

Exploring Idioms

A Critical-thinking Resource for Grades 4-8

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Acid Test

Definition: A test to determine the quality or worth of something; undeniable results.

Background: Back in the days of the California gold rush, which started around 1849 (giving its participants the nickname “49ers”), it was critical for prospectors and consumers to know if substances mined or sold were gold or a gold-colored base metal. Fortunately, it was discovered that touching a small amount of nitric acid (HNO₃) to metal resulted in a certain color change or none at all depending on the metal being tested. Today, the phrase *acid test* is used to describe any definitive test or challenge that yields firm or undeniable results.

For example: The acid test for good teaching is always how much students learn.

Chewing the Fat: Would you pay \$100 for a drink of water? Do an Internet search using the terms \$100, *drink of water*, and *gold rush* to see why the “49ers” did. How does this compare to purchasing oil (or other) products today?

The Proof Is in the Pudding:

- What is *fool's gold*? Find out how you can tell the difference between fool's gold and other metals beyond the acid test. Discuss how unscrupulous individuals could take advantage of unsuspecting consumers.
- Research the shrewdness of Hungarian chemist George de Hevesy. See how he used his knowledge of gold to outwit the Nazis during World War II. Report to the class how his cunning is related to the Nobel Prize.

Related Idioms for Further Inquiry:

- Heart of gold
- Gold mine (of information)
- Golden opportunity
- Gold digger

Ants in the Pants

Definition: To be restless, eager, and/or energetic to a high degree.

Background: *Ants in the pants* as an idiom is self-explanatory as anyone can imagine the reaction to having ants crawling into one's pants—clearly an uncomfortable sensation! This idiom first came into popular use in the 1930s. By the late 1960s, *ants in the pants* had evolved into *antsy*, although both phrases are still widely used.

For example: The squirming boys seemed to have ants in their pants at the photo shoot for their kindergarten graduation picture.

Chewing the Fat: We are all antsy from time to time. When do you seem to have *ants in the pants* and what strategies do you use to compose yourself?

The Proof Is in the Pudding:

- Make a list of words that rhyme with *ant(s)*. Create a short, zany poem using as many of these words as you can. Read your poem aloud in class for a round of good-natured giggles.
- Ants are usually viewed as pests, yet they have many admirable traits that would benefit humans to imitate. See how many positive qualities you can find about ants. Draw an outline of an ant. Write one trait on your outline and, with others, make an ant “trail” on the floor or wall of your classroom. Discuss what you have learned.

Related Idioms for Further Inquiry:

- Fly by the seat of one's pants
- Wear the pants
- Scare the pants off someone
- Kick in the pants

Apple of One's Eye

Definition: A precious, favorite, or cherished person or thing.

Background: To be *the apple of one's eye* has its origins in a misunderstanding of human anatomy. Early anatomists believed that the eye's pupil was a hard, round organ. Because the apple was a commonly known fruit and had a roughly spherical shape, it became known as the *apple* of the eye (called the *pupil* of the eye today). Because one's sight was regarded as the most valued sense, the analogy of being coveted, valued, or held precious rang true then, as it does today. The use of this idiom dates back to Biblical times; it is mentioned in the Old Testament as well as later in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

For example: My grandpa thinks that I am wonderful and can do no wrong; I am the apple of his eye.

Chewing the Fat: Why does the "eye of the beholder" matter in determining what is deemed precious or cherished?

The Proof Is in the Pudding:

- Research or brainstorm idioms that include fruit or other food items. Using colored construction paper, draw and cut out your food items. Write the idiom on each cut-out and paste them on a paper plate for display.
- Pick a beloved object, pet, or person. Write a poem declaring your affection or admiration for the apple of your eye.

Related Idioms for Further Inquiry:

- Seeing eye to eye
- Eyes in the back of one's head
- Have stars in one's eyes
- All eyes

Back Burner

Definition: To be given a low priority or to postpone action that does not need immediate attention.

Background: *Putting something on the back burner* very likely has a culinary origin. Cooks know that some foods, needing constant or immediate attention, are placed on the front burners of the stove. Other foods, needing only an infrequent glance or stir, are put on a back burner. The scope of this idiom has expanded to refer to most areas of our lives as we continuously decide what needs fast action and what can wait.

For example: The family put thoughts of buying a new car on the back burner until they put their last child through college.

Chewing the Fat: Is there a difference between *putting something on the back burner* of our lives versus *procrastination* in getting things done?

The Proof Is in the Pudding:

- In small groups, think of the qualities that you want in a friend. Put one quality each on an index card. Collaboratively, rank the “quality cards” from the most important characteristics (front burner) to least important (back burner). Compare your end results with those from other groups.
- Identify one area in your life that is currently on the back burner but that you need to bring to the front. Develop a realistic action plan to do so.

Related Idioms for Further Inquiry:

- Burning question
- Burn the midnight oil
- Burn one’s candle at both ends
- Burn your bridges