

Essentials of Business Communication

Idioms and phrases with meaning and usage

Back out – to withdraw from a promise, contract: I felt grieved when he backed out of his promise to help me.

Backup – to support, to sustain: He was backed up by his union to fight for his rights

Bear out - to support, to confirm: The evidence does not bear out the charges levelled against him

Boil down – to amount to: His entire argument boiled down to the fact that he did not consider the project economically feasible

breakdown of a car, a piece of machinery – to go wrong so that it will not function: the plant broke down on account of extreme voltage fluctuations

breakout – to arise suddenly :when riots broke out in the city, all industrial activity came to a standstill

Break up – to disperse to dissolve : the meeting will break up after the President has addressed the audience

Bring out – to reveal clearly: these facts clearly bring out the beneficial effects of the liberalisation of the economic policy of the government

call back ; Mr.Shukla is busy at the moment. can u call back later?

call on : to pay a short visit : our agent regularly calls on the chemists to book orders for our medicines

call upon; to order to require: I was unfortunately called upon to give evidence against my immediate superiors

carryon- to continue; if you carryon working hard, your business will soon flourish

carryout – to execute given directions: the manager was not satisfied by the manner in which his instructions had been carried out

cast aside : to reject, to throw aside as useless: All other considerations were cast aside at the insistence of the manager

come across: to meet by chance: In the lift I came across an old friend of mine

come off - to take place: the inauguration of the plant came off on Tuesday last

cry down: to depreciate, to make little of: one must not always cry down the suggestions given by others

cut down – to reduce: we have taken some effective measures to cut down the expenditure

cut out: designed for : you appear to be cut out to be a company secretary

fall back on – to make use of in an emergency: if I do not get this job, I can fall back on my father's resources

fall in with – to agree ; I found it difficult to persuade the chairman to fall in with my suggestions

fall through - to fail to materialise : the project fell through for want of adequate funds

get through – to a person : I have been trying to get through to Mr.Yadav the whole morning. He does not appear to be in his office

Gloss over – to explain away : such serious lapses cannot be glossed over, however

go down- to be accepted : our finance minister will go down in history as the most innovative economist of our country

hold back – to keep back , to conceal; no important facts should be held back from the policy makers

hold on – will you hold on for a moment ? I will just put you through to Mrs.Mehra

labour under- to remain under an impression: Let us not labour under the illusion that these measures will generate immediate profits

Let off – to allow to go free to release : In spite of the mistake being serious, he was let off with a warning

Make out – to discover, to find out: I cannot make out the thrust of this document

pull through – to go to the end of something difficult and dangerous with some success: the scheme was ultimately pulled through

run out- to come to an end : The supplies of petrol are sure to run out

see through – to comprehend, to discern : we could easily see through their evasive tactics

tell upon – to affect – hardwork told upon the secretary's health

other idioms and phrases

Above all – that which is of greatest importance: be cheerful in your looks, polite in your behaviour but above all be sincere to your work

above board – honest and frank: Unless you are above board in your dealings, you will not be able to earn the good will of your clients

To add fuel to the fire – to offer additional cause for anger or dispute : the laborers were already indignant over the rigid attitude of the mill owners

All the same – immaterial : whether my proposal is accepted or turned down, it is all the same to me.

Apple of discord – something that causes friction, quarrels or discord: the right to use irrigation water often proves to be an apple of discord among the farmers

Argues – eyed – extremely vigilant, watchful: No activity can escape the Argus – eyed guard posted on duty at the gate

(to be) at a loss – puzzled, unable to decide : There is a great discrepancy between the oral instruction and the written instruction. I am at a loss to know what to do.

at a man's beck and call – to be at someone's service : go and get it yourself. Don't think I am at your beck and call

At a stretch – continuously : If we work for inordinately long hours at a stretch, we are bound to make mistakes

At arm's length – at a distance in a state of unfriendliness: It should be one's avowed policy to keep the flatterers at arm's length

at daggers drawn – bitterly hostile : They have been at daggers drawn ever since they had a dispute over the sharing of the profits

at home: to feel comfortable – the office environment is so congenial that the employees feel perfectly at home there

at loggerheads – disagreeing or quarrelling with – it is unfortunate that India has mostly been at logger heads with all its neighbours

At one's wit's end – wholly puzzled and not knowing what to do – I was at my wit's end the moment I discovered that my credit card had been stolen

At random: in a haphazard manner: we picked some people at random and gave them the questionnaire

at sea – confused I am completely at sea with this new system of filing the income tax accounts of the firm are all at sixes and sevens

at eleventh hour – at the last moments – at the eleventh hour, we discovered that we had run short of funds

Backstairs influence – secret and improper influence: He got this job not by virtue of his merit but by backstairs influence

Bad Blood – ill feeling : MR. Munjal's out of turn promotion has created bad blood between him and his colleagues

to beat a retreat – to withdraw to retire as a sign of defeat – when the gangsters saw the police arriving, they beat a hasty retreat

(TO) bat about the bush – to say things in a round –about manner : having no convincing argument to defend his point, the speaker began to beat about the bush.

To have a bee in one's bonnet – to have a crazy idea or notion in one's head: He has no resources whatsoever but he is bent upon setting up a rice mill; he must be having a bee in his bonnet

To beg the question – to assume that which requires to be proved : To talk about this company's future begs the question whether it has a future

To beggar description – to be so extraordinary that no words may be adequate to describe it; the atrocities committed by the Nazis beggar description

Behind one's back – in one's absence: The policy of flattering someone to his face and criticising him behind his back does not pay in the long run

Behind the scenes – the grim reality behind attractive appearances – this novel lets us behind the scenes and acquaints us with the hard life of a call centre employee

Between Scylla and Charybdis – between two unpleasant situations – I am between scylla and charybdis. If I resign, starvation stares me in the face. If I continue working here, there is nothing but humiliation for me.

Between the devil and the deep sea; between two fires – both the expressions mean the same as between scylla and charybdis

To bid fair – to seem lively, to promise well: with an enterprising temperament and a management degree from a prestigious institution, she bids fair to be a successful manager

to bide one's time – to wait patiently: let us bide our time till the machine is repaired and we are able to resume work

bird's eye view: a general view of something : climb to the top of the Qutub Minar if you want to have a bird's eye view of Delhi

Black sheep: a person who betrays his associates

In black and white: written on paper in ink

A blessing in disguise: a misfortune that later proves to be a blessing

to blow hot and cold in the same breath: to be favourable and unfavourable by turns: I can never rely on a person who is in the habit of blowing hot and cold in the same breath

to boil down to : to finally amount to : our problem boils down to just one thing paucity of funds

a bolt from the blue – an utterly unexpected blow or disaster : The large scale damage to our factory because of the tsunami proved to be a bolt from the blue

a bone of contention – this expression means the same as ' an apple of discord'

bread and butter – the means of life, food, clothing etc: our society should be so reorganised that everybody gets at least bread and butter

To breathe one's last – to die : Those who lead a contented life breathe their last in peace

To bring to book – to call to account , to punish: If this project report is not submitted by Monday, we are sure to be brought to book

to build castles in the air – to think of unattainable targets: In our office we need down to earth people, not those used to building castles in the air

Bull in a china shop; one who is careless about the way he or she behaves and is therefore destructive: she did not realise the delicacy of the situation and behaved in the meeting like a bull in a china shop

to burn one's fingers - to suffer loss or hurt as by investing money in some financial enterprise or taking part in another quarrel; you will burn your fingers if you try to bring about reconciliation between them

to burn the candle at both ends : to spend resources extravagantly: after the first years phenomenal profits he started burning the candle at both ends and soon fell into a debt trap

to bury the hatchet – to forget past quarrels : all round development of the nation is possible only if different communities bury the hatchet and work together

a burning question: an issue that is being hotly discussed everywhere: runaway inflation that the government does not know how to curb is the burning question of the day

by and by – gradually –don't lose patience things will improve by and by

by dint of - by virtue of - success can be achieved only by dint of hard work and a bit of God's grace

by fair means or foul – by any means good or bad; in the modern materialistic society, the only aim of the people appears to be to acquire money by fair means or foul

by fits and starts – without steady application, at intervals – success demands incessant hard work working by fits and starts does not take one anywhere

by hook or crook – by fair means or foul

by leaps and bounds – at a rapid pace: Information technology has developed by leaps and bounds. Often we find it difficult to keep pace with it

To call a spade a spade – to be straightforward in one's talk – he who calls a spade a spade fails to win immediate popularity but wins people's admiration in the long run

to call to account – to demand an explanation : at whatever level the mistake is committed, it is the departmental head who will be called to account

to carry the day: to win a victory – though the Australians carried the day in the final match, theirs was not the best team of the tournament

to cast a slur upon – to comment derogatively on someone's reputation – his comments cast a slur upon the integrity of his employees

a cat's paw - a person used as tool by another: they tried to use their accountant as a cat's paw to present a false picture of their progress

a child's play – something easy to perform : getting admission to an IIM is not a child's play

a close-fisted man – a miser; people who appear to be close-fisted often donate very liberally to genuine causes

to clean the Augean stables: to remove the corruption and inefficiency in administration : notwithstanding tall claims and promises the UPA government has not been able to clean the Augean stables and provide good governance

A close shave: a narrow escape

A cock and bull story: an absurd tale or an unconvincing pretext invented to cover up a fault

In cold blood – deliberately without any provocation : the terrorists killed several correspondents in cold blood

cold comfort - very little satisfaction : the words of consolation my boss uttered after I was denied a well-deserved promotion gave me only cold comfort

To come off with flying colours – to be victorious – I hope you will come off with flying colours in your interview

to come to grief – to come to suffer : if you invest all your savings in the stock

to come to light – to be known

to come to terms- to get reconciled to something

to come to the point – to speak plainly on the real issue

to cope with – to deal successfully with

crocodile tears – hypocritical show of sympathy

to cross the rubicon – to do something which cannot be changed later and which will strongly influence future events

A cry in the wilderness – a warning or advice which goes unheeded

to cry over spilt milk – to regret uselessly

to cut a sorry figure – to create a bad impression

cut and dried – already prepared

to cut one short – to interrupt and stop another who is speaking

to cut the gordian knot – to solve a difficult problem by bold measures

to cut to the quick – to hurt intensely – the office peon was cut to the quick when he was accused of theft

to dance attendance on – to be constantly at the service of

a dark horse – an unexpected winner

a dead letter – a something no longer in force

to die in harness- to continue in ones post or at one occupations until ones death

to do a good turn – to render a service to someone

a dog in the manger policy – the policy of a selfish man who refuses to allow his neighbour to use what he himself cannot

double dealing- trickery and deceit

to draw a blank – to be unsuccessful in an enterprise

to drive a hard bargain – to be uncompromising in making a deal

to eat the humble pie – to suffer humiliation

to egg on – to instigate to urge

elbow room – the freedom to do what one wants

to end in smoke – to yield no practical result

enough and to spare – having this in sufficient quantity

an eye wash – a deception mere profession

to face the music – to face criticism

fair and square – honest, just : a fair weather friend

to fall a prey – to be victim of

to fall flat = to fail to create any interest and effect

to fall short of – to be less than

to fall to someone's lot – someone being chosen to do a thing

a far cry – very distant

to feather one's nest – to provide for one's own comfort and interest

to fight shy of – to avoid to keep away from

to find fault with – to blame

to fish in troubled waters – to make profit when others are in trouble

a fish out of water – in uncongenial and uncomfortable surroundings

to flog a dead horse- to waste effort on something that there is no chance of succeeding at

to follow suit – to do as some other person has done before

a fool's paradise – a state of imaginary or unreal happiness

french leave – absence from duty without taking proper leave

from hand to mouth- without making any provision for the morrow

in full swing – at the height of activity –

to get into hot water – to get into awkward situation

to get a hand of the thing – to understand the general meaning and implications of anything

to get the better of – to score a victory over

to give a piece of one's mind- to rebuke

give and take – mutually obliging each other

gift of the gab – the ability to speak

to give one the slip – to evade or escape from a person who is seeking you

to give oneself airs – to be self important

to give ear to – to pay attention to

to give the cold shoulder – to treat coldly and formally

to give vent to – to express vocally

to give way – to yield to surrender

to go astray – to follow a wrong path

to go on a fool's errand – to go on an expedition which leads to a foolish end

to get to pieces – to be wrecked completely

good offices – influences

a good samaritan – a kind and charitable person

a good turn – an act of kindness

to go to the dogs – to be ruined to be damned

to go to the wall – to be allowed to suffer hardships

to grease the palm of – to bribe

the green-eyed monster - jealously

to be hands in glove with – to be on intimate terms

to handover – to transfer something anothers possession

to hang fire – to be delayed or postponed

to harp on the same string – to repeat the same argument

hard and fast – definite, rigid

to be hard up – to be short of money

to have an axe to grind – to have a personal or selfish motive in doing soemthign

to have ones hands full – to be very busy

to have too many irons in the fire – to have too many projects demanding attentions

head and shoulders above – for above than or superior to

a herculean task- any work requireing very great effort

high time – ripe time

to hit below the belt – to strike another unfairly

hobsons choice – a choice that is really no choice

to hold good- to remain valid

hoping against hope – to entertain hope even when there is no basis for hope

to be in a fix – to be in difficulty

In a nutshell – briefly and concisely

in ones element – in the right mood

in ones good books – in ones favour

in ones sleeves – secretly

in ones true colours – as a person really is distinct from what he pretends to be

in the long run – eventually in the end

in the nick of time- at the exact time

in the teeth of – in direct opposition to

ins and outs – details

in the bargain - in addition extra

jack of all trades – one who can turn his hand to any kind of business but is expert at none

a jaundiced eye – a prejudiced mind

to jump to a conclusion – to arrive at a conclusion hastily

to keep abreast of – to keep oneself informed

to keep an eye on – to watch

to keep ones eyes open – to be on the alert

to keeps ones fingers crossed- to wait expactantly

to keep pace with – to move at an equal speed

to keep the ball rolling – to continue the conversation succsffully

to keep up apperances – to remain outwardly unchanged

to kick u p a row – to cause disturbance

kith and kin- blood relations

to kill two birds with one stone – to achieve two results with one effort

to lay heads together- to consult and to discuss

to lay ones hands on – to obtain posession of

to lay stress on – to empahsise

to lay waste – to destroy

to lead by the nose – to control a person completely

a leap in the dark – an action the result of which cannot be foreseen

to leave no stone unturned – to do ones best for soemthing

to lose ground – to lag behind

to lose heart – to lose courage

a maiden speech – the very first speech delivered by someone in his life

to make a clean sweep – to win everything that is available

to make a fool of oneself – to exhibit one's foolishness by awkward behaviour

to make a virtue of necessity – to treat something one is obliged to do as if it were done from choice

to make amends – to compensate for some injustice or wrong

to make both ends meet – to make one's income meet one's expenditure

to make hay while the sun shines – to make use of a favourable opportunity to win an advantage

to make head or tail of – to understand

to make light of – to treat as if of no importance

to make much ado about nothing – to make a great fuss about a trifle

to make one's mark – to do something noteworthy

to make up one's mind – to decide to determine

a mare's nest – something illusory

(not to) mince matters – to not take plainly or bluntly

to mind one's p's and q's – to take care of minute details

a nine days wonder – something that causes a great excitement for a short time

null and void- ineffective

off and on- now and again

off-hand – without having thought over something earlier

off the track – away from the proper subject

on tenterhooks – in a state of suspense or uncertainty

on the eve of – at the time preceding some event

on the face of it – judging from what is apparent

on the horns of a dilemma – in a state of uncertainty

on the spur of the moment – acting under the first impulse, without preparation

(to be) on the wane – to be on the decline

on the verge of - on the brink of

once in a blue moon- very seldom indeed

an open question – a matter of discussion, something not yet decided

an open secret – a secret that is well known

out and out - thoroughly

Out of questions – impossible

to be out of order – not to be in a working condition

over and above – in addition to

over head and ears – completely

part and parcel – an essential part

to pay one in one's own coin – to treat another in as harsh a manner as he had treated you

to pay through the nose – to pay a very heavy price

penelope's web – a piece of work that goes on and on

penny wise and pound of foolish ; to be very careful while spending small sums of money and to become extravagant where large sums of money are concerned

to pick a bone with – to pick a quarrel with

to play a double game – to do one thing fairly and openly and another thing unfairly and the secretly

to play fast and loose – to behave recklessly or irresponsibly

to play into the hands of – to be controlled by

to play the second fiddle – to work

to play the game – to deal in a fair and honest manner

to pocket an insult – to tolerate the insult

point blank – directly, plainly

to poison the ears of – to make someone prejudiced against another

to poke one's nose into – to interfere unnecessarily

to pour oil on troubled waters – to take steps to pacify a situation

pros and cons – arguments for and against

to pull along with – to act in harmony with

to pull one's leg – to play joke with one

to pull oneself together - to collect one's faculties

to pull the strings – to manipulate from behind the scenes

to put heads together – to confer

to put on airs – to look important

to put one's cards on the table – to be absolutely frank and conceal nothing

to put ones best foot forward – to try ones best

to put ones shoulder to the wheel – to try oneself and not to look to others for help

to rack ones brains – to exert one's brains to the utmost

rank and file – ordinary worknig members of an organisation

ready money – cash

to read between the lines – to see the wrippers's concealed meaning

a red letter day – a day memorable for some joyful event

red rag to a bull – something or somebody that specially provokes someone

red tapism- official formalities that delay action

to rest on one's laurels – to lead a relaxed

without rhyme or reason – without sense

to rise a phoenix – to rise up to former glory after being totally destroyed

to rise to the occasion – to prove equal to an emergency and handle it boldly

to rule the roost – to be the one who dictates others

a scapegoat – one punished for the misdeed of others

to scatter to the winds – to waste, to squander away

scold free- safe

to see eye to eye with – to have the same opinion on a subject

to set store on - to consider (something) to be

to set the Thames on fire – to cause excitement

to steer clear of – to lead successfully through a difficult phase

to serve one right - to give one the punishment one deserves

to show off – to make a vain display

to show the white feather= to act like a coward

a snake in the grass – a secret foe

to speak volumes – to supply plenty of evidence

to split hairs – to make fine distinctions

to spread like wild fire – to spread rapidly

to stand in a good stead – to prove useful in a difficulty

to steal a march upon – to gain an advantage over a competitor

to stick to the point – not to digress

at a stone's throw - - quite nearby

storm in a tea cup – disturbance marked by much noise but of no importance

to strain every nerve – to try very hard

to strike when the iron is hot – to act with energy and promptness

sum and substance = the essence, the meaning in nutshell

the sword of damocles – a danger that constantly threatens a person

to take a cue- to take a hint

to talk shop – to talk about business

tall talk – pretentious claims

to take advantage of – to gain an advantage of someone's else weakness or one's own strength

to take exception to – to find fault with

to take heart – to take courage

to take hold of – to seize, to grasp

to take one by surprise – to come upon one suddenly and unexpectedly

to take pains – to make a considerable effort

to take the bull by the horns – to deal decisively with a difficult or unpleasant situation

to take stock of – to examine or assess

to take to heart – to feel grieved

to take to task - to rebuke , to punish

to be taken back – surprised

a thankless task - a task that is not appreciated

the thin edge of the wedge – the first small beginnings which may lead to what is serious

through and through – entirely and completely

through thick and thin –under all circumstances

to throw cold water on – to discourage to dissuade

to throw down the gauntlet – to issue a challenge
to throw dust into the eyes of – to deceive
to throw mud at – to speak ill of
to tide over – to overcome
tooth and nail – violently, fiercely
topsy turvy – upside down
to turn a deaf ear – to pay no heed
to turn over a new leaf – to change ones way of life
to turn the tables on – to reverse the position
a turning point – a point at which decisive changes occur
under the thumb of – under the control of
up to the mark – measuring up to a certain standard
ups and downs – prosperity and adversity, vicissitudes
to wash ones hands of – to refuse to do anything more with
to weather the storm – to face difficulties successfully
a white elephant – anything very costly but now very useful
a wild goose chase – a futile pursuit
to win hands down – to win comfortably convincingly
to win laurels – to gain honour
with a grain of salt – not at the face value
with an eye to – with a definite purpose
with open arms – with a warm welcome
yeomans service – excellent work