Tools for Instruction

Idioms, Adages, and Proverbs

When students encounter an idiom, adage, or proverb in a text, they are not always familiar with the expression's nonliteral meaning. Model how to use context clues and background knowledge to interpret the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions. Help students build knowledge by exploring the meaning of expressions that are commonly used.

Step by Step   30–40 minutes

① **Introduce idioms, adages, and proverbs in context.**

- Display and read aloud the following paragraph. Ask students to pay close attention to the underlined phrases.

> It was almost time for music, and Cassie realized she had forgotten her violin again. *How did it slip my mind?* she wondered. Cassie didn't want to be in hot water with Ms. Ramos, so she walked into the music room to apologize. Then she remembered she could use the spare violin in the music room. *Maybe it's better to let sleeping dogs lie*, Cassie thought. *Why mention it if Ms. Ramos doesn't even need to know?*

- Point out the underlined phrases. Say, *Is the first phrase really about slipping? Is the second phrase really about hot water? Is the third phrase really about sleeping dogs?* Have students work with partners to reread the text and figure out what the underlined phrases could mean.

- Ask volunteers to share their ideas about the meaning of each expression. Have them point out clues in the text and tell about background knowledge they used to figure out the meanings. Help clarify meanings, if necessary. (slipped my mind: forgot; to be in hot water: to be in trouble; let sleeping dogs lie: to ignore a problem rather than call attention to it)

② **Explain and use idioms, adages, and proverbs.**

- Explain that *idioms*, *adages*, and *proverbs* are all expressions with meanings that are different from the literal meanings of the individual words. *Proverbs* and *adages* are about wisdom or advice.

- Display and read the following example and its meaning.

Expression	Meaning
Let sleeping dogs lie.	To ignore a problem rather than call attention to it

- Add and discuss the meaning of common expressions like the ones listed below:

> - Don't cry over spilled milk.
> - Don't count your chickens before they hatch.
> - It cost an arm and a leg.
> - Don't judge a book by its cover.

- Have partners brainstorm and share other idioms, adages, and proverbs they know in English or other languages. Display the expressions and have students explain and discuss their meanings.

- Have partners take turns using idiomatic expressions in oral sentences. Ask them to include details that help explain the meaning. (She was already planning what she would buy with the prize money, but I told her, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch.")

3 Draw the meanings of idioms, adages, and proverbs.

- Display the idiomatic expression *It cost an arm and a leg* and draw a vertical line beneath it.
- Model how to draw examples of the literal meaning and the figurative meaning of the expression. On one side of the line, draw a picture of someone paying for an item with a literal arm and leg. On the other side, draw a picture of someone paying a lot of money.
- Ask students to choose one of the idiomatic expressions from the previous step to illustrate. Have them write their expression across the top of a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. Then ask them to draw an example of the literal meaning on one side and the figurative meaning on the other side.
- Have volunteers take turns explaining their expressions. Display examples of the illustrated expressions in the classroom.

Check for Understanding

If you observe…	Then try…
difficulty understanding the figurative meaning of an expression	asking students to explore the literal meaning in depth before trying to make a figurative connection. For instance, ask students what it means to literally "get the ball rolling." (It takes effort to push a ball at first. Then it just keeps rolling by itself for a while.) Then help students make a connection to a figurative meaning. (When you build something, it can be hard to start, but once you start, it's easy to keep going. Starting a project is like getting a ball rolling.)