

# Learning Commons: Writing Centre/Grammar, Diction, and Tone

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## Idioms

Idioms (or idiomatic expressions) are set expressions that have a meaning different from the meaning of the words combined.

Have you heard the idiom “bring home the bacon”? What does it mean? Perhaps you know it is not related to bacon at all. Instead, the meaning is “make money”. What about “as hungry as a horse”? Here, the meaning of “extremely hungry” is much easier to understand.

Obviously, it can be very difficult to guess the meaning of idioms only from looking at their words. Understanding when and how to use idioms often takes a lot of practice.

Idioms are often very old but continue to be common in modern English and are generally used in informal situations. They often convey a strong feeling in few words. Some people believe idioms are too casual for academic writing. However, some genres like narratives use a lot of idioms.

Sometimes idioms that don't fit are used in writing, and it interrupts the fluency of the writing. Only use idioms in your writing when you feel very comfortable with the use and meaning of the idiom.

## Practice with Idioms

Here is a small list of common English idioms (from [goenglish.com](http://goenglish.com)) with example sentences. Read the sentences and then match idioms to their meanings below.

1. A chip on your shoulder You've had a chip on your shoulder since you arrived. What's bothering you? \_\_\_
2. A piece of cake I'm really anxious about the test this evening, but my friend told me it's a piece of cake so I guess I'll be okay. \_\_\_
3. All in the same boat The entire class is nervous because we have to each give a speech in front of the class. We're all in the same boat, so just we should try to relax! \_\_\_
4. At the drop of a hat I can't just come and meet you at the drop of a hat. I have plans right now! \_\_\_
5. Bend over backwards I've been bending over backwards to impress my mother-in-law, but nothing I do makes her happy. \_\_\_
6. Get off on the wrong foot When I met my new boss, I accidentally hit her with my briefcase and spilled coffee on her suit! I'm worried that I really got off on the wrong foot with her. \_\_\_
7. Keep an eye on The cookies will be done soon, so keep an eye on the oven, okay? \_\_\_
  - a. Something is very easy
  - b. To do something suddenly
  - c. Have a bad first impression, not like someone in the beginning
  - d. To try very hard to make someone happy
  - e. To watch something closely
  - f. To become angry or annoyed easily

Choose the appropriate idiom to complete the sentences.

1. I always \_\_\_\_\_ my children when they are playing outside because there is a busy road close to our house.
  2. Learning to drive is \_\_\_\_\_ if you have a good teacher.
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3. I'm moving into a new dorm tomorrow and I hope I don't \_\_\_\_\_ with my new roommates.
4. My mother tells me I have a \_\_\_\_\_ whenever she mentions cleaning my room.
5. James loves baking, so if you ask him to make you anything he will start \_\_\_\_\_.

Here are some more common idioms. Read the sentences and then match idioms to their meanings below.

8. Not a chance I've missed my submission deadline for my final paper and now my professor says there is not a chance that I will pass the class. \_\_\_
  9. On the fence Tony was offered jobs from two companies downtown! He says he's on the fence about which job to accept. \_\_\_
  10. On the same page I think me and my new roommate are really on the same page. We have the same sense of humour and similar tastes in food, people, and music! \_\_\_
  11. On your mind My grandmother has been on my mind a lot lately. She's getting old and I'm worried about her health. \_\_\_
  12. Out of the blue My old best friend from elementary school called me today out of the blue! I was really surprised to hear from him. \_\_\_
  13. Start from scratch I forgot to save my work on my laptop before I turned it off. Now I have to start from scratch again! \_\_\_
  14. Under the weather How are you feeling today? You look a bit pale. Are you feeling under the weather? \_\_\_
- h. Unsure of which decision to make
- i. To start something from the very beginning
- j. To feel a little bit sick
- k. Impossible, something will not happen
- l. To be thinking about something often
- m. Something happens suddenly and is unexpected

Choose the appropriate idiom to complete the sentences.

1. What's \_\_\_\_\_? You look like you're thinking about something.
2. It doesn't seem that Nina and Jose are \_\_\_\_\_ with their project. They are working on totally different things!
3. I'm so hungry but I'm \_\_\_\_\_ about what to order for dinner.
4. Carol was shocked when Tomo told her \_\_\_\_\_ that he was in love with her.
5. I have a huge essay to write tonight, so there is \_\_\_\_\_ that I can attend your party. I'm sorry.

## Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs (or two/three-part verbs) are a combination of a verb and one or more particles. The combination of the words often creates a new meaning.

Can you think of any phrasal verb examples? What about "turn on" (to start a machine), or "hang out" (to spend time somewhere or with someone)? Both of these examples show us that phrasal verbs always have a verb and at least one particle. However, starting a machine does not involve putting anything on anything. And spending time with someone does not have to be outside, and also is not connected to "hanging" at all.

Just like idioms, the meaning of phrasal verbs are generally different than their separate words. Phrasal verbs are extremely common in spoken English, and often used in writing as well. However, phrasal verbs are not generally used in very formal writing genres.

There are rules for using objects with phrasal verbs.

1. If you are using a pronoun as your object, place the object between the verb and particle. For example:

Turn it on VS. Turn on it. × Invite her over Invite over her ×

2. However, if your object is not a pronoun, it can go in between or at the end of the phrasal verb.

Turn the radio on VS. Turn on the radio

Invite Ji Hye over Invite over Ji Hye

- Of course there are exceptions to these rules as well. Some phrasal verbs cannot be separated (run into, work on, get over, etc)

3. If your object is very long place it at the end of the phrasal verb. For example:

Would you please hand in your assignment that you spent all Friday and Saturday writing? VS. Would you please hand your assignment that you spent all Friday and Saturday writing in? ×

### Practice with Phrasal Verbs

Read the conversation. Notice how the phrasal verbs are used.

Mary: I still need to fill out this form to give to the bank. I should have done it last week!

Chanda: Why have you put it off for so long?

Mary: I've been really busy working on my report that's due tomorrow. I've been writing all day and night!

Chanda: Wow, really? A report? Do you need me to look it over for you?

Mary: That would be great. You could tell me if I've left something out. I've researched a lot, but I might have forgotten something.

Chanda: No problem. Why don't you come by my house tonight and I'll help you out.

Mary: Thanks a lot! I'll pick up some doughnuts for us to snack on as we work.

Chanda: No thanks, I'm trying to cut down on my sugar.

What do you think these phrasal verbs mean?

1. Fill out \_\_\_\_\_

2. Put off \_\_\_\_\_

3. Work on \_\_\_\_\_

4. Look over \_\_\_\_\_

5. Left out \_\_\_\_\_

6. Come by \_\_\_\_\_

7. Help out \_\_\_\_\_

8 Pick up \_\_\_\_\_

9. Snack on \_\_\_\_\_

10. Cut down on \_\_\_\_\_

If you don't know the meaning, try selecting from the definitions below. a. The check something

b. To forget or omit something

c. To bring something and bring it somewhere

d. To reduce an amount of something, especially in eating

e. To assist or help someone

f. To write information in documents

g. To postpone something

- h. To visit someone
- i. To eat something (between meals)
- j. To do something, try to complete something

## Transitional Words

Transitional words are an efficient way to show the connections between your ideas in writing. These words also greatly improve the “flow” of writing. Use these words to show relationships between your ideas and smoothly move to new ideas or topics.

### Showing Sequence

- First, second, third (etc)
- Firstly, secondly, thirdly (etc)
- Lastly, last of all, last, finally
- Next, after, afterward, then

### Showing Addition

- Furthermore, moreover, in addition, and, also, plus, besides

### Showing Contrast

- However, but, although, nevertheless, on the contrary
- In spite of, despite, regardless of, although

### Showing Consequence

- Because, since, for this reason, as,
- Thus, therefore, as a result, hence, so, consequently

### Showing Similarity

- likewise, similarly, in the same way, equally, just so

### Showing Examples

- For example, for instance, such as, as, specifically

Look at the following paragraph. Where do you think transitional words could be used to improve the flow and connection of ideas? Rewrite the paragraph to include smooth, logical transitions.

“It’s Never Too Late to Say Thank You” Excerpt from *The Westcoast Reader* by Acosta Joan, 2012 at [www.bestofthereader.ca](http://www.bestofthereader.ca)

Remo Pastro and Walter Fabian were schoolboys in 1978. They lived in New Westminster, B.C. One day, the boys were playing outside. They heard cries. They followed the cries to the porch of a vacant house. There they found a tiny baby wrapped in a sheet. The boys carried the baby home. They called the police. The police took the baby to the hospital. There were articles about the baby in the newspaper. The police could not find the mother or father. A young couple adopted the baby. They named him Thomas. Thomas Pearson contacted the police in New Westminster in 2006. He said he wanted to find Walter and Remo. He wanted to thank the men for rescuing him. Thomas met Walter and Remo in January 2007. He finally had a chance to say thank you.

## Connotative and Denotative Definitions

Most words have both a denotative meaning and a connotative meaning, which can be very different. For example, think about the word “home”. The definition is “a place where someone lives”. But when you think of this word you may imagine your childhood bedroom, your parents, flowers in the garden, or the sound of your dog barking. This is an example of the many levels a word can have in its meaning. We can see there is a large difference in the two meanings of “home”. We call these different meanings denotative and connotative meanings.

Denotative meanings are the dictionary definition or literal meaning of a word. The denotative meaning of “home” would be “a place where someone lives”. However, the connotative meanings show the emotional connections or imagery connected with the word. Therefore, the image and words associated with your “home” are the connotative meaning.

### **Practice with Connotation and Denotation**

Activity Do you feel any differences in opinion with these words? Which has a more positive connotation to you?

- Cheap/inexpensive
- Bright/brainy
- Laugh/Giggle
- Demonstration/Protest
- Skinny/slender
- Assertive/Pushy

These word pairs have very similar denotative meanings but their connotative meanings are quite different. Because of the strong difference in connotative meanings, sometimes these words cannot be exchanged for each other. It is important to be careful when using a thesaurus since not all synonyms show the same feeling.

Compare the sentences. Are there any differences?

1. There was a demonstration downtown. vs. There was a protest downtown.
2. The coat is cheap. vs. The coat is inexpensive.

Examples adapted from: [http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/098\\_PDF/06Sep15Connotation\\_Denotation.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/098_PDF/06Sep15Connotation_Denotation.pdf)

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