An idiom is a set expression that seems to defy logical grammatical explanation. Native speakers growing up with a language incorporate idioms into their speaking and writing without much difficulty, but non-native speakers often find idiomatic expressions the most difficult parts of learning a new language. Such is certainly the case in learning English.

The difficulty is that you cannot take the words in idiomatic expressions literally and predict meaning based on individual words. For example, when someone offers to “give you a hand,” this does not mean literally that she will remove her hand and offer it to you. And when a friend says that he will “hit the hay,” he means that he is going to bed, not that he plans to strike a bale of hay.

If you are bored with television, why would you not be tired with television? Instead you are tired of television. You are dependent on others yet independent of others. You may wait in line to be seated at a restaurant, but the waitress waits on you, while you wait with patience.

These idiomatic combinations with prepositions may seem strange and perverse, and there are not simple rules for learning them. When in doubt about the use of the appropriate preposition following a word, consult a good dictionary or usage book. (See a list on pages 2 and 3.) Although dictionaries do not list the correct preposition for all nouns, adjectives, and verbs, good dictionaries do list many of the appropriate combinations. Do not look up the preposition but rather the word with which it is used.

The following is an entry from the 2nd edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary* that illustrates the information available about the word *agree* and its idiomatic combinations:

**agree** (ə-greˈ) v.  **agreed, agreeing, agrees.** –*intr.* 1. to grant consent; accede. Used with the infinitive: *He agreed to accompany us.* 2. to come into or be in accord: *The copy agrees with the original.* 3. To be of one opinion. Often used with *with:* *“Didst though not agree with me for a penny?”* (Matthew 20:13). 4. To come to an understanding or to terms. Used with *about* or *on:* *Is it possible to agree on such great problems?* 5. To be suitable; appropriate. Used with *with:* *Spicy food does not agree with him.* 6. Grammar. To correspond in gender, number, case, or person. –*ir.* To grant or concede. Used with noun clause: *He agreed that we should go.* –See Synonyms at assent. [Middle English *agreen*, from Old French *agreer*, from Vulgar Latin *aggratare* (unattested), to be pleasing to: *ad−*, to + *gratus*, beloved, agreeable (see *gwere* in Appendix*).]

**Synonyms:** agree, conform, harmonize, accord, correspond, coincide. These verbs all indicate compatible relationship between people or things. *Agree* may indicate mere lack of incongruity or discord, but often it suggests acceptance of ideas or actions and thus accommodation. *Conform* stresses close resemblance in form, thought, or basic characteristics, sometimes the result of accommodation to established standards. *Harmonize* implies a relationship of unlike things combined or arranged to make a pleasing whole. *Accord* implies close similarity between things or harmonious relationship or both. *Correspond* refers either to actual similarity in form or nature or to similarity in function of unlike things. *Coincide* stresses exact agreement in space, time, or thought.
Below are listed examples of idiomatic combinations that cause difficulty:

- angry with someone
- angry about an event or happening
- differ with a person
- differ about or over a question
- familiar to someone
- familiar with a problem
- put on the stove
- put in the refrigerator
- result from [a cause]
- result in [an effect]
- wait at a place
- wait for a train or a person
- wait on a customer

Much like idiomatic expressions that involve prepositions, some word pairs are troublesome and require careful distinction.

**among/between** – use *among* with three or more entities; *between* with two.

Among the members of the class, the differences between the president and vice president were apparent.

**few/less** – use *few* to name items that can be counted. *Less* refers to general amounts.

With less heat in the dorms, students would have fewer colds.

**number/amount** – use *number* with quantities that can be counted; use *amount* with those that cannot.

The number of pages assigned affects the amount of homework.

---

**Sources for Help with Idioms**

The most useful and popular desk dictionaries:

- *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2nd edition)*
- *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*

Unabridged Dictionaries

- *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*

Specialized Dictionaries on Idioms

- *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*
- *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic Usage*
- *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*
Exercise in Idiom Usage

Insert the preposition that appropriately completes each of the following idiomatic expressions:

1. The choice ___________ Bucknell and F&M was difficult for me.
2. The waitress was so busy that she had difficulty waiting __________ all the customers.
3. After class I waited __________ my roommate who was talking __________ the professor.
4. Some students constantly borrow money __________ their friends.
5. Park the car __________ the street when you arrive, not __________ the driveway.
6. The book is illustrated __________ a famous woodcut artist.
7. The estate was divided __________ his five daughters.
8. He hopes to participate __________ many activities.
9. I was sad to part __________ my adopted family when I left Australia after a year as an exchange student.
10. My brother is susceptible __________ upper respiratory infections.
11. She has time __________ her disposal.
12. The lived __________ South Ben when I first knew them.
13. Bring the tools __________ the tool shed when you leave. Put them here __________ the shelf.
14. Be careful __________ punctuation if you want to receive a good grade.
15. I was astonished __________ John’s attitude.
16. The kitchen is furnished __________ modern equipment.
17. The food processor is useful __________ chopping vegetables.
18. The sermon was followed __________ a hymn.
19. I believe you are familiar __________ the material in this chapter.
20. The dress was copied __________ a Paris model.
21. The sheep, frightened __________ the noise, began to run.
22. His arrival prevented us __________ going.
23. I will speak __________ Mr. Simons __________ a job in his department.
24. My mother always disapproves __________ my boyfriends.
25. The second edition of the book differed significantly __________ the first.
26. My professor was critical __________ my term paper.
27. When hiking in the park, one should beware __________ bears.
28. She was angry __________ her roommate because of the clutter in the room.
29. Her would sooner part __________ his friends than part __________ his Corvette.
30. The writer entrusted me __________ her manuscript.
Answers

1. between
2. on
3. for, with
4. from
5. on, in
6. by
7. among
8. in
9. with
10. to
11. at
12. in
13. into, on
14. with
15. by
16. with
17. in or for
18. by
19. with
20. from
21. by
22. from
23. with, about
24. of
25. from
26. of
27. of
28. with
29. with, with
30. with