Business Idioms · Part 2

B1+–B2 · Adults · 60–75 minutes · Pairs or small groups

1. up in the air



The dates are still up in the air until the client confirms.

Meaning · Still undecided or uncertain.

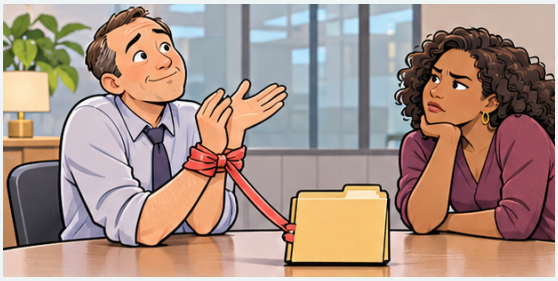
2. get someone up to speed



Maya missed the meeting. Can you get her up to speed?

Meaning · Give someone the latest details.

3. my hands are tied



My hands are tied until Finance approves the extra cost.

Meaning · I can't act without approval.

4. by the book



We do every safety check by the book.

Meaning · Follow the rules or procedures exactly.

5. bring something to the table



Jo brings a working prototype to the table.

Meaning · Contribute something useful.

6. the bottom line



The bottom line is that we can't pay more than £800.

Meaning · The most important fact or result.

7. a long shot



Getting a bigger stand at this stage is a long shot.

Meaning · Something unlikely to succeed.

8. back to the drawing board



The prototype failed the test, so it's back to the drawing board.

Meaning · Rethink a plan or design that failed.

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Listen and find the meaning

The Friday demo · a short planning conversation between two colleagues

02 Listen twice

Play Track 1 · The Friday demo

MP3 · BEI2-01-The-Friday-Demo-Listening.mp3

First listen. What are Tess and Alex trying to do?

A. Plan a backup for Friday's demo.

B. Cancel the demo and book a new room.

C. Ask the sales team to move the equipment.

Second listen. Note the details and compare with a partner.

1. What is still undecided?

2. Who can approve a different unit?

3. What will Alex look for?

03 Match the meanings

Cover page 1. Match idioms A–H to meanings 1–8. Then check the picture guide.

A. a long shot

B. by the book

C. bring to the table

D. up in the air

E. the bottom line

F. back to the drawing board

G. my hands are tied

H. get someone up to speed

1. A plan is still undecided.

2. A rule or someone's decision stops me from acting.

3. Follow the rules exactly.

4. Give someone the latest details.

5. Contribute something useful.

6. The key fact, result or limit.

7. Something unlikely to succeed.

8. Rethink a plan or design that failed.

Two meanings of the bottom line

It can mean the most important point or the final financial result. Compare "The bottom line is that we need approval" and "The extra costs hurt our bottom line".

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Read the dialogues

Take a part each. Read aloud, answer, then try the speaking task.

A The display won’t fit

Mina The display we designed won’t fit in the space. We might have to go back to the drawing board.

Jay Could we ask for a bigger space?

Mina It’s a long shot. Most of the other spaces have already gone. What could the events team bring to the table?

Jay They have two smaller stands we could borrow. We could put one sample on each.

Mina That might work. The bottom line is that we’ve only got one afternoon to set up.

Jay I can check the measurements now. If both stands fit, we’ll use them.

Mina Great. If they don’t fit, we’ll take one sample and show the other on a screen.

1. What could the events team offer? What will Mina and Jay do if it doesn’t fit?

Cover the dialogue. Tell a colleague the problem, the first option and the backup in your own words.

B A quote without a delivery date

Zoe Can you get me up to speed on the customer quote? I’ve just joined the project.

Amir The price is ready, but the delivery date is still up in the air. We’re waiting to hear from the warehouse.

Zoe Could we promise next Friday and sort out the details later?

Amir My hands are tied. We have to do it by the book and get the date confirmed before we promise anything.

Zoe What if we send the price now and say when we’ll confirm the date?

Amir Good idea. The bottom line is that the customer needs enough information to make a decision today.

Zoe I’ll draft the message and ask the warehouse for an update by three.

2. Why can’t they promise a date yet? What will Zoe do before sending the quote?

Swap roles. The customer needs to decide by noon. Suggest what you could send today and what you’d leave open.

Compare the two phrases

Back to square one stresses starting again. Back to the drawing board stresses rethinking a plan or design. A failed prototype might need a redesign even if some of the earlier work is still useful.

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Use the idioms

Practise the expressions, then use them in workplace conversations.

04 Complete the mini-dialogues

Use each expression once. Say the exchanges aloud with a partner.

by the book	**get me up to speed**
a long shot	**my hands are tied**
up in the air	**the bottom line**

1. A Has anyone agreed a date for the training yet?
   B No, it's still _____.
2. A I'm back from leave. Could you _____?
   B Of course. Here's what happened while you were away.
3. A Could you approve the refund now?
   B I'm afraid _____. Only the manager can sign it off.
4. A Shall we skip the usual checks this time?
   B No. Let's do it _____.
5. A Do you think the client will extend the deadline again?
   B It's _____, but we can ask.
6. A What's the most important limit we need to remember?
   B _____ is that we only have £500.

05 Play Claim Three

Play Team A vs Team B on page 5. Agree on your answer as a team before one person speaks. Keep page 1 face down.

06 Ask and answer

Choose two questions. Give a real or invented example and ask one follow-up.

1. What can a new colleague bring to the table?
2. What is up in the air on a project you know about?
3. When is a long shot worth trying?
4. When have you gone back to the drawing board? What did you change?

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Claim Three

Team A vs Team B · One board and a pen · 10–15 minutes

Take turns. Pick any empty square. Your team has 30 seconds to agree on an idiom that fits and say a full sentence using it. A different teammate speaks each turn.

If your sentence fits, write A or B in the small box. If it doesn't, leave the square open. The other team takes its turn. The teacher can settle close calls.

To win
Claim three neighbouring squares in a straight line: across, down or diagonally. If time runs out, the team with more squares wins.

01 ☐ The client still hasn't chosen a date for the launch.	**02** ☐ Your new colleague missed yesterday's briefing. Offer a quick update.	**03** ☐ A customer wants a refund, but only your manager can approve it.	**04** ☐ A teammate suggests skipping a step in the safety check. Reply.
05 ☐ Your partner can introduce you to local customers. Describe what they offer.	**06** ☐ The main thing is that everything must be ready by Friday.	**07** ☐ You could ask for a bigger stand, but they're nearly all booked.	**08** ☐ The design doesn't fit the space. Suggest starting a new design.
09 ☐ Finance must approve the extra cost before you can act.	**10** ☐ The prototype failed twice. Suggest rethinking the design.	**11** ☐ What's the one limit the team can't ignore? You only have £500.	**12** ☐ You were on leave last week. Ask a colleague for the latest news.
13 ☐ You could ask for more time, but the client will probably say no.	**14** ☐ The auditor asks how you handled the order. You followed every step.	**15** ☐ Your team has design skills the project needs. Tell the group.	**16** ☐ Nobody knows yet who will lead Friday's demo.

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Eight idioms at work

Name _____ Date _____

07 Complete the gaps

Use each expression from the box once. Check the pictures on page 1 after your first try.

the bottom line	**back to the drawing board**
bring to the table	**up in the air**
get you up to speed	**by the book**
a long shot	**my hands are tied**

1. The client hasn’t chosen a date, so the launch is still _____.

2. You missed the planning meeting. I’ll _____ before the next call.

3. I can’t release the payment without approval. I’m afraid _____.

4. The auditor is here today. Follow every step and do it _____.

5. What skills could this partner _____ that our team doesn’t have?

6. We could add more features, but _____ is that we only have £800.

7. Winning the contract on our first try is _____, but we can still apply.

8. The design failed its test. We’ll go _____ and try a different shape.

From memory

Choose one picture and cover the phrase. Say the idiom, then use it to describe a real or invented problem at work.

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The first week

Extra business idioms · Complete the dialogue, then listen and check.

Rosa and Ben are planning the first week for Jamie, a new member of their team.

01 Five useful expressions

from the ground up	from the beginning, starting with nothing
a steep learning curve	a situation where you have to learn a lot quickly
learn the ropes	learn how a job or task works
between a rock and a hard place	in a situation with two difficult options
get down to business	start dealing with the main task

02 Complete the dialogue

Use each expression once. Then listen and check the words you wrote.

Rosa Right, let's (1) _____. We need a plan for Jamie's first week. What should he do first?

Ben He can sit with me on Monday. It'll help him (2) _____ before he answers any customer calls.

Rosa Good idea. There's (3) _____ with the new booking system. Can you show him how to change an order?

Ben Yes. We built the training guide (4) _____, so it starts with the basics.

Rosa The problem is Tuesday. We've got lots of calls, and he needs more practice. I feel like we're (5) _____.

Ben What if he listens in while I take the calls, then tries two practice calls after lunch?

Rosa That works. I'll put it in his schedule.

Play the homework dialogue online **Embedded MP3**

Play the audio in a browser. For offline use, open the paperclip in a desktop PDF reader.

03 Check and write

1. What will Jamie do on Monday?
2. What is Ben's plan for Tuesday?

Write a 3–4 line message to Jamie. Explain what he'll do first and what might be difficult. Use two phrases from the box.

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Teacher notes and keys

Pages 1–7 are for learners. Give each pair of teams one board.

Class route

Picture guide (8 min) → listening and matching (12–15) → dialogues (15) → gap-fills (8–10) → board game and Q&A (17–22). For the game, model square 1 and let both teams check a sample sentence. Set pages 6–7 for homework.

02 Listening	First listen A. 1 The delivery time. 2 The safety lead. 3 A recent recording of the new unit.
03 Meanings	1 D · 2 G · 3 B · 4 H · 5 C · 6 E · 7 A · 8 F
Read A/B	A: Two smaller stands. If they don't fit, take one sample and show the other on a screen. B: The warehouse hasn't confirmed the date. Zoe will draft the message and ask for an update by three.
04 Mini-dialogues	1 up in the air · 2 get me up to speed · 3 my hands are tied · 4 by the book · 5 a long shot · 6 The bottom line
05 Board game	1, 16 up in the air · 2, 12 get someone up to speed · 3, 9 my hands are tied · 4, 14 by the book · 5, 15 bring something to the table · 6, 11 the bottom line · 7, 13 a long shot · 8, 10 back to the drawing board. Accept other idioms if the sentence fits.
07 Core homework	1 up in the air · 2 get you up to speed · 3 my hands are tied · 4 by the book · 5 bring to the table · 6 the bottom line · 7 a long shot · 8 back to the drawing board

Page 7 · Listening homework key

1. get down to business · 2. learn the ropes · 3. a steep learning curve · 4. from the ground up · 5. between a rock and a hard place

Listening: 1. Sit with Ben to learn how the job works. 2. Listen while Ben takes calls, then try two practice calls after lunch.

Writing model: Sit with Ben on Monday to learn the ropes. The booking system has a steep learning curve, so start by watching how Ben changes an order. You can practise after lunch on Tuesday.

Track 1 transcript · The Friday demo

Tess Hi, Alex. Could you get me up to speed on the demo? I missed the planning call.

Alex Sure. We've booked the room for Friday, but the delivery time is still up in the air. The supplier says they'll confirm it after lunch.

Tess Could we use the older unit if the new one doesn't arrive? It's ready to go.

Alex I'd like to, but my hands are tied. Only the safety lead can approve a different unit, and she's off until tomorrow.

Tess Right. Let's do it by the book. Can we set up a video of the new unit as a backup?

Alex Yes, we can show a recording without moving any equipment. I'll check whether we have a recent one.

Tess Great. I'll let the sales team know we might use a video instead.

Optional expressions from the source handout

Corner the market: gain control of most of a market. Go down swinging: keep fighting even when you are likely to lose. It's not rocket science: it's straightforward. This last phrase can sound dismissive when said to someone who is struggling.

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