

# Origins of Common Sayings

## Teachers guide

*Welcome to Etymology 101, does any- one know what Etymology is?*

Etymology; the study of word origins.

Although you might not know it, you probably quote history on a daily basis. While the connections are sometimes obvious, other phrases have become so commonplace that most speakers probably never stop to consider their source.

If you ever thought long and hard about why you say something a certain way, you could probably make a guess. However, some English expressions are so crazy and unusual that it is impossible to guess where on earth it originated from — unless you know the history.

In case you didn't know, historical events, legends, important figures, religion, and even advertisements form the basis of many expressions used today

We've compiled a list of the phrases and words that we find most interesting. Some of the sayings are hundreds of years old and some of their exact origins remain a mystery. Opinions vary about the exact derivations of some.

Here are the origins of some of the most interesting idioms!

*Instructor: you might want to ask the class if they want to discuss any particular sayings to get the dialog going*

*We made the handouts of 30 common sayings but am including a copy 79 saying for reference if needed*

2

**Alphabetized list**  
**Etymology..... The Origin of Common Sayings**

**Instructors may want to have this on hand for all 79 sayings**

**1. A square meal.**

Nobody actually knows where this idiom came from, though the Royal Navy did serve meals on square plates at one point. Another idea is more linguistic in nature: the use of "square" to mean honest and straightforward goes back to at least the 16th century, which makes sense as "square meal" refers to a healthy, hearty dinner. This one might remain a mystery.

**2. Armed to the Teeth                      To be fully prepared for a confrontation.**

Medieval warriors were often so laden with weapons that sometimes they would have to carry one in their teeth.

**3. As the crow flies or in a beeline**

The use of the phrase *as the crow flies* is used to denote a direct or straight-line path is attested from the early 19th century,

**B**

**4. Balls to the Wall                                      To be pushed to the limit.**

It derives from aviation. The 'balls' sat on top of the levers controlling the throttle and fuel mixtures. Pushing them forward toward the front wall of the cockpit made the plane go faster.

**5. Bandy around                                      To argue, discuss in a lively fashion.**

Bandy was a medieval bat-and-ball game, similar to hockey. To 'bandy' words is to knock them back and forth as one would bandy a ball.

**6. Barge in**

Heavy freight was moved along the Mississippi in large barges pushed by steamboats. These were hard to control and would sometimes swing into piers or other boats. People would say they "barged in"

**7. Beat about the bush                                      To avoid the issue.**

In hunting it's often necessary to beat the underbrush noisily in order to flush animals out into the open. A timid and unwilling hunter will 'beat about the bush', making a show of finding and killing the beast, but not actually doing so.

**8. Bee's knees                                      Perfection.**

In the 1920s there was a great craze for this animal plus body part construction. There were loads of them ....elephant's wrist, eel's ankles, bullfrog's beard.....but only three have survived into the modern age: bee's knees, cat's pyjamas, and dog's bollocks..

**9. Breaking the ice**

**To break off a conflict or commence a friendship**

Back when road transportation was not developed, ships would be the only transportation and means of trade. At times, the ships would get stuck during winter because of ice formation. The receiving country would send small ships to "break the ice" to clear a way for trade ships. This gesture showed affiliation and understanding between two territories.

**10. Between a rock and a hard place      Out of options.**

It's a somewhat inaccurate reference to the greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. There's a passage where the hero has to choose whether to sail close to the monster Scylla or the whirlpool Charybdis.

**11. Big Wig**

Picture a big puffy white haired gentleman and then you'll be picturing a "big wig." This term is derived from powdered wigs worn by men in the 18th century. The bigger the wig, the more wealthy the individual. Who knows, perhaps someday wigs for men will come back in style!

**12. Bite the Bullet**

**To accept something difficult or unpleasant**

In the olden days, when doctors were short on anesthesia or time during a battle, they would ask the patient to bite down on a bullet to distract from the pain. The first recorded use of the phrase was in 1891

**13. Blood is thicker than water**

**Family comes before everything else**

In ancient Middle Eastern culture, blood rituals between men symbolized bonds that were far greater than those of family. The saying also has to do with "blood brothers," because warriors who symbolically shared the blood they shed in battle together were said to have stronger bonds than biological brothers.

**14. Butter someone up**

**To impress someone with flattering**

This was a customary religious act in ancient India. The devout would throw butter balls at the statues of their gods to seek favor and forgiveness

**15. Bury the hatchet**

**To stop a conflict and make peace.**

This one dates back to the early times North America when the Puritans were in conflict with the Native Americans. When negotiating peace, the Native Americans would bury all their hatchets, knives, clubs, and tomahawks. Weapons literally were buried and made inaccessible

**16. Buying the Farm**

This is synonymous with dying.....

During WW 1 soldiers were given life insurance policies worth \$ 5,000.

This was about the price of an average farm so if you died you "bought the farm" for your survivors.

**17. By and large**

As far back as the 16th century, the word "large" was used to mean that a ship was sailing with the wind at its back. Meanwhile, the much less desirable "by," or "full and by," meant the vessel was traveling into the wind. Thus, for mariners, "by and large" referred to trawling the seas in any and all directions relative to the wind. Today, sailors and landlubbers alike now use the phrase as a synonym for "all things considered" or "for the most part."

C

**18. Can't hold a candle to...**

Before electricity, workers needed a second set of hands to hold a candle for them. Holding a candle was clearly a less challenging job, so someone who isn't even qualified to provide light to a competent worker obviously wouldn't be able to perform the task himself.

**19. Cat got your tongue**

**Something said when a person is at a loss for words**

There are two possible sources for this common short saying. The first refers to the cat-o'-nine-tails – a whip used by the English Navy for flogging. The whip caused so much pain that the victims were left speechless.

The second refers to the practice of cutting out the tongues of liars and blasphemers and feeding them to cats.

**20. Chance your Arm**

**To take a risk.**

The arm in question refers to a stripe of military rank worn on the upper sleeve. Take a risk and you might be demoted, thereby losing a stripe.

**21. Caught red-handed**

**To be caught in the act of doing something wrong**

This originates from an old English law that ordered any person to be punished for butchering an animal that wasn't his own. The only way the person could be convicted is if he was caught with the animal's blood still on his hands

**22. Cobweb**

The Old English word for spider was "cob"

**23. Cold Feet**

**To show reluctance.**

It's a military term. A man who has cold or frozen feet — a common affliction until the late 19th century — can't rush into battle, and so proceeds slowly.

**24. Cold shoulder**

Being unwelcoming or antisocial toward someone

In medieval England, it was customary to give a guest a cold piece of meat from the shoulder of mutton, pork, or beef when the host felt it was time for the guest to leave. This was a polite way to communicate, "You may leave, now"

**25. Curfew**

The word "*curfew*" comes from the French phrase "*couvre-feu*" which means "cover the fire". It was used to describe the time to blow out all the candles and lamps. Later in Middle English it was adopted as "*curfeu*" which later became the modern "curfew"

**2<sup>nd</sup> theory**

In the Early colonies homes did not have fireplaces so a fire was built in the center of the room, in order that the fire did not get out of control at night, it was required that, by an agreed upon time a fire was covered with a clay pot called a "curfew"

**D**

**26. Diehard**

While it typically refers to someone with a strong dedication to a particular set of beliefs, the term "diehard" originally had a series of much more literal meanings. In its earliest incarnation in the 1700s, the expression described condemned men who struggled the longest when they were executed by hanging. The phrase later became even more popular after 1811's Battle of Albuera during the Napoleonic Wars. In the midst of the fight, a wounded British officer named William Inglis supposedly urged his unit forward by bellowing "Stand your ground and die hard ... make the enemy pay dear for each of us!" Inglis' 57th Regiment suffered 75 percent casualties during the battle, and went on to earn the nickname "the Die Hards."

**27. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.**

Horses' gums recede with age, leading to longer teeth. A common way to inspect a horse's "worth" is to check it's mouth, hence the phrase. Receiving a horse as a gift and immediately inspecting its value was considered offensive, much like inquiring about the worth of a present today is rude.

**28. Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.**

This is from an Aesop fable. He wrote of a young milkmaid balancing a pail on her head. The girl thought, the milk in this pail will provide me with cream, which I will make into butter, which I will sell in the market, and buy a dozen eggs, which will hatch into chickens, which will lay more eggs, and soon I shall have a large poultry yard. I'll sell some of the fowls and buy myself a handsome new gown and go to the fair, and when the young fellows try to make love to me, I'll toss my head and pass them by. At that moment, the girl tossed her head and lost the pail of milk. Her mother admonished, "Do not count your chickens before they are hatched."

**29. Dressed to the nines.****Meaning to dress exceptionally well**

There's no concrete consensus on the origin of "*dressing to the nines*," but the most popular theory comes from the fact that the very best suits used a full nine yards of fabric.

**30. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater****Don't get rid of valuable things along with the unnecessary ones.**

You won't believe this one! In the early 1500s, people only bathed once a year. Not only that, but they also bathed in the same water without changing it! The adult males would bath first, then the females, leaving the children and babies to go last. By the time the babies got in, the water was clouded with filth. The poor mothers had to take extra care that their babies were not thrown out with the bathwater.

**E****31. Everything but the kitchen sink**

Comes from World War II when everything possible was used to contribute to the war effort...all metal was used for the U.S arsenal. The only objects left out were porcelain kitchen sinks. Does anyone still have a porcelain sink.

**32. Eating crow****To admit fault or be proved wrong after taking a strong position.**

The Bible lists crow as unfit for eating, and along with buzzards and rats, it was actually illegal to eat crow in the Middle Ages. As such, it was notably humiliating to consume.

**33. Eat Humble Pie****Making an apology and suffering humiliation along with it**

During the Middle Ages, the lord of a manor would hold a feast after hunting. He would receive the finest cut of meat at the feast, but those of a lower standing were served a pie filled with the entrails and innards, known as "*umbles*." Therefore, receiving "*umble pie*" was considered humiliating because it informed others in attendance of the guest's lower status.

**F****34. Flash in the pan:****Something disappointingly short-lived.**

There was an old type of gun that had a "*pan*" on which a trail of powder led from the charge to the flint. Sometimes the powder ignited, but the gun didn't go off. Hence it was merely a flash in the pan

G

**35. Get one's goat**

**To irritate.**

It's a horse racing term. Nervous horses could be calmed down by placing a goat in the stall with them. Dastardly rival horse owners would sometimes steal, or 'get', these goats, thereby upsetting the horse and making it likely to lose the race.

**36. Go Cold Turkey**

**To quit something abruptly**

People believed that during withdrawal, the skin of drug addicts became translucent, hard to the touch, and covered with goose bumps – like the skin of a plucked turkey.

**37. God willing and the creek don't rise**

*God willing and the creek don't rise* referred to the Creek Indians, not a body of water. It mentions Benjamin Hawkins of the late 18th century, who was asked by the US president to go back to Washington. In his reply, he was said to have written, "God willing and the Creek don't rise". Because he capitalized *Creek* it's asserted that he was referring to the Creek Indian tribe and not a body of water. Is this derivation correct?

Every researcher who has investigated the expression has dismissed an Indian connection as untrue. The tale is widely reproduced and believed nevertheless. It's worth looking into because of the way in which it has been elaborated in the version you quote

**38. Gone haywire:**

**In a mess.**

In frontier towns of the United States, wire would be taken from hay bales and used for domestic jobs, such as hanging clothes or binding the stove together. A 'haywire' camp was one that was poor, backward, or slovenly

H

**39. Hogwash**

Steamboats carried both people and animals. Since pigs smelled so bad they would be washed before being put board. The mud and other filth that was washed off was considered useless "hog wash"

**40. Hot off the presses**

**To get immediate information**

As the paper goes through the rotary printing press friction causes it to heat up, Therefore, if you grab a paper right off the press it is hot.

I

**41. Iron clad contract**

This came about from the ironclad ships of the civil war, It meant something so strong it couldn't be broken.

J

**42. Jaywalker**    **One who crosses the street in a reckless or illegal manner**  
 Jay birds that traveled outside of the forest into urban areas often became confused and unaware of the potential dangers in the city – like traffic. Amused by their erratic behavior, people began using the term “Jaywalker” to describe someone who crossed the street irresponsibly.

K

**43. Keep Mum**    **To remain silent.**  
 Nothing to do with mothers. It’s derived from the German word for mumble, *mummeln*. Hundreds of years ago people played a dice game called *mumchance*, which was played in complete silence.

**44. Kiss of death.**

"The kiss of death" marks the demise of something. Its roots rest in the Italian mafia, where someone who's been marked for death receives the metaphorical kiss prior to execution.

**45. Kick the Bucket**    **Meaning to die**

When a cow was killed at a slaughterhouse, a bucket was placed under it while it was positioned on a pulley to collect the blood. Sometimes the animal’s legs would kick during the adjustment of the rope and it would literally kick the bucket before being killed.

L

**46. Let the cat out of the bag.**    **To reveal a secret**

"Letting the cat out of the bag" finds its roots in 18th-century street fraud. Suckling pigs were often sold in bags, and a popular scheme was to replace the pig with a cat and sell it to an unwitting victim.

**47. Let sleeping dogs lie**

**It mean that you shouldn't stir up things that will only cause trouble.**

It is a phrase originated by Chaucer around 1380 in Troilus and Criseyde, 'It is nought good a slepyng hound to wake.

If things are not bad the way they are, don't change them

If someone’s actions aren’t harming you, don’t do anything to stir the person up against you

**Another meaning**

**The Book of Proverbs (26:17) says:**

He that passes by, and meddles with strife belonging not to him, is like one that takes a dog by the ears.

In other words, the saying “let sleeping dogs lie” has its roots in the Bible.

It means that people should leave situations or people alone else it might cause them trouble.



**48. Let one's hair down                      To relax or be at ease**

In public, the aristocratic women of medieval times were obliged to appear in elegant hair-dos that were usually pulled up. The only time they would "let their hair down" was when they came home and relaxed

**M**

**49. Mad as a Hatter**

This phrase comes from the days when felt hats were made using mercury on some cheaper furs, that caused the hatter to go mad, thus the "mad hatter" in Alice In Wonderland. Mercury poisoning caused tremors, brain damage, tooth loss, slurred speech, and more. A "mad hatter" was one to be avoided.

I think the lesson to be learned is 1) don't make your own hats and 2) don't use mercury!

**50. Mind your p's and q's.**

In the 17th century, pubs served beer in pints and quarts. If a patron was getting unruly, the bartender might warn them to mind their p's and q's. Now the term simply means to mind your manners, drunk or not.

**51. More Than You Can Shake a Stick At                      Having more of something than you need**

Farmers controlled their sheep by shaking their staffs to indicate where the animals should go. When farmers had more sheep than they could control, it was said they had "more than you can shake a stick at."

**N**

**52. No Spring Chicken                      Someone who is past his prime**

New England chicken farmers generally sold chickens in the spring, so the chickens born in the springtime yielded better earnings than the chickens that survived the winter.

Sometimes, farmers tried to sell old birds for the price of a new spring chicken. Clever buyers complained that the fowl was "no spring chicken," and the term came to represent things or anyone past their prime.

**P**

**53. Paint the town red**

The phrase "paint the town red" most likely owes its origin to one legendary night of drunkenness. In 1837, the Marquis of Waterford—a known lush and mischief maker—led a group of friends on a night of drinking through the English town of Melton Mowbray. The bender culminated in vandalism after Waterford and his fellow revelers knocked over flowerpots, pulled knockers off of doors and broke the windows of some of the town's buildings. To top it all off, the mob literally painted a tollgate, the doors of several homes and a swan statue with red paint. The marquis and his pranksters later compensated Melton for

the damages, but their drunken escapade is likely the reason that "paint the town red" became shorthand for a wild night out.

Still yet another theory suggests the phrase was actually born out of the brothels of the American West, and referred to men behaving as though their whole town were a red-light district.

**54. Passing the Buck /the buck stops here**

Most men in the early west carried a jack knife made by the Buck Knife Company. When playing poker it was common to place one of these knives in front of the dealer so that everyone knew who he was. When it was time for a new dealer the deck of cards and the knife were given to the new dealer. If this person didn't want to deal he would "pass the buck" to the next player. If that player accepted then "*the buck stops here*"

**55. Pulling my leg**

**Meaning to tease someone or jokingly lie to them**

*Pulling one's leg*" actually has sinister origins, rooted in the criminal world of the 18th century. Street thieves would literally pull victims down by their leg in order to more easily rob them.

R

**56. Read the riot act**

These days, angry parents might threaten to "*read the riot act*" to their unruly children. But in 18th-century England, the Riot Act was a very real document, and it was often recited aloud to angry mobs. Instituted in 1715, the Riot Act gave the British government the authority to label any group of more than 12 people a threat to the peace. In these circumstances, a public official would read a small portion of the Riot Act and order the people to "*disperse themselves, and peaceably depart to their habitations.*" Anyone that remained after one hour was subject to arrest or removal by force. The law was later put to the test in 1819 during the infamous Peterloo Massacre, in which a cavalry unit attacked a large group of protestors after they appeared to ignore a reading of the Riot Act.

**57. Red haired step child**

The origin of the phrase "*red haired/headed step child*" dates to the 1830's & 40's when Irish emigrants began arriving in America. Then, like now, young men were having sexual relations with young women before marriage. Sometimes the men were Irish and the girls were not. This resulted in many out of wedlock children with that red Irish hair. When these young women did finally marry, usually to a young man not of Irish descent, the new husband was not particularly patient or sympathetic to the red haired step child and treated them harshly. The phrase is derogatory although many do not know its origin, it is still considered an insult to knowledgeable people of Irish descent, and should be avoided in polite conversation.

**58. Resting on your laurels**

**Proud of one's past achievements**

The idea of resting on your laurels dates back to leaders and athletic stars of ancient Greece. In Hellenic times, laurel leaves were closely tied to Apollo, the god of music, prophecy and poetry. Apollo was usually depicted with a crown of laurel leaves, and the plant eventually

became a symbol of status and achievement. Victorious athletes at the ancient Pythian Games received wreaths made of laurel branches, and the Romans later adopted the practice and presented wreaths to generals who won important battles. Venerable Greeks and Romans, or "laureates," were thus able to "rest on their laurels" by basking in the glory of past achievements.

Only later did the phrase take on a negative connotation, and since the 1800s it has been used for those who are overly satisfied

**59. Rub the wrong way                      To bother or annoy someone**

Early Americans, during the colonial times, would ask their servants to rub their oak floorboards "the right way". The wrong way (not wiping them with dry fabric after wet fabric) would cause streaks to form and ruin it, leaving the homeowner annoyed.

**60. Rule of Thumb**

No, this phrase is definitely NOT "P.C"! Who knew? Some people think "Rule of thumb" is derived from the days when woman were sometimes beaten with a switch. To be "kind" the switch could not be thicker than a thumb's width. This was made law in 1782 when an English judge stated that men were allowed to beat their wives but that the stick could not be thicker than one's thumb.

**2 theory**

The "rule of thumb" as a form of rough measurement probably comes from carpenters approximating inches with their thumbs. Another theory is that farmers used the length of a thumb to estimate how deep to plant seeds.

**61. Run Amok                                      Go crazy**

This saying comes from the Malaysian word Amok, which describes the behavior of tribesmen who, under the influence of opium, became wild, rampaging mobs that attacked anybody in their path.

**2<sup>nd</sup> theory**

"Running amok" is commonly used to describe wild or erratic behavior, but the phrase actually began its life as a medical term. The saying was popularized in the 18th and 19th centuries, when European visitors to Malaysia learned of a peculiar mental affliction that caused otherwise normal tribesmen to go on brutal and seemingly random killing sprees. Amok—derived from the "Amuco," a band of Javanese and Malay warriors who were known for their penchant for indiscriminate violence—was initially a source of morbid fascination for Westerners. Writing in 1772, the famed explorer Captain James Cook noted that "to run amok is to ... sally forth from the house, kill the person or persons supposed to have injured the Amock, and any other person that attempts to impede his passage." Once thought to be the result of possession by evil spirits, the phenomenon later found its way into psychiatric manuals. It remains a diagnosable mental condition to this day.

**62. Saved by the Bell****Rescued from an unwanted situation**

As scary as it sounds, being buried alive was once a common occurrence. People who feared succumbing to such a fate were buried in special coffins that connected to a bell above ground. At night, guards listened for any bells in case they had to dig up a living person and save them "by the bell."

**63. Shot of Whiskey**

In the old west a .45 cartridge for a six gun cost 12 cents, so did a glass of whiskey. If a cowhand was low on cash he would often give the bartender a cartridge in exchange for a drink. This became known as a shot of whiskey

**64. Show Your True Colors****To reveal one's true nature**

Warships used to fly multiple flags to confuse their enemies. However, the rules of warfare stated that a ship had to hoist its true flag before firing and hence, display its country's true colors.

**65. Ship State Rooms**

Traveling by steamship was the height of comfort. Passenger's cabins on the boats were not numbered, instead they were named after states. To this day cabins are called staterooms

**66. Showboat**

These were floating theaters built on a barge that was pushed by a steamboat. These played small towns along the river. Unlike the boat shown in the movie "Showboat" these did not have an engine. They were gaudy and attention grabbing which is why we say someone who is being the life of the party is "showboating"

**67. Sleep tight!****Sleep well**

The phrase "sleep tight" dates from the time when mattresses were supported by ropes. These ropes needed to be pulled tight to provide a stable mattress and a good night's rest.

**68. Son of a Gun**

One version of this saying is that sailors traveling to the West Indies sometimes raped native woman on ships, which sometimes occurred between the cannons. When a woman gave birth to a son, he was called "*son between the guns.*"

This term was used later, using the word "gun" to mean soldier. His son would thus be called a "son of a gun."

Other etymologists speculate that son of a gun meant an illegitimate son of a soldier, who would be nicknamed "gun." How "son of a gun" transformed into its current usage is unknown

**69. Spill the Beans**

**To reveal a secret**

In Ancient Greece, beans were used to vote for candidates entering various organizations. One container for each candidate was set out before the group members, who would place a white bean in the container if they approved of the candidate and a black bean if they did not. Sometimes a clumsy voter would accidentally knock over the jar, revealing all of the beans and allowing everyone to see the otherwise confidential votes.

**70. Stay on the straight and narrow.**

Today it means to generally stay out of trouble, but the original phrase is actually biblical in origin. Matthew 7:13/14 described the gates to heaven as "strait" and the way to eternal life as "narrow."

**T**

**71. Three sheets to the wind**

Sailors had a lot of terms for being drunk and they all related to the ship. Being tipsy was "a sheet in the wind's eye" and being hammered was a full "*three sheets to the wind*." The sheets in question were actually the ropes that held down the sails, so if all three ropes were loose, the sails would billow about like a drunken sailor.

**72. To be Stumped**

Be stumped no more! Being "stumped" comes from the pioneering days when the land was cleared to lay down train tracks. When the workers came across a tree stump, it would cause a dilemma or "to be stumped."

**73. Turn a blind eye**

The phrase "turn a blind eye"—often used to refer to a willful refusal to acknowledge a particular reality—dates back to a legendary chapter in the career of the British naval hero Danish-Norwegian fleet. When his more conservative superior officer flagged for him to withdraw, the one-eyed Nelson supposedly brought his telescope to his bad eye and blithely proclaimed, "I really do not see the signal." He went on to score a decisive victory. Some historians have since dismissed Nelson's famous quip as merely a battlefield myth, but the phrase "turn a blind eye" persists to this day

**74. The third degree**

There are several tales about the origin of "the third degree," a saying commonly used for long or arduous interrogations. One theory argues the phrase relates to the various degrees of murder in the criminal code; yet another credits it to Thomas F. Byrnes, a 19th-century New York City policeman who used the pun "Third Degree Byrnes" when describing his hardnosed questioning style.

In truth, the saying is most likely derived from the Freemasons, a centuries-old fraternal organization whose members undergo rigorous questioning and examinations before becoming "third degree" members, or "master masons.

**W**

**75. Waking Up on the Wrong Side of the Bed      Waking up in a bad mood**

The left side of the body or anything having to do with the left was often considered sinister. To ward off evil, innkeepers made sure the left side of the bed was pushed against a wall, so guests had no other option but to get up on the right side of the bed.

**76. White elephant      Burdensome possession**

White elephants were once considered highly sacred creatures in Thailand—the animal even graced the national flag until 1917—but they were also wielded as a subtle form of punishment. According to legend, if an underling or rival angered a Siamese king, the royal might present the unfortunate man with the gift of a white elephant. While ostensibly a reward, the creatures were tremendously expensive to feed and house, and caring for one often drove the recipient into financial ruin. Whether any specific rulers actually bestowed such a passive-aggressive gift is uncertain, but the term has since come to refer to any burdensome possession—pachyderm or otherwise.

**77. Whole nine yards      To try your best at something**

During World War II, the fighter pilots were equipped with a nine yard chain of ammunition. When they ran out, it meant that they had tried their best at fighting off the target with the entirety of their ammunition

**78. Wrong end of the Stick**

If you imaged the most disgusting origin then you were right! There were two possible origins. One comes from the outhouse days when there were no flushing toilets. The other dates back much earlier, to the days of the Roman baths. Regardless, the outcome was the same! The person in the next stall may have asked for their neighbor to "pass the stick," instead of toilet paper since that did not exist yet. The stick had a sponge on one end and if the recipient grabbed the wrong end, they'd be getting the wrong end of the stick. Most definitely unpleasant!

**79. Wrong Side of the Tracks**

Before there were cars, trains were an important means of transportation. Of course, pollution wasn't a big concern so when a train rolled by, heavy black smoke and soot went with it. Usually the wind blew the black smoke to one side of the tracks and only the poorest of people would endure living in that hard to breathe environment. No one wanted to be on "the wrong side of the tracks."

## References

20 Surprisingly Origins of Sayings

25 Common Sayings and where they came from

10 Common sayings with Historical origins

14 Expressions with crazy origins

The surprisingly origins of 35 English phrases

Origins of words and sayings

Online Etymology Dictionary

There are dozens of sites to find other words and phrases, have fun

# Etymology

## Origins of Common Sayings

### Handout

#### **A square meal.**

Nobody actually knows where this idiom came from, though the Royal Navy did serve meals on square plates at one point. Another idea is more linguistic in nature: the use of "square" to mean honest and straightforward goes back to at least the 16th century, which makes sense as "**square meal**" refers to a healthy, hearty dinner. This one might remain a mystery

#### **Armed to the Teeth        means    To be fully prepared for a confrontation**

Medieval warriors were often so laden with weapons that sometimes they would have to carry one in their teeth.

#### **Balls to the Wall                                Means    To be pushed to the limit.**

It derives from aviation. The 'balls' sat on top of the levers controlling the throttle and fuel mixtures. Pushing them forward toward the front wall of the cockpit made the plane go faster.

#### **Barge in**

Heavy freight was moved along the Mississippi in large barges pushed by steamboats. These were hard to control and would sometimes swing into piers or other boats. People would say they "**barged in**"

#### **Breaking the ice                                To break off a conflict or commence a friendship**

Back when road transportation was not developed, ships would be the only transportation and means of trade. At times, the ships would get stuck during winter because of ice formation. The receiving country would send small ships to "break the ice" to clear a way for trade ships. This gesture showed affiliation and understanding between two territories

#### **Between a rock and a hard place        Out of options.**

It's a somewhat inaccurate reference to the Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. There's a passage where the hero has to choose whether to sail close to the monster Scylla or the whirlpool Charybdis.



**Bite the Bullet**                    **Means To accept something difficult or unpleasant**  
In the olden days, when doctors were short on anesthesia or time during a battle they would ask the patient to bite down on a bullet to distract from the pain. The first recorded use of the phrase was in 1891

**Butter someone up**                    **means To impress someone with flattering**  
This was a customary religious act in ancient India. The devout would throw butter balls at the statues of their gods to seek favor and forgiveness

**Bury the hatchet**                    **means To stop a conflict and make peace.**  
This one dates back to the early times North America when the Puritans were in conflict with the Native Americans. When negotiating peace, the Native Americans would bury all their hatchets, knives, clubs, and tomahawks. Weapons literally were buried and made inaccessible

**Buying the Farm**  
This is synonymous with dying.....  
During WW 1 soldiers were given life insurance policies worth \$ 5,000.  
This was about the price of on average farm so if you died you "bought the farm" for your survivors.

**Caught red-handed**                    **means To be caught in the act of doing something wrong**  
This originates from an old English law that ordered any person to be punished for butchering an animal that wasn't his own. The only way the person could be convicted is if he was caught with the animal's blood still on his hands

**Cold shoulder**                    **Being unwelcoming or antisocial toward someone**  
In medieval England, it was customary to give a guest a cold piece of meat from the shoulder of mutton, pork, or beef when the host felt it was time for the guest to leave. This was a polite way to communicate, "You may leave, now

**Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.**  
Horses' gums recede with age, leading to longer teeth. A common way to inspect a horse's "worth" is to check it's mouth, hence the phrase. Receiving a horse as a gift and immediately inspecting its value was considered offensive, much like inquiring about the worth of a present today is rude.

**Get one's goat** means **To irritate.**

It's a horse racing term. Nervous horses could be calmed down by placing a goat in the stall with them. Dastardly rival horse owners would sometimes steal, or 'get', these goats, thereby upsetting the horse and making it likely to lose the race.

**God willing and the creek don't rise**

*God willing and the creek don't rise* referred to the Creek Indians, not a body of water. It mentions Benjamin Hawkins of the late 18th century, who was asked by the US president to go back to Washington. In his reply, he was said to have written, "God willing and the Creek don't rise". Because he capitalized *Creek* it's asserted that he was referring to the Creek Indian tribe and not a body of water. Is this derivation correct?

Every researcher who has investigated the expression has dismissed an Indian connection as untrue. The tale is widely reproduced and believed nevertheless. It's worth looking into because of the way in which it has been elaborated in the version you quote

**Jaywalker** means **One who crosses the street in a reckless or illegal manner**

Jay birds that traveled outside of the forest into urban areas often became confused and unaware of the potential dangers in the city – like traffic. Amused by their erratic behavior, people began using the term "Jaywalker" to describe someone who crossed the street irresponsibly.

**Kick the Bucket** means **To die**

When a cow was killed at a slaughterhouse, a bucket was placed under it while it was positioned on a pulley to collect the blood. Sometimes the animal's legs would kick during the adjustment of the rope and it would literally kick the bucket before being killed.

**Mad as a Hatter**

This phrase comes from the days when felt hats were made using mercury on some cheaper furs, that caused the hatter to go mad, thus the "*mad hatter*" in Alice In Wonderland. Mercury poisoning caused tremors, brain damage, tooth loss, slurred speech, and more. A "*mad hatter*" was one to be avoided.

I think the lesson to be learned is 1) don't make your own hats and 2) don't use mercury!

**Mind your p's and q's.**

In the 17th century, pubs served beer in pints and quarts. If a patron was getting unruly, the bartender might warn them to mind their p's and q's. Now the term simply means to mind your manners, drunk or not.

**Paint the town red**

The phrase "paint the town red" most likely owes its origin to one legendary night of drunkenness. In 1837, the Marquis of Waterford—a known lush and mischief maker—led a group of friends on a night of drinking through the English town of Melton Mowbray. The bender culminated in vandalism after Waterford and his fellow revelers knocked over flowerpots, pulled knockers off of doors and broke the windows of some of the town's buildings. To top it all off, the mob literally painted a tollgate, the doors of several homes and a swan statue with red paint. The marquis and his pranksters later compensated Melton for the damages, but their drunken escapade is likely the reason that "paint the town red" became shorthand for a wild night out.

Still yet another theory suggests the phrase was actually born out of the brothels of the American West, and referred to men behaving as though their whole town were a red-light district.

**Passing the Buck /the buck stops here**

Most men in the early west carried a jack knife made by the Buck Knife Company. When playing poker it was common to place one of these knives in front of the dealer so that everyone knew who he was. When it was time for a new dealer the deck of cards and the knife were given to the new dealer. If this person didn't want to deal he would "pass the buck" to the next player.

If that player accepted then *"the buck stops here"*

**Red haired step child**

The origin of the phrase *"red haired/headed step child"* dates to the 1830's & 40's when Irish emigrants began arriving in America. Then, like now, young men were having sexual relations with young women before marriage. Sometimes the men were Irish and the girls were not. This resulted in many out of wedlock children with that red Irish hair. When these young women did finally marry, usually to a young man not of Irish descent, the new husband was not particularly patient or sympathetic to the red haired step child and treated them harshly. The phrase is derogatory although many do not know its origin, it is still considered an insult to knowledgeable people of Irish descent, and should be avoided in polite conversation

**Rule of Thumb**

No, this phrase is definitely NOT "P.C"! Who knew? Some people think "Rule of thumb" is derived from the days when woman were sometimes beaten with a switch. This was made law in 1782 when an English judge stated that men were allowed to beat their wives but that the stick could not be thicker than one's thumb.

**2nd theory**

The "rule of thumb" as a form of rough measurement probably comes from carpenters approximating inches with their thumbs. Another theory is that farmers used the length of a thumb to estimate how deep to plant seeds.

**Shot of Whiskey**

In the old west a .45 cartridge for a six gun cost 12 cents, so did a glass of whiskey. If a cowhand was low on cash he would often give the bartender a cartridge in exchange for a drink. This became known as a shot of whiskey

**Show Your True Colors      To reveal one's true nature**

Warships used to fly multiple flags to confuse their enemies. However, the rules of warfare stated that a ship had to hoist its true flag before firing and hence, display its country's true colors.

**Showboat**

These were floating theaters built on a barge that was pushed by a steamboat. These played small towns along the river. Unlike the boat shown in the movie "Showboat" these did not have an engine. They were gaudy and attention grabbing which is why we say someone who is being the life of the party is "showboating"

**Stay on the straight and narrow.**

Today it means to generally stay out of trouble, but the original phrase is actually biblical in origin. Matthew 7:13/14 described the gates to heaven as "strait" and the way to eternal life as "narrow."

**Three sheets to the wind**

Sailors had a lot of terms for being drunk and they all related to the ship. Being tipsy was "a sheet in the wind's eye" and being hammered was a full "three sheets to the wind." The sheets in question were actually the ropes that held down the sails, so if all three ropes were loose, the sails would billow about like a drunken sailor.

**The third degree**

There are several tales about the origin of "the third degree," a saying commonly used for long or arduous interrogations. One theory argues the phrase relates to the various degrees of murder in the criminal code; yet another credits it to Thomas F. Byrnes, a 19th-century New York City policeman who used the pun "Third Degree Byrnes" when describing his hardnosed questioning style.

In truth, the saying is most likely derived from the Freemasons, a centuries-old fraternal organization whose members undergo rigorous questioning and examinations before becoming "third degree" members, or "master masons.

**Waking Up on the Wrong Side of the Bed      Waking up in a bad mood**

The left side of the body or anything having to do with the left was often considered sinister. To ward off evil, innkeepers made sure the left side of the bed was pushed against a wall, so guests had no other option but to get up on the right side of the bed.

**Wrong end of the Stick**

If you imaged the most disgusting origin then you were right! There were two possible origins. One comes from the outhouse days when there were no flushing toilets. The other dates back much earlier, to the days of the Roman baths. Regardless, the outcome was the same! The person in the next stall may have asked for their neighbor to "pass the stick," instead of toilet paper since that did not exist yet. The stick had a sponge on one end and if the recipient grabbed the wrong end, they'd be getting the wrong end of the stick.

Most definitely unpleasant!

## From Lendamai Poole

### Piss Poor

They used to use urine to tan animal skins, so families used to all pee in a pot and then once a day it was taken and sold to the tannery. If you had to do this to survive you were piss poor. But worse than that were the really poor folks who couldn't even afford to buy a pot.... they didn't have a pot to piss in and were the lowest of the low

### Here are some facts about the 1500's

Most people got married in June because they took their yearly bath in May, and they still smelled pretty good by June. However, since they were starting to smell, brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide body odor. Hence the custom today of carrying a bouquet when getting married.

### It's raining cats and dogs

Houses had thatched roofs...thick straw piled high, with no wood underneath, it was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the cats and other small animals [mice, bugs] lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof. Hence the saying.

### Canopy Beds

There was nothing to stop things from falling into the house. This posed a real problem in the bedroom where bugs and other droppings could mess up your nice clean bed. Hence, a bed with big posts and a sheet hung over the top afforded some protection. That's how canopy beds came into existence.

### Dirt Poor

Floors were dirt, only the wealthy had something other than dirt

### Thresh hold

The wealthy had slate floors that would get slippery in the winter when wet, so they spread thresh [straw] on the floor to help keep their footing. As winter wore on, they added more thresh until, when you opened the door, it would all start slipping outside.

A piece of wood was placed in the entry-way.

### Stew

In those old days, they cooked in the kitchen with a big kettle that always hung over the fire and added things to the pot. They ate mostly vegetables and did not get much meat. They would eat the stew for dinner, leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight and then start over the next day. Sometimes stew had food in it that had been there for quite a while. Hence the rhyme: peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old.

Sometimes they could obtain pork, which made them feel quite special.

**Bring home the bacon**

When visitors came over, people would hang up their bacon to show off. It was a sign of wealth that a man could bring home the bacon. They would cut off a little to share with guests and would all sit around and chew the fat.

**Poisonous tomatoes**

Those with money had plates made from pewter. Food with high acid content caused some of the lead to leach onto the food, causing lead poisoning deaths. This happened most often with tomatoes, so for the next 400 years or so tomatoes were considered poisonous.

**Upper Crust**

Bread was divided according to status, workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guest got the top, or the upper crust.

**Saved by the bell**

Lead cups were used to drink ale, the combination of lead and ale would sometimes knock the imbibers out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would take them for dead and prepare them for burial. They were laid on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around and eat and drink and wait to see if they would wake up. Hence the custom of holding a wake

England was old and small and local folks started running out of places to bury people, so they would dig up coffins and would take bones to a bone-house, and reuse the grave. When reopening these coffins, 1 out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside and they realized they had been burying people alive, so they would tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would have to sit out in the graveyard all night [the graveyard shift] to listen for the bell; thus someone could be saved by the bell, or was considered a dead ringer.

Now, whoever said history is boring? So get out there and educate someone!

Share these facts with a friend

Inside of every older person is a younger person wondering, "What the heck happened "?

We'll be old friends until we are old and senile. Then we will be new friends

Smile it gives your face something to do.

### ORIGINS OF COMMON SAYINGS QUIZ

#### FILL IN THE BLANKS!!!!

1. A tough \_\_\_\_\_ to follow.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ the pond.
3. Take into \_\_\_\_\_.
4. An \_\_\_\_\_ in the hole.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ of one shadow.
6. The \_\_\_\_\_ around one's neck.
7. A \_\_\_\_\_ kettle of fish.
8. Cards are stacked \_\_\_\_\_ me.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ out of nowhere.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ the call of nature
11. Dead as a \_\_\_\_\_.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ swords with someone.
13. Draw a \_\_\_\_\_.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ sword.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ clear.
16. Jack of all trades and \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_.



## ANSWERS TO QUIZ

1. Act
2. Across
3. Account
4. Ace
5. Afraid
6. Albatross
7. Different
8. Against
9. Appear
10. Answer
11. Door nail
12. Cross
13. Blank
14. Double-edged
15. Crystal
16. Master of none

## The true story of Rudolph the reindeer

A man named Bob May, depressed and broken hearted, stared out of his drafty apartment window into the chilling December night.

His four year old daughter Barbara sat on his lap quietly sobbing, Bob's wife Evelyn was dying of cancer.

Little Barbara couldn't understand why her mommy could never come home.

Barbara looked up into her daddy's eyes and asked, "why isn't mommy like everybody else's mommy".

Bob's jaw tightened and his eyes welled up with tears.

Her question brought waves of grief, but also of anger.

It had been the story of his life. Life always had been different for Bob's life.

Small when he was a kid, Bob was often bullied by other boys, he was too little at the time to compete in sports. He was often called names he'd rather not remember. From childhood, Bob was different and never seemed to fit in.

Bob did complete college, married his loving wife and was grateful to get his job as a copywriter at Montgomery Ward during the great Depression.

Then he was blessed with his little girl. But it was short lived, Evelyn's bout with cancer stripped them of all their savings, and now Bob and his daughter were forced to live in a two-room apartment in the Chicago slums.

Evelyn died just days before Christmas in 1938. Bob struggled to give hope to his child, for whom he couldn't even afford to buy a Christmas gift. But if he couldn't buy a gift, he was determined to make one ... a storybook!

Bob had created an animal character in his own mind and told the little animal's story to little Barbara to give her comfort and hope. Again and again Bob told the story, embellishing it more with each telling. Who was the character? What was the story all about?

The story Bob May created was his own autobiography in fable form. The character he created was a misfit outcast like he was. The name of the character?

A little reindeer named Rudolph, with a big shiny nose.

Bob finished the book just in time to give it to his little girl on Christmas day.

But the story doesn't end there.....The general manager of Montgomery Ward caught wind of the little storybook and offered Bob May a nominal fee to purchase the rights to print the book.

Wards went on to print "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and distribute it to children visiting Santa Claus in their stores. By 1946 Wards had printed and distributed more than six million copies of Rudolph.

That same year, a major publisher wanted to purchase the rights from Wards to print an updated version of the book. In an unprecedented gesture of kindness, the CEO of Wards returned all rights back to Bob May.

The book became a best seller. Many toy and marketing deals followed and Bob May, now remarried with a growing family, became wealthy from the story he created to comfort his grieving daughter. But the story doesn't end there either.....

Bob's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, made a song adaptation to Rudolph. Though the song was turned down by popular vocalists such as Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore, it was recorded by the singing cowboy, Gene Autry.

"Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was released in 1949 and became a phenomenal success, selling more records than any other Christmas song, with the exception of "White Christmas"

The gift of love that Bob May created for his daughter so long ago kept on returning back to bless him again and again.

And Bob May learned the lesson, just like his dear friend Rudolph that being different isn't so bad. In fact, being different can be a blessing.