**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

The past few weeks we've discussed the benefits of community colleges as a low cost option for people to advance their careers and job prospects. We read stories about famous people who attended community college and went on to achieve successful careers such as Amy Tan and George Lucas. They were ambitious and determined to improve their skills and knowledge.

We also read a story about a young woman who was determined to become a doctor after her experience taking care of her mother. She worked her way up from working as a janitor to becoming a doctor at Yale New Haven Hospital while she also cared for her family. She financed most of her post-secondary education herself.

As you may well imagine, there are many quotes and idioms about ambition and determination in American culture. Idioms are special phrases that don't always take on the literal meaning of the words used, but they make a point in a more interesting way.

For example, the idiom "go the extra mile" doesn't literally mean to walk an extra mile. Rather it means to put in more work or effort than anyone expects to reach a goal. Learning idioms helps you understand conversations and enables you to say things in a more colorful way. Read each of the following idioms and practice using them in a dialog. Then discuss the following questions:

- When you first read the idiom, what do you picture? Can you guess the meaning of the idiom?
- What are other similar ways to express the same thing? What is the core idea of the idiom?
- Are there similar sayings in your native language?

The answer key is at the end of the handout.

## Idioms For Ambition and Determination

1. **Idiom: to put one's nose to the grindstone; keep one's nose to the grindstone**
   **Meaning:** to start a hard tedious task; to work very hard for a long time without stopping; to return to a difficult task
   **Dialogue**
   **A**: Emma is so determined to get into the college of her choice.
   **B:** I know. She is taking a lot of tough courses and is also on the basketball team.
   **A**: She hardly has any free time outside of school and sports.
   **B:** Yeah, she has kept her **nose to the grindstone** all year.

2. **Idiom: to bend over backwards**
   **Meaning:** To work extra hard to help someone or to make them happy. This idiom highlights one's dedication and willingness to achieve a goal or support others
   **Dialogue**
   **A**: Julia is graduating this year. She finished early.
   **B:** That's right. Her parents couldn't afford to cover all her tuition, but that didn't deter her.
   **A**: I think she worked half time to pay for most of her tuition and fees.
   **B:** Yes, she really **bent over backwards** to finish college in three years and save her family a lot of money!

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

**3. Idiom: blood, sweat, and tears**

**Meaning:** extremely hard work, intense physical or mental effort, and great suffering or sacrifice required to achieve a goal

**Dialogue**

**A**: I heard there are several big companies that want to buy Joe's new invention.

**B:** Yes, it's an amazing new medical tool. He really put his nose to the grindstone the past two years to finish it.

**A**: I thought he was just lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

**B:** His success wasn't due to luck; it was **blood, sweat and tears** all the way.

**4. Idiom: to fight tooth and nail**

**Meaning:** To engage in a fierce, intense struggle or use every resource available to achieve something or defend oneself.

**Dialogue**

**A:** The plans for the new golf course in the city park were cancelled.

**B:** Yes, when we found out the land developer wanted to cut down 25% of the trees, we organized the neighbors to oppose the plan.

**A**: Well, you were successful.

**B:** Yes, but we had to **fight tooth and nail** for six months to win.

**5. Idiom: from the ground up**

**Meaning:** To build or start something completely from the very beginning stages, often with nothing but determination.

**Dialogue**

**A:** Wow, Sarah's bakery is expanding to a third location!

**B:** She must have had a lot of investors.

**A:** Actually, no. She built that entire business **from the ground up** using her own savings.

**B:** Amazing! She is one of the hardest working people I know.

**6. Idiom: to be hell-bent on doing something**

**Meaning:** stubbornly and sometimes recklessly determined to achieve a specific goal, regardless of the obstacles or consequences

**Dialogue**

**A:** The weather report says there is a massive blizzard coming tonight.

**B:** Is Mark still driving across the state?

**A:** Yes, he is **hell-bent on** making it to that conference tomorrow morning.

**B:** He's always been that way. No one can change his mind.

**7. Idiom: to make headway**

**Meaning:** to make progress with a project or situation, especially when facing difficult conditions or slow circumstances.

**Dialogue**

**A:** How is the research paper coming along? You looked really stuck yesterday.

**B:** Yes, I came to a dead end with my online research, but I feel better now.

**A:** What did you do? How did you find the information you needed?

**B:** I **made some headway** after finding a few new sources this morning at the library. They were in an archive that is not online yet.

**8. Idiom: never say die**

**Meaning:** an expression used to urge someone to never give up hope or surrender, no matter how bleak the situation looks.

**Dialogue**

**A:** Let's go home, our team is down by twelve points and there are only two minutes left in the game.

**B**: It's not over yet! They've overcome tougher games than this one.

**A:** I don't think they'll win this one. The other team is on a winning streak.

**B:** Come on, **never say die**! It's not over until the final whistle.

**9. Idiom: to pound the pavement**

**Meaning:** to go from place to place to actively and tirelessly looking for a job, making sales, or seeking information.

**Dialogue**

**A:** The past few weeks have been tough for Liz. She lost her job when the factory closed down.

**B:** I know. Has she managed to find another job?

**A:** Not yet, but She's out there **pounding the pavement** every single day applying for jobs at every business in town.

**B:** I'm sure she'll be hired soon. She's a great worker and has excellent references.

**10. Idiom: to pull out all the stops**

**Meaning:** to make every possible effort and use all available resources to ensure a project or event succeeds

**Dialogue**

**A:** Our group project is due tomorrow, and we still haven't finished it.

**B:** It's been a lot harder than we thought.

**A:** I know! We need to **pull out all the stops** tonight and to get it done. We have no choice.

**B:** Okay. I'll order some dinner for the team, and we'll plan to stay at the office until it's perfect.

**11. Idiom: to punch above your weight**

**Meaning:** to perform, compete, or achieve at a level that is much higher than what is expected

**Dialogue**

**A:** Our small local charity managed to raise more money for the wildfire victims than the national non-profits this month.

**B:** I know! It's amazing. How were you able to do that?

**A:** Our new public relations director planned a brilliant social media campaign!

**B:** You really **punched above your weight** when that campaign went viral.

**12. Idiom: to mean business**

**Meaning:** to be completely serious, earnest, and determined about achieving an objective

**Dialogue**

**A:** The boss had a meeting with all the teams to ask why product development is late.

**B.** Yes, she looked incredibly calm when she announced the new strict deadlines.

**A:** Don't let her tone fool you; she **means business** and won't accept any excuses this time.

**B:** Oh, I believe her. She's a tough cookie, and we can't get anything past her.

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

**13. Idiom: to sink your teeth into something**

**Meaning:** to engage with something—like a project or a challenge—vigorously, deeply, and with immense focus

**Dialogue**

**A:** This new apartment development project looks incredibly complicated and long.
**B:** That's exactly the type of project Ed loves.
**A:** Really? I'll ask him to join the team. We need good people like him.
**B:** Excellent! He's been waiting for a real challenge to **sink his teeth into**.

**14. Idiom: against all odds**

**Meaning:** achieving success despite having a massive disadvantage or facing seemingly impossible obstacles.

**Dialogue**

**A:** It's hard to believe Clara had that terrible accident last year.
**B:** I know! We were so worried it would take her a long time to walk again.
**A:** Luckily, she has wonderful doctors and has worked hard on her physical therapy.
**B:** Yes, **against all odds,** she crossed the finish line of a 5K race today.

**15. Idiom: to leave no stone unturned**

**Meaning:** to look everywhere and try every possible option or method to achieve a goal or find a solution.

**Dialogue**

**A:** When we tested the new software program, the system crashed.
**B:** We need to find out why the system crashed before the product launches next week.
**A:** Don't worry, the engineering team is on it.
**B:** I heard they are **leaving no stone unturned** to find the bug.

**16. Idiom: to keep your eye on the prize**

**Meaning:** to remain entirely focused on the ultimate goal and not allow oneself to be distracted by temporary difficulties.

**Dialogue**

**A:** How long have you been training for the marathon?
**B:** For six long months. The training has been exhausting! I felt like quitting every morning.
**A:** Just **keep your eye on the prize,** Tom.
**B:** That's what I keep telling myself. I have to think of how amazing I'll feel crossing that finish line.

**17. Idiom: to push the envelope**

**Meaning:** to approach or extend the current limits of performance, innovation, or capability.

**Dialogue**

**A:** The special effects in this new sci-fi movie are unlike anything I've ever seen before.
**B:** Wow! Weren't they incredible?
**A:** Yes, the director tries to **push the envelope** with new filming technology.
**B:** His background is in computer programming and hardware.

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

**18. Idiom: to rise to the occasion**

**Meaning:** to perform exceptionally well and find the necessary courage or strength when faced with an unexpected crisis or difficult challenge.

**Dialogue**

**A:** The head chef walked out in the middle of a job last night.
**B:** No kidding! How did the junior chef handle the situation?
**A:** She really **rose to the occasion** and managed the kitchen perfectly all night.
**B:** She should get a bonus and a raise!

**19. Idiom: no pain, no gain**

**Meaning:** a phrase used to express that suffering, hard work, or sacrifice is necessary to make progress or achieve success.

**Dialogue**

**A:** My muscles are incredibly sore after that new gym workout routine.
**B:** That's how I felt two months ago when I started the routine.
**A**: Well, I guess **no pain, no gain**!
**B:** Keep it up and you'll see results soon.

**20. Idiom: to take the bull by the horns**

**Meaning:** to deal with a difficult, dangerous, or unpleasant situation directly and with confident determination.

**Dialogue**

**A:** Are you still waiting for your manager to solve the problem?
**B:** No, I decided to **take the bull by the horns** and told him what he should do.
**A**: How did he take it?
**B:** He was glad I took the initiative and is now giving me a raise!

**ANSWER KEY FOR OTHER WAYS TO EXPRESSTHESE IDIOMS**

1. **Idiom: to put one's nose to the grindstone; keep one's nose to the grindstone** (see photo By Horace Nicholls Imperial War Museums, Public Domain)

**Core Idea:** This describes a worker who is hunched over their work sharpening tools. A grindstone is used to sharpen metal tools, knives, and axes The worker must focus so as not to cause an accident.
**Other ways to say it**: to be diligent; to keep working; to focus and be dedicated

**2. Idiom: to bend over backwards**

**Core Idea:** It describes a situation where one dedicates everything into a difficult task. It symbolizes **Other ways to say it**: to go out of one's way; to give maximum effort; to try one's hardest

**3. Idiom: blood, sweat, and tears**

**Core Idea:** It describes a situation where one dedicates everything into a difficult task. It symbolizes the pain and exhaustion that can be behind a major accomplishment.
**Other idiomatic ways to say it**: elbow grease

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

**4. Idiom: to fight tooth and nail**
**Core Idea:** It reflects a deep determination where a person refuses to give up, fighting with everything they have.
**Other ways to say it**: to give everything you've got

**5. Idiom: from the ground up**
**Core Idea:** It emphasizes the grit required to construct a business, project, or career by laying the foundation yourself.
**Other ways to say it**: to build something from scratch (idiom) or from the start

**6. Idiom: to be hell-bent on doing something**
**Core Idea:** It captures an unstoppable, almost aggressive level of focus where nothing can change the person's mind.
**Other idiomatic ways to say it**: to be fired up; to be doggedly (idiom) determined

**7. Idiom: to make headway**
**Core Idea:** It represents steady, determined advancement against resistance, like a ship pushing through heavy waves.
**Other ways to say it**: to move forward; to make an advancement

**8. Idiom: never say die**
**Core Idea:** It is a classic rallying cry for ultimate resilience and maintaining a positive, determined attitude during failure.

**9. Idiom: to pound the pavement**
**Core Idea:** It symbolizes the actual physical determination and the relentless legwork required to create your own opportunities.
**Other idiomatic ways to say it**: Hit the streets; knock on doors

**10. Idiom: to pull out all the stops**
**Core Idea:** It is about going all-in, removing any limitations, and maximizing effort for a grand result.
**Other ways to say it**: to try everything one can to achieve a goal; to go all out

**11. Idiom: to punch above your weight**
**Core Idea:** It highlights the determination of an underdog who outmaneuvers larger or more powerful competitors through sheer effort and skill.
**Other ways to say it**: to exceed expectations; to defy the odds

**12. Idiom: to mean business**
**Core Idea:** This signals a focused intent that indicates how serious one is in order to commands respect or compliance from others.
**Other ways to say it**: to be serious; to mean what one says

**13. Idiom: to sink your teeth into something**
**Core Idea:** This idiom describes an intense determination to tackle a complex task with full energy and passion.
**Other idiomatic ways to say it**: to dive into; to dig into

**English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library**
**September 10, 2026**
**Idioms for Ambition and Determination**

**14. Idiom: against all odds**
**Core Idea:** It is the ultimate victory of determination, where the outcome defies logic or expectations.
**Other ways to say it**: against all expectations

**15. Idiom: to leave no stone unturned**
**Core Idea:** It represents exhaustive determination to pay attention to every detail, even the smallest ones.
**Other ways to say it**: to move heaven and earth (idiom); to spare no effort

**16. Idiom: to keep your eye on the prize**
**Core Idea:** It emphasizes the mental discipline needed to block out distractions and stay motivated by the future reward.
**Other ways to say it**: to stay the course; to not lose sight of the goal

**17. Idiom: to push the envelope**
**Core Idea:** It reflects a progressive, bold determination to break boundaries and redefine what is considered possible.
**Other ways to say it**: to push the boundaries; to push the limits

**18. Idiom: to rise to the occasion**
**Core Idea:** It is about finding a hidden reserve of determination precisely when the stakes are at their highest.
**Other ways to say it**: to meet the challenge; to step up

**19. Idiom: no pain, no gain**
**Core Idea:** It acknowledges that growth and accomplishment are inextricably linked to discomfort and effort.
**Other ways to say it**: nothing ventured, nothing gained; hard work pays off

**20. Idiom: to take the bull by the horns**
**Core Idea:** It focuses on taking control of a problem immediately instead of procrastinating or acting timidly out of fear.
**Other idiomatic ways to say it**: to jump in with both feet; to face the music

**References**

https://www.learn-english-today.com/idioms/idiom-categories/ambition-determination/ambition-determ3_make-wait.html