

For better or for worse, the workplace is full of idioms. People don't begin a project. They "get a project off the ground." Speak Business English Like an American They don't call each other to discuss progress – they "touch base." Later, if the project is not going well, they don't end it. They "pull the plug." Here are some idioms you're likely to encounter in the workplace. They're taken from the book, *Speak Business English Like an American*, which contains over 350 business-related idioms and expressions. After getting to know the idioms, listen for them in everyday conversations and look out for them in newspapers and magazines.

at a premium

at a high price; at a relatively high price

Example: When flat-screen televisions first came out, they were selling at a premium.

back-of-the-envelope calculations

quick calculations; estimates using approximate numbers, instead of exact numbers

Example: I don't need the exact numbers right now. Just give me some back-of-the-envelope calculations.

Note: This expression refers to the quick calculations one would do informally, as on the back of an envelope.

belt-tightening

reduction of expenses

Example: When worldwide demand for software decreased, Microsoft had to do some belt-tightening

(to) bite the bullet

to make a difficult or painful decision; to take a difficult step

Example: When demand was down, U.S. automakers had to bite the bullet and cut jobs.

Origin: This idiom comes from the military. During the Civil War in the United States, doctors sometimes ran out of whiskey for killing the pain. A bullet would be put in the wounded soldier's mouth during surgery. He would "bite the bullet" to distract him from the pain and keep him quiet so the doctor could do his work in peace.

bitter pill to swallow

bad news; something unpleasant to accept

Example: After Gina spent her whole summer working as an intern for American Express, failing to get a full-time job offer from the company was a bitter pill to swallow.

Blockbuster

a big success;

**Origin:** This term comes from the blockbuster bombs used during World War Two by the British Royal Air Force. They were huge and created a large explosive force. Blockbuster ideas similarly create a big impact - and hopefully don't cause destruction like blockbuster bombs!

**brownie points**

credit for doing a good deed or for giving someone a compliment

**cash cow**

a product, service, or business division that generates a lot of cash for the company, without requiring much investment

**Example:** With strong sales every year and a great brand name, Mercedes is a cash cow for DaimlerChrysler.

**(to) cash in on**

to make money on; to benefit financially from

**Example:** Jamie Oliver, star of the TV show The Naked Chef, cashed in on his popularity by writing cookbooks and opening restaurants.

**(to) climb the corporate ladder**

advance in one's career; the process of getting promoted and making it to senior management

**(to) compare apples to oranges**

to compare two unlike things; to make an invalid comparison

**Note:** You will also see the related expression "compare apples to apples" which means to compare two things of the same type. This means that you are making a valid comparison, as opposed to when you're comparing apples to oranges.

**crunch time**

a short period when there's high pressure to achieve a result

**dog-eat-dog world**

a cruel and aggressive world in which people just look out for themselves

**Origin:** This expression dates back to the 1500's. Wild dogs were observed fighting aggressively over a piece of food. The connection was made that people, like dogs, often compete aggressively to get what they want.

**(to) dot your i's and cross your t's**

to be very careful; to pay attention to details

**(to) drum up business---** to create business; to find new customer

Example: Sales have been very slow lately. Do you have any ideas for drumming up business?

(to) face the music

to admit that there's a problem; to deal with an unpleasant situation realistically

Example: Enron executives finally had to face the music and admit that they were involved in some illegal activities.

(to) fast track a project

to make a project a high priority; to speed up the time frame of a project

Example: Let's fast track this project. We've heard rumors that our competitors are developing similar products.

(to) generate lots of buzz

to cause many people to start talking about a product or service, usually in a positive way that increases sales

Note: "Buzz" is a popular word for "attention."

(to) have a lot on one's plate

to have a lot to do; to have too much to do; to have too much to cope with

Example: Carlos turned down the project, explaining that he already had a lot on his plate.

Note: There is also the variation: to have too much on one's plate.

(the) hard sell

an aggressive way of selling

Example: Car salesmen are famous for using the hard sell on their customers.

Note: The opposite of "the hard sell" is "the soft sell," which is a sales technique using little or no pressure.

(to) jump the gun

to start doing something too soon or ahead of everybody else

Example: The company jumped the gun by releasing a new product before the results of the consumer testing were in.

Origin: A runner "jumps the gun" if he or she starts running before the starter's pistol has been fired.

(to) jump through hoops to go through a lot of difficult work for something; to face many bureaucratic obstacles Example: We had to jump through hoops to get our visas to Russia, but we finally got them.

(to) keep one's eye on the prize

to stay focused on the end result; to not let small problems get in the way of good results

Note: You will also see the variation: keep one's eyes on the prize.

(to) keep something under wraps

to keep something secret; to not let anybody know about a new project or plan

Example: I'm sorry I can't tell you anything about the project I'm working on. My boss told me to keep it under wraps.

Note: "Wraps" are things that provide cover, so if something is "under wraps" it's covered up and hidden.

mum's the word

let's keep quiet about this; I agree not to tell anyone about this

Example: Please don't tell anybody about our new project. Remember: mum's the word!

Origin: The word "mum" comes from the murmur "mmmm," the only sound you can make when your mouth is shut firmly. Try making other sounds besides "mmmm" with your lips and mouth shut firmly, and you will see that it's impossible!

my gut tells me

I have a strong feeling that; my intuition tells me.

Note: The "gut" is both the intestines and stomach and also the innermost emotional response.

nothing ventured, nothing gained

If you don't try to do something, you'll never succeed.

Example: It's risky to spend so much money developing a new brand, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

on top of trends

modern; aware and responding to the latest tastes

(to) pass the buck

to shift the blame; to blame somebody else

Example: It's your fault. Don't try to pass the buck!

(to) plug (a product)- to promote a product; to talk positively about a product Example: American Express often hires famous people to plug their credit cards. No wonder people pay attention to their ads!

(to) pull one's weight

to do one's share of the work

Example: Don't rely on others to get your job done. You need to pull your own weight.

(to) pull the plug

to put a stop to a project or initiative, usually because it's not going well; to stop something from moving forward; to discontinue

(to) put a stake in the ground

to take the first step; to make a big move to get something started; to make a commitment

Example: Our business in California has grown steadily over the past two years. Now is the time to put a stake in the ground and open a regional office there.

(to) rally the troops

to motivate others; to get other people excited about doing something; to do something to improve the morale of the employees and get them energized about doing their work

Example: After the lay-offs and salary cuts, the airline president organized a meeting to rally the troops and plan for the next year.

Note: The verb "to rally" has several definitions, but in this case means to "call together for a common goal or purpose." Troops is an informal way of describing a group of employees. The term comes from the military - a troop is a military unit.

reality check-- let's think realistically about this situation (said when you don't like something that's being

suggested because you don't think the other person is thinking practically or logically)

Example: You think we can start selling our products through our website next month? Time for a reality check! Nobody at our company knows anything about e-commerce.

(to) scale back one's hours

to reduce the number of hours one works

Example: When Christine had a baby, she decided to scale back her hours and just work part-time. Synonym: to cut back one's hours

Shape up or ship out!

improve your behavior or leave; if you don't improve your performance, you're going to get fired

Origin: This expression was first used in the U.S. military during World War Two, meaning: you'd better follow regulations and behave yourself ("shape up"), or you're going to be sent overseas to a war zone ("ship out").

(to) throw cold water over (an idea, a plan)

to present reasons why something will not work; to discourage

Note: You will also hear the variation: to throw cold water on.

through the roof

very high; higher than expected

Example: No wonder people are complaining about the cost of heating their homes. Oil prices have gone through the roof!

(to) turn around one's business

to make a business profitable again; to go from not making profits to being profitable again

(to) work down to the wire

to work until the last minute; to work until just before the deadline

Note: This expression comes from horse racing. In the 19th century, American racetracks placed wire across the track above the finish line. The wire helped determine which horse's nose crossed the line first. If a race was "down to the wire," it was a very close race, undecided until the very last second.

(to) work out the (or some) kinks

to solve the problems with

Example: The company announced that they will delay the launch of their new product by two weeks. They still need to work out the kinks with their packaging process.

Note: A "kink" is a problem or flaw in a system or plan.

yes man

an employee who always agrees with the boss or does whatever the boss says

Example: Don't expect Larry to argue with the boss. He's a yes man.