

The following idioms all contain the word “hand”. Read them carefully and try to understand the idioms—in bold type—from their context.

1. New York is a very big city, but I’ve been living here for over ten years and I **know** the place **like the back of my hand**.
2. The new law clearly favoured the rich, so it was obvious that the Conservatives had **had a hand in** writing it.
3. I told my brother that I needed him because I wouldn’t be able to move all the furniture on my own, but he refused to **give me a hand**.
4. What with her full-time job, three school-age children and her piano lessons, Judy **has her hands full**.
5. After the murderer was acquitted for lack of evidence, the victim’s parents decided to **take the law into their own hands** and hire a contract killer to murder him.
6. The big boss said that if I accepted his offer, he would **give me a free hand**: I would be able to recruit whoever I wanted, choose my working hours and even work from home.
7. The meeting had got off to a bad start, and when a few shareholders started to interrupt the speaker, it became clear that things would soon **get out of hand**.
8. Jerzy came in first in last year’s race; he’s so much better than his challengers that I’m sure he will **win** this year’s championship **hands down**.

Now associate each idiom with its definition:

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| 1) know something like the back of your hand | a) become impossible to manage |
| 2) have a hand in something | b) help someone do something |
| 3) give someone a hand | c) be very busy |
| 4) have your hands full | d) allow someone to do what they want |
| 5) take the law into your own hands | e) know something very well |
| 6) give someone a free hand | f) be involved in something |
| 7) get out of hand | g) win easily |
| 8) win hands down | h) to punish someone illegally |

1. e know something like the back of your hand = know something very well

New York is a very big city, but I've been living here for over ten years and I **know** the place **like the back of my hand**.

New York est une très grande ville, mais j'y vis depuis plus de dix ans et je la connais comme ma poche.

SYNONYMES : **know something inside out** ou **know something backwards** (ex. : Miles knows his poem backwards *Miles connaît sa poésie sur le bout des doigts*) ou encore **know your way around a place** *bien connaître un endroit*.

CONTRAIRE : **not know the first thing about something, not have a clue about something** *ne connaître strictement rien de quelque chose*.

2. f have a hand in something = be involved in something

The new law clearly favoured the rich, so it was obvious that the Conservatives had **had a hand in** writing it.

La nouvelle loi favorisait manifestement les riches, et donc il était évident que les Conservateurs avaient participé à / joué un rôle dans / influencé sa conception.

VARIANTE : **take a hand in something**.

Dans d'autres contextes l'expression se traduira plutôt par être mêlé à, être impliqué ou même *tremper*, par exemple dans un scandale.

SYNONYME : **play a part in something** *intervenir / jouer un rôle dans quelque chose*.

NOTER AUSSI : **have a big hand in something** *jouer un rôle important dans quelque chose, être pour beaucoup dans quelque chose* (ex. : The US had a big hand in triggering this crisis *Les États-Unis sont pour beaucoup dans le déclenchement de cette crise*).

3. b give someone a hand = help someone do something

I told my brother that I needed him because I wouldn't be able to move all the furniture on my own, but he refused to **give me a hand**.

J'ai dit à mon frère que j'avais besoin de lui parce que je ne pourrais pas déplacer tout le mobilier tout seul, mais il a refusé de me donner un coup de main.

VARIANTE : **lend someone a hand**, ou encore **give / lend someone a helping hand**.

NOTER AUSSI : **give someone a leg-up**, qui signifie d'abord *faire la courte échelle* et par extension : *donner un coup de pouce à quelqu'un, voire mettre le pied à l'étrier à quelqu'un*.

Ne pas confondre avec : **give someone a big hand** qui signifie *applaudir* (ex. : Let's give Mr Wilkins a big hand, everyone! *Applaudissons tous bien fort M Wilkins !*)

4. c have your hands full = be very busy

What with her full-time job, three school-age children and her piano lessons, Judy **has her hands full**.

Avec son travail à temps complet, trois enfants d'âge scolaire et ses cours de piano, Judy est débordée / submergée.

SYNONYMES : **have a lot on your plate** ou **be up to your ears / eyes in work** ou **be snowed under with work**.

5. h take the law into your own hands = punish someone illegally

After the murderer was acquitted for lack of evidence, the victim's parents decided to **take the law into their own hands** and hire a contract killer to murder him.

Après que le meurtrier fut acquitté pour manque de preuves, les parents de la victime ont décidé de se faire justice (soi-même) / jouer les justiciers et d'engager un tueur à gages pour le liquider.

On appelle **vigilante** une personne qui appartient à un de ces groupes d'auto-défense qui parcourent les quartiers de certaines villes, aux États-Unis ou en Afrique du Sud par exemple.

6. d give someone a free hand = allow someone to do what they want

The big boss said that if I accepted his offer, he would **give me a free hand**: I would be able to recruit whoever I wanted, choose my working hours and even work from home.

Le grand patron m'a dit que si j'acceptais son offre, il me donnerait carte blanche / me laisserait le champ libre : je pourrais recruter qui je voulais, choisir mes horaires de travail et même travailler chez moi.

SYNONYMES : **give someone free rein / full rein / a blank cheque**.

CONTRAIRE : **have your hands tied** avoir les mains liées ou **be tied hand and foot** être pieds et poings liés.

NOTER AUSSI : **have a free hand** avoir le champ libre

7. a get out of hand = become impossible to manage

The meeting had got off to a bad start, and when a few shareholders started to interrupt the speaker, it became clear that things would soon **get out of hand**.

La réunion avait mal démarré, et quand quelques actionnaires se sont mis à interrompre l'orateur, il est devenu clair que la situation allait bientôt devenir incontrôlable / dégénérer, dérapier.

SYNONYMES : **get out of control** ou **become unmanageable**.

8. g win hands down = win easily

Jerzy came in first in last year's race; he's so much better than his challengers that I'm sure he will **win** this year's championship **hands down**.

Jerzy est arrivé premier de la course de l'an dernier ; il est tellement meilleur que ses concurrents que je suis sûr qu'il gagnera le championnat de cette année haut la main / brillamment.

SYNONYME : **win with flying colours**, expression que l'on emploie aussi pour quelqu'un qui réussit un examen (ex. : Nasreen passed her exam with flying colours *Nasreen a réussi son examen avec brio*).

Notes personnelles

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Read these examples carefully and use these words to complete the definitions that follow:

dangerous, discovery, mind, position, realistic,
successful, superior, widespread

1. Dyson knew his revolutionary vacuum cleaner would be a hit, but it took twenty years for his project to really **get off the ground**.
 - When something gets off the ground, it starts to be
2. As the recession deepens and people feel more and more insecure, extremist views **are gaining ground** on both the left and the right.
 - If a movement or a trend gains ground, it becomes more
3. Ingrid's brothers tried to discourage her from embarking on such a risky enterprise, but she **stood her ground** and now she's at the head of a thriving business.
 - If you stand your ground, you refuse to change your or your position about something.
4. Our firm **broke new ground** when it opened a subsidiary in Spain, something none of its competitors had ever thought of doing.
 - If you break new ground, you make a or do something that has not been done before.
5. Poverty is the **breeding ground** on which religious extremism thrives, as you can see in the slums of big cities from Cairo to Manila.
 - A breeding ground is a place where something, especially something, is able to develop.
6. Everyone found it very difficult to understand Jordan's position because he **shifted his ground** several times in the course of the discussion.
 - If you shift your ground, you change your about a subject.
7. When debating sensitive moral issues such as euthanasia or same-sex marriage, many people tend to **take the moral high ground**, especially those whose reasoning is based on religious arguments.
 - Someone who takes the moral high ground argues in a way that makes them look morally to their opponents.
8. Tancred often comes up with very good ideas but he doesn't **have his feet on the ground** and the result is that he hardly ever manages to convince the rest of the team.
 - If you have your feet on the ground, you are

1. When something gets off the ground, it starts to be **successful**.

Dyson knew his revolutionary vacuum cleaner would be a hit, but it took twenty years for his project to really **get off the ground**.

Dyson savait que son aspirateur révolutionnaire aurait du succès, mais il a fallu vingt ans pour que son projet décolle, démarre vraiment.

SYNONYME : **take off**, qui s'emploie à propos d'un avion, mais aussi d'un projet, de l'économie d'un pays etc.

2. If a movement or a trend gains ground, it becomes more **widespread**.

As the recession deepens and people feel more and more insecure, extremist views **are gaining ground** on both the left and the right.

Alors que la récession empire et que les gens se sentent de plus en plus menacés, les opinions extrémistes gagnent du terrain / prennent de l'ampleur à gauche comme à droite.

SYNONYMES : **gain momentum** ou **gain impetus** ou **gather pace**.

CONTRAIRES : **lose ground / momentum / impetus** ou **run out of steam**
perdre du terrain, s'essouffler (ex. : Initially, the independence movement seemed bound to win the referendum but it soon ran out of steam
 Au départ, le mouvement indépendantiste semblait être certain de remporter le référendum, mais il s'est vite essoufflé).

3. If you stand your ground, you refuse to change your **mind** or your position about something.

Ingrid's brothers tried to discourage her from embarking on such a risky enterprise, but she **stood her ground** and now she's at the head of a thriving business.

Les frères d'Ingrid ont essayé de la dissuader de s'embarquer dans une entreprise aussi risquée, mais elle a campé sur ses positions / tenu bon et maintenant elle est à la tête d'une affaire florissante.

VARIANTE : **hold your ground**.

SYNONYMES : **fight your corner** ou **stick to your guns**.

4. If you break new ground, you make a **discovery** or do something that has not been done before.

Our firm **broke new ground** when it opened a subsidiary in Spain, something none of its competitors had ever thought of doing.

Notre entreprise a innové quand elle a ouvert une filiale en Espagne, ce qu'aucun de ses concurrents n'avait jamais pensé à faire.

VARIANTE : **break fresh ground**.

De cet idiome est dérivé l'adjectif **groundbreaking révolutionnaire**, souvent employé au sujet d'une nouvelle technologie. On dit d'une découverte majeure que c'est **a breakthrough** une percée.

5. A breeding ground is a place where something, especially something **dangerous**, is able to develop.

Poverty is the **breeding ground** on which religious extremism thrives, as you can see in the slums of big cities from Cairo to Manila.

La pauvreté est le terreau sur lequel prospère l'extrémisme religieux, comme on le voit dans les taudis des grandes villes, du Caire à Manille.

breed = se reproduire, se multiplier. Plus rarement, l'expression peut avoir un sens positif et se traduire par : terrain favorable, pépinière, vivier (par exemple de terroristes).

NOTER AUSSI : **hotbed** foyer qui peut avoir des connotations positives (ex. : a hotbed of creative businesses une pépinière d'entreprises innovantes).

6. If you shift your ground, you change your **position** about a subject.

Everyone found it very difficult to understand Jordan's position because he **shifted his ground** several times in the course of the discussion.

Tout le monde a eu du mal à comprendre la position de Jordan parce qu'il a changé son fusil d'épaule plusieurs fois au cours de la discussion.

NOTER AUSSI : **change tack** virer de bord et par extension changer de tactique, renverser la vapeur et **change course** changer de cap (ex. : As economic growth was threatening to slow down as a result of the austerity plan, the government decided to change course and boost demand *Alors que la croissance économique menaçait de ralentir en raison du plan d'austérité, le gouvernement décida de changer de cap pour gonfler la demande*).

7. Someone who takes the moral high ground argues in a way than makes them look morally **superior** to their opponents.

When debating sensitive moral issues such as euthanasia or same-sex marriage, many people tend to **take the moral high ground**, especially those whose reasoning is based on religious arguments.

Lorsqu'ils discutent de problèmes délicats comme l'euthanasie ou le mariage gay, beaucoup de gens se mettent au-dessus de la mêlée, surtout ceux dont le raisonnement se fonde sur des arguments religieux.

VARIANTES : **claim / seize the moral high ground**.

NOTER AUSSI : **get on your high horse** *monter sur ses grands chevaux* (ex. : If she gets on her high horse, it's probably because she's short of arguments *Si elle monte sur ses grands chevaux, c'est probablement parce qu'elle est à court d'arguments*), et l'expression un peu ancienne **be in high dudgeon** *se sentir offensé dans sa dignité*.

8. If you have your feet on the ground, you are **realistic**.

Tancred often comes up with very good ideas but he doesn't **have his feet on the ground** and the result is that he hardly ever manages to convince the rest of the team.

Tancred a souvent de très bonnes idées, mais il n'a pas les pieds sur terre et le résultat, c'est qu'il n'arrive presque jamais à convaincre le reste de l'équipe.

SYNONYME : **have a good head on your shoulders**.

CONTRAIRE : **have your head in the clouds** *avoir la tête dans les nuages*.

Notes personnelles

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