

# Lesson 9: Business Idioms – Part 1

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Idioms are short phrases with meanings that are different from the meanings of their individual words. **Idioms are different from slang** - idioms are in between formal and informal, so they are acceptable in everyday English conversations and e-mails - including some communication at work. Slang is very informal, and is usually used in humor, music, and conversations between close friends.

- **Formal:** Official business, legal, academic English
- **Casual:** Idioms, everyday conversation, e-mails
- **Informal:** Slang, humor, music

Slang is almost never used in business English, but idioms are often used in conversations and e-mails - so I'm going to introduce you to some common idiomatic expressions.

This is the method we'll use for learning the idioms:

1. **Look at the example of the idiom in context**
2. **Guess the meaning of the idiom**
3. **Wait for the answer and explanation**

Why do I recommend these three steps? Well, it's important to try to figure out the meanings of the idioms from the context. This helps you think actively about the expressions and learn to understand new expressions faster.

Ready? Let's begin! *(write your answers on a piece of paper, and then scroll down to the end of the lesson to see the answers and explanations)*

## Idiom 1:

"We showed the president 20 ideas for new products, but she didn't like any of them - so we had to **go back to the drawing board.**"

- a) ask other people for advice
- b) start again from the beginning
- c) reuse a good idea from the past

## Idiom 2:

"Our sales estimates were **way off the mark**. We'd projected sales of \$15M, but the actual numbers were closer to \$9M."

- a) too optimistic
- b) higher than average
- c) very wrong/inaccurate

## Idiom 3:

"The text for the article is almost perfect. I just want to **tweak** one or two sentences."

- a) remove
- b) make small adjustments
- c) make longer

## Idiom 4:

"I need to submit a weekly report on this project, so please keep me **in the loop**."

- a) informed / updated
- b) working hard
- c) in the office

## Idiom 5:

"Three people from my department are on vacation, so **I've got a lot on my plate** at the moment."

- a) I have a lot of responsibilities
- b) I wish I was on vacation, too
- c) I have nothing to do

## Idiom 6:

"The **rule of thumb** is to reinvest no more than 30%, but it's OK if you go over that number occasionally."

- a) minimum amount
- b) strict limit
- c) general practice

## Idiom 7:

"Bob said I missed the deadline, but I want to **set the record straight** – I submitted my work on time, but he didn't check his e-mail."

- a) correct a mistake and say the truth
- b) express a different opinion
- c) get permission

## Idiom 8:

"We have until December to prepare these documents, so let's **put them on the back burner** for now. We have other, more urgent projects."

- a) send them back to their origin
- b) give them low priority
- c) finish them quickly

## Idiom 9:

"That program never produced any significant results, so the director finally decided to **pull the plug**."

- a) get personally involved
- b) improve the technology
- c) stop, discontinue

## Idiom 10:

"Yesterday's meeting lasted four hours... but **in a nutshell**, we decided to close our office in India and open a branch in China."

- a) in an argument
- b) in the end
- c) in summary

## Idiom 11:

"Laura didn't go to the meeting. Could you send her a summary of the discussion to **bring her up to speed**?"

- a) help her work faster
- b) give her the most recent information
- c) find out what her perspective is

## Idiom 12:

"Don't make any changes without talking to Peter. He's the one **calling the shots** on this project."

- a) communicating with the supervisor
- b) making the important decisions
- c) working very hard

# Answers and Explanations

## 1. go back to the drawing board

b) start again from the beginning

Designers and engineers often draw a picture of a product as the first step in its development. So "going back to the drawing board" means to start again at step 1 of a process.

## 2. way off the mark

c) very wrong/inaccurate

This idiom comes from the sport of archery, where arrows that do not hit the target are said to be "off the mark." The word "way" means "very" - so "way off the mark" means "very inaccurate."

## 3. tweak

b) make small adjustments

I don't know the origin of this word, but it can be used as either a noun or a verb - you can say "I want to tweak one or two things" or "I want to make a few tweaks" to talk about minor adjustments.

## 4. in the loop

a) informed / updated

You can also say the opposite - "out of the loop" - if you are not being informed or updated about a project or news.

## 5. I've got a lot on my plate

a) I have a lot of responsibilities

If you go to a buffet and you put a lot of food on your plate, then you are obligated to eat it all. So having "a lot on your plate" means you have many tasks or responsibilities.

## **6. rule of thumb**

c) general practice

A "rule of thumb" is a general rule or general practice that may have exceptions in some situations. This is your "thumb":

If you use your thumb to measure something, you can get a general idea, but the measurement will not be perfectly accurate. So a general rule with exceptions permitted is called a "rule of thumb."



## **7. set the record straight**

a) correct a mistake and say the truth

When there is a misunderstanding or something was falsely reported, you should "set the record straight" – say what is true, so that people have the correct understanding of the situation.

## **8. put something on the back burner**

b) give it low priority

This idiom comes from cooking. This picture shows a stove with four burners:



If you are cooking multiple things at the same time, you put the less important items, which don't need your attention, on the back burner - and you put the items on which you are actively working on the front burner. So to "put something on the back burner" is to temporarily give it low priority and less attention.

## **9. pull the plug**

c) stop, discontinue

This is a plug:



*Image courtesy of jiggoja at [FreeDigitalPhotos.net](http://FreeDigitalPhotos.net)*

If you pull (remove) the plug of your television from the source of electricity, the television will stop working. So to "pull the plug" on a project or program means to discontinue it.

## **10. in a nutshell**

c) in summary

When you summarize a lot of information in a short phrase or explanation, you can begin the statement with "in a nutshell." This picture shows nuts:



The "shell" is the hard exterior of the nut. A nutshell is very small - so when you put a lot of information into a small number of words, you can say "in a nutshell" to express the fact that you are giving a summary.

## **11. bring her up to speed**

b) give her the most recent information

If someone is "up to speed," it means they are fully informed about the latest information. To "bring" or "get" someone up to speed is to give them the most recent information so that they can be up-to-date on the current situation.

## **12. calling the shots**

b) making the important decisions

The person who is "calling the shots" is the one who has authority to decide what must be done, and other people must follow his/her instructions.



# Quiz: Lesson 9

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*Choose the best idiom to complete each sentence in the dialogue below.*

a lot on your plate	calling the shots	rule of thumb
on the back burner	in a nutshell	tweak
bring me up to speed	in the loop	way off the mark
	back to the drawing board	

**Diane:** I've been away for the past couple weeks – can you  
(1)\_\_\_\_\_ on this project?

**Bill:** All the specifications are in the shared folder... but (2)\_\_\_\_\_,  
the client wants us to create an e-commerce site.

**Diane:** That sounds pretty straightforward. How's it going?

**Bill:** It's taking forever! They keep wanting to (3)\_\_\_\_\_ the  
design, and they never seem satisfied.

**Diane:** But you must be getting close, right? At least they haven't made you go  
(4)\_\_\_\_\_.

**Bill:** Actually, they did that last month. I had to come up with a whole new  
design.

**Diane:** Why are they being so picky? Who's (5)\_\_\_\_\_ on this  
project in the client's company?

**Bill:** I've been working with the marketing director, but the problem is that  
she's been keeping the CEO (6)\_\_\_\_\_, and he makes  
suggestions that are (7)\_\_\_\_\_. He doesn't know a thing  
about websites.

**Diane:** What kinds of things does he want?

**Bill:** Here's an example – the (8)\_\_\_\_\_ in web design is to use font size 14 or greater, but he wants the text as small as possible so more can fit on the page.

**Diane:** Sounds like you've got (9)\_\_\_\_\_. Anything I can do to help make things easier?

**Bill:** You've got a way with words – maybe you can talk to them and explain that if this site doesn't get done soon, I'll have to put it (10)\_\_\_\_\_. We have other clients who need our help, too.