

## UNDERSTANDING IDIOMS: CULTURALLY SPECIFIC EXPRESSIONS

Every language includes ***idiomatic language: conversational expressions that have certain meanings within a culture.*** Usually, the meanings are more abstract than the words in the expression. For example, “Tina was *over the moon* about the award,” describes her feeling of excitement, not her location in space.

### WAYS TO RECOGNIZE AND DEFINE IDIOMATIC LANGUAGE

You may be reading idiomatic language if:

- you can define all of the words in a sentence, but their meanings do not match the main idea of the sentence or paragraph.
- you see two prepositions in a row (*make up for*) or a verb followed by a preposition (*jump in*).
- the ideas of a paragraph are clear, but the reason they are in the paragraph or the tone of the paragraph is not clear.

You can understand idiomatic language if you:

- build context through skimming multiple parts of a text for repeated, main ideas. Do topic, transition, and conclusion sentences have a similar idea or tone?
- notice the function and format of sentences. Is the author explaining, comparing, or analyzing? Do sentences follow a similar grammatical format in order to emphasize something?
- become comfortable with online resources. Using resources will help you learn vocabulary over time, and, unlike native-speakers, they are available at any time, even at midnight the day before your paper is due.
- become aware of the following three types of idiomatic language: phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms. Search for these terms online or discuss them with a Writing Center tutor.

### HELPFUL LINKS:

[yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com)

[dictionary.cambridge.org/us/](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/) (This one has phrasal verb blog entries and an app.)

You probably expect conversational, idiomatic language in social situations. However, it is occasionally found in academic texts. Also, your professor may assign non-academic texts that use many idioms. What can you do in these situations? Read the following example situations and strategies.

### **SITUATION #1: Idioms used in an academic source**

Sara had to read and summarize an article from a scholarly journal. She understood the main ideas, but the author's opinion seemed inconsistent. In order to write a complete summary, she needed to understand the author's tone and final opinion.

- First, she tried to **identify confusing sections of the reading** that did not seem to match the main idea or did not seem complete.
- Second, she **looked for repeated words and repeated sentence structure** in those sections. She discovered that one paragraph repeated the words *small wonder* at the beginning of two sentences.
- Third, she defined *small wonder* using an **online resource** ([yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com) and [dictionary.cambridge.org/us/](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/)). The author had used this idiom to structure a paragraph emphasizing the logical, believable nature of a result.

Sara found a possible place for an idiom, which helped her recognize and define the idiom. Try to do this when you cannot follow a main idea or opinion through every section of the text.

### **SITUATION #2: A required non-academic source**

Jason had to write a paper comparing two authors' opinions about a band. One of the required sources was an Op-Ed (an opinion article) from a non-academic magazine; idioms appeared several times in each paragraph. Even the author's main claims included expressions that were not in Standard English dictionaries.

- First, Jason tried to **build context**. He skimmed the title, picture captions, and the author's biography. He read the first and last sentence of each paragraph. He carefully read the conclusion paragraph. He began to guess the author's main opinion.
- Second, Jason tried to **identify idioms in important places** like transition sentences and the conclusion paragraph. He used **online resources** ([yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com) and [dictionary.cambridge.org/us/](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/)).
- Third, he **read the complete article a second time**, looking for more context clues while referring to the idiom definitions he found online.

Jason used context and defined idioms in important sections of the article. Try to do at least the first step before the text is discussed in class. Use notes from class to help you complete the second and third steps. Before writing the paper, discuss your final understanding of the text with your professor during office hours or compare notes with a native-speaking classmate.