Idioms

Nuance, register and figurative meaning

Precise figurative meanings

A double-edged sword has both advantages and disadvantages. A grey area is an unclear or uncertain situation. The tip of the iceberg is the small, visible part of a larger problem.

Work and cooperation

Pull your weight means do your fair share. Cut corners means save effort or money at the expense of quality. Move the goalposts means change the requirements during a process; a stumbling block is an obstacle.

Views and arguments

Play devil's advocate means test a view by arguing the opposite position. Sit on the fence means avoid taking a clear side. Take something with a pinch of salt means treat it with scepticism.

Register and evaluation

A storm in a teacup dismisses a dispute as exaggerated. A bitter pill to swallow describes an unpleasant fact that is hard to accept. Idioms often express judgement; choose them carefully in formal writing.

Study the pattern, then the meaning

Compare the examples. Identify the rule and explain why it fits the situation. Create a new example of your own, then check that its meaning and grammatical form agree.