

## Words of wisdom: idiomatic phrases

One of the things that makes the English language so fun is that it has so many idiomatic phrases. Why say “it’s raining a lot” when you can use fun idioms like “it’s bucketing down”? An idiomatic phrase is a combination of words with a meaning that is hard to guess just by looking at the individual words. You can’t change the words or the word order. You have to learn the complete idiom and the right context to use it in. But idioms are great fun to say and the best thing is that there are buckets of them!

Look at these screenshots from the Macmillan online dictionary and see how the complete idiomatic phrases are given as well as their definitions and examples.

**let your hair down** DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS  
PHRASE INFORMAL

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**DEFINITIONS** 1

**1** to relax and enjoy yourself because you are in a comfortable environment  
*We need a place where young folk can let their hair down and enjoy themselves.*

**shake like a leaf** DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS  
PHRASE

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**DEFINITIONS** 1

**1** to shake a lot, for example because you are cold, nervous, or afraid  
*Put on a sweater – you’re shaking like a leaf!*

### Activity 1

Complete the idioms with a word from the box. If you need help, look in the Macmillan online dictionary. Then check the meaning of each idiom.

bearings chance corner inch matter mile mind pocket prey spot wisdom

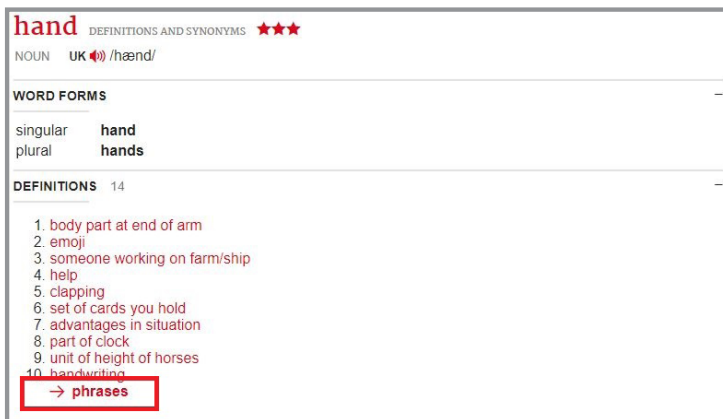
- a not give an inch
- b go out of your \_\_\_\_\_
- c to fall \_\_\_\_\_ to something
- d the heart of the \_\_\_\_\_
- e to find your \_\_\_\_\_
- f a sore \_\_\_\_\_
- g words of \_\_\_\_\_
- h turn a \_\_\_\_\_
- i on the off \_\_\_\_\_
- j stand out a \_\_\_\_\_
- k pick someone’s \_\_\_\_\_


# VOCABULARY BUILDERS

## Activity 2

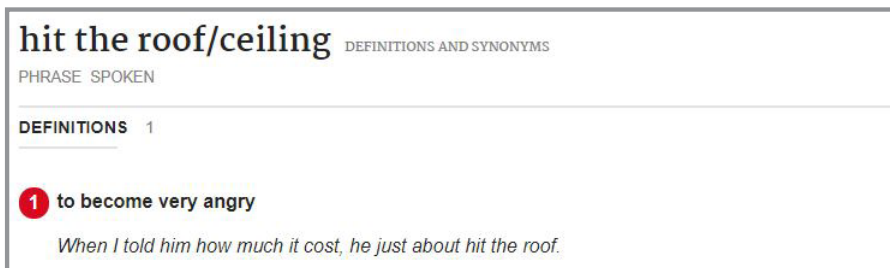
To find an idiomatic phrase in the dictionary, try following these steps:

- Decide which is the keyword in the idiomatic phrase. Usually this word is a noun or a verb, but it might be an adjective or adverb.
- Look up the keyword in the Macmillan online dictionary to see if the idiom is listed in the phrases section. If the idiom isn't listed, try one of the other words. For example, the idiom *have your hands full* isn't listed in the phrases section of *have*—you can find it in the phrases section of *hands*.



**hand** DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS ★★★  
 NOUN UK  /hænd/  
 WORD FORMS  
 singular **hand**  
 plural **hands**  
 DEFINITIONS 14  
 1. body part at end of arm  
 2. emoji  
 3. someone working on farm/ship  
 4. help  
 5. clapping  
 6. set of cards you hold  
 7. advantages in situation  
 8. part of clock  
 9. unit of height of horses  
 10. handwriting  
 → **phrases**

Guess the keyword in this idiom. Then look up that word in the dictionary and see if the idiom is in the phrases section.



**hit the roof/ceiling** DEFINITIONS AND SYNONYMS  
 PHRASE SPOKEN  
 DEFINITIONS 1  
 1 to become very angry  
 When I told him how much it cost, he just about hit the roof.

keyword: \_\_\_\_\_

## Activity 3

Read the sentences and underline the idiomatic phrase in each. Then guess the keyword in the idiom and look up this word to find the meaning of the idiom.

- |  |              |
|--|--------------|
|  | keyword      |
| a She has always been the <u>apple of her father's eye</u> .           | <u>apple</u> |
| b Sally got cold feet at the last moment and called off the wedding.   | _____        |
| c It's been difficult but now there is light at the end of the tunnel. | _____        |
| d He took the plunge and asked her to marry him.                       | _____        |
| e I'm trying to get back in her good books.                            | _____        |
| f We've got her confession right here in black and white.              | _____        |