350 Idioms Important for Passing the TOEFL Exam

Definitions Plus Sample Sentences in Context

Portable and Easy-to-Use for Learning English
TOEFL Idioms Quiz Book
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TOEFL iBT with CD-ROM, 2008-2009 Edition

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TOEFL Vocabulary Quiz Book

Learn English Through Classic Literature Series

The Short Stories and Essays of Mark Twain

American Tales of Horror and the Supernatural
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a standardized test designed to measure your ability to understand and use English as it is used in a North American university setting. Recent changes to the TOEFL have shifted the focus from how much you know about English to how well you comprehend, speak, and write English.

Whether you are taking TOEFL iBT, TOEFL CBT, or TOEFL Pencil-and-Paper, Kaplan's TOEFL Idioms Quiz Book is perfectly designed to help you learn over 350 idioms frequently used in English.

An idiom is a word or phrase that has a special meaning apart from its literal translation—it is usually a metaphor. Only people who are good at speaking English will know what an idiom means. Idioms can be difficult to learn, and they require time and patience to master well.

With this book, read the idiom on the front of the page to determine whether you know it; on the reverse side, its definition and a sample sentence are offered to be sure that you understand its correct usage.

Once you have mastered a particular idiom, clip or fold back the corner of the flashcard so that you can skip over it to get to the words you still need to study.

The words are organized according to their part of speech. In some cases, two parts of speech are common, and we have noted these cases with more illustrative examples.

You will also see some notes in square brackets [ ]. This provides additional information about the origins of the idiom that should make it easier to memorize.

In some cases—mainly with verb phrases—some words are interchangeable. In such situations, we have provided two example sentences, one for each version, The most common version appears on the first page.

Study the idioms in any order and start on any page.

Good luck!
to push the envelope
verb

to abide by the rules
verb
verb
to do something new and different that goes beyond what was previously thought to be possible; to innovate
*His new website really pushes the envelope of what the Internet can be used for.*

verb
to accept and follow (a law, ruling, etc.); to comply with
*Both companies claim the right to sell the product, but they will abide by the judge's decision.*
to carry on doing something

verb

to test the waters

verb
verb
to continue
*The book was so interesting* he carried on reading it after the end of study hall.
*They will carry on with the dance lessons until they master the tango.*

verb
to check the likelihood of success before proceeding
*Before announcing their new initiative, the politicians tested the waters by conducting polls on the likely public response.*
to pan out

verb

to account for a discrepancy

verb
verb
to yield good results; to turn out well
*He has had several job interviews but nothing has panned out yet.*
[from *to pan for gold*: to attempt to extract gold from a river]

verb
to explain; to be or provide an explanation for
*The police asked him to account for the missing money.*
*The full moon accounts for the exceptionally high tide today.*
to give away the ending

verb

to follow suit

verb
verb
to reveal (information that was supposed to be kept secret)
The party was supposed to be a surprise, but my little sister gave it away.

verb
to do the same; to follow the example set by someone else
He decided to skip the tournament and the rest of the team followed suit.
[a reference to card games in which all players must play a card of the same suit as the one led by the first player]
to grow out of something
verb

to back up data
verb
verb
1. to become too large for (something); to outgrow; 2. to develop on the basis of (something)
She gives her son's clothes to charity when he grows out of them. This book grew out of a series of lectures I gave last year.

verb
to make an electronic copy (of a computer file, etc.) as security in case the original is damaged or deleted
The power outage wasn’t a problem because we had already backed up the files on the computer.
to know the ropes

verb

to back someone into a corner

verb
verb
to understand how things are done in a particular place
To succeed in a new job, ask someone who really knows the ropes to train you.
Hence to show someone the ropes means 'to show someone how things are done.'
[A reference to old-fashioned sailing ships, which had complicated ropes and riggings]

verb
to put (someone or oneself) into a position where there is no way out and no room to maneuver
His political opponents tried to back him into a corner, so that any position he took would cause him to lose support.
She has painted herself into a corner by setting the standards so high that no one – including her – can meet them.
to have second thoughts

verb

to look after a child

verb
verb
to reconsider
After I saw the reading list, I had second thoughts about taking the class.

verb
to take care of
She looks after her little brother after school every day.
to look forward to an event
verb

to look into a suspicious incident
verb
verb
to anticipate (something) with pleasure
*I'm looking forward to the concert next week.*

verb
to investigate; to seek information about
*We are looking into buying a camper for our summer trip.*
to keep one’s options open
verb

to bring the facts home to her
verb
verb
to avoid doing anything that might rule out a future course of action
*He will probably matriculate to State University, but he’s keeping his options open until he has gotten a response from all of the schools he applied to.*

verb
to make (the reality of something) clear
*This book finally brought the complexity of the issue home to me.*
to bring new information to light

verb

to see the light

verb
verb
to reveal; to uncover

Their study brought to light some long-forgotten manuscripts.

verb
to finally realize something after serious consideration

I thought he would never agree with me, but eventually he saw the light.
to look up
verb

to look something up
verb
to show signs of improvement
*She had more tests done and the doctors say her health is looking up.*

verb

to seek information about (something) in a reference work
*I looked up the words I didn’t know in a dictionary.*
to look up to someone

verb

to give someone free rein

verb
verb
to have respect and admiration for (someone)
*He had always looked up to his uncle, who was a teacher.*

verb
to put few restrictions on the behavior of (someone)
*The new teacher gives the students free rein to study whatever they want.*
See to rein someone in.
[A rein is the strap used to control a horse while riding.]
to rein someone in
verb

to give her story the benefit of the doubt
verb
verb
to control (someone’s) behavior closely
*Whenever he began to stray from the task our supervisor reined him in.*
See to give someone free rein.

verb
to assume that (a person or statement) is truthful until proven otherwise
*His alibi is suspicious, but let’s give him the benefit of the doubt until we know more.*
to hold one's own
verb

to hold one's tongue
verb
verb
to perform reasonably well in a challenging situation
*The other runners in the race are much more experienced, but he is holding his own* and will probably finish right in the middle.

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verb
to stay silent; to refrain from speaking
*She was upset and wanted to say something, but she held her tongue.*
to bring something to mind
verb

to set the record straight
verb
verb
to be reminiscent of (something); to remind
This dish brings to mind a meal I once had in Paris.

verb
to correct a false story; to provide accurate information
The media initially reported that the escaped animal was a tiger, but zoo officials set the record straight, announcing that it was a harmless kangaroo.
to use up a resource

verb

to size up the competition

verb
verb
to consume (something) completely
I couldn’t brush my teeth this morning because my brother had **used up** the toothpaste.

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verb
to evaluate or assess
*The dogs growled and walked in a circle, sizing each other up.*
to have one’s hands tied

verb

to lower the bar

verb
verb
to be restricted; to be prevented from doing something

I wish I could give you more information, but my hands are tied.
The government was unable to respond quickly because its hands were tied by regulations.

verb
to reduce standards so that it is easier to succeed

When no one qualified under the original criteria, the admissions committee lowered the bar.
to flare up

verb

to ask after someone

verb
verb
to erupt or break out; to recur
*My doctor had said the rash on my knee was cured, but it flared up again.*

verb
to inquire about the well-being of (someone)
*He heard your mother was in the hospital and called to ask after her.*
to hold sway
verb

to go through with it
verb
verb
to dominate; to have great influence
*The Dutch held sway in New York until 1664, when the English took control.*

verb
to perform (an action) as planned; to carry out
*We went through with our plan to have a picnic in spite of the rain.*
to end up
verb

to lay claim to property
verb
verb
to come eventually to a particular situation or place
*It ended up costing much more than we expected.*
*After walking for hours, they ended up in the same place where they started.*

verb
to assert that one has the right to (something); to claim ownership of
*My sister always laid claim to the top bunk bed, so I was stuck on the bottom.*
to cross one's mind
verb

to hold on to shares in the company
verb
verb
to occur to one
*I'm so accustomed to flying that the possibility of driving home never crossed my mind.*

verb
to keep or retain
*He considered selling his motorcycle, but he decided to hold on to it.*
to hold out

verb

to leave no stone unturned

verb
verb
to resist or endure in a challenging situation
Her doctor advised her to give up meat, and she held out for six months before giving in to temptation.

verb
to look everywhere; to attempt everything
We left no stone unturned in our search for the city's best hot dog.
to cross paths
verb

to run into someone
verb
verb
to meet by chance

*They crossed paths in Italy when they both happened to be vacationing there.*
*He crossed paths with my sister in college.*

verb
to meet (someone) by chance

*I hadn’t seen him in months, but I ran into him at the supermarket last week.*
to have one’s work cut out for
verb

to get one’s act together
verb
verb
to have a lot of work to do in order to accomplish something
If she wants to finish this drawing before the art fair she has her work cut out for her.

verb
to prepare oneself to accomplish something; to get organized
We need to get our act together if we're going to finish this by Friday.
to drop by
verb

to drop in on someone
verb
verb
to make a short, usually unannounced, visit
*He dropped by for a few minutes last night.*

verb
to make a short, usually unannounced, visit to (a person)
*On the way home we dropped in on my grandmother to see how she was doing.*
to have one's hands full

verb

to go wrong

verb
verb
to be very busy; to have a lot to do
*She has *had her hands full* lately, so she probably won’t be able to help you.*

verb
to cause a failure; to go amiss
*The experiment failed, but scientists still aren’t sure what went wrong.*
to err on the side of caution

verb

to rest on one’s laurels

verb
verb
to emphasize (a particular aspect of an issue) so that if a mistake is made it will enhance that aspect
No one knows what level of pollutants is safe for fish, so it seems best to err on the side of conservation by stopping all pollution in the river.

verb
to be satisfied with one's past accomplishments rather than attempting anything new
Since his highly praised first novel came out he has been resting on his laurels and hasn't written anything new.
[a reference to the ancient Greek tradition of crowning a person with a wreath of laurels, or bay leaves, to honor a great accomplishment]
to take one's time
verb

to tighten one's belt
verb
verb
to proceed slowly; to avoid rushing
*I'm taking my time on this paper, since it isn't due until the end of the semester.*

verb
to take extreme measures in order to economize; to cut back
*Our funding has been cut, so we are going to have to tighten our belts and reduce the budget.*
[a reference to losing weight from eating less, which might cause someone to need a smaller belt]
to touch on a subject

verb

to see eye to eye

verb
verb
to address (a topic) briefly
The course will mainly cover the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but it will also touch on some of his contemporaries, such as Voltaire and Diderot.

verb
to have similar opinions; to understand each other
They have almost nothing in common, but when it comes to baseball they see eye to eye.
to have a say
verb

to cherry-pick
verb
verb
to have a degree of influence or power
*It is important for children to have a say in decisions about their activities.*
*In a democracy, citizens have a voice in their government.*

verb
to take only the most desirable items available from among a selection
*She sells the most cars because she cherry-picks the most promising customers, leaving the rest of us with the reluctant ones.*
to do someone good
verb

to narrow down a list
verb
verb
to have a beneficial effect on (someone)
*He has seemed very stressed out lately; a vacation will do him good.*

verb
to reduce the number of options in (a selection)
*They started with a pool of twenty applicants, but they narrowed it down to three finalists.*
to draw a blank
verb

to do one's best
verb
verb
to be unable to remember or respond
*I studied thoroughly for the test, but when I saw the first question I just drew a blank.*

verb
to try as hard as possible
*He didn't get a perfect score, but he did his best, and that is what really matters.*
to throw down the gauntlet
verb

to throw in the towel
verb
verb
to issue a challenge
*The American colonists threw down the gauntlet to England in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence.*
[A gauntlet is a type of armored glove, which would traditionally be thrown down by a medieval knight in a challenge to an opponent. To accept the challenge, the opponent would pick up the glove; hence to take up the gauntlet means ‘to accept a challenge.’]

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verb
to accept defeat; to surrender
*After struggling for many years with our business, we finally threw in the towel after realizing we needed to make major renovations.*
**to throw** someone **to the wolves**

*verb*

**to fill** someone **in**

*verb*
verb
to leave (someone) to face criticism or challenges alone; to abandon (someone)
*He claimed not to know anything about the scandal and threw his assistant to the wolves.*

verb
to inform (someone) fully; to give (someone) the details
*Lisa missed the meeting where that was discussed, so someone will have to fill her in.*
to fill in for someone
verb

to take someone's place
verb
verb
to replace or substitute for
*I usually work on Mondays and Fridays, but I’m **filling in for** Mark today.

verb
to replace or substitute for (someone)
*The star of the play got sick, so the understudy **took** her **place.**
to come to grips with a challenging concept

verb

to stay out of a dispute

verb
verb
to become capable of dealing with or understanding
*Many companies still haven’t *come to grips with* the new regulations.*
*It took us a long time to *get to grips with* this computer program.*

verb
to avoid getting involved in
*The United States stayed out of the First World War until April of 1917.*
to wear thin
verb

to speak out on a controversial issue
verb
verb
to become less effective due to overuse
You claim to have forgotten your homework at least once a week, so that excuse is **wearing thin**.

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verb
to express one's opinions openly
*It was nice to hear a politician **speak out** about the problems facing farmers today.*
to think up a new game
verb

to take advantage of someone or something
verb
verb
to invent; to make up
Our math teacher is always thinking up new ways to make sure we do our homework.

verb
1. to exploit (someone); 2. to utilize or avail oneself of (something)
They were only taking advantage of him, and had no interest in really being his friends.
She is trying to take advantage of the many cultural experiences the city has to offer.
to carry out orders
verb

to meet someone halfway
verb
verb
to obey; to put into action
*He carried out* your instructions perfectly; everything is the way you wanted it.

verb
to compromise with (someone)
*We made several good offers, but he stubbornly stuck to his original price and refused to meet us halfway.*
to meet one's match
verb

to keep a low profile
verb
verb
to find one's equal
*He is a great chess player, but in you he finally met his match.*

verb
to avoid getting attention or publicity
*Like many celebrities, she started keeping a low profile after she had children.*
to get a message across

verb

to get away with a crime

verb
verb
to express
The president’s latest speech really **got across** his concern about the need for more educational funding.

verb
to manage to escape the consequences of (an action)
*I can’t believe he **got away with** cheating on that quiz.*
to think on one's feet

verb

to wash one's hands of the whole affair

verb
verb
to react quickly and effectively without prior preparation
*She had to think on her feet when she was unexpectedly asked to lead the discussion.*

verb
to claim to no longer be responsible for or involved with (something); to dissociate oneself from
*He has washed his hands of the group since it participated in a controversial protest last year.*
to settle for a lower price
verb

to cast doubt on something
verb
verb
to accept less than desired or expected
*He had dreamed of becoming president, but he settled for being mayor of a small town.*

verb
to make (something) appear doubtful or dubious
*The photos from the party cast doubt on his version of events.*
to make a point of doing something verb

to make do verb
verb
to make a deliberate effort to do something
*I make a point of calling my grandmother once a week.*

verb
to manage without something important; to get by
*During the Second World War cooks often made do without rationed ingredients like chocolate and sugar.*
to make sure
verb

to make sense
verb
verb
to be certain; to confirm
Before leaving the house he *made sure* he had his keys.

verb
to be reasonable or logical
*Her theory makes sense.*
to keep an eye on something
verb

... 

to get over a setback
verb
verb
to watch; to monitor
Could you please keep an eye on the cake in the oven and make sure it doesn’t burn?

verb
to recover from; to bounce back from
She is finally getting over her cold.
The team needs to get over today’s loss and start preparing for the next game.
to take someone’s word for it
verb

to take a break
verb
verb
to believe someone without additional evidence

*He says that he didn’t take the money, and I’m taking his word for it.*

verb

to take a rest; to stop an activity temporarily

*She painted for hours at a time without taking a break.*
to draw the line
verb

to think better of a decision
verb
verb
to set a limit about how far one is willing to go
She is an adventurous eater, but she **draws the line** at insects. I'll help you out one more time, but that is where **I draw the line**.

verb
to decide against (doing something) after thinking about it more; to reconsider
He had planned to take part in the prank, but he **thought better of it** and stayed home.
to think something over
verb

to think twice
verb
verb
to consider (something) carefully
*I probably won't accept the job offer, but I am still thinking it over.*

verb
to consider carefully before making a decision
*If I were you, I would think twice about buying a used car over the Internet. When he was invited to give a speech at his old high school, he didn't think twice before agreeing.*
to get rid of something

verb

to get the best of someone

verb
verb
to discard or eliminate
*We got rid of all the food in the refrigerator that was past its due date.*

verb
to defeat or outwit
*He tried to stay awake for the fireworks at midnight, but his fatigue got the best of him and he fell asleep before 11:00.*
to get to the bottom of a mystery

verb

to get underway

verb
verb
to uncover the truth about
We reported the strange sounds coming from the house next door and the police promised to get to the bottom of it.

verb
to begin; to start
The annual Autumn Festival gets underway next week.
to mince words

verb

to jump on the bandwagon

verb
verb
to avoid directly saying something which might upset or offend; to euphemize
Tell me what you really thought of my performance and don’t mince words.

verb
to take up an activity or idea that is suddenly very popular
The price of the stock rose quickly as investors jumped on the bandwagon and bought shares.
She has listened to their music for years, but now everyone is getting on the bandwagon.
to make good on a promise
verb

to make off with the money
verb
verb

to follow through on

*The company made good on its pledge to donate new computers to the school.*

verb

to take or steal (something); to abscond with

*He was caught after the party trying to make off with two silver vases.*
to stand for
verb

to stand up for someone
verb
verb
1. to support or advocate (a belief or principle); 2. to be an abbreviation of
The memorial should express the ideals he stood for all his life: freedom and equality.
FBI stands for Federal Bureau of Investigation.

verb
to defend; to advocate for
She always stood up for her little brother when other children teased him.
to stand out
verb

to wind down
verb
verb
to be conspicuous; to attract attention
*The white flowers stand out against the dark background of the painting.*

verb
1. to slow down, to draw to a close; 2. to relax (said of a person)
*The wedding season hits its peak in June and starts to wind down in September.*
*After three days of tough hiking, we spent a day winding down at the beach.*
to wind up somewhere
verb

...
verb
to find oneself in a place or situation; to arrive or end up
*I was as surprised as anyone when I wound up in the television industry.*

verb
to continue to do; to persist or persevere with
*She had trouble at first, but she kept at it and is now one of the best gymnasts in the state.*
to keep information from someone

verb

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to keep from doing something

verb
verb
to hide (something) from someone; to keep (something) secret from someone
*Romeo and Juliet kept their marriage from their families.*

verb
to stop oneself from doing something; to refrain from or avoid
*When she saw his new haircut she could hardly keep from laughing.*
to keep up with someone or something
verb

to lend a hand
verb
verb
1. to travel at the same speed as; to stay abreast of; 2. to stay informed about
He couldn't *keep up with* the other cyclists on the hilly part of the course.
I try to *keep up with* the latest advances in computer science.

verb
to help
Local charities *lent a hand* to the effort to rebuild after the earthquake.
Could you please *give me a hand* with this heavy box?
to jump to conclusions
verb

to sit around
verb
verb
to form an opinion about something quickly without examining all of the facts
*A good doctor looks at all of a patient’s symptoms carefully before making a diagnosis rather than just jumping to conclusions.*

verb
to lounge or be idle; to hang around
*He used to exercise a lot, but now he just sits around playing video games.*
to sit through a long ceremony
verb

to sit tight
verb
verb
to stay to the end of (an event or performance)
I wanted to leave the play at intermission but my parents made me sit through all three hours of it.

verb
to wait patiently
Could you just sit tight for a little bit longer? I'm almost ready to leave.
to get on with an activity
verb


to take a piece of information into account
verb
verb
to continue
We need to stop wasting time and get on with studying for the exam.

verb
to consider; to give attention to
The theory was flawed because it didn't take into account the importance of environmental factors.
to show up
verb

to show someone up
verb
verb
to arrive
*She didn't show up at work until after 11:00 am.*

verb
to embarrass or outperform (someone)
*He showed up the team captain by making the most goals in last night's game.*
to split hairs

verb

to go without saying

verb
verb
to make small, unimportant distinctions
They still haven’t agreed on the final wording of the contract, but they are just splitting hairs now; all of the important issues have been decided.

verb
to be obvious or self-evident
It goes without saying that you should wear respectful clothes to a job interview.
to take something in stride
verb

to wipe something out
verb
verb
to deal with (something difficult) in a calm way, so that it
does not cause disruptions
*The players took the insults of the opposing team in stride and
focused on winning the game.*

verb
to destroy (something) completely
*Three years of drought wiped out the region’s agriculture.*
to save one’s breath
verb

to save face
verb
verb
to refrain from saying something that is useless or unnecessary
*She won't stop smoking no matter what you say; save your breath.*

verb
to preserve one's dignity or honor; to avoid embarrassment
*He saved face by resigning from his job before he could be fired.*
to fill out a form

verb

to bide one's time

verb
verb
to complete (a form)
He has filled out all of his college applications.

verb
to wait patiently
She's living with her parents for a while, biding her time until she finds the right apartment.
to keep her on her toes
verb

to keep track of
verb
verb
to force (someone) to stay alert
*Our teacher keeps us on our toes by asking questions throughout his lectures.*

verb
to keep a record of; to stay informed about
*She kept track of her expenses so that she could be reimbursed.*
to slip someone's **mind**

*verb*

to pave the way

*verb*
verb
to be forgotten by someone
I was supposed to buy milk on the way home but it completely slipped my mind.

verb
to make future accomplishments possible; to prepare the way
The achievements of pioneering female scientists like Marie Curie paved the way for later generations of women in science.
[Way is an old-fashioned word for road; paving a road makes it easier and faster to travel on.]
to take it easy
verb

That name is starting to ring a bell.
verb
verb
to relax; to be idle
*Last summer I worked 40 hours a week, but this year I am **taking it easy.***

verb
to bring back a memory; to sound familiar
*I don't recognize her face, but her voice **rings a bell.***
to put the rumors to rest
verb

to pin down the details
verb
verb
to put a stop to; to end; to quell
If you are afraid of flying, the new technology in these planes should put your fears to rest.

verb
to define firmly; to figure out
The wedding is supposed to be this summer but they haven’t pinned down the date yet.
to field questions

verb

to count as

verb
to answer questions from a group of people
After his speech, he **fielded questions** from the audience.

**verb**

to be considered; to qualify as
Astronomy 101 **counts as** a science course for the school’s distribution requirement.
to count on
verb

to keep a threat at bay
verb
verb
to rely on; to depend on
We need to be home early because Mom is counting on us to help her with dinner.

verb
to make (something) stay away; to ward off
I've been keeping the flu at bay by resting and drinking lots of orange juice.
The moat around the castle was designed to hold invaders at bay.
to figure out
*verb*

to cut back on long-distance phone calls
*verb*
verb
to determine or conclude
*The mechanic *figured out *that the problems were being caused by a leak in my car’s fuel line.*

verb
to use or do less of (something)
*His doctor told him that he should *cut back on *sugar.*
to cut off

verb

to cut to the chase

verb
verb
1. to interrupt; 2. to stop or discontinue
She rudely cut him off in the middle of his story.
The storm cut off the city's supply of electricity.

verb
to get directly to the point
He started describing all of the different features, but we were in a hurry so we asked him to cut to the chase.
to come around

verb

to come down to

verb
verb
to agree to something eventually
*My father didn’t like the idea of me going to college so far away from home, but I’m sure he’ll come around.*

verb
to have as an essential point; to be dependent upon
*There are all sorts of fad diets around, but healthy weight loss comes down to two factors: eating well and exercising regularly.*
to come along
verb

to bear fruit
verb
verb
1. to accompany; 2. to progress

*He invited a friend to *come along.*
*There were a lot of construction problems at first, but the new house is finally *coming along.*

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verb
to produce results; to be successful

*After twenty years of research, our effort to cure the disease is finally *bearing fruit.*
to take its toll

verb

to put off a meeting

verb
verb

to have a negative effect

*The drought **took its toll** on the crops, and the harvest was much smaller than usual.*

*She looks exhausted. All of those late nights of studying are finally **taking their toll**.*

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verb

**to postpone**

*Our teacher **put the test off until next week**.*
to pass up an opportunity

verb

to put one's finger on a piece of information

verb
verb
to decline; to fail to take advantage of
She passed up a scholarship at a prestigious university because the school didn’t have a good soccer team.

verb
to identify; to pinpoint
There must be something missing but I can’t put my finger on what it is.
to turn a blind eye to a problem

verb

to take note of the changes

verb
verb
to ignore; to overlook
The superintendent accused local schools of turning a blind eye to plagiarism and cheating.

verb
to notice; to observe
He didn’t immediately take note of her new haircut.
to fall into place

verb

to fall out with someone

verb
verb
to turn out as hoped for

*We were afraid that we would never finish planning our wedding, but everything seems to be falling into place.*

verb
to have a serious disagreement

*They fell out with each other years ago over who would run the family business.*

*Also as a noun: to have a falling-out with someone.*
to fall short

verb

to muddle through

verb
verb
to fail to meet expectations
Our profits for last year fell short.

verb
to find a way in spite of difficulty or disorganization; to manage
I didn't know anything about how to direct a play, but I muddled through.
**to bring** someone **up to date**

*verb*

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**to put** a **project on hold**

*verb*
verb
to give (someone) the latest information
Since you have been absent, talk to me after class and I will bring you up to date.

verb
to stop (something) temporarily; to suspend
We are putting the renovation on hold until next summer.
to rule out a possibility
verb

to play down an achievement
verb
verb
to exclude (something) as a possible option or explanation
We haven't decided where to spend our honeymoon yet, but we have ruled out going on a cruise.
The doctor told her that tests had ruled out cancer as the cause of her symptoms.

verb
to minimize the importance of
The other students were impressed by her famous father, but she always played down her glamorous background.
The opposite is to play up 'to exaggerate'
to play it safe
verb

to play with fire
verb
verb
to avoid taking risks
They **played it safe** and allowed two hours for the drive to the airport.

verb
to do something dangerous or risky
We warned the diplomat that he was **playing with fire** by getting involved in local politics.
to keep something in mind
verb

to bargain for
verb
verb
to remember and account for (something)
*While writing your essay, **keep in mind** that you will get a higher grade if it has a clear argument.*

verb
to expect or be prepared for
*The vacationers got more rain than they had **bargained for** when monsoon season hit a few weeks early.*
to deal with a problem
verb

to take over the company
verb
verb
to handle or control
*They are finding new ways of dealing with the rising cost of college tuition.*

verb
to take control of
*He is difficult to work because he usually tries to take over the most interesting projects.*
to run out of provisions
verb

to take on someone or something
verb
verb
to use up (a supply of something)
I couldn't make cookies because I ran out of sugar.

verb
1. to hire (an employee); 2. to confront; to fight against
They decided to take him on as a research assistant.
The environmental group is taking on a big corporation it accuses of polluting the lake.
to beat around the bush
verb

to put down roots
verb
verb
to avoid talking directly about something
The community meeting was frustrating, because the mayor kept beating around the bush instead of addressing the important issues facing our community.

verb
to settle down; to establish a permanent residence
After years of traveling, he is finally putting down roots by buying a house in his hometown.
to put up with something unpleasant
verb

to take part
verb
verb
to endure or tolerate
Rather than disciplining students who are late for class, she **puts up with** their behavior.

verb
to participate
Fifty nations **took part** in the conference at which the Charter of the United Nations was drafted in 1945.
to take sides
verb

to talk someone into doing something
verb
verb
to align oneself with one of the sides in a dispute
*Parents should avoid *taking sides* when their children argue.*

verb
to convince (someone) to do something
*He didn’t want to join the team, but they *talked him into it.*
Hidden page
verb
to do things in the wrong order
Critics say that buying furniture for the new library before the architect has been chosen is *putting the cart before the horse*.

verb
to decide; to make a decision
*He got into three different colleges, so now he is trying to* make up his mind *about which one to attend.*
verb
to bear the consequences of a mistake or misdeed
The school principal made the whole class pay the price for graffiti made by one student.

verb
to try; to make an attempt
I've never baked a pie before, but I'm taking a stab at it this weekend.
They asked him to make a stab at creating a web page.
to part with a possession

verb

to take something with a grain of salt

verb
verb
to give (something) up
*Even when he went to college, he refused to part with his teddy bear.*

verb
to be skeptical about (something)
*Since he has strong views on this subject, so I took his report with a grain of salt.*
Hidden page
Hidden page
adjective
competent at one’s profession
*Any coach *worth his salt* would have taught you how to stretch your muscles after practice.*

adjective
unprepared
*She did well for most of the interview, but she was caught off guard by the last question.*
blue collar

adjective

white collar

adjective
run of the mill

on the tip of one's tongue
adjective
unexceptional; ordinary
Despite all of the attention he has gotten in the press, I think he is really just a run-of-the-mill portrait painter.

adjective
on the verge of being recalled
I can't quite remember his name, but it's on the tip of my tongue.
beside the point
*adjective*

to the point
*adjective*
adjective
irrelevant; unimportant
The real issue in the renovation is that we need more space; the color of the carpet is beside the point.
See to the point.

adjective
directly related to the topic at hand; relevant
The testimony of the star witness in the case was concise and to the point.
See beside the point
at a loss for words

*adjective*

neither here nor there

*adjective*
Hidden page
down to earth
adjective

down and out
adjective
adjective
reasonable and practical; realistic
*She seems remarkably down to earth for the daughter of a wealthy celebrity.*

adjective
very poor; destitute
*A decade ago he was a down-and-out alcoholic, but today he owns his own business and has been sober for 8 years.*
in check

beside oneself
adjective
under control
Now that our rent is higher, we will have to keep our spending in check.

adjective
extremely agitated or upset; distraught
He came home three hours late and his mother was beside herself with worry.
full-fledged
  adjective

a no-win predicament
  adjective
adjective
complete; mature; fully developed
*Her hobby of baking cookies has become a **full-fledged** business, with stores all over the city.*

adjective
having no possibility of a positive outcome
*It was a **no-win** situation: we either had to pay the fine or pay a lawyer to fight it.*
*See win-win.*
a **win-win** situation

*adjective*

*in charge of*

*adjective*
Hidden page
on the right track

*adjective*

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on the wrong track

*adjective*
Hidden page
Hidden page
red-handed

*adjective*

‘FYI’ is **short for** ‘for your information’.

*adjective*
**adjective**
in the act of committing a crime
*They caught the thief red-handed, with the stolen jewelry in his pockets.*

**adjective**
used as an abbreviation or shortened form of
*Did you know that the word ‘pram’ is short for ‘perambulator’?*
wrapped up in something

up in the air
Hidden page
Hidden page
adjective
scarce; insufficiently available; running out
*We have plenty of food left, but water is in short supply.*

adjective
relaxed; laid-back; restrained
*We are having a party but it won't be anything big, just a low-key gathering of friends.*
feeling **up to** it

*adjective*

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**in the pipeline**

*adjective*
adjective
ready for or able to do something
It is a very steep mountain; are you sure you’re up to the hike?

adjective
on the way; being developed
She published two books last year and she already has another one in the pipeline.
on the same page

in touch with someone
at a premium

in the wings

Copyrighted material
adjective
particularly valuable; especially in demand
*In today's job market, computer skills are at a premium.*

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adjective
ready to act or be used at any time
*Newspaper columnists often keep one idea in the wings in case of writer's block.*
*There were many people waiting in the wings to take over when she retired.*
[a reference to the wings of a theater, where actors wait to go on stage]
adjective
being planned or produced; in process
A sequel to that movie is in the works.

adjective
in accordance with; consistent with
The themes of her most recent novel are in line with her previous work.
adjective
completely under the control of; powerless against; totally dependent upon
Medieval peasants were often at the mercy of their local overlord.
The small ship was at the mercy of the storm.

adjective
doing everything necessary to accomplish (something); in control of
I offered her help with the decorations for the dance, but she said she was on top of it.
time-honored

adjective

on the table

adjective
adjective
traditional; long-standing
Serving turkey with cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving is a time-honored custom in the United States.

adjective
up for discussion; possible as an option
We haven’t made a final decision yet, so all of the proposals are still on the table.
Hidden page
adjective
not talkative; reticent
*My grandmother is a woman of few words, but when she says something it is usually very insightful.*

adjective
impossible; inconceivable; not worth considering
*Because of the recent snowstorm, driving over the mountain was out of the question.*
worse for wear
*adjective*

thin-skinned
*adjective*
adjective
showing signs of age or use
This sofa was beautiful when it was new, but it is getting a bit worse for wear.

adjective
extremely sensitive; easily upset
When students are too thin-skinned, it can be difficult to give them feedback on their work.
The opposite is thick-skinned.
light years ahead
*adjective*

out of hand
*adjective*
a grass-roots effort

fine tuning
adjective
based on the efforts of ordinary people
Our new city councilwoman didn’t get a lot of support from powerful politicians, but she had a strong grass-roots campaign. Also as a noun: support from the grass roots.

noun
minor adjustments needed to perfect something
The car is running now, but we have to do some fine tuning to make it ready to drive on the road.
Also as a verb: We need to fine-tune our performance.
adjective
very simple
Since he had studied so hard, he thought the exam was easy as pie.

adjective
unique; unusual
The company knew they'd found one in a million when they hired her for the job.
Hidden page
adjective
new; untested
He doesn’t know yet how his company’s e-mail system works, because he’s only been here one day and is still wet behind the ears.

adjective
inexperienced; new
Her first interview with the mayor went too long, because she was still green and didn’t know which questions to ask.
foregone conclusion

noun

odds and ends

noun
level playing field

noun

mixed emotions

noun
Hidden page
the powers that be
noun

the light at the end of the tunnel
noun
Hidden page
noun
a possession that is useless or unwanted, and difficult to get rid of
*The painting is valuable, but no one wants a picture of a slaughterhouse, so it's really a **white elephant**.*

noun
a person who is currently in a position of authority, but whose successor has already been chosen
*When a sitting president loses the election for a second term in November, he becomes a **lame duck** until the new president is inaugurated the following January.*
*Now that our company's CEO is a **lame duck**, people doubt that she will be able to accomplish much before she retires.*
noun
a new burst of energy or strength to continue a difficult effort
*In the last week before the play opened, the actors got their second wind and rehearsed long hours to ensure that it was a success.*
[originally used to describe the sudden ability to breathe more easily which some people feel after exercising for a long time]

noun
the latest possible time
*She always leaves her homework until the last minute.*
Also as an adjective: *last-minute Christmas shopping.*
white lie
noun

salt of the earth
noun
noun
a lie considered to be harmless, often told out of politeness
*I told her she looked nice, but it was a white lie; her dress was really ugly.*

noun
a person who is decent, honest, kind, and unpretentious
*Her parents are very nice people, the salt of the earth.*
Often used as an adjective: *salt-of-the-earth people.*
yellow journalism
noun

the lesser of two evils
noun
noun
journalism that is sensationalist and biased
That newspaper will print anything to sell papers – it's all gossip and yellow journalism.
Also yellow press.

noun
an option which is bad, but still better than the alternative
I wasn’t impressed with either of the candidates, but I voted for the lesser of two evils.
red tape

noun

small talk

noun
noun
excessive regulations and bureaucracy
We had to deal with a lot of red tape to get the proper visa to travel here.
[From the reddish-colored tape or ribbon that was once used to tie together bundles of legal documents]
Hidden page
noun
a small but easily recognized part of a much larger problem or issue

*The corruption scandals reported in the news are only the tip of the iceberg.*

[a reference to the fact that the biggest part of an iceberg is hidden underneath the water – only the tip is visible]

noun
no extra time, meaning it is necessary to do something right away

*There is no time to lose, so let’s get to work.*
double-edged sword

noun

sticking point

noun

Copyrighted material
Hidden page
zero tolerance
noun

mint condition
noun
noun
a policy of punishing even minor offenses
*The school has instituted policy of zero tolerance for dress code violations; last week, a student got detention for forgetting to wear a tie.*
Also as an adjective: *a zero-tolerance approach to law enforcement.*

noun
in excellent condition, as if new
*These antique toys are very valuable because they are still in mint condition.*
Also as an adjective: *a mint-condition car.*
[in reference to mint, a place where coins are made]
the upper hand

noun

bad blood

noun
noun
the better position in a situation; the advantage
When the other team's best player was injured, we gained the upper hand.

noun
hostility due to past events; ill will; antagonism; hatred
There has been bad blood between them ever since the lawsuit ten years ago.
game plan

noun

the cutting edge

noun
Hidden page
gray area  
noun

face value  
noun
Hidden page
noun
a complete reversal; a U-turn
After ten years of supporting the same party he did an about face and started voting for the opposition.

noun
the qualities required to accomplish something
Your daughter has what it takes to be a professional musician.
a vicious circle
noun

the eleventh hour
noun
Hidden page
noun
an unpleasant fact that is difficult to accept
*The knee injury that ended his tennis career was a* bitter pill,
*but he became a successful coach.*

noun
a new or unfamiliar situation
*Advances in biotechnology are taking scientists into* uncharted
*waters requiring new ethical guidelines.*
*[uncharted means ‘unmapped or unexplored’]*
Hidden page
noun
a general or approximate guideline
*When cooking rice, a good **rule of thumb** is to use two parts water to one part rice.*

noun
negative feelings of resentment or bitterness
*They are no longer in business together, but they are still friends and there are no **hard feelings** about the end of their partnership.*
noun
the days of one’s youth, regarded either as a time of inexperi-
ence or as a peak or heyday
We recalled the rash decisions of our salad days.
His performance has declined since his salad days.
[from Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra: my salad days,
when I was green in judgment]

noun
a project undertaken purely out of pleasure or interest
He paints portraits for money, but his still-life paintings are a
labor of love.
olive branch
noun

seeing the big picture
noun
Hidden page
ill-gotten gains
noun

quantum leap
noun
noun
profits or benefits acquired unfairly or illegally
Robin Hood is both a thief and a hero, because he shares his *ill-gotten gains* with the poor.

noun
a sudden and significant improvement or advance
In the past decade there has been a *quantum leap* in our scientific understanding of human genetics.
[from Physics, where a *quantum leap* (also *quantum jump*) is the abrupt shift of an electron within an atom from one energy state to another]
Hidden page
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ivory tower

noun

a change of pace

noun
noun
a place that is insulated from the concerns of the real world
To really understand social issues, he needs to get away from the ivory tower of university life.

noun
a change from what is usual or ordinary
She usually drinks coffee every morning but today she’s having tea for a change of pace.
noun
the most important consideration or conclusion; the main point
*We talked about a lot of techniques for time management, but the bottom line is that we just need to get more done.*
[from the use of the bottom line in accounting, where it refers to the final total of a balance sheet]

adverb
for all; in every category
*The new budget makes cutbacks in government services across the board, from highways to education.*
at odds with established theory

adverb

speaking off the cuff

adverb
adverb
in contradiction to; in disagreement or conflicting with
His account of events is at odds with the story published in the newspaper.

adverb
without any preparation
Everyone was impressed when he gave a fantastic speech off the cuff.
now and then
*adverb*

hand in hand
*adverb*
adverb
occasionally
He doesn’t exercise much, but he does go biking now and then.

adverb
1. while holding hands; 2. in close association; jointly
Couples walked down the street hand in hand.
Low unemployment often goes hand in hand with inflation.
He was left in the dark

adverb

down the road

adverb
adverb
without important information; uninformed
*She was upset that they had kept her in the dark about their plan to sell the house.*


adverb
in the future
*This may seem like a risky investment now, but I am confident that it will pay down the road.*
prepared ahead of time

at stake
adverb
in advance; beforehand
He practiced an acceptance speech **ahead of time** just in case he won the prize.

adverb
at risk; in question
The national championship is **at stake** in this game.
in the wake of
adverb

through thick and thin
adverb
adverb
as a consequence of; in the aftermath of
In the wake of the recent earthquake we decided to redesign the building for stability.

adverb
through good times and bad times; in all circumstances
Married couples vow to support each other through thick and thin.
adverb

worth mentioning

He doesn't have any savings to speak of; he spends all of his money on entertainment.

adverb

certainly; absolutely; unquestionably

It was without a doubt the worst book I have ever read.
on top of everything else

out of the blue
adverb
in addition to; besides
On top of all of his other accomplishments, he is now captain of the hockey team.

adverb
without any warning; unexpectedly; out of nowhere
I hadn’t seen him in months, but he called me out of the blue last week and invited me to dinner.
adverb
based on the information (a person) has; to the best of (a person's) knowledge
*She isn't here yet, but as far as I know she is still planning to come.*

adverb
in one's thoughts; preoccupying one
*I have a lot on my mind right now.*
*That incident has been on his mind lately.*
behind closed doors

on behalf of someone
**adverb**
in secret; out of public view
The government eventually signed the treaty, but we may never know what bargains were made behind closed doors to make it happen.

**adverb**
as a representative of someone; in the interest of someone
He wrote a letter on behalf of his mother, asking the company to give her a refund.
adverb
nevertheless
Some say that printed books are becoming obsolete; be that as it may, publishing remains a dynamic and prosperous business.

adverb
without proper permission or disclosure; illegally
He was getting paid under the table to avoid taxes.
[See above board]
we experienced it at first hand

adverb

on and off

adverb
**adverb**
in a short summary; very briefly
*This book covers the major points of the topic* **in a nutshell.**

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**adverb**
in the future; eventually
*This may seem like a good policy now, but it could cause major problems* **down the line.**
to a fault
  adverb

by word of mouth
  adverb
adverb
excessively; so much that it causes problems
*She is careful to a fault; it takes her forever to finish anything.*

adverb
through informal conversation
*They didn’t have enough money to advertise in the newspaper, but they got a lot of publicity by word of mouth.*
Also as an adjective: *word-of-mouth advertising.*
behind someone’s back
adverb

behind the scenes
adverb
Hidden page
all of a sudden
*adverb*

beyond the shadow of a doubt
*adverb*
adverb
without any warning; instantly
We were walking in the park when all of the sudden the lights went out.

adverb
without any doubt at all; for certain
We now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Vikings reached North America centuries before Columbus.
in the balance
  adverb

in over one's head
  adverb
adverb
at stake; at risk
Applying to college is very stressful; sometimes it feels like your entire future is in the balance.

adverb
in a situation for which one is not qualified or prepared
He got in over his head when he agreed to do all of the paperwork for the project.
by the book
*adverb*

*as far as* someone *is concerned
*adverb*
Hidden page
in no time

adverb

by virtue of

adverb
Hidden page
for the time being
adverb

by all means
adverb
Hidden page
Hidden page
adverb
absolutely not; not at all
*She is a talented singer but by no means the best in the choir.*
*See by all means.*

adverb
as ordinarily or habitually happens; like always
*I planned to study before class today, but as usual I overslept.*
back to square one

*adverb*

in view of

*adverb*
in the long run
  adverb

by the way
  adverb
adverb
after a long time; in the end; eventually
*It may seem hard to save money for retirement now, but in the long run you will be very glad that you did.*

adverb
incidentally
*I read that book you lent me. By the way, did you know the author lives near here?*
Hidden page
adverb
in general; mostly
*Her grades this year were good for the most part.*

adverb
up to the present time; as of now
*They will be hiring a new secretary, but as yet they have not done so.*
adverb
considering; because of; taking into account
She was given a lighter punishment in light of the fact that this was the first time she had broken the rules.

adverb
in addition; beyond what is needed
The recipe called for four cloves of garlic, but I added two more for good measure.
against all odds

by hand
adverb
despite it being very unlikely; incredibly, unexpectedly
Against all odds, she won her match against the five-time state champion.
He recovered from the operation and, against the odds, was able to walk again.

adverb
without using a machine
Delicate fabrics like cashmere should be washed by hand.
adverb
based on the appearance of something; apparently
From the looks of the orientation assembly, there must be fewer students at school this year.
The bake sale is raising a lot of money this year, by the looks of it.

adverb
1. immediately; 2. in an awkward position where one is forced to make a difficult decision right away
She didn’t expect to get an answer for several weeks, but the accepted her application on the spot.
He put me on the spot by proposing marriage in front of his whole family.
with one voice
*adverb*

warts and all
*adverb*
adverb
unanimously; in unison
*The company's employees opposed the policy* with one voice.

adverb
including a person's faults as well as his or her positive qualities
*Parents love their children unconditionally, warts and all.*
Hidden page
on the loose
   adverb

under the weather
   adverb
In the affirmative

*adverb*

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In the negative

*adverb*
on the spur of the moment

*adverb*
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