

Understanding Shakespeare's Idioms

An idiom or idiomatic expression is a group of words in a fixed order that have a meaning which cannot be worked out by looking up the individual words in a dictionary. Their meaning has to be learned.

Examples:

a piece of cake – easy to do

"This exercise is really easy, it's a piece of cake!"

It's raining cats and dogs. – It's raining heavily.

"Don't forget your raincoat when you go out. It's been raining cats and dogs all morning."

Shakespeare wrote his plays more than 400 years ago but the images he creates in our minds can be just as lively and interesting today as they were then. Some of the idioms that can be found in Shakespeare's writings are listed below. They are all still used in today's English!

good riddance (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 2, Scene 1) - pleasure of being rid of somebody who is annoying

"Do you remember Eric, who never completed any of the work he was supposed to do? He left yesterday. Good riddance!"

dead as a doornail (*II Henry VI*, Act 4, Scene 10) - completely or certainly dead

"The plants are all dead as a doornail, did you not give them any water at all?"

it's Greek to me (*Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2) – something that cannot be understood

"He tried to explain the rules of the game, but it was all Greek to me."

salad days (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 1, Scene 5) - days of youthful inexperience; also, a period when somebody was at the peak of their abilities—not necessarily in that person's youth

"In my salad days, I used to go mountain climbing every weekend."

to be tongue-tied (*I Henry VI*, Act 2, Scene 4) - speechless, silent; also shy, reserved

"In their presence I became self-conscious and tongue-tied."

Language

in a pickle (*The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1) - to be in a troublesome or difficult situation

"Am I in a pickle! I accidentally made plans to meet with two different friends at the same time!"

without rhyme or reason (*As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 2) - Expressing lack of good sense or reasonableness.

"His managing style was without rhyme or reason."

Here are some more idioms Shakespeare used. Can you match the idiom with its meaning?

I haven't slept a wink.	A life that seems to have been protected by a charm, magic or spell.
Love's blind.	to hide so that you will not be caught
He's eaten me out of house and home.	When you love someone, you don't see their faults.
to lie low	to eat a lot
to lead a charmed life	I couldn't sleep last night.

Now can you complete each sentence with the correct idiom?

Last night my neighbour's dog was all alone in the house and would not stop howling. I _____.

_____. Jim is truly terrible at buying presents but his girlfriend doesn't seem to care.

Charlie is still small, but she has a big appetite, so don't be surprised if she _____.

Margaret is really angry at me because I broke her vase. I think it is best if I _____ for a little while.

I seem to have always _____. Other than a cold I have never been really ill.