

Say What You Mean: Mastering Idioms for the ACT

Idiomatic Prepositional Phrases, Gerund and Infinitive Idioms

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade	**Time Frame**	2-3 class periods
Subject	English/Language Arts	**Duration**	150 minutes
Course	A.P. Language and Composition		

Essential Question

How does grammar enhance your writing? How will understanding the role of idioms help ACT performance?

Summary

Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings extend beyond their individual components and don't always follow standard grammatical rules. In this lesson, students will master three critical idiom types that frequently appear on the ACT English subtest: prepositional, infinitive, and gerund idioms. Understanding these patterns is essential for ACT success because they represent some of the most commonly tested elements in usage and rhetoric questions. Using George Orwell's, "Shooting an Elephant" as the text in this focused approach, students will directly boost their test readiness and overall ACT English performance.

Snapshot

Engage

Students listen to determine whether sentences are correct or incorrect using the Sounds Right, Sounds Off strategy.

Explore

Students categorize Card Sort phrases based on commonalities they discover.

Explain

Students define types of idioms as seen on the ACT using the 8-Up strategy.

Extend

Students identify different types of idioms in an excerpt from George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," by answering ACT style questions.

Evaluate

Students write a short narrative including examples of the three types of idioms and peer edit a partner's

narrative identifying their examples of the idioms.

Standards

ACT College and Career Readiness Standards - English (6-12)

USG 304: Use idiomatically appropriate prepositions in simple contexts
USG 403: Use idiomatically appropriate prepositions, especially in combination with verbs (e.g., long for, appeal to)
USG 404: Recognize and correct expressions that deviate from idiomatic English
USG 702: Use idiomatically and contextually appropriate prepositions in combination with verbs in situations involving sophisticated language or complex concepts

Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts (Grade 11)

11.5.W.1: Students will write using correct mechanics.
11.5.W.2: Students will compose simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences and questions, including the use of phrases and clauses, to signal differing relationships among ideas.

Oklahoma Academic Standards: English Language Arts (Grade 12)

12.5.R.1: Apply their knowledge of syntax (e.g., parallel structure, active and passive voice, and phrases/clauses) to analyze and evaluate a variety of texts, understanding that usage and convention change over time.
12.5.W.2: Demonstrate command of Standard American English (i.e., grammar, mechanics, and usage) in writing, presentations, and/or multimodal literacies to convey specific meanings and ideas, intentionally departing from standard usage to achieve a specific effect.

Attachments

- ACT Challenge (Teacher Guide)—Say What You Mean.docx
- ACT Challenge (Teacher Guide)—Say What You Mean.pdf
- ACT Challenge_Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean.docx
- ACT Challenge_Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean.pdf
- Idiom Workout—Say What You Mean - Spanish.docx
- Idiom Workout—Say What You Mean - Spanish.pdf
- Idiom Workout—Say What You Mean.docx
- Idiom Workout—Say What You Mean.pdf
- Idioms Card Sort—Say What You Mean - Spanish.docx
- Idioms Card Sort—Say What You Mean - Spanish.pdf
- Idioms Card Sort—Say What You Mean.docx
- Idioms Card Sort—Say What You Mean.pdf
- Lesson Slides—Say What You Mean.pptx
- Shooting an Elephant (Teacher Guide)—Say What You Mean.docx
- Shooting an Elephant (Teacher Guide)—Say What You Mean.pdf
- Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean copy - Spanish.docx
- Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean copy - Spanish.pdf
- Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean .docx
- Shooting an Elephant —Say What You Mean .pdf
- Sounds Right, Sounds Off—Say What You Mean - Spanish.docx
- Sounds Right, Sounds Off—Say What You Mean - Spanish.pdf
- Sounds Right, Sounds Off—Say What You Mean.docx
- Sounds Right, Sounds Off—Say What You Mean.pdf
- Tips for Tackling Idioms —Say What You Mean.docx
- Tips for Tackling Idioms —Say What You Mean.pdf
- What Does it Mean—Say What You Mean - Spanish.docx
- What Does it Mean—Say What You Mean - Spanish.pdf
- What Does it Mean—Say What You Mean.docx
- What Does it Mean—Say What You Mean.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Sounds Right, Sounds Off handout (attached; one per pair)
- Idioms Card Sort cards (attached; see preparation note)
- What Does It Mean handout (attached; one per student)
- Idiom Workout handout (attached; one per student; optional)
- Shooting an Elephant handout (attached; one per student)
- Shooting an Elephant (Teacher Guide) handout (attached; teacher copy)
- ACT Challenge: Shooting an Elephant handout (attached; one per student; optional)
- ACT Challenge (Teacher Guide) handout (attached; teacher copy; optional)
- Sticky notes
- Highlighters (optional)
- Pen/Pencil

10 minutes

Preparation

Card sort

Print and prepare the attached Idioms Card Sort and the Idioms Card Sort Key. Print on heavy or card stock paper if possible and cut both pages of cards to create one set for each group of two students. For example, if your class size is thirty, prepare at least 15 card sort sets. (Tip: many teachers find it helpful to place card sort sets in small sandwich bags for reuse.)

40 minutes

Engage

Use the attached **Lesson Slides** to facilitate this lesson. Transition through **slides 2-4** to review the title, essential questions, and lesson objectives in as much detail as you think necessary.

Ask students to find a partner. Distribute a copy of the **Sounds Right, Sounds Off** handout to each pair. Display **slide 5** and introduce the Sounds Right? Sounds Off? strategy. Explain to students that they will be taking turns reading each sentence aloud. One student will read while the other listens and responds with either "Sounds Right" or "Sounds Off." Instruct students to check off their answer on the sheet and be prepared to discuss why they chose that answer when they get back to the large group. Give students time to evaluate each sentence. Then ask them to go back through and double-check their answers, discussing as they read.

Move to **slide 6** and use the Sounds Right, Sounds Off Answer Key on the slide to facilitate a class discussion. Discuss answers to the handout and the follow-up questions as a class.

30 minutes

Explore

Display **slide 7** to introduce the Card Sort strategy. Place students into groups of two. Then, pass out the prepared **Idioms Card Sort** sets and a few sticky notes to each pair. Ask each student pair to group the cards that are similar and talk about their description for each grouping they create. Instruct students to then use the sticky notes to create their own labels for each group. Allow 10 minutes for this activity. Ask each group to share how they labeled each group and why. Use the card sort answers on **slides 8-10** to help facilitate the class discussion.

Teacher's Note: Card Sort Scaffolding

If you're seeing students struggle after about five minutes, tell the students that there are only three categories.

40 minutes

Explain

Transition to **slide 11** and pass out the **What Does it Mean** handout to each group. Ask students to read the definitions and examples looking for patterns as they read. Then, give them time to create their own interpretations of the definitions for each type of idiom. Allow students time to work.

Transition to **slide 12** and introduce students to the instructional strategy 8 Up. Tell students that, as a class, they will be creating a group definition for each type of idiom, but first they will create definitions with their small group, then in larger groups, before finally coming together as a class.

Divide your class into pairs. Instruct students to share their definitions with their partner. Together, they should come to a consensus on one set of definitions for the different types of idioms. Start the 4 Minute K20 Timer.

Once time is up, move to **slide 13** and have pairs partner up with another pair and share their responses. You should now have about four larger groups. Together, they should take their responses and combine or synthesize them into a new set of definitions. Start the timer.

Once time is up, move to **slide 14** and have groups partner up with another group and share their responses. Together, they should take their responses and combine or synthesize them into a new set of definitions. Start the timer. Move to **slide 15**. Have the large groups share their definitions with one another and as a whole class decide on one set of definitions.

Teacher's Note: Additional Resources

This might be a good place to discuss the **Idiom ACT Prep Resource** handout. Don't forget to emphasize that there are common idiomatic patterns but NO set rules.

Attaching these to students' Google Classroom or other LMS so they have easy access to review would also be advised. Sharing these tips in a parent newsletter is a great way to communicate about the importance of preparing for the ACT as well.

40 minutes

Extend

Teacher's Note: Scaffolding Modification

If your students need more scaffolding, consider having them work through the **Idiom Workout** handout individually then check with a partner before going over the answers all together.

Display **slide 16**. Distribute the **Shooting an Elephant** handout. This is an excerpt from George Orwell's nonfiction essay, "Shooting an Elephant" modified to replicate ACT style passages. Explain that students will have only four minutes to read and answer the questions according to ACT best practices. If needed, feel free to elaborate further by explaining that with the 2025 ACT updates, the English section is expected to have 5 passages with 10 questions each (50 total). Students will have 35 minutes, about 42 seconds per question. For this practice, we've shortened the number of questions to help students build stamina. Once the timer runs out, transition through **slides 17-21** and discuss the answers as a class.

Teacher's Note: ACT Best Practices

This activity reflects the newest enhancement changes ACT announced Summer 2025. For the latest information we encourage you to visit their website: ACT.org . Also, for more helpful ACT practice check out our Power Up: English ACT Prep 10-Week Series where you will find ten 35-minute activities focused on English ACT standards.

Teacher's Note: Optional Extension

For those students who need a challenge, have them work with a partner to identify the idioms in the essay, "Shooting an Elephant," using the Categorical Highlighting strategy. Unhide **slide 22** and explain that they will highlight each type of idiom (prepositional, gerund, and infinitive) in different colors. Students should discuss their justifications as they work together. Use the provided **Shooting an Elephant (Teacher Guide)** handout as a reference.

40 minutes

Evaluate

Move to **slide 23** and display the writing prompt for students: *Write about a time where you were in conflict between your conscience and what others might think of you.* Explain that students will write a short narrative with at least two examples of each type of idiom. Allow them time to work.

After students are done, move to **slide 24** and have them exchange their papers with a partner digitally using classroom norms. With their partner, have students use the instructional strategy Margin Mates to peer edit their partner's narrative using the "comments" feature. Remind students that they should be able to identify two examples each of the three types of idioms.

After students have given their feedback to their partner, move to **slide 25** and have students complete the Exit Ticket by reflecting on idioms and ACT practice.

Follow-Up

For additional ACT practice, we encourage you to provide students a copy of the **ACT Challenge: Shooting an Elephant** handout which uses the same excerpt but is accompanied with different questions. These questions are more akin to what students will see on the actual ACT test as they are varied in topic and are closer to the estimated number of questions per passage. Use the provided **ACT Challenge (Teacher Guide)** handout to help review and explain the correct answers.

Resources

- ACT. (n.d.). ACT Education Corp. https://www.act.org/
- K20 Center. (2021, September 21). *4 Minute Timer* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/kpCsfuvzQeY?feature=shared

- K20 Center. (n.d.). 8-up. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/2494
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Bell ringers and exit tickets. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/125
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Card sort. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/147
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Categorical highlighting. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/192

- K20 Center. (n.d.). Margin mates. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/5116
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Sounds right? Sounds off? Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/4991