



# 21 Common Dog Idioms



## That Native Speakers Use

### Word Meaning

**dog** - noun

an animal with four legs and a tail, often kept as a pet or trained for work, for example, hunting or guarding buildings. There are many types of dogs, some of which are wild.

- I take my **dog** for a walk every morning.

#### Some other ways to use **dog**

the dogs [plural] (British English, informal) greyhound racing

- David just went to **the dogs** again. It's his third time this week. I wish he'd stop gambling, he never wins.

(especially North American English, informal) a thing of low quality; a failure

- I usually like that author but his last book was an absolute **dog**.

(informal, offensive) an offensive way of describing a woman who is not considered attractive

- Emily was a **dog** in high school, but now she looks absolutely gorgeous. She could be a runway model.

used, especially after an **adjective**, to describe a man who has done something bad

- Who is the **dirty dog** that stole my sandwich from the fridge?

Word Origin

Old English docga, of unknown origin.

[dog\\_at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com](http://dog_at.OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com)

### DOG Idioms

#### Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

This expression is used to advise against actions that might cause problems. If things are fine right now, we shouldn't change them if we think there is a danger that things may become worse.

The idea is that if a dog is sleeping and we wake him up, he may become angry. It's better to just let him sleep.

- Jill: "Should I ask the boss if he's upset with me? I came in late this morning?"  
Jane: "If he hasn't said anything to you, I wouldn't mention it. Maybe he didn't notice. **Just let sleeping dogs lie.**"  
= If the boss didn't say anything you shouldn't mention it, there is no need to mention it.

### **You Can't Teach An Old Dog New Tricks**

You can't teach an old dog new tricks

This idiom means it is difficult to make someone change the way they do something. Especially when they have been doing it the same way for a long time. It is much more difficult to teach an older dog than it is to teach a puppy.

- Do you want to teach your grandfather to use a computer? He is 84. **You can't teach an old dog new tricks**, you know.  
= It will be hard to teach your 84-year-old grandfather how to use a computer.

### **Every Dog Has Its Day**

This idiom means that everyone will get a chance to do something at some time – OR – have an opportunity to be great.

It comes from a time when dogs were thought of as very low animals.

But even though you are low now, you will have a chance to do something great someday, even for only one day.

- You didn't make the soccer team this season but keep practicing. **Every dog has its day.**  
= Keep trying and your chance to make the soccer team will come.
- I lost my tennis match today but I'll have another chance next month and **every dog has its day.** I will show everyone how good I am.

### **Barking Up The Wrong Tree**

This expression is used when someone has the wrong idea and they are wasting their time.

Dogs often like to chase cats or other animals that will run up a tree for safety. If the animal escapes from the tree but the dog doesn't realize it, he keeps barking even though the tree is empty.

We say he is barking up the wrong tree. His idea is not correct, he is wasting his time.

- Hector had nothing to do with the robbery – the police are really **barking up the wrong tree** this time.  
= I think the police are wasting their time with Hector. He didn't do it.
- Diane has a boyfriend. You could ask her out but I think you're **barking up the wrong tree**.  
= It's a waste of time to ask her out because she already has a boyfriend.

### **Work Like A Dog**

This expression means to work very very hard.

It comes from a time when dogs were work animals that had a job to do. They weren't just pets and they had to work very hard to earn their food.

- My team at the office **worked like dogs** all December to prepare our year-end report. We are all so tired!
- It's been a hard month, I have been **working like a dog**.

### **Sick As A Dog**

- Last Friday I had to cancel my dentist appointment because I felt terrible. I had a headache and an upset stomach. I was **sick as a dog**.

Can you guess what the expression "sick as a dog" means? If you are sick as a dog you are very ill.

- Jonathan drank too much at the party last night and today he's **sick as a dog!**

### **Someone's Bark Is Worse Than Their Bite**

If someone's bark is worse than their bite it means they talk tough but they're actually not. They act dangerous but their words are stronger than their actions.

- The Prime Minister talks tough but he gets pushed around by other leaders all the time. Unfortunately, **his bark is worse than his bite**. I wish you would be more forceful, especially when dealing with bigger countries.
- The boxer talked a lot to reporters about how he was going to dominate the fight. On Fight Night he was knocked out in the fourth round, it seems like **his bark was much worse than his bite**.

### **(Be) In The Doghouse**

We say that a person is in the doghouse if they've done something to displease another person, especially someone they are close to.

- My wife is really mad at me. I came home late last night because I went drinking with my friends after work. I missed the nice dinner she prepared for us. I'm **in the doghouse** now.  
= My wife is not happy with me right now.

### **Puppy dog eyes**

If someone looks at you with puppy dog eyes they want your attention or your affection. Puppies have large round eyes that can cause us to desire to pet or feed them. We want to give them our attention and affection.

- I can't say no to my daughter when she looks at me with those **puppy dog eyes**.

### **Underdog**

An underdog is a person, team, country, etc. that is considered to be weaker and less likely to be successful or win a competition.

This term comes from the 1800s when dog fights were common in parts of the world. The dog who lost the fight would be called the underdog.

- I don't often gamble but when I bet on sports I always bet on the **underdog**. The payout is much higher if they win.  
= I bet money on the team that is less likely to win.
- She was a popular politician who always fought for the **underdogs**.  
= The politician always took care of the people who needed help, people who are not so successful

### **Be Raining Cats And Dogs**

(informal) to be raining heavily

- When I woke up this morning it **was raining cats and dogs**. I'm glad I have the day off.

You can find this idiom in my collection of Weather Idioms at the post here: [29 Common English Weather Idioms \(Real examples you can use\)](#)

### **A Dog And Pony Show**

(North American English, informal, disapproving) an event that is planned only in order to impress people so that they will support or buy something

- The vice president's visit to the veteran's hospital was just **a dog and pony show** as far as I'm concerned. I want to see the government take real action to support injured veterans.

### **(A Case Of) Dog Eat Dog**

a situation in business, politics, etc. where there is a lot of competition and people are willing to harm each other in order to succeed

- It's getting harder to survive in this **dog eat dog** world. I'm glad I'm surrounded by friends and family.

### **A Dog's Breakfast/Dinner**

(British English, informal) a thing that has been done badly

SYNONYM mess

- After painting my living room I noticed streaks and uneven lines everywhere. The walls look like **a dog's breakfast**. I should have paid a professional to paint the room for me.

### **A Dog's Life**

an unhappy life, full of problems or unfair treatment

- There is so much competition these days with big chain coffee shops opening everywhere. Running your own small cafe is **a dog's life**.

### **Go To The Dogs**

(informal) to get into a very bad state (Often used with the past participle GONE)

- The school has **gone to the dogs** since our last principal retired. I miss him. The new principal doesn't seem to know what he's doing.

Learn everything you need to know about the Past Participle verb tense at my post here: [Use Past Participles The Right Way \(25 examples + PDF list\)](#)

### **The Hair Of The Dog (That Bit You)**

(informal) alcohol that you drink in order to make you feel better when you have drunk too much alcohol the night before

- Well Scott you look really hungover today, I think you need **the hair of the dog that bit you**. Let me pour you a drink.

Does idiom is often used with "a little."

- It looks like you could use a little **hair of the dog that bit you**.

### **Have A Dog In The Fight**

(North American English also have a dog in the race/hunt)

(informal) to be involved in a situation so that you will gain or lose according to the result - often used with DON'T.

- I don't live in that city so I'm not worried about who becomes the next mayor. I **don't have a dog in that fight**.

### **Like A Dog With A Bone**

(informal) very determined and refusing to give up

- As soon as the detective had a clue, she would work hard until the case was solved. She

### **The Tail (Is) Wagging The Dog**

used to describe a situation in which the most important aspect is being influenced and controlled by somebody/something that is not as important

- Most big decisions I made by cabinet members, not the president. It's **the tail wagging the dog**.

### **Throw Somebody To The Dogs**

to allow somebody to suffer or be punished in an unfair way, as if they have no value

- If the project succeeds my boss will take all the glory, if it fails he will **throw the rest of us to the dogs**.



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