

# Collins Cobuild Idioms Dictionary Third Edition by Collins (Oct 22 2012)

## How to find an idiom in the dictionary

To find an idiom in the Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary, you should identify the key word in the idiom and go straight to that entry in the dictionary. Look at the guidelines below to help you decide what this key word is. If the idiom you want is not explained in the entry, you will find a note – called a cross-reference – telling you where in the dictionary you will find the explanation.

### Headwords in the dictionary

The idiom entries in the main dictionary text are each attached to a headword, which is normally one of the lexical words in the idiom. Headwords are arranged alphabetically. This is to help you find idioms as easily as possible. For example, *spill the beans* is under the headword **beans**. Note that if the word we choose as headword is a plural noun or a verb participle, then the headword will also be in that form, rather than in the base form of the noun or verb. This is why *spill the beans* is under **beans** rather than **bean**. Generally, the word we choose as headword is a noun; for example, *rock the boat* is under the noun **boat** as headword, and *sit on the fence* is under **fence**. If there are two nouns, then the headword is the first noun; for example, *it's raining cats and dogs* is under the headword **cats** and *cost an arm and a leg* under **arm**. If there is no noun in the idiom, then the headword will be the verb, unless the idiom contains an adjective or adverb that is more 'meaningful' than the verb (this idiom is under the headword **red**). If the idiom contains no nouns or verbs, then the headword will be either an adjective or an adverb.

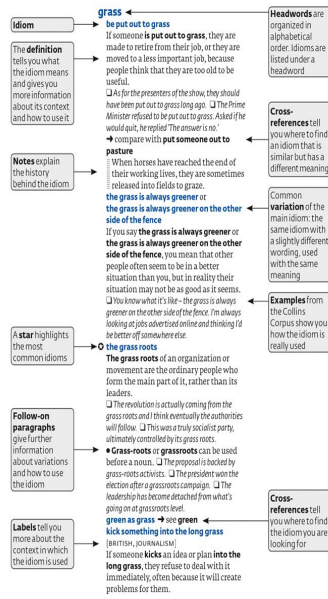
There are four main exceptions to these general rules:

1. the word chosen as headword is normally a fixed word in the idiom; that is, it never varies. In some cases, the only noun in the idiom varies, and so we have chosen to put the idiom under another word which is fixed. For example, *beat your breast* has a common variation *beat your chest*, and so you will find the idiom under the verb **beat**.
2. occasionally, our rules for choosing headwords would mean that two idioms which contain similar words would end up in very different parts of the dictionary. In this case, we put them under the same headword. For example, we put both *a fair crack of the whip* and *crack the whip* under the headword **whip**.
3. if an idiom contains two nouns, but the first noun is a very general word such as 'end' or 'top', then the idiom will be found at the second noun. For example, *the thin end of the wedge* is under **wedge**.
4. finally, similar words such as *white as sheet* and *old as hills* are always dealt with under their adjectives – **white** and **old** in these cases – rather than under their nouns. This is because they generally reinforce or emphasize the meaning of the adjective.

### The order of idiom entries

Idioms are arranged in alphabetical order under each dictionary headword. This is the case even if the idiom is followed by a cross-reference to another headword. Note that the words 's' and 'the' are not taken into account. Note also that only the main forms of idioms are alphabetized. This means that any variant forms given at the beginning of an entry for an individual idiom may appear to be out of alphabetical order. For example, *fall on your feet*, a variation given at the idiom *land on your feet*, appears out of alphabetical position.

## Guide to the dictionary entries



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