2016-06-01

Getting All the Ducks in a Row: Towards a Method for the Consolidation of English Idioms

Ethan Michael Lynn
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Linguistics Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Lynn, Ethan Michael, "Getting All the Ducks in a Row: Towards a Method for the Consolidation of English Idioms" (2016). All Theses and Dissertations. 6014.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/6014

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
ABSTRACT

Getting All the Ducks in a Row: Towards a Method for the Consolidation of English Idioms

Ethan Michael Lynn
Department of Linguistics and English Language, BYU
Master of Arts

Idioms play an important role in language acquisition but learners do not have sufficient time to learn all of them. Therefore, learners need to focus on the most frequently occurring idioms, which can be determined by corpus searches. Building off previous corpus studies, this study generated a comprehensive list of English idioms by combining lists from several sources and developed a methodology for organizing and sorting idioms within the list. In total, over 27,000 idiom forms were amalgamated and a portion of the list was compiled, which featured 2,697 core idioms and 5,559 variant idiom forms. It was found that over 35% of idioms varied structurally and thirteen types of idiom variation were highlighted. Additionally, issues concerning idiom boundaries were investigated. These results are congruent with previous findings which show that variation is a commonly occurring element of idioms. Furthermore, specific problematic elements for future corpus searches and English language learners are identified.

Keywords: idioms, corpus linguistics, idiom variation, ESL
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Dee Gardner, for his time, attention, and guidance during this thesis. I also wish to express gratitude to my mentor and good friend Dr. Neil J. Anderson who inspired me to pursue my studies in TESOL. My parents, Gregory and Debbie Lynn, made education a priority and provided the means to afford my education. For that, I am extremely grateful. Finally, I would like to express appreciation to my wife, Felicia, for her love, support, belief, and encouragement.
Table of Contents

TITLE PAGE ................................................................................................................................... i
ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................... ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................... iv
List of Charts .................................................................................................................................. vi
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................... vii
Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2: Review of Literature ..................................................................................................... 4
  Defining Idiom ............................................................................................................................ 4
  Idiom Form Variation ................................................................................................................. 5
Corpus-based Idiom Studies ........................................................................................................... 8
  Simpson and Mendis Idiom Study .......................................................................................... 9
  Grant and Bauer Idiom Studies ............................................................................................. 10
  Liu Idiom Study .................................................................................................................... 12
Research Aims .......................................................................................................................... 12
Chapter 3: Methodology ............................................................................................................... 14
  Idiom Sources and Amalgamation ....................................................................................... 14
  Combining Variant Forms .................................................................................................... 15
    Determining the Keyword ................................................................................................. 15
    First Occurring Noun ....................................................................................................... 15
    First Occurring Verb ....................................................................................................... 16
    First Occurring Adjective .............................................................................................. 17
List of Charts

Table 1. Types of Variation from Previous Studies ................................................................. 7
Table 2. Summary of Previous Corpus-based Idiom Studies ...................................................... 9
Table 3. Use of the Asterisk in Core Idioms .......................................................... 22
Table 4. Summary of Types of Idiom Variations ................................................................. 28
Table 5. Summary of Pre-Core Reductions ............................................................. 30
Table 6. Summary of Post-Core Reductions ................................................................. 31
List of Figures

Figure 1. Flowchart of the Process for Determining the Keyword............................................. 19

Figure 2. Example of Completed Excel Spreadsheet.............................................................. 23
Chapter 1: Introduction

Idioms are a necessary element of language for learners to acquire because they frequently occur in all aspects of language. In fact, Cooper (1998) estimates that people use approximately 980 idiom tokens per day, and 20 million in a lifetime. Idioms also add depth to the language because they “contain rich, unique features of the language and culture” (Liu, 2008, p. 104). Due to their frequency and unique role in communication, idioms “can be a great asset to learners in acquiring a new language” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 39). Therefore, it is necessary for learners to acquire idioms in order to promote authentic and natural use of the language (Cooper, 1999; Fernando, 1996). However, idioms can be difficult to acquire because their non-literal nature “[adds] confusion and difficulty to the learning of language” (D'Angelo Bromley, 1984, p. 272). Thus, “the learning of idioms must...be considered an integral part of vocabulary learning” (Irujo, 1986, p.236). Because of the importance of idiom acquisition, how to effectively help English language learners (ELLs) acquire idioms has been an area of focus for teachers and scholars alike.

One of the most important issues to consider is which idioms should be taught. Cooper (1998) admonishes teachers to “choose idioms that are frequently encountered in the target language” because, as Liu (2008) states, “it is impossible for language learners to grasp all idioms, especially in a short period of time” (p. 118). Consequently, “selecting appropriate idioms for instruction is...very important” (p. 118). Even though there is a need for teaching frequently occurring idioms, it has been noted that idiom books and dictionaries are “double-edged swords, since they often contain items that are obsolete, or of little or no value to a specific group of students” (Yorio, 1980, p.439) because “most...sources—general dictionaries, or specialist dictionaries of idioms—record and perpetuate items not necessarily found in current
English” (Moon, 1998, p. 45). Liu (2003) explains that “the selection of idioms in [idiom books and idiom dictionaries] often reflects primarily the authors' intuition rather than any empirical data” (p.672). Clearly, “idiom teaching materials would be more helpful if… [the idioms included in teaching materials] were based on frequency and range of occurrence in authentic language” (Grant, 2007, p. 181). Therefore, corpus studies of the most frequently occurring idioms in the English language are needed because “corpus research has become the most effective method of ascertaining the use frequency of idioms” (Liu, 2008, p.109). The end goal of using a corpus to generate the most frequently occurring idioms is to inform and improve both the teaching of idioms and the materials needed to do so.

Useful studies of idiom frequency using corpora have been conducted in the recent past (e.g., Grant, 2005; Grant, 2007; Grant & Nation, 2006; Liu, 2003; Moon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). However, Liu (2003) recommends that “the results of [his] study...need to be interpreted cautiously” (p.687). In fact, this same concern could apply to the results of any of the studies to date. For example, the researchers used differing definitions of idioms, some of which were far too narrow, to capture the full scope of idioms in English. Another concern found in previous studies is that although issues regarding form variation in idioms have been alluded to (Grant & Nation, 2006; Moon, 1998; Liu, 2003; Liu, 2008), problematic features of idiom form that could complicate future corpus studies need to be more thoroughly investigated and analyzed. Finally, the literature neglects how these form-based issues can potentially affect the acquisition of idioms.

To begin addressing these form and definitional issues involving idioms, the current study attempted to present a clear methodology for consolidating and organizing the massive amount of English idioms, allowing corpus researchers to search for, count, and establish
pedagogically useful lists for English language education. This methodology also included an examination of problematic features of idioms that could complicate both corpus searching and the acquisition of idioms for learners.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Defining Idiom

Language researchers have not been able to agree upon a definition of idiom because “idiom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways” (Moon, 1998, p.3). Liu (2003) noted that some scholars adhere to a more inclusive definition which includes all fixed phrases, proverbs, formulaic speech, and polysemic words. For example, Cooper (1998) considers metaphoric words like weigh as in weigh a decision, and slang phrases like you got it to be idioms. Yet, others adhere to a narrow and limited definition that excludes decomposable and figurative expressions. To illustrate, Grant and Bauer (2004) consider phrases like red herring and the Big Apple to be idioms, while rejecting dog in the manger and between the devil and the deep blue sea as idioms. Furthermore, some scholars include phrasal verbs in their definition of idiom (Liu, 2003), while others choose to segregate idioms and phrasal verbs (Simpson & Mendis, 2003). As a result of the lack of consensus among scholars, some have estimated that there are over 10,000 idioms in English (Brenner, 2003), while others claim that there only 103 (Grant, 2005; Grant & Nation, 2006).

How to define idiom is therefore left to the discretion of the researcher. This is the case because, as Tabossi and Zardon (1993) declare, idioms are “multi-faceted and require differing viewpoints and methodological approaches” (145). Consequently, idioms are defined and identified “on the basis of criteria which strike the analyst as being the most illuminating” (Fernando, 1996, p.40). It is unavoidable that varying criteria and methods will be generated based on the scope and context of a given study.

This study adopts Liu’s (2008) definition of idiom: “[a] multiword expression that [is] invariant or variance-restricted in structure and often (not always) non- or semi-literal in
meaning” (p.15-16). Although this definition asserts that idioms are multiword expressions, compound words can be considered idioms (e.g., \textit{airhead}). This study did not exclude idioms on the basis of not being multiword. Liu’s definition also includes those idioms that are invariant in their form while also considering those with a limited range of variation, which is discussed in further detail below. Finally, this definition includes idioms that are both non-literal and that have a degree of literalness. This is congruent with the work of Fernando (1996) who developed a continuum featuring varying degrees of literalness: non-literal (e.g., \textit{spick and span}), semi-literal (e.g., \textit{drop names}), and literal (e.g., \textit{arm in arm}). It is important to note that this study made no attempt to exclude idioms based on their degree of literalness, because the nature of determining the literalness of an idiom is indeed quite subjective.

As explained above, a liberal interpretation of Liu’s (2008) definition was employed for this study. Therefore, all entries in established idiom dictionaries and/or existing electronic lists can be used, because it can be argued that they adhere to Liu’s (2008) definition. However, phrasal verb dictionaries were not included as sources of idioms because phrasal verbs are distinct enough to merit separate investigation and analysis (Gardner & Davies, 2007). The remainder of this study uses this definition of idiom in developing a methodology for amalgamating and producing an electronic list of idioms for performing corpus searches.

\textbf{Idiom Form Variation}

The balance between invariance and variance-restriction with regard to the structure of idioms merits further investigation. At one extreme, Grant and Bauer (2004) explain that “frozen/fixed” phrases cannot allow “permutation,...paradigmatic replacement, [or] addition or deletion of elements” (p.44). To illustrate, Fernando (1996) states that idioms such as \textit{bread and butter} and \textit{fancy free} have become “conventionally fixed in a specific order and lexical form”
fixedness is an essential characteristic of idioms, the data from her corpus study “show clearly that [the forms of idioms] are often unstable” (p.120). In fact, nearly 40% of the idioms in her study demonstrated variation, and 14% had two or more examples of variation. Thus, it has been said that idioms are phrases that have “a restricted set of variants” (e.g., seize/grasp the nettle and have/get cold feet) (Fernando, 1996, p.31-32). Although some variation in idioms is acceptable to some scholars, others do not consider expressions that demonstrate a high degree of variability as idioms. In order to find a balance between an acceptable amount of variation and too much variation, Fernando (1996) explained that the phrases catch a train or catch a bus are not considered idioms, even though the word catch is used idiomatically, because the word catch can co-occur with several forms of transportation. Thus, any of the combinations using the idiomatic meaning of catch (e.g., catch a cab, catch a ride, etc.) is considered to be too variable in its form to qualify as an idiom (p.31). It is important to note that this study makes no attempt to evaluate whether an idiom contains a restricted set of variants or if it varies too much because such distinctions can be subjective. Rather, in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, if an idiom occurs in an idiom dictionary or other idiom resource, it is considered an idiom for this study.

The numerous types of idiom variation have been explored in previous studies. Table 1 shows common types of idiom variation.
Table 1

Types of Variation from Previous Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Variation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>Foot/fit the bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>Tempt fate/providence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective/Modifier</td>
<td>Bad/rotten apple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particle</td>
<td>Out of/from thin air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>Hit and/or miss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplification</td>
<td>(out) on a limb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truncation</td>
<td>Finders keepers (loser weepers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Blending</td>
<td>Twist someone’s arm → arm twisting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Furthermore, there is a difference between idioms found in dictionaries (canonical form) and idioms used in fluent speech. The types of variations encountered in oral communication “could pose difficulties in comprehension when learners encounter idioms as actually used by fluent speakers” (Simpson & Mendis, 2003, p.435-436).

Moreover, variation is particularly problematic for researchers conducting corpus searches (see Grant, 2005; Grant & Nation, 2006; Liu, 2003; Moon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003). In particular, Grant (2005) noted in her study that “because many idioms…are not fixed or frozen, care had to be taken that the corpus search found all occurrences” (p.438).

Furthermore, Liu (2008) cautions that merely performing a “straight-out search...will miss out many examples of an idiom” (p.110). Specifically, punctuation, hyphens, apostrophes, spelling, inflections, word order, substitutions and truncation make corpus searches problematic (Grant & Nation, 2006, p.4-5). For example, a search for red herring found 56 occurrences; a search for the hyphenated variation red-herring found an additional 2; a search for the plural variation red herrings found 26 occurrences. In addition, when the phrase to be all in was searched for, all possible variations of the verb to be needed to be included in the search (e.g.,
Likewise, it was found that when searching for the verbs look (look/looks/looked) and feel (feel/feels/felt/feeling), all verb variations also had to be accounted for in similar fashion (Grant & Nation, 2006). As Liu (2003) noted, accounting for such variations in corpus searches can indeed be quite “laborious” (p.680).

Clearly, it is evident that idiom form variation is an important issue to consider. Specifically, many types of variation occur which create difficulties for both the corpus researchers and the language learner.

**Corpus-based Idiom Studies**

Idiom frequency has received attention recently as seen by the many corpus-based frequency studies that have been conducted (Grant, 2005; Grant, 2007; Grant & Nation, 2006; Liu, 2003; Moon, 1998; Simpson & Mendis, 2003) (see Table 2). These studies have focused on the following aspects of idiom acquisition in English: spoken American English (Liu, 2003), academic speech (Simpson & Mendis, 2003), “core idioms” in the British National Corpus (Grant, 2005; Grant & Nation, 2006), and “figuratives” in both American and British English (Grant, 2007). Such corpus-based frequency studies have provided valuable findings because the use of corpora “provide a large empirical database of natural discourse, so that analyses are based on naturally-occurring structures and patterns of use rather than intuitions and perceptions, which often do not accurately represent actual use” (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 2004, p.169-170). Despite the valuable insights gained from each study, the lists of idioms used to search the corpora were too limited, mainly because the researchers adhered to exclusive criteria for defining idioms, which limited the findings. To validate this claim, a brief review of each study seems warranted.
Table 2

Summary of Previous Corpus-based Idiom Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Number of Idioms Searched</th>
<th>Corpora Used</th>
<th>Size of Corpora (tokens)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simpson and Mendis (2003)</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>MICASE</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant (2005)</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>100,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant and Nation (2006)</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>100,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant (2007)</td>
<td>146 (“figuratives”)</td>
<td>BNC, MICASE</td>
<td>11,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu (2003)</td>
<td>9,683</td>
<td>CSPAE, Corpus of American media, MICASE</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Simpson and Mendis Idiom Study**

Simpson and Mendis (2003) investigated the most frequently occurring idioms in spoken academic English. In order to give intensive analysis to the frequently occurring idioms in their study, they needed a manageable amount of examples. Therefore, a “narrow definition” of idiom was employed when creating their list of idioms to be considered for the study, which yielded a list of 238 idiom types to be searched for in their study. (p.423). To illustrate, the criteria for defining an idiom featured the following elements: fixedness, institutionalization, and semantic opacity. Specifically, they defined semantically opaque idioms as expressions whose meaning “is not transparent based on the sum of their constituent parts” (e.g., *tongue in cheek* and *on the ball*) (Simpson & Mendis, 2003, p.423). Therefore, idioms that were considered to be too semantically transparent were not considered for the study. Indeed, the quantity of idioms searched for (238 idiom types) was clearly limited due to the “narrow definition” used, which, in turn, limited the results. Furthermore, the small corpus used in this study, the MICASE, limited the amount of idioms found. Clearly, more inclusive criteria for defining idioms are needed in order to generate a more comprehensive list with a larger quantity of idioms.
**Grant and Bauer Idiom Studies**

The studies of Grant (2005), Grant (2007), and Grant and Nation (2006) all used the same criteria for defining idiom, which was developed by Grant and Bauer (2004). According to Grant and Bauer (2004), an idiom must be both non-compositional and “non-figurative.” A multi-word unit (MWU hereafter) was considered compositional if each word in the expression is replaced with its dictionary definition and the meaning of that expression is retained. A MWU is considered to be non-compositional if each word in the expression is replaced with its dictionary definition and the meaning of that expression is not retained. In other words, for a MWU to be an idiom it cannot be broken down into smaller units in order to derive meaning. Furthermore, figures of speech are distinguished from “core idioms” because Grant and Bauer (2004) argue that “figures of speech can be interpreted according to general cognitive principles, while idioms have to be learnt [sic]” (p.49). Figures of speech, or “figuratives” in their study, have an element of untruth in them which can be pragmatically reinterpreted, whereas the meaning of a “core idiom” cannot be reinterpreted. It is important to note that the terminology used in Grant and Bauer’s (2004) study may be confusing to some. Simply put, if it was determined that the meaning of a MWU could be figured out, the MWU was considered to be a “figurative” and not an idiom. If it was determined that the meaning of a MWU could not be figured out, the MWU was considered a “non-figurative” (even though it could be argued that it contains figurative language) and a candidate to be a “core idiom.”

To determine if a MWU was truly a “core idiom”, a simple test was conducted. First, a MWU had to be non-compositional, or the meaning had to be retained when each word of the phrase was replaced with its own definition. If the meaning was retained after such a replacement occurred, the MWU was compositional and not a “core idiom”. For example, the MWU *red book*
is compositional because the words *red* and *book* both contribute to the meaning of the MWU, whereas the MWU *red herring* cannot be broken down further, which makes it a non-compositional. Second, it was important to determine if the meaning of a MWU could be understood by reinterpreting the expression to logically infer its meaning. If an expression could be reinterpreted and the meaning ascertained, then it was considered to be a “figurative” and not a “core idiom”. For example, they argued that the MWU *as good as gold* can be reinterpreted so that its meaning can be ascertained, rendering it a “figurative”. On the other hand, they argued that the MWU *red herring* cannot be understood through a logical reinterpretation. Therefore, *red herring* is a “core idiom” because it is both non-compositional and “non-figurative”, *red book* is neither a “core idiom” nor a “figurative”, and *as good as gold* is considered a “figurative” but not a “core idiom.”

These criteria set the stage for three follow-up studies. Both Grant (2005) and Grant and Nation (2006) conducted corpus-based frequency studies of core idioms. From these studies, it was determined that only 103 “core idioms” occurred in English and that the low-frequency of these core idioms did not merit them worthy of direct instruction. Rather, they advocated for the teaching of interpretation strategies in order to comprehend “figuratives”, which they argued were more common in the language.

Taking the previous studies a step further, Grant (2007) sought to generate a frequency list of “figuratives” occurring in English. Her study indicated that figuratives do present a challenge for language learners. However, only 146 “figuratives” were searched for in this study. Indeed, the quantity of both “core idioms” and “figuratives” that were searched for in these studies was quite small and exclusive.
**Liu Idiom Study**

Liu (2003) conducted the most broad corpus-based idiom frequency search. In his study, he generated a list of the most frequently occurring idioms in spoken American English, using a combination of three corpora that collectively contained six million tokens. In order to generate a list of idioms to be searched in the corpora, he compiled a list whose contents were taken from four major idiom dictionaries and three major phrasal verb dictionaries. In order for an idiom to be included as part of the list, it had to occur in at least two of the four idiom dictionaries. Similarly, phrasal verbs that occurred in two of the three phrasal verb dictionaries were also included on the list. In total, the list of idioms used in the search contained 9,683 idioms and phrasal verbs.

From the perspective of the current study, the list of idioms used in Liu’s was too narrow primarily because of the requirement that an idiom had to occur in two of the four idiom dictionaries. Thus, because the list was limited, numerous idioms were not included in the search. Clearly, more inclusive criteria for compiling a list of idioms are needed, so that a more comprehensive search may be conducted.

While these studies exemplify sound corpus-based research, the extremely narrow criteria for defining idioms severely limited the amount of idioms searched for. Once again, it is evident that a broader definition of idiom is needed so that a more comprehensive list of idioms can be generated for the purpose of conducting corpus-based frequency searches.

**Research Aims**

The review of the literature regarding the definition of idiom, the role of variation, and previous corpus-based frequency studies indicates that the definition of idiom has not been
agreed upon by scholars, and that idioms vary in their form, which make them difficult to both
search for in corpora and to acquire by learners. Furthermore, previous studies have laid a solid
groundwork for idiom frequency in English, but were too narrow in their criteria for defining and
identifying idioms, resulting in a need for a broader definition, as explained above, in order to
compile more-inclusive list of searchable idioms. Therefore, future corpus-based studies of
idioms would greatly benefit from a more comprehensive list of idioms. With this in mind, the
current study attempts to achieve the following research aims:

1. To make substantial progress in generating a comprehensive and corpus-searchable list of
electronic English idioms by consolidating extensive lists from multiple sources.

2. To develop a rationale for objectively consolidating lists of English idioms from multiple
sources.

3. To highlight problematic features of idiom entries that might make corpus searches
difficult.

4. To illustrate and explain possible problems ELLs might face in acquiring English idioms
based on data obtained from 1-3 above.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to make substantial progress in generating a comprehensive and corpus-searchable list of electronic English idioms, and to develop a rationale for combining lists of English idioms from multiple sources. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the following steps will be taken:

1. Bringing together many idioms resources
2. Amalgamating the idioms from those resources
3. Finding varied forms of the same or similar idiom and organizing them systemically
4. Producing a list of core idioms for corpus searching

Idiom Sources and Amalgamation

In order to create a comprehensive and corpus-searchable list of idioms, sources of idioms needed to be identified. To begin, an initial electronic list of idioms was inherited by the author. This list had been compiled several years prior to the study. This list contained idioms from both the Longman American Idioms Dictionary (1999) and the following website: http://home.t-online.de/home/toni.goeller/idiom_wm/\(^1\). For this study, entries were added from the Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (1998), Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms (2003), and Wiktionary. Using computer software, the entries from the two Cambridge dictionaries were scanned. The entries from Wiktionary were already in a digital format. Using a

\(^1\) This site no longer exists under this URL.
pivot table in Microsoft Excel, the idioms from the five sources were amalgamated, with exact matches being eliminated from the list. This process resulted in a final list of over 27,000 idioms, which formed the baseline for the current study.

**Combining Variant Forms**

**Determining the Keyword**

The next step was to develop criteria to organize and sort the idioms for the purpose of preparing them for future corpus searches. Following the same pattern found in contemporary idiom dictionaries, idioms were organized under a keyword. Contemporary idiom dictionaries organize idioms based on one or more keywords found within a given idiom. Thus, in order to find a particular idiom, one must search for the keyword. For example, in the Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2012), some idioms like *pardon/excuse my French* can be found under one keyword (in this example the sole keyword is *French*). In addition, many idioms like *the world is your oyster* can be found under two keywords (*oyster* and *world* are both keywords for this example). As a result, idioms that have two or more keywords appear twice in the dictionary. For the purposes of this study—which is to prepare a list of idioms for corpus searching—each idiom entry on the list needed to appear only once.

A rationale for determining an idiom’s sole keyword was therefore necessary and will be explained below (see Figure 1 at the end of the section).

**First Occurring Noun**

For each idiom entry, the first noun in the expression was selected as the keyword. For example, in the idiom *beat the system*, *system* is the assigned keyword because it is the only noun. Additionally, in the idiom *keep your eye on the ball*, *eye* is the assigned keyword because it is the
first occurring noun. Nouns that acted adjectivally in the idiom were not counted as nouns but as adjectives. For example, in the idiom *blood money*, *blood* is a noun acting adjectivally so *money* is determined to be the keyword; in the idiom, *back seat driver*, *back seat* is a noun acting adjectivally so *driver* is determined to be the keyword. If the first occurring noun had variation, the next occurring noun was chosen as the keyword (like *a deer/rabbit caught in the headlights*, *barrel/bundle of laughs*, and *pinch/grain of salt*). This same pattern of skipping variant nouns was done until the first non-variant noun was selected as the keyword. The following are examples of other notable occurrences.

1. Compound nouns were not broken down into smaller units. *Horseplay*, *skinhead*, and *wordsmith* were all keywords.

2. Complex and conjoined nouns were also designated as keywords (e.g., *mind your p’s and q’s*, *play cat and mouse*, and *hand-me-down*).

3. If the first noun was too generic, the next occurring noun was selected as the keyword (*body of water*, *one at a time*, and *all the way down the line*).

4. In phrases whose word order could vary, the most salient noun was chosen (e.g., *bring home the bacon* because *bring the bacon home* could be an acceptable variation).

**First Occurring Verb**

There were many instances where the following occurred in expressions on this list: (1) there was no noun present; (2) there was at least one noun that functioned adjectivally with no other non-varying noun; (3) there was at least one noun that was considered to be generic with no other non-varying noun; or (4) there was at least one variant noun without another non-varying noun in the idiom. In cases like these, the first lexical verb was chosen. For example, in *laugh [oneself] silly/sick*, *laugh* was assigned to be the keyword because there was no content
noun present. If there was a noun present but the noun had variation, the verb was assigned to be the keyword. This is can be seen in the following examples: *sleep like a log/top/baby*, and *if the shoe/hat fits*. In addition, other notable occurrences were encountered:

1. Complex verbs were considered as a single keyword (e.g., *candy-coat* and *two-time*).
2. The root of verbs whose form was changed was considered the keyword (e.g., in the idiom *to be named later*, *name* was assigned as the keyword)
3. If the first verb was considered to be too generic, then the next occurring verb was selected as the keyword (e.g., in the idiom *get your wires/lines crossed*, *cross* was determined to be the keyword instead of *get*).
4. Although phrasal verbs were not explicitly included in the list, they occasionally appeared in idiom dictionaries and they became the keyword (*fire off something*, *fire away*, *sleep in*, *flesh out something*, and *iron out something/the kinks*).

**First Occurring Adjective**

There were some instances where expressions did not have a noun or verb present, the existing nouns were adjectival, generic, or variant, and the existing verb had variation. In cases like these, the first adjective was assigned to be the keyword, like in the phrase *bloodied but unbowed*. If there was a varying noun present and there was not a non-varying verb present, the adjective was assigned to be the keyword. The following phrases demonstrate this: *golden boy/girl/child* and *an uphill task/job*. If there was no non-varying noun but a varying verb present, the first adjective was determined as the keyword (e.g., *seem/smell/sound fishy*). Within this rule, it is important to clarify that complex adjectives were not broken down and they were considered keywords (e.g., *user friendly, down home*, and *dog-tired* were all determined to be respective keywords).
Most Salient Word

There were some instances where idioms behaved in such a way that they could not be organized based on the established criteria. In such cases, the most salient word in the idiom was determined to be the keyword. The researcher and a professional applied linguist discussed each of these cases to determine saliency. Three examples are explained below.

1. The following combination of varying idioms was encountered: *march to a different drummer*, *march to the beat of a different drum*, and *march to the beat of a different drummer*. Based on the particular variant form, either *drummer* or *beat* could be determined as the keyword. It was determined that *drum* was the keyword due to salience.

2. The following combination of varying idioms was encountered: *penny pincher* and *pinch pennies*. It was determined that *pinch* was the most salient word so it was determined to be the keyword.

3. The interjection *whoops-a-daisy* was encountered. It was determined that this phrase could not be broken down. Therefore, the entire expression, *whoops-a-daisy*, was determined as the keyword.
Figure 1: Flowchart of the Process for Determining the Keyword. This chart graphically depicts the process for determining the keyword (represented by the circles at the bottom). Note: solid lines indicate the answer “yes” to the question and dotted lines indicate the answer “no” to the question. It is important to note that this chart is useful for nearly all idioms but there are some exceptions for which the chart does not account.
Organization of Idioms

Searching for the Keyword

Once the rationale for keyword was established, it was necessary to organize and sort the idioms. The following outlines the process by which idioms were organized (see Appendix A for a visual display of this process):

1. The idioms were alphabetized and compiled in Excel and transferred to Notepad.
2. The idioms were imported into the TextPad 5.4.2 program.
3. Using the TextPad program, entries that contained a particular keyword were selected and subsequently extracted from the list.
4. The extracted keywords were pasted into a Microsoft Excel workbook.

To illustrate this, one of the keywords during the search was mouth. Using the find feature, which is under the search tab on the ribbon, the following entry was typed into the search bar: "\<mouth". It is important to note that the program features a unique set of symbols to facilitate searching. In this case, the symbols employed indicated all entries containing the word mouth were to be selected. To select all the idioms that contained mouth, the function “mark all” was clicked and a blue flag appeared on the side of each entry containing mouth. Under the ribbon heading edit, the cut other function was selected. Within the cut other function, the bookmarked lines function was clicked. The entries containing mouth were then automatically cut and placed on the computer’s clipboard. The entries were subsequently pasted into a Microsoft Excel workbook.
Grouping Similar Idioms

In the Microsoft Excel workbook, all of the phrases which were extracted from the list were pasted into Column A, which was entitled *Sort and Ship*. Next, all idioms that were similar in form were identified and then grouped together in Column C, entitled *organization*. For example, the idioms *from the horse’s mouth, straight from the horse’s mouth*, and *horse’s mouth*, which were originally in Column A, were identified as being similar in form. Subsequently, they were grouped together in Column C using the *cut* and *paste* function.

Determining Core Idioms

Since the purpose of this study was to create a list of electronic idioms for corpus searching, the next step reduced all the variations into a “core idiom.” Simply put, a “core idiom” is the most basic form of an idiom that accounts for and captures all possible variations. Based on the possible variations from Column C, a core idiom was identified and typed in Column D, entitled *Core Idiom*. To illustrate, the example from above contained the following three variations: *from the horse’s mouth, straight from the horse’s mouth, and horse’s mouth*. In an attempt to account for and capture all possible variations, it was determined that *from the horse's mouth* was the core idiom and it was typed in Column D. The idiom *from the horse's mouth* was chosen because if it were searched for in a corpus, it could capture all possible variations. Specifically, a search for *from the horse’s mouth* could find *straight from the horse’s mouth*, but a search for *straight from the horse’s mouth* would exclude *from the horse's mouth*. Furthermore, the variant form *horse’s mouth* was not chosen because it was determined that *from* was a necessary part of the idiom’s identity.
As mentioned earlier, all forms of variation needed to be accounted for when determining the core idiom. Therefore, a rationale which employed the use of certain symbols was developed to facilitate accounting for various forms of core idiom variation. For example, similar to Liu’s (2003) study, an asterisk (*) was inserted in core idioms as highlighted by Table 3.

Table 3

*Use of the Asterisk in Core Idioms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Phrase</th>
<th>Original Idiom</th>
<th>Modified Idiom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article Variation</td>
<td>given half (a/the) chance</td>
<td>given half * chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive Determiners</td>
<td>ring [one’s] bell</td>
<td>ring * bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Form Variations</td>
<td>silver tongue or silver-tongued</td>
<td>silver<em>tongue</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural Variations</td>
<td>smoke signal(s)</td>
<td>smoke signal*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyphens</td>
<td>red(-)letter day</td>
<td>red*letter day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Words</td>
<td>hit a (brick) wall</td>
<td>hit a * wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite Pronouns</td>
<td>nail [someone] to the wall</td>
<td>nail * to the wall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, the forward slash (/) was used to indicate variation of words within an idiom. The following examples demonstrate the use of the forward slash symbol: raise/lift a finger, frighten/scare the daylights out of, bad/rotten apple, from the four corners of the earth/globe, hard/tough as nails, back against/to the wall, and ringside seat/view.

The process of organizing idioms required determining a keyword, grouping similar idioms together, and determining the core idiom. Figure 2 depicts an example of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.
Managing Unsorted Idioms

As previously illustrated, a rationale was developed for identifying the keyword of an idiom, grouping similar idioms, and determining the core of an idiom. This process was repeated until all idiom entries were properly grouped in Column D entitled core idioms. However, many idioms remained unsorted in Column A because, although they contained the keyword, they were not organized under that particular keyword. For example, the entry put your foot in your mouth contains the keyword mouth, but, in this case, mouth is not the keyword because foot is the first occurring noun. Such entries were removed from the spreadsheet and pasted back into the Notepad file. A subsequent search for the keyword foot would find put your foot in your
*mouth* and, by following the outlined process, it could be sorted under its proper keyword, *mouth*.

There were many similar instances to this one, requiring a great deal of manual sorting.

This chapter lays out a clear and objective rationale for determining the keyword of an idiomatic phrase, sets forth the process for organizing the idioms based on keywords, and explains the identification of core idioms. This process allowed a large quantity of idioms to be sorted and provided rich data for analysis. The findings of this study are explained in the following chapter.
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this study was to make substantial progress in generating a comprehensive and corpus-searchable list of electronic English idioms, and to develop a consistent rationale for consolidating lists of English idioms from multiple sources. In total, a list of 2,697 core idioms (see Appendix B) was generated from 5,559 forms, which required over 120 hours of manual sorting. It is important to note that idioms were chosen randomly from the TextPad file based on a particular keyword. Therefore, none of the remaining unsorted idioms will be sorted under any existing keywords or core idioms. Time constraints did not allow for all 27,000 idiom forms to be processed. However, the established method provides a framework for the list to be completed consistently and reliably.

Basic Statistics

By applying the rationale set forth and explained in chapter 3, a list of 2,697 core idioms was compiled. These 2,697 core idioms were derived from 5,559 variant forms of the core idioms. For example, the two expressions *an airhead* and *airhead* were both grouped together in Column C because they were determined to be a variant of the same idiom. From those two examples, the core idiom was determined to be *airhead*. The same process occurred for the following entries: *bend the rules*, *bend/stretch the rules*, and *break the rules*. It was determined that *bend/break/stretch the rules* was the core idiom because it captured all the variations. The ratio of variant forms to core idioms was 2.1:1, which means that for every core idiom there were 2.1 varying forms on average. The core idiom with the most variant forms was *lay/put [something] on the line*, which had nineteen variant forms. The core idiom with the second highest amount of variant forms was *see/show [one's] true colo(u)rs* and possible variations.
As mentioned in the previous chapter, an asterisk (*) was inserted in core idioms which
tained article variation, possessive determiners, word form variations, plural variations,
hyphens, extra words, and indefinite pronouns, etc. It was found that an asterisk occurred in
31.2% of all core idioms. Core idioms that contained a forward slash (/), which indicated a
variation in a lexical word (see chapter 3 for further detail), occurred in 9.5% of all core idioms
(e.g., fingers/hand in the till and back to/against the wall). Core idioms that contained both an
asterisk and a forward slash constituted 3.8% of all core idioms (e.g., bear/keep*[something] in
mind and back/force *[someone] into a corner). Entries that contained either an asterisk or a
forward slash constituted 36.9% of all core idioms. It is important to note, however, that core
idioms often excluded many variations that were not considered to be essential to the core. For
example, the variants behind the times, fall behind the times, and be behind the times were
reduced to behind the times. In this example, the variation in the preceding verbs, fall and be, are
not accounted for because they are not considered part of the core. Thus, the statistics may not
capture all potential variations because this also happened in numerous other examples.

Finally, a total of 307 keywords were assigned for all the idioms compiled in this list. For
example, the following core idioms were assigned to the keyword voice: voice (crying) in the
wilderness, with one voice, find [one’s] voice, and give voice to. The five keywords appearing
most frequently in core idioms are as follows: hand in 118 core idioms, time in 115 core idioms,
eye in 111 core idioms, head in 102 core idioms, and word in 69 core idioms. (See Appendix C
for a list of all core idioms organized under these keywords.) The ratio of core idioms to
keywords is 8.8:1, meaning that under every keyword, an average of 8.8 core idioms was
assigned. In addition, the ratio of variant forms to keywords is 18:1, meaning that under every
keyword an average of 18.1 variant forms of core idioms were assigned. Thus, each keyword captured both a great deal of core idioms and form variation.

**Types of Idiom Variation**

It was found that numerous types of variation occurred in idiom form. The findings corroborate those of both Liu (2003) and Moon (1998). Table 4 illustrates the types of variations, their frequency, and examples.
Table 4

Summary of Types of Idiom Variations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Variation</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possessive Determiner</td>
<td>spill [one’s] guts</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>break [one’s] heart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite Pronoun</td>
<td>whip [someone/something] into shape</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>throw [someone] to the dogs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>come/go cap in hand</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lift/raise a finger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrasal</td>
<td>Straw man; man of straw</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nose picker/picking; pick one’s nose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyphenation</td>
<td>pie in the sky/pie-in-the-sky</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>boy next door/boy-next-door</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>battle/war of nerves</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fight tooth and claw/nail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective/Modifier</td>
<td>best/greatest thing since sliced bread</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>final/last straw</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particle</td>
<td>get [something] into/through [one’s] head</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>baptism by/of fire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity/Amplification</td>
<td>Give someone the (evil) eye</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scare the (living) daylights out of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truncation</td>
<td>You can lead a horse to water (but you can't make him/it drink)</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross my heart (and hope to die)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>off colo(u)r</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dollars to donuts/doughnuts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article</td>
<td>hit a/the (brick) wall</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>point a/the finger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>day and night/day or night</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Syntactic Boundary Distinction

As part of the process of compiling the list, it was necessary to reduce idioms to their core, as explained previously. This next section will highlight two types of common reductions that occurred while compiling the list. The implications of such reductions for both researcher and ELLs will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Pre-core Reductions

There were many instances of non-essential parts of idiomatic phrases that preceded the core component of an idiom. Such reductions were labeled pre-core reductions. Table 5 highlights the types of pre-core reductions, and the process by which the reduction was done by displaying the similar variant forms which informed the decision for determining the core idiom.
### Table 5

**Summary of Pre-Core Reductions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Pre-Core Reduction</th>
<th>Variant Form</th>
<th>Core Idiom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Verb</td>
<td>put lead in your pencil</td>
<td>lead in [one’s] pencil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>have lead in your pencil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pay top dollar</td>
<td>top dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>top dollar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrasal Wording</td>
<td>fly on the wall</td>
<td>fly on the wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’d like to be a fly on the wall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Verb</td>
<td>on the line</td>
<td>on the line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>be on the line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>a false alarm</td>
<td>false alarm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>false alarm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifiers/Intensifiers</td>
<td>all the bells and whistles</td>
<td>bells and whistles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bells and whistles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As</td>
<td>(as) easy as pie</td>
<td>easy as pie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>easy as pie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Post-core Reductions**

Similarly, there were many instances of non-essential parts of idioms that followed the core component. Such reductions were labeled post-core reductions. Table 6 highlights the types of post-core reductions, and the process by which the reduction was done by displaying the similar variant forms which informed the decision for determining the core idiom.
Table 6

Summary of Post-Core Reductions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Post-Core Reduction</th>
<th>Variant Form</th>
<th>Core Idiom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>keep the edge</td>
<td>keep the edge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>keep the edge on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>keep the edge over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pick up the pieces</td>
<td>pick up the pieces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pick up the pieces of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object of Preposition</td>
<td>heart is in/to [something]</td>
<td>heart is in/to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>put your money on sb/sth</td>
<td>put your money on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That</td>
<td>cross [one's] fingers</td>
<td>cross [one's] fingers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cross [one's] fingers that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the results of this study indicate that idioms vary quite frequently and the manner in which they vary is quite extensive. Furthermore, idiom cores are often embedded in larger syntactic chunks, which often contain non-essential elements. Indeed, these results provide valuable insights pertaining to idiom variation, form, and “coreness.” Further discussion of these findings and their ramifications for corpus searching and ELLs is addressed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study both made progress in generating a comprehensive and corpus-searchable list of electronic English idioms, and developed a consistent rationale for consolidating lists of English idioms from multiple sources. Based on the results, problematic features of idiom entries for both researchers and ELLs can be identified. This section will discuss those problematic features and their implications.

Problematic Features for Linguists

Four key points emerged from the data in regards to issues that might complicate future corpus studies.

1. Capturing the varying function words. As the data show, the four most frequently occurring variations found in this study were possessive determiners, indefinite and varying nouns, phrasal variation, and hyphenation. Therefore, capturing and accounting for these types of variations is vital for a future corpus searching. As Liu (2003) suggests, the use of a wildcard symbol (like an asterisk *) could to be employed to capture possessive determiners, indefinite articles, and hyphenation. It is important that the system for capturing these function words is consistent and thorough.

2. Capturing both word variation and phrasal variation. The third most common type of variation found in this study was phrasal variation, which is often created by word variation within the idiom. For example, *as sick as a dog* and *sicker than a dog* are both variants of the same idiom. Within the phrasal variation, the word *sick* varies due to morphological inflection. This change in inflection causes the idiomatic phrase to change form. It is essential for those conducting future corpus studies to account for such
variations when searching a corpus. Furthermore, it has been found in this study that inflections, variant word forms, contractions, and singular/plural variations can all contribute to phrasal variations. Therefore, linguists wishing to conduct corpus searches involving idioms may need to make flexible adjustments to core idioms in order to find all variations.

3. Capturing all possible variations. As part of the rationale set forth in this study, idioms were organized under one keyword. However, some variant forms of the same idiom may be organized and counted as a separate idiom when it should be grouped in with other varying forms. For example, an entry on the list captured the variation of the idiom *if the hat/shoe fits (wear it)*, which was organized under the keyword *fit*. Another variant form of the same idiom, *if the cap fits (wear it)*, was not found in the initial search and therefore was not grouped with the former idiom. If such an error had not been caught, these two variations of the same idiom would have been considered two separate entries and thus they would have been counted twice. Similar issues require direct intervention.

4. Knowing the boundary between idioms. As part of the rationale in this study, idioms with similar forms were grouped together. Although the focus was on form, often times meaning came into play when determining which idioms were similar and which were not. To illustrate, as part of the list, there were 55 variations that were grouped together under the keyword *lose*. For example, the following are some of the entries grouped together: *lose one’s way, lose one’s touch, lose one’s temper, lose one’s mind, lose one’s marbles*, and *lose one’s edge*, etc. From these examples, should *way, touch, temper, mind, marbles*, and *edge* be grouped together or are they semantically different enough to be grouped separately? Determining such distinctions can be difficult. It is thus important
for future corpus studies to make accurate semantic distinctions so that similar idiom variations are grouped together under the same core idiom and different idiom variations are grouped under different core idioms. Because such distinctions may be subjective, linguists ought to provide a rationale explaining why each distinction was made.

**Implications for ELLs**

While it has been established that idioms are multi-word units and non-literal in meaning, this study has also shown that lexical and semantic variation, and issues regarding boundary distinctions make idioms difficult for ELLs to negotiate and acquire. Therefore, materials developers and those who oversee instruction ought to do the following:

1. Raise learner awareness that idioms frequently vary. Idiom dictionaries often present one form of each core idiom with perhaps one variant form. This can lead learners to believe that the forms found in dictionary entries are the only forms for a given idiom. However, as demonstrated in this study, some core idioms have numerous variations. Principally, learners need to be aware that idioms often vary in their form, and that simply learning one or two forms may not be sufficient. Teachers can assist ELLs by regularly addressing this variation issue.

2. Assist learners to identify how to semantically distinguish between differing idioms. As explained in this chapter and the one previous, idioms with seemingly similar forms may have differing meanings. Indeed, this is especially difficult for ELLs. Therefore, instructional resources and teachers should make learners aware of these semantic distinctions and provide learning opportunities to help ELLs become aware of this issue.
3. Identify and clarify the boundaries of idioms in order to help learners know where an idiom begins and ends. In order to determine a core idiom, many idioms in this study were reduced through the elimination of unnecessary elements. As was demonstrated, some idioms were significantly reduced while others were not reduced at all. Specifically for ELLs, it is important for them to learn the skills of identifying a core idiom in a larger phrase. This has special ramifications for reading but may apply to listening comprehension as well.

Limitations

Three main limitations of this study are important to note. First, only a portion of the idioms from the list was organized. Therefore, the statistics given should be interpreted cautiously. They serve to show patterns and trends, but are not definitive by any means. Second, due to scanning constraints, the scope of dictionaries used for this study was limited. The findings would be more robust had more dictionaries been included in the master list. Third, the determination of the core idiom was not definitive. Rather, it was a means to an end, which is to facilitate future corpus searches. The core idioms are subject to revision as that next stage of research is undertaken. Despite this, this study has established a robust rationale that can lead to the completion of the list in a consistent and reliable way. Furthermore, this study provides rich data that shows patterns and trends that can inform idiom research, teaching, and learning.

Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge as a result of this study. First, finishing the consolidation and organization of the list is the next logical step. The methodology section of this study provides an accurate explanation for how this is to be done. It is important to note that 120
hours of manually sorting resulted in about 20% of the list being organized. With such a clear methodology, multiple people can work simultaneously to organize the list in a timely manner. It may also be possible to design programs to assist this manual consolidation process, perhaps saving valuable time. It is also crucial to note that many of the core idioms listed in this study may be one step away from automatic corpus searching. Second, once the list has been organized in its entirety, corpus studies using this list will prove to be invaluable because the list is more comprehensive than lists used in previous corpus studies. It is important to note that the core idioms identified in this study may be modified as needed for these future corpus searches. Third, entries from additional dictionaries can serve to bolster the list and the findings. Such additions could supply variant forms that have not been identified in this study, and supply more additional core idioms, not contained in the dictionaries used. Fourth, making the finished list publicly available can be a great resource for researchers, learners, and teachers, and could become a standard for future corpus studies involving English idioms. As noted previously, there was a lack of consistency in the previous idiom studies, which can be overcome by using this list. Finally, further investigating the keywords could provide great insight into which words tend to be more “idiom-prone.” Out of the 2,697 core idioms recorded in this study, there were only 307 keywords. A study of the most prolific keywords could help identify characteristics of words found frequently in English idioms.
References


Available from


English Idioms. (n.d.) In *Wiktionary*. Retrieved from


Appendix A

Steps for Organizing Idioms

Step 1

Figure A1. Idiom entries were compiled in alphabetical order in a text file using the Notepad program.

Step 2

Figure A2. Idiom entries were transferred from the Notepad program to the TextPad 5.4.2 program.
Step 3a

Figure 3A. Under the “Search” tab, the “Find” function was used to extract idioms containing a certain word.

Step 3b

Figure 4A. Within the “Find” function, the certain keyword was typed with symbols unique to the program. The symbols in this example indicate word beginning.

Step 4a
Figure 5A. Once the proper symbols and the keyword were typed, the “Mark All” function was then selected.

Step 4b

Figure 6A. After the “Select All” function was selected, blue flags appeared beside the idioms which contained what was searched for.

Step 5
Figure 7A. Under the “Edit” tab, the “Cut Other” function was opened and the sub function “Bookmarked lines” was selected. All the idioms with a blue flag on the side were extracted from the Textpad program.

Step 6

Figure 8A. The idioms that were cut from the Textpad file were pasted in Column A of an Excel workbook.
### Step 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sort and Ship</th>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>make [one's] mouth water</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>make ab's mouth water</td>
<td>horse's mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>straight from the horse's mouth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>be down in the mouth be laughing out of the other side of your mouth be speaking/talking out of</td>
<td>a big mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>be speaking/talking out of both sides of your mouth be two sides of the same coin split your sides (laughing)</td>
<td>a big-mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>out of the mouths of babies</td>
<td>all mouth and no trousers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Out of the mouths of babies (and sucklings)</td>
<td>all mouth and trousers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>out of the mouths of babes and sucklings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>a mouth to feed</td>
<td>bad taste in my mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>a/your smart mouth</td>
<td>bad taste in one's mouth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9A. Similar idioms were grouped together by cutting them from Column A and pasting them into Column C with a space between each group of similar idioms.

### Step 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Core Idiom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>straight from the horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10A. Based on the collection of similar idioms in Column C, a core idiom was determined and typed in Column D next to each variant form.
Step 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Core Idiom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horse's mouth</td>
<td>horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straight from the horse's mouth</td>
<td>straight from the horse's mouth</td>
<td>from the horse's mouth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11A. The keyword was typed in Column B next to every variant form.

Step 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sort and Ship</th>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>put [one’s] foot in [one’s] mouth</td>
<td>put one’s foot in one’s mouth</td>
<td>put your foot in your mouth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12A. Although some idioms in Column A contained the keyword, there were some that remained and which were not organized under that particular keyword. Idioms in this circumstance were cut from the workbook and pasted into the Textpad file so they could be properly organized later.
Appendix B

Core Idioms

nail in * coffin
come/spring to mind
toy boy
hard/tough as nails
cross * mind
whipping boy
hit the nail on the head
do * mind
wide boy
spit nails
don't make no never mind
bad boy
Nail*biter
great minds think alike
big boy*
on the nail
go out of * mind
boy in the boat
cool as a cucumber
half a mind
hit the nail on the head
have a mind of * own
boy, oh boy
spit nails
closed mind
boys * toys
Nail*biter
have a good mind to do
boys in blue
on the nail
mind like a steel trap
boys will be boys
sweet tooth
have a mind to
from the boys
long in the tooth
one*track mind
good old boy
hen's tooth
half a mind to
poor boy
false alarm
right mind
wet boy
alarm bell*
keep * in mind
all work and no play makes jack a dull
be as sound as a bell
right mind
boy
saved by the bell
if * put * mind to it
be a fast worker
bells and whist les
right mind
work like a dog/Trojan
be waiting with bells on
it's all/only in * mind
work it
be a fast worker
ring * bell
mind * buzzing
blue-collar worker
hear wedding bells
mind * in the gutter
close enough for government work
Hell's bells
mind go blank
detective work
had * bell rung
mind in neutral
dirty work
babe in the woods
mind over matter
donkey work
babe in arms
mind*umbering
donkey work
baker's dozen
mind you
give * the works
cheaper by the dozen
never * mind
banker's dozen
ever * mind
battle of wits
pay * no mind
battles
prey on * mind
battle of wits
in/at the back of * mind
battle of wits
put * mind to it
battle of wills
put * out of your mind
battle of wits
put * in mind of
battle of wits
put/set * mind at rest
battle of the sexes
read * mind
march to * different drum*
lose battle
say what's on * mind
work cut out for
half the battle
set * mind at ease
work* up
pick/choose * battles
slip * mind
need for the works
do battle
speak * mind
give battle
sticks in * mind
how goes the battle
take * mind off
the battle of the sexes
set * mind at ease
uphill battle
slip * mind
work the works
win a battle but lose the war
work out
a blood brother
work* up
elder brother
work it
younger brother
work it
every* and * brother
work off
feather in * cap
banker's dozen
cap in hand
decimal dozen
cap over the windmill
* to the dozen
come/go cap in hand
six of one, * half a dozen of the other
if the cap fits
dime a dozen
bust/pop a cap
do a dime
put * thinking cap on
drop a dime
set one's cap at
not worth a dime
a fifty-fifty chance
stop/turn on a dime
fighting chance
Yankee dime
lead pipe cinch
march to * different drum*
eye of a needle
eye of the beholder
see eye to eye
eyes are popping out of * head
eyes glaze over
eyes peeled
feast *eyes *
four*eyes
get your eye in
give * the eye
give * the evil eye
give * eye teeth
give * the glad eye
go into * with * eyes closed/open/shut
keep * eye on
hard on the eyes
Have * * eye for
have an eye for/on the main
have eyes in the back of * head
have eyes like a hawk
have stars in [one's] eyes
have * beady eye on *
half an eye on
have/keep one eye on
one in the eye for
hit * * between the eye*
in * mind's eye
in a pig's eye
in the twinkling of an eye
in the wink of an eye
in * father's eye
keep * eyes glued
keep * eyes open
keep * eye's peeled
keep a weather eye *
keep an eye on
keep *eye on the ball
keep an out
keep * eye in * eyes on
look * in the eye*
make sheep's eyes at
magic eye
more * * than meets the eye
naked eye
scales fall from * eyes
not * bat an eye*
have eyes for
open * eyes to
private eye
pull the wool over * eyes
* eyes * pop* out of * head
right before my eyes
roll * eyes
do * with * eyes *
eyes are out on stalks
see dollar signs in * eyes
set eyes on
shut * eyes to
sight for sore eyes
snake eyes
spit in * eye
fat*cat
smile/grin like the Cheshire cat
fraidy/scaredy cat
like a cat on a hot tin roof
cat in the sack
cat * out of the bag
like the cat that ate the canary
cool cat
copy cat
swing a cat
see which way the cat jumps
fight like cats and dogs
* the cat dragged in
kick at the cat
like the cat that got the cream
put/set the cat among the pigeons
when/while the cat's away, the mice will
play
who's *, the cat's mother?
* rain* cats and dogs
dog my cats
herd cats
cat and mouse
beauty is only skin deep
beauty is in the eye of the beholder
beauty sleep
not lose * sleep over
big sleep
can do * in * sleep
deep sleep
eternal sleep
go to sleep
put * to sleep
sleep rough/rough sleeper
sleep around
sleep in
sleep * off
sleep on *
sleep together
sleep with
sleep like a baby/log/top
beauty queen
beau queen
bio queen
drag queen
drama queen
faux queen
hangar queen
ice queen
queen of beasts
race queen
rice queen
riverboat queen
speed queen
let sleeping dogs lie
dog and pony show
dog in the manger
hot dog
as sick as a dog/sicker than a dog
be like a dog with two tails
call off the dogs
can't teach an old dog new tricks
wind up * bottom
bottom dollar
almighty dollar
be as sound as a dollar
dollars to donuts/doughnuts
* dollars to donuts/doughnuts
dollars-and-cents
look/feel (like) a million dollars
top dollar
stretch the dollar
x number of dollars
million/64,000 dollar question
pop/ask the question
out of the question
beg the question
beyond question
burning question
call * into question
good question
not a question of
no question
no questions asked
open to question
pointed questions
shoot first and ask questions later
without question
pants /trousers down
* can't keep a good man/woman down.
way to a man's heart is through his
stomach
ways and means
user friendly
matter of time
two-time
fancy-pants
billet-doux
pick up the bill /tab
act/play the fool
act/play the goat
horse/trad*
pink dollar/pound
night and day
uphill job/task
for want of a better word
mum's the word
wordsmith
glamour girl/puss
golden boy/girl
poster girl/boy/child
girl/boy next door
that a/atta boy/girl
miracle-worker
workaholic
bare * heart/soul
soul mate
copper-bottomed
at the end of the day
cutting edge
bottom edge
close to the edge
on a knife/razor* edge
on edge
stars in * eyes
dirty dog
dog's breakfast/dinner
dog *
dog around
dog*eat/dog
dog in the hunt
dog it
keep a dog and bark yourself
every dog has its day
everyone/everybody/the whole world
and * dog
go * to the dogs
junkyard dog
lap dog
like a big dog *
look for a dog to kick
lucky dog
red dog
put on the dog
top dog
throw * to the dogs
until the last dog is hung
walk the dog
yellow dog
throw on a dog for you
dog tired
dog ear
doggone
in the doghouse
central dogma
could not get elected dogcatcher
mind/watch * P's and Q's
like a deer/rabbit * in the headlights
candy-coat
nosebleed section
thin section
sleep camel
camel through the eye of a needle
the straw that broke the camel's back
a straw in the wind
clutch/grasp at straws
bang straw
draw the short straw
final/last straw
straw that stirs the drink
he-man
straw man/man of straw
iron man
dirty old man
family man
hatchet man
hit man
a man about-town
man for all seasons
man of God
man of letters
man of * parts
man of the cloth
man's got to (gotta) do what a man's got to (gotta) do
man's man
marked man

bleeding edge
drive/push * to the edge
drive/push * to the edge
edge of something else
edge out
fray around/at the edges
fray around/at the edges
gain the edge
have the edge
have the edge
over the edge
rough edges
on the ragged edge
on the edge of * seat
keep the edge
take the edge off
take the edge off
life/live on the edge
rough around the edges
set * teeth on edge
thin edge of the wedge
top edge
double-edged/two-edged sword
double-edged/two-edged sword
sword of Damocles hangs over * head
sword and sandal
beat/turn swords into ploughshares
beat/turn swords into ploughshares
cross swords
cross swords
fall on * sword
fall on * sword
put to the sword
sword and sorcery
bye night is mightier than the sword
bye night is mightier than the sword
slip of the pen
put pen to paper
penny wise, dollar dumb
penny wise, dollar dumb
A penny saved is a penny earned.
A penny saved is a penny earned.
turn up like a bad penny
turn up like a bad penny
ten/two a penny
ten/two a penny
pretty penny
pretty penny
In for a penny, in for a pound
In for a penny, in for a pound
not have two pennies to rub
not have two pennies to rub
pennies from heaven
pennies from heaven
penny in the fusebox
penny in the fusebox
spend a penny
spend a penny
the penny drops
the penny drops
worth every penny
worth every penny
lead in * pencil
lead in * pencil
sharpen * pencil
sharpen * pencil
pencil in
pencil in
pay the penalty
pay the penalty
kill a penalty
kill a penalty
penny wedding
penny wedding
white wedding
white wedding
shotgun wedding/marriage
shotgun wedding/marriage
ride shotgun
ride shotgun
bottom line
bottom line
all the way down the line
all the way down the line
top of the line
top of the line
line of fire
line of fire
battle lines are drawn
battle lines are drawn
fine/thin line
fine/thin line
all along the line
all along the line
along/on the * lines
along/on the * lines
out of line
out of line
be in line
be in line
wall of silence
handwriting/writing on the wall
walls have ears
hell on earth
for the hell of it
hell of a *
living hell
the hell you say
all hell break loose
blown to hell
to hell in a handbasket
hell on wheels
shot to hell/pieces
beat the hell out of
come hell or high water
forty minutes of hell
frighten/scare the hell out of
give * hell
go through hell and back
hell*for*leather
go to hell
hell and half of Georgia
hell hath no fury like a woman scorned
hell to pay
in one hell of a hurry
cold day in hell
like a bat out of hell
match made in hell
no screaming hell
not have a hope in hell
road to hell is paved with good intentions
play * hell with
put * through hell
raise hell
sure as hell
there* hell to pay
* hell freezes over
to hell and gone
to hell with
hell mend
hell*bent
hell*raiser
would see * in hell before *
what the hell
full*throttle
easy as pie
apple*pie order
be as nice as pie
cow*pi*e
cutie pie
humble pie
motherhood and apple pie
pie*in*the*sky
slice of the pie
sweetie pie
piece of cake
conversation piece

medallion man
poor man's *
Renaissance man
self-made man
yes man
Are you a man or a mouse?
as much as the next man
as one man
man in the moon
barrow man
*man
* own man
be a man
be man enough to do *
be no good/use to man or beast
big man on campus
black man
boldly go where no man has gone before
bottle man
company man
dimmer dumber upright man
every last man *
every man for himself
every man has his price
every man Jack *
front man
see a man about a *
grand old man of *
man of the moment
I see, said the blind man
lad* man
leg man
main man
make a man * of *
man after * own heart
man among men
man and boy
man and wife
man in the middle
man in/on the street
man of few words
man of * word
man of the hour
man of the people
man up
man upstairs
* man*of*war
man*to*man
man's home is his castle
May the best man win
old man
odd man out
* man in
point man
red man
see a man
sick man
stick it to the man
straight man
take it like a man
low man on the totem pole
the man

in * line
on the line
be on the right lines
firing line
front line
below the poverty line
bring * into line with
clear * lines
color inside/outside the lines
come on line
cross the line
don't give me that line
double vertical line
down the line
draw * line
draw a line under
draw a line under
drop * a line
fall in/into line
give/feed/hand * a line
get/have a line on
hard line*
on the right lines
hold the line
in line
in the line of duty
* on the line
lead the line
line of authority
line up
read between the lines
right down the line
sign on the dotted line
somewhere along the line
step over the line
string a line
take a soft line
toe/tow the line
walk a straight line
walk the line
penguin suit
birthday suit
follow suit
suit *
pencil/pen pusher
at a push
hard pushed
push it
get/give * the push
push comes to shove
push * around
push *
push in
push off
push on
pencil whip
crack the whip
whip through
whips and jingles
catch * air
air out
turn the air blue/air was blue
wouldn't hurt a fly
on the fly
fly*y blind
flying high
fly*yby*night
fly low
fly off
will never fly
blood run cold
bad blood
after * blood
bay* for blood
in * blood
blood * stone
blood * turnip
out for blood
too risky for * blood
blood and guts
blood and thunder
blood in the water
blood is thicker than water
blood is up
blood run* cold
blood sweat and tears
blue*blood*
draw * blood
fresh blood
have * blood on * hands
taste blood
in cold blood
blood boil
new blood
blood curdle*
scent blood
smell blood
spit blood
sweat blood
tie in * blood
too rich for * blood
written in blood
* blood * worth bottling
young blood
blood* but unbowed
bloody minded
beat/knock the * daylights out of
broad daylight
frighten/scare the * daylights out of
see daylight
all systems go
beat the system
buck the system
get * out of * system
spin doctor
just what the doctor ordered
doctor * up
doctors make the worst patients
bad/rotten apple
An apple a day keeps the doctor away
apple doesn't fall far from the tree
compare apples and oranges
big apple
how do you like them apples
give * a rough/hard/bad time
give the time of day
go down for the third time
show */have a good time
hard times
hard/rough/thin time of *
have a lot of time for
have all the time in the world
no time for
no time for *
have no time to lose
time of * life
time on * hands
time on * side
high time
time flies
in * own good time
in due time
in next to no time
in no time *
* in time *
about time
It's feeding time at the zoo!
keep up with the times
time to kill/kill time
lead time
lean time
let the good times roll
let time take its course
long time no *
make good time
make time
make up for lost time
many a time
many's the time
mark time
move with the times
nine times out of ten
no time like the present
not give * the time of day
not have much time for *
nut-cutting time
old time used to be
on time
once upon a time
time will tell
pass the time of day
play for time
pressed for time
put in time
real time
right time
rotation time
* time is up
serve time
sit on your time
spend time
take * sweet time
take time to smell the roses
time of the month
time is ripe
there's a first time for everything
lippy
stiff upper lip
lick * lips
on everyone's lips
tight lip*
bite * lip
curl * lip
don't give * any/none of * lip
fat lip
lips are sealed
lip off
lock lips
loose lip
read * lips
rented lips
zip * lips
put lipstick on a pig
whip hand
The hand that rocks the cradle (rules the world).
heavy hand*
hand-wringing
high handed
right-hand man/woman/person
hands on
stick/put * hand in * pocket
go hand in hand
work hand-in-hand
gouty-handed
catch * red-handed
first*hand
wait on * hand * foot (and finger)
hand in the cookie jar
tip * hand
hands down
a firm/steady hand on the tiller
change hands
all hands on deck
all hands to the pumps
old hand
at first hand
at the hands of
dab hand
in hand
in safe hands
in * hands
on hand
high-hat
bear a hand
bite the hand that feeds *
by hand
by * own hand
can't keep * hands off
can't put * hands on it
cement hands
close/near at hand
crawl on my hands and knees over
broken glass just to see her photo
dead hand
dirty * hands
dishpan hands
don't hand me that
mix apples and oranges
road apple
She'll be apples.
She's apples.
wise apple
down with * apple*cart
upset the apple*cart
put the cart before the horse
cart * off
cart * away
get/give * carte blanche
criss-cross applesauce
green*eyed monster
a Frankenstein's monster
back*seat driver
designated driver
Sunday driver
out of/from the corner of * eye
around the corner
back/force * into a corner
be backed into corner
be in a tight corner/spot
box * into a corner
kitty/catty corner*
cut corners
from/to the four corners of the earth/globe
get/have a corner on the market
got * cornered
in * corner
light * corner
paint * into a corner
pick corners
turn * corner
fresh pair of eyes
a safe pair of hands
extra pair of hands
grow a pair
have a pair
pair off
pair up
show sb a clean pair of heels
strap on a pair
a slice of the pie
slice of life
a slice of the cake
any*way * slice it
no matter how * slice it
slice of the action
three slices short of a full loaf
whichever way * slice it
best/greatest thing since sliced bread
a little bit of bread and no cheese
bread*and*butter
bread and circuses
break bread
brown bread
butter * bread on both sides
cast * bread upon the waters
know which side * bread is buttered on
earn * bread
man cannot live by bread alone
There's a time and a place.
there's no time like the present
There's no time to lose.
third time is a charm
throwback to a time
time after time
time and again
time and material
time and time again
time flies *
time hangs/lies heavy *
time is money
time is of the essence
time off
time*out
time ran out
time stands still
time* wasting
time* up
tough time of it
waste no time
put * pants on one leg at a time
wear the pants
catch * with * pants down
pee/piss/wet * pants
smarty*pants
lick/beat the pants off
bore the pants off
poop/crap/shit * pants
keep * pants on
kick in the pants
scare the pants off
ants in * pants
red ant
warrior ant
walk and chew gum at the same time
black gum
gum up
up a gum tree
bark up the wrong tree
out of * tree
three-on-the-tree
up a tree
family tree
fruit of the poisonous tree
make like a tree and leave
off * tree
shake the pagoda tree
the top of the tree
dead tree edition
bash the bishop
Christmas tree bill
bill and coo
clean bill of health
bill of goods
bulk bill*
fill the bill
fit the bill
foot the bill
on * bill
pay the bills
tough/hard act to follow
eat out of (the palm) of * hand
have/hold * in the palm of * hand
* can get * hands on
fall into * hands
into the wrong hands
fill * hands
firm hand
force * hand
free hand
from my cold, dead hands
upper hand
get * hands dirty
get/*lay * hands on *
out of hand
out of * hands
give * a * hand
in good hands
hands full
hand it to
ham hand*
hand down
hand in
hand off
hand on * heart
hand*out
hand over
hand over fist
hand to mouth
hand* up
hands are tied
have * on * hands
have a hand in
clean hands
have * hand out
hand it to
helping hand
hold * hand
hot hand
keep * hand in
lay * hand* on
leave * in * hands
* hand doesn't know what the * hand is doing
life * in * hands
take * off * hands
on the gripping hand
on the one hand
on the other hand
on * hands
overplay * hands
play into * hands
play the hand * is dealt
put * hands together
raise * hand
raise * hand against/to
reject * out of hand
shake hands with the unemployed
show * hand
sit on * hands
take * in hand
take the law into * own hands
take * into your own hands
Turkish bread
be/live below/on the breadline
hair's breadth
balls to the wall
ground ball with eyes
ball and chain
ball*breaker
a different ball of wax
a slime ball
ball * in * court
ball of fire
balls off a brass monkey
balls-out
balls-up
behind the eight*ball
on the ball
break/bust * balls
carry the ball
drop the ball
set/start/keep/get the ball rolling
have/got the balls
have/got * by the balls
have a ball
head-the-ball
kick in the balls
have a lot on the ball
low*ball
pick up/take the ball and run
play ball
spike the ball
take one's ball and go home
take the ball and run
that * the way the ball bounces
whole ball of wax
throw * a curve ball
too many balls in the air
wait for the ball to drop
flesh*and*blood
become one flesh
exchange flesh
flesh out
make * flesh crawl/ creep
meet/see * in the flesh
press the flesh
put flesh on * *
retake * flesh
thorn in * flesh/side
thorny *
pound of flesh
pack/pile on the pounds
pound salt/sand
quarter-pounder
spirit is willing but the flesh is weak
free spirit
* the spirit moves you
dampen * spirits
Dunkirk spirit
erenter/get into the spirit
kindred spirit
raise/lift * spirits
spirit away
spirit of the law
catch * in the act
balancing/juggling act
act of Congress
act out
act up
class act
clean up * act
disappearing/vanishing act
Dutch act
get * act together
get in on the act
in the act
read * the riot act
rearguard action
out of action
take action
actions speak louder than words
extracurricular activity
bad actor
dead duck
lame*duck
sitting duck
all duck or no dinner
ugly duckling
break * duck
duck out
ducks in a row
ducking and diving
ducks in order
golden duck
hunt where the ducks are
just ducky
odd duck
take to * like a duck to water
like water off a duck's back
body of water
above water
bath water
dead in the water
deep water
hot water
tread* water
water over the dam
water under the bridge
Blood is thicker than water.
blow * out of the water
carry * water
carry water for
could talk under water
don't miss the water till the well runs dry
hold * water
muddy the waters
navigable waters
pass water
pour/throw cold water on
running water
still waters run deep
test the waters
under water
walk on water
water to * mill
water down
talk to the hand
third hand
throw in * hand
tie * hands
top hand
try * hand
turn * hand to
wandering hands
wash * hands of
with one hand tied behind * back
with * bare hands
with * own fair hands
wring * hand*
lip service
put * into service
yeoman's service
press into service
hat in hand
buy straw hats in winter
all hat and no cattle
tip * hat
old hat
talk through * hat
eat * hat
hang * hat
hang up * hat
hats off *
* hat on
take * hate off to
under * hat
pass the hat around
pull * out of * hat
pull a rabbit out of * hat
stovepipe hat
throw/loss * hat into the ring
top hat
wear * hat*
wear the black hat
white hat
brick in * hat
You can't make bricks without straw
brick* and mortar
brick by brick
brick in
like a ton of bricks
drop * like a hot brick
drop a brick
brick* short of a full load
he like talking to a brick
thick as a brick
hit the bricks
yellow brick road
down the road, not across the street
further down the road
get out of the road
hit the road
in the road
take the low road
on the road
one for the road
road to Damascus
rocky road
that's the spirit
the moving spirit
an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure
above the salt
worth * salt
attic salt
salt of the earth
below the salt
covenant of salt
old salt
rub salt in/into * wound*
pinch/grain of salt
salt away
buil* on sand
bring sand to the beach
the shifting sands of
pound the pavement
hit the pavement
go through * like a dose of salts
get/give * a does/taste of * own medicine
in small doses
in/at a pinch
feel the pinch
pinch to grow an inch
*pinch*
pinch hit*
grain of truth
against the grain
bury/stick/put * head in the sand
raise/rear * * head
beat/bang * head against a * wall
a cool head
a wise head on young shoulders
an old head on young shoulders
banging/hitting * head
hanging over * head
head over heels
off * head
out of * head
over * head
bite * head off
bite/snap * head off
bring * to a head
head of steam
butt heads
standing on * head
can't make head* nor tails* of
clear * head
come to a head
head to head
cool head
cooler heads prevailed
do * head in
from head to foot/toe
funny in the head
head out of the clouds
get * head together
ger a big head
get * into/through * head
in over * head
like a fish out of water
flying fish
bigger/other fish to fry
a big fish
big fish in a small/little pool/pond
cold fish
sleep with the fishes
neither fish nor fowl
bottom fishing
drink like a fish
fish and company stink after three days
fish out
queer fish
shooting fish in a barrel
need * like a fish needs a bicycle
odd fish
other/plenty more fish in the sea
seem/smell/sound fishy
straw horse
* can lead a horse to water (but * can't
make * drink).
piss like a race horse
* and the horse * rode in on
charley horse
dark horse
horse of another/a different color
talking horse
Trojan horse
back the wrong horse
flog/beat a dead horse
change horses in mid*stream
high horse
choke a horse
could eat a horse
Don't spare the horses.
eat like a horse
get back on the horse that bucked *
* look a gift horse in the mouth
hold * horses
horse and rabbit strew
horse around
horses for courses
no horse in this race
pick the wrong horse
strong as a horse
wild horses would/could not drag * away
willing horse
Horseplay
go through fire and water
pull * bacon out of the fire
bacon-faced
bacon-fed
save * bacon
bring home the bacon
get the bacon bad
a good voice to beg bacon
voice * in the wilderness
with one voice
find * voice
give voice to
home away from home
An Englishman's home is his castle
take the high road
rubber meets the road
burn rubber
lay rubber
rubberneck
rubber-chicken dinner
be done like a (dog's) dinner
show on the road
after the Lord Mayor's show
go to show
show*stop*
all show
gong show
good show
have * to show for
horror show
run the show
show * around
show * up
show off
steal the show
The show must go on.
showboat
showdown
show/fly/wave the flag
like holding/waving a red flag in front of
a bull
freak flag
keep the flag flying
drape/ wrap * in the flag
flag down
Put the flags out!
raise the flag and see who salutes
white flag
red flag
Spanish flag
strike * flag
wrap * in the flag
run * up the flagpole and see who salutes
show/bare * teeth
armed to the teeth
as scarce as hen's teeth
back teeth are floating
like pulling teeth
gnash* * teeth
cut * teeth
get/sink * teeth into
grit * teeth
have teeth
lie through * teeth
make * teeth itch
would give * teeth
teething pains/troubles/problem
HE-double-toothpicks
true color(s)
fly color(s)
off color(s)
local color
sail under false color(s)
see the color(s) of * money
nail * color(s) to the mast
the ropes
get/wrap * head around
give * head a shake
hang * head
head in the clouds
* head on * shoulders
head screwed on

make * at home
be at home
close to home
home and dry
home and hosed
bring * home *
come home to roost
drive/hammer * home
hit/strike * home
home sweet home

no one/nobody is home
* to write home about
play away from home
stay at home

romp home
down*home

home free
home run
not give * house room
halfway house
house of cards
basket house

as safe as houses
big house

get on like a house on fire
bottom the house
brick house
eat * out of house and home
bring down the house/bring down the house

clean house
full house

get/set/put * house in order
go * round the houses
haunted house
house of ill fame

keep house
move house
nut house

on the house
poor house
rock the house

household name
name-calling
name-dropper
to be named later
name to conjure with

give * bad name
* middle name
name of the game
big name
blacken * name
call * names

clear * name
common name
drag/sift * name through the mud

drop * name*
go by the name of
have * name on *

have * name taken
* name written all over *

piss up a rope
on the ropes
give * enough rope and * will hang *
skip/jump rope

rope into
money for old rope
spend money like water
blood money
piss money up the wall

money maker
you pays * money and you takes *

chances
more money than brains

right on the money
mint/coin money

in the money
conscience money
dirty money
made of money
easy money
even money
for my money
found money
funny money

money to burn
hush money

launched money
mad money

money doesn't grow on trees
money for jam
money is no object
money talks
money to hum

Monopoly money
money is on *

need money to make
new money
old money

pin money
money where * mouth is

put up the money
raise money
run for * money

seed money
silly money

smart money
spending money

take the money and run

throw * money around

throw good money after bad
throw money around

throw money at sin

with money to burn

you need money to make money

moneybags

license to print money
poetic license

fool and his money are easily/soon parted

nobody's fool

flannelled fool
take * head off
talk over * head
talking head
think with * head
touched in the head
tube head
turn * head
two heads are better than one
use * head
guiding light/spirit
wall flower
paper flower
belle of the ball
alarm bells ring
bells and whistles
ring a bell
bell out
with bells on
pull the other one, it's got bells on
ring a bell
warning bells ring
bell the cat
belly up
Delhi belly
yellow*bell*
had a bellyful
fire in * belly
into the fire
quick*fire
play with fire
come under fire
breathe fire
catch fire
draw * fire
escape fire
fat hit the fire
fat*in the fire
fight fire with fire
fire away
fire off
hang fire
hang/hold * fire
keep the home fires burning
start/light a fire under
light * fire
on fire
open fire
fired up
pull out of the fire
put out a fire
rediscover fire
set fire
* irons in the fire
bad iron
iron out
pump iron
shooting iron
strike while the iron is hot
baptism of/by fire
skeleton in * closet
mind your tongue
slip of the tongue
name in lights
put a name to *
in all but * name
in heaven's name
in name only/alone
in the name of
make a name for *
name and shame
name is mud
name names
put * name in the hat
take * name in vain
what/why in the name of heaven
you name it, * has/got *
remain nameless
name/choose * poison
what's * poison
poisoned chalice
poison-pen letter
dead letter
Dear John letter
French letter
chain letter
dash off a letter
to the letter
letter of the law
letters after * own name
letter-perfect
red*letter day
take it one day at a time
plain as day
black day
cold day in July
day late and a dollar short
dog days
all the livelong day
clear/plain as day
back in the day
bad hair day
banyan day
as honest as the day is long
big day
call it a day
carry the day
dawn of a new day
day after day
day and age
day by day
day in * day out
day of days
day of reckoning
day of the family farm
day out
halcyon days
day*to*day
days are numbered
days of yore
field day
rainy day
give * * any day
glory days
good day
fool around
fool away
fool with
fool you
fools rush in where angels fear to tread
more fool *
suffer fools gladly
play * for a fool
play the fool
You could've fooled me.
fool's paradise
paradise on earth
fool's errand
lost errand
run an errand
for love or money
all's fair in love and war
it is better to have loved and lost than
never to have loved at all
cupboard love
fall in love
first love
for the love of *
love * and leave
love at first sight
love conquers all
love is blind
love is where you find it
loved up
make love
no love lost
play for love
progressive love
puppy love
the love of your life
tough love
labor/labour of love
misery loves company
put * out of * misery
a misery guts
hate * guts
slog/sweat/work * guts out
duck's guts
bust/split * gut
got guts
guts for garters
rot gut
down the gut-filer
gut-bucket
gut-wrenched
spill * guts
gut reaction
chain reaction
knee-jerk reaction
a rubber check
gut check
rain check
body check
hold/keep * in check
checks and balances
check is in the mail
check * out
face/mouth
barrel/bundle of laughs
don't make me laugh
catch heat
dead heat
heat is on
if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen
heat of the moment
pack heat
put the heat on *
take the heat
take the heat off *
turn up the heat
bang/beat the drum
drum up
feathers fly
as light as a feather
knock * down/over with a feather
horse feathers
ruffle * feathers
smooth ruffled feathers
spit feathers
birds of a feather flock together
A bird in the hand (is worth two in the bush).
little bird told *
early bird
free as a bird
* for the birds
bird in the bosom
bird of * brain
birds and * bees
dicky-bird
early bird gets/catches the worm
eat like a bird
flip/give * the bird
ghetto bird
have * bird
kill two birds with one stone
naked as a jay bird
rare bird
strange bird
The bird has flown.
wading bird
bird*brain
no*brainer
out of * brain
brains behind
heat/blow * brain* *
bored out of * brains
brain is fried
get * brain in gear
popcorn brain
rack * brains
what a brain
pick * brain*
on the brain
brain*storm
head honcho
chicken with its head cut off
like a headless chicken
lost for words
last word in *
break * word
breathe a word
word of mouth
mince words
exchange words
f-word
famous last words
from the word go
get the word out
give * * word
good word
hang on * every word
have * word* with *
have a word in * ear
final/last word
in a word
in other words
in so many words
words of one syllable
say the word
keep * word
loaded word
my word
no word
not believe a word of it
not say a word
on my word
word is law
or words to that effect
pen those words
put in a good word for *
put words in/into * mouth
send word
spoken word
spread the word
take * word for it
take * at * word
take the words * out of * mouth
operative word
s-word
the word is
There's many a true word spoken in jest.
twist * words
upon my word
weasel word*
weigh * word
without a word of a lie
won't hear a word *
word*for*word
word has it
man/woman of * word
word is good
word is out
word of honor
word on the street
word on the wire
words fail *
tomorrow is another day
no tomorrow
here today, gone tomorrow
know like a book
make book
on the books
read * like a book
throw the book at
turn up for the book
wrote the book on *
smart/sharp cookie
tough cookie
Oreo cookie
that's the way the cookie crumbles
toss * cookies
woof * cookies
cookie-cutter
burn a hole in * pocket
drinking/watering hole
hole* in * head
a hole in the wall
full of holes
in * hole
blow/make a hole in
put * in a hole
dig * into a hole
dig/get * out of a hole
go into the hole
hole in one
hole up
need * like (you need) a hole in the head
pick holes
rabbit hole
shuck on down to the fraidy hole
white hole
ace in the hole
ace of spades
ace up * sleeve
within an ace of
have/hold all the aces
play * ace
heart rule * head
hear and soul into
bleeding heart
heart of gold
heart of stone
after * own heart
at heart
be all heart
be still my heart
break * heart
know/learn * by heart
close/dear to * heart
cross my heart (and hope to die)
cry/sob * heart out
have the heart to
eat * heart out
faint of heart
find it in * heart
follow * heart
from the heart
get to the heart of
harden * heart
have a big heart
have a heart
chicken and egg
dilemma/problem/situation
spring chicken
chicken in every pot
like a chicken on a June bug
chicken out
chickens * come home to roost
choke the chicken
don't count * chickens before they hatch
get up with the chickens
like a chicken with the pip
play chicken
grab/hit make the headlines
* candy
like/ as easy as taking candy from a baby
like a kid in a candy store
bull*headed
like a bull in a china shop
full of bull
like a bull at a gate
strong as a bull
take the bull by the horn*
sweat bullets
dodge a bullet
magic bullet
silver bullet
take a bullet
bite the bullet
number one with a bullet
faster than a speeding bullet
open mind
all in * mind
bored out of * mind
frightened out of * mind
of two minds
be of * mind
on * mind
out of * mind
worried out of * mind
clear * mind
blow * mind
boggle * mind/ mind*boggling
bring * to mind
hear/keep * in mind
love-in
ready cash/ money
jam tomorrow
God's gift to *
Gift of gab
business as usual
be in business
not in the business of doing *
business is business
do a land-office business
do a roaring business
do * business
do the business
fifth business
funny business
get down to business
give * the business
go about * business
got/have no business
like nobody's business
make it * business to do
mean business
Mind your own business!
mix business with pleasure
monkey business
none of * business
risky business
strictly business
take care of business
business girl
call girl
bunny girl
chill girl
comfort girl
sweater girl
poor little rich girl
working girl
big girl's blouse
blue-eyed boy
backroom boy*
fair-haired boy
one of the boys
mama's/mummy's/mother's boy
rent boy
cast * mind back
change * mind
from the horse's mouth
heart is in the right place
heart set on
heart bleeds
heart goes out to
heart in/into *
heart missed/skipped a beat
heart of glass
heart to heart
heart * in * mouth
heart of hearts
open * heart
pour * heart out
heart is in * boots
heart sinks
sick at heart
steal * heart
straight from the heart
strike at the heart of
take * to heart
take heart
tear your heart out
way to * heart
wear * heart on *sleeve
win the hearts
with all * heart
young at heart
knife-edge
money's worth
two pennies' worth/two penn'orth
pencil-neck*
penalty box
change * mind
from the horse's mouth
Appendix C

Keywords with the Most Core Idioms

Keyword: Hand

whip hand
The hand that rocks the cradle
(rules the world).
heavy hand*
hand-wringing
high handed
right-hand man/woman/person
hands on
stick/put * hand in * pocket
go hand in hand
work hand-in-hand
gouty-handed
catch * red-handed
first*hand
wait on * hand * foot
(and finger)
hand in the cookie jar
tip * hand
hands down
a firm/steady hand on the tiller
change hands
all hands on deck
all hands to the pumps
old hand
at first hand
at the hands of
dab hand
in hand
in safe hands
in * hands
on hand
high-hat
bear a hand
bite the hand that feeds *
by hand
by * own hand
can't keep * hands off *
with * own fair hands
can't put * hands on it
cement hands
close/near at hand
crawl on my hands and knees
over broken glass just to see
her photo
dead hand
dirty * hands
dishpan hands
don't hand me that
eat out of (the palm) of * hand
have/hold * in the palm of * hand
* can get * hands on
fall into * hands
into the wrong hands
fill * hands
firm hand
force * hand
free hand
from my cold, dead hands
upper hand
get * hands dirty
get/lay * hands on *
out of hand
out of * hands
give * a hand
give * a big hand
in good hands
hands full
hand it to
ham hand*
hand down
hand in
hand off
hand on * heart
hand*out
wring * hand*
hand over
hand over fist
hand to mouth
hand* up
hands are tied
have * on * hands
have a hand in
have * hand out
hand it to
helping hand
hold * hand
hot hand
keep * hand in
lay * hand* on
leave * in * hands
* hand doesn't know what the * hand is doing
life * in * hands
take * off * hands
on the gripping hand
on the one hand
on the other hand
on * hands
overplay * hands
play into * hands
play the hand * is dealt
put * hands together
raise * hand
raise * hand against/to
reject * out of hand
shake hands with the unemployed
show * hand
sit on * hands
take * in hand
take the law into * own hands
take * into your own hands
talk to the hand
third hand
throw in * hand
tie * hands
top hand
try * hand
turn * hand to
wandering hands
wash * hands of
with one hand tied behind * back
with * bare hands
Keyword: Time

time and tide wait for no man
catch * at a bad time
all in good time
* not before time
no time to lose
about time *
ahead of * time
ahead of time
all the time in the world
at one time
at the best of times
at times
time bandit/burglar/thief
bad time
one at a time
before * time
behind * time
borrowed time
mark* time
beat * time
behind time
bide * time
big time
buy time
closing time
copious free time
do time
easy time of it
every time * turns around/round
for the time being
from.since time immemorial
time to time
get with the times
give * a rough/hard/bad time
give the time of day
go down for the third time
show */have a good time
hard time*
hard/rough/thin time of *
no time for *
have no time to lose
time of * life
time on * hands
time on * side
high time
time flies
in * own good time
in due time
in next to no time
in no time *
* in time *
about time
It's feeding time at the zoo!
keep up with the times
time to kill/kill time
lead time
lean time
let the good times roll
let time take its course
long time no *
make good time
make time
make up for lost time
many a time
many's the time
mark time
move with the times
nine times out of ten
no time like the present
not give * the time of day
not have much time for *
nut-cutting time
old time used to be
on time
once upon a time
time will tell
have a lot of time for *
have all the time in the world
real time
right time
rotation time
* time is up
serve time
sit on your time
spend time
take * sweet time
take time to smell the roses
time of the month
time is ripe
there's a first time for everything
There's a time and a place.
there's no time like the present
There's no time to lose.
third time is a charm
throwback to a time
time after time
time and again
time and material
time and time again
time flies *
time hangs/lies heavy *
time is money
time is of the essence
time off
time*out
time ran out
time stands still
time* wasting
time* up
tough time of it
waste no time
pass the time of day
play for time
pressed for time
put in time
Keyword: Eye

eye for an eye
eye for an eye
roving eye
eyes * bigger than * stomach/belly
red*eye
all eyes and earsall eyes are on
eagle*eye*
eye of the storm
bat * eye/eyelid/eyelash
be all eyes
be easy on the eye
in the public eye
bedroom eyes
believe * eyes
black eye
blink of an eye
can't take/keep * eyes off
cast/run * eye over
cast a critical eye over
cast a professional eye over
cast an eye on
catch * eye
clap eyes on sb/sth
close/shut * eyes to
close one's eyes and think of England
coon eyes
cry * eyes out
cut your eye teeth
do * with * eyes closed
dry one's eyes
ears/eyeballs/eyes in sth
easy on the eye*
evil eye
eye of a needle
eye of the beholder
see eye to eye
eyes are popping out of * head
not * bat an eye*

four*eyes
get your eye in
give * the eye
give * the evil eye
give * eye teeth
give * the glad eye
go into * with * eyes
closed/open/shut
have/keep * eye on
hard on the eyes
Have ** eye for
have an eye for/on the main
have eyes in the back of * head
have eyes like a hawk
have stars in [one's] eyes
have * beady eye on *
half an eye on
have/keep one eye on
one in the eye for
hit ** between the eye*
in * mind's eye
in a pig's eye
in the twinkling of an eye
in * father's eye
keep * eyes glued
keep * eyes open
keep * eye's peeled
keep a weather eye *
keep * eye on **
keep an out
keep * eye in
* eyes on
look * in the eye*
make sheep's eyes at
magic eye
more ** than meets the eye
naked eye

open * eyes to
private eye
eyes glaze over
eyes peeled
feat *eyes *
pull the wool over * eyes
* eyes * pop* out of * head
right before my eyes
roll * eyes
do * with * eyes *
eyes are out on stalks
see dollar signs in * eyes
set eyes on
shut * eyes to
sight for sore eyes
snake eyes
spit in * eye
stars in * eyes
stink eye
take * eye off the ball
apple of * eye
there wasn't a dry eye in the house
there's less to * that meets the eye
throw an eye
turn a blind eye
when * was a * twinkle in *
father's eye
with a jaundiced eye
wipe *eye
worth a Jew's eye
with an eye to
with an eye towards
with * eyes * open
would give * eye
give a black eye
Keyword: Head

bury/stick/put * head in the sand
raise/rear * * head
beat/bang * * head against a * wall
a cool head
a wise head on young shoulders
an old head on young shoulders
banging/hitting * head
head over heels
off * head
out of * head
over * head
bite * head off
bite/snap * head off
bring * to a head
head of steam
butt heads
standing on * head
can't make head* nor tails* of
clear * head
come to a head
head to head
cool head
cooler heads prevailed
do * head in
from head to foot/toe
funny in the head
head out of the clouds
get * head together
get a big head
get * into/through * head
in over * head
get/wrap * head around
get/put/keep * head down
give * head a shake
give * * head
head start
give * a big head
go to * head
hang * head
head in the clouds
* head on * shoulders
head screwed on
a head for *
have * head read
hold * over * head
* hanging over * head
have * head * up
head * buzzing
head and shoulders above
stand * on * head
head down *
head is spinning
head*on
head out
head south
head to toe
head up *
head [modal] roll
heads or tails
heads*up
hold * head high or head held high
keep * head above water
keep * head* together
put/keep/stick * head above the parapet
laugh * head off
knock heads
lay * head on the block
lose * head
make *head spin
melon head
mop head
need * head examin*
need * like * a hole in the head
need * head testing
not * right in the head
off the top of * head
price on * head
pumpkin head
stick/put * head in a noose
put * head in the lion's mouth
put * head on the block
put * heads together
put a gun to * head
put ideas into sb's head
scratch * head
scream * head off
sleepy head
soft in the head
stand on * head
* comes into your mind
swelled head
stand/turn * on * head
take * into * head to do *
take * head off
talk over * head
talking head
think with * head
touched in the head
tube head
turn * head
two heads are better than one
use * head
Keyword: Word

four-letter word*
mark my words
buzz word
dirty word
word to the wise *
get a word in edge*
bad word
as good as * word
eat * words
lost for words
last word in *
breathe a word
word of mouth
mince words
exchange words
f-word
famous last words
from the word go
get the word out
give * * word
good word
hand on * every word
have * word* with *
have a word with *
have a word in * ear
final/last word
in a word
in other words
in so many words
words of one syllable
say the word
keep * word
loaded word
my word
no word
not believe a word of it
not say a word

pen those words
put in a good word for *
put words in/into * mouth
send word
spoken word
spread the word
take * word for it
take * at * word
take the words * out of * mouth
operative word
s-word
the word is
There's many a true word spoken in jest.
twist * words
upon my word
weasel word*
weigh * word
without a word of a lie
won't hear a word *
word*for*word
word has it
man/woman of * word
word is good
word is out
word of honor
word on the street
word on the wire
words fail *
on my word
word is law
or words to that effect