

ENGLISH IDIOMS RELATED TO SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

In a world which is rapidly evolving, the usage of certain words or phrases which are related to science and technology is perfectly justified. While in the past the lives of the people were dominated by the land and the seasons, these days our lives are shaped by science and technology. The English language is extremely abundant in idiomatic expressions which relate to different fields of science, either we speak of Chemistry or Physics, as well as to machines or electronic machinery. Our article has tried to focus on the idiomatic expressions which refer to science and technology, in an attempt to give a list, as comprehensible as possible, of these expressions.

Keywords: science, technology, idiom, meaning, language

Rezumat

Într-o lume aflată în rapidă evoluție, utilizarea anumitor cuvinte sau expresii legate de știință și tehnologie este perfect justificată. Dacă în trecut viața oamenilor era dominată de pământ și anotimpuri, în zilele noastre viețile noastre sunt modelate de știință și tehnologie. Limba engleză este extrem de abundentă în expresii idiomatice care se referă la diferite domenii ale științei, fie că vorbim de chimie sau fizică, precum și de mașini sau utilaje electronice. Articolul nostru a încercat să se concentreze asupra expresiilor idiomatice care se referă la știință și tehnologie, în încercarea de a oferi o listă cât mai ușor de înțeles a acestor expresii.

Cuvinte cheie: știință, tehnologie, idiom, sens, limbă

Our everyday language abounds in all kinds of expressions which might seem familiar but whose meaning we often don't know. There are many cases in which we are only guessing what a certain expression mean, therefore we are afraid of putting it into a certain context so as to avoid public embarrassment. Even if we are not obliged to use these phrases, it is advisable to know their meanings, so that we can use them correctly in a conversation and thus make a good impression.

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We have tried to render a list, as comprehensible as possible, comprising words or phrases that belong to the idiomatic linguistic domain which relate to science and technology. Each entry contains a definition of the word or phrase, an example and sometimes a note on the origin of the idiom. We have had as a reference book "*Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*"¹.

There are a lot of idioms or idiomatic expressions that are connected with science. Here are some examples:

- *all gas and gaiters* = a favourable or pleasant state; e.g. *My son has just been admitted to college, so all is gas and gaiters.*
- *a practical, scientific turn of mind* = a practical, scientific way of thinking about things; e.g. *He's got a scientific turn of mind; he can fix almost anything.*
- *a quantum leap / jump* = a sudden very large increase, advance or improvement in something; e.g. *There has been a quantum leap in the photovoltaic energy lately.* Note: in Physics, a *quantum jump* is a sudden change in a physical quality such as energy from one fixed level to another.
- *a / the pecking order* (familiar speech) = the way a group is organized, with some members being more important or powerful than others; e.g. *There is a reason why there is a pecking order in this company.* Note: this idiom was first used by a scientist in the 1920s after studying groups of birds; he noticed there was an order when birds were feeding, with the strongest birds eating first.
- *blind somebody with science* = deliberately confuse somebody with your special knowledge, especially by using difficult or technical words which they do not understand; e.g. *Stop trying to blind me with science every time I ask you a simple question!*
- *go down like a lead balloon* (familiar speech) = be very unsuccessful; not be accepted by people; e.g. *He was really disappointed that his marriage proposal went down like a lead balloon.* Note: *lead* is a heavy soft grey metal (symbol = Pb).
- *have / get down to a science* (especially American English) = have a very precise and efficient way of doing something, especially something that is normally done in a casual or informal way; e.g. *I believe Susan when she says she has shopping down to a science.*
- *it's not rocket science* = used in order to emphasize that something is not complicated or difficult to do or understand;

¹*Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*, Oxford University Press, 2006



e.g. *I've already explained to you this exercise twice, why don't you understand it? It's not exactly rocket science, is it?*

- *the acid test (of something)/ the litmus test* (American English) = a situation which finally proves whether something is good or bad, true or false, etc.; e.g. *They have always trusted each other, but the acid test will come when they have to keep a big secret.* Note: both these expressions originally referred to chemical tests. The *acid test* uses nitric acid to test if something is made of gold. The *litmus test* uses litmus paper to test for acids and alkalis.

A great number of idioms relate to machines. Here are some examples:

- *a big wheel* (familiar speech) = an important person with a lot of influence in an organization, etc.; e.g. *His uncle is a big wheel in the pharma industry.* Note: in this idiom, *cheese* comes from the Urdu word *chiz*, meaning *thing*.
- *a cog in the machine / wheel* (familiar speech) = a person who plays a small part in a large organization or plan; e.g. *Although he is very conceited, he is nothing but a cog in the machine at the firm.*
- *add fuel to the fire / flames* = do or say something which makes a difficult situation worse, or makes somebody even angrier, etc.; e.g. *Considering all the bad things that have happened to her lately, we can't argue with her and add fuel to the fire.*
- *a fifth / third wheel* (American English) = an unwanted, extra or unnecessary person; e.g. *The night out with Claire and Adam made me feel like a fifth wheel.* Note: this idiom refers to adding an extra unnecessary wheel to a vehicle.
- *asleep at the wheel* (British English) / *asleep at the switch* (American English) = not paying attention to possible problems; e.g. *He was asleep at the wheel and forgot to pay his annual car insurance.* Note: this idiom refers to someone falling asleep while driving a car or while operating a control on a train track.
- *at full throttle* = if you do something *at full throttle*, you do it with as much speed and energy as you can; e.g. *She has always lived her life at full throttle.* Note: the *throttle* is a device that controls the amount of fuel going into the engine of a vehicle.
- *be on automatic pilot* = do something without thinking because you have done the same thing many times before; e.g. *He is on automatic pilot every time his mother tells him to clean up his room.* Note: the *automatic pilot* is the device in an aircraft that



- keeps it on a fixed course without the need for a person to control it. It is often shortened to *autopilot*.
- *break a butterfly on a wheel* = use unnecessary force to destroy something fragile or insignificant; e.g. *The police broke a butterfly on a wheel when they started to use physical force against civilians*. Note: in former times, *breaking someone upon the wheel* was a form of punishment or torture which involved fastening criminals to a wheel so that their bones would be broken or dislocated.
 - *bumper to bumper* = if vehicles are *bumper to bumper*, there is so much traffic that they are very close together and can hardly move; e.g. *Being a mini vacation, it was bumper to bumper on the highway leading to seaside resorts*. Note: a *bumper* is the bar fixed to the front and back of a vehicle to reduce the effect if it hits anything.
 - *climb / jump on the bandwagon* (familiar speech) = do something that others are already doing because it is successful or fashionable; e.g. *The campaign of the Popular Party was very successful and that's why thousands of people started to jump on the bandwagon*. Note: at political celebrations in the USA, there was often a band on a large decorated vehicle. If somebody joined a particular *bandwagon*, they publicly supported that politician in order to benefit from their success.
 - *firing / working on all cylinders* (familiar speech) = using all your energy to do something; working as well as possible; e.g. *They are working on all cylinders to finish their project on time*.
 - *full steam ahead* = with as much speed or energy as possible; e.g. *We were learning full steam ahead in order to pass our high-school graduation exam*. Note: this idiom refers to the order given on a ship by the captain to the engine room.
 - *under your own steam* (familiar speech, British English) = without help from others; e.g. *He refused to do the project with his colleagues as he was convinced he could do better under his own steam*.
 - *get into gear* = start working in an efficient way; e.g. *After a few difficult months at the office, I feel I am really getting into gear now*.
 - *get up / pick up steam* (familiar speech) = get bigger, more active or popular; e.g. *I am really trying to pick up steam and finish writing this essay in due time*.



- *give somebody / have a bumpy ride* = make a situation difficult for somebody; have a difficult time; e.g. *Susan has had a bumpy ride at the office lately.*
- *go wrong (of a machine)* = stop working correctly; e.g. *This apparatus keeps going wrong. I just get really annoyed dealing with it.*
- *grind to a halt / standstill / come to a grinding halt* = stop slowly; e.g. *The bus ground to a halt and I was able to get off.* Note: this idiom refers to the way a very large machine slowly stops working, with some of its parts *grinding* (= rubbing) together.
- *gum up the works* (familiar speech) = make progress or an activity impossible; e.g. *When things gets more complicated, Jim just tends to gum up the works.* Note: the *works* are the moving parts of an engine.
- *hit the buffers* (familiar speech) = if a plan, somebody's career, etc. *hits the buffers*, it suddenly stops being successful; e.g. *My plan to go to the mountains this weekend hit the buffers when I realized I was a bit short of cash.* Note: *Buffers* are two round metal devices on the front or end of a train, or at the end of a railway, that reduce the shock if the train hits something.
- *keep / put the pedal to the metal* (familiar speech, American English) = 1. drive a car quickly; e.g. *As we were running late, I asked my husband to put the pedal to the metal.*; 2. work hard; e.g. *If you really keep the pedal to the metal, you will manage to finish the project on time.* Note: *pedal* in this idiom refers to the flat bar in a car that you press with your foot in order to make the car move quickly (= the accelerator / the gas pedal). The *metal* is the floor of the car.
- *keep your nose to the grindstone* (familiar speech) = continue to work very hard; e.g. *Congratulations for your excellent results! Keep your nose to the grindstone and you will surely be admitted to the university.* Note: a *grindstone* is a machine used for grinding, sharpening and polishing knives and tools.
- *leave somebody to their own devices* = leave somebody to do something without your help, or to spend their time as they like; e.g. *You should leave your children to their own devices so that they could learn to manage on their own.*
- *let off steam* (familiar speech) = release energy, strong feelings, nervous tension, etc. by intense physical activity or noisy behaviour; e.g. *I went to the gym today to let off steam after an exhausting week.*



- *oil the wheels* (British English) / *grease the wheels* (American English) = help something to happen easily and without problems, especially in business or politics; e.g. *The government came up with some aid state measures to oil the wheels of economic growth in the country.*
- *on an even keel* = living, working or happening in a calm way, with no sudden changes, especially after a difficult time; e.g. *After going bankrupt two years ago, his life seems to be getting on an even keel again these days.* Note: the *keel* is the long piece of wood or steel along the bottom of a ship, on which the frame is built, and which helps to keep it in a vertical position in the water.
- *out of gear* = (of emotions or situations) out of control; e.g. *Whenever we quarrel, my sister's temper often slips out of gear.*
- *prime the pump* = give somebody, an organization, etc. financial help in order to support a project, business, etc., when it is beginning; e.g. *This company will survive only if its leadership primes the pump.* Note: originally, this was a way of making a pump work properly by adding water to it.
- *put a damper on something* (familiar speech) = make an event less enjoyable or cheerful; e.g. *The news of his brother-in-law's car accident put a damper on his wedding anniversary.* Note: a *damper* is a device in a piano that is used to reduce the level of the sound produced.
- *put / throw a spanner in the works* (familiar speech, British English) / *put a spoke in somebody's wheel* = spoil or prevent the success of somebody's plan, idea, etc.; e.g. *The bad weather really put a spanner in the works and hindered us to go to the beach.* Note: a *spanner* is a metal tool used for fastening things tightly. The *works* are the moving parts of a machine. *Spoke* may be an incorrect translation from Dutch of *spaa*k meaning *bar* or *stick*.
- *put your shoulder to the wheel* = start working very hard at a particular task; e.g. *James really put his shoulder to the wheel and got the job done.*
- *run out of steam* (familiar speech) = lose the energy, enthusiasm, etc. that you had before; e.g. *Toward the end of the race, he seemed to run out of steam and finished as runner-up.*
- *reinvent the wheel* = waste time creating something that already exists and works well; e.g. *Why does it take you so much time to fix the leaky tap? It's not like you are reinventing the wheel now.*
- *set the wheels in motion* = do what is necessary to make a start on a project, plan, meeting, etc.; e.g. *I would like to start a*



business, but I need a little bit of cash to set the wheels in motion.
Note: this idiom refers to starting a large and complicated piece of machinery.

- *spin your wheels* = use your time, energy, etc. without achieving anything; e.g. *How long are you going to spin your wheels? Don't you see you are getting nowhere?*
- *steal somebody's thunder* = spoil somebody's attempt to surprise or impress, by doing something first; e.g. *Sam is the best student at Maths in our class, so, no matter how hard I try, he is always stealing my thunder.* Note: in the 18th century, the writer John Dennis invented a machine that made the sound of thunder for use in his new play. The play was not a success, and was taken off and replaced by another play. When Dennis went to see the other play, he was angry to hear his thunder machine being used and complained that '... they will not let my play run, but they steal my thunder.'
- *steamed up* (familiar speech, British English) = very angry or excited; e.g. *Her betrayal made me really steamed up.*
- *the nuts and bolts of something* (familiar speech) = the most important and practical details of something; e.g. *Jane came up with a brilliant idea as she is an expert when it comes to the nuts and bolts of finding solutions.* Note: *nuts and bolts* are small pieces of metal that are screwed together to fasten things together.
- *the squeaky wheel gets the grease / oil* (proverb, American English) = used to say that a person who complains or talks a lot gets more attention; e.g. *You should ask the manager for a promotion taking into account your excellent results in the company. You know the saying: the squeaky wheel gets the grease.*
- *the wheel has come / turned full circle* (proverb) = something that changed greatly has now turned to its original state or position; e.g. *It doesn't usually take long for the wheel of fashion to come full circle.*
- *wheel and deal* = do a lot of complicated deals in business or politics, often in an dishonest way; e.g. *If you can't wheel and deal, you don't belong in politics.*
- *wheels within wheels* = used to describe a situation which is difficult to understand because it involves complicated or secret processes and decisions; e.g. *There are always wheels within wheels in this factory.*



Electronic machinery has also generated a big number of idiomatic expressions. As illustrative examples in this sense we could mention:

- *a live wire* (familiar speech) = a lively and enthusiastic person; e.g. *My best friend is a real live wire; when I am around her, I feel energetic and cheerful.* Note: a *wire* that is *live* is connected to a source of electrical power, so it has a great deal of energy.
- *assault and battery* = a violent physical attack; e.g. *He is under arrest for conspiracy to commit assault and battery.*
- *at the buzzer* (American English) = at the end of a game or period of play; e.g. *The home team lost the game at the buzzer.* Note: a *buzzer* is an electrical device that makes a sound as a signal, for example to show that no time is left in a game.
- *be on / have a short fuse* (familiar speech) = be likely to get angry easily, because you are tired, stressed, etc.; e.g. *He has had some trouble at work lately and I guess that is why he has a very short fuse.*
- *be on the same wavelength* (familiar speech) = have the same opinion or feelings about something; e.g. *I find it very easy to communicate with him- we are always on the same wavelength.*
- *blow a fuse* (familiar speech) = get very angry; e.g. *If they don't finish their project on time, their boss will blow a fuse.* Note: this idiom refers to the fact that if the flow of electricity in a piece of electrical equipment is too strong, the fuse (= a small wire or device inside it) will break, often with a loud noise, and stop the current.
- *button it!* (familiar speech) = used to tell rudely to somebody to be quiet; e.g. *Stop talking nonsense and button it!*
- *get your wires crossed* (familiar speech) = misunderstand each other; e.g. *I thought you were supposed to see Jane off to the airport, not me; we must have got our wires crossed.* Note: this idiom refers to telephone wires that are not connected properly.
- *go / come down to the wire* (familiar speech) = if you say that a situation *goes down to the wire*, you mean that the result will not be decided or known until the very end; e.g. *The winner of the tennis match is yet uncertain, so I expect this game to go down to the wire.* Note: in this idiom, the *wire* refers to the finishing line in races.
- *on the button* (familiar speech, especially American English) = 1. at exactly the right time or at the exact time mentioned; e.g. *The train arrived at the station on the button.* 2. exactly right; e.g. *He is on the button regarding this matter.*



- *press / push the panic button* (British English) = react in a sudden or an extreme way to something unexpected that has frightened you; e.g. *The fact that he was fired without any explanation made him push the panic button.*
- *pull wires* (familiar speech, American English) = use your influence in order to get an advantage for somebody; e.g. *There are some people that are used to pull wires in order to get to the top.*
- *push / press somebody's buttons* (familiar speech, especially British English) = make somebody react, especially in an angry or excited way; e.g. *The fact the she cheated on him really pushed his buttons.*
- *recharge your batteries* (familiar speech) = rest for a while to get more energy for the next period of activity; e.g. *What I really need is a few days in the mountains to recharge my batteries.*
- *the small screen* = the television (when contrasted with cinema); e.g. *Cinema movies reach the small screen very quickly nowadays.*

English expressions related to science and technology are, as far as we could see throughout our article, numberless since , being in the 21st century, science and technology are taking the lead in bringing us to a better world. There are more nuances related to science and technology that English learners must acquire by means of various idiomatic expressions. For non-native speakers of English the vocabulary related to science and technology can be a particularly useful topic of study, allowing them to use a certain idiom or idiomatic expression in everyday language.

Apart from being used in the literal sense, English vocabulary related to science and technology is also used figuratively, through idioms. Our article has focused on these particular idiomatic expressions which are used in a non-literal way, while retaining their literal meanings.

This article has tried to render a list as comprehensible as possible of these expressions in order to help all those people who want to be proficient in the use of the English language, to expand their vocabulary and to become better English speakers.

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