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A Collection of Original Stories and Lessons for Teaching Idiomatic Expressions

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A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL STORIES AND LESSONS FOR
TEACHING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for
International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont

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FILE ABSTRACT FORM

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ABSTRACT:

This project consists of a series of twelve original stories that each incorporate 10-20 commonly used American English idiomatic expressions. A list of the expressions used is included with each story. Each expression is defined and an example of its use is given.

Eight different activities that can be used to work with the stories are offered. Included are some techniques for teaching the students some important metalinguistical phrases. Finally suggestions are made to other teachers as to how they can write their own stories.

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This project by Elisabeth C. Gilster is accepted in its present form.

DATE

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Special thanks go to my dear friends and family who gave me the inspiration to write these stores about them. Thanks to my wonderful students in Mexico and Japan who participated in the activities and allowed me to refine them as we worked with them. Thanks to Ruth Epstein, MAT XV, who encouraged me and helped me get started on this project. Thanks to Mike Jerald, my adviser and to Jackie Blencowe, my reader for their patience and advice.

INTRODUCTION

This project evolved during the course of my teaching experiences in Mexico and Japan. As I was faced with teaching extremely advanced students who had studied English for many years and many of whom were English teachers themselves, I was a little unsure of what to teach them.

Advanced ESL students often need to work on pronunciation and intonation but that wasn't what I wanted to focus on in the class. I considered basing the class on cultural awareness, but then I felt as though it was merely a conversation class and that possibly I was enjoying and learning from it even more than the students. That didn't seem right either. I was challenged by these classes.

Inspired by this challenge, I set out to create something to take into the classroom that was personal, informative and full of things that they could learn from. I wrote a series of stories using ten to twenty idiomatic expressions in each story. Using this material I was able to create a collection of lessons that I found to be useful and enjoyable in the classroom.

I discovered the stories were wonderfully rich in content both in terms of vocabulary development and cultural awareness training. None of the stories are factual, but they are all about situations that could have possibly happened to the individuals involved. They are all about real people

including myself and I feel they are all believable. As a result, students tend to be very interested in the stories and that enables them to learn more effectively.

This project will attempt to illustrate the value of using these stories or other stories that teachers can write for their own classes. There are four sections in this project.

The first section will explain why the teaching of idiomatic expressions is valuable in the classroom and why these stories are a good tool to accomplish this.

The second section will provide suggestions for their use in the classroom. A few of these techniques were original; I planned them, tried them and revised them. Others, occurred spontaneously with the help of my students.

The next section will include the stories and a list of all the idioms that are used in each story. Each idiom will be defined and an example of its use will be given.

In conclusion, suggestions as to how other teachers can write their own stories will be offered. It's very easy and very enjoyable for both the teacher and the students. Finally, there will be a discussion of what writing and using these stories has done for me as a teacher.

SECTION ONE

JUSTIFICATION

This section deals with the reasons why students must be given an opportunity to learn idiomatic expressions and why these stories are so useful. This project will be justified from both the students' and the teachers' point of view.

Many years ago, when I was a student of Spanish, I remember being horrified when my teacher handed out a list of 100 Spanish idiomatic expressions and instructed us to memorize them. Not only did it seem a formidable task, but it also seemed useless. I went ahead and memorized them so that I could get a good grade in the class. The next summer I traveled to Mexico and to my surprise and delight, I heard people using those expressions in everyday speech. I was also able to incorporate them into my own speech and thus was able to communicate in a more natural manner with the people.

Many of my students who have worked with these stories have expressed similar feelings of surprise and reward when they have encountered these expressions in their reading and especially in movies.

It's much easier for students to grasp the feeling that an idiom produces when they can comprehend and empathize with the situation and the speakers involved. All of the stories in this project give descriptions of the characters, their

personalities and the situations in a manner that is intelligible to the student. The idioms are all used in context so the students can acquire knowledge of the expression naturally, just as native speakers have. Even so, many students are puzzled by idioms, especially when they encounter them "en masse." I find that this is alleviated by focusing students on the characters and the situations, rather than the "difficult" language. Then they can really create vivid, comprehensible images to link with the language.

English speakers from all areas of the United States and Canada speak their own brands of English. Most of it is very colorful and expressive, but it is not the kind of English that a textbook can offer. I believe a student of EFL or ESL must at least become aware that most people in the United States and Canada do use these expressions in normal every day speech. However, I believe that only high intermediate and advanced students can be expected to incorporate such expressions into their own spoken English.

Each story in this project is about typical people from the United States and Canada, all of whom are friends of mine. None of them are famous or particularly unusual in any way. They are all people I enjoy and would like to introduce to my classes. This way the students are able to become better acquainted with Americans and Canadians other than the instructor.

The situations are all typical examples of the life and trials that the average American or Canadian has. To my surprise, I have discovered that many of the idioms themselves suggest conflicts of some kind. Therefore, I've had to incorporate problems into the lives of my good friends and myself. It is true that life, no matter the culture, is full of such encounters. I don't generally like to focus attention on them especially if they are minor. However, I feel that if we can learn from our disagreements, then they are useful experiences. The students can, by working with these stories, understand how some Americans and Canadians deal with these problems and make comparisons to their own culture.

For example, in one class, I felt as if we were finished with a story. They had completed various activities with it and I felt they had mastered the expressions. I thought an interesting way to close the unit would be to ask if they thought such a conflict could occur in their country. What I thought would be a five minute talk became an hour long, fascinating and emotionally revealing, cultural discussion. After the discussion the class became very close. The students, who had been divided due to differences in age and experiences, became united in their common culture. Also, they came to understand me and my beliefs and values a little better.

Each story carries with it some message, some lesson to be learned. One deals with a young couple and their efforts to cope with the pressure that the young woman's career puts on their relationship. Another has to do with a young man's struggle to start his own solar construction business. Others tend to be more routine, dealing with family dramas or problems between friends and business partners. Even though the stories may be full of problems, the endings are all happy.

From a teacher's point of view, the utility of these stories serves many needs. First of all, they provide the teachers with rich and informative material that they can use with high intermediate and advanced students. Not only are they a great resource of language and culture but they also lend themselves quite nicely to a variety of techniques, some of which I will describe in this project.

Another practical benefit for the teacher is that these stories provide a natural inroads to cultural discussions such as the one I've described. This is useful for students who are in need of increasing their cultural awareness as well as linguistic knowledge. This is also useful for a teacher who more often than not, profits and learns from such discussions, especially if the teacher is away from his or her homeland.

Finally, a major benefit for me in using these stories is that it brings me closer to my students and to the friends and

family that the stories are about. It's great fun to introduce and share my friends with my classes. My students seem quite interested in knowing my friends. I also think that it brings the students closer to me and to each other. Often they will volunteer more personal things about themselves once they see that I'm willing to do that myself.

SECTION TWO

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

To introduce these activities, I must identify some of my assumptions about teaching and learning. First of all I believe that the teacher and the students all need to be mentally present in the class so that they can give all their attention to the learning tasks. To be present in this sense is to be focussing completely on the target language without being distracted by anything else. In order to encourage this presence in the class, the materials need to be interesting to the class and the teacher. Therefore, if I sense that the students don't really care about learning about American culture or learning about idioms, then I wouldn't suggest using these materials.

I feel that activities used in a class should require the student's active involvement. Unless the student puts some energy into learning, he or she will not learn much. I've found in some classes that the students are not initially willing to participate, many times they are shy or afraid to make mistakes. In these activities the students are encouraged to let go of their shyness and fear and become creative and active in their own learning. Some of these activities may make the student feel uncomfortable at first, but after the student sees that all the students in the class are

participating, he or she will not want to be left out. I always encourage the more outgoing students to participate first.

Within this compilation of activities, I've included a section, which I will refer to as "Control"¹, which I have found effective in providing the students with the language that they need to control a speaker of English. As the students become comfortable with this language of control, they sense a new power of understanding. As a result, they become more active in the class. Once this happens, they can control any speaker of English, anywhere and anytime. These stories lend themselves beautifully to the use and practice of this technique. However, I feel these stories are just one of the great resources with which the students can work using this language of control.

I use the stories differently in each activity. Sometimes I give the story out at the beginning and we work with it on paper as will be described in this section. Many times I wait until we've worked with a story a while before I give them a copy. This way, they aren't distracted by it while we're trying to do an activity that doesn't require them to read it.

¹ Maybin, Don. "Creating the Active Student." Presentation at JALT meeting, Hamamatsa, Japan, 9 June 1985.

Furthermore, when they finally read the story, they can understand it and that does a lot for their self confidence.

I have included a list of the expressions and the meanings with each story. I tell the students that I have it and that they will receive a copy of it at some point so that they don't feel like they have to be writing down definitions themselves and thus distracting themselves from the activity. Depending on the activity, I give out these lists at different times. Usually after we have all worked together at coming to the meaning of the expressions. I also use it as a back up in case the class begins to feel overwhelmed, I can hand it out and they can work with them to understand the story.

I have divided these activities into three sections. The first section called "Presentation," consists of two activities that can be used to present a story. The second section, called "Extension," consists of four activities that can be utilized to work with the stories or the idioms after the students have become familiar with them. Finally the last section called "Control" consists of an explanation of a technique and examples of activities that can be used in conjunction with it.

PRESENTATION

ACTIVITY #1

This is one of the easiest activities to use to present these stories. Simply give the students a copy of the story. Tell them that this is a story that contains many expressions that they may not understand. Tell them that the story will be read to them and when they hear and see an expression that they don't understand to underline it. After they hear the whole story, they can ask questions about the words and expressions that they didn't understand and therefore should have underlined. This will help to clarify the meanings of the expressions.

VARIATION:

If they are shy and don't seem to want to speak up and ask, ask them to break into groups and paraphrase the story. In groups they will discuss the story and in a short time they will ask questions as a group. I find that this helps to alleviate the anxiety produced by focusing the attention on the students individually.

When all the groups have completed the task, bring them back together as a group. Give each small group an opportunity to present its paraphrased story. By comparing the

presentations, and with the help from the teacher, all the meanings of the expressions should become clear.

ACTIVITY 2

This activity takes more time than the others, possibly two class periods. Divide the class into groups. Give each group a story. Make sure that the number of people in each group equals the number of characters in each story. The students are first to study their story and come to understand the meanings of the expressions. They do this by asking the teacher questions and/or using the paper with the definitions and examples. Then they are to practice acting out the story. The teacher will act as the director and coach the students working on the pronunciation and intonation and correct usage of the expressions. When the groups are ready, they will come back together as a group and perform the stories for the other groups. After each performance, the class discusses their perceptions of what occurred in the story and the performing group helps the other groups to understand the expressions used in the story.

EXTENSION

ACTIVITY 3

The students can work individually or in small groups in this activity. After the students have a good grasp on the meanings of the expressions, have them write their own stories using them. In order not to overwhelm them, tell them to use a certain number of them, or as many as they can incorporate into their stories, but that you don't expect them to use all of them. After they have completed their stories, have them read them to the class or even better have them perform them.

At this point the students should be acquainted enough with the idioms so that they can understand the stories or performances without clarification. This activity is usually very enjoyable because the students aren't having to deal with anything new, except for what they themselves have created.

ACTIVITY 4

This activity requires some additional preparation by the teacher. Choose six idioms that have been worked with that need to be reviewed. In this example, some of the ones that begin with the words "to make" have been chosen. Write a six line story using one of the idioms in each line. Make the story have a well defined sequence or time line, so that you can

scramble the sentences and the students can put them in the right order. To present the sentences, write each sentence on a separate sheet of paper. Instead of using the idiom, use the equivalent meaning of it and underline it. Here is an example of a story:

When I came to Brattleboro last month, I went immediately and directly to the Common Ground. (made a beeline)

When I arrived, I looked at the dinners on the menu and they looked very delicious. (made my mouth water)

During dinner I learned that the Common Ground is not afraid of the consequences of their political views and actions. (makes no bones about)

After dinner I heard of some terrible things that are happening in Central America that frightened me. (made my hair stand on end)

When I paid the bill, I found that the Common Ground doesn't make a lot of money from its customers. (make a killing)

After I got home, I told my roommate that the Common Ground is a good place to go when you want to meet your financial obligations. (make ends meet)

Put each sentence on a separate sheet of paper. Have the class divide into 5 or six groups. Give each group one sentence. As a group they are to substitute to correct idiomatic expression for the underlined words in their sentence. Then they are to memorize their sentence. If there are five groups, write the first sentence on the board and have the class decide together what the correct idiom is. Tell them that that is the first sentence of the story. Designate two or more stations in the class (depending on the size of the class) and have the groups divide and go to different stations. There they shall find one member from each of the groups who has memorized their sentence. Then they need to work together to decide how to put the story together. If there are an odd number of students, they will choose a station and assist the others in ordering the sentences. Then each station will tell the story with each student reciting their sentence. The stations will compare the stories to see if they are all the same.

ACTIVITY #5

Ask the students if they have any questions about anything that happened in the story. Ask them if they think that the story could have occurred in their culture. Find out why or why not.

ACTIVITY #6

Ask the students if they have any idioms that mean the same things in their native language. See if they can translate them word for word into English and share them with the class. The students can learn a lot about each other's culture.

CONTROL

The language taught through this technique is very simple and may seem too elementary for the students for whom the stories are appropriate. I was impressed in Japan with the fact that many of the students weren't able to control English speakers so that they could understand them in an acceptable way. Often they did it with me but it was done by making a gesture or an utterance in Japanese that I could understand but most native speakers of English wouldn't understand. Therefore, I felt it was necessary to teach this language to even some of the advanced students in my classes.

CONTROL*

*teacher writes
**students write

STOP*

EXCUSE ME**
PARDON ME**

UNDERSTAND*

ONCE MORE PLEASE**
SPEAK LOUDER PLEASE**
SPEAK SLOWER PLEASE**
WHAT DOES _____ MEAN?**
HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT?**

CHECK YOURSELF*

DO YOU MEAN _____?**

The first time this technique is used, produce this chart on brown butcher paper with the help of my students. Leave the chart on display in the classroom for subsequent lessons.

Start by telling the students that there are only a few things they need to know to control and understand and speaker of English. Then tell them that there are two very common and polite expressions that they can use to stop a speaker. Say, "What would you say to stop me if I begin talking about my brother John?..." Then, without warning and as a surprise to them, start talking faster and softer and use words that you know they don't know. The students will look perplexed, encourage them to stop you. by pointing to the word STOP on the board or paper. The the students will eventually say "excuse me" or "pardon me" or in some cases "STOP!". If the students say "STOP!," remind them that you want a polite expression. If necessary, go ahead and tell them the target expressions. Have the students write those two expressions up on the chart.

At this point, ask the students if they understand. Tell them that there is a polite way to ask for repetition and see if anyone can tell the class what it is. If not tell them that "Once more please" is an easy and polite way to ask for repetition. Have a student write it up on the chart.

To elicit "Speak slower please," repeat the same thing you said earlier and say it very fast. When the students express frustration at the speed of your speech, tell them that "Speak slower please" is a good phrase to use when you want someone to

slow down. Have a student write that expression up on the chart. Speak slower so they can understand you.

To elicit "Speak louder please," speak softly to the students and when they say they can't hear you, tell them that "Speak louder please" is a good phrase to use when you want someone to speak louder. Have a student write that up on the chart. Speak loudly so they can hear.

To elicit "What does (that) mean?," continue the story but use a word that you are certain they don't understand. For example, "My brother John is humungous." Speak slowly and clearly so they will know that there is a word they don't understand, tell them that that is the problem. When the students say they don't understand, tell them that "What does (that) mean?" is a good phrase to use to find out about a word they don't know. Have a student write it up on the chart. Tell them what the word means.

To elicit "How do you spell that?," incorporate a word into your story that you know they can read, but can't understand. For example, McDonald's, is a fast food restaurant that most students are familiar with. The restaurant is spelled the same in English all over the world but it is pronounced differently depending on the language of the country that it is located in. Continue the story about John, say "He

eats at McDonald's everyday." When they look perplexed, write the word up on the board so they can see it written and understand the word. Tell them that there are many words they may know how to read, but sometimes when they hear them, they don't recognize them. Therefore, "How do you spell that?" becomes a very useful expression. Have a student write it up on the chart.

The last thing the students need to know are the questions used to check their understanding. For this, it is good to play a miming or guessing game for vocabulary words for actions, sports or professions. Have several cards with pictures that denote actions or sports or professions (enough for each student to have a turn). The student picks a card and mimes it and the teacher guessed by saying, "Do you mean _____?" Finally, ask a student to write "Do you mean _____?" up on the chart.

Once the students have the language up on the chart that they need to control, they need practice in using it until they really feel comfortable with it. To do this, first work on intonation by tapping out the rhythm of the expression. Encourage the students to join in, tapping their pencils on their desks. Do this in unison until every one can do it together. Then you can play a guessing game (in teams for a

large class). Tap out one of the phrases and the first one to guess which one it is gets a point. The one with the most points wins. Later on, when a student doesn't use the correct expression he or she can be cued simply by tapping out the intonational pattern or by pointing to it on the chart.

To practice these new expressions, this jazz chant has proven very enjoyable and useful. A jazz chant² sets everyday situational English to jazz rhythms to demonstrate the rhythm and intonation pattern of conversational English. It is best practiced by dividing the class into two groups and reciting the words and clapping hands or snapping fingers together to maintain the rhythm.

3
HUMUNGOUS

Humungous, humungous

Excuse me, excuse me
Once more please.

I said,

Humungous, humungous

Pardon me, pardon me
What does that mean?

It means very big
It means very, very big.

Speak slower please.
Speak louder please.

² Graham, Carolyn. Jazz Chants Oxford University Press. New York. 1978.

³ Gerritson, Liesbeth. Humongous. Four Seasons Language School. Hamamatsu, Japan. 1985.

It means very big.
It means very, very big.

Pardon me, pardon me
How do you spell that?
How do you spell that?

It's spelled
H-U-M-U-N-G-O-U-S

Oh I see! Oh I see!
Do you mean Huge?

Excuse me, excuse me.
What does Huge mean?

Sometimes just knowing these expressions isn't enough to encourage the student to speak up in class. Frustrated by this, I've built another dynamic into this activity.

ACTIVITY #7

Tell the students that you are going to tell them a story and afterwards they will be given a little test. Smile when you say this so they won't get nervous. Tell them that they must control you so that they can understand everything and do well on their test. If you don't like the idea of a test, divide them up into teams and call it a race to answer questions. Then ask for two volunteers to come to the front of the room. Sit with your back to the class with the volunteers standing and facing you and the rest of their classmates. This focusses the attention on them even though the teacher is telling the story. Tell the volunteers that their job is to control the story teller so that the class can understand the

story. Tell them the story using your natural speed and tone of speech. As soon as one of the students controls the storyteller by stopping her or him, and understanding something, have that student take a seat and send another student to the front of the class. After every student has had a chance to stand and control, give them a quick test by asking some very simple and comprehensive questions about the story. Points are scored for correct answers and the team with the most points wins a round of applause from the rest of the students.

ACTIVITY #8

Take a story and divide it up into four to six parts. Divide the class into the same number of groups, give each group a part. As a group they have to work together to understand their part of the story. The teacher acts as a "consultant" that the groups can control to discover the meaning of their part of the story. As they work, the "consultant" circulates around the room checking on the groups' progress.

When the groups feel that they understand their parts of the story, they come together. Each group tells its part of the story to the other groups using the same expressions they

found in the original story. The other groups have to control the group telling the story until they understand.

When all the groups have told their parts of the story and everyone feels that they understand, the "consultant" can "test" them by asking them simple questions about the people and the incidents in the story. A variation of this is not to tell the groups the order of the parts of the story and let them put it in the correct order.

SECTION THREE

This section consists of twelve original stories. Each story contains ten to twenty idiomatic expressions. After each story, there is a list of the expressions that includes their meanings and examples of their use.⁴

⁴ Definitions were sometimes taken from: A Dictionary of American Idioms by Maxine Full Boatner and John Edward Gates. Barrons Educational Series, Inc. Woodbury, N.Y. 1975 and A Handy Book of Commonly Used American Idioms by Solomon Wiener. Regents Publishing Co., Inc. 1981.

THE PERFECT COUPLE

The other day I overheard Mrs. Smith and her friend chewing the fat. Although I didn't hear who they were talking about, I could feel it in my bones that they were gossiping about Charles and my sister Louise. They live close by, only five miles as the crow flies, although you have to drive ten miles by road to reach their house.

Louise is studying to be a T.V. producer and also works at a T.V. station. She often has to burn the candle at both ends to get all her work done and have time to spend with Charles.

Charles is a college professor of art history. Although he's very knowledgeable about his subject, at age 30, he's still a little wet behind the ears. He is also an excellent chef.

One night he invited me over for dinner. He had prepared a beautiful meal for Louise and me. He's a man after my own heart, he made Chicken Marsala, my favorite dish.

Louise came home just as Charles finished preparing dinner. She said, "Oh Charles! I can't stay for dinner! I still have lots of work to do tonight at the station! I'm supposed to be there in fifteen minutes. If I leave right now I'll only get there by the skin of my teeth!"

Charles said "Calm down Louise, after all the hours you put in at the station, one more is just a drop in the bucket!"

Louise got mad, "Oh Charles, you just don't understand. The owner of the station is there tonight and if I'm late, I'll be cooking my own goose!" She grabbed her things and ran out of the house slamming the door behind her.

Well, I thought that Charles was chicken hearted, Sometimes I thought that he might be jealous of Louise and her work. I told Louise, "You are doing so well at the university and at work, I'm sure that the station will offer you a good job. Working at a T.V. station is so much more exciting than working at the university that Charles will eat his heart out!"

But I now know that I have to eat my words because Louise did graduate from the university with honors and she did get a great job with the station. Now she gets to travel all over the state and she's always interviewing very important and interesting people. She loves her work and Charles too. He is also glad that she is happy with her work and that she does it so well.

I'll stop beating around the bush and get to the point of this story. After Louise became successful in her field, she and Charles buried the hatchet and are now living happily ever after.

The are lots of nice couples that live happily together. But couples in which each person has their own work which fulfills them and at which they are successful are few and far between.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANING AND EXAMPLE
To chew the fat	Gossip, talk about someone; We heard them chew the fat.
To feel it in one's bones	Know about something intuitively; I could feel it in my bones that she was coming tonight.
As the crow flies	In a straight line; They live only two miles from us as the crow flies.
To burn the candle at both ends.	Exhaust oneself; I had to burn the candle at both ends to get my thesis done.
Wet behind the ears.	Young and inexperienced; The young man was still wet behind the ears.
After one's own heart.	With similar interests; With his interest in music, he's a man after my own heart.
By the skin of one's teeth.	With very little margin; He passed the test by the skin of his teeth.
Drop in the bucket.	Relatively small amount; Compared to his earnings, what he spends on her is only a drop in the bucket.
To cook one's own goose.	Ruin an opportunity; When he insulted his boss, he cooked his own goose.
Chicken hearted.	Cowardly, timid; Don't be chicken hearted, ask him to the party.
To eat one's heart out.	Be very sad; She's eating her heart out because she didn't get the job.

Beat around the bush.

Delay coming to the point;
Don't beat around the bush,
tell us what happened.

To bury the hatchet.

Make peace, stop fighting;
Let's just bury the hatchet
and be friends.

Few and far between.

Scarce, hard to find, rare;
Skilled eye surgeons are few
and far between.

Boyfriends Can't Be Shared

Ruth is a good friend of mine. Although she is usually cheerful and fit as a fiddle, sometimes she does get up on the wrong side of the bed.

One day I felt like she was giving me the cold shoulder. I decided not to pay too much attention to it, I just figured that she had the blues. Later on when it seemed like she was sad for too long, I asked her if she had something on her mind.

She turned and replied abruptly, "I have a bone to pick with you Lissa!"

Then I knew I was in trouble because Ruth is a real go-getter and when she gets mad, she gets even. However, I tried to remain calm, and asked, "What's the problem? It goes without saying that we are good friends and that we should be able to deal with our problems rationally and calmly."

She glared at me and said, "Well, I just got wind of the fact that you have a crush on my boyfriend!"

Then I realized how upset she must have been, and it was not possible for me to remain calm. I said, "Now Ruth, just hold your horses! Let me give you a piece of my mind! Now I like Wayne and I would always go out of my way for him, but only because he's your boyfriend! He is a friend to me and that's all! What's more, next time you 'get wind' of something

that concerns our friendship, please confirm that it is true before you decide to get mad at me."

She looked sad and she said, "Oh Lissa, I was just afraid that...."

I interrupted her and said, "I'm sorry too, don't worry about it. Let's forget the whole thing. Say, do you want to go to Seibu Department store with me? I hear they have a great sale on sweaters!"

She lighted up and smiled and said, "Sure, I'd love to. You know Shelagh went there yesterday and bought a beautiful sweater for a song."

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANING AND EXAMPLE
Fit as a fiddle	In excellent physical condition; She returned from Japan fit as a fiddle.
To get up on the wrong side of the bed.	Arise in the morning with a bad temper; What's wrong with Sue? Did she get up on the wrong side of the bed?
To give someone the cold shoulder.	Ignore, treat in an unfriendly manner; After the scandal, the neighbors gave him the cold shoulder.
To have the blues.	Be depressed or sad; I'm worried about her, she really has the blues.
To have something on one's mind.	Be worried; Don't bother him, he has something on his mind.
To have a bone to pick with.	Discuss a complaint; Mary, I have a bone to pick with you.
Go-getter.	One who always accomplishes things well and with energy and enthusiasm; I'm not surprised that she got the promotion, she's a real go-getter.
To get even with.	Retaliate, get revenge. I'll get even with him for cheating me.
To go without saying.	To be easily understood; It goes without saying, we loved Hawaii.
To get wind of.	Acquire information unintentionally; They got wind of our plans and met us in the park.

To have a crush.

Admire, be infatuated with;
She has had a crush on Joe for
months.

To hold one's horses.

Be calm or patient; She was
so excited, I told her to hold
her horses.

To give someone a piece
of one's mind.

Express one's frank opinion in
a strong fashion, scold
severely; He was very angry
and gave me a piece of his
mind.

To go out of one's way.

Take extra care for someone;
She went out of her way to
make us feel comfortable.

For a song.

Extremely cheap; It's amazing
he sold me the car for a song.

What Are Friends For?

Well, I've seen Eric in the dumps before, but this time he was really leading a dog's life. Not only was he laid up but he was also in the doghouse with his best friend Al and in hot water with the local authorities.

Now Eric has been a good friend of mine for many years. He's a very kind man, who is always loyal to his friends. He's not the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on, but he's pretty good looking. And, he's really funny, he loves jokes and is always in the limelight at parties.

I had been out of state for a long time so I was in the dark about what was happening. He explained that he was upset with his best friend Al and said some terrible things about him. I stopped him by saying, "Eric, hold your tongue!"

At that very moment Al came to the door and I said hello to him and tried to keep the ball rolling by making polite conversation about my travels and the things he'd been doing since I last saw him.

Suddenly, Eric stood up and jumped down Al's throat referring to a problem they had on their fishing trip. Well, the phone rang just in the nick of time and I left the room to answer it.

When I came back to the room, Al was gone and Eric was feeling very ill at ease about the argument. He said he wished

he could keep cool about it. I suggested that maybe he should keep his distance from Al to avoid any other arguments. Then I asked him to tell me what happened on the fishing trip.

Eric was relieved to know that he was in good company with an old friend and he sat down and relaxed and told me the whole story. Afterwards, he thanked me for listening and I told him, "Of course Eric, that's what friends are for."

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANING AND EXAMPLE
In the dumps.	Sad, discouraged; The team was down in the dumps after the game.
To lead a dog's life.	To live a hard life; The handicapped people lead a dog's life.
Laid up.	Confined due to illness; He was laid up for a week.
In the doghouse.	In disgrace or disfavor; He was in the doghouse because he came late.
To lay eyes on.	To see; She felt she knew him as soon as she laid eyes on him.
In the limelight.	The center of attraction; She was very popular, she was always in the limelight.
In the dark.	In ignorance, without information; The tourist was in the dark about the current political situation.
To hold one's tongue.	To be silent, still, not talk; The teacher told the boy to hold his tongue.
To keep the ball rolling.	To keep up an activity or conversation; He kept the ball rolling by playing good dance music at the party.
To jump down one's throat.	To suddenly become very angry at someone; When George found out that Ben was dating Mary, he jumped down his throat.
In the nick of time.	At the right time, barely soon enough, almost too late; The police arrived just in the nick of time to catch the robbers.

Ill at ease.

Uncomfortable; It was Joe's first trip abroad and he felt a little ill at ease.

To keep cool.

To remain calm; She kept cool throughout the crisis.

To keep one's distance.

To be cool towards someone, avoid being friendly; I kept my distance from my ex-boyfriend at the party.

What Are Friends For? - Part II

That night I learned the whole story. He and Al had gone to their favorite fishing hole to catch some salmon. They go there every year, but this year they had jumped the gun.

Eric thought that it was nice because they were the only fishermen, but he also thought that it was a bit strange because usually it is very crowded there. Al had assured him that it was the first day of fishing season. After they caught their limit of three fish, they packed up and headed home. Al carried the gear and Eric was carrying the string of six beautiful fish. Suddenly Al shouted, "Run Eric! There's the fishing warden!" Eric ran but he slipped and twisted his ankle and fell to the ground with the fish. Al left Eric holding the bag.

Eric continued his story. He said that he was literally carried off by the authorities (he couldn't walk) and questioned and fined. He managed to keep a stiff upper lip and not mention Al's name to them.

When he got back to town, he saw Al and told him what happened and that he wanted him to pay for half of the fine. I guess that Al couldn't keep a straight face because Eric said that he started to laugh. I must say myself that poor Eric is not at all athletic and he never breaks the law so to picture him in that situation did seem funny. Anyway, Eric thought

that that was pretty inconsiderate of Al and since then they hadn't gotten along very well at all.

The next day I saw Al and I gave him a piece of my mind. He hit the ceiling, he told me that he planned to give Eric the money, but Eric jumped to the conclusion that Al wasn't ever going to pay him.

I told him in plain English to keep his cool, and that I thought that poor Eric with all his problems, wasn't really in his right mind these days. Al agreed and together we went to Eric's and ironed things out. Al paid him the money and I baked us a lasagne dinner and we had a nice evening together. It was just like old times.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
To jump the gun.	To start before you should; He jumped the gun when he called me the day before my birthday.
To leave someone holding the bag.	To force someone to take whole responsibility for something that others should share; The girls left the party and left Mary holding the bag when her parents came home.
To keep a stiff upper lip.	To be brave; The child had three cavities but she kept a stiff upper lip and sat quietly in the dental chair.
To keep a straight face.	Remain serious; Joe tried to keep a straight face but he couldn't help laughing.
To get along.	To live or work together in a friendly way, agree, cooperate; Joyce is thankful that she gets along so well with her boss.
To give someone a piece of one's mind.	To express one's frank opinion in a strong fashion, scold severely; He was very angry and gave her a piece of his mind.
To hit the ceiling.	To become violently angry; When she came home at 3:00 a.m., her parents hit the ceiling.
To jump to the conclusion.	To decide too quickly without thinking or finding the facts; When the poor student got an "A" on the test, his teacher jumped to the conclusion that he'd cheated.

In plain English.

In understandable terms; She kept beating around the bush, I finally asked her to tell us the story, in plain English.

In one's right mind.

Sane; The man was apparently in his right mind when he made the decision.

To iron things out.

To discuss and reach an agreement; The workers and the managers ironed out their differences.

Making Hay While The Sun Shines
Between Ecuador and Alaska

When I was a college student in South America, I completed an anthropological study of the Indians in the mountains of Ecuador. I traveled through the mountains and visited the different Indian villages and studied their markets. Throughout my studies, I left no stone unturned. However, as much as I sometimes tried to be like the, whenever I lived with them I felt like a fish out of water. All in all, it was a great experience and one of the advantages of it was the fact that I could study the markets and do my shopping at the same time, that is I could kill two birds with one stone.

One morning I was at the market in Otavalo. I was looking for an old man who sold the nicest shirts in the market. There were so many merchants that it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. When I finally found him, I bought a shirt for my father. Then I noticed a young man who was obviously from the U.S. or Canada. He was standing nearby and was making eyes at me.

I looked at him and he made no bones about the fact that I knew he was looking at me. I though his behavior was a little improper, but I decided not to make a mountain out of a molehill. So I just turned and made a beeline in the other direction for my favorite restaurant.

A person who was sitting across the room from me was eating banana pancakes. They made my mouth water so I ordered some. Then, the same man from the market who had been making eyes at me strolled into the restaurant. He sat down next to me and we chatted about the beauty of the mountain village and its people. All I found out about this strange man was that his name was Christopher and that he was a mountain climber from Alaska. He invited me out for dinner and since I was just a poor university student trying to make ends meet, I accepted.

That afternoon, I traveled by bus to another mountain village to investigate the textile market there. On the way back the bus driver drove so fast that it made my hair stand on end.

When I got back to Otavalo, I just felt like relaxing. I didn't really want to go to dinner with that strange man, but I saw him in the lobby of my hotel so I had to go with him. We went back to the same restaurant. We were both a little nervous so we drank a little wine and then we felt better and he let his hair down. And soon, he let the cat out of the bag and I knew all about his import business.

I also told him about myself and my studies and the research I'd done of the local Indian markets. He said that he was looking for someone to be the buyer for his business and he suggested that I would be good for that job.

I asked him for more details about his business and I asked him if he was afraid he might loose his shirt. He just laughed and said, "No! I'm already making a killing! The people in Alaska love this stuff! Come on Lissa, make hay while the sun shines!"

Well, several months later, I finished my university studies and went into business with him. We didn't really make a killing, but we didn't loose our shirts either. I guess you could say that we were able to make ends meet.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
To leave no stone unturned.	Make a thorough investigation or search; They will leave no stone unturned to find the missing documents.
Like a fish out of water.	Helpless, out of one's familiar surroundings; Among so many strangers, we felt like fish out of water.
To kill two birds with one stone.	Accomplish two things with one single action; You can kill two birds with one stone by working abroad and taking a vacation at the same time.
To look for a needle in a haystack.	Search for a small object on a large area; Looking for a coin on a beach is like looking for a needle in a haystack.
To make eyes at.	Flirt, look longingly at; Do you know that boy is making eyes at you?
To make no bones about.	Do something without fear of the consequences; She made no bones about quitting at the end of the month.
To make a mountain out of a molehill.	Exaggerate, make a big deal about a small thing; Don't make a mountain out of a molehill, it wasn't that difficult.
To make a beeline for.	Go quickly and directly to; As I was late, I made a beeline for the office.
To make one's mouth water.	Be very desirable or attractive; That chocolate cake makes my mouth water.

To make both ends meet.

Meet one's financial obligations; With inflation it's difficult to make both ends meet.

To make one's hair stand on end.

Frighten, terrify; That strange noise made my hair stand on end.

To let one's hair down.

Relax, behave informally; After a glass of wine, he began to let his hair down.

To let the cat out of the bag.

Reveal a secret unintentionally; No one knew we were married until she let the cat out of the bag.

To make a killing.

Make a lot of money; He made a killing selling computers.

To loose one's shirt.

Loose all of one's money; He lost his shirt in Las Vegas.

To make hay while the sun shines.

Take advantage of an opportunity; Make hay while the sun shines and buy stock today.

How To Keep The Old Flame Burning

Marty and Barbara live in a little old one horse town in southern Alaska. They've been married for more than twenty years. When they first moved to Alaska more than fifteen years ago, they were living on a shoe string. They had three children and Marty was working as a car mechanic. In fact Marty always is an old hand at fixing most things.

He's always on his toes. Whenever it seems like something needs work, he fixes it of his own accord. Anytime something needs repairing, he fixes it on the spot. He always says that when he senses any kind of mechanical disorder he likes to nip it in the bud.

Barbara is really on the ball too. She's always on the go. She has her own real estate business and her own radio program too. She's on the air every Wednesday morning. She knows a lot about classical music. When I hear a familiar tune, but I can't remember the name, when its on the tip of my tongue, I know that if I ask her she'll be able to tell me.

On the whole, I would say that they have the ideal marriage. When they think of their old flames, they think of each other. But once in a blue moon, they do have a disagreement.

One day, Barbara was busy in the kitchen cooking dinner. She was a little on edge that day because her son David had an

accident in their new truck just the night before. Marty was in the workshop monkeying around with the generator when it went out of control. It started shaking and making a terrible noise. Barbara didn't hear the noise or know what happened. All she knew was that all of a sudden, the power went out. She thought to herself, "Oh my goodness, what has Marty done now?"

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANS AND EXAMPLES
One-horse town.	Small and insignificant town; She was a young woman from a little one-horse town out west.
On a shoestring.	With little money; It's impressive that they raised five children on a shoestring.
Old hand.	Experienced person; She's an old hand at working with the handicapped.
On one's toes.	Alert, ready to act; A good policeman is always on his toes.
Of one's own accord.	Voluntarily; The children did their work of their own accord.
On the spot.	At that exact time and place, without waiting or leaving; The news of the nuclear accident was broadcast on the spot.
Nip it in the bud.	To prevent, block or destroy at the start; The mechanic heard the noise and nipped the problem in the bud.
On the ball.	Paying attention and doing things well; Sue is really on the ball, she always does her work promptly and correctly.
On the go.	Active and busy; Healthy and happy people are usually on the go.
On the air.	Broadcasting or being broadcast on radio or TV; She on the air every week.

- On the tip of one's tongue. Almost remembered, at the point where one can almost say it but cannot because it is forgotten; The name of his friend is on the tip of my tongue.
- On the whole. In the most important things, In most ways; On the whole, the people are very friendly here.
- Old flames. Former sweethearts; The new man in the office was an old flame of mine.
- Once in a blue moon. Very rarely; Once in a blue moon, I meet someone who shares all my interests.
- On edge. Excited or nervous; Norm was on edge after driving all day in traffic.
- Monkeying around. To spend time playing, fooling or joking instead of being serious or working, waste time; She told the students to stop monkeying around.
- Out of control. Uncontrollable; The man was frightened when the machine went out of control.
- All of a sudden. Without warning, abruptly; All of a sudden I heard a noise and dropped my books.

How To Keep The Old Flame Burning - Part II

Marty came into the house and explained to Barbara about the generator. He also told her that since the machine was out of date it would take a long time to get the parts needed to repair it. The manufacturer was based out of state and Marty was also afraid that it had gone out of business.

This wasn't the first time that they had had problems with that generator. They bought it many years ago and when it was on its last legs. Since then, Marty had repaired it many times. Barbara was always after him to get a new one.

Marty said that he was hungry and asked if dinner was ready. Barbara looked at him and asked him if he was out of his mind. She told him that they must go out for dinner. He showed her his filthy hands and told her that that was out of the question because he couldn't get cleaned up without any hot water and that without a generator there was no hot water.

Then their son David came down the stairs and asked if he could use the car to go out on a date. Barbara looked at him and said, "Over my dead body."

Marty realized that she was upset and went to her and tried to reason with her. He said, "Now Barbara, never mind about David. Whether he takes the car tonight is neither here nor there."

Then David said, "Yeah, Mom, and first I'll pick up some dinner for you and Dad and bring it home for you."

They agreed, David left and Marty went back out to try one more thing to repair the generator. He checked it out over and over. He was going to give up but he gave it a final once over and he discovered a loose wire. He connected it and it started up on the spot.

Marty went into the house to take a shower. David arrived with some pizza and Barbara turned on some soft music. They ate a romantic dinner by candlelight even though they had electricity again.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
Out of date.	Obsolete, no longer in fashion; The dress she is wearing is really out of date.
Out of state.	Of or from another state; She got a ticket for having out of state license plates.
Out of business.	No longer in business; I tried to get my radio fixed, but the repair shop went out of business.
On its last legs.	Exhausted, on the verge of failing; The old TV was on its last legs when the picture tube burned out.
Out of his mind.	Acting in a crazy way; I thought the kid with green hair was out of his mind.
Out of the question.	Unthinkable, impossible; I thought that snow in July was out of the question.
On a date.	Spending some time with someone special; John and I went out on a date last Saturday night.
Over one's dead body.	Against one's strong opposition; He told her she'd have to buy the fur coat over his dead body.
Never mind.	Don't worry about it; Never mind about making lunch, we're not hungry.
Neither here nor there.	Not important to the thing being discussed; Whether the children like the teacher is neither here nor there, is she qualified?

Over and over.

Many times, repeatedly; She told him over and over that she didn't love him, but he didn't believe her.

Once over.

A quick look or examination; When he feels he's finished a job, he always gives it a final once over.

On the spot.

At that exact time and place, Without waiting or leaving; The news of the nuclear accident was broadcast on the spot.

He Didn't Jump The Gun After All

It was 1975 and in most Americans' minds, solar power was only a dream. Robyn has always been a hard worker and even though his parents could have helped him more, he was determined to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. So he and his brothers put their heads together and established a solar construction business.

When Robyn told me about his new business, I asked him, "Robyn, aren't you putting the cart before the horse?" I really thought he was playing with fire. Well it turns out that I put my foot in my mouth.

Now, Robyn had been a friend for many years and he had always put up with my doubts and less than positive attitude about his ideas. But this time he put his foot down. He said that the oil producing nations were trying to pull a fast one and the oil companies were helping them to pull the wool over our eyes. As a result, Americans had to pay through the nose for gasoline and heating oil.

He knew that he had a small business and that he'd be playing second fiddle to other businesses in the area. But at least he was offering an alternative, and when all the businesses and oil companies put their cards on the table, it became clear that solar energy was the most sensible energy to use.

Looking at it from that point of view it was easy to put two and two together and realize that he was right. It wasn't long until I was out campaigning for solar energy myself.

Now, ten years later I am happy to say that Robyn and his brothers really pulled it off. Their business is in big demand all across the state of Missouri. Not only that but with all his gained knowledge and expertise, he has built himself a beautiful and entirely self sufficient home in the Missouri hills.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
To pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps.	To succeed without help, by your own efforts; Horatio illustrated the American Dream by pulling himself up by his own bootstraps.
To put their heads together.	To plan or consider things together; The committee put their heads together and planned the fund raising drive.
To put the cart before the horse.	Put things in the wrong order; To buy a house before you have a good job is putting the cart before the horse.
To play with fire.	To put oneself in danger, to take risks; Walking around downtown at night is playing with fire.
To put one's foot in one's mouth.	To speak carelessly and rudely; When she said she didn't like Susan, in front of her boyfriend, she really put her foot in her mouth.
To put up with.	To accept patiently; The teacher will not put up with any rude behavior.
To put one's foot down.	To take a decided stand; After the terrorist attack in Berlin, Mr. Reagan put his foot down.
To pull a fast one.	Cheat, deceive; Mr. Smith pulled a fast one when he sold us that car.
To pull the wool over someone's eyes.	To fool someone into thinking well of you, deceive; He tried to pull the wool over his boss' eyes but she was too smart for him.

Pay through the nose.

To pay too much; You have to pay through the nose for imported goods.

To play second fiddle.

To follow another's lead, be less noticed; Joe was a good carpenter but he always played second fiddle to his brother, an electrical engineer.

Put one's cards on the table.

To let someone know your position and interest openly; When he put his cards on the table, we knew what his motives were.

Point of view.

Personal opinion; His point of view is that nuclear war is a dangerous and unreasonable option.

Put two and two together.

To reason from the known facts; I put two and two together and decided where she must have gone.

Pull off.

To succeed in; The thieves pulled off the robbery.

My Second Mother

When you read this story, you won't have to read between the lines to see that Mary Gray had a strong influence on me.

The first time I saw Mary Gray, I knew right off the bat that she was a kind and gentle woman. When she came to work for us after my mother died, I knew that taking care of youngsters was second nature to her. My brothers and I were always getting into trouble so she really had to run around in circles to keep up with us.

We grew up in the city but we really like to rough it and go camping and canoeing in the summers. Mary Gray didn't know how to swim and she was really afraid of the water. One time we pretended to push her in and it scared the daylights out of her. We used to see eye to eye on most things. Sometimes, however, when we didn't do as we were told, she would see red.

I'll never forget the time my friend Nancy and I were sitting on the dock, shooting the breeze. My brother came by in his canoe and splashed us. His paddle slipped accidentally. It hit me on the head so hard that I saw stars. When Mary Gray found out, she told Norm, "You better watch out boy, you're skating on thin ice. If you do that again, I'll tell your daddy."

Well, if I had to choose whether to have Mary Gray or my dad angry with me, I'd have to say that I sit on the fence. Its six of one and half a dozen of another.

My dad would take away my allowance and make me stay home on weekends. Mary Gray would be very angry and not talk to me. That would hurt because she was also a good friend and she helped me a lot.

Now Mary Gray lives in Michigan and I miss seeing her, but we do write letters and send pictures to each other. I'll always think of her as my second mother who saw me through my teenage years. She taught me a lot about people and gave me a first hand experience of life with a person with one of the biggest hearts on earth.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
To read between the lines.	To understand all of the writers meaning by guessing at what he has left unsaid; In order to understand poetry, you often have to read between the lines.
Right off the bat.	Immediately; Pam knew the man's intentions right off the bat.
Second nature.	Instictive, automatic action; Locking the car doors has become second nature to her.
To run around in circles.	Be confused; She had so much to remember that she was just running around in circles.
To rough it.	Live with little of the comfort and equipment of civilization; Many Americans like to rough it on weekends.
To scare the daylights out of one.	To frighten very much; The sudden noise scared the daylights out of me.
To see eye to eye.	To agree fully; The girl did not see eye to eye with her parents.
To see red.	To become very angry; When the boys made fun of him, he began to see red.
To shoot the breeze.	To talk, chat; The old man sat on the front porch every evening, shooting the breeze.
To see stars.	To imagine you are seeing stars as a result of being hit on the head; When she fell on her head, she saw stars.

To skate on thin ice.

To take a chance, risk danger, disapproval or anger; When John teased his sister about her boyfriend, he was skating on thin ice.

Sit on the fence.

Not able or wanting to choose, undecided; Mr. Jones has decided to vote for a Republican but Ms. Jones is still sitting on the fence.

Six of one and half-a-dozen of another.

Two things that are the same, not a real choice; When she had to choose between the two houses, she said, "It's six of one and half-a-dozen of another."

Best Friends

Merrily was one of the best friends a girl could have in high school. We really sowed our wild oats during those years. We spent all our weekends together and we'd stay up into the small hours of the morning.

Being young high school girls, we often had stars in our eyes. It seems there was always a boy or two who we dreamed would sweep us off our feet. Merrily was really stuck on a guy named Steve. He was the spitting image of a handsome, western movie star. He was very cool and casual, next to him, I felt like a stuffed shirt.

One day Merrily told me that she didn't stand a chance of winning his affection. She felt embarrassed and couldn't even talk to him.

I thought Steve was a nice guy who could stand on his own two feet. He was always willing to stick his neck out for a friend. I wanted to help Merrily.

I decided to take some action. I spoke to my friend George about his friend Steve. I trusted George not to tell Steve about our conversation. Well, George spilled the beans and told another friend and then the news spread like wildfire.

When Merrily found out that everyone knew about her feelings for Steve, she was very upset with me.

She said to me, "Let's hear it straight from the horses' mouth! What did you tell Steve about me?"

Just as I tried to explain by saying, "Merrily, I'm sorry, it was just a slip of the tongue...." Steve walked into the room.

Merrily tried not to smile and said "Well, speak of the devil!"

Steve went up to Merrily and looked her in the eye. He nodded and said, "Now I understand, I thought you might have some feelings for me, but then you ignored me. I was afraid I'd done something wrong. Now that I know the truth, I won't let you slip through my fingers."

Merrily glanced over at me and winked. She said, "Well Lissa, I guess you didn't stab me in the back after all."

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
To sow one's wild oats	Dissipate, indulge in pleasurable activities; He's beginning to sow his wild oats.
Small hours of the morning.	Between approximately 1 am and 4 a.m; He never got home until the small hours of the morning.
Stars in one's eyes.	Appearance or feeling of great happiness; Young people often have stars in their eyes.
To sweep one off one's feet.	To make someone have feelings of love or happiness too strong to control; He completely swept her off her feet.
Stuck on.	Crazy about, very much in love with; She was stuck on him for years.
Spitting image.	An exact likeness, a duplicate; He was the spitting image of Paul Newman.
Stuffed shirt.	Very pompous person; He's not really a stuffed shirt, he's just insecure.
To stand a chance	Have any possibility; I don't stand a chance of being offered the position.
To stand on one's own two feet.	Be independent, earn your own living; She learned to stand on her own two feet when she was young.
To stick one's neck out.	To do something dangerous or risky; He was willing to stick his neck out for his friends.

- To spill the beans. To tell a secret to someone who is not supposed to know about it; No one knew we were seeing each other till George spilled the beans.
- To spread like wild fire. Become known quickly. The news of the accident spread like wild fire.
- Straight from the horse's mouth. From a reliable source; We knew it was true because we heard it straight from the horse's mouth.
- Slip of the tongue. A mistake of saying something you had not wanted or planned to say; He didn't mean to tell her, it was just a slip of the tongue.
- To speak of the devil. A person comes just when you are talking about him or her; Jim walked in the door just as I told Sue about his new job, speak of the devil!
- To slip through one's fingers. To escape without someone's knowing how; The police surrounded the bank, but the thieves managed to slip through their fingers.
- To stab someone in the back. To say or do something unfair that harms a friend; no one likes her because she stabbed her best friend in the back.

A Lesson In Perserverance And Diplomacy

Peter and Tam and I have been through thick and thin. We were the best of friends throughout our Master's Degree program. I have always thought highly of both of them.

To describe them, I will just talk turkey. Tammy is a bit eccentric, the style in which she dresses would take your breath away. Peter is also very remarkable. He talks incessantly, sometimes he has a lot of important points to make and sometimes he's just talking through his hat. Many of the things he says I have to take with a grain of salt. Lots of the things he talked about, he had heard through the grapevine.

About half of the way through the program, my luck took a turn. I had broken up with my boyfriend and I felt very sad. Peter and Tam took me under their wing. They asked me to share an apartment with them. There weren't many suitable apartments available. Right when we were just about to throw in the sponge, we found a nice two bedroom apartment in an old renovated building, above a wine and cheese shop.

Peter started talking with the manager. The manager said that someone else was coming to look at the apartment and that we'd better decide soon. Peter told him that it was a big decision for us and that we'd like to take our time and discuss it.

Tammy announced, "If our choice right now is to take it or leave it, I say let's take it!"

Before Peter could take it up with Tammy I agreed, "Tammy, you just took the words out of my mouth."

Peter tried to argue that the apartment was too small, with only two bedrooms. Tammy volunteered to sleep in the living room. We all agreed that we could take turns sleeping in the living room.

So it was decided in a few minutes. We signed the contract, paid the rent and we were moved in that same night.

The apartment was a little small, but we were there for only three months. It all worked out well. Divided by the three of us, the rent was quite cheap and we spent our extra money downstairs on wine and cheese.

Some Common American Idioms and Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS & EXAMPLES
Through thick and thin.	Through good times and bad times; We were good friends through thick and thin.
To think highly of.	To consider to be very worthy, valuable, important; The supervisor thought highly of his employees.
To talk turkey.	Talk in a businesslike way, talk with the air of getting things done; At the meeting, he disregarded all the trivial complaints and really talked turkey.
To take one's breath away.	To impress, leave speechless with surprise or wonder; The beautiful scenery took our breath away.
To talk through one's hat	To say something without knowing or understanding the facts; He said it took 5 hours to drive to Santa Fe, but he was just talking through his hat.
To take with a grain of salt.	To accept or believe only in part; I took his adventure stories with a grain of salt.
Through the grapevine.	From gossip or unofficial sources; I heard it through the grapevine that there was a position here.
To take a turn.	To change; After she finished her degree her luck took a turn for the better.
To take someone under one's wing.	To protect; The man took the frightened child under his wing.

To throw in the sponge.

Admit defeat, surrender, give up; After months of trying to win her love, he finally threw in the sponge.

To take one's time.

To avoid haste, act in an unhurried way; She likes to take her time in the morning.

To take something or leave it.

Decide yes or no, accept or refuse; He gave us his offer and said, "take it or leave it."

To take the words out of someone's mouth.

To say something that someone else was about to say; When you said you were tired, you took the words out of my mouth.

To take turns.

Act in rotation, alternate; We took turns doing the dishes.

Rena's Independence

I was tickled to death to hear that Rena had finally moved into her own place. I was beginning to think that she was tied to her mother's apron strings. I knew that her father and she had fought tooth and nail. Thank goodness she was finally able to make a move that will help them to turn over a new leaf.

Rena is an excellent nurse. She studied hard and graduated from nursing school with flying colors. She has made good use of her skills. She has an important position at a good hospital and she also cares for her family when they are ill or just under the weather. She's always been a very thoughtful and competent woman.

Rena's parents aren't well off, but they do live somewhat comfortably in a house in Southern California. They immigrated to the U.S. from Germany to escape Hitler's persecution of the Jewish people. They are retired. Her mother keeps herself busy doing work for their synagogue. Her father is always busy working on things around the house. Rena's mother is very nice and fun to be with. Her father seems to be a sweet little old man, but I guess he's like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Rena had a Capri, a Ford that's produced in Germany. It was a good car, but it was a little difficult to get parts for it. Rena knew that her father would be upset if he knew that it was made in Germany, so she told him a white lie and just said that it was a Ford.

One day the car wasn't running well. Her father knew of a good mechanic who was inexpensive. This mechanic worked for himself so he could get paid under the table and avoid taxes. Rena told him under her breath that it was a German car. She feared that if her father heard her it would upset the apple care.

Her father heard her. He got very upset and said he wanted to wash his hands of her and then he vanished into thin air. She and the mechanic set out to find him. It was a wild goose chase all over L.A. County. They finally found him sitting alone in a park. Rena tried to reason with him but she felt like she was wasting her breath.

Even though Rena realizes how much pain her father suffered in Germany, it must be hard to understand how much that must have affected him. It seems as if he'll never lose the bitterness that he feels. I'm just very happy for Rena, that she's been able to grow and become a caring and successful and independant woman in spite of what her parents went through.

Some Common American Idiomatic Expressions

IDIOM	MEANINGS AND EXAMPLES
Tickled to death.	Very pleased; She was tickled to death to see her granddaughter.
Tied to one's mother's apron strings.	Dominated by one's mother; The young man was tied to his mother's apron strings.
Tooth and nail.	Fiercely, vigorously; The men fought tooth and nail for their freedom.
To turn over a new leaf.	Change for the better; Every New Years, many Americans try to turn over a new leaf.
With flying colors.	In triumph; Jim passed the exam with flying colors.
Under the weather.	Ill, sick; The old man had been under the weather for a week.
Well off.	Rich, wealthy; The Busch family in St. Louis is very well off.
Wolf in sheep's clothing.	A person who pretends to be good but is really bad; The woman turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing.
White lie.	A harmless lie told to comfort someone; To prevent her disappointment, he told her a while lie.
Under the table.	Secretly; He paid \$100 under the table for his cooperation.
Under one's breath.	In a whisper, low voice; He told her under his breath that he was being followed.

Upset the apple cart.

To ruin a plan; John upset the the apple cart when he spilled the beans about the surprise party.

To wash one's hands of someone.

To disclaim any responsibility for; When she picked up her son from the police dept. she said she would wash her hands of him if he did it again.

Vanish into thin air.

Disappear; All the money I make vanishes into thin air.

Wild-geese chase.

Absurd or hopeless errand; Our day of shopping was nothing but a wild goose chase.

Waste one's breath.

To speak or argue with no result; He was so stubborn, to talk to him was to waste your breath.

SECTION FOUR

In this section, I will offer suggestions as to how other teachers can write their own stores. Then I will conclude by discussing what the creation of this project has done for me as a teacher.

Suggestions:

I hope that other teachers will find my stories useful and enjoyable to use in the classroom. I must stress, however, that these stories are especially enjoyable for me because they are about my friends and family members. Other teachers may wish to write their own stories about the people who are dear to them.

I never considered myself a "writer." I was not confident when I started to write my first story. I was impressed with how easy it was to write and how well it turned out. I feel certain that anyone who wants to can write their own stories. First I will list the steps I go through to write a story. Then I will list a few things to be concious of as you write.

1. Make a list of all the target idioms.
2. As you look them over, think of any friends or family members that you can imagine using the expressions. Also think of any possible situations they might be involved in when they use them.

3. Write down the situations. If they don't seem to go together leave them as separate segments.

4. Rewrite what you have. Re-order, rewrite or delete the segments as necessary.

5. Tie all your segments together to make a coherent story line.

6. Rewrite the story one last time to insure that it is consistent and well organized.

Things to Keep in Mind:

- Don't worry if you don't know what the story will be about or how it will end. Your segments and sequencing will pull it all together.

- Start with twenty idioms. Then if you really can't make all of them work in the story you can feel free to delete one or a few of them.

- Always be sure that the characters in your story are consistent with the real people you choose to write about. This way you have an accurate description of them that you can relate to.

- Don't worry if the story isn't true. If the characters are consistent with your friends' real characters, their descriptions and actions will be authentic and believable to your students.

- Don't be afraid to incorporate conflict into the lives of your friends. Life is full of conflict and we all learn and deal with it in our own unique ways. Foreign students can learn a lot about our culture by becoming aware of what causes our conflicts and how we resolve them.

- Have the characters resolve each conflict. Stories that close on a positive note make for cheerful and positive feelings in the class.

If this technique is used to write a whole series of stories, the writer will have a warm and personal collection of old friends. These special people can be packed up in a suitcase and travel with you wherever you go. It's a wonderful resource for both the teacher and his or her students.

CONCLUSION

In writing and using these stories, I've been able to discover and experiment with a variety of ways to teach idioms to high intermediate and advanced level ESL students. Idioms always pose a challenge to students, so it's very useful to have these materials and techniques on hand.

I have found that when I create the material that I use in class and gain experience using it, I have almost complete control over the language we use in the class. That way we can focus on the target expressions. As a result we don't get distracted by other things that come up.

I believe that it's important to share personal experiences and friends with my classes. In doing so, the class grows to know me. Also the students are often more willing and sometimes eager to share similar experiences. This way we all get to know each other and grow closer as a class. With this closeness, a strong trusting relationship can be built. As learning takes place more really in a secure yet open environment, I find this to be crucial.

Finally, I grew to be a more confident teacher when I realized that I was successful at producing effective materials for my classes. At the onset of my teaching career, my lack of self-confidence was my biggest weakness. Now, I feel I've overcome that and I'm willing to take on challenges of all kinds.