

IMPROVING OUR ENGLISH

This section of Panorama will be regularly published for the benefit of Filipino students of English. It will be devoted to idiomatic English — nouns, verbs, adverbs, propositions, and expressive phrases. Idiomatic expressions are distinctive ways or peculiarities of using words and phrases in English. They are usually forcible, terse, and vivid. They are the most difficult part of the language for a person who is not an American or Englishman to learn. *They must be committed to memory and frequently used in speaking and writing.*

A. ADJECTIVE AND NOUN PHRASES

1. *An able-bodied seaman* is a skilled sailor.
2. *An absent-minded person* is a person inattentive to what is going around him at the moment.
3. *Advanced in years, or in life* means growing old.
4. *Argus-eyed*. Argus was a fabled monster of antiquity, having a hundred eyes and set by Juno to watch Io, of whom she (Juno) was jealous. Hence the adjective has come to mean jealously watchful.
5. *Augean stables*. According to Greek mythology, Augeus, King of Elis in Greece, had a stable occupied by three thousand oxen, which had not been cleansed for thirty years. Hercules cleansed it in one day by turning two rivers through it. Hence to cleanse the Augean stables is to correct widespread evils and abuses.
6. *Bad blood* between two persons means active enmity.
7. *A bad tongue* means an unhealthy tongue. *A foul tongue* is one given to uttering oaths; a *sharp tongue*, a sarcastic one.

8. A *besetting sin* is a vice or sin to which a person has often yielded as, intemperance, laziness, hot temper.
9. *One's betters* is colloquial, meaning one's superiors in rank.
10. *Blackmail* is money extorted by threats or intimidation.
11. *Black market* is the illegal traffic in officially controlled goods.
12. A *black sheep* means one who has a bad reputation in a company of people usually a member of a family.
13. A *blind alley* is a narrow street closed at one end.
14. *Blue blood* is noble blood. Formerly it was held that the blood of a nobleman was blue as distinct from the red blood of the common people.
15. *Bodily fear* is fear that harm will come to one's person.
16. A *burning question* is a matter in dispute which urgently calls for settlement.
17. *Capital punishment* is the punishment of death legally inflicted.
18. *The cardinal points* are the four points of the horizon known as North, South, East, and West.
19. A *chicken-hearted fellow* is a timid, cowardly fellow. The adjective *chicken-hearted* is used contemptuously.
20. A *close-fisted man* is a stingy, niggardly, penurious man; a miser. It is the opposite of 'open-handed'.
21. A *close shave* is colloquially used, meaning, almost an accident.
22. A *close vote*. When votes are counted and found to be nearly equal, for and against, it is said there has been a close vote.
23. A *cold-blooded murder* is an unprovoked murder, a murder done deliberately without any cause to excite personal anger, hatred, or revenge. Such a murder is often said to be committed in *cold blood*.
24. *Cold comfort* is something offered as comfort, but instead of really consoling the sufferer will only increase the pain or produce irritation. The offer may be

made with a kind intention, but in ignorance of what would suit the case, or it may be made with a secret wicked wish to vex and irritate the sufferer further.

25. To have *cold feet* is to feel frightened.
26. To give one the *cold shoulder* is to show a person dislike for his company.
27. A *cold manner* is behavior wanting in warmth of kindness, a manner without any enthusiasm.
28. A *cool head*. One whose nature is not easily excited is sometimes spoken of as having a cool head. A judge, for instance, needs to have a cool head.
29. *Crocodile tears*. Old travellers tell, though it is now known to be a fiction, that the crocodile sheds tears over its prey, as if the reptile wept for the victim it was going to destroy. Hence *crocodile tears* means hypocritical tears; pretended sorrow.
30. A *crying shame* or a *burning shame* is a phrase applied to something notoriously shameful.
31. A *dizzy height* is a very great height, to look down from which is enough to make one dizzy.
32. A *dog-in-the-manger policy*. A churlish man is said to follow such a policy when he cannot himself use what another wants, and yet will not let that other have it. The allusion is to the fable of the dog who made his bed in a manger of hay, and would not let the ox come near to eat the hay.
33. A *fair hand* is writing which is easily read.
34. A *fair weather friend* is one who deserts you in difficulties.
35. *Family likeness* is similarity of features of the face, such as is often observed in persons of the same family.
36. A *fast man* is an extravagant man; a spendthrift.
37. A *foregone conclusion* is an obvious one, resolved on beforehand, or determined before argument or investigation.

38. *A forlorn hope* is a desperate enterprise of which there is no reasonable probability that it will succeed. In military language, a forlorn hope is a body of soldiers told off to lead in an assault which is attended with great peril.
39. *French leave* is absence without permission, or going off without intimation.
40. *A golden mean* is a middle course or position between two extremes.
41. *Good breeding* is polite manners formed by a good education.
42. *To write a good hand* is to write in clear, legible penmanship.
43. *A good Samaritan* is one who befriends a stranger or friendless person in difficulties. The phrase is derived from the parable of the Good Samaritan.
44. *Good sense* is soundness of judgement.
45. *Good spirits* mean a cheerful and even hilarious state of mind.
46. *The green-eyed monster* is jealousy.
47. *A greenhorn* is colloquial for a raw, inexperienced person.
48. *Half-hearted* is having no enthusiasm for the business in hand.
49. *Hard-boiled* is used metaphorically to mean callous.
50. *A henpecked husband* is a man habitually snubbed by his wife.
51. *A herculean task* is a work requiring very great effort for its accomplishment, a work which only a Hercules could perform.
52. *Hush money* is a bribe paid to secure silence; money paid to prevail on someone to keep back information and to prevent a disclosure of unpleasant or compromising facts.
53. *Indian file* is one after another. *File* here means a row of men ranged after one another, and *Indian* here means North American Indian. *Indian summer* is another. American expression for the spell of fine weather which occurs there in late autumn.

54. A *jail bird* is a notorious offender who has often been in jail for his crimes.
55. A *laconic speech* is a short pithy speech; a bald statement of fact without any of the embellishments of oratory. Such speech the Spartan warriors, who despised oratory, were wont to indulge in and as Sparta was the capital city of that province of Greece called Laconia, any abrupt, bald, pithy speech came to be called a *laconic speech*.
56. A *laughing-stock* is an object of ridicule, a butt for amusement.
57. A *left-handed compliment* is one of doubtful sincerity, or ambiguous meaning.
58. A *light sleeper* is a person easily awakened from sleep. The opposite is a *heavy sleeper*.
59. *Long-winded* is tedious in speech or argument.
60. A *mealy-mouthed fellow* is a fellow so timid and sneaking that he is afraid to tell the truth in plain language, but speaks with feigned delicacy of speech. Tennyson speaks of one being 'nursed by mealy-mouthed philanthropies'.
61. A *narrow escape* is an escape effected at great risk, an escape involving exposure to serious danger.
62. A *one-sided statement or view* is a statement or view which gives only one side of a case and is therefore only a partial statement.
63. An *open-handed man* is a man generous with his money.
64. An *open mind* is a mind not yet made up. A man is said to have an open mind about a thing when he is waiting for further light before forming a definite opinion regarding it.
65. An *open question* is a matter for discussion and not yet decided.
66. An *open secret* is a secret that has become known.
67. A *pass word* is a word privately agreed on beforehand to be given as a sign before one is allowed to pass.

68. *Passing strange.* The word passing here is equivalent to surpassing, and the phrase means, exceedingly strange.
69. A *pious fraud* is a deception carried out under the plea of religion. It is justly regarded as doubly wicked because it is perpetrated in a holy name or cause.
70. A *practical joke* is a trick played upon a person by which it is sought to put him into a ridiculous position or show him in a ridiculous light. A practical joker sometimes gives grave offence and brings himself into serious trouble.
71. A *random statement* is a statement made without due consideration, a chance guess. It is generally implied by the phrase that the guess is not correct, or that the statement is far from the truth.
72. *Raw recruits* are men enlisted but not yet drilled to be soldiers.
73. A *red letter day* is an auspicious, fortunate day; so called because in the old Christian calendars the holy days or saints' days were marked with red letters, and the holy days were festival days.
74. *Red tape.* Official documents are generally tied with red tape, and so the phrase has come to mean excessive official formality.
75. A *right hand man* is one's chief helper or agent, a man whose active service one cannot do without.
76. A *rough guess* is a guess made without careful calculation, one only approximately correct.
77. A *round robin* is a petition or declaration to which men attach their signatures in a circle so that it may not be known who of them is the leader.
78. *The ruling passion* is the passion or motive which dominates a person's life, as the love of money, desire for popularity.
79. *Scot free* is, exempt from payment, untaxed; and hence, unhurt, safe, without molestation. Scot formerly was the name of a tax or assessment. Hence scot free is literally, free from the scot or tax.

80. *Saesoned timber* is timber so thoroughly dried that all the sap has gone out of it.
81. *Sharp practice* is a recognized euphemism for knavery. The phrase is probably derived from the practice of some unprincipled lawyers who are at pains to manage their cases so as to secure for themselves as much money as possible.
82. *A shooting pain* is a quick, sharp pain, coming suddenly like a shot.
83. *A side issue* is a question only indirectly akin to the question under consideration.
84. *Single blessedness* is a term jocularly applied to the unmarried state.
85. *A sinking fund* is a fund formed by setting aside a specified annual sum which will accumulate and in course of time wipe out a debt.
86. *Small fry* is colloquial for children or insignificant persons.
87. *Small talk* is trivial conversation, gossip.
88. *Spare time* is unoccupeid time, leisure time, time to spare.
89. *A standing joke* is a continuous subject for mirth or ridicule.
90. *Standing water* is stagnant water, as distinguished from running or flowing water.
91. *Stone deaf* is completely deaf.
92. *A strait-laced person* is one who has very rigid principles and manners, and who acts in a narrow-minded way.
93. *Strong language* is severe, angry language.
94. *A swan song*. The swan, though not a singing bird, was formerly believed to sing a sweet song before dying. So when a man just before resignation or retirement makes a statement, it is sometimes called his swan song.
95. *Sworn foes* are bitter enemies.
96. *Tall talk* is a colloquial expression for exaggerated language, especially language that is boastful.
97. *A thankless task* is a work for which, if you perform it, you will get no thanks or credit.

98. *The three R's* are reading, writing, and arithmetic. The third word is pronounced as if the first letter were omitted — 'rithmetic.'
99. A *time-honored* custom is a custom which has been followed for a long time.
100. *Total abstinence* is entire avoidance of the use of alcoholic liquor. They who practise this are called total abstainers or teetotallers.
101. An *untimely end* is premature death.
102. *Virgin soil* is soil which has never yet been cultivated.
103. A *watery grave*. One who dies by drowning is said to have found a watery grave.
104. A *well-read man* is a man of literary culture. One who has read many good authors.
105. A *wet blanket*. A blanket saturated with water if put over a fire will slowly extinguish the fire. Hence the phrase has come to be applied generally to any person or anything who discourages enthusiasm.
106. A *white elephant*. The elephant is an animal so hard to supply with food that he would soon eat all that an ordinary person possesses. Hence, to call a thing a white elephant, means that it is an unprofitable possession.
107. *White heat* is intense heat. Iron when hottest looks white. We also speak of a person being in a white heat when he is in extreme passion.
108. A *white lie* is a harmless and non-malicious untruth.
109. A *wild goose chase* is a foolish, wild, unprofitable adventure, the pursuit of anything not knowing where it will lead one.
110. A *young hopeful* is an ironical expression referring to a naughty boy or a pretentious youth.

FOR NEXT ISSUE
ADJECTIVES, PARTICIPLES,
AND APPROPRIATE PREPOSITIONS