

Idioms from Household Items and Tools



Reading

Read the story. Then discuss the questions.

A Flash in the Pan

My friend Marta wanted me to be in the talent contest with her. I didn't want to get onstage. I have no talent. But she said that I was **a wet blanket** and that I never wanted to do anything fun. I decided **to throw in the towel** and not to argue with her.

At the contest, Marta sang a Beatles song. Then it was my turn. Fortunately, I'd found one of my nephew's old puppets. I did a ventriloquist act, in which it looked as if the puppet and I were trading old jokes. My friends who saw me onstage must have thought I **had a screw loose**. I was surprised that the audience laughed and seemed to enjoy my act. Then it was time for the winner of the contest to be named. I could see Marta, waiting **on pins and needles**, hoping to win. I could see that she was angry when my name was called. She didn't talk to me for a week. But now we've **buried the hatchet** and we are friends again. But my victory was **a flash in the pan**. I have never been onstage before or since.

1. Is a **wet blanket** a person who is fun to be with?
2. When you are **on pins and needles**, how do you feel? When are you on pins and needles?
3. When you **bury the hatchet**, do you make enemies with someone?

Meanings

Each example has an idiom with a household item or a tool. Read the example carefully to find the meaning of the idiom. Then look at the definitions that follow the examples. Write the idiom next to its definition.

as sharp as a tack	Tommy is only three, but he's as sharp as a tack . He can say the ABCs and can read some words.
to bury the hatchet	Let's forget our disagreement and bury the hatchet .
a flash in the pan	I got a 100 on the ^{first} final test, but that was just a flash in the pan . I got low scores on all the rest of the tests, and I was barely able to pass the course.
to have a screw loose	Anatoly didn't take a jacket even though it was cold and windy. He must have a screw loose .
on pins and needles	I wasn't sure if I did well on the test. So I was on pins and needles when the teacher was giving them back.
to pan out	If things pan out , we hope to get a bank loan and start a computer service business.
potluck	Our end-of-class party was a potluck dinner for which each student made a special food.
soap opera	My aunt has watched the same soap opera on TV for ten years. She's very interested in all the difficult problems that the people in the soap opera have.
to sponge off	It's about time Gary got his own apartment. He's sponged off us long enough.
throw in the towel	When the candidate saw she couldn't win the election, she threw in the towel and quit the race.
a wet blanket	Andy is such a wet blanket . He never wants to go to parties, and if he does go, he won't dance.

1. _____ a person who doesn't enjoy things and keeps others from enjoying them

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| 2. _____ | to be crazy |
| 3. _____ | something that starts out well but that may not continue |
| 4. _____ | clever, intelligent |
| 5. _____ | to agree to no longer be enemies |
| 6. _____ | to succeed, to have a good result |
| 7. _____ | to take money or hospitality and never pay anything back |
| 8. _____ | a meal in which everybody brings a food to eat |
| 9. _____ | to accept defeat or loss |
| 10. _____ | a drama on TV or radio that continues over time and in which the characters have many problems |
| 11. _____ | very nervous and anxious |

Practice

A. Answer each question with **yes** or **no**. Explain your answer.

1. We all had a great time at the picnic. Dorothy as usual complained about the food, how uncomfortable it was, and how many insects there were. Is Dorothy a wet blanket?
2. My wife prepared a special meal when my boss came over for dinner. Was it potluck?
3. Brian hoped to get the job as head teller in the bank, but he didn't get it. Did things pan out for Brian?
4. For years my best friend has been watching the story "Main Street" on television every afternoon. Does my friend like to watch soap operas?
5. Don thinks that creatures from other planets visit Earth all the time. Do you think Don has a screw loose?
6. Whenever Richard borrows anything from me, he immediately gives it back the next day. Does Richard sponge off me?
7. Jeff is always very calm before he has to take a test. Is he on pins and needles?
8. When I saw that I couldn't persuade them, I stopped arguing. Did I throw in the towel?
9. Every book this author writes is a success. The last one was a success too. Was it a flash in the pan?



10. Brenda quarreled with her best friend, Judy, last week. But yesterday, they decided to be friends again. Did they bury the hatchet?
11. Lila is always well dressed when she goes to work. Is she as sharp as a tack?

B. Complete the idioms in each example with the correct word or words.

1. She's too lazy to work and sponges _____ her brother.
2. We won't invite him again. He's always _____ blanket.
3. If I have enough money and things _____, I'll take a trip this summer.
4. He sometimes talks to himself. I think he has _____ screw _____.
5. They just love to watch those _____ operas in the afternoon.
6. At the end of the close game, I was on _____ and _____, hoping our team would win.
7. At the meeting, no one paid attention to my arguments. So I threw in _____.
8. His success today is only a flash _____ pan.
9. After ten years of fighting, the two families decided to _____ hatchet.
10. Ming can do this in no time. He's as sharp _____.
11. I brought a special salad to the _____ dinner.

Conversation

Practice each conversation with a partner.

SITUATION 1

Two friends are talking.

JOAN: Ted, what's wrong? You look so nervous.

TED: Yes, I'm on pins and needles, but nothing's wrong. I'm just waiting to hear if I got a bank loan.

JOAN: What are you planning to do with the money if you get it?

TED: If things pan out, I'm going to buy a house.

SITUATION 2

Another pair of friends is talking.

MARTHA: I want to be at home at one this afternoon to watch my soap opera.

ANNIE: Are you watching "Main Street"?

MARTHA: Yes. Today Buddy's finally going to bury the hatchet with his son. I just can't miss that!

SITUATION 3

A final pair of friends is talking.

KEN: What are your two nephews doing?

LIN: Neither of them works, you know.

KEN: How come?

LIN: One's lazy and just sponges off his parents, and the other has a screw loose and can't hold a job.

On Your Own

Work with a partner. Choose three idioms. Write a short conversation for each idiom. Then act out your conversations.

Discussion

Work with a partner or in a small group. Do the following activities.

1. What are the household items found in the idioms in this unit? Can you explain what these items are used for?
2. What idioms in your native language use household items and tools? Are any idioms like the ones in English?
3. If you **take potluck** as an unexpected guest, you eat whatever the others eat at the table. How do people in your native country treat an unexpected guest? How do they treat an expected guest?
4. People watch **soap operas** on television. Do you know any popular soap operas? Describe them.