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# Idioms and Figurative Phrases

Some phrases have meanings that are distinct from those of the individual words in them. These phrases are called **idioms**. For example, you may say that someone “came down with the flu.” *Came down* is an idiom that means “became ill.” It has nothing to do with the literal meaning of *came* or *down*.

**Figurative phrases** are sometimes called idioms, too. They are colorful phrases that have meanings apart from the individual words in them. For example, you may say that a person is “just spinning her wheels.” By comparing a person to a car that is stuck in snow, you mean that she isn’t making any progress.

Read the passage. Then answer the questions that follow.

The ad offered ten top-of-the-line DVDs for only \$4.99! Roger was on cloud nine until he showed the ad to his mom. She burst his bubble by reading the fine print. Roger would have to buy 10 more DVDs at full price, and the shipping and handling fees cost an arm and a leg. “What a rip-off!” Roger complained.

“You’re lucky you showed this to me,” his mom said. “You dodged the bullet this time. Imagine how much it would have cost you if you had sent in this form!”

*Top-of-the-line* is an idiom that means—

- A dazzling to look at
- B of the best quality
- C in the latest style
- D just out of reach

Idioms  
and Figurative  
Phrases

*Top-of-the-line* is an idiom you may have seen in advertisements. But even if you had never heard it before, you could tell from the context that it has nothing to do with the usual meanings of *top* or *line*. It means “of the best quality”—choice B.

Write the figurative phrases in the passage that mean:

very expensive \_\_\_\_\_

feeling great \_\_\_\_\_

avoided a serious problem \_\_\_\_\_

You probably use idioms and figurative phrases all the time without thinking of their literal meanings. You probably figured out that the phrases the question is asking for are, in order, “cost an arm and a leg,” “on cloud nine,” and “dodged the bullet.”

## Daedalus and Icarus

a myth of ancient Greece

When King Minos built his palace on Crete, he decorated it with his war trophies and sacrificed a hundred bulls to mighty Zeus. But his subjects whispered behind their hands because of the son his queen had borne. It was a monster, called the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull. Surely its father was not the king but a god! To hide his embarrassment, Minos ordered a maze be built behind the palace to house the creature.

To build it, the king turned to Daedalus (DED•uh•lus) of Athens. He was an architect, famous for his wit and craft. Daedalus constructed a labyrinth with numberless winding passages and turnings opening into one another. It seemed to have neither beginning nor end, like the river Maeander, which returns on itself, and flows now onward, now backward, in its course to the sea. There, Minos hid his wife's monstrous son, and only Daedalus knew the way in and out of the maze.

Soon afterward, however, Daedalus lost the king's favor. Together with his young son Icarus (ICK•uh•rus), he was imprisoned in a tower overlooking the sea. And he longed

for his home, far beyond Crete's watery walls. One day as he watched the king's ships come and go, Daedalus declared, "Though Minos rules the sea and commands everything on this island, he does not control the air!" So he set to work using all his subtle craft to outwit nature. He fashioned wings out of feathers, binding them together with string and wax. They cast a shadow like the reed pipes that shepherds play, each feather longer than the last. While Daedalus worked, Icarus played, catching feathers in the air and sealing them with wax, his playfulness often getting in his father's way.

When the wings were done, Daedalus tested them and found that they worked. Then he made a smaller pair for Icarus and taught him how to use them. "Remember," he said, "take your course not from the stars, but follow me. Fly neither too low nor too high, for if you fly too near the sea, the salt spray will make your wings too heavy, and if you fly too near the sun, its flames will burn them from your sides." Then he kissed his son—tearfully, as though he knew what would happen—and took off from the



tower. He looked behind him once, encouraging Icarus to follow, as a bird teaches her young, and away they flew. The fisherman looked up from his rod in awe, the farmer from his plow. The shepherd leaned on his staff and stood still in wonder, taking them for gods.

On they flew—past the isles of Samos and Delos, past Paros and Calymne. But in time, Icarus began to feel the joy of flight and forgot his father’s warning. He steered his course beyond his father’s lead and flew as if to reach heaven itself. The heat of the

sun softened the wax which held the feathers together, and they came off. Icarus fluttered with his arms, but down he fell. He cried out to his father, but his voice was swallowed by the blue waters of the sea, which is called the Icarian to this day.

“Icarus, Icarus, where are you?” Daedalus cried. At last he saw the feathers floating on the water. Bitterly cursing his own arts, he recovered his son’s body and buried him. Daedalus continued on to Sicily, where he built a temple to Apollo, the Sun, and hung up his wings as an offering to the god.

Idioms  
and Figurative  
Phrases

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1 What does the idiom “whispered behind their hands” mean?

A lied

B gossiped

C told secrets

D were afraid to speak

2 The story compares the maze to \_\_\_\_\_.

3 Daedalus “longed for his home, far beyond Crete’s watery walls.” The “walls” in this sentence are—

A the walls of the tower

B the walls of the maze

C Daedalus’s tears

D the sea

4 The author lets the reader see the image in the sentence above by using—

A an idiom

B a simile

C a metaphor

D personification

5 How does the story foreshadow what will happen to Icarus?

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