

## IDIOMS – PROVERBS

English has a variety of ways and means of conveying meaning or a message. To describe someone who has a calm manner, we can use the expression ‘as cool as a cucumber’. To use the expression ‘every little bit helps’ we would be conveying the message that even though someone’s monetary contribution may have been small; it was, nonetheless, helpful and appreciated. To reassure someone that a person is not as unpleasant as they seem from the way they speak, we might say **his/her bark is worse than his/her bite**.

These are different types of fixed expressions, which are generally called idioms. More specifically they are called a simile, maxim and **proverb**, respectively. Idioms are commonly found in informal spoken and written English, and are important to learn and know at all levels. In using idioms your English will sound more natural and native-like, and be more interesting and colourful. Building on the information in the program, these study notes explore **proverbs** in more detail.

## Proverbs – traditional sayings

Proverbs are traditional sayings, and are used to give advice, tell us something about the world or life in general, or simply to state a general truth. A proverb is a fixed expression, so its meaning may not always be transparent. For example, the saying **blood is thicker than water** is not about water or blood as such, but about family relationships. The proverb means ‘family loyalty, the blood which links members of a family, is far stronger than anything else could possibly be’. The context, however, will help in determining the meaning. Look at the proverb in bold in the following context.

“Even if he did abuse you for taking his parking space, you shouldn’t have insulted him in return. **Two wrongs don’t make a right.**”

The context tells us that if someone brings harm to you or is bad to you, by reciprocating in an equally rude or negative way will not make the situation right.

Proverbs are usually found in informal spoken and written language. They are often not quoted in full because they’re well-known sayings. Using them correctly and naturally will require special effort – practise, patience and time.

## STUDY TIPS

When looking up a word in the dictionary always check whether the word is used in any special way such as in a proverb.

Make a note of the proverb and provide a context in which it can be used. This makes it easier to learn and remember.

When listening to people speak, when reading a newspaper or watching television, be aware that in all these situations proverbs are commonly heard and used.

Using proverbs correctly and naturally takes practice and time.

Be patient and you’ll be rewarded.

There are different ways of remembering proverbs. They can be grouped according to a topic, for example, feelings (positive/negative, praise etc.), situations (problems, solutions etc.) or perhaps by a key word in the expression.

Here is a list of some of the more common proverbs with an example and explanation. They are cited in their full form, but any words enclosed in brackets are sometimes omitted when quoting.

## PROVERB NOTEBOOK

PROVERB	EXAMPLE	MEANING
<b>absence makes the heart grow fonder</b>	"You must be home sick by now, John. Isn't it close to a year that you haven't seen your partner? You know what they say, <b>absence makes the heart grow fonder.</b> "	being away from someone for a while will make you love them even more
<b>actions speak louder than words</b>	"Frankly, I'll wait and see how management handles the impasse, but after all the promises I feel it's reached a stage now where <b>actions speak louder than words.</b> "	what someone does is more important than what they say they'll do
<b>blood is thicker than water</b>	"Michael has always caused the family so much grief and sorrow with his actions, but we aren't going to forsake him now. <b>Blood is thicker than water.</b> "	family loyalty is far stronger than anything else could possibly be
<b>every cloud has a silver lining</b>	"Though she lost out on the IT job, the company did give her a promotion and salary increase. So <b>every cloud has a silver lining.</b> "	you can find something good in every bad or difficult situation
<b>to err is human, (to forgive, divine)</b>	"You shouldn't have been so hard on him. Don't you know <b>to err is human!</b> "	it's only natural for people to make mistakes
<b>don't count your chickens (before they're hatched)</b>	A: "I have everything worked out. By buying the little café on the corner, I can make lots of money." B: "Jill, <b>don't count your chickens (before they're hatched).</b> "	you shouldn't make plans prematurely thinking that you'll be successful because things may still go wrong



# STUDY ENGLISH

IELTS PREPARATION

PROVERB	EXAMPLE	MEANING
<b>the early bird catches the worm</b>	“They’re giving away free samples for the promotion. Let’s get to the shop first thing in the morning. You know what they say, <b>it’s the early bird that catches the worm.</b> ”	if you go to the trouble of doing something or getting somewhere before others you will have an advantage over them
<b>it’s not over until the fat lady sings</b>	A: “There’s no way they can win 22–20 down with two minutes to go.” B: “Have no fear – <b>it’s not over until the fat lady sings.</b> ”	one can’t be certain of the end result of anything until it is finished
<b>first come, first served</b>	“There are a limited number of seats available on the morning flight, so <b>first come, first served.</b> ”	people are assisted in the order in which they arrive
<b>forewarned is forearmed</b>	“I’d like to be briefed please before I meet with the delegation. You know what they say, <b>forewarned is forearmed.</b> ”	if you prepare for an event, you are better able to handle any problems which might arise
<b>the grass is (always) greener on the other side (of the fence)</b>	A: “I’ve been grounded again. Michael has it really easy. He can do whatever he likes, stay out as late as he wants and his parents don’t say a thing.” B: “You know, Bob, <b>the grass is always greener on the other side.</b> ”	being unhappy with your current situation and thinking others are in a better situation/position than you
<b>imitation is the sincerest form of flattery</b>	“Have you noticed she’s taken on your management style? You know what they say, <b>imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.</b> ”	by following someone’s example you are paying that person the highest compliment without actually saying so
<b>don’t look a gift horse in the mouth</b>	“My parents have given us their old lounge suite to furnish the new apartment. It’s seen better days, but <b>we aren’t looking a gift horse in the mouth.</b> ”	if someone gives you something never ask about the value or usefulness of it – accept it graciously



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PROVERB	EXAMPLE	MEANING
<b>make hay while the sun shines</b>	“They’re predicting heavy rain over the weekend, so we had better <b>make hay while the sun shines</b> and do the washing today.”	take advantage of any opportunities you have
<b>no news is good news</b>	“The doctor hasn’t called about the test results, so I assume <b>no news is good news.</b> ”	if there is no news this must mean everything is fine because bad news would have been relayed
<b>two heads are better than one</b>	A: “I’ve asked Heather for ideas about the project to get things moving along.” B: “You know what they say, <b>two heads are better than one.</b> ”	more can be achieved from the input of two people than one person working alone
<b>nothing ventured, nothing gained</b>	A: “I’ve always wanted to try for a supervisor’s job.” B: “Why don’t you – <b>nothing ventured, nothing gained.</b> ”	if you never take a risk, you’ll never succeed
<b>no pain, no gain</b>	“You’ll have to train harder if you want to get into the state basketball team. As with everything in life – <b>no pain, no gain.</b> ”	if you want to be successful or achieve something, you need to work very hard for it
<b>once bitten, twice shy</b>	“You can be assured he won’t be speeding again after being fined \$160. As they say, <b>once bitten, twice shy.</b> ”	if someone has had a bad experience in the past they will be more cautious or wary in future to avoid the same thing happening again
<b>practice makes perfect</b>	“Jane will perform brilliantly at the next track meet. She has been practising very hard, and <b>practice makes perfect.</b> ”	by practising an activity regularly, you will become proficient at it



# STUDY ENGLISH

IELTS PREPARATION

PROVERB	EXAMPLE	MEANING
<p><b>it never rains but it pours</b> (British English)</p> <p><b>when it rains, it pours</b> (North American English)</p>	<p>“What a week! On Sunday the heavy winds brought down the old gum tree onto the house. On Tuesday, I had my bag stolen, and then yesterday the car broke down on the freeway. <b>When it rains, it pours.</b>”</p>	<p>when one misfortune happens to you, other bad things tend to follow soon after</p>
<p><b>the proof of the pudding (is in the eating)</b></p>	<p>“The shop called to say they fixed my computer but <b>the proof of the pudding is in the eating.</b> I’ll give it a go tonight.”</p>	<p>you can only judge the quality of something after it has been tested or experienced over time</p>
<p><b>when in Rome (do as the Romans do)</b></p>	<p>“On a recent trip to Oman I found myself <b>doing as the Romans do</b> – wearing a headscarf and a long-sleeved blouse.”</p>	<p>when visiting a foreign country or in a situation which is unfamiliar, one should fit in with the habits and lifestyle of the place</p>
<p><b>(speech is silver but), silence is golden</b></p>	<p>“I don’t get involved in their marital quarrels because <b>silence is always golden.</b>”</p>	<p>in some situations it’s often best not to say anything</p>
<p><b>you can’t teach an old dog new tricks</b></p>	<p>“There’s no point in getting Aunt Sue a DVD when she still hasn’t worked out how to use the VCR. <b>You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.</b>”</p>	<p>it’s hard to get people to change their habits, ideas, method of work, etc. if they are set in their ways</p>
<p><b>variety is the spice of life</b></p>	<p>A: “Jill, don’t you think you’re overdoing it with your scuba diving, trekking, and hang-gliding.”                      B: “You know what they say John, <b>variety is the spice of life.</b>”</p>	<p>life is more enjoyable when it’s filled with new and exciting experiences</p>
<p><b>don’t wash your dirty linen in public</b></p>	<p>“Details of the Smith’s acrimonious divorce settlement have made front-page news. They <b>shouldn’t have washed their dirty linen in public.</b>”</p>	<p>one shouldn’t discuss private matters which may be scandalous publicly</p>

PROVERB	EXAMPLE	MEANING
<b>waste not, want not</b>	“Tommy, you should finish your meal. <b>Waste not, want not.</b> ”	if you don't waste what you have, usually spoken in reference to food and money, you'll never be short of it
<b>all's well that ends well</b>	“ <b>All's well that ends well.</b> The insurance company eventually did replace everything that we had stolen and damaged in the break in.”	in any difficult situation if everything works out all right in the end that's the only thing that matters
<b>where there's a will, there's a way</b>	“I couldn't believe she managed to get tickets for tomorrow's concert, but it only proves that <b>where there's a will, there's a way.</b> ”	if you desperately want to do something, you'll find a way of doing it
<b>two wrongs don't make a right</b>	“Even if he did abuse you for taking his parking space, you shouldn't have insulted him in return. <b>Two wrongs don't make a right.</b> ”	if someone brings harm to you or is bad to you, by reciprocating in the same way will not make the situation right

Here are some other proverbs, which are commonly used:

- You shouldn't judge a book by its cover.
- You can always judge a man by the clothes he wears.
- All that glitters is not gold.
- A rolling stone gathers no moss.