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ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

idiom: a commonly used phrase that means something different from the literal meaning of the words

HERE'S HOW

Step 1. Identify the unfamiliar idiom. Many idioms are so common that we use them without thinking. Unfamiliar idioms, however, can be confusing.

Step 2: Look for context clues. If an idiom is unclear, first look for clues to its meaning in the surrounding words. In particular, look for example clues, restatement clues, comparison or contrast clues, or definition clues. Ask yourself: Does anything hint at the meaning of this expression?

Step 3: Try out a meaning. Use the clues to figure out what the idiom means. Then try plugging the meaning into the sentence, or into other sentences to see if it sounds sensible.

Step 4: Use a dictionary. Look up the idiom in a dictionary under the definition of the phrase's main word.

Step 5: Confer. Idioms are figures of speech in common use. If you can't find an idiom in a dictionary, ask a teacher, another adult, or a fellow student what it means.

EXAMPLE: IDIOM

Read the following passage, looking for clues to the meaning of the idiom.

We had been planning an August vacation all along and had even put down a deposit for the cabin. Then Tanya fell out of our tree-house, and broke her ankle and Dad had to take care of her. Tanya's accident really **upset the applecart.**

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
I'm not sure what *upset the applecart* means. Perhaps it's an idiom.	The first sentence talks about a family vacation. The second tells about a fall and an injury. **The vacation plans must have been ruined.**	The family's plans were spoiled or upset by the accident. To "upset the applecart" must mean **"to spoil or interfere with a plan."**	You could look up this idiom in a regular dictionary or in a dictionary of idioms under "*upset*" or "*applecart.*"