/have+a+green+thumb>

Out of the blue - Something happens unexpectedly.

This idiom has been in use since the 1800s. “The blue” has meant the sky or the sea since the 1600s, so something coming from either of those places would be a surprise.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/out+of+the+blue>

Rose-colored glasses - Seeing things in a positive light, being idealistic.

“Rosy” and “rose-colored” meant hopeful in the 1700s. When eyeglasses were invented, people began wearing different colors of lenses to try and treat different ailments. A similar idiom is “painting a rosy picture”, meaning that someone describes something in a very optimistic, positive way.

<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/257566/origin-of-rose-tinted-glasses>

Golden opportunity - An excellent opportunity that does not happen often.

Since gold is very rare a valuable golden opportunity would be something also rare and valuable.

<http://idioms.languagesystems.edu/2011/11/golden-opportunity.html>

Feeling blue - To feel sad.

In use since the 1800s, the idiom “feeling blue” probably developed from older phrases. To have “a blue devil” meant one was feeling melancholy or depressed. In Ireland, the expression “blue-molded” arose from a blue mold growing on a farmer’s wheat crop. In the USA, Black musicians developed a style of music called “the blues” which often had sad lyrics.

<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/41804/origin-of-the-of-the-phrase-feeling-blue>

White lie - A lie one tells so as not to hurt someone's feelings.

This idiom was first used in the 1700s. The color white symbolized purity, whilst black symbolized evil. A white lie was supposed to be harmless because it wasn't told for a bad reason.

<https://www.theidioms.com/white-lie/>

On a silver platter - To receive something without any effort or work.

Silver is expensive so a silver platter would be used in a rich household. Often a wealthy person would be brought food or beverages on a platter by a servant. A similar idiom, describing a rich person, is that they "are born with a silver spoon in their mouth".

<https://www.theidioms.com/on-a-silver-platter/>

Red handed - Caught in the act of doing something wrong.

First used in Scotland in the 1400s, this idiom referred to criminals caught with blood on their hands.

<http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2012/05/what-is-the-origin-of-the-phrase-caught-red-handed/>

Once in a blue moon - Something that happens rarely, not very often.

This idiom has been used since the 1800s. Usually a full moon only appears once every month. However, every thirty-two months, there is a full moon twice in one month. This "blue moon" is rare.

<https://www.theidioms.com/once-in-a-blue-moon/>

Give the green light - To give someone permission to do something.

This idiom developed from the fact that green lights are used to signal to trains or vehicles that they may proceed.

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/green-light>

Roll out the red carpet - To treat someone with great hospitality.

Red dye was expensive to make, so only very wealthy people could afford to have red clothing or carpets. In the ancient Greek play Agamemnon, red

tapestries were rolled out to welcome a victorious warrior. Indian Mughal emperors used red tapestries in the 1600s. The red dye, cochineal, was made from an insect in South America by the Aztec and Maya people.

<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160222-where-does-the-red-carpet-come-from>

With flying colors - To accomplish something almost perfectly.

War ships used to return to their home port with flags flying from their masts. This was to show they had won a victory in a battle.

<https://www idioms online /with-flying-colors/>

Green with envy - To feel jealous.

This ancient idiom traces back to the Greeks. They believed a green complexion was caused by sickness, jealousy, or fear. The playwright, William Shakespeare, made the idiom popular after using it in his play, Othello: "Beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster ..."

<https://www.theidioms.com/green-with-envy/>

A red flag - A warning sign that something is wrong.

In many historical circumstances, flags were raised to send messages or convey warnings. For example, flags were raised by ships to show that they were in distress. In wars, flags were used to send messages. Railway workers raised flags to signal to train engine drivers, and flags are used nowadays for traffic control.

<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/54908/what-is-the-origin-of-the-phrase-raise-a-flag>

Raise the white flag - To surrender, to accept defeat.

Raising a white piece of cloth, or a flag, during war signifies that a person, or a group, or even a country, is surrendering or wishes to negotiate. This practice has existed since the Han dynasty in China (AD 25-220) and was used by ancient Rome, in Medieval Europe, and in India in the 1500s. Anyone raising a white flag must not be attacked by the enemy.

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/white+flag>

Horse of a different color - Something completely different. This is generally used when comparing things.

The original date of this idiom's first usage is not known. However, since horses have been domesticated and bred for many centuries, and since horses exist in a wide range of colors, it could be a very old phrase.

<https://www idioms online/horse-of-a-different-color>

In the dark - Not told about something.

It's unknown how or when this idiom originated. However, something in a dark place is like a secret because it cannot be seen.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/keep+in+the+dark>

Additional websites to learn more about color idioms

<http://www.idiomconnection.com/color.html>

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/color>

<https://www.myenglishteacher.eu/blog/colour-idioms-list-and-their-meanings/>

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