# The History Of Popular English Sayings That Don't Seem To Make Sense

## Close But No Cigar

Meaning: Said to someone who falls slightly short of a successful or winning outcome.

Historical Context: The phrase likely originates from the 1920s, [when cigars were handed out as prizes](https://www.rd.com/article/close-but-no-cigar-origin/) at fairs and carnivals. At the time, these games were actually meant for adults, rather than kids, leading to the patently adult prize of a cigar.

As many carnival games seem designed to feel winnable, but then are nearly impossible to actually win, people in the '20s were probably often "close, but no cigar."

## A Laundry List

Meaning: A (typically) long list of items.

Historical Context: Back in the 1800s, more than 2,000 patents were filed for [washing machines](http://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-history-of-laundry-list) in the United States. A new business popped up in turn - commercial laundry services for those who didn't want to buy the pricey new machines but still hated doing their laundry the old-fashioned way (by hand).

To ensure that no customers lost a stray sock, users of the service had to list out the items they were sending to be washed, and a laundry list was born. Of course, listing out each item of clothing was probably almost as tiresome as actually doing the laundry. So in the 1860s, the process was improved by providing customers a handy itemized list of clothing articles where they could fill in a tally of their laundry.

## The Proof Is In The Pudding

Meaning: The true value of something is best determined by using said thing.

Historical Context: This phrase became more confusing over the years as it was shortened [from the original version](https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/origin-of-the-proof-is-in-the-pudding-meaning), which is usually something like "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

While the exact phrase was first recorded in the early 1600s, the idea of tasting a pudding to test it probably dates back to medieval times. These puddings were not of the Jell-O snack pack variety, but savory concoctions of mystery meats like intestines or stomachs that may or may not have been contaminated.

Thus, the only true way to find out if a pudding was good, bad, or straight-up poisonous was to eat it and see for yourself.

## Three Sheets To The Wind

Meaning: Extremely inebriated.

Historical Context: "Three sheets to the wind" comes from [sailing lingo](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/three-sheets-to-the-wind.html) but surprisingly doesn't originate with drunken sailors nor the sails themselves (which look, to many of us, like sheets). The sheets are actually ropes that hold the lower corners of the sails on a ship in place. If one is unfortunate enough to have three sheets loose and flailing in the wind, the sails and the boat will also flail about, much like someone who's had one too many at the bar.

In the 1800s, sailors might refer to someone as anywhere from one to three sheets to the wind, depending on how drunk they were.

## Don't Look A Gift Horse In The Mouth

Meaning: Be grateful for a gift rather than trying to assess its value.

Historical Context: As a horse specialist in the olden days, looking inside the mouth of a horse that was gifted to you would be like publicly examining the amount on a check inside your grandmother's birthday card.

A horse's mouth [changes as it ages](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/dont-look-a-gift-horse-in-the-mouth.html), with new teeth growing in and their existing teeth pushing further forward. To examine the horse's mouth could tell someone the horse's age, and therefore its value.

The saying first appeared in print in English in 1546 as part of a book of proverbs by John Heywood. Heywood collected many sayings of his time in the book, but he probably got this particular phrase from a Latin text, The Letter to the Ephesians, written around 400 CE.

## You Can't Have Your Cake And Eat It Too

Meaning: You must make a choice; you can't have it both ways.

Historical Context: The proverb "you can't have your cake and eat it too" often causes confusion, as most people in possession of a cake tend to eat it. But [similar to an Albanian proverb](https://grammarist.com/phrase/have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too/) saying you can't swim and not get wet, the phrase is pointing out that the choices are mutually exclusive. Once you eat your cake, it's gone; you no longer have it. For some, reversing the order of the phrase makes it clearer. And historically, the idiom has done a fair amount of flip-flopping.

The earliest records of the phrase pop up in the 16th century. In John Heywood's 1546 book of proverbs, he [writes the phrase](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/20/magazine/20FOB-onlanguage-t.html) as "Wolde ye bothe eate your cake, and haue your cake?" It's often put in this order, (eating then having) until 1749, when the clauses are flipped. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the have-then-eat style gained popularity, eventually becoming the better-known version of the aphorism.

The saying had one of its [biggest historic moments](http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002762.html) from this reversal controversy. Ted Kaczynski (AKA the Unabomber) was a diehard member of Team "eat your cake and have it too." It was this unusual wording of the phrase that led to Kaczynski's identification; he used it in both the Unabomber manifesto and a letter he'd written that his brother, David, came across. The case became one of the most famous and groundbreaking applications of "forensic linguistics."

## Happy As A Clam

Meaning: Very happy or content.

Historical Context: [Most historians agree](https://priceonomics.com/why-are-clams-so-damn-happy/) that the phrase "happy as a clam" is actually a shortened version of the idiom, "happy as a clam in the mud at high tide." This mouthful of a phrase is thought to have originated with sailors and shellfish gatherers in the mid-1600s. The shortened version didn't appear until the 1800s.

Clams generally live and reproduce in shallow water. Low tide, when the ocean ebbs furthest from the shore, leaves a clam at its most exposed and vulnerable. A clam at high tide, then, would be safe, and perhaps "happy."

## Mum's The Word

Meaning: Telling someone to keep quiet about something; it is not to be shared.

Historical Context: "Mum" was [actually a word](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/mums-the-word.html) back in the 14th century, originating from the "mmm" humming sound one makes with a closed mouth. Thus, "mum" referred to someone unwilling or unable to speak. But the term wasn't just an old English word; it was also an old English Christmas tradition.

In the Middle Ages, mumming was a holiday activity, sort of like caroling but with silence. Mummers would show up in disguises at people's homes, where they were invited in to dance or play games. The only catch was they couldn't say anything other than "mmm." If this sounds at all familiar, mumming was sometimes referred to as "miming."

Since they were disguised, mummers took on a mischievous role, getting away with things they couldn't while unmasked. The church and the monarchy were not fans of mumming, and Henry V went so far as to threaten potential mummers with imprisonment in 1418. But mummers were gonna mum, and the practice continued through the 17th century when it became more of a public performance than a private in-home show.

The phrase "mum's the word," as it's used now didn't come into play until the 1700s, though a [notable variant](https://grammarist.com/idiom/mums-the-word/) can be found in Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part 2, written in 1592. The line is, "Seal up your lips and give no words but mum."

## I Got My Work Cut Out For Me

Meaning: You have a difficult task ahead of you.

Historical Context: The [earliest iterations](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/have-your-work-cut-out.html) of this phrase in print appear in the 1590s, where "work cut out" seems to mean "work provided." A popular explanation holds that the meaning was connected to tailoring, as a tailor would have all of their fabrics cut and laid out before starting work. However, the earliest uses don't mention tailoring, so it's impossible to say definitively.

The phrase wasn't used with its more [modern meaning](https://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-wor1.htm) until 1843, when it appeared in Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol.

## Rule Of Thumb

Meaning: A general guide or principle, based on experience or estimation rather than exact science.

Historical Context: The phrase "rule of thumb" has a hotly debated history. A long-standing rumor held that the phrase derived from an English law that said a husband could beat his wife, so long as the stick he used [was no thicker than his thumb](https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/rule-thumb-idiom-origins-meaning-phrase-why-do-we-say/). Judge Sir Francis Buller supposedly made the ruling in 1782 and became known as "Judge Thumb."

While men were vaguely allowed to punish their wives in "moderation," there's no concrete evidence that the rule of thumb was ever actually a law nor that this judge ever issued such a statement.

The official origins remain unknown, but [a probable theory](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/rule-of-thumb.html) is that the phrase came about from the many ways a thumb can be used to estimate or measure things. Whether a seamstress roughly estimating an inch of fabric or a brewmaster dipping their thumb into the beer to get the temperature, there are plenty of old-school ways that a "rule of thumb" was likely used.

## Pushing The Envelope

Meaning: To surpass normal limits; to try something daring or risky.

Historical Context: While it might sound like a saying that originated in an office, "pushing the envelope" originally referred to aeronautics. In space flight, the "envelope" refers to performance limits that can't be surpassed safely.

The phrase [made its way](https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/push-the-envelope-idiom-space-aeronautics-origin) into the everyday vernacular when it appeared in Tom Wolfe's 1979 nonfiction book The Right Stuff, which discussed the pilots of experimental rocket-propelled aircraft. The phrase used is "pushing the outside of the envelope."

## The Bee's Knees

Meaning: Something that's very cool or the best.

Historical Context: The bee's knees [origin story](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/the-bees-knees.html) is about as random as the phrase itself. It started in the 18th century as a joke phrase for something that didn't exist. An apprentice might be sent to the store to pick up imaginary items, such as a left-handed hammer, ham trees, or "seven cases of bees' knees."

In the Roaring Twenties, however, the meaning changed. The hip slang of the time was to use nonsense phrases to epitomize something that was excellent or the very best, like "the cat's pajamas" and "the snake's hips." Some of these stuck better than others. The bee's knees also became a cocktail, [probably around the same time](https://www.traveldistilled.com/history-of-the-bees-knees-cocktail/).

## Give Up The Ghost

Meaning: To die or, in the case of an object, to stop working.

Historical Context: "Give up the ghost," like many common expressions, [originates in the Bible](https://www.adefenceofthebible.com/2021/01/14/common-expressions-that-originated-from-the-bible/). In 1535, Miles Coverdale printed the first complete Bible translated into English. [The phrase](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/155500.html) shows up in Acts 12:23, "Immediatly the angell of the LORDE smote him... And he was eaten vp of wormes, and gaue vp the goost."

The meaning clearly seems to be that "the ghost" is the ghost of the subject, who perished. A more [modern translation](https://grammarist.com/idiom/give-up-the-ghost/) might be "giving up one's spirit."

## Take It With A Grain Of Salt

Meaning: Advising one to view or "take" something with skepticism.

Historical Context: The phrase, known as "with a pinch of salt" in British English, is thought to come from [Pliny the Elder](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/take-with-a-grain-of-salt.html) when he was translating an ancient text in 77 CE:

After the defeat of that mighty monarch, Mithridates, Gnaeus Pompeius found in his private cabinet a recipe for an antidote in his own handwriting; it was to the following effect: Take two dried walnuts, two figs, and twenty leaves of rue; pound them all together, with the addition of a grain of salt; if a person takes this mixture fasting, he will be proof against all poisons for that day.

The text has been interpreted as an antidote to poison. Thus, the addition of a grain of salt would mitigate injurious effects, or have a protective effect. The meaning evolved as scholars studied Ancient Greek texts, such as Pliny's, and was used in English in the 17th century.

Still, the idiom seemed to disappear for several centuries until it popped up again in the 20th century with its modern usage. So it's probably best to take any exact origin story with... a grain of salt.

## Break A Leg

Meaning: Good luck; usually said to someone involved in some type of performance.

Historical Context: The theatrical world has many long-held superstitions, one of which is the usage of the term "break a leg" instead of wishing someone luck. The theory goes that by wishing someone misfortune, like a broken limb, the opposite will occur. How this phrase came to be, however, [is less clear](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/break-a-leg.html). The theater version first popped up in print in a US newspaper in 1948.

During WWII, members of the German Luftwaffe had a version of the saying they'd use before flights, "Hals und Beinbruch," which means "break your neck and leg." It's possible that these ironically used parting words came from a Hebrew phrase, "hatzlakha u-brakha," meaning "success and blessing." Around this time, Jewish people made up a significant portion of the United States theater community, making one of the most plausible theories that the idiom made its way to English from earlier German and Yiddish versions.

However, of all the idioms, "break a leg" has one of the highest numbers of variant (and less plausible) explanations put forward. One theory suggests that "breaking a leg" refers to bending in a bow or curtsy, as one would do after a stirring performance. [Another holds](https://transcendencetheatre.org/break-a-leg/) that it dates back to Ancient Greece, when audiences would stomp their feet instead of clapping, and perhaps break a leg. Or to the Elizabethan era, when audiences would bang chairs against the ground and break a chair leg.

A final interesting yet unlikely theory is that the phrase derives from the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, as John Wilkes Booth broke his leg while leaping off the balcony at Ford's Theatre.

## Bob's Your Uncle

Meaning: Used to conclude something that was simple or easy - a variant of "and there you have it."

Historical Context: While the origin of "Bob's your uncle" isn't 100% clear, the [most popular theory](https://books.google.com/books?id=S1YkAQAAMAAJ&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=bob's+your+uncle) posits that Bob was actually Prime Minister Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury.

In 1887, this Bob appointed his nephew, Arthur Balfour, as Chief Secretary for Ireland. Apparently, people didn't take well to this bit of nepotism, as Arthur's main qualification for the job was "Bob's your uncle."

## Happy As Larry

Meaning: Used to describe someone who is very, very happy.

Historical context: This phrase is often used in New Zealand and Australia, which is probably where it came about, sometime [in the late 19th century](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/as-happy-as-larry.html). A common theory is that the phrase originated [from a boxer](https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/special-shows/the-mystery-hour/words/why-are-we-happy-as-larry-who-was-larry-42317/) named Larry Foley who never lost a fight and at one point won a boxing prize of about $150,000. A subsequent New Zealand newspaper article purportedly used the headline "Happy As Larry."

An alternate origin story suggests that "Larry" derives from the slang term "larrikin," which refers to a rough, hooligan-type.