



## Easy as Apple Pie: Teaching Idioms

by [Claire Fisher](#) and [Meghan Killeen](#)

We've all seen textbooks with an "idioms list" either shoved in the back or relegated to a blurb in a single chapter. Figurative language is often undervalued and underutilized by English language teaching materials, contributing to the perception that idioms are unimportant. On the contrary, though, idioms are used for meaning-making throughout a wide variety of registers and genres. For this reason, teachers should raise students' awareness of idioms and help them identify tools for unlocking their meaning. It is also essential for students to understand how using idioms can enrich language by creating a dynamic subtext, conveying mood, and contributing to a sense of identity.

Idioms are not rare. If you're looking for it, you'll realize that figurative language is extremely common in English, which means that idioms should not be taught in isolation. Like any other vocabulary item, idioms are used in specific contexts and for specific communicative purposes. Cooper (1999) has shown that learners are able to decode the majority of idioms they encounter by using three skills that we can explicitly teach:

- guessing from context
- using the literal meaning
- activating background knowledge

## Teaching Specific Target Idioms

Because idioms exist in so many authentic contexts, you can teach them in conjunction with other language-learning tasks and goals. This approach makes it easier to fit idioms into a tight class schedule, and also helps students recognize that idioms are not a niche topic. Following are some example activities.

### Sample Activity 1: *Monopoly*

#### *Rationale*

Playing games generates spontaneous language use. Board games with complicated written rules also require good reading skills, such as skimming, scanning, and syntax analysis. In other words, playing a board game can be a multiliteracy activity. Because the stakes are low and games are fun, they can also get shy students out of their shells.

### *Objectives*

- Students will be able to (SWBAT) engage in friendly classroom competition.
- SWBAT ask clarifying questions, negotiate for meaning, and debate a guiding text.
- SWBAT use *mortgage*, *rent*, *sell*, and *buy* in context, and infer the meaning of two idioms.

### *Target Idioms*

- Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200
- Get-out-of-jail-free card

### *Lesson Procedure*

- Before class, have students read and annotate the rules of *Monopoly*.
- In class, play a 90-minute game of *Monopoly*. You can assign students roles (banker, real estate agent, rule-reader) in advance to make this run smoothly. One student should record the audio while they play.
- After class, have students listen to the audio recording of the game and analyze how they communicated during it.
- Have them write a summary of how the game went.
- Share short corpus examples of “do not pass go, do not collect \$200” and “this is your get-out-of-jail-free card” being used outside the context of the game. From those examples and using the literal meanings from the game, have students infer potential figurative meanings for each.

### *Expansions*

Many other idioms are derived from games, such as “cards on the table,” “call your bluff,” “cross off X on my card,” and “I’ll take [topic] for \$200.” You can teach the basics of those games and share examples of those idioms to help students practice using literal meanings to infer figurative meanings.

## **Sample Activity 2: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)**

### *Rationale*

Movies can teach a wide variety of listening skills, including analyzing dialect, register, and tone and understanding humor, sarcasm, and emotional intonation. In addition, many idioms were coined as references to plot points from famous movies. This activity involves watching the original scenes that coined those terms, and then inferring their idiomatic meanings from authentic contexts.

### *Main Objectives*

- SWBAT draw connections between literal and figurative meanings.
- SWBAT work with authentic, corpus-based sample texts.

### *Target Idioms*

- Not in Kansas anymore
- Ding dong, the witch is dead

- Off to see the wizard
- Flying monkeys
- Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain

### *Procedure*

The class alternates between reading a synopsis of the movie *The Wizard of Oz* and watching key scenes with famous quotes. On the worksheet (provided in **the Appendix**), each quote is followed by a corpus example of it being used in an unrelated context. As the students work through the movie, they pause for small-group discussion of what each quote means a) in the movie and b) in the unrelated quote. Then, they extrapolate a context in which they could use that idiom themselves. You'll be surprised how productive and creative these conversations become!

### *Expansions*

*The Wizard of Oz* is a particularly rich source of famous quotes that are now used as idioms, but dozens of other movies and TV shows can be used in a similar way. Ask your students what kinds of movies they enjoy, and get creative!

## **Sample Activity 3: *Alice in Wonderland***

### *Rationale*

Pleasure reading is a valuable tool in vocabulary acquisition. *Alice in Wonderland* is one of the most influential stories in the English language. Its influence on internet culture is most obvious in the increasing popularity of “down the rabbit hole.” Moreover, this children’s novel includes lots of wordplay and jokes, so the text is both accessible and challenging.

### *Main Objectives*

- Assessing students’ reading level
- Raising awareness of cultural references
- SWBAT extrapolate a figurative meaning from the literal meaning of an idiom.

### *Target Idiom*

- Down the rabbit hole

### *Procedure*

- Students read Chapter 1 of *Alice in Wonderland* (10 pages), in which Alice falls down a rabbit hole.
- After they read, they must answer: “Now that you’ve read the chapter that created the idiom ‘[go] down the rabbit hole,’ what do you think that idiom means?” This forces them to use the literal meaning to extrapolate possible figurative meanings.
- After sharing their best guesses, students check against definitions on [theidioms.com](http://theidioms.com).
- Students look up the [darker](#) modern definition of “down the rabbit hole”: “To get extremely and obsessively involved in something.” Discuss how one meaning could lead to the other.

### *Expansions*

Student enthusiasm sometimes justifies reading the rest of the novel together, which provides rich opportunities to work with descriptive language, wordplay, symbolism, characterization, and poetry. Students also sometimes know the drug-culture meaning of “down the rabbit hole,” which is “high.” For age-appropriate students, this provides an opportunity for you to add a listening text, “White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane.

## **Raising Awareness of Idioms, Identity, Styling, and Translanguaging**

Personal speech style is composed of many different linguistic features. These styles can vary, shifting through communication strategies such as code-switching and translanguaging techniques. The following activities promote the use of idioms as identity-building and help foster diversity in speech through the “holistic and equitable view of multilingualism” (Wei, 2022).

### **Sample Activity 4: Personal Narrative**

#### *Rationale*

The main purpose of a personal narrative is self-expression; it lends itself to a distinct authorial voice that can be amplified by idiomatic word choice.

#### *Objectives*

- Students will be exposed to a variety of personal narrative exemplar texts to identify different moods and personas.
- Students will learn idioms and compound adjectives to help build their vocabulary, specifically as they relate to character and setting.
- Students will gain an awareness of communication fluidity and practice flexing their multilingual repertoire through their own personal narrative piece.

#### *Target Idioms*

These can relate to personality, such as “cheapskate,” “big mouth,” and “go-getter,” or to intentions, such as “put one on a pedestal,” and “set an example.”

#### *Procedure*

- Students read an excerpt from two different exemplar texts that are personal narratives, such as *A House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *99 Nights in Logar* by Jamil Jan Kochai. Here is a list of other texts [related to “living between languages.”](#)
- Students discuss the texts and identify which idiomatic words and phrases convey personality/setting. Students also discuss why some words were not used in English.
- Preteach common idioms that convey personality and setting (see target examples).
- After class, have students write two different personal narratives about the same experience and try to convey two different moods based on their word choice using the vocabulary taught in class.

### *Expansions*

Students review each other’s personal narratives and make guesses about word choice.

## Sample Activity 5: Film Scripts

### *Rationale*

Maintaining continuity, dialogue word choice shows personality. It is conducive to building idioms around a theme.

### *Objectives*

- Students will examine how language conveys personality and how other linguistics features, such as rhythm and intonation, play into meaning.
- Students will have an awareness of how idioms are economical and relate to pop culture.

### *Target Idioms*

Similar to the Personal Narrative exercise, you can review idioms that relate to personality or common exclamations, such “hitting the nail on the head.”

### *Procedure*

- Students read an excerpt from a movie script (scripts from Quentin Tarantino films tend to be rich with idioms, though these films should be screened for adult content and language).
- Students identify the idioms and try to guess the meaning from context.
- Students act out the script.
- Read a character description of two different characters in a film (from the same script or a different one). Cut up a few lines of dialogue from two or three different characters. Have students match the dialogue to the correct character. Have students watch the scene and see if their guesses were correct.

### *Expansions*

Have students brainstorm an “odd couple” (close friends with opposite personalities) for two of their characters and write dialogue. Students use idioms and are also encouraged to use idioms from their language.

## Conclusion

Lessons on idioms should focus on developing strategies for students to *notice*, *decode*, and also *use* idioms. The activities in this article illustrate authentic contexts that expose students to idioms. Ultimately, students see how idioms can promote their identities, and they develop the confidence to add idioms to their own personal repertoires.

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## Appendix. The Wizard of Oz: A Quotable Movie

The movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is a frequently quoted American movie. It's been popular for at least four generations now. Let's watch parts of the movie and discuss key quotes from it.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) is an orphaned teenager who lives with her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry on a Kansas farm. She daydreams about going "over the rainbow" to escape her problems. One day, she's about to run away from home when a tornado approaches the farm. Unable to open the door to the storm cellar, Dorothy enters the house, and is knocked unconscious. The tornado picks up her house and flies it away.

Quote #1: "I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

What does it mean in the movie? \_\_\_\_\_

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*You get your first assignment. You are being sent overseas into a combat zone. Your stomach tightens; you knew you signed up for this, but the danger seemed far away back then.... When you step off the plane, it hits you that **you are not in Kansas anymore**. This is foreign territory. (Smith, 2021)*

What do you think it means in this quote? \_\_\_\_\_

Can you think of a situation in which you would say, "you're not in Kansas anymore"? \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Summary sections of *The Wizard of Oz* are from IMDb.com. (n.d.).  
[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032138/plotsummary?ref\\_=tt\\_stry\\_pl#synopsis](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032138/plotsummary?ref_=tt_stry_pl#synopsis)

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The tornado drops Dorothy's house on the Wicked Witch of the East, killing her. The Munchkins of Oz come to thank Dorothy.

Quote #2: "Ding dong the witch is dead."

What does it mean in the movie? \_\_\_\_\_

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*James Holzhauer, who amassed winnings at a startling rate during his 32-game win streak on Jeopardy!, wasn't playing games when he eviscerated Mike Richards on Tuesday. After word got out that Richards was pushed out as executive producer following his resignation as the quiz show's new host, Holzhauer tweeted a GIF of "Ding Dong The Witch Is Dead." (Dicker, 2021)*

What do you think it means in this quote? \_\_\_\_\_

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Can you think of a situation in which you would say, "Ding dong the witch is dead"? \_\_\_\_\_

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The Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton), who is the sister of the dead witch, threatens Dorothy. But Glinda (Billie Burke), the Good Witch of the North, gives Dorothy the dead witch's enchanted Ruby Slippers, and the slippers protect her. Glinda advises that if Dorothy wants to go home to Kansas, she should seek the aid of the Wizard of Oz, who lives in the Emerald City. To get there, Dorothy sets off down the Yellow Brick Road.



Quote #3: "You're off to see the wizard." (*Later in the movie they also sing "we're off to see the wizard."*)

What does it mean in the movie? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*[In this car] the 2.5 turbo [engine] is fairly sedate until 3500rpm, at which point the turbo kicks in, things get loud and you're off to see the wizard, with a huge grin on your face.*

(McKinnon, 2017)

What do you think it means in this quote? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Can you think of a situation in which you would say, "we're off to see the wizard"? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Along the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy meets several companions: a talking Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) whose dearest wish is to have a brain; a Tin Woodman (Jack Haley), who longs for a heart; and the Cowardly Lion (Bert Lahr), who wishes for courage. All four of them want to see the wizard and get his help.

Despite the Wicked Witch of the West's interference, the four reach the Emerald City. The friends are frustrated at their reception by the "great and powerful" Wizard of Oz (Frank Morgan). He refuses to help unless they bring him the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West. They head for the Witch's castle, but get attacked by Flying Monkeys that the Witch has enslaved.

Dorothy kills the Wicked Witch. Dorothy and her friends bring the broomstick back to the Emerald City, but the wizard isn't pleased to see them again.

## Quote #4: "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

What does it mean in the movie? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*In this last election, with Trump mostly out of sight, voters were able to focus on their frustrations with President Joe Biden, and on other issues. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, Republicans seemed to be saying. It worked, but the curtain is rustling; the man behind it is restless. He won't stay hidden for long. (Ghitis, 2021)*

What do you think it means in this quote? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Can you think of a situation in which you would say, "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain"? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The wizard tries to fly Dorothy home in a hot-air balloon, but only manages to fly himself out of Oz. Glinda appears and explains that Dorothy has always had the power to get home; Glinda didn't tell her before because Dorothy wouldn't have believed it.

## Quote #5: "There's no place like home."

What does it mean in the movie? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Want to buy some drugs? It's time to click your heels together three times and repeat: "There's no place like home." If State Senator Ronald Rice has his way, people caught buying or selling drugs beyond the borders of their hometowns could face stiffer mandatory minimum penalties. (Bruder, 2005)*

What do you think it means in this quote? \_\_\_\_\_

Can you think of a situation in which you would say, “there’s no place like home”?

In the end, Dorothy wakes up in her own bed with Auntie Em and Uncle Henry fussing over her. Oz was only a dream. (The Wizard of Oz).

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