

Chapter Sixteen

World of Idioms & Phrases

A **phrase** is, simply speaking, a group of words. But certain phrases assume significance because they lend a special beauty to the language. Moreover, there are some phrases which give a meaning different from the literal one. Such phrases are called **idioms**. In this chapter, let us get acquainted with some of the idioms and phrases.

Note: “The World of Words” also has some idioms and phrases. So go through that chapter once again.

be/keep abreast of: If you *keep abreast of* a subject or *are abreast of* it, you know all the most recent facts about it. You are aware of the latest news, ideas, developments, etc. Survival in today’s world depends upon *keeping oneself abreast of* the latest changes. This is particularly true of the software sector. If you *are not abreast of* the latest developments, chances are you will get less lucrative offers.

settle/square an account: If you *settle* or *square an account* with someone, you punish him or cause him harm because he has harmed you in the past. This is also known as *settling a score*. The motive is one of revenge. You often see this happening in films. The villain misbehaves with a child’s parents. The child grows up to be a hero and *settles the account* towards the end of the film.

add fuel to the flames: If something *adds fuel to the flames*, it makes the situation worse. In such a case, people react more strongly or fiercely. The society of India had already become polarised between forward and backward classes. The Mandal Commission recommendations only *added fuel to the flames*.

A similar idiom is **add insult to injury**. If something *adds insult to injury*, it adds to the damage that has already been done.

alive and kicking: People had started talking about recession in the US. But latest reports say that the US economy is *alive and kicking*. That is, it is still living, not dead. And besides, it is in good health and active. We are often glad to hear about a certain friend or relative, who underwent a serious crisis, that he is *alive and kicking*.

make allowances for: If you *make allowances for* someone, you deal with him less severely. You consider his special problems or difficulties. For example, we follow a strict schedule at camps. But we *make allowances for* the sick and the elderly.

If you *make allowances for* something, you take that factor into account in your plans or actions. Those against a uniform civil code *make allowances for* cultural differences.

at/on the altar of: What is an *altar*? It is a table on which gifts or sacrifices are

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offered to a god. So if you sacrifice *X on the altar of Y*, you consider Y to be of greater importance. Y is equivalent to the god. Now, this Y varies from person to person. We often find persons sacrificing moral considerations *on the altar of profit*.

make amends: You are familiar with *amendment*, I suppose. It is a change brought about in the Constitution. Why the change? It is an attempt to correct a mistake. Similarly, if we *make amends* for a mistake, we do something to compensate for it. We make things better. We show that we are sorry for the mistake. But if we do not *make amends* for a small slip of tongue, it may even develop into a war.

run amok: If someone *runs amok*, he behaves in a violent and uncontrolled way. He rushes about in a state of wild and angry excitement. You might sometimes have seen bulls *run amok* on the roads. When this happens, traffic comes to a standstill.

sheet anchor: What is an *anchor*? It is a heavy hooked object that is dropped from the boat into the water to prevent it from moving. Now, a *sheet anchor* is much larger and stronger than an ordinary anchor. It is used only when a boat is in difficulties.

Idiomatically speaking, a *sheet anchor* is that which helps you more than anything else when problems occur. Sachin Tendulkar's innings has often proved to be the *sheet anchor* of India's batting.

up the ante: *Ante* is an amount that is bet before a person receives cards in a gambling game. So if you *up the ante or raise the ante*, you increase the value of the stake. Idiomatically speaking, you increase your demands when you are in dispute. In coalition politics, we often see smaller parties *upping their ante*.

the apple of one's eye: If someone is *the apple of your eye*, you are extremely fond or proud of him. You love him more than anyone else. Generally, a beautiful or intelligent son becomes *the apple of his mother's eye*. His siblings then develop an inferiority complex.

keep at arm's length: An arm's length is supposed to be quite a safe distance. If you *keep somebody at arm's length*, you avoid becoming too friendly or involved with him. Some politicians *keep the press at arm's length* because they want to carry out their activities peacefully.

with open arms: Often, our body says a lot. When a visitor comes, we generally welcome him with folded hands. But if he happens to be a near and dear one, we hold our arms stretched out. *With open arms* we are ready to hold him affectionately. Idiomatically, if you welcome something *with open arms*, you are very pleased about it. You accept it gladly. Employers today welcome a degree in software *with open arms*.

up in arms: The word *arms* has another meaning—weapons or devices that are used to hurt or kill people. Obviously, they are used against an enemy. That is,

against someone or something that you do not like. Idiomatically, if you are *up in arms* about/over something, you are very angry about it and are protesting strongly. The *swadeshis* are *up in arms* over the globalisation process.

avoid like the plague: In olden times *bubonic plague*, or simply *the plague*, was an infectious disease that killed many people. The outbreak of the disease wiped away one town after another. People were either killed or got so scared that they deserted the settlements. In recent times, Surat witnessed a plague in 1994 in the aftermath of the Latur earthquake. And how scared we were!

So if you *avoid* somebody *like the plague*, you try very hard not to meet him. You deliberately avoid him. Beware of psychopants! *Avoid* them *like the plague*.

have an axe to grind: If you *have an axe to grind*, you have private reasons for being involved in something. That impels you to tell others to make that thing happen. You persuade them that the thing needs to be done. But there are selfless social workers, on the other hand, who *have no axe to grind*. Their only motive is philanthropy.

throw the baby out with the bathwater: *Bathwater* is useless, undesirable. *Baby* is useful, desirable. So throw out the *bathwater*, not the baby. If you *throw the baby out with the bathwater*, you lose the good things as well as the bad. This happens because instead of removing just the bad parts, you reject the thing completely.

Suppose the Constitution of a country is found to be flawed. The ideal way out is to rectify only the flaws. But if the entire constitution is rejected, it would be *throwing the baby out with the bathwater*.

back to the wall: if you have your *back to the wall*, you have very great problems, which you may not be able to overcome. You are in a difficult position. You are under pressure. When a team follows on in cricket, it has its *back to the wall* because it trails by an innings and more.

jump on the bandwagon: A *bandwagon* is any popular or fashionable activity. So if you *climb or jump on the bandwagon*, you join others in doing something fashionable or likely to be successful. Dotcom has become the buzzword these days. So we have seen fresh management graduates *jump on the dotcom bandwagon*.

bark up the wrong tree: If you are *barking up the wrong tree*, you are trying to do something without realising that you have no chance of success. In other words, the course of action you are pursuing is wrongly directed. In today's world, if you try to convince people that money is not very important, you are *barking up the wrong tree*.

beat about the bush: I ask you, "Who won the match?" You reply, "India played very well in the beginning. But then Australia, you know, is a tough team. Michael Bevan turned the match in their favour. But our Harbhajan Singh then

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worked miracles” I lose my patience and yell at you, “Stop *beating about the bush* and tell me which team won.”

Clear, isn't it? If you *beat about the bush*, you talk about something without coming to the main point.

at one's beck and call: If you are *at someone's beck and call*, you are ready to obey his orders immediately. You are constantly available and ready to do what they ask. Gone are the days of servants and masters. In today's age it is very difficult to have anyone *at your beck and call*.

beside oneself: If you are *beside yourself* with some emotion, you have lost control of yourself because of the intensity of your emotion. My sister was *beside herself* with joy when I told her of her selection for the job. She couldn't believe it and started jumping—something we had never seen her do for the past couple of years.

bide one's time: If you *are biding your time*, you are waiting for a good opportunity. Suppose the stock market crashes. Several investors panic and sell their shares even at low prices to avert further risk. What does the intelligent investor do? He keeps his calm and *bides his time*. When the share prices go up again, he sells his shares and makes profit.

bite the bullet: If you *bite the bullet*, you accept something unpleasant because you cannot avoid it. In coalition politics, the ruling party at the Centre is dependent on regional parties. When assembly elections come, the regional parties resort to arm-twisting. They give lesser seats to the national party. If the national party does not agree, the regional party threatens to withdraw support at the Centre. So the national party *bites the bullet*.

black and white: If something is in *black and white*, it is in writing or in print. Oral agreements are not too reliable. You should insist on getting the agreement done *in black and white*.

A *black-and-white* issue is one which is considered to involve issues that are simple and straightforward. For example, in a *black-and-white* situation, you brand a person as either honest or dishonest. But in real life, we seldom come across *black-and-white* problems. There are shades of grey involved. That is, complexities occur. Few of us are either fully honest or fully dishonest.

in the blues: *The blues* refers to feelings of deep sadness or depression. So if you have got *the blues* or are *in the blues*, you feel sad and depressed. The frantic pace of modern life leaves many of us *in the blues*. Is there a way out of this? Yes, look at the sunny side of life and you will come out of depression.

above board: If a business arrangement or deal is *above board*, it is honest and open. It is being done in the correct or official way. There is nothing hidden or deceitful about it. If we want to get rid of scams, deals should be *above board*. Secrecy leads to corruption.

breathe down somebody's neck: If you *breathe down somebody's neck*, you follow him or watch what he is doing too closely. This makes him feel uncomfortable. He is unable to act freely or make his own decisions. Parents should stop *breathing down* their children's *neck* when they grow up.

a bull in a china shop: We generally associate a *bull* with roughness. Cups and plates made of *china* (clay), on the other hand, are delicate. So *a bull in a china shop* refers to a person who is rough and clumsy when skill and care are needed.

take the bull by the horns: *Horns* are what the bull uses to attack us. So if you *take a bull by the horns*, you face a difficulty or danger directly and with courage. And this you do in spite of being nervous or frightened. Keep away from dangers as long as you can. But if confrontation becomes a must, *take the bull by the horns*.

burn one's fingers: If you *burn your fingers* or *get your fingers burnt*, you suffer because you committed a mistake. When you did the act, you did not realise that it would have bad consequences for you. Several speculators *burn their fingers* by dabbling in the stock market. When prices are zooming, people simply forget that what goes up also comes down.

go bust: If a company *goes bust*, it is unable to continue operating because of lack of money. It becomes bankrupt. We have seen dotcom companies *go bust* because they could not become profitable. The initial hype soon died down. Venture capitalists refused to sustain them any longer.

in cahoots: If you are *in cahoots* with someone, you are working in close cooperation with him. And the planning is especially for something that will harm anyone else. The minister was *in cahoots* with the queen in poisoning the king.

call it a day: If you *call it a day*, you decide to stop doing something. You leave it to be finished later or even permanently. Suppose you have worked for a number of hours. You are tired and your productivity diminishes. What do you do? You *call it a day* because it makes little sense to labour without obtaining any result.

cap in hand: If you go to someone *cap in hand*, you go to him very humbly, as if begging. Usually, you are asking him for something. Or, you are apologising for something you have done. When a country fails to use its own resources, it has to go *cap in hand* to institutions like the World Bank and the IMF.

let the cat out of the bag: Ranjan had married secretly. Only Amit had been called to the wedding. He had assured Ranjan that he would keep the marriage a secret. One day while Amit was talking to his friends, he said Ranjan and his wife had gone to Pune. "His wife!" the friends exclaimed. It was then Amit realised that he had *let the cat out of the bag*. That is, he had revealed a secret carelessly or by mistake.

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catch a tartar: Who is a *tartar*? A *tartar* is a fierce, bad-tempered person who is in a position of authority. So if you *catch a tartar*, you deal with too troublesome an opponent.

cheek by jowl: *Jowls* are the lower part of your cheeks covering your jawbones. Thus *cheeks* and *jowls* are very close to each other. So if you are *cheek by jowl* with someone, both of you are close together. For example, politicians and businessmen live *cheek by jowl*. Bettermen and match-fixers are *cheek by jowl* with each other.

strike a chord: What is a *chord*? It is a number of musical notes played or sung at the same time. What does it produce? A pleasing or satisfying effect. So if you *strike a chord* with someone, you make him feel a particular emotion, usually sympathy or enthusiasm. When you are on the stage as a speaker, you must know how to *strike a chord* with the audience.

in a cleft stick: If you are (caught) *in a cleft stick*, you are in a difficult situation. Whichever action you take, the consequences will be bad. One of my friends scored poorly in the exam and was caught *in a cleft stick*. If he appeared the next year for improvement, he would lose a year. If he decided to be satisfied with this score, on the other hand, it would be a blot on his bio-data.

too clever by half: One who is *too clever by half* is too confident of being clever. He is always planning things, often in a dishonest way, in order to get what he wants from situations. But does he succeed? As a rule, he does not. He is more likely to get into trouble. Besides, his scheming is so evident that you get annoyed by it.

cloak-and-dagger: A *cloak-and-dagger* situation or activity is one that involves mystery, adventure and secrecy. We often hear of *cloak-and-dagger* films and stories. In fact, most of the thrillers are based on *cloak-and-dagger* stories. Suspense continues to be the key motivator of the reader and the audience down the ages.

on cloud nine: If you are *on cloud nine*, you are very happy, and rather excited. When children are in school they are *on cloud nine*. They feel they are best suited to solve the problems of the world. But when they confront real-life situations, the excitement soon subsides. Often, a number of people even get depressed.

under a cloud: *Under a cloud* implies the sun does not shine upon you. Not a good sign, that is. So if you are *under a cloud*, you are in disgrace and people have a poor opinion of you. You are suspected of doing something bad. Cricketers came *under a cloud* after match-fixing allegations were levelled against them.

carry coals to Newcastle: Newcastle in England is famous for its coal reserves. So if you carry coals to Newcastle, you take goods to a place where there are already plenty of them. You supply something where it is not needed. I don't

take gifts to rich men because I consider that to be carrying coals to Newcastle.

to turn one's coat: If you *turn your coat*, you change your loyalty. It is from this phrase that we get another word—turncoat. A *turncoat* is a person who leaves one political party or group and joins an opposing one. Politics has become a dirty game today. And it is the politicians who are to be blamed for this. They do not mind *turning their coats* whenever the need arises. Opportunism prevails.

to give the cold shoulder: *Coldness* in a person's manner is associated with lack of emotion. If someone is happy when you visit him, he gives you a *warm welcome*. If not, he gives you a *cold reception*.

Now, if you *give the cold shoulder* to someone, you treat him in a way that is deliberately not friendly. You show him that you do not care about him or that you want him to go away. Poor relatives often complain that the rich ones *give them the cold shoulder*.

make common cause: If you *make common cause* with someone, you unite with him in order to achieve a shared aim. There is hardly anything common between the Congress and the Left. And yet *they made common cause* to prevent the BJP from coming to power. Similarly, the BJP *makes common cause* with its allies merely to remain in power.

cook the books: If you *cook the books*, you alter facts or figures dishonestly or illegally. You change a written record in order to deceive people. Now, what is the job of a chartered accountant (CA)? It mainly consists of planning the taxes of his clients. But a CA often ends up *cooking the books* so that his client does not have to pay much.

cut corners: If you *cut corners*, you do something easily, quickly or cheaply. In the process, rules are ignored and things omitted. The pressure of deadline often forces workers to *cut corners*. But this leads to decline in quality. So *cutting corners* is not desirable for a business with its long-term prospects in mind.

the corridors of power: The *corridors of power* are the places where the most important decisions in government are made. This refers to the senior levels of government or administration. Access to the *corridors of power* is available only to a limited few. But then you can always take the help of middlemen to reach there. True, isn't it?

keep one's own counsel: *Counsel* means advice. So if you *take counsel* with someone, you meet him in order to discuss a problem or seek advice. On the other hand, if you *keep your own counsel*, you keep your opinions, plans or intentions secret. *Take counsel* with knowledgeable persons. *Keep your own counsel* if there is a fear of your idea being hijacked or mocked.

count one's chickens: A number of dotcom projects failed because they began

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counting their chickens (before they were hatched). That is, plans were made on the basis of expectations, not actual happenings. When you *count your chickens*, you are too confident that things will be successful. But remember not all eggs hatch into chickens. And again, not all chickens grow up into cocks and hens. So I warn you: “Don’t *count your chickens (before they are hatched)*.”

not cricket: If your behaviour is *not cricket*, you have not behaved in a fair or honourable way. The phrase is a testimony to the fact that cricket is gentleman’s game. (Now, please don’t start talking about match-fixing.) Let us not tarnish a game merely because few individuals were guilty. Such criticising just *isn’t cricket*.

crocodile tears: The idiom refers to expressions of sorrow that are not sincere or genuine. Few politicians are concerned about the masses. But when they visit their constituencies on the eve of elections, they sympathise with the voters. Shedding *crocodile tears*, they say, “Your sorrows are my sorrows.” Once the campaigning is over, they fly back to five-star comforts.

cross one’s fingers: I am *crossing my fingers* that the new edition of the book will be a success. That is, I am hoping that the new edition will be successful. If you *are crossing your fingers* about something, you are hoping that everything will happen as you want it to. This is also reflected in your gesture.

cross the Rubicon: *Rubicon* was the name of a river that marked the boundary between Italy proper and Cisalpine Gaul. When Julius Caesar led his army across the Rubicon in 49 BC, he declared war on the republic. Going back was not possible. Hence *crossing the Rubicon* implies an irrevocable step. Thus if you *cross the Rubicon*, you start a process which is important and which cannot be reversed. When Manmohan Singh announced the New Economic Policy in 1991, he *crossed the Rubicon*. Any party that came to power after that has not dared to go back on it.

cross swords: If you *cross swords* with someone, you disagree with him about something. You argue with him about it. The finance minister was a champion of free market. But his colleagues were in favour of state control. So when the cabinet met on economic reforms, the minister *crossed swords* with his colleagues.

at cross-purposes: Sample the following:

Wife: “There’s someone in my life.”

Husband: “Who is that?”

Wife: “Someone who cares for me.”

Husband (with envy and rage): “May I know the name?”

Wife: “I can’t do without it.”

Husband (suddenly relieved): “It! Thank God.”

The husband now realised that the two of them were talking *at crosspurposes*. While the wife was talking about *it* (perhaps a women’s

magazine), he had mistaken this “someone” to be a lover. Thus, if people are *at cross-purposes*, there is a misunderstanding between them. Because they are talking or thinking of different things, though they don't realise it.

at a crossroads: A *crossroads* is a place where two roads meet and cross each other. This is a very important point. Suppose your destination is 10 km to the right. Instead, you turn left. Then you are going away from the destination. So when you reach a crossroads, a sense of direction becomes very important. Idiomatically, if you are *at a crossroads*, you have reached a very important stage in your life or development. When the students pass out of school, they are *at a crossroads*. Their career depends on the direction they take.

cry over spilt milk: Madhu knocked the can and the milk spilt. She started crying. But it made no sense. The milk could not come back into the can. So if you *cry over spilt milk*, you feel sad about something that has happened and cannot be changed. When Rajesh failed the exam, he sat depressed. So his mother told him, “It's no use *crying over spilt milk*. Prepare for next exam.”

cry wolf: This idiom comes from the story of a goatherd. He wanted to play a prank on the villagers. So he cried, “Wolf! Wolf!” When the villagers came, he made fun of them. Because there was no wolf. So if you *cry wolf*, you pretend there is danger. You call for help when it is actually not needed. The result: people no longer believe you even when you are in real trouble. Country *X has cried wolf* for so long that the international community is no longer ready to believe it.

not one's cup of tea: If something is *not your cup of tea*, you do not like it. Since you are not interested in it, you will not choose to do it. A friend of mine is very good at literature. But give him a simple calculation and he says, “Mathematics is *not my cup of tea*. Why don't you calculate it?”

curry favour: If you *curry favour* with someone, you try to gain his favour by giving him help, praise, etc. You try to please him so that he will notice you and approve of you. You are *buttering him up*. Many employees think they can move up the company ladder only if they curry favour with their boss.

at daggers drawn: A *dagger* is a short pointed knife used as a weapon. When do you draw daggers? When you are against someone. Idiomatically, if you are *at daggers drawn* with someone, you show strong dislike for him. You are hostile towards him. You are having an argument with him. You are very angry at him. The two captains were *at daggers drawn* on the controversial lbw decision.

a dark horse: A *dark horse* refers to someone about whom very little is known. He has not told anything about himself, especially his special personal qualities or abilities. When HD Deve Gowda became the prime minister, the media called him *a dark horse*. The country knew very little about him before this event.

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between the devil and the deep blue sea: On one side is the devil. On the other is the deep blue sea. Both are dangerous. What is to be done? So if you are *between the devil and the deep blue sea*, you are in a difficult situation. Because you have to choose between two equally unacceptable alternatives. You have to sail between *Scylla and Charybdis* (another idiom used in the same sense). Take the case of this batsman. If he scores poorly, he may lose his place. If he bats well, he will be accused of having deliberately failed in the earlier innings. He is caught *between the devil and the deep blue sea*.

a dime a dozen: A *dime* is a coin in the US worth ten cents. Now, if you get a dozen of something just for a dime, it must be pretty worthless. So if something is *a dime a dozen*, it is nearly worthless or very common. Engineering degrees from a university are a *dime a dozen*.

a dog in the manger: What is a *manger*? It is a long open box from which horses or cattle can feed. Now, place the manger before a dog. What do you notice? Even if it does not eat the food, it does not allow anyone else to come near it. So *a dog in the manger* refers to a person who stops others enjoying something he cannot use or does not want. That is, he neither uses the thing nor allows others to use it.

go to the dogs: If something *is going to the dogs*, it is losing the good qualities that it had. It is falling into a bad state. Our company set an example for others. But it has *gone to the dogs* ever since outsiders were allowed to enter it.

in the doldrums: The *doldrums* refers to the parts of the ocean near the equator where there is little or no wind. As a result, it was very difficult for ships with sails to move. Idiomatically, if someone is *in the doldrums*, he is feeling depressed. He is in low spirits. If an activity is *in the doldrums*, it is very quiet. Nothing new or exciting is happening. The economy has been *in the doldrums* ever since last year's depression.

dot one's i's and cross one's t's: Write down the word *titillate*. Did you notice something? You dotted your *i's* and crossed your *t's* after writing the word, didn't you? As if you were completing the final details. So if you *dot the i's and cross the t's*, you deal with all the remaining small details before a task is completely finished. When the pressure of deadline is there, you can't afford much time *dotting your i's and crossing your t's*.

drag one's feet/heels: If you *drag your heels* or *drag your feet*, you delay doing something. You are deliberately slow in making a decision. The reason: You do not want to do the work. The government has been *dragging its heels* on shifting factories out of the city. It does not want to lose the support of factory-owners.

at the drop of a hat: There are some tasks for which one needs a lot of prodding. But there are other tasks which one is ready to do *at the drop of a hat*. That is, one does it without delay or hesitation. One does it without good reason. One

of my cousins starts singing *at the drop of a hat*. People therefore avoid mentioning songs before him.

drop names: If you *drop names*, you mention famous or powerful people. You say that you know them so that others get impressed by your high connection. Well, *name-dropping* may help you enter a place. But if you want to move ahead, you can't rely on *dropping names*. There it is your work that counts.

duck diamond: The idiom refers to "one's beloved". Haven't you read those romantic stories? Or take the Hindi films for that matter. The hero is ready to lay down his life for the sake of his *duck diamond*. Dharmendra, in the film *Sholay*, threatened to commit suicide for his *duck diamond*, Bāsanti (Hema Malini).

eat humble pie: If you *eat humble pie*, you say you are very sorry for the mistake you had made. This may reflect even in your behaviour. In the clash between the US and China on the spy plane affair, the US mistake was clear to everyone. But the US first adopted an unbending stance. Later, however, it had to *eat humble pie*.

put all eggs in(to) one basket: If you *put all your eggs in one basket*, you are relying on one particular action. You risk everything you have on the success of one plan. And you have no alternative if this one plan fails. Businessmen prefer diversification; they are afraid of *putting all their eggs in one basket*.

in one's element: If you are *in your element*, you are in your usual or preferred surroundings. You are doing what you are good at and what you enjoy. If the reverse is true, then you are *out of your element*. I am in my *element* when I do creative writing.

make both ends meet: What are the two ends of finance? Income and expenditure. So if you *make ends meet*, you balance the two. That is, you earn enough money to live without getting into debt. You are able to manage financially because you have just enough money for your needs. Most of the Indians have to struggle all their life to *make ends meet*.

get even: If you are going to *get even* with someone, you are going to take revenge. You will inflict similar trouble, harm, injury etc on him as he has inflicted on you. Battles are fought because one country wants to *get even* with the other. Jayalalitha got Karunanidhi arrested to *get even* with him.

break even: When a company *breaks even*, it makes neither a profit nor a loss. First you have to make investment and sales are low. So, initially you have losses. As the volume of sales picks up, the loss diminishes and gradually you *break even*. That is, no profit no loss. This point is also known as *break-even point*. When sales rise beyond this, your company goes into profit.

see eye to eye: If you *see eye to eye* with someone, you agree with him and share the same opinions and views. Almost every family faces this problem: the new generation does not *see eye to eye* with the older one.

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stare in the face: If something, say an answer or solution, *is staring you in the face*, it is so obvious that you should have seen it long ago. The established batsmen of the Australian team were dismissed early. With a big target to defend and only the tail-enders left, defeat *was staring the Australians in the face*.

set one's face against: If you *set your face against* something, you are determined to oppose it. The US has *set its face against* the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Its Republican regime feels that nuclear development is essential for national security.

face the music: Since I have gone for inter-caste marriage, I must *face the music*. That is, I must face the criticisms or unpleasant consequences of a decision I have taken. This music is not pleasant to one's ears. At the same time, this is something one is ready for. Leaders take decisions; they do not care for criticism. They *face the music*.

fair and square: If you tell someone something *fair and square*, you say it clearly, honestly and directly. The boss told us *fair and square* that our pay hike would be proportional to the amount of labour we put in.

If you hit something *fair and square*, you hit it directly, firmly and in the middle. You hit it bang on target. There is no uncertainty, no possibility of error. Almost every shot of golfer Tiger Woods is *fair and square*.

play fast and loose: If you *play fast and loose* with someone, you change your attitude towards him repeatedly in an insincere way. You treat him lightly or casually. You behave with him unreliably and irresponsibly. I told my friend, "Love her or leave her. If you *play fast and loose* with her, she will find it difficult to get a husband."

a feather in one's cap: If something is *a feather in your cap*, it is an achievement that you can be proud of. Others admire you for the achievement. If you add another achievement to your string of achievements, you *add a new feather to your cap*. Sachin Tendulkar *added a new feather to his cap* when he scored 10,000 runs in one-dayers.

feather one's nest: If you *feather your nest*, you make yourself richer or more comfortable, usually at someone else's expenses. You make a lot of money over a time, especially in a dishonest way. This manager is little concerned about the company; he is busy *feathering his own nest*.

show the white feather: If someone *shows the white feather*, he runs away because he is scared. First, he made tall claims of being a mighty wrestler. But when he saw his formidable opponent before him, he *showed the white feather*.

play second fiddle: What is a *fiddle*? It is a violin. So one who plays second fiddle can only be an assistant violinist, not the main violinist. Idiomatically, if you *play second fiddle* to someone you are treated as less important than him.

You have a less powerful position than him. Intellectuals have a problem with their ego; they are not ready *to play second fiddle* to anyone.

find one's feet: If you *find your feet*, you start to feel confident in a new situation. You become able to act independently and confidently. Ramesh entered the school in Class IX while others had been there for years. So he felt quite shy in the beginning. But in six months' time he *found his feet*.

under fire: If you come *under fire* from someone, he criticises you severely. The government has come *under fire* from trade unions for its pro-industrialist budget. The management is *under fire* for the new hire-and-fire policy it has adopted.

a flash in the pan: If a success is *a flash in the pan*, it is not likely to be repeated. It lasts only a short time. And it is not an indication of future achievements. Arundhati Roy's success as a novelist seems to be *a flash in the pan*. She wrote a Booker-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*. But since then she has concentrated on social activism. Can we expect more novels from her?

fall flat: If something *falls flat*, it is unsuccessful. It completely fails to produce the effect intended or expected. Recently, a renowned psychologist wrote a novel. There was much media hype about it. But when it was published, it *fell flat* upon the readers.

flotsam and jetsam: What is *flotsam*? It refers to parts of a ship or its cargo found floating on the sea after the ship has been wrecked. What is *jetsam*? It also has a similar meaning. Idiomatically, *flotsam and jetsam* refers to people who have no homes or work and who wander about in a helpless way. *Flotsam and jetsam* refers to an untidy collection of unimportant or useless objects.

fly in the face of: If an action or belief *flies in the face of* an accepted idea, it seems to oppose or contradict it. If a brilliant Bihari does not become an IAS, it *flies in the face of* what his society thinks. Similarly, if a mediocre Gujarati or Punjabi decides to pursue higher studies, it *flies in the face of* these business communities.

fly in the ointment: What is an *ointment*? It is a smooth thick substance that helps wounds heal. Imagine what will happen if a fly falls into it? Its healing property may diminish. So idiomatically, if something is *a fly in the ointment*, it spoils a situation or activity. The activity fails to be as successful as one had hoped. We had always relied on Mr Verma. His withdrawal at a crucial juncture became the *fly in the ointment*.

take time by the forelock: If you *take time by the forelock*, you do your work in time. Success cannot be had unless one learns how to *take time by the forelock*. In other words, punctuality is the key to success.

out of the frying-pan into the fire: Take the case of an insect which gets into a

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frying-pan. Unable to bear the heat, it jumps out of it. But it jumps into the fire and loses its life. *Frying-pan* was bad, but *fire* proved worse. So idiomatically, if you *jump out of the frying-pan into the fire*, there is little hope of improvement in the situation. Chances are that the situation will turn from bad to worse.

come full circle: What will happen if you turn a wheel *full circle*? Each point will come to where it was. So if something *comes full circle*, it returns to the situation from which it started. In between it witnessed a series of events or experiences. At one time India was known for its spinners. Then pacers and medium-pacers dominated the scene. But with the emergence of Harbhajan Singh and the reliability of Kumble, we are back again in the spin era. Indian bowling *has come full circle*.

give up the ghost: If someone *has given up the ghost*, he has died. If a machine *has given up the ghost*, it has stopped working properly. And it can't be repaired.

be given to: If you *are given to* something, you are in the habit of doing it. You have a tendency of doing that. History tells us about rulers who *were given to luxury*. Some *were given to* drinking. Others *were given to* womanising. Such rulers weakened their empire. Whether you are a king or common man, only discipline can take you ahead.

break fresh ground: If you *break fresh ground* or *break new ground*, you make a new discovery. Or, you do something that has not been done before. You start a new activity. Earlier, classical music was considered to be sacred by the Indians. Experimenting with it was not allowed. But Pandit Ravi Shankar *broke new ground* when he fused it with Western music.

make somebody's hackles rise: What are *hackles*? They are the long feathers on the neck of certain birds. Also, they are the hairs on the neck of a dog. When the creatures are afraid or angry, the hackles rise. So if you *make somebody's hackles rise* or *raise his hackles*, you make him angry. Everytime he mocks my friend, he *raises my hackles*.

hammer and tongs: Tools you might get afraid of; aren't they? So if you are going at something *hammer and tongs*, you are doing it in a very vigorous way. If two persons go at each other *hammer and tongs*, they argue or fight violently and noisily. The ruling party and the opposition went at each other *hammer and tongs* on the controversial telecom bill.

right-hand man: Your *right-hand man* is your chief assistant. He is the most reliable person helping you. He helps and supports you a lot in your work. Whenever we hear of mafia dons, we are also told that each one has a *right-hand man*. In the legendary film *Sholay*, Sambha was the *right-hand man* of Gabbar Singh.

wash one's hands: If you *wash your hands* of something, you refuse to be responsible for it. You refuse to be involved with it. The older employees

prompted the newer ones to rebel. The newer employees went on strike. When the manager ordered an inquiry, the older employees *washed their hands* of the incident.

hang fire: If a plan or project *hangs fire*, it is delayed. If something hangs fire, it does not progress or develop for a period of time. Projects like GSLV hang fire because not enough money is spent on research and development in defence. At times matters *hang fire* because of too much of bureaucratic interference.

be hard up: *Are you hard up* for word power? If you say 'yes', it means you know too few words. If you *are hard up* for something, you have too few or too little of it. Most of the students *are hard up* for money. And then they are **hard put** to buy books. If you are *hard pushed*, *hard pressed* or *hard put* to do something, you have great difficulty doing it.

above one's head: The lecture went *above my head*. That is, I could not understand the lecture. In other words, the lecture could not go *into* my head, but went *above* it. So if something goes *above your head* or *over your head*, it is too difficult or complicated for you to understand.

If you do something *over someone's head*, you do it without consulting him. I was not a party to the decision; it was made *over my head*.

wear one's heart on one's sleeve: If you *wear your heart on your sleeve*, you allow your emotions to be seen. Your love for someone becomes apparent. You openly show your deepest emotions rather than keeping them hidden. Remember your history? A Rajput queen would bravely send her husband or son to the battlefield. She did not *wear her heart on her sleeve*.

take to one's heels: If you *take to your heels*, you run away. As soon as I heard that the police was coming, I *took to my heels*. If somebody is *hard on your heels*, he is closely following you.

to the hilt: A *hilt* is the handle of a sword. So *to the hilt* implies including the handle also. That is, the maximum amount possible. If you support or defend someone *to the hilt* or *up to the hilt*, you give him all the support that you can. Politicians defend their partymen *to the hilt* irrespective of whether they are right or wrong.

get off the hook: If you *get off the hook*, you manage to get out of a difficult or dangerous situation. If you allow somebody to do so, you *get him off the hook* or *let him off the hook*. For those who belong to the ruling party, punishment is a remote possibility. They *get off the hook*. Even the government agencies allegedly favour them and *let them off the hook*.

hook, line and sinker: Have you ever gone for fishing? Then you would know the meaning of these words. If you carry the three, your fishing equipment is complete. So if you do something *hook, line and sinker*, you do it entirely or completely. If you are aiming to achieve a goal, you must work at it *hook, line and sinker*.

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from the horse's mouth: If an information comes (*straight*) *from the horse's mouth*, it is given by a person who is directly involved with it. Coming from a rather authentic source, it is likely to be true. For example, rumours abound on when the elections will be held. Just then you spot an Election Commission employee. You then say, "Let's ask him. Why not have it *from the horse's mouth*?"

hum and haw: If you *hum and haw*, you express yourself badly. You take a long time to say something because you are nervous. You are not sure what to say. More generally, if you *hum and haw*, you take a long time to make a decision. You are hesitant. A number of people *hum and haw* before saying 'yes' to a marriage. They are not sure whether a better offer will come their way.

icing on the cake: *Icing* is a mixture of sugar, egg white, flavouring, etc used for covering and decorating cakes. Now, a cake is good in itself. Does it really need icing? No. Though attractive, icing is an unnecessary addition to the cake. So if something is the *icing on the cake*, it is an attractive but unnecessary addition to an already satisfactory thing. For example, take a well-furnished office with every article in order. Now, if you put a picture or two in the corner, it can only be *the icing on the cake*. So, don't worry about pictures.

every inch: An *inch*, or 1/12 of a foot, is a small measure. And it is this meaning that prevails in all the idiomatic usages of the word. So *every inch* is used to emphasise the whole of something. That is, not even a small area is left out. When the police came, they examined *every inch* of Mr Sharma's house. But they left Mr Verma because he was *every inch* a gentleman.

If you miss something *by inches*, you only just miss it. If you do something *inch by inch*, you do it very slowly. You do it in small steps. If you are *within an inch* of something, you are very close to it.

make an issue of: An *issue* is an important topic for discussion or argument. So if you *make an issue of* something, you treat a minor matter too seriously. If you *take issue with* someone, you start disagreeing or arguing with him about something.

If you *join issue with* someone, you take an opposite position in a dispute. On the other hand, if you *join forces with* someone, you become associated with him and work towards a common goal.

have itchy feet: Have you ever felt an *itch*? An uncomfortable feeling on the skin. It causes a desire to scratch. So idiomatically, if you *are itching for* something, you have a constant desire for it. Tendulkar *is itching for* hits to the boundary.

Idiomatically, if you *have itchy feet*, you have a strong desire to leave a place and to travel. Travel writers Hugh and Colleen Gantzer must be *having itchy feet*.

ivory tower: If you live in an *ivory tower*, you deliberately keep yourself away from practical matters. Since the problems of everyday life are unpleasant, you pretend that they do not exist. We hear the judges telling from their *ivory tower*

that only CNG buses should run in Delhi. They are unmindful of the problems the commuters will face.

go for the jugular: What is *jugular vein*? It is a vein in your neck that carries blood from your head back to your heart. If you have to kill a person (God forbid), this is the weakest point to attack. So if you *go for the jugular*, you make an aggressive attack on the weakest point in an opponent's argument or character. For example, a major error in his argument that he feels embarrassed about.

jump the gun: You may be in a crisis. But don't stop the project. That may be *jumping the gun*. If you *jump the gun*, you do something before the proper time. Or, you do something before everyone else.

do oneself justice: If you *do yourself justice*, you produce the best of yourself. You show how good or capable of doing something you are. Mr Raghavan was a brilliant student but settled for a clerical job. He did not *do himself justice*.

If you *do justice to* someone, you treat or represent him fairly. You deal with him properly and appropriately. The novel did not win a Booker. But to *do justice to* it, it is a well-crafted work.

handle with kid gloves: If you *handle* somebody *with kid gloves* or *treat* him *with kid gloves*, you deal with him very gently. You try not to offend or upset him. Some people believe that the government *handles* the terrorists with kid gloves. They want that severe action should be taken against them.

make a killing: Talk of capital markets and faces turn sour. But there are people who *have made a killing* by buying and selling shares at the right time. If you *make a killing*, you make a large profit very quickly and easily.

the kiss of death: Whom do we kiss? Someone we love or have respect for. But imagine if you kiss someone and he dies. Kiss of death, isn't it? So *the kiss of death* is an apparently favourable action that makes failure certain. Take the case of the boss of a company who knew nothing about computers. It was *the kiss of death* whenever he announced he would help the computer operators. Data was sure to be deleted.

cut the Gordian knot: A *Gordian knot* is a difficult or apparently impossible problem or task. So if you *cut the Gordian knot*, you solve a difficult problem in a direct or forceful way. You reject gentler or more indirect methods. Right-wingers believe that ceasefire is no solution to Kashmir problem. We must have the will to *cut the Gordian knot*.

be up with the lark: A *lark* is a small brown bird that has a pleasant song. You get to hear this song early in the morning. So if you *are up with the lark*, you get out of bed very early in the morning. In towns and cities most of us are late-risers. Those who *are up with the lark* are seen as boorish.

laugh all the way to the bank: A bank is the place where you keep your money.

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Most of us are worried when we go to the bank. Because the balance reduces every time you withdraw money. But there are some who can afford laughing. Because they make money and are happy. So if you are *laughing all the way to the bank* only too happy, you are making a lot of money easily. You feel very pleased about it. You feel very confident. When a film is a hit, the producer laughs all the way to the bank.

win laurels: A *laurel* is an evergreen bush with dark smooth shiny leaves. In ancient times, the winner was crowned with a *laurel wreath*. That is, a ring of laurel leaves was worn on the head as a sign of victory or honour.

Let us now look at the idiomatic usages. If you *win laurels*, you win honour and distinction following a great achievement. If you *look to your laurels*, you are careful not to lose your superior position. If you *rest on your laurels*, you become complacent. You feel so satisfied with your past achievements that you do not try to do any more.

take a leaf from somebody's book: Leaf refers to the pages in a book. So if you *take a leaf from someone's book*, you copy him. You act or behave like him. Reason: his behaviour is considered to be especially good. Or, he has been successful. Software merchants want to laugh all the way to the bank. But it would be good if they *took a leaf out of Bill Gates' book* and learnt to labour.

pull someone's leg: One day Mohan came to Ramesh and said, "Your dog has run away." Ramesh, who loved his dog dearly, began to cry. Mohan then said, "Stop weeping. I was just *pulling your leg*."

What did Mohan do? He played a joke on Ramesh. He made him believe something that was not true. Such a lie is generally shocking or worrying. Later on, when you realise it is not true, you find it amusing.

lick one's wounds: If someone is *licking his wounds*, he is recovering after being thoroughly defeated or humiliated. It is a process of trying to recover one's strength or confidence. Take the case of Ranjit Thakur. He was the school badminton champion last year. This year he could not make it even to quarter-finals. He has stopped coming to the school and is *licking his wounds*.

see the light: This idiom has several meanings:

- (i) If you *see the light*, you finally understand something. That is, the understanding comes after having thought about it for some time. One of my colleagues decided to quit the office. I had an hour-long discussion with him on the benefits of office. Finally, he *saw the light*.
- (ii) If you *see the light*, you become converted to a particular religion. I am a Hindu. One of my uncles started visiting the church. One day he came and said he *had seen the light*—he had become a Christian.
- (iii) If something *sees the light of day* at a particular time, it comes into existence at that time. Or, it is made known to the public at that time. The first edition of this book *saw the light of day* in Aug 1997.

lock, stock and barrel: He copied everything from the book, *lock, stock, and barrel*. That is, every single part was included without making any change at all.

the long and short of it: *The long and short of it* implies the basic facts of a situation that you are mentioning or summarising. It is all that needs to be said about the situation. It is the general effect or result of the situation. When I went to my village, my neighbours there recounted a long story. *The long and short of it* was that they no more found the village worth living.

look sharp: Have you ever seen Siddharth Basu conduct a quiz? When he is in the buzzer round, he tells the contestants, "*Look sharp!*" That is, be quick. Hurry up. Because whoever presses the buzzer first gets to answer the question. And if he answers correctly, he gets the point in his kitty.

there is no love lost: If *there is no love lost* between A and B or *there is little love lost* between them, the relationship between them is not a friendly one. They dislike each other. For example, it is common knowledge that *there is no love lost* between India and Pakistan.

leave in the lurch: What is *lurch*? A sudden unsteady leaning or rolling movement. Obviously, a difficult situation. So if you *leave* somebody *in the lurch*, you abandon him when he is in a difficult situation. Mayank befriended Preeti and married her. But he found it difficult to run the family. So he ran away, *leaving* his family *in the lurch*.

put on the map: Have you seen a map of the world? It is a representation in miniature. Try to find out your house or town on a world map. Most of you will not be able to find it. Why? Because it is not very famous or important. Idiomatically, if you *put a place on the map*, you make it famous and important. Phanishwarnath Renu put Purnia on the literary map of the country.

a square meal: *A square meal* is a large and satisfying meal. Modern men are not able to have *a square meal* on weekdays in spite of having the means.

Also, "satisfying" is a relative concept. So what is "normal" for the rich may be "satisfying" for the poor. Haven't we heard of the poverty of India? The poor can't even afford *two square meals* a day.

in the melting pot: *A melting pot* is a place or situation in which people, ideas, etc of different kinds gradually get mixed together. The American society is often referred to as a melting pot. The Americans came from different origins and yet developed a unique Americanness. What happened in this process? Change took place. So if something is *in the melting pot*, it is likely to change. It is in the process of changing.

burn the midnight oil: In older times if you worked, you had to keep your oil lamp burning. Working till late in the night essentially implied burning the midnight oil. Today the phrase has become an idiom. If you *are burning the midnight oil*, you are staying up very late in order to study or to do some work.

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Sometimes, it simply means putting in hard work. Success can be had only when one *burns the midnight oil*.

grist to the mill: If something is *grist to the mill*, it is a thing that you can use for your profit or advantage. It is useful for a particular situation. Though my friend is employed as a government servant, he also earns from tuitions now and then—it's all *grist to the mill*.

make mincemeat of: Let us first know the meaning of *mince*. If you *mince* food, say meat, you cut it into very small pieces. Now, idiomatically, if you *make mincemeat of* someone, you defeat him completely in a fight, a contest or on argument. Given a free hand, Indian soldiers can *make mincemeat of* their opponents.

be in two minds: We have only one mind, haven't we? But sometimes we think as if we had two minds. One mind says, "Go and study; you have your exam tomorrow." The other mind says, "Today is the last day of the film. You will miss it if you don't go today." And then we are in dilemma. I *am in two minds* about studying today; I have my exam tomorrow, but it is also the last day of the film. If you *are in two minds* about something, you feel doubtful about it. You hesitate over it.

a moot point: If something is *mooted*, it is proposed. The matter is raised for discussion. *A moot point* is a statement or idea about which there is uncertainty. It may or may not be true. Or, there is disagreement about it. It's *a moot point* whether English should be the criterion for judging one's ability.

get away with murder: Murder is a heinous crime. Imagine getting away with it! Idiomatically, if you *get away with murder*, you can do whatever you like. No one tries to control or punish you though what you do is wrong. Flouting rules does not bring you any punishment. The authorities *get away with murder* while the common man suffers.

music to one's ears: I have seldom met a man who does not like music. The ears listen to music and we are happy. So if an information is *music to your ears*, it makes you feel very pleased and happy. Mr Ramesh has always been a supporter of the Congress. The news that the party won the election was *music to his ears*.

a nail in someone's coffin: A *coffin* is a box in which a dead body is buried. So *coffin* stands for end or destruction. Now, if something is a nail in someone's *coffin*, it helps to lead to his failure or destruction. The Mughal empire was getting weak for 150 years. The Revolution of 1857 proved to be the last *nail in its coffin*.

in name only: The phrase has to be understood in this way. A *thing* is different from its *name*. So if the *name* is present, but the *thing* is not, we say it exists *in name only*. That is, in reality the thing does not exist. There are a number of publications which exist *in name only*. You will find them in record-books but not see them anywhere.

neck and neck: Have you seen a closely contested horse race? Often, in such cases, one horse defeats another by the margin of barely a neck. That is, the winner horse gets its neck across the finishing-line first. So if two competitors are *neck and neck*, they are level with each other. They appear to have an equal chance of succeeding or winning. In this election, voters seem to be equally divided. Both the contestants are *neck and neck*.

pay through the nose: If you *pay through the nose* for something, you pay a very high price for it. Mr Verma was advised to buy a house in the suburbs. But he bought one in the heart of Delhi. Naturally, he had to *pay through the nose*.

null and void: Both the words *null and void* give the meaning of “zero” or “nothingness”. The phrase is used in law. If a contract or agreement is *null and void*, it has no legal force. It is not legally valid. My friend pinned his hopes on the terms of the contract. But he was shocked when the court declared it *null and void*.

sow one's wild oats: If somebody *sows his wild oats*, he goes through a period of wild behaviour while young. He behaves in an uncontrolled way, especially when it comes to sexual activities. And this happens before he settles down to a career or family life.

at odds: If you are *at odds* with somebody, you are disagreeing or quarrelling with him. She was *at odds* with her boss on the cover design. The boss wanted a dazzling cover. But she preferred a plain one. Her argument: since it was a serious book, a bright cover would be *at odds* with its content. That is, the cover would not match the content. One would not suit the other.

off and on: That is, not always *on*. Sometimes *off*, sometimes *on*. If something happens *off and on* or *on and off*, it happens occasionally. It does not happen regularly or continuously. In Delhi one does not see continuous spells of rain. It rains *off and on*.

But go to the hills and there it rains *on and on*. For several days without a break. If something happens *on and on*, it continues to happen for a very long time.

in the offing: If something is *in the offing*, it is likely to happen soon. Rain is *in the offing*. I can already see dark clouds in the south-west corner. Let us get home soon.

go overboard: If you literally *go overboard*, you go over the side of a ship into the water. You can see there is a sense of crossing the limits. Idiomatically, if you *are going overboard*, you are doing something to a greater extent than is necessary or reasonable. And this is not considered good. For example, it is good to praise people. But when you *go overboard*, you will only embarrass the person you are praising.

If you *go overboard for* someone, you find him extremely attractive. Or, you fall in love with him.

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come into one's own: We have protected our industries far too much. It is only when they face competition that they *will come into their own*. If you *come into your own* you have the opportunity to show your qualities or abilities.

hold one's own: If you can *hold your own* against somebody, you can maintain your position against his attack. You don't become weaker in the face of competition. Though the opponent may be good, you don't appear foolish either. Debators from our school can *hold their own* even against university debators.

paper over the cracks: The glass of Manish's window cracked last night. Afraid of the landlord, he tried to cover it with paper. Unfortunately, when the landlord came next morning, the paper came off. True, how long can you cover a crack with paper?

Idiomatically, if you *paper over the cracks*, you try to hide a problem. But your efforts are not likely to be successful. Instead of *papering over the cracks*, the administration should uproot the problems.

not a patch on: If X is *not a patch on* Y, X is not nearly as good as Y. X is much less interesting, successful, etc. I have read both modern as well as earlier authors. And I find the modern ones are not a patch on their predecessors.

pearls before swine: In Hindi, we say that monkeys know not the taste of ginger. Similarly, swine (or pigs) can't appreciate pearls. So if you are *casting pearls before swine*, you are offering valuable things to people who do not appreciate them. You are thereby wasting your time. The student does not know what a bank is and I am telling him about innovative banking. I am just *casting pearls before swine*.

a slip of the pen: What is a *slip*? It is a minor error caused by being careless or by not paying attention, etc. So if there is *a slip of the pen*, it means a minor error occurs in writing. Similarly, if there is *a slip of the tongue*, a minor error occurs in speech. Reports often have *a slip of the pen*; the copy editor has to rectify those errors.

pick holes: Solid things are much valued. If there are holes in it, it appears as if there is something counterfeit. So if you *pick holes* in something, you find faults in it. For example, you *pick holes* in an argument or theory. That is, you find weak points in it so that it is no longer valid. It is the Opposition's nature to *pick holes* in every Bill that the Government tables.

set the cat among the pigeons: Try doing that and see the pigeons' reaction. You will then understand the meaning of the idiom fully. If you *set the cat among the pigeons*, you introduce something that is likely to cause trouble or disturbance. You do or say something that causes a lot of argument. It even makes people angry. The minister *set the cat among the pigeons* when he decided to sell the government stake in a public sector unit.

from pillar to post: If you go *from pillar to post*, you go from one place to

another. You do so because you are trying to do a lot of things quickly. Often, you end up without achieving anything. Students often narrate their experiences of how they ran *from pillar to post* in order to get a few certificates.

take with a pinch of salt: If you *take* someone's statement *with a pinch of salt*, you think that it is not likely to be true. You believe the statement only partly. Our manager's estimates suggest that the company will make huge profits. But he is over-optimistic and you must learn to *take* his estimates *with a pinch of salt*.

queer somebody's pitch: If you *queer somebody's pitch* or *queer the pitch* for somebody, you spoil his plans or chances of getting something. The Australians were on a winning spree when they came to India. But Harbhajan Singh's devastating bowling *queered the pitch* for the Australians. They had to succumb to the hosts.

a poisoned chalice: What is a *chalice*? It is a large gold or silver cup with a thin stem and is used for holding wine. Now, the cup is very attractive. But imagine if there is poison inside it! So idiomatically, a *poisoned chalice* is a thing that appears attractive but later proves harmful or unpleasant. Ask Indian cricket captains and they would tell you that captaincy is a *poisoned chalice*.

play possum: If you *play possum*, you pretend that you are asleep. Or, that you do not know something. And you do so in order to deceive someone. One of my friends is very smart. He behaves like an ignoramus. Taking him to be a simpleton, people blurt out everything before him. It is only later on that they realise he *was just playing possum*.

the pot calling the kettle black: There is not much to choose between a pot and a kettle when it comes to their appearance. We use the idiom when A is criticising B for faults which both A and B have. Take the case of Indian politics. The Congress is accusing the BJP of corruption - it's a case of *the pot calling the kettle black*.

have one's pound of flesh: In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* there is a Jew money-lender called Shylock. He lends on condition that if the borrower fails to repay the amount, he will have to give a pound of flesh from his body. And he is hell-bent on implementing this cruel condition. Ethics and morals don't bother Shylock.

Idiomatically, if you are demanding your *pound of flesh*, you are insisting on getting something that is legally due to you. It hardly matters to you that doing so is morally offensive. This "pound of flesh" will bring little benefit to you but cause enormous suffering to the payer.

pour oil on troubled waters: If you *pour oil on troubled waters*, you try to settle a disagreement or dispute. You end a quarrel by talking to people and calming them down. An essential part of liaisoning is the ability to *pour oil on troubled waters*.

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the prodigal son: Have you read the story of “The Prodigal Son” in the Bible? He left his home and wasted money on a life of pleasure. Soon he became poor and started suffering. He then regretted his extravagance and returned home. So, anyone sharing these characteristics is referred to as *the prodigal son*.

pull to pieces: If you *pull somebody to pieces*, you criticise him severely, especially when he is not present. If you *pull something to pieces*, you argue against it. You find fault with it. The fiery opposition leader *pulled* the ruling party’s argument *to pieces*.

Pull to pieces may also be written as *pick to pieces* or *tear to pieces*.

pull out all the stops: If you *pull out all the stops*, you make the greatest effort possible in order to achieve something. You do everything possible to make something happen successfully. Have you seen Michael Bevan of Australia come at a time when defeat is certain? He then *pulls out all the stops* in order to steer his team to victory.

pull the rug from under somebody’s feet: Have you stood on a rug covering the floor? Imagine what will happen if someone pulls the rug! Idiomatically, if you *pull the rug from under somebody’s feet*, you take help or support away from him suddenly. In a coalition government, smaller parties are itching *to pull the rug from under the bigger party’s feet*.

pull strings: If you *pull strings* to get something, you use your influence with other people in order to get it. And this is not considered to be good. Bureaucrats are said to *pull strings* to get their children employed in multinational companies.

Note that **pull the strings** has a different meaning. If you *pull the strings*, you control events or actions of other people. She may be the chief minister but it is her husband who is *pulling the strings*.

when push comes to shove: What is the difference between *push* and *shove*? Well, *push* is rather gentle. But when you shove somebody, you push him with a quick, rather violent movement. So *shove* is an indication of hurry, of desperation.

The idiom *when push comes to shove* means “when there is no other choice” or “when everything else has failed”. Our company believes in firing people only *when push comes to shove*.

put paid to: If something *puts paid to* your chance of doing something, it ends or destroys the chances. We had all planned to go to the cinema. Ten minutes before we were to leave, a guest dropped in. His arrival *put paid to* our hopes of going to cinema.

put a spoke in somebody’s wheel: Ramesh was all set to start his business. But Mahendra was jealous of Ramesh and *put a spoke in his wheel*. That is, he deliberately made it difficult for Ramesh to start his business. He prevented Ramesh from carrying out his plans.

mind one’s p’s and q’s: If you are asked to *mind your p’s and q’s*, you have to be very careful not to say anything impolite. Similarly, your actions should also

be careful and polite. Remember, sophistication does not come with electronic gadgetry alone. It is reflected in your speech and behaviour. So *mind your p's and q's* if you have to create a good impression.

save for a rainy day: In earlier times, you worked on a sunny day and earned. You could not work on a rainy day and could not earn. But you needed food on a rainy day also. How did you get it unless you saved for the day?

Idiomatically, if you *save something for a rainy day*, you save it for a time when you may need it. In other words, you are being prepared for the uncertainties of the future. Don't spend every penny that you earn. Always *save some money for a rainy day*. In today's world, jobs are not permanent.

smell a rat: If you *smell a rat*, you suspect that something is wrong with a situation. My neighbour is known for being stingy. She gets upset on every penny spent. So when she invited me for a party yesterday, I could *smell a rat*. And my suspicions proved right. She wanted me to get her son employed.

read between the lines: Everybody reads the lines in a book. But what is there between the lines? A blank space. Well, that is so if you can't read between the lines. But if you *read between the lines*, you discover a meaning in what is not openly stated. You are aware even of the hidden feelings of an individual. Don't be taken in by your manager's sweet words. *Reading between the lines* will convince you that he is simply exploiting you.

a broken reed: If somebody is referred to as *a broken reed*, he is no longer reliable or effective. Time was when USSR was a superpower. But today Russia, its successor state, has become *a broken reed*.

reinvent the wheel: Wheel was the first invention of man. Now, the best thing man can do is to utilise it or modify it. But it makes no sense to invent the wheel again. It's already there. Idiomatically, if you *reinvent the wheel*, you spend a lot of time creating something which already exists or is known. This is a waste of one's effort. We don't need a book on how to work. Several books are there on this topic. Why *reinvent the wheel*?

ring a bell: If something *rings a bell*, it reminds you of something in a vague way. It sounds familiar to you, but you cannot remember exactly why. The name of that company *rings a bell*; perhaps that is where my cousin works.

on the rocks: A ship is *on the rocks* if it has hit some rocks and is breaking apart. If a marriage, business or some other relationship is *on the rocks*, it is in danger of failing. It is in a severe crisis. It is unsuccessful and about to break up. Neither the husband nor the wife has an accommodating nature; so their marriage is *on the rocks*.

shout from the rooftops: If you *shout something from the rooftops*, you talk about it in a very public way. This may embarrass or annoy somebody. Mr Mohan, I know you are privy to the secrets of the film stars. But a respected

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journalist like you should not *shout it from the rooftops*.

rub shoulders with: Pervez is no more the simple student he used to be. He has become a sports journalist and *rubs shoulders with* stars like Tendulkar and Anand. If you *rub shoulders with* someone, you meet and talk to him. They are the famous people—the ones you *rub shoulders with*. You meet those famous people either socially or as part of your job.

a rule of thumb: *A rule of thumb* is a rough practical method of assessing or measuring something. It is usually based on past experience rather than on exact measurement. Therefore, it is not completely reliable in every case or every detail. As *a rule of thumb*, a good school should have one teacher on every twenty students.

If you do something by *rule of thumb*, you do it in the way that you judge is best at the time. You don't go by a fixed set of rules. While good batsmen play by the book, genius lies in playing by *rule of thumb*.

salad days: The vegetables that you eat as *salad* are usually raw, aren't they? So your *salad days* are the period in your life when you are raw—that is, young and inexperienced. It will be very difficult for Pankaj to handle the responsibility; he is still in his *salad days*.

worth one's salt: If you are *worth your salt*, you are good at your job. A manager *worth his salt* would never make careless remarks.

score a point: What happens when you score a point in a game? You are in a relatively advantageous position. Idiomatically, if you *score a point*, you gain an advantage over someone else. This is usually done by saying something clever or by making a better argument. Your clever amusing remark makes the other person appear foolish. Deals are not made by *scoring points*; you have to win the other person's heart.

on the edge of one's seat: Have you seen a one-day match between India and Pakistan? As the excitement grows, we give up our reclining posture and start moving towards the edge of our seats. Idiomatically, if you are *on the edge of your seat*, you are very excited. You give full attention to what is going on. The contest in this election is neck-and-neck. The results have started coming and the people are *on the edge of their seats*.

go to seed: If a plant like lettuce or cauliflower *goes to seed* or *runs to seed*, it produces flowers and seeds as well as leaves. My friend does not have the patience to allow his plants to *go to seed*.

If a person *goes to seed*, he becomes physically less fit or mentally less efficient. He begins to look untidy. Symptoms of old age, aren't they? Yes, because plants also *go to seed* when they are old. Vivek's grandfather doesn't recognise people easily; it appears he *has gone to seed*.

black sheep: *Black sheep* refers to a person who is strongly disapproved of by other members of his family. He is considered bad or worthless. Most of the

students who come from Abhay's school are employed in government jobs or with multinationals. But Abhay makes a living by giving tuitions. His alumni association considers him to be the *black sheep*.

a knight in shining armour: We hear of stories in medieval times where a knight in shining armour saves a damsel in distress. And it is nothing short of a miracle. Just like the hero in a film saves the heroine from the clutches of the villain. Well, the idiom a *knight in shining armour* too has comical connotations. It refers to a person who saves one from a difficult or dangerous situation. Mr Vadhera is in deep trouble in this election. He is waiting in vain for *a knight in shining armour* to turn around his fate.

a shrinking violet: Have you seen the flower violet? It is a picture of shyness. Imagine if that too shrinks! Idiomatically, if a person, especially a woman, is *a shrinking violet*, she is a shy, timid person. The idiom is often used humorously. Manisha is not the *shrinking violet* that she appears to be. Even men fail before her firmness in board meetings.

born with a silver spoon in one's mouth: When it comes to money, we are not all born equal. Some babies can afford spoons of silver; others can't. The favoured ones must obviously have rich parents. So if you are *born with a silver spoon in your mouth*, it means you have rich parents. Though still a student, Manish spends money lavishly. And he can afford it because he was *born with a silver spoon in his mouth*.

sit on the fence: *Fence* is a structure that marks a boundary. So, *fence-sitters* are unable to decide which side of the boundary they are on. If you *sit on the fence*, you fail or refuse to decide between two proposals, courses of action, etc. Often, it is so because you are afraid of somebody. Or, you do not want to offend somebody. You avoid supporting a particular side in a discussion or argument. Someone asked me, "Which of the two parties are you voting for?" I replied, "I'm *sitting on the fence*."

at sixes and sevens: If a place or event is *at sixes and sevens*, it is disorganised. Our alumni association often meets. But the meetings are all *at sixes and sevens*. So little comes out of them.

If somebody is *at sixes and sevens*, his thoughts and feelings are confused. When a smooth business suddenly begins to collapse, its owner is *at sixes and sevens*.

a skeleton in the cupboard: If you have *a skeleton in the cupboard* or *a skeleton in the closet*, you have an unpleasant fact about yourself or your family kept secret. The secret is usually within the family. If it became known publicly, it would embarrass you. *Skeletons in the cupboard* began to tumble when the police got hold of the politician's diary.

go up in smoke: It was a major fire and the entire godown *went up in smoke*. That is, it was burnt completely. But idiomatically speaking, there need not be

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any fire. If we say that something *goes up in smoke*, we mean it fails or ends without anything being achieved. It leaves behind nothing of value. My plans *have gone up in smoke* because of the government's new policies.

a snake in the grass: A *snake in the grass* is a deceitful person. Though he pretends to be a friend, he is secretly acting against you. For example, he may be a business partner but says things which are against you. I have always valued Deepak as a friend. But he has been selling my valuables without my knowledge. He has proved to be *a snake in the grass*.

spill the beans: If you *spill the beans*, you tell something that people have been trying to keep secret. And you reveal the information without intending to do so. There was corruption in a political party. But it was never on the surface. Once unfortunately, one of the members talked about it to a journalist and *spilt the beans*. He was making statements off the record. But he did not know the journalist was carrying a spy-camera.

split hairs: Can you split something so thin as a hair? And even if you can, is it necessary? So idiomatically, if you *split hairs*, you make very small and unnecessary distinctions in an argument. In my book I wrote "*Answers and explanations*". One of my friends said it should be "*Answers with explanations*". Now, that's *splitting hairs*.

a square peg in a round hole: Can a square peg fit into a round hole? No, the shape of the peg renders it unsuitable. So idiomatically, if you are *a square peg in a round hole* (or simply *a square peg*), your character or abilities make you unsuitable for or uncomfortable in a job or position. You do not seem to be successful in a particular situation. Look at the poor fellow. He took up accounts after graduating in English—*a square peg in a round hole*.

lock the stable door after the horse has bolted: Horses live in a stable. Now, if you want the horses safe, you should lock the stable door as a precaution. Unfortunately, some people lock the door after the horse has run away. Too late, isn't it? Idiomatically, if you *lock the stable door after the horse has bolted*, you try to prevent a loss or damage when it is already too late to do so. The company should have built up its reserves. It has now embarked on economy measures when it is on the verge of collapse. *Locking the stable door after the horse has bolted!*

stay put: If you *stay put*, you remain in a place or job and do not try to move from it. You remain where you are placed. Job-hopping has become the fashion these days. Those who *stay put* are seen as lacking in merit or enterprise.

stick one's neck out: If you *stick your neck out*, you do or say something bold which may be risky for yourself. The risk of criticism comes because people's attention gets drawn towards your statement or action. A BCCI official *stuck his neck out* when he said that India would lose the series 3-0.

a storm in a teacup: If a situation is described as *a storm in a teacup*, a lot of fuss is being made about something that is not important. You get angry or worried for something very trivial. My uncle shouted at his wife because he had lost a hanky. My neighbour asked, "What's the matter?" I replied, "It's just *storm in a teacup*."

For Americans, the idiom is *a tempest in a teapot*.

the last straw: *The last straw* refers to the final event after which something becomes impossible to tolerate. Such an event may not be important in itself. But since it happens after a series of similar unpleasant or annoying events, it carries a cumulative effect. It serves as the immediate cause of giving up that "something". Ramesh and Naresh were getting distant over the months. But when Ramesh did not call Naresh on his son's birthday, it was the last straw. Naresh severed his ties.

The idiom is also known as the *final straw or the straw that broke the camel's back*.

take something in one's stride: If you *take* a difficult situation *in your stride*, you accept it. You deal with it without worrying or reacting too strongly. You don't consider it to be a problem. Great men *take* failures *in their stride*. They don't stop working. Rather, they put in extra effort and finally emerge successful.

no string ; attached: If an offer comes to your *with no strings* attached or *without strings*, it comes without any special conditions or restrictions. These days one has to be very careful with ads. Few offers come *with no strings attached*. Most of them are followed by a tiny asterisk which tells you that "conditions apply".

have a sweet tooth: Sure, teeth cannot be sweet. But they can bite and chew sweet things. If you *have a sweet tooth*, you like to eat sweet things. In general, women prefer hot and sour food. But most of the children *have a sweet tooth*. They prefer pastry to *samosa*.

a sword of Damocles: Damocles, a courtier of king Dionysius, was invited by him to a feast. During the feast, he saw above his head a sword suspended by a single hair. It could fall on him any time. Damocles recognised this as a symbol of the insecurity of the great.

Idiomatically, therefore, *a sword of Damocles* refers to an unpleasant or terrible thing that may happen at any time. This threat causes a feeling of anxiety and danger. The threat of unemployment hangs like *a sword of Damocles* over most of the employees of the private sector.

turn the tables: If you *turn the tables* on somebody, you reverse a situation. You move from being disadvantaged to a position of superiority. While the other person now faces the same troubles that he caused you earlier. As soon as the hero reached the pistol, he *turned the tables* on the villain's gang. You must have seen this happen umpteen times in Hindi cinema.

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test the waters: Before diving into a river or rowing in it, it is advisable to test the waters. Idiomatically, if you *test the waters*, you find out what the situation is before taking action or forming an opinion. *Test the waters* before you launch any campaign. Only then can you expect it to be successful.

a thick skin: If you have *a thick skin*, you have a character that does not make you easily upset by criticism, insults, etc. On the other hand, if you have *a thin skin*, you get easily upset by adverse responses. Artists generally have *thin skin*. They are unsuitable for sales job, where you need *a thick skin*.

through thick and thin: If you continue to do something *through thick and thin*, you do it in spite of all the difficulties. However bad the conditions or circumstances may become, you continue to do it. Mr Chaudhary has stayed with his company *through thick and thin*. As a reward, now that the company is in a good position, he has been made the vice-president.

have a lump in one's throat: If you *have a lump in your throat*, you feel pressure in the throat as a result of strong emotion. The emotion may be caused by love, sadness, etc. The novelist has depicted the child's agony in a touching manner. I *had a lump in my throat* when I read the novel.

throw down the gauntlet: A *gauntlet* was a metal glove worn as part of a suit of armour by soldiers in the Middle Ages. When a warrior challenged another, he threw down the gauntlet before him. If the other warrior took up the gauntlet, it meant that the challenge was accepted.

Idiomatically, if you *throw down the gauntlet*, you offer a challenge. If you *take up the gauntlet*, you accept the challenge. Recently, the ruling party *threw down the gauntlet* and said the Opposition could go for a no-confidence motion. But the Opposition refused to *take up the gauntlet*.

throw in the towel: If you *throw in the towel*, you admit that you are defeated. You stop trying because you realise that success is unattainable. Generally, people go for all four (or more) attempts at UPSC until they get the coveted job. But one of my friends *threw in the towel* after two attempts. He said, "It's not my cup of tea."

under the thumb of: If you are *under somebody's thumb*, you are completely under his influence or control. A modern woman does not like to be *under her husband's thumb*. Instead, she wants the husband to be *under her thumb*. Is that equality?

blow one's own trumpet: This is a unique book. No other author gives you what I do. If you haven't read this book, you have missed something. Am I *blowing my own trumpet*? Sorry. I am a modest guy. I just wanted to explain the meaning of the idiom. If you *blow your own trumpet*, you praise your own abilities and achievements. You boast.

upset the apple cart: If you *upset the apple cart*, you do something which causes a plan, arrangement, or system to go wrong. I had planned things in the

calendar till June. Monsoon sets in only at June-end in Delhi. But rains came early this year and *upset my applecart*.

make a virtue of necessity: If you *make a virtue of necessity*, you pretend that you did it out of goodness. However, in fact, you did it because you had no choice. The school forced Mr Seth to pay a hefty sum for his child's admission. Mr Seth *made a virtue of necessity* and said he made a voluntary contribution to the charitable cause of education.

the tail wagging the dog: Normally, what happens? The dog wags the tail, one of its parts. But sometimes the reverse may happen. A situation is described as *the tail wagging the dog* when a minor part of something is controlling or determining the course of the whole. The regional party has only two MPs but it is driving the coalition—a case of *the tail wagging the dog*.

the writing on the wall: *The writing on the wall* refers to clear signs that warn of failure, disaster or defeat. For example, signs that a business is unlikely to be able to exist much longer. The world of the future will be technology-driven. Non-technical personnel should see *the writing on the wall* and re-orient themselves.

water under the bridge: If an event or incident is *water under the bridge*, it has happened and cannot be changed now. So there is no point in worrying about it. The mistake cannot be undone. My friend bought land and later realised it was a bad buy. But it's *water under the bridge* now.

meet one's Waterloo: The Battle of Waterloo has an important place in history. Napoleon Bonaparte, who was considered to be invincible, finally met defeat in this battle. His French army was humbled by Wellington's British forces.

Idiomatically, if you *meet your Waterloo*, you lose an important contest, to your own severe disadvantage. The Australian cricket team *met its Waterloo* in its series against India.

make waves: If you *make waves*, you cause trouble. You disturb a peaceful situation. Fundamentalists raise one bogey after another and *make waves*.

give way: This idiom has several meanings:

- (i) If X *gives way* to Y, it is replaced by Y. The reason: either X is old-fashioned or Y is more important. In most of the offices, typewriters *have given way* to computers.
- (ii) If something *gives way*, it collapses. The bridge could not bear the burden of four trucks at a time. So it *gave way*.
- (iii) If you *give way* to something, you eventually agree to allow it, even though you really disagree or disapprove of it. We have often seen politicians *giving way* to the strikers' demands.
- (iv) If you *give way* to an emotion, you allow yourself to give vent to your feelings. You lose control of yourself. Don't *give way* to anger in an interview.

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make heavy weather of: if you *make heavy weather of* a task, you make it more difficult than it really is. This happens so because you do it very inefficiently. Running an association is a simple task but some people *make heavy weather of* it.

under the weather: A change in weather often makes us slightly ill, doesn't it? Idiomatically, if you are *under the weather*, you feel slightly ill or depressed. Today Prasanna was not his own cheerful self. He looked *under the weather*.

throw one's weight about: If you *throw your weight about*, you use your authority too aggressively in order to achieve what you want. The party workers were in no mood to support the bill. But the party president *threw his weight about* and mustered support.

wheel and deal: If you are *wheeling and dealing*, you are trying to get something, especially in business. You are trying to create a situation which will be of advantage to you. Often, this is done by means of deception or unfair methods. And you are known as a *wheeler-dealer*. A number of politicians have risen through *wheeling and dealing*.

blow the whistle: Ranjit sold books of the company without the knowledge of his seniors. Kamal, one of his colleagues, came to know of this. He demanded money from Ranjit to keep mum. But Ranjit refused to oblige. So Kamal *blew the whistle* on him. The next day Ranjit's seniors warned him not to indulge in such malpractices.

If you *blow the whistle* on someone, you make him suddenly stop doing something, especially something illegal. This is usually done by informing people in authority.

white elephant: If something is *white elephant*, it is useless and often expensive to maintain. I told my prince friend, "Your palace is a *white elephant*. Why don't you sell it and shift to an apartment?"

get wind of: If you *get wind of* something, you hear about it. And this especially when someone did not want you to know about it. Often, you hear a rumour that something is happening. I've *got wind of* the results though they are yet to be declared officially.

a nine days' wonder: Wonderful for nine days and then forgotten! If somebody is *a nine days' wonder*, he attracts attention for a short time but is soon forgotten. He is interesting and popular but only for a short time. Narendra Hirwani came with a bang but then faded away—*a nine days' wonder*.

Chapter Seventeen

World of Phrasal Verbs

Often, we come across phrases that are a combination of a simple verb with an adverb and/or a preposition. This phrase becomes a new verb with a meaning different from that of the simple verb. Such phrases are called *phrasal verbs*. Let us learn them in this chapter.

Note: Some phrasal verbs have also been covered in “World of Words” and in “Answers and explanations” of “Fill Up the Blanks”.

abide by: Whether you are in a school or in an office, you have to *abide by* their rules. The government has to abide by the court rulings. Every citizen has to *abide by* the law of his country. At home, we should *abide by* what our elders say. If you *abide by* something, you accept it and behave in accordance with it.

account for: If you *account for* an action, you explain how it happened. You explain how you did it. There is no harm in raising funds but you must *account for* the expenditure.

If X *accounts for* Z parts of Y, then Y has Z parts of X in it. The US *accounts for* 25 per cent of the global production.

alight on: If you *alight on* something, you find it by chance. You notice it. When my friend was walking in the ruins of the palace, his eyes *alighted on* a magic wand. He typed a report on his discovery. When he began to read it, his eyes *alighted on* the mistakes he had made in the report.

allow for: If you *allow for* something in a calculation, you include that also as a factor. For example, you *allow for* problems, delays or extra expenses in your planning. This is part of a contingency plan so that you can deal with problems that are likely to arise in future. Whenever you are making plans with respect to time, you must *allow for* power cuts.

answer for: The publisher will have to *answer for* the errors in this book. If you *answer for* something bad that you have done, you are punished for it. You have to accept the blame or responsibility for it.

But I can *answer for* the quality of his work. He won't let errors creep in. If you can *answer for* someone or his qualities, you are sure he will do the needful. You can guarantee that he has those qualities.

back up: This phrase has several meanings:

- (i) If you *back up* a claim or story, you supply evidence to prove it is true.
- (ii) If you *back somebody up*, you give him help and support when he is in a difficult situation. Sometimes, you *back your friend up* (that is, confirm his statement) even when you know he is lying.
- (iii) In the language of computers, if you *back up* a file or a program, you

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make a copy of it. You are then on the safe side in case the original is lost or damaged.

(iv) If you *back up*, you walk backwards a little way. Or, the vehicle you are driving moves backwards a little way.

bear down on: The biker took a sharp turn as the truck bore down on him. If something large bears down on you, it moves quickly towards you in a threatening way.

Bear down on the stump so that it goes into the ground. That is, push or press it downwards with quite a lot of steady pressure.

bear on: If X (say a fact or situation) *bears on* Y or *bears upon* Y, X relates to Y. Or, X affects Y. Or, X is relevant to Y. The increase in petroleum prices *bears on* the inflation level. And the inflation level *bears on* the health of the economy.

bear out: The evidence must *bear out* what you say. Only then can people believe your words. If somebody *bears you out* or *bears out* a claim you are making, he supports what you are saying or claiming.

bear up: The goods lack quality and will not *bear up* if a test is conducted. If something does not *bear up*, it is not good enough to survive criticism or careful examination.

Things will improve but you have to *bear up* for the present. If you *bear up* when experiencing difficulties, you remain cheerful. You show courage in spite of the difficulties.

beef up: If you *beef up* something, you add force or weight to it. You strengthen it. You make it more interesting, significant, or important. We often hear of security being *beefed up* when a VIP visits our area. And then the VIP comes and lectures us how *beefing up* production is the only way out of a crisis.

bind over: This is a phrase used in legal language. If a court *binds you over*, it warns you that you will be made to appear in court again if you break the law. It gives you an order. You are legally obliged to do as the order says for a particular period of time. The magistrate *bound* him *over* to remain within the city for a year.

black out: If you *black out*, you lose consciousness or memory temporarily. Uttam did not remember what happened after the accident; he *had blacked out*.

If you *black out* a house, you put out lights completely. Or, you cover windows so that light cannot be seen from outside. Similarly, if you *black out* something written or printed, you cover it with black ink so that it can't be read.

blow over: When a storm *blows over*, it becomes less fierce and ends. Similarly, if an argument or a trouble *blows over*, it comes to an end. And is perhaps forgotten about. The *tehelka* expose has raised the issue of corruption. Political parties are in a crisis. But I'm sure the crisis will soon *blow over*.

blow up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) if you *blow* something *up*, you destroy it by an explosion. You must have read about how terrorists *blow up* places. Sometimes, a situation *blows up in your face*. That is, it goes wrong unexpectedly and you suffer considerably.

(ii) If you *blow up*, you lose your temper. You become very angry. My friend *blew up* at the very mention of his office.

(iii) If you *blow up* a balloon or a tyre, you fill it with air. You inflate it.

(iv) If you *blow up* a photograph or picture, you print a larger copy of it. The enlargement is known as a *blow-up*. Have you seen walls covered with *blow-ups*?

(v) If a storm *blows up*, the weather becomes stormy.

boil down: If you *boil down* a liquid, you reduce it by boiling. Similarly, if you *boil down* an amount of information, you reduce it. That is, you keep only the most important parts of it. The data has to be *boiled down* so that people don't get scared by its volume.

boil down to: Some people believe everything in life *boils down to* money in the end. If a situation, issue or question *boils down to* X, then X is the most important thing in it. Good language ultimately *boils down to* the vocabulary you possess.

boil over: When a liquid being heated *boils over*, it rises and overflows the container. Similarly, if a situation *boils over*, people become so angry or excited that the situation gets out of control. When it comes to religious issues, passions arise and the situation *boils over*.

bow out: If you *bow out* of something, you withdraw from it. You stop doing it or retire from it. You give up your position, often in order to allow someone else to take your place. Having served for more than two decades, Jyoti Basu *bowed out* of the Writers' Building.

bowl over: They were in a hurry and *bowled over* anybody who came in their way. If you *bowl someone over*, you knock him down by colliding with him when you are moving very quickly.

I was *bowled over* by the news that the fat woman could run. If you *are bowled over* by something, you are surprised or astonished by it. The reason: it is so different or exciting.

break away: When you *break away*, you escape suddenly from being held prisoner. The thief *broke away* from the prison but was arrested again.

Also, you *break away* from a political party, state, etc and form a new one. The split generally happens because of a disagreement. Jharkhand *broke away* from Bihar.

break down: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) A machine *breaks down*. It stops working because it is damaged.

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(ii) A system, plan or discussion *breaks down*. It fails because of a problem or disagreement.

(iii) An idea or statement is *broken down*. It is separated into its parts. Which makes it easier to understand or deal with.

(iv) A substance *breaks down*. It changes into a different form because of a chemical or biological process.

(v) You *break down* a fixed idea or a difficult situation. You change people's attitudes so that the idea or situation no longer exists.

(vi) A person *breaks down*. He loses control of his emotions and probably cries. Or, he becomes ill because he is not able to cope with his problems.

break in: Burglars *break in*. That is, they enter a building by force. Sometimes, you *break in* on someone's conversation or activity. That is, you interrupt them by talking to them.

break out: Second World War *broke out* in 1939. A fight, argument or disease *breaks out*. That is, it begins suddenly, and often violently.

Sweat *broke out* on his forehead. If something *breaks out* on your body, it starts to appear on the surface of your skin. Alternatively, you *break out* in spots, sweat, rashes, etc.

If you *break out* from a place or a situation, you escape from it, especially by using force. For example, you *break out* from an undesirable or dull situation. *Breaking out* of the vicious circle of poverty is very difficult.

break through: If you *break through* a barrier, you succeed in forcing your way through it. You deal successfully with the barrier. It no longer causes you difficulties. You achieve a *breakthrough*. It is very difficult to *break through* the layers surrounding a mystery.

If something *breaks through*, it appears in a place where it was previously hidden. It was a cloudy day but the sun *broke through* in the afternoon.

bring forth: Trees *bring forth* fruit. A woman *brings forth* a baby. If you *bring forth* something, you produce it. You cause it to happen or be experienced.

bring out: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) You *bring out* a new product. For example, a company *brings out* a new book or record. That is, it produces it and sells it.

(ii) Something *brings out* a particular kind of behaviour or feeling in you. That is, it causes you to have such feelings although normally you do not have/show them.

(iii) An actor or a musician *brings out* a particular feature in a work. That is, he makes people aware through his performance that such a feature exists in the work.

(iv) You *bring someone out*. That is, you encourage or cause him to be less shy. You make him more confident. Personality developers promise to *bring you out*.

bring round: If you *bring round* a person who is unconscious, you cause him to become conscious again. She fainted; her husband sprinkled water on her face and *brought her round*.

If you *bring someone round*, you cause him to change his opinion about something. You then make him share your opinion. After eight rounds of discussions, our foreign minister managed to *bring round* the other country to our point of view.

bring up: You *bring up* a child. That is, you look after it until it is grown up. You try to give it particular beliefs and attitudes. That is why we talk of the *upbringing* of a child.

You *bring up* a subject. That is, you introduce it into a discussion or conversation. You *bring up* food. That is, you vomit.

burn out: If a fire *burns out*, it stops burning. Reason: there is nothing left to burn. Similarly, if a piece of machinery *burns out*, it stops working. Reason: it has been used too much or worked too hard. These days human beings *burn themselves out*. That is, they make themselves exhausted or ill by working too hard. Haven't you heard of the *burn-out* syndrome? Young executives, hardly in their thirties, don't feel like working. Reason: they have worked at a hectic pace.

butt in: Don't *butt in* on a discussion. That shows a lack of education. If you *butt in*, you rudely join in a private conversation or activity without being asked for. You interrupt somebody. You interfere in something. And this interference is uncalled for (see *call for*).

calculate on: If you *calculate on* something, you depend or rely on it. You can't *calculate on* most of the players in the cricket team. They are stars in one series and good-for-nothing in another. Even within a series, their performance is not consistent.

call down on: Religions believe that man's misdeeds *call down* the wrath of God *on* mankind. If something *calls down* anger or curse *on* somebody, it causes him to receive it.

call for: If A *calls for* B, it demands, requires or needs B. The Indian political climate has become vitiated and *calls for* an introspection. But that does not mean we need an overhaul of the Constitution. Such an exercise is *uncalled-for*. That is, it is not fair, justified or necessary in the circumstances.

call off: You *call soldiers off*. That is, you order them to stop attacking or searching.

You *call off* a deal, a strike or an event. That is, you cancel or abandon it. The match between India and Pakistan was *called off* because of hostile relations between the two countries.

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call up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *call up* someone, you make a telephone call to him.

(ii) If something (say X) *calls up* something else (say Y), X brings back Y to your mind. In other words, X makes you recall Y. A meeting with my classmate *called up* memories of our school days.

(iii) If you *call up* something, you use something that is stored or kept available. He *called up* his spiritual powers to rise to the occasion.

(iv) If you *call up* someone, you summon him for military service. You draft him (into the armed forces).

carry away: Don't get *carried away* while watching a film; real life is different from reel life. If you *are carried away*, you become very excited. You lose control of your feelings/emotions. You become so eager or enthusiastic that you behave in a hasty or foolish way.

carry on: If you *carry on* doing something, you continue to do it. I can't *carry on* my research unless I get adequate financial support. And do you know why they have stopped my support? They said I was *carrying on* with my boss. If you *carry on* with someone, you have a love affair with him/her.

carry out: You *carry out* a promise, a threat, a plan or an order. That is, you do as required or specified. You fulfil a task.

Also, you *carry out* an experiment, a test, an enquiry or a survey. That is, you perform or conduct it. You begin doing it and continue until it is finished. We *carried out* a survey to find out whether students really need English.

carry over: If you *carry over* something from one state to another, you make it continue to exist in the new situation or state. Remember addition? Suppose you add the units digits and get 13. What do you do? You put down 3 at the units place in the sum and *carry over* 1 to the tens digits. Good habits of student days *should be carried over* even in adult life.

catch on: It takes time for those coming from small towns to *catch on* to the metropolitan lifestyle. If you *catch on* to something, you understand and learn it.

McDonald's has *caught on* with the youth of our country. If something *catches on* (with somebody), it becomes popular.

catch out: If you *catch someone out*, you make him commit a mistake, often by an unfair trick. You try to show that he is ignorant or doing something wrong. He tried to *catch me out* with a difficult question.

If you *are caught out* by something, you find yourself in an unfortunate situation or in a weak position. You are put in a difficult position. Dotcom employees *were caught out* by the recession in the US.

catch up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) You *catch up* with someone who is in front of you. That is, you reach him by walking faster than he.

(ii) You *catch up* with someone at a higher level. That is, you reach the same standard or level as he is at. It is very difficult for villagers to *catch up* with urban people.

(iii) You *catch up* on/with something. That is, you spend time or effort, making up for lost time. Last night I had guests; so I am *catching up* on sleep in daytime.

(iv) You **are caught up** in something. That is, you are involved in it, usually unwillingly. He has exams at hand, but he **is caught up** in social obligations.

check in: What is the first thing you do at a new place? You *check in* at a hotel. If you *check in*, you register as a guest at a hotel or as a passenger at an airport. If you *check in* your luggage, you leave or accept your luggage that is to be transported.

check out: When you *check out* of a hotel, you pay your bill and leave the hotel. If you *check* something out, you discuss it or examine it carefully. Reason: You want to make sure that everything is correct or safe. *Check it out* if the money can be taken back before the year ends.

If you *check* someone *out*, you obtain information about him. Often, this is done to find out if the person is suitable for a particular purpose. *Check* a person *out* before you employ him.

consist in: The beauty of Wordsworth's poetry *consists in* its simplicity. If A *consists in* B, then A has B as its main part or its only part.

consist of: A compound *consists of* elements. If A *consists of* B, A is made up of B. A is made from B.

cook up: He *cooked up* a story as an excuse for his delay. If you *cook up* a plan or a scheme, you invent it. It is rather dishonest. In fact, the very purpose of inventing it is to deceive someone. A similar meaning is conveyed by the idiom *cook the books* (See "World of Idioms and Phrases").

cool down: He is so excited that he can't even speak. Let him *cool down* first. If you *cool down*, you become or make somebody calm, less excited or less enthusiastic.

Cool off is also used in a similar sense. If something literally *cools down*, it becomes cooler until it reaches the desirable temperature.

cotton on: If you *cotton on* to something, you understand it or realise it. And this when you are not told about it. Mahendra doesn't phone me any more. He has *cottoned on* to the fact that I am not interested in his ideas.

count against: He has enough of experience but age *counts against* him. Old men are not considered suitable for employment these days. If something

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counts against you, it is considered to be to your disadvantage. It may cause you to be punished, rejected or defeated.

count on: If you *count on* something, you expect it to happen and include it in your plans. I am *counting on* an increase in income. That is why I have changed my lifestyle. But my brother thought I was *counting on* him. If you *count on* somebody, you rely on him to support you or help you.

cover up: What do you do on a cold night? You *cover yourself up* with a blanket. That is, you spread the blanket over your body to protect and hide it. Idiomatically, if you *cover up* a mistake or an illegal act, you make efforts to hide it. Politicians try to *cover up* their misdeeds and journalists are bent on exposing them.

crack down: If you *crack down* on a group of people, you become stricter in making them obey rules or laws. You strictly punish those who do not obey the rules. This is done in order to prevent an illegal activity. We often hear of the police *cracking down* on drug dealers. Or the income-tax department *cracking down* on tax evaders. [See *crackdown* in “World of Words”.]

crawl with: The act of *crawling* is moving slowly with the body on or close to the ground. An ant *crawls*. A snake *crawls*. Insects and reptiles *crawl*. Now what would be your reaction if there are ants *crawling* all over the ground. Disgusting, isn't it? So if a place is *crawling with* people or things of a particular kind, it is full of them. And you do not like this. Some govt offices are *crawling with* touts; you can't get your work done without bribes.

cream off: Students of Netarhat Vidyalaya secure the top ranks in the Board exams. But some feel the school can hardly take credit for this. Reason: the school *creams off* the best students in the state right at the time of admission. If you *cream off* part of a group of people, you take them away and treat them in a special way. Because you think they are better than the rest of the group.

cry out for: We often see babies *crying out for* milk. If you are *crying out for* something, you are demanding it. The people *are crying out for* employment but the govt does not listen. That is, people need employment very much.

If you *are crying out against* something, you are complaining about it. Reason: you do not approve of it. The advocates of swadeshi *are crying out against* globalisation.

cursed with: When the sages got angry with someone, they *cursed* him. That is, they asked a supernatural power to cause him harm. Idiomatically, if you *are cursed with* something, you are very unlucky in having it. You have the bad thing habitually. Ramesh is brilliant and could have gone places, but he is *cursed with* a violent temper.

cut across: If an issue or problem *cuts across* barriers, it does not correspond to the usual division between two groups. The issue is so important to both groups that the barriers seem unimportant. Increase in salary for the MPs is an issue that *cuts across* party lines. Even hostile parties share the same view on this issue.

cut back: Bushes have a wild growth unless you *cut them back*. That is, you make them smaller by cutting off shoots and branches. You prune them. Thus, if you *cut back (on)* something, you reduce it. If your income does not keep pace with inflation, what do you do? You *cut back (on)* expenditure.

cut down: If you cut something *down*, you make it fall down by cutting at its base. For example, you *cut down* a tree.

If you *cut down (on)* something, you reduce its amount or quantity. You reduce the amount you eat, smoke, spend, etc. My friend has *cut down (on)* smoking ever since he read about the dangers from tobacco.

And what is *cut down to size*? Raman was boasting about his brothers to Sheila, "You know, they are brilliant. Both of them are at IIM." Sheila listened patiently and said at last, "My brother teaches at IIM." That *cut Raman down to size*. If you *cut somebody down to size*, you show him that he is not as clever or important as he thinks he is.

cut out for: Like a number of other film stars, Amitabh Bachchan entered politics. But he soon realised he was not *cut out for* it. If you are *cut out for* something or *cut out* to do it, you have the qualities and abilities needed for it. If two persons are *cut out for* each other, they are well-matched. Marriages succeed when the husband and the wife are *cut out for* each other.

cut up: If you *cut somebody up*, you destroy him completely. Foreign invaders time and again *cut up* the Indian forces.

If you *are cut up* about something that has happened, you are very unhappy because of it. You are emotionally upset. The ten-year-old child *was cut up* by his parents' divorce.

die away: She kept on listening to the procession until the noise of the slogans *died away*. If a sound *dies away*, it gradually becomes weaker or fainter. And finally, it disappears altogether.

die down: If something *dies down*, it gradually becomes less strong, loud, noticeable, etc. It becomes very much quicker or less intense. When you come out of college, you are full of enthusiasm. But then worldly pressures start exerting their force and the enthusiasm *dies down*.

die out: If something *dies out*, it becomes less and less common and at last disappears completely. A custom or practice *dies out*. A family or species *dies out*. That is, it does not have any members alive. In other words, it becomes extinct through a gradual process.

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dig out: Have you ever used a spade? We *dig* soil with a spade. There are two important things about *digging*. One, it needs a lot of effort. Two, it reveals what was hidden before. So if you *dig* something *out* of somewhere, you get it out after a certain amount of effort or difficulty. If you *dig* out some information, you get it by searching or study. If you *dig* something out, you find it after it has been hidden or stored for a long time.

dispense with: If you *dispense with* something, you stop using it. Or, you get rid of it altogether. Reason: Because you no longer need it. Calculators have dispensed with the need for learning tables. Computers *have dispensed with* a large number of employees. But people with ideas will always remain *indispensable*. That is, you cannot *dispense with* them.

do away with: Some people think we should *do away with* the parliamentary form of governance. But is there any guarantee that such a change will *do away with* our troubles? If you *do away with* something, you stop doing or having it. You cause it to end. If someone *does away with* himself, he kills himself.

do up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *do* something *up*, you fasten it. Kids often have problem in *doing* their shoelaces *up*.

(ii) If a woman *does* her hair *up*, she arranges it so that it is tied or fastened close to her head. It does not hang loosely.

(iii) If you *do up* an old building, you decorate and repair it. This makes its condition better. It looks more modern. Cinema-halls *are* often *done up* to attract audience from the higher classes.

(iv) If something is *done up*, it is covered in material or paper, like a parcel. The gift was cheap but it was *done up* in costly paper.

do without: If you *do without* something, you manage or survive in spite of not having it. Comfort is a matter of habit. Students can *do without* a number of facilities. But with age we get accustomed to comforts. And then we can't *do without* them.

drag down: He can't cope with stressful situations; pressure of work *drags* him *down*. If something *drags* you *down*, it makes you feel weak or depressed.

Mrs Sinha told her son: "Don't mix with children of the slums. They will *drag* you *down*." If A *drags* B *down*, he reduces B to an inferior social status or to lower standards of behaviour.

drag in(to): If you *drag in* something, you mention it when it is not really relevant to the conversation. One of my cousins is obsessed with trains. Talk to him of anything and he will *drag in* trains.

If you *drag* someone *into* an event or situation, you involve him in it unnecessarily. You could have done without involving him. Though he was an outsider, they *dragged* him *into* village politics.

drag out: Meetings should be held regularly, but they should not *be dragged out*. If you *drag something out*, you make it longer than necessary.

If you *drag something out* of somebody, you persuade him to reveal something that he is not willing to. I assured my friend full confidentiality. Only then I was able to *drag the truth out* of him.

draw on: It is early June and monsoons *are drawing on*. If a time or season *draws on*, it approaches.

I *am drawing* heavily *on* the dictionaries for this book. If you *draw on* or *upon* a resource or supply, you use it in order to do something.

Computer institutes *draw* students *on* with full-page ads in newspapers. If you *draw* somebody *on*, you attract or tempt him.

draw up: When you *draw up* a document, list or plan, you prepare it and write it out. This requires careful thought or planning. Policy-makers in the foreign ministry are busy *drawing up* the agenda for talks with Pakistan.

drop in: I was passing by this way. So I just *dropped in* to say 'Hello!'. If you *drop by* or *drop in* (on somebody), you visit him informally. And the visit is usually without a prior arrangement. It is a casual visit.

drop out: If you *drop out* of something, you withdraw from it. Anil Kumble *dropped out* of the match because he was not physically fit. Language keeps on changing and words *drop out* of use.

If you *drop out* of an institution or group, you leave it without telling anyone. Or, you leave it without finishing your course. Bill Gates *dropped out* of university and set up Microsoft.

edge out: One of the arguments against globalisation is that multinational companies (MNCs) *edge out* local producers from the market. *If A edges out B*, it causes B to gradually lose its position or power.

even out: When something *evens out*, its distribution becomes more equal. Often, this happens because some of it has gone from one place to another. Our country is known for unequal distribution of water supply—floods in some places, drought in others. In such a scenario only irrigation systems can *even out* the supply of water.

Even out is also used when something becomes level or steady. Share prices were volatile earlier but they *have now evened out*.

expand on: *Expand* means "to become bigger". So if you *expand on* or *expand upon* something, you give more information about it. Thus your speech or writing becomes detailed on that theme. In a long-answer question, it is not sufficient to merely mention points; you must *expand on* each of them.

explain away: If you *explain away* a mistake or inefficiency, you give reasons for it. You try to prove that it is not very important. Or, that it is not really your

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fault. So you should not be blamed for it. It was very difficult for the spokesperson of the party to *explain away* the loopholes in the disinvestment deal.

fall apart: “Things *fall apart*; the centre cannot hold.” That is a famous line from WB Yeats. If something *falls apart*, it breaks into pieces. Usually, this happens because it is weak, old or badly made. If an organisation or system *falls apart*, it becomes disorganised. It is unable to work effectively. If a person *is falling apart*, he is becoming emotionally disturbed. He is unable to think normally and calmly. Reason: he is in a difficult or unpleasant situation.

fall back on: If you **fall back on** somebody, you go to him for support when in difficulty. If you *fall back on* a particular solution, you choose it because it is easy, obvious or safe. It need not be the best. I feel it difficult to operate computer, so I *fall back on* pen and paper.

fall on/upon: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If something unpleasant *falls on* somebody, it happens to him. Misfortune *fell upon* the king and he lost his kingdom.

(ii) If something *falls on* you, it becomes your responsibility or duty. Traditionally, when the father dies, it *falls upon* the eldest son to run the family.

(iii) If somebody *falls on* you, he attacks you suddenly and violently. In Delhi, it was reported, a monkeyman created menace when he *fell on* innocent people.

(iv) If your eyes *fall on* something, you see or notice it. People’s eyes *fell on* a bomb-like object and an alarm was raised.

fall out: Trinamool Congress was an ally of the BJP but they *fell out* on the Tehelka expose. If you *fall out* with somebody, you have an argument and you stop being friendly with him.

Fall out is also used as the antonym of *fall in*. Those who have participated in parades must be familiar with these terms. When the commander orders you to *fall in*, you get into lines and form a military formation. When you *fall out*, you leave your positions and the formation is broken up.

fall through: If an arrangement, plan or deal *falls through*, it fails before it can be completed. The project *fell through* because none of the partners were serious about it.

fall to: If a responsibility or duty *falls to* you, it becomes your responsibility or duty. [Note: See fall on/upon, (ii).] It *fell to* Mr Ram to arrange the venue of the meeting.

If you *fall to* doing something, you start doing it, although it is not very sensible for you to do so. Pankaj failed the exam. Instead of studying again, he *fell to* cursing his fortune.

figure out: Something is wrong with my car, but I can't *figure it out*. If you *figure something out*, you understand it by thinking about it. For example, you *figure out* a solution to a problem. You *figure out* the answer to a question. You *figure out* the reason for something. You *figure out* the nature of something. If you *figure out* the answer to a sum, you work it out by using arithmetic. In other words, you calculate it.

find out: If you *find out* something, you learn something that you did not know earlier. And you gain this knowledge by study or inquiry. That is, you make a deliberate effort to learn it. Philosophers try to *find out* answers to questions that perplex mankind. If you *find somebody out*, you discover that he has done something wrong, or that he has lied, or that he has done something dishonest. How long can you escape the police? Some day you will be *found out*.

fix on/upon: If you *fix on* a particular thing, you decide to choose and have that thing. When I *fixed on* the date for the election, I took his consent. But when he *fixed on* Mr Verma as the candidate, he did not even bother to inform me.

fix up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *fix something up*, you repair, decorate or adapt it. You do work that is necessary in order to make it more suitable or attractive. The landlord is *fixing up* the flat so that he can get more rent.

(ii) If you *fix something up*, you build it very quickly or roughly. Probably because you need it at once. Or, because you need it for only a short time. The fruit-seller tried to *fix up* a shelter from the sun, but the wind blew it away.

(iii) If you *fix someone up*, you make the arrangements that they need. Your travel agent *fixes you up* with tickets for your vacation.

follow through: if you follow through an action, you carry it out or continue it to the end. You complete it. Most of the projects get aborted because people do not have the patience to *follow it through*.

If you *follow through* in a sport such as golf, tennis or football, you complete the movement of hitting a ball. You continue to move your arm or leg in the same curve after you have hit the ball.

follow up: Students of Analytical Reasoning get familiar with the word *follow-up* when they solve problems on "Courses of Action". If you *follow something up*, you take further action on it. You develop or exploit it. Now that Mr Rungta has met the client once, he must *follow up* the talks.

If you *follow up* a lead, clue or rumour, you investigate it closely.

freak out: If you *freak out*, you behave excitedly, strangely and wildly. Often, such a behaviour is the result of mental illness or drugs. But these days movies and McDonald's are enough for teenagers to *freak out*. If something delightful or frightening *freaks you out*, it makes you react strongly to it.

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frown on/upon: *Frown* is the antonym of *smile*. It is symbolic of dislike of things. So if you *frown upon* something, you disapprove of it. The society considers marriage to be an essential institution. It *frowns upon* those who remain unmarried.

gain on: If you *gain on* someone or something that is moving in front of you, you gradually catch them up. You come closer to them. Thus you *gain on* a rival. Or, you *gain on* something you are pursuing. The Rajdhani trains *gain on* the ones that have departed earlier.

gear up: Those who drive must be familiar with *gear*. It *prepares* you to move from one speed level to another. *Gear* also refers to equipment or clothes that you use for a particular activity. Again, the sense of *preparedness* is there. So if you *are gearing up* to a particular activity or you *are geared up* to it, you are preparing to do it. Our publishing house *is now gearing up* to enter classroom coaching.

get about/around: If you *get about*, you go to do a lot of different places as part of your way of life. Mr Sen is now in an office job; he can't *get about* as much as he did when in field. If a piece of news or rumour *gets about*, it spreads from person to person; it circulates. News *got about* that Mr Prasad has purchased a car; so everyone in the village is rushing to his house.

get across: Want to go in public relations (PR)? You must have the ability to *get your message across*. That is, you must be a good communicator. If something *gets across* or you *get/ it across*, you succeed in making other people understand it. It gets communicated.

get after: If you *get after* somebody, you try to catch him, especially when he has committed a crime. The police is supposed to *get after* the thief as soon as a theft is reported. Unfortunately, that seldom happens.

get along: If you *get along* with someone, you have a friendly relationship with him. A husband must learn to *get along* with his wife or be prepared for a divorce.

If you *are getting along* with a task or a machine, you are being successful in doing it or using it. Their son *is now getting along* with his studies.

get away with: Traffic rules are not observed here; you can *get away with* jumping a red light. That is, you will not be punished for violating the rule. If you *get away with* something, you are not punished for doing something that you should not do.

get over: (i) If you *get over* an unpleasant experience, you recover from it. The earthquake victims have now managed to *get over* the trauma.

(ii) If you *get over* a problem, you overcome it. We can *get over* difficulties if we apply our minds coolly.

(iii) If you *get* your meaning *over*, people understand what you are saying. First-time lovers have difficulty in *getting* their meaning *over* to their partners.

get round: (i) If you *get round* a rule or law, you find a way of doing something that it is intended to prevent. At the same time, you do not actually break that rule or law. Well, that's what lawyers do. They find ways for their client to *get round* law.

(ii) If you *get round* someone, you persuade him to allow you to do or have something. For this, you try to please or flatter him. Her boss seems to be a tough man. But she knows how to *get round* him.

(iii) You *get round* a problem or difficulty. [See *get over* (ii).]

(iv) News *gets round*. [See *get about*.]

get through: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *get through* a task, you complete it, especially when it requires a lot of effort.

(ii) If you *get through* an unpleasant period of time, you manage to live through it.

(iii) If you *get through* a large amount of something, you completely use it up.

(iv) If you *get through* to somebody, you succeed in making him understand something that you are trying to tell him.

(v) If you *get through* to somebody, you succeed in contacting him on the telephone.

(vi) If you *get through* an examination, you pass it.

(vii): If a law or proposal *gets through*, it is officially approved by, say, a parliament or committee.

give away: Mr Bose *gave away* one lakh rupees to Charity Home. But this was a secret known only to himself, his wife and the head of Charity Home. One day, while talking to her neighbour, Mrs Bose *gave away* the secret.

If you *give* something *away*, you give it to someone. Reason: either you do not want it or you want to give him a present.

If you *give away* information that should be kept secret, you make it known to others. Often, this happens by mistake.

give in: If you *give in*, you yield. You admit that you are defeated. You admit that you can't do something. Or, you admit that you will have to do something you did not want to. The govt *gave in* to international pressure and proposed to hold talks with Country X.

If you *give* a book or paper in, you hand it to someone who has asked for it—a teacher, an official or some other authority.

give up: Some people *have given up* smoking from May 31, the No-Tobacco Day. If you *give up* something, you stop doing it or believing in it. If you *give*

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up while solving a problem or puzzle, you admit that you cannot solve it. If you *give up* your job, you resign from it. If you *give up* an object, you allow someone else to have it. If you *give* a person *up*, you let the police or others know where that person is hiding.

hail from: If you *hail from* a particular place, you originate from there. You come from there. That is, either you were born there or your forefathers resided there. I *hail from* Srinagar, a placid village in north-east Bihar.

hand down: Caste system was useful in that the father *handed down* his expertise to the son. If you *hand down* possessions, skills or knowledge, you give or leave it to those who are younger. Clothes are often *handed down* to younger brothers or sisters. Such clothes are known as *hand-me-downs*.

hand out: If you *hand* something *out* to people, you distribute it. You give each person in a group one of a set of similar or identical things. The teacher often *hands* photocopies *out* to the entire class. If people in authority *hand out* advice or punishment, they give it to people and expect them to accept it. The court *handed out* sentences to the criminals.

hand over: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *hand* something *over* to someone, you transfer a position of authority or power. Britain *handed over* Hong Kong to China.

(ii) If X *hands over* a prisoner to Y, X gives the control of and responsibility for the prisoner to Y. An extradition treaty carries the obligation of *handing over* to a country criminals of that country.

(iii) If you *hand* something *over* to somebody in authority, you deliver it to him formally. They *handed* their weapons *over* to the police.

(iv) If you *hand X over* to Y in a news broadcast or on the telephone, you let X listen or speak to Y.

harp on: I don't like visiting Mr Tiwari. He is always *harping on* the problems in his office. He has nothing else to talk about and I have little interest in those problems. If you *harp on* (about) a subject, you talk about it repeatedly in a boring or annoying way.

hedge against: Why do you put a *hedge* round a garden? To protect it from animals, etc. So if you *hedge against* something unpleasant or unwanted, you do something which will protect you from it. You try to prevent possible loss. Investing in mutual funds *hedges against* frequent drops in interests on fixed deposits.

hit on/upon: If you *hit upon* a good idea, you think of it suddenly or by chance. Often, such an idea is a solution to a problem. A publication was not making much profit. Times were bad. Suddenly, one of its owners *hit upon* the idea of launching a correspondence course. Money ceased to be a problem thereafter.

hold forth: He loves speaking and can *hold forth* on any subject. If you *hold forth* on something, you speak about it at great length. Often, however, this becomes boring to the audience.

hold off: (i) If you *hold off* an attack, you prevent it from coming too close to you. Though few in number, they were able to *hold off* the opposition's army for days.

(ii) If you *hold off* doing something, you delay doing it. You delay making a decision about it. Not finding the market favourable, he *held off* the release of his film.

(iii) If the rain *holds off*, it does not rain when you have expected it to.

hold on: (i) If you **hold on** to something, you keep it for yourself. You do not give it to anyone else. A long-term investor *should hold on* to his shares when the prices are down.

(ii) If you *hold on* to your beliefs, you continue to believe in them. Others might try to influence you. Circumstances may cause you to doubt them. But come what may, you do not change your beliefs. A successful man *holds on* to his dream until it gets realised.

(iii) If you *hold on*, you wait for a short time. Things will improve if they can *hold on* for a couple of weeks.

hold out: (i) If you *hold out*, you resist or survive in a dangerous or difficult situation. You refuse to surrender. The Palestinian movement cannot be crushed; the rebels *have been holding out* for years.

(ii) If you *hold out* a chance, hope or possibility, you offer it. There is a hope that something will happen as you want it to. Researches *hold out* the hope for a cure for cancer.

(iii) If you *hold out* for something, you cause a delay in reaching an agreement in the hope of gaining that something. You refuse to be satisfied with lesser concessions. The trade union is *holding out* for a more liberal treatment.

hold over: (i) If you *hold* something *over* someone, you use it to threaten him. With its help, you make him do what you want. He held *the* photograph *over* her; so she had to do his bidding under compulsion.

(ii) If you *hold* something *over*, you decide not to deal with it immediately. It is left to be dealt with later. The discussion on fund-raising *has been held over* until the next meeting.

(iii) If a play or film *is held over*, performances of it continue for longer than was originally planned. The success of Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap* led to its being *held over* again and again.

hold up: (i) If somebody *holds* you *up*, he delays you. I was late for the class because I was *held up* by the Principal.

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(ii) If somebody *holds you up*, he points a weapon at you. And you are made to give him money or valuables. Masked men *held up* the bank staff and robbed the bank.

(iii) If you *hold up* somebody, you use or present him as an example to be followed. In today's age film stars are *held up* as role models.

(iv) If theories, beliefs and arguments *hold up*, they remain convincing after undergoing close examination.

inquire after: To *inquire* about somebody is to ask for information. If you *inquire after* somebody, you ask about his health or welfare. General questions are asked. Like "How are you?", "What are you doing?", etc. Do not inquire after a patient on phone; the ring might only disturb him.

inquire into: If you *inquire into* something, you investigate it carefully. You try to learn the facts about it. The govt often sets up committees to *inquire into* issues of national concern.

invest in: When you buy something expensive but useful, you *invest in* it. Some people *invest in* real estate (land, house, etc). Others *invest in* cars. Still others *invest in* shares. And there are a few who even *invest in* paintings.

invest with: If you *invest* somebody *with* a particular quality, you cause him to have it. If you *invest* somebody *with* rights or responsibilities, you give them to him legally or officially. A management institute *invests* its students *with* skills required to go ahead in the corporate world.

issue from: Blood *issues from* a wound. Smoke *issues from* a chimney. Streams *issue from* caves. Smells *issue from* kitchens. Strange noises *issue from* the darkness. If something—liquid, sound, smell, etc—*issues from* something else, it comes out of it.

jump at: If you *jump at* an offer or opportunity, you accept it eagerly. As soon as the offer is made, you grab it. Youngsters today *jump at* any opportunity in the software sector.

jump in: Manish! You are not a kid now. You should stop *jumping in* when elders are talking. If you *jump in*, you suddenly join in a conversation or discussion. You interrupt others. Or, you say something that they do not want you to say.

keep away: If you *keep away* from somewhere, you avoid going there. I have decided to *keep away* from politics; it's a dirty profession. If you *keep* someone *away* from somewhere, you prevent him from going there. When Buddha was young, his father *kept* him *away* from the sorrows of the world.

keep on: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *keep on* doing something, you continue to do it. You do not stop. He *kept on* writing even though we had gone there to meet him.

(ii) If you *keep* someone *on*, you continue to employ him or educate him at school. And this you do in spite of conditions not being normal. For example, the work contract may have ended. Or, in case of a student, he is old enough to leave school. Thus *keeping* someone *on* is giving him an extension. In future, govt servants *will be kept on* after 52 years of age only if they have merit.

(iii) If you *keep on* about something, you continue to talk about it in a boring or repetitive way.

(iv) If you *keep on* at someone, you repeatedly ask or tell him something. And this annoys him.

keep to: Slower vehicles should *keep to* the left lane. Both the parties should *keep to* the terms of the agreement. That is, they should remain faithful to it. They should do what has been agreed. While answering a question, *keep to* the point. That is, talk only about the point in question and not anything else. Thus, if you *keep to* something, you stick to it. You avoid wandering from it.

keep up: If you *keep up*, you continue to maintain a high level. You do not lag behind. Look at its various usages:

(i) If you *keep up*, you move at the same speed as someone else. If he increases his speed, you also do so. My friend drives very fast; it is difficult to *keep up* with him.

(ii) If you *keep up*, you learn all the recent facts about something. You deal successfully in a situation where things are rapidly changing. My friend *keeps up* with the latest changes in technology.

(iii) A top-ranker's report card always reads, "Well done! *Keep it up.*" If you *keep it up*, you continue working as hard as you have been in the past.

labour under: Do not *labour under* the delusion that your noble background will fetch you a job. It is your personal worth that matters. The sooner you realise this, the better. If you *labour under* a delusion or misapprehension, you are deceived or misled by the wrong belief. You continue to believe something which others know to be false.

lash out: If you *lash out*, you attempt to hit somebody quickly and violently. And this you do with a weapon or with your hands and feet. Some cows *lash out* at the milkman when he goes to milk them.

If you *lash out* at or against somebody, you suddenly speak to him very angrily or cruelly, criticising or scolding him. The critic minced no words and lashed out at the author's irresponsibility.

lay aside: Ramesh has *laid aside* his responsibilities and is now enjoying life. If you *lay aside* something, say your studies or responsibilities, you abandon it. You give it up. You *lay aside* a feeling, belief or activity. Whatever you earn, *lay* some money *aside* for the future. If you *lay* something *aside* or *lay* something by, you save it and keep it for future use.

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lay down: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *lay* something *down*, you put it down. The usual reason: you have finished using it. I finished writing the letter and *laid down* my pen.

(ii) If you *lay down* an idea, attitude, rank, etc, you give it up. You stop doing a particular job. The President *laid down* his office after five years.

(iii) If somebody *lays down* arms, he stops fighting and makes peace.

(iv) If somebody *lays down* his life in a war or for a particular cause, he is killed because he is involved in it or supports it.

(v) If you *lay down* a plan, you carefully prepare it, so that you can continue with it, develop it, or benefit from it later.

(vi) If an organisation *lays down* rules, it states them with official authority. Other people are expected to obey them.

lay off: *Laying off* workers is a sensitive issue because it adds to unemployment. If a worker is *laid off* by his employer, he is told to leave his job. Reason: There is no more work for him to do.

lay out: Look at its several usages:

(i) You *lay out* a dinner. You *lay out* clothes, jewels and ornaments. That is, you spread them out and arrange them neatly. This lends them a clear visibility.

(ii) You *lay out* ideas or information. That is, you express or present them clearly and thoroughly.

(iii) You *lay out* a garden, building or town. That is, you plan and design how it should appear.

(iv) You *lay out* a dead person. That is, you clean his body and dress him for people to see before the funeral.

(v) You *lay out* money on something. That is, you spend a large amount of money on it.

leaf through: While he waited for the doctor, he *leafed through* Reader's Digest. If you *leaf through* a book or magazine, you turn the pages quickly. You don't actually read the book or look at it carefully.

let down: If you *let* someone *down*, you disappoint him. You fail to help him and are not reliable. Sachin Tendulkar is a batsman who seldom *lets you down* in a crisis. On the other hand, there are the match-fixers who *let the country down*. That is, what they did reflects badly on the country as well as themselves.

let off: Our teacher did not *let us off*; so I ran away from the school. If somebody *lets you off* a duty or chore, he allows you not to do it. But our teacher did not allow us to leave school. When the Principal called me, I was scared. I expected severe punishment but he *let me off* only with a reprimand. If somebody *lets you off*, he gives you a lighter punishment than you expect. Or, sometimes no punishment at all. If you *let off* a gun, you fire it. If you *let off* a bomb, you cause it to explode.

let out: Are you a landlord or a tenant? You must have placed or seen 'To Let' signs. They imply that a house is available on rent. If you *let out* houses, rooms, etc, you make them available for people to rent. So you can *let out* houses only when you are a landlord.

let up: If something *lets up*, it stops or becomes less strong or intense. If you *let up*, you relax your efforts. It seems as if the rain won't *let up*. But we will continue our journey, come what may. We will also not *let up*.

level at/against: You *level* a criticism, charge or accusation *at* or *against* someone. That is, you criticise or accuse him. In a democracy, the opposition keeps on *levelling* charges *against* the ruling party.

live through: If you *live through* something, you experience it and survive it. You *live through* an event or change, usually an unpleasant one. Our difficulties seem nothing when we learn about those who have lived through wars.

live up to: If you *live up to* expectations, you behave as well as expected. You are as good as expected. You are as good as you were expected to be. A number of films are becoming the victims of advertising these days. They do not *live up to* the media hype generated around them.

live with: This phrase has two meanings:

(i) If you *live with* someone, you live in the same house as he. You have a sexual relationship with him but you are not married to him. The phrase *live together* can also be used in this sense. Such a relationship is known as *live-in* relationship.

(ii) If you have to *live with* an unpleasant or unwelcome situation, you have to accept it. Since it is likely to continue, you have to tolerate it. And you have to carry on with your life or work. For example, metros have their own problems but you have to *live with* them.

log in/out: *Log in* and *log out* are basically entering a computer and exiting from it respectively. When you *log in*, you go through the procedures to begin use of a computer system. You may have to enter a password to gain access to the system. In the world of Internet, in order to visit a website, you have to *log on* to it.

When you *log off* or *log out*, you go through the procedures to end use of a computer system. Always *log out* before switching off your computer. Otherwise, the data in your system may get corrupted.

make for: As soon as it is evening, I *make for* home. If you *make for* a place, you move towards it. Being home early *makes for* happy family life. If A *makes for* B, A makes it likely that B will happen. A helps to make B possible. A contributes or leads to B.

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make of: To *make of* something is to understand its meaning or nature. What you *make of* something is your impression or opinion of it. I can *make* nothing of her behaviour; it's just unpredictable!

make out: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) If you *make* something out, you manage with difficulty to see, hear or understand it. His voice couldn't reach me clearly on the phone; I could only *make out* a few words.

(ii) *Make out* also has the sense of pretending. He *makes* himself out to be more innocent than he is. Or, you try to make people believe that something is the case. Secessionists try to *make out* that the Centre is hostile to their state.

(iii) If you *make out* a case for something, you try to establish that it is the best thing to do. Women have *made out* a case for reservation in parliament.

(iv) If you *make out* a form, cheque, etc, you write on it all the necessary information. Applications must be *made out* in duplicate.

make over: The widow has *made over* her property to a trust. If you *make* something *over*, you legally transfer its ownership.

make up: This phrase also has several meanings:

(i) A number of things *make up* X. That is, they join together to form X. Cells *make up* our bodies. In other words, our bodies are *made up* of cells. That is, our bodies constitute of cells. Or, our bodies are formed of cells.

(ii) You *make up* excuses. That is, you invent excuses. This you do in order to deceive people. Or, in order to explain something you have done.

(iii) You *make up* a difference. That is, you complete the number or amount required. We have collected Rs 9,000. So we need Rs 1,000 more to *make up* the target of Rs 10,000.

(iv) Two persons *make up* or *make it up*. That is, they become friends again after they have had a quarrel or a disagreement.

(v) You *make up* for something. That is, you do something to replace what is damaged, lost or missing. You compensate for it. I have worked less this week, so I will have to *make up* for it next week.

measure up: My friend is hunting for bride, but none of the women *measure up* to his expectations. If you *measure up* to a standard or to someone's expectations, you reach the standard required or expected. You are good enough to fulfil the person's expectations.

meet with: This phrase has the following usages:

(i) Something *meets with* a particular reaction. That is, it gets that reaction from people. His proposal of social work *met with* sarcasm from his young friends.

(ii) You *meet* something *with* a particular reaction. The members *met* the president's proposal *with* enthusiasm.

(iii) Someone *meets with* an accident. That is, he has an accident.

(iv) Something *meets with* success or failure. That is, it is successful or unsuccessful.

mow down: If a large number of people are *mown down*, they are all killed violently at one time. For example, this could happen by shooting. Militants were *mown down* in an encounter with the armed forces. Crown-prince Dipendra of Nepal reportedly *mowed down* the royal family.

nail down: What happens when you *nail* something *down*? You fix it firmly to the wall or the floor so that it cannot move. This sense of firmness gets reflected in its figurative usages. If you *nail* someone *down*, you force him to agree to something. Or, you force him to confirm something definitely. If you *nail down* an agreement, you manage to reach a firm agreement with a definite result.

note down: If you *note* something *down*, you record it in writing. You write it down. Often, you write down the important points quickly, so that you will be able to refer to them later. I often have to tell my students, “*Note down* what I say, or else you will forget.”

number among: I *number* Sanjay Manjrekar *among* the finest Indian cricketers. If you *number* somebody *among* a particular group, you include him in that particular group or category. You believe him to belong in that group.

open out: If you *open out*, you start to say exactly what you think or feel about someone. You communicate more freely. Caution demands that one should not *open out* in a first meeting.

open up: This phrase has several meanings:

(i) Same as *open out*.

(ii) When an opportunity *opens up*, the situation gives you that opportunity. The boom in software has *opened up* career opportunities for the youth.

(iii) If a place or area *opens up*, it becomes easier to get to. Or, it provides opportunities for development. The objective of the WTO is that markets should be *opened up* across the globe.

(iv) If somebody with a gun *opens up*, he starts shooting.

(v) When you *open up* (a building), you unlock and open the door so that people can get in.

own up: Some of the students had stolen the teacher's book. But nobody was ready to *own up*. If you *own up* to doing something wrong, you confess that you are to blame for it. Though you find this difficult, you tell someone that you did it.

pack off: If you *pack* somebody *off* somewhere, you send him there to stay for a period of time. Reason: You do not want him with you. Some parents want to remain independent, so they *pack* their children *off* to boarding schools.

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pack up: One summer day her husband came excited with joy. He told her, "Honey! *Pack up* soon. We're off to Shimla." If you *pack up* (your belongings), you put them in a case or bag. Reason: You are leaving one place and going to another.

parcel out: *Parcel* means *piece*. So if you *parcel something out*, you divide it into parts or portions. Each of these parts is given to different people. Since land was *parcelled out* one generation after another, the plots have now become too small to be profitable.

parcel up: Here *parcel* carries the meaning of the wrapped-up package you receive by post. If you *parcel something up*, you make it into a parcel. You wrap it up. The books were *parcelled up* and ready to be despatched.

pare down: When you *pare something down*, you make it smaller by cutting thin pieces off it. For example, you *pare down* the nails of your fingers and toes. Or, you reduce it or make it less extensive. For example, I have *pared down* my needs in order to be happy. The lesser you need, the happier you are.

part with: Despite his poverty, he refused to *part with* his grandfather's watch. If you *part with* something valuable or something that you would prefer to keep, you give it or sell it to someone else. You *part with* such cherished possessions only under tremendous pressure.

pass away: *Pass away* is a euphemism for *die*. [See **euphemism** in "World of Words".] Thus, if someone *passed away*, he died. When something *passes away*, it slowly disappears and stops existing. The glory of a culture *passes away* with the passage of time.

pass down: If something is *passed down*, it is passed from one generation to the next. Thus, parents *pass down* stories, traditions and characteristics to their children. Heirlooms are *passed down*. What is an heirloom? It is a valuable object that has belonged to the same family for several generations.

pass off: An event *passes off*. That is, it takes place and is completed. And generally, this happens in a satisfactory way. The meeting *passed off* without any unpleasant incidents. A feeling or condition *passes off*. That is, it comes to an end gradually. The pain in my leg *passed off* after some time. You *pass X off* as Y. That is, you falsely represent X as Y. Since Y is a more valuable thing than X, you convince people that X is Y. It was an imitation jewellery but the goldsmith *passed it off* as real.

pass on: This phrase is variously used:

(i) You *pass something on* to somebody. That is, you give it to him after you have used it or after someone else has given it to you. In a relay race, the baton is *passed on*.

(ii) You *pass on* a message, story or information to someone. That is, you act as a conduit. Someone else told you the story. And now you are telling it to a third person.

(iii) You *pass on* costs to someone else. That is, instead of paying for something yourself, you make the next person in the chain pay for it.

(iv) You *pass on* to a different subject. While writing or speaking, you move on from one subject to another.

(v) You *pass on* to a different place. That is, you go there, especially as part of a journey or tour.

(vi) Like *pass away*, the phrase *pass on* is also a euphemism for *die*.

pass out: When you *pass out*, you leave a military college after completing a course of training. *Passing out* parades are held on such occasions. The meaning of the phrase is gradually broadening. Increasingly, it is being used for any institute, not necessarily a military one.

pass over: Ratan worked very hard for the company. But in this year's promotion he was *passed over* in favour of a new entrant. This disheartened Ratan and he does not work seriously now. If you *pass* someone *over*, you do not choose him for a job or promotion. Instead, you choose someone who is younger, less experienced or less deserving. But Ratan likes to be silent on this topic. Whenever it is mentioned, he *passes* it *over*. If you *pass over* a topic, in a conversation, you do not discuss it. Rather, you ignore or avoid it.

peter out: If something *peters out*, it decreases or fades gradually before coming to an end. We hear of protest campaigns against scams but they *peter out* in a few months. No one talks of the scam after that.

pick at: I love boys who eat mouthfuls of food, not the ones who merely pick at it. If you *pick at* food, you eat only very small amounts of it. You do not seem to have an appetite for it. But you can also *pick at* things other than food. That is, you pull it with repeatedly small movements. Some boys don't play with toys; they only *pick at* them.

pick off: If you *pick off* people, animals or aircraft, you shoot them down one by one, aiming at them from a distance. The dacoit *picked off* the watchman and entered the palace.

pick on: I am not in my teacher's good books, so she *picks on* me whenever something goes wrong. If you *pick on* someone, you unfairly speak to him in an unpleasant way. You treat him unkindly. You blame or punish him repeatedly and unfairly.

pin down: If you *pin* something *down*, you define it exactly. Often, you try to *pin down* something which is hard to define or describe. I know a man who can make out when his wife does not sing properly. But he can't *pin down* what is wrong with the song.

If you *pin* someone *down*, you cause him to make an exact and clear statement about something. And this when he has been trying to avoid doing so. Politicians love phrases of vagueness but journalists try to *pin* them *down*.

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pine away: Some women *pine away* out of grief. That is, they become ill or grow thin and weak because of grief until they die. And what occasions this unhappiness? Probably because someone in the family has left them. Or a near and dear one has died.

play along: If you *play along* with somebody, you pretend to be in agreement with his plans. You agree to do what he wants you to do. But you intend to stop doing this after a period of time. I have decided to *play along* with them. Once I have recovered my money, I will leave them.

play down: The management is trying to *play down* the crisis so that the workers do not panic. If you *play down* a fact, you try to make people think that it is unimportant. They should not attach much concern to it. On the other hand, if you *play up* a fact, you project it as being more important than it really is.

play off against: If you *play A off against B*, you put them in competition with each other. Or, you make them oppose each other. Your motive: if they fight, you will gain an advantage. The British *played* the Hindus *off against* the Muslims. The policy has been referred to as “Divide and Rule”.

play on: If you *play on* somebody’s feelings, you take their advantage. You say things which make use of those feelings. And thereby you persuade him about something. The Opposition *plays on* the voters’ resentment against the ruling party and wins elections. If a writer or speaker *plays on* an idea or word, he cleverly makes use of its different aspects. And by doing so he often achieves a humorous effect.

polish up: How do you *polish up* an object? You rub it with a cloth. And what effect does the object achieve? It begins to shine. Similarly, if you *polish up* an ability or skill, you improve it by working at it. *Polish up* your communication skills and you are bound to succeed.

provide against: If you *provide against* something, you make preparations in case that happens. Life insurance *provides against* the death of an individual. General insurance provides against the loss of goods.

provide for: This phrase is variously used:

(i) If you *provide for* somebody, you give him money and the things he needs to live—food, clothes, etc. Man is supposed to be the breadwinner of the family. He has to *provide for* the entire family.

(ii) If you *provide for* a possible future event, you take it into account when you plan something. Whenever you make a work schedule, you must *provide for* the arrival of guests. They may come at any time. And when they come, you can’t work.

(iii) If a law or decision *provides for* something, it makes it possible for it to be done later. The Constitution of our country *provides for* amendments in it.

pull down: Men like Jagmohan and Khairnar can't tolerate encroachments. They believe in *pulling down* buildings that violate laws. If you *pull down* a building or other structure, you destroy it completely. You remove or break the bricks or stones which it is made of.

pull through: If you *pull through* a serious illness, you recover from it. He has undergone a major operation but he *will soon pull through* it. If somebody *pulls you through* a difficult situation, he helps you succeed at it or survive it. The state was undergoing a crisis but an IMF aid *pulled it through*.

pull together: If the opposition wishes to dislodge the ruling party, it will have to *pull together*. That is, the opposition parties will have to co-operate with each other. They will have to ignore the things they disagree about so that they can get through a difficult situation. Never take an impulsive decision. *Pull yourself together* and then decide upon the course of action. If you *pull yourself together*, you bring your emotions under control. You behave calmly and reasonably and think clearly.

rail at/against: If you *rail at* or *rail against* somebody, you complain about him strongly and angrily. You complain loudly and bitterly. They *railed at* him for his blasphemous behaviour.

rattle off: The children *rattled off* the (multiplication) tables and ran away to play. If you *rattle something off*, you say or repeat it quickly and without much effort.

If you *rattle away* or *rattle on*, you talk quickly and for a long time. And what you *rattle on* about is not important or interesting. If you *rattle through* something, you deal with the work quickly in order to finish it.

read into: If you *read* a meaning or quality *into* something, you assume that it means more than it actually does. You find meaning which may actually not be there. The pessimists *read* darkness *into* even normal situations.

reckon with: The business collapsed because he had not *reckoned with* the sudden fall in the market. That is, he had not taken it into account. He had not considered its possibility. And since he had not expected it, he was not prepared for it. In any business, fluctuations in the market are a major force to be *reckoned with*. That is, you have to deal with the fluctuations. And it is difficult to deal with them.

be riddled with: If something *is riddled with* holes, it is full of them. Similarly, if something *is riddled with* undesirable qualities or features, it is *full of* them. For example, your answer *could be riddled with* mistakes. The administration in the country is believed to be riddled with corruption.

ride out: There is enough money in our reserves, so we *can ride out* the current crisis. If you *ride out* a period of difficulty or danger, you come

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successfully through it. You continue as normal during a difficult time until it passes.

rise above: If you *rise above* a problem, you show yourself able to deal with it. You do not let it prevent your progress. You manage to succeed without being affected by it. *Rise above* petty concerns; only then can you achieve something great.

root out: Roots are something basic. If the roots remain, the plant will grow up again. If you want no further growth, the only way is to *root out* the plant. So if you *root* something out, you destroy or remove it completely. Some feel the only way to peace is to *root out* terrorism. Also, if you *root out* something, you find it after searching for a long time. I have managed to *root out* the papers of this property; we can now go to court.

rule out: If you *rule out* something, you exclude it. For example, you *rule out* an idea, solution or course of action. That is, you decide that it is impossible, unsuitable, or not worth considering. The govt has *ruled out* conspiracy angle in the murder of the king. If one thing *rules out* another, it prevents it from happening or being possible. Rain *ruled out* any further play in the match.

saddle with: I *have been saddled with* the job of organising meetings. If you *are saddled with* something, you are given an unpleasant responsibility or task. You are put in a position where you have to deal with a problem.

savour of: If X *savours of* Y, then X contains a suggestion of Y. That is, X contains certain characteristics that make people think of Y. And, generally, Y is something bad. At the same time, these characteristics are not very obvious. Her manner of speaking *savours of* conceit. By the way, conceit means excessive pride in oneself.

see off: When you *see somebody off*, you go to a railway station or airport to say goodbye to him. And he is about to start a journey from there. I *saw* my friend *off* at New Delhi Railway Station.

The phrase has a slightly different meaning also. If you *see somebody off*, you force him to leave a place. And this could be done by chasing them. The boys came to pluck mangoes but the watchman *saw* them *off*.

see through: I can *see through* his apparent benevolence; he is setting a trap for me. If you *see through* somebody or his action, you realise what his intention is, although he is trying to conceal it from you. You realise the truth and thereby avoid being deceived. Tendulkar *saw* the innings through and reached India to victory. If you *see* something through, you do not abandon it until it is finished. You *see* a task or a project through. Save money; it will *see* you *through* old age. If something *sees* you *through* a difficult time in your life, it gives you help during that period. It satisfies your needs in those days.

see to: If you *see to* something that needs attention, you attend to it or deal with it. Mohan reached home and *saw to* the arrangements being made for his younger brother's wedding. If you *see to* it that something happens, you make sure that it happens. The father of the groom *saw to* it that no one got late for the wedding.

sell out: This phrase is used in several ways:

(i) If a shop is *sold out* of something, it has sold it all. There is none of it left in the shop. The demand of milk was so high that the shop has *sold out* of it. But the shopkeeper has assured me he will arrange for more.

(ii) If a show is *sold out*, all the tickets have been sold. 'House Full' sign indicates that the show is *sold out*.

(iii) If you *sell out*, you betray someone. And this you do in order to gain an advantage for yourself. For example, some may say that the Govt has *sold out* to the World Bank. What are its implications? One, that the Govt has betrayed the country by accepting the Bank's conditions. Two, that those in power will benefit from the deal.

set about: Let us *set about* preparing for the meeting. If you *set about* a task, you start doing it. And you do this in an energetic or purposeful way.

set back: If something *sets you back*, it causes a delay. Frequent changes in govt has *set* the project *back* by a couple of years.

set in: Rains *set in*. Hot weather *sets in*. An infection *sets in*. A feeling of despair *sets in*. If something unpleasant *sets in*, it begins and seems likely to continue or develop.

set up: This phrase has several usages:

(i) If you *set up* a structure or monument, you place it or build it somewhere. This monument has been *set up* as a memorial to the departed leader.

(ii) If you *set up* a piece of equipment, you make the necessary preparations so that it is ready to be used. The manual will tell you how to *set up* your stereo.

(iii) If you *set* something *up*, you make the arrangements and preparations that are necessary to start it. The US had *set up* a dialogue between israel and Palestine.

(iv) If you *set up* so.newhere, you establish yourself in a position. My friend has *set herself up* in literary circles.

(v) If you *set up shop*, you start working for yourself or running your own business. He has *set up shop* as a consultant.

settle for: IAS is the coveted service for most of the Indians. But only a handful can get there. The rest have to *settle for* lesser jobs. If you *settle for* something, you accept what you do not really want. Though it is not satisfactory, you choose it because there is nothing else available. Or, because it is the safest or easiest thing to do.

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settle on: If you *settle on* an idea or suggestion, you decide on it after thinking or talking about it. The groom's family has rejected hundreds of photographs. They are yet to *settle on* the bride for him. In legal terms, if you *settle* something *on* somebody, you give money or property to him formally, especially in a will. The childless widow has *settled* her house *on* her nephew.

shy away from: Successful men do not *shy away from* responsibilities; they accept them and carry them out. If you *shy away from* something, you avoid doing it. You are either afraid to do it or not confident enough.

sigh for: What is a *sigh*? It is a long deep breath that you can hear when someone expresses sadness, relief, tiredness, etc. The phrase *sigh for* is associated only with sadness. If you *sigh for* somebody, you feel a deep sad desire for him. Reason: either he is lost or he is far away. The people *sighed for* the king even years after his death.

sign off: If you *sign off*, you end a letter. You write a final message and your name at the end. For example:

Wishing you all the best,

Yours ever

XYZ

But now you get to hear this phrase more often on radio. "This is your RJ Suchitra *signing off*.... Have a nice day and take care." If you *sign off*, you end a broadcast in some way. The announcers—disc jockeys (DJs) and radio jockeys (RJs)—prefer *signing off* by playing a short piece of music.

sort out: It is a recurring problem; no one has been able to *sort it out*. If you *sort out* a problem or misunderstanding, you deal with it and find a solution to it.

spark off: If A *sparks off* the happening of B, then A becomes its immediate cause. That is, A leads to the happening of B. But this is probably not deliberately intended. The statement of a religious leader *sparked off* riots between two communities.

spell out: Have you *spelt out* a word? That is, written or spoken each letter of the word one after another? For example, when someone confuses descent with dissent, you *spell it out*: "D-E-S-C-E-N-T". In the process, you made the word clear. So, figuratively, if you *spell* something *out*, you explain it in detail. You explain the thing in a clear way. The businessman *spelt out* his plans before the venture capitalist.

stamp out: If you *stamp* something *out*, you put an end to it. You destroy it completely. And this you do by force or vigorous action. Militancy cannot be *stamped out* with the gun; one needs to go into the reasons of the alienation of the militants.

stand by: (i) If you *stand by*, you let something bad happen. You are present there but you take no action to prevent it from happening. Yudhisthira stood by and let Dusshasana disrobe Draupadi.

(ii) If you *stand by*, you are ready to provide help or take action if it becomes necessary. It is the police that is involved in the action but the army is also *standing by*.

(iii) If you *stand by* somebody, you support or help him, especially in a difficult position. A friend is one who *stands by* you in times of crisis.

(iv) If you *stand by* a decision, you continue to support it. You do not go back on it. India *stands by* the Shimla agreement.

stand out: (i) Printed in red, the word *stood out*. A thing stands out if it can be seen very clearly because of its colour, size or shape.

(ii) There have been several Indian authors in English but RK Narayan *stands out* among them. If X *stands out*, he is much better or much more important than others of the same kind.

(iii) I have seen few individuals *stand out* for their original ideals; most bend before what is accepted in the society. If you *stand out* for or against something, you continue with a particular attitude or policy. Though it is unpopular or difficult, you do not give up.

stand up: (i) The simplest meaning is opposite of *sit down*.

(ii) If you *stand up to* someone more powerful, you defend yourself against his attacks or demands. In a film, the hero *stands up to* attacks from all sides by the villain's gang.

(iii) If something *stands up to* a lot of use, pressure, etc, it remains unharmed even when severely tested. It remains in good condition in spite of being much in use. The ancient buildings have *stood up to* the test of time.

(iv) If you *stand up for* a principle, you take forceful action in order to defend it from attacks or criticism. Gandhiji *stood up for* the Indians' right to freedom.

(v) If a claim or piece of evidence *stands up*, it is accepted as true or satisfactory after being carefully examined. We will be satisfied only when his argument *stands up* in the court.

stay up: Earlier, children had to sleep by 9 pm. But now they *stay up* with their parents late in the night and watch TV. If you *stay up*, you remain awake. You do not go to bed.

subscribe to: If you *subscribe to* an opinion, a theory or a belief, you agree with it. Some economists feel that globalisation is a panacea for all economic ills. But I do not *subscribe to* this view.

swarm with: A *swarm* is a large number of insects or birds moving around together. A *swarm* of bees comes out of the hive. Now, if a place is *swarmed*

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with people or things, it is full of them. When we went to listen to the prime minister's speech, the venue *was swarming with* ordinary people as well as police.

swear in: The new President *will be sworn in* sometime next year. If somebody *is sworn in*, he is asked to swear an oath because he is being appointed to a new position or responsibility. He makes a solemn promise.

tear at: If you *tear at* something, you attack it violently and try to break it into pieces by cutting or tearing it. Some dogs are really dangerous; they can *tear at* strangers.

tear between: In a transitional society, people *are torn between* ambition and duty. That is, they have to make a painful choice between the two. They cannot decide which one to choose. And this makes them feel anxious.

tear down: If you *tear* something *down*, you bring it to the ground. You demolish it. Bulldozers are used to *tear down* buildings.

thrash out: Let us *thrash out* a plan to get rid of this problem. If you *thrash out* a difficult problem or idea, you discuss it in detail until you reach agreement or arrive at a solution.

throttle back: What is a *throttle*? It is a device in a motor vehicle that controls the quantity of fuel entering the engine. So if you *throttle back* or throttle down when driving a motor vehicle or aircraft, you make it go slower by reducing the quantity of fuel entering the engine.

throw away: Don't *throw* your chance *away*; you have only two chances left. If you *throw away* something you have, you waste it rather than using it sensibly. The actor *threw* his speech *away*. If somebody *throws* words *away*, he speaks them in a deliberately casual way.

throw back: If you *throw back* at somebody what he said or did in the past, you remind him of it in order to hurt him. In films, the hero often *throws back* at the villain what he had done to him when he was a poor child. If you are *thrown back* on your own powers or resources, you have to use them. Reason: There is nothing else you can use. When a govt servant retires, he is *thrown back* on his own resources.

tide over: Readily available bank loans now *tide* you *over* during your student days. If you do something for somebody to *tide* him *over*, you do it to help him through a difficult period. You provide him what he needs, especially money, during this period.

toy with: If you *toy with* an idea, you consider it casually or without serious intent. You do not make a definite decision on it. Several persons *toy with* the idea of writing a book. This goes on for a few months and then they gradually forget it. If you *toy with* an object, you handle or move it carelessly or without thinking. You

keep moving it with your fingers while you are thinking of something else. Don't *toy with* the paperweight when you go to meet someone at his table.

train on: The dacoit *trained* his gun *on* the owner of the house. Scared by this, the owner's wife readily handed over the key to the dacoit. If you train something *on* somebody, you aim it at him and keep it pointing steadily towards him. It could be a gun, a camera, a hosepipe, binoculars, a light, etc.

trickle down: If something, especially money, *trickles down*, it spreads from rich to poor people through the economic systems of a country. The capitalists believe that money will ultimately *trickle down* if business does well.

turn away: The poor avoid going to their rich friends. They do not want to be *turned away* and humiliated. If you *turn* somebody *away*, you refuse to allow him to enter a place. You refuse to give him help or support. You reject him.

turn down: If you *turn down* an offer, a request or a proposal, you reject it. You refuse to consider it. The groom's side *turns down* several marriage proposals because the bride-to-be has dark complexion.

If you *turn down* a cooker, a heater or a radio, you reduce the amount of heat or sound being produced. And this you do by adjusting the controls. *Turn down* the gas; this preparation needs low heat.

turn out: This phrase has several usages:

(i) if something *turns out* a particular way, it happens in that way. It has the result in that way. The project has *turned out* to be a damp squib.

(ii) If something *turns out* to be a particular thing, it is discovered to be that thing. The man whom we went to meet *turned out* to be a relative of ours.

(iii) If you *turn out* a light, etc, you switch it off.

(iv) If an organisation *turns out* something, it produces it. Our school *turns out* ideal citizens for the country.

(v) If you *turn* someone *out*, you force him to leave a place, especially the place where he has been living. Since he failed to pay the rent, the landlord *turned* him *out*.

(vi) If you *turn out* a container, you empty it. You clean it thoroughly by removing the contents. *Turn out* the drawer so that the new employee can use it.

(vii) If people *turn out* for an event or activity, they are present at it. They assemble there or attend the event. Not many people *turned out* for the lecture.

urge on: Successful men often tell us that they were *urged on* to reach the heights by their near and dear ones. If you *urge* somebody *on*, you encourage him to do something. You encourage him to start and continue it.

use up: If you *use up* something, you use all of it so that no more is left. When the lady came back, there was nothing in the kitchen. Her servant had *used up* every item.

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visit on/upon: The sins of this life will be *visited upon* you in the next. That is, they will inflict punishment on you in the next life. If something is *visited upon* you, something very unpleasant happens to you.

wade through: If you *wade through* water or mud, you walk through it with an effort. Figuratively, you *wade through* a boring or unpleasant task. That is, you spend a lot of effort and time completing it. Researchers often have to *wade through* voluminous reports which hardly say anything.

wait on: What does a waiter do? He *waits on* you in a restaurant. If somebody *waits on* you, he acts as a servant for you, especially by serving food and drink at a meal. Mr Chandran is a difficult guest; he always expects somebody to *wait on* him.

warm up: If you *warm up* for an event or activity, you prepare yourself physically or mentally for it. And this you do by doing some gentle exercise. You practise the activity in a less intense way. Just before a race, you can see runners *warming up*. If a machine or engine *warms up*, it runs for a short time to reach the temperature at which it will operate efficiently.

waste away: The old man has been *wasting away* since his son refused to come back home. If somebody *wastes away*, he becomes thin or weak. Reason: He is ill or worried and is not eating properly.

water down: If you *water down* a liquid, you dilute it by adding water. Figuratively, if a speech or a piece of writing is *watered down*, you make it less forceful or offensive. And this you do by changing it or leaving out certain details. The original proposal was too offensive; so it had to be *watered down*.

weigh down: If a heavy load *weighs you down*, it stops you moving easily. You have to bend. Figuratively, if you are *weighed down* by a difficulty, you feel anxious and depressed. Since he has taken over as the chief of his company, he has been *weighed down* by responsibilities.

weigh up: You must *weigh up* the pros and cons before you do anything. That is, you must consider which is relatively more important so that you can make a decision. Have you ever faced an interview? Did you notice how the interviewer *weighed you up*? That is, he formed an opinion of you by observing and talking to you.

wind up: We have had enough of phrasal verbs. Let us now *wind up*. If you *wind up* an activity, you finish it or stop doing it. If you *wind up* a business, you stop running it. You close it down completely.