

Idioms: Explaining Literal and Nonliteral Language



An **idiom** is a saying or an expression that has a different meaning than the literal meaning of the words. Idioms have a nonliteral, or *figurative*, meaning.

Directions: Use context clues in the conversations below to determine the literal and nonliteral meanings of the underlined phrases. An example has been done for you.

LITERAL	NONLITERAL
Example: Idiom: raining cats and dogs	
<p>Eva: Ouch! What just fell on my umbrella?</p> <p>Gloria: Three puppies! And ... two kittens? It's <u>raining cats and dogs</u>.</p> <p>Eva: I can't believe my eyes! How is this even possible?</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #f1c40f;"/> <p>The literal meaning of the idiom is <u>cats and dogs are falling from the sky.</u></p>	<p>Niles: If you go outside, be sure to wear rain boots and a rain jacket.</p> <p>Anika: Should I bring an umbrella as well?</p> <p>Niles: Yes. <u>It's raining cats and dogs.</u></p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #f1c40f;"/> <p>The nonliteral meaning of the idiom is <u>it is raining very hard.</u></p>
1. Idiom: fish out of water	
<p>Max: Mom, have you seen my fish?</p> <p>Mom: Did he jump from his tank again? Do we have a <u>fish out of water</u>?</p> <p>Max: (<i>Scooping him up.</i>) He's okay! It looks like we found him just in time.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #f1c40f;"/> <p>The literal meaning of the idiom is <u>the fish is no longer in the water.</u></p>	<p>Cam: Moving to the city from the country is harder than I thought it would be.</p> <p>Maya: I know! I feel like a <u>fish out of water</u>.</p> <p>Cam: I think the city will begin to feel more like home once we make some new friends.</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #f1c40f;"/> <p>The nonliteral meaning of the idiom is <u>to feel out of place.</u></p>

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Directions: Keep going! Use context clues to determine the meaning of the underlined phrase, and write it in the chart.

LITERAL	NONLITERAL
2. Idiom: up in the air	
<p>Theo: Wow, that bird is huge!</p> <p>Cam: The one in the tree?</p> <p>Theo: No, the one circling, <u>up in the air</u>.</p>	<p>Sam: Are you going on the hike tomorrow?</p> <p>Joy: I'm not sure. I might be volunteering at the art center with my sister.</p> <p>Sam: I don't know if I can go either. I'm still <u>up in the air</u>, too.</p>
<p>The literal meaning of the idiom is <u>in the sky.</u></p>	<p>The nonliteral meaning of the idiom is <u>uncertain.</u></p>
3. Idiom: the icing on the cake	
<p>Jai: What kind of cake should we bake for dad on his birthday?</p> <p>Alice: Chocolate. But I think <u>the icing on the cake</u> should be caramel.</p>	<p>Marisol: How was your camping trip?</p> <p>Alex: It was so much fun! We sang songs, roasted marshmallows, and told ghost stories. <u>The icing on the cake</u> was seeing a shooting star the final night.</p>
<p>The literal meaning of the idiom is <u>cake frosting.</u></p>	<p>The nonliteral meaning of the idiom is <u>the best part.</u></p>
4. Idiom: in hot water	
<p>Lula: How do you make mint tea, grandma?</p> <p>Grandma: Take fresh mint and boil it <u>in hot water</u>. Add sugar, then stir.</p>	<p>Finn: What time is it? If I don't get home by 5 p.m., I will be <u>in hot water</u>.</p> <p>Ray: It's 4:30.</p> <p>Finn: Phew! My parents worry when I'm late for dinner.</p>
<p>The literal meaning of the idiom is <u>water at a high temperature.</u></p>	<p>The nonliteral meaning of the idiom is <u>in trouble.</u></p>