BRITISH COUNCIL

A collection of 100 English phrases

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Introduction and foreword

Across generations, the way we use language is constantly shifting. Some expressions stay with us, others fade or take on new life. From long-standing proverbs to the latest online slang, phrases evolve as they pass from one generation to the next. In *Phrase-ology,* we explore how phrases shape, and are shaped by, the lives and voices of Baby Boomers, Gen Z and everyone in between – all part of our ever-evolving global language, shared across cultures and geographies – English.

To understand how different generations use phrases, we analysed online comments from Twitch, YouTube and news websites – each platform reflecting different age demographics. Combined with research across media sources and language corpora, our findings reveal which expressions endure, which are newly minted and which are slipping from everyday use.

But this isn't just a generational journey – it's a global one. English has absorbed words and phrases from every corner of the world. From joie de vivre to mano a mano, from ancient scripture to modern-day memes, English carries the imprint of countless cultures. It's a language shaped by people – and always evolving.

At the British Council, we're proud to lead this research. As the UK's international organisation supporting peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide, we champion the English language as a powerful medium for opportunity, creativity and connection. We support millions of people worldwide to learn and use English – not only to pass exams or hold conversations, but to access education, work, travel, friendships and lifelong opportunities.

This collection celebrates English in all its richness – as a shared language of expression, understanding and exchange. It also looks ahead, exploring the future of English with and for the people who use it every day. Because English is shaped by the people who use it – and that includes you.

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What do we mean by ‘phrases’?

In this project, we use the term *phraseological expressions* or *phrases* to describe idioms, phrases and proverbs, drawing on definitions from Espinal and Mateu (2019).

Idioms
A group of words with a meaning that isn’t obvious from the individual words. Examples: *cat got your tongue*, *under the weather*, *the elephant in the room*.

Phrases
Word groups that work together to express a single idea. Example: *have a good time, make the bed, a sense of pride.*

Proverbs
Short, well-known sayings that often carry advice or wisdom. Example: *To kill two birds with one stone, to turn the other cheek, better late than never.*

Contents

Same phrase, new vibe: idioms across the generations

From timeless proverbs to trending slang, phrases are passed down, reshaped and revived by each new generation. Our research reveals which expressions transcend age, how digital culture drives change and what happens when the Baby Boomer generation, Gen Z and everyone in between meet in the great global conversation that is English.

How we did it
To understand how different age groups use idioms, we looked at online comments from three platforms: Twitch (used mostly by Gen Z), YouTube (used mainly by Millennials) and news websites (used mostly by older adults). This helped us see which expressions are more common in each generation. Lexicographic and digital corpora, and media sources were also consulted to extract trends and insights. The expressions in each dataset were divided into quartiles based on frequency of use, with the most frequently used expressions placed in quartile four and the least frequently used in quartile one. This grouping made it possible to identify generational patterns in language usage.

From 'glow ups' to 'main character energy' – Gen Z understood the assignment
Every generation has its own slang – a way to connect, stand out and express what matters most. Phraseological expressions remain part of how young people communicate today. Our research reveals phrases unique to Gen Z.

Gen Z phrases reflect bold self-expression, identity and affirmation. From *main character energy* and *to glow up* to *understood the assignment*, these expressions celebrate confidence, creativity and achievement. Others, like *let them cook*, *say less* and *no cap*, build trust and encouragement in just a few words, and is often rooted in African American English.

Shaped by digital culture and social media, Gen Z slang brings performance and play to everyday life. Phrases like *spill the tea*, *to hit different* and *to live rent free* show how language captures social dynamics and lasting impressions in just a few words. While many expressions are uniquely Gen Z, others like *YOLO* or *you only live once*, *say less* and *to glow up* are shared across generations, showing language's power to connect us all.

Main character energy

Describes someone with confidence and presence, like the star of their own film. Celebrating self-belief, acting with intention and romanticising everyday life. Sometimes playfully mocking attention-seeking behaviour. Popularised through TikTok trends and social media.

In use: When you're running in the rain and the main character energy starts to hit.

To glow up

A striking personal transformation in confidence, appearance or personal milestones. A major trend on TikTok and Instagram, often used to celebrate self-improvement, before-and-after progress or life transitions. May be a play on 'grow up'. Also used by Millennials.

In use: They had such a glow up over the summer!

Understood the assignment

First popularised in the 2010s, this TikTok-linked phrase means someone has achieved a task or exceeded expectations with confidence, flair or accuracy.

In use: He didn't just do the job, he understood the assignment and made it shine.

Let them cook

An encouraging, often playful phrase meaning 'let them do their thing'. Used to cheer someone on, show trust in their skill or support them trying something new, without interference or criticism. Popularised in US sports and rap by Lil B.

In use: She's working on something big. Just let her cook for a while.

To say less

First appearing in the 2010s, this phrase means 'I get it' or 'understood'. It likely comes from African American English and replaces 'say no more'. Shared with older adult generations.

In use: Free tickets? Say less.

No cap

First used in 2011, a slang term meaning 'no lie' or 'I'm serious', from African American English where 'cap' means exaggeration or falsehood.

In use: Best pizza ever, no cap.

To spill the tea

Emerging in the 2000s, this phrase means to share gossip or inside info. Rooted in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and LGBTQ+ culture, it rose in popularity through *RuPaul's Drag Race.*

In use: What did you hear? Spill the tea!

To live rent free in someone's head

First used in the 2010s, this phrase means something or someone is stuck in your thoughts – often annoyingly – without effort or permission. Familiar also to the Millennial generation.

In use: That song has been living rent free in my head all week!

Ate and left no crumbs

First used in the 2010s, this slang phrase means to do something flawlessly. It began in New York's ballroom scene within Black and Latino LGBTQ+ culture.

In use: Wow, that performance was incredible. They ate and left no crumbs!

To hit different

First used in 2019 to describe something that affects you in a unique or powerful way. Originates from metaphoric use of 'hit' in LGBTQ+ culture. Also features to a lesser extent in older adult usage.

In use: Watching that movie again hit different now that I'm older.

YOLO / you only live once

Encouraging people to take risks and seize the moment, YOLO became a cultural catchphrase popularised by the rapper and singer Drake in 2011 – though the phrase itself dates to the 1800s. As a centuries-old philosophy, it continues to resonate across older, Millennial and Gen Z generations.

In use: Booked the trip – YOLO!

‘Green flags’: phrases across the generations

Still known, but less spoken
Some phrases remain clearly rooted with older generations. Expressions like *to step up to the plate*, *to bad-mouth someone* and *below the belt* are frequently used among older generations, ranking in the top quantile (Q4) within news comments. However, all three fall into the lowest quantile (Q1) on YouTube and Twitch, highlighting minimal usage among Millennials and Gen Z. This contrast suggests these phrases are still culturally recognised but their everyday use may be declining in younger generations.

Across generations: the phrases we all know
In contrast, other expressions show striking cross-generational appeal. All seven of these phrases are among the most frequently used phrases and rank in the top quantile (Q4) across news comments, YouTube and Twitch, indicating broad familiarity and consistent use across older generations, Millennials and Gen Z, underlining their clarity, simplicity and everyday relevance.

- **Red flag / green flag** – Millennials use the phrase most, but its Q4 ranking across all generations suggests broad awareness and adoption, with strong though slightly lower usage among Gen Z and older adults. The term ‘red flag’ has been in use since the 1500s, originally in maritime and sporting contexts. Its adoption in dating language emerged in the 2010s, rising sharply after 2020 and peaking in 2025. Paired with ‘green flag’, this live linguistic trend now signals warning signs or positive traits in relationships.

- **It is what it is** – Originating in 1949, this phrase, had a steep rise in use after the global pandemic of 2020, stands out for its exceptionally high usage across all datasets, ranking in the top quantile (Q4) for older adults, Millennial and Gen Z. While most frequently used by older generations, the phrase remains widely adopted across age groups, resonating for its ability to express difficult or unchangeable situations.

- **Bucket list** – High frequency among Millennials and common among older generations, trends show a peak in use around the time of the 2006 film *The Bucket List* with continued interest since. Gen Z use is noticeably lower, which may reflect changing cultural references. Nonetheless, a widely recognised idiom to describe a personal list of goals or experiences to complete during a lifetime.

- **YOLO / you only live once** – A standout phrase born with Millennials, it was popularised by Drake in 2011 and surged on social media and spread across generations. The data shows highest usage among Millennials, then Gen Z, with lower but notable use by older generations. The spread and timing suggests YOLO began as youth slang and gradually entered wider use – a youth-led linguistic innovation to catch on with older generations.

- **Right off the bat** – Sees high usage among older generations and Millennials, though less frequently with Gen Z. Trends reveal a significant rise in popularity from the 1990s, peaking around 2019, with steady interest in recent years. This pattern suggests the phrase remains a familiar and widely used expression across generations, especially among older age groups.

- **Better late than never** – Strongly associated with older generations, but its consistent Q4 ranking suggests it is still very much alive in the language of Millennial and Gen Z speakers. Steady historical use into the 2010s suggests it remains a familiar and accessible idiom across generations, for its simplicity and universal meaning.

- **Let them eat cake** – The data suggests a strong resonance with older generations. While Millennials also use it, Gen Z use is notably lower, indicating a possible generational decline in relevance. Although Marie Antoinette likely never said it, the phrase reflects aristocratic indifference to poverty, with earlier links to Maria Theresa of Spain. A variation, *to have your cake and eat it,* suggests wanting it all without compromise.

- **No cap** – While the expression *no cap* may be overestimated in the data – some occurrences could reflect different meanings or uses like news sites referencing financial caps on taxes or benefits – it remains the most used phrase identified from Twitch data, indicating high use among Gen Z.

Boomer to Zoomer: the phrases skipping a generation

Interestingly, there are some loan phrases and idioms that highlight moments of intergenerational overlap.

- **Joie de vivre** – Around since the late 1800s, with steady use since the 1960s, this phrase has long-standing appeal among the Baby Boomer generation (Q3). While the idiom appears to have skipped Millennials almost entirely (Q1), it has a notable presence among Gen Z (Q4) hinting at a quiet resurgence. Does this phrase's joyful spirit unite generations?

- **Throw in the towel** – Appears most frequently among Baby Boomers (Q4), is absent among Millennials (Q1), and yet resurfaces strongly with Gen Z (Q4), suggesting a dip then revival in use. Originating in boxing, the phrase soon came to mean giving up in everyday situations. Despite low Millennial use, the idiom may be making a comeback with Gen Z, boosted by gaming culture, suggested by high Twitch frequency.

Top 20 phrases by generation

	Older generations	Millennial generation	Gen Z
1.	Red flag / green flag	Red flag / green flag	No cap
2.	The powers that be	Bucket list	Yolo / you only live once
3.	The elephant in the room	The elephant in the room	Long time no see
4.	It is what it is	Yolo / you only live once	Red flag / green flag
5.	Quid pro quo	It is what it is	Instant karma
6.	To run amok	No cap	It is what it is
7.	No cap	The powers that be	Rude boy
8.	To step up to the plate	Right off the bat	Bucket list
9.	Let them eat cake	I'm dead	I'm dead
10.	Carte blanche	To spill the beans	Right off the bat
11.	The writing on the wall	Long time no see	Better late than never
12.	Better late than never	Better late than never	To pipe down
13.	Bucket list	Quid pro quo	Let them eat cake
14.	To turn the other cheek	The writing on the wall	To keep it real
15.	To bad-mouth someone	To bite the bullet	To glow up
16.	Right off the bat	To pipe down	Carte blanche
17.	Between a rock and a hard place	A taste of one's own medicine	To throw in the towel
18.	To toe the line	To say less	Moment of truth
19.	Faux pas	Let them eat cake	Joie de vivre
20.	To bite the bullet	To be salt of the earth	The elephant in the room

Phrases used across generations

- Q1 (Least frequent 25% or not present)
- Q2–Q3 (Mid-range frequency)
- Q4 (Most frequent 25%)

Phraseological expression	Older generations	Millennials	Gen Z
Red flag / green flag	Q4	Q4	Q4
No cap	Q4	Q4	Q4
It is what it is	Q4	Q4	Q4
Bucket list	Q4	Q4	Q4
Yolo / you only live once	Q4	Q4	Q4
Right off the bat	Q4	Q4	Q4
Better late than never	Q4	Q4	Q4
Let them eat cake	Q4	Q4	Q4
I'm dead	Q4	Q4	Q4
To pipe down	Q4	Q4	Q4
To keep it real	Q4	Q4	Q4
Long time no see	Q2–Q3	Q4	Q4
The elephant in the room	Q4	Q4	Q1
The powers that be	Q4	Q4	Q1
Quid pro quo	Q4	Q4	Q1
The writing on the wall	Q4	Q4	Q1
Carte blanche	Q4	Q4	Q4
To run amok	Q4	Q4	Q1
To bite the bullet	Q4	Q4	Q1
To spill the beans	Q4	Q4	Q1

*Note that the data on *no cap* could be overestimated due to its use on news sites where it might refer to current affairs, for example.

From this data, we can see that older generations are more likely to adopt new phrases and use Gen Z slang, whereas the younger generation (Gen Z) are more noticeably phasing out traditional or established phrases like *the powers that be* and to *bite the bullet.* Other phrases such as *long time no see* have seen a revival among Gen Z, highlighting the evolving nature of language.

‘Keep it 100’: how phrases evolve with us

Traditional idioms like *kill two birds with one stone* and *between a rock and a hard place* remain among the most used in written English today. But language never stands still. *Keep it 100* – a modern twist on *keep it real* – reflects how tone, meaning and cultural influence shift over time.

Phrases also evolve through reinvention. *Spill the beans* first appeared in 1919 but gained traction from the 1990s onward. More recently, *spill the tea* – from African American and LGBTQ+ communities – has surged through digital culture, showing how each generation reshapes idioms to reflect heir own voices, values and ways of sharing.

Trending talk: how idioms take over sports, work and pop culture

We don't just speak English – we quote it. From football pitches to Friday meetings, from TV screens to social media feeds, idioms and phrases shape the way we chat, joke, and get our point across. Many of our everyday expressions come from three key corners of culture: pop culture, where catchy lines become cultural shorthand; sport, where competition gives rise to metaphor; and the workplace, where office banter and business lingo evolve into common turns of phrase. These sayings reflect how language evolves with culture, keeping our conversations colourful, current and full of character.

Screen-speak: phrases that pop culture made popular

Many phrases we use today have roots in TV, film, music and social media, often crossing generational lines. For instance, *bye, Felicia* was first popularised in the 1995 film *Friday*, but it surged again in 2015, thanks to social media. Similarly, *bucket list* originated in 2006 and was popularised by the 2007 film *The Bucket List.* Unlike other expressions that developed over time, this phrase was practically unheard of before this. It's believed to derive from the phrase *to kick the bucket.*

Music also plays a big role in shaping language, with phrases like *instant karma* (John Lennon) and *rude boy* (Rihanna) gaining widespread use. And while *one-hit wonder* is now tied to music, its origins actually trace back to baseball. Music's ability to transcend borders, genres and generations makes lyrical phrases instantly recognisable, often spreading them faster and more effectively than traditional word-of-mouth.

An idiom meaning to live a carefree, luxurious life, first recorded in 1911, likely American in origin with possible French or Irish influence (Oxford English Dictionary (OED)).

In use:

Ever since winning the lottery, she's been living the life of Riley.

Beat your face

An idiom meaning to apply makeup expertly, popularised in the 1970s drag culture, later gaining traction in 2015 via social media.

In use: She really beat her face for that photoshoot.

Green flag / red flag

A dating phrase where green flags represent positive traits in a partner, and red flags indicate warning signs, popularised in the 2010s.

In use: She has great communication skills – definitely a green flag. But her constant secrecy is a major red flag.

Denial is not a river in Egypt

A humorous proverb meaning someone is in denial, first recorded in 1931, playing on the similarity between 'denial' and 'Nile'. Its popularity surged online around 2012 – 2013.

In use: When he refused to admit his mistake, I said, 'denial is not a river in Egypt!'

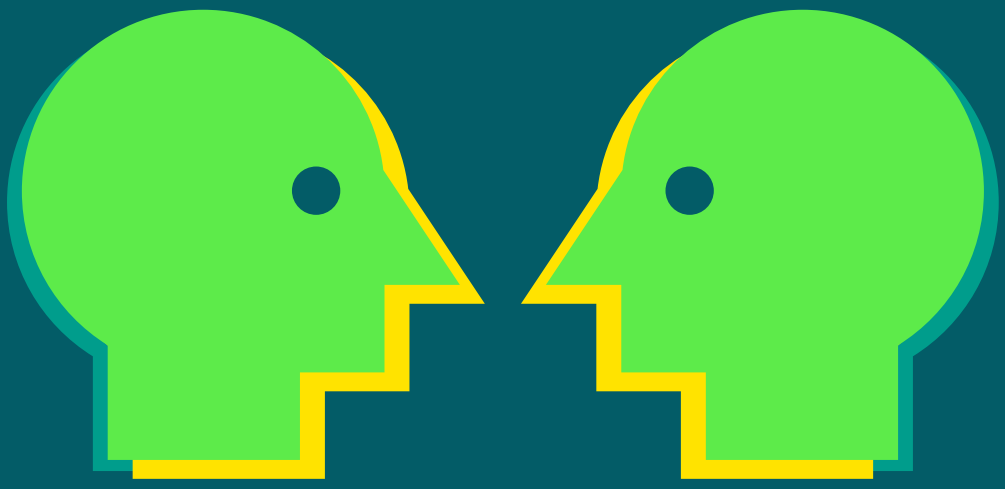
In the lap of the gods

A proverb meaning fate beyond human control, first recorded in 1920. You might recognise it from Queen's 1974 album *Sheer Heart Attack*.

In use: The outcome of the game is now in the lap of the gods.

From the pitch to the page: how sport shapes our language

From boxing to baseball, sports have given us many popular phrases. For instance, *below the belt,* meaning unfair behaviour, comes from boxing and dates back to 1832. Similarly, *out for the count* and *throw in the towel* also come from boxing, both dating back to the early 20th century.



Straight from the horse's mouth

An idiom meaning 'the original, authentic source of information,' (OED) first recorded in 1917 (Grammarphobia), likely originating from horse racing where insider knowledge came from those closest to the horses.

In use:

I heard it straight from the horse's mouth – he's definitely coming to the party!

An idiom meaning ‘immediately’ or ‘without delay,’ originating from baseball, first recorded in 1910.

In use:

He started the meeting right off the bat with an exciting announcement.

Baseball has given us some of the most widely used phrases, many of which have made their way into everyday conversation and the workplace in particular. Phrases like *to step up to the plate*, *to throw a curveball*, *to knock it out of the park* and *to touch base* are all rooted in baseball, yet are frequently used in office lingo.

An idiom meaning to make a provisional or tentative arrangement, first recorded in 1898: 'Mr Charles Warner, who...is, as the phrase goes 'pencilling in dates' as fast as a manager can' (J.R. Ware).

In use:

Let's pencil in the meeting for next Tuesday,
but we can adjust if needed.

All in a day's work

Like those derived from baseball, there are many phrases that come from or that are used in the workplace. Many of these can be traced throughout history. For example, to *toe the line* and *to know the ropes* are both nautical terms with possible origins in Britain's naval history. Other phrases come from classical or religious backgrounds. *To move mountains* is thought to stem from Greek or Aramaic, with biblical connections, while *to play devil's advocate* traces back to Latin and the Roman Catholic Church (Oxford Dictionary of Idioms). The idioms, now common in the workplace, carry centuries of history.

Timeless turns of phrase: the hidden histories of everyday phrases

Some expressions feel like they've always been part of the language – passed down from generation to generation, woven into conversations without a second thought. But every phrase has a beginning.

This timeline traces the evolution of English phrases from the earliest records to the dawn of the 20th century – spanning sacred scripture, medieval poetry, Shakespearean theatre, naval traditions and satirical writing. Some originated in the Bible or on the Renaissance stage. Others journeyed through trade, diplomacy and storytelling, shaped by classical languages, Arabic proverbs and global exchange.

They may sound familiar today, but these expressions carry hidden histories – each one offering clues about the people, places and perspectives that shaped them.

What unites them is their remarkable staying power. These timeless turns of phrase continue to help us express what we feel, make sense of the world and connect across cultures – generation after generation.

How our phrases took shape

700–1500s
Early religious influence

The earliest expressions are grounded in religious teachings and Biblical sources, pointing to a time when religion shaped not only belief but everyday language.

This period reflects a world where oral tradition, scripture and moral storytelling were central to cultural life and the shaping of phrases.

Early 700s
Salt of the earth

Someone good, honest, kind and humble. First recorded in the Lindisfarne Gospels (OED), a masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon art. The phrase appears in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5:13*), encouraging people to act with integrity and contribute positively, as salt was once used to preserve food.

In use: You can count on her for anything. She's salt of the earth.

1229 est.
All that glitters is not gold

A reminder that what appears valuable on the surface may not be. First recorded in a Middle English religious text – *nis hit nower neh gold al þet ter schineð* (OED) – the proverb appears in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and was later popularised in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* as *'All that glisters is not gold'.* With verbs like *shines*, *glisters* and *glitters*, this phrase has truly stood the test of time in English.

In use: Their Instagram photos look perfect, but all that glitters is not gold.

1382
To put words in someone's mouth

Misrepresenting someone's words to someone or telling them what to say. It originates in the Old Testament Book of Samuel, where Joab instructs a woman to tell a rehearsed story to the king to sway his judgement.

In use: I never said that – don't put words in my mouth!

1529
To turn the other cheek

Responding to harm with peace. This Biblical expression comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, urging people not to retaliate, but to show restraint. Gandhi praised it as a guiding principle in his autobiography.

In use: Instead of arguing back, she turned the other cheek.

1500s–1700s
Renaissance and early modern English

During the Renaissance and early modern period, theatre and literature played a powerful role in shaping English. Expressions rooted in Latin, Arabic and Classical myth entered the language, while writers like Shakespeare and Swift helped popularise idioms – blending global ideas, creativity and cultural exchange in an increasingly connected world.

1553–77 est.
To break the ice

To say or do something to ease tension and start conversation, especially between strangers. Based on a Latin metaphor, *scindere glaciem*, revived by Erasmus, comparing social tension to breaking frozen waterways to let boats pass (Grammarphobia). In its earliest recorded use Bishop John Fisher describes diplomatic efforts after Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Used in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

In use: A joke helped break the ice.

1661
To rain cats and dogs

This vivid phrase means to rain heavily. One theory links it to Jonathan Swift's poem, *A Description of a City Shower* (Library of Congress), where storm floods swept debris and unfortunate animals through the streets, as if fallen from the sky.

In use: We cancelled the picnic – it was raining cats and dogs!

Late 1600s
The straw that broke the camel's back

A small, regular act that leads to a sudden, large outcome built up from previous pressures. Its roots can be traced back to an Arabic proverb about placing more weight than a camel can carry. Early recorded versions use a horse or donkey. Another use is *'the last straw'.*

In use: There's a mess in the kitchen again – that's the last straw!

1785
Best-laid plans

Even careful plans can unexpectedly go wrong. It comes from a Robert Burns poem, *To a Mouse*. As legend has it, Burns wrote it after ploughing through a mouse's winter nest by mistake.

In use: We stuck to the schedule, but even best-laid plans can't predict a power cut.

1788
To bite the bullet

To prepare yourself for a difficult experience, especially when it can't be avoided. Possibly linked to soldiers biting down during surgery to endure pain. Harriet Tubman recalled assisting in such a surgery during the American Civil War (Samuel Hopkins Adams, 1989).

In use: The deadline's tight – we'll need to bite the bullet and work late.

1800s–1900s
Modern and transatlantic influence

From the 1800s onwards, English expressions were shaped by storytelling, satire and shifting global influences. Rooted in fables, folklore and philosophy, these phrases reflect growing transatlantic exchange, everyday experience and the power of language to capture truth, tension and transformation.

1827
Under the weather

This phrase means feeling unwell. It may have nautical roots, with sick sailors taking shelter below deck, out of the weather.

In use: I'm staying home. I'm feeling a bit under the weather.

1858
A taste of one's own medicine

This phrase means being treated as badly as you've treated others. It's rooted in an Aesop's fable about a dishonest seller of fake medicine who is later made to take it himself.

In use: The critic received a harsh review of his own work – a taste of his own medicine.

1919
To spill the beans

To reveal a secret. First used in *The Man From Tall Timber* (T. K. Holmes, 1919), it may trace back to Ancient Greek voting, where spilling beans could accidentally reveal results – but that's still debated.

In use: She accidentally spilled the beans about the surprise party.

1921
Between a rock and a hard place

Being stuck between two difficult choices. It may echo the Greek myth of sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis (Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs), a six-headed monster and a whirlpool, a deadly challenge for ancient sailors – danger on both sides.

In use: Support her friend or tell the truth? She was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

1935
The elephant in the room

This American idiom was first used in the title of a book about child welfare. In 1985, it was adopted in Philosophy (OED), to mean **a major issue that's awkward, uncomfortable or deliberately avoided.**

In use: We were all chatting, but no one mentioned the elephant in the room – his recent breakup.

Long time no see: the forgotten global origins of English phrases

Language is a bridge between cultures, and idioms are some of its most vivid expressions. Every language has phrases that capture universal human experiences in unique ways, and many of these sayings travel across borders, weaving into new tongues and taking on fresh meanings.

English, like many languages, has borrowed and shared countless idioms – from French's *joie de vivre* to Spanish's *mano a mano*. Exploring these cross-cultural exchanges reveals how language connects us, enriches our communication, and offers new ways to see the world.

Borrowed phrases: the global evolution of everyday idioms

Our research delves into the fascinating ways English has borrowed idioms, proverbs, and phrases from languages around the world. Many common phrases we use today have roots in other cultures, often adapting over time to fit new linguistic landscapes.

Idioms borrowed from around the world

Today, *long time no see* is a familiar greeting in English when meeting someone after a while. However, there's an ongoing debate among language experts about where the phrase *long time no see* really comes from.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first recorded use to 1892 in the *Boston Sunday Globe,* later appearing in books about the American West, where it was linked to Native American speech. These early uses may be problematic, as they likely stem from crude imitations of those speaking Pidgin English (Applied Linguistics blog). Pidgin us a simplified form of language with basic vocabulary and structure, often developed through trade or cultural contact to help people without a shared language communicate.

Another widely accepted theory is that *long time no see* is a direct translation from the Mandarin phrase 'hǎojiǔ bújiàn', meaning exactly that. It may have been introduced in England by British naval officers who encountered Chinese speakers using Pidgin English. The origins of this everyday phrase are often overlooked, yet it remains widely used by English speakers around the world – including in China, where locals often say it to English-speaking friends.

Rome wasn't built in a day

An idiom meaning 'great achievements take time', first recorded in English in 1545, originating from a French proverb dating back to 1190.

In use:

Learning a new language takes patience – Rome wasn't built in a day!

Another widely used expression, *don't put all your eggs in one basket*, gained renewed popularity thanks to the reality TV show *Love Island*. This phrase, however, dates back centuries and is believed to have Spanish or Italian origins. It appears in *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1615) and later in *A Common Place of Italian Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1666) (Idioms online).

Other phrases derived from global languages include:

Better late than never

A proverb meaning 'it's better to do something late than not to do it at all', first attested in the 13th Century with roots in Latin/Greek.

In use: I know I'm late to the party, but better late than never!

Faux pas

A French phrase meaning 'a social blunder' or 'mistake', first recorded in 1676, literally translating to 'false step' (OED).

In use: Wearing white to a wedding is a classic fashion faux pas.

Better the devil you know, than the angel you don't

A proverb meaning 'it's wiser to deal with a familiar but undesirable situation', first recorded in 1827, based on a version from 1586, possibly stemming from Spanish (OED).

In use: I know my current job isn't perfect, but better the devil you know, right?

Haud yer wheesht

A Scots/Irish Gaelic phrase meaning ‘be quiet’ or ‘shut up’, first attested in the late 1800s, with the Northern Irish variant, ‘houl yer wheesht,’ gaining popularity in shows like *Derry Girls* and *Line of Duty* (Allster).

In Use: Haud yer wheesht, I’m trying to concentrate!

Carte blanche

A French phrase meaning ‘full discretionary power’, first adopted in the 1700s literally translating to ‘white paper’, symbolising complete freedom to act (OED).

In use: The CEO gave him carte blanche to lead the project as he saw fit.

Moment of truth

An idiom meaning ‘a crisis’, ‘turning point’, or ‘testing situation’, first used in 1932, derived from Spanish *‘hora de la verdad’* (OED), referring to the final conclusion in a bullfight, symbolising the decisive moment (Siefring, 2005).

In use: The moment of truth came when he had to decide whether to take the job offer.

Chin chin

A Chinese phrase meaning ‘please’ or ‘to invite’, first recorded in 1625, originally used as a greeting and later adopted as a toast in English (OED).

In use: ‘Chin chin!’ we all said before taking our first sip of our drink.

To run amok

An idiom meaning to act uncontrollably or behave erratically, or to rush in in a disruptive, unpredictable or chaotic manner. First recorded in English in 1652, from Old Javanese, Malay and Indonesian (OED).

In use: The crowd ran amok when the shop announced a big clearance sale.

To bury the hatchet

An idiom meaning to ‘stop fighting’ or ‘make peace’, first recorded in 1694, originating from North American Indigenous customs. (OED)

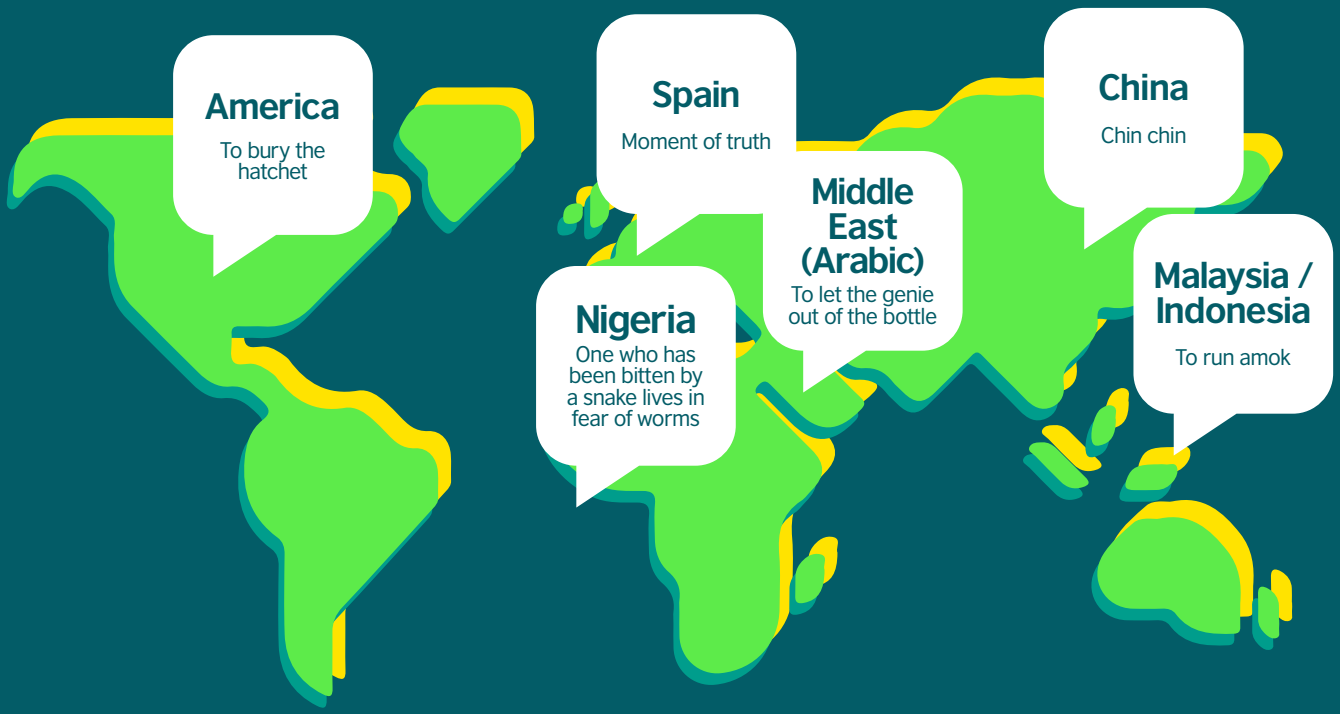
In use:

After years of rivalry, the two companies finally buried the hatchet and announced a partnership.

Tracing the multicultural roots of English idioms

While some idioms are direct translations from other languages, others evolved within English but were influenced by international roots. For instance, *the grass is always greener on the other side* comes from American English but likely has Irish or French origins. Today, similar versions exist in both French *(L’herbe est toujours plus verte chez le voisin)* and Italian *(L’erba del vicino è sempre più verde).* Similarly, “the whole shebang” is an American English phrase with possible ties to Irish or French.

The English proverb *the apple never falls far from the tree*, first recorded in 1836 (OED), likely has German or Scandinavian influence. Such expressions highlight linguistic exchange, showing how languages evolve and reflect shared human experiences across cultures. Similarly, *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*, first recorded in 1450 (OED), has equivalents in German and Spanish, showcasing shared human wisdom across cultures. Mostly used by the Baby Boomer generation, this may reflect a worldview that prioritises caution over risk.



Bridging language: how different cultures phrase the same thought

Many cultures share expressions with similar meanings despite different wording. The Nigerian proverb *one who has been bitten by a snake lives in fear of worms* mirrors sayings in Bengali, Portuguese (BBC Learn English), and Hindi, all warning of caution after a bad experience. The English equivalent, *once bitten*, *twice shy*, is even featured in the song *Last Christmas* by British pop duo *Wham!.*

Many English phrases have counterparts in other languages, adapting to different cultures while keeping their core meaning. Expressions like *break a leg*, *kill two birds with one stone*, and *let the genie out of the bottle* all have equivalents in German, Spanish, French, and Arabic. *To spin a yarn* – meaning to tell a story or chat – has even influenced Nigerian English, where *to yarn dust* means to 'talk rubbish'.

Language varies across cultures, but the emotions and ideas behind expressions are universal. Shared phrases reflect common human experiences, revealing deep cultural connections and showing that, despite linguistic differences, we often speak the same language at heart.

A – Z of phrases, idioms and proverbs

Phraseological expression	Meaning
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush	It's better to keep what you have than risk more.
A taste of one's own medicine	To be treated as badly as you've treated others.
All that glitters is not gold	What appears valuable on the surface may not be.
Ate and left no crumbs	To do something flawlessly.
Beat your face	To apply makeup skilfully, creating a stunning appearance.
Below the belt	Unfair or inappropriate behaviour, especially in conflict.
Best-laid plans	Even careful plans can unexpectedly go wrong.
Better late than never	Doing something late is better than not doing it at all.
Better the devil you know, than the angel you don't	Familiar risks are better than unknown possibilities.
Between a rock and a hard place	Being stuck between two difficult choices.

Blood is thicker than water	Family bonds are stronger than anything else.
Bucket list	A list of things to do before you die.
By the skin of one's teeth	To barely escape disaster.
Bye, Felicia	Dismissive farewell to someone unimportant or annoying.
Carte blanche	Complete freedom to act as one wishes.
Chin chin	A respectful greeting, a cheerful toast or way to 'cheers'.
Denial is not a river in Egypt	A humorous way to say someone is refusing to face facts.
Don't put all your eggs in one basket	A warning against risking everything on one option.
Dressed up to the nines	Looking exceptionally fashionable.
Faux pas	A social blunder or embarrassing mistake.
Red flag / green flag	*'Red flags'* indicate potential problems; *'green flags'* signal positive traits, especially in relationships.
Haud yer wheesht	'Be quiet' or 'shut up'.
I'm dead	Slang to say something is unbelievably funny or shocking.
In the lap of the gods	A situation where the outcome is beyond human control.
Instant karma	Immediate consequences for one's actions, good or bad.
It is what it is	Used when something frustrating must be accepted as it is.
It's giving me life	Used for something that gets you excited or makes you laugh hard.
Joie de vivre	Joy of life, exuberant enjoyment of living.

Let them cook	Letting someone excel without interference.
Let them eat cake	Used when someone ignores or dismisses others' hardship. Also *have your cake and eat it*, wanting the best of both worlds, without compromise.
Long in the tooth	Used to describe someone who's getting older or no longer at their peak.
Long time no see	A greeting for someone not seen in a while.
Main character energy	Describes confident behaviour, like the star of their own film. Used to either praise or mock.
Mano a mano	A direct confrontation or one-on-one competition.
Moment of truth	A crucial moment that determines the outcome or decision.
No cap	Slang to emphasise what's being said is genuinely true.
No man's land	Disputed area between two opposing sides, usually military forces.
One who has been bitten by a snake lives in fear of worms	Past negative experiences lead to cautiousness in similar situations. Equivalent: *once bitten, twice shy*.
One-hit wonder	A musician or group with only one hit success.
Out for the count	Completely defeated or fast asleep.
Quid pro quo	One thing given in return for another, an equal trade.
Right off the bat	Immediately, without delay, or right from the start.
Rome wasn't built in a day	Great achievements take time and shouldn't be rushed.
Rude boy	A confident, rebellious young man, often in urban culture.
Straight from the horse's mouth	Directly from the original or most reliable source.
The apple never falls far from the tree	Children often resemble or inherit traits from their parents.

The early bird catches the worm	Getting up early or acting quickly leads to advantage.
The elephant in the room	A serious, sensitive topic people ignore or sidestep.
The grass is always greener on the other side	People often mistakenly think other situations are better than their own.
The life of Riley	An effortless, enviable lifestyle full of comfort and luxury.
The powers that be	Those in charge or with official authority.
The straw that broke the camel's back	A final small act that triggers a major breaking point.
The whole shebang	Everything involved; the entire thing or situation.
The world is one's oyster	In a good position to take advantage of opportunities in life or a situation.
The writing on the wall	A clear warning of coming disaster.
To bad-mouth someone	To talk negatively about someone to other people.
To be in someone's good books	Being liked or approved of by someone.
To be the salt of the earth	Someone good, honest, kind and humble.
To bite the bullet	To brace yourself for a difficult, unavoidable situation.
To break a leg	A way to wish someone good luck.
To break the ice	To do or say something to gently begin a conversation or interaction.
To burn the midnight oil	Working hard late into the night.
To bury the hatchet	To make peace and end a conflict.
To cry over spilled milk	To dwell on things you can't change.
To cut and run	Depart suddenly to avoid trouble or danger.

To give a cold shoulder	To behave with coldness or indifference.
To glow up	A bold transformation in confidence, looks or growth.
To hit different	Used to describe something that affects you in a unique or powerful way.
To keep it real	To act with authenticity, staying true to who you are.
To kill two birds with one stone	To achieve two goals with a single effort.
To knock it out of the park	To perform exceptionally well or achieve great success.
To know the ropes	To understand the right way to do something. Variation: *To show someone the ropes*.
To let the genie out of the bottle	Unleashing or trying to control something powerful or uncontrollable.
To live rent free in someone's head	Something or someone that occupies your thoughts – often frustratingly – without effort or permission.
To move mountains	To accomplish something very difficult or extraordinary.
To pencil in	To tentatively schedule or plan something.
To pipe down	Be less noisy, talkative or overly persistent.
To play devil's advocate	To argue something for the sake of a debate.
To put words in someone's mouth	To falsely say someone said something or tell them what to say.
To rain cats and dogs	To rain heavily.
To run amok	To act uncontrollably or behave erratically, or to rush in in a disruptive manner.
To say less	Used to show agreement or understanding without further comment.
To sleep on (something)	To miss or overlook something, or underestimate it's true value.

To speak with a forked tongue	To dishonestly say one thing and do another.
To spill the beans	To tell a secret.
To spill the tea	Slang for sharing gossip or inside information.
To spin a yarn	To tell a story.
To step up to the plate	To take on a responsibility or challenge.
To throw a curveball	To introduce an unexpected or unpredictable situation.
To throw in the towel	To give up or admit defeat.
To toe the line	To conform to rules or expectations.
To touch base	To make contact or check in briefly.
To turn the other cheek	To respond peacefully when provoked by others.
To yarn dust	To talk nonsense or speak rubbish.
Under the weather	Feeling unwell.
Understood the assignment	Used to applaud someone when they have understood a situation, achieved a task or exceeded expectations.
Wearing your heart on your sleeve	To let your true feelings show without disguise.
When in Rome do as the Romans	To follow local norms and customs when in unfamiliar places.
YOLO / you only live once	Live in the moment and don't worry about the future.

Methodology

The project compiled a curated list of 100 phraseological expressions – including idioms, phrases, and proverbs – from a wide range of sources such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Dictionary.com, Green's Dictionary of Slang, academic literature, and popular culture materials including blogs, newspapers and online platforms.

Quantitative analysis
To examine how these expressions are used across generations, the project analysed five key datasets including: the Google Ngram corpus (1500-2022), Google Trends (online search queries), and three generationally representative digital corpora:

- Civic Comments (Older generations, 55+)
- YouTube comments (Millennials, 35-55)
- Twitch comments from League of Legends channels (Gen Z, under 35).

(Please note generational mapping is based on external demographic data from each platform.)

Frequencies were measured as occurrences per million comments or documents, allowing idioms to be classified as most used, average use, or least used.

The expressions were also grouped into quartiles within each dataset:
- Q1 = least frequent 25%
- Q2–Q3 = mid-range
- Q4 = most frequent 25%

This made it possible to detect generational patterns in usage. Some expressions (e.g., *no cap*) may be overestimated due to ambiguity in meaning; resolving such cases would require more advanced methods beyond this project's scope. Normalisation steps were applied throughout to reduce bias and ensure consistency.

In this study, users are grouped based on approximate generational ranges, which may not align exactly with traditional generational definitions. These age ranges serve as proxies for each generation, reflecting the usage patterns observed within the specific datasets (Civic Comments, YouTube, and Twitch). While these groupings are not strictly bound by conventional generational labels, they are intended to reflect audience behaviour in relation to the frequency of certain expressions.

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