# Common Idioms with Unexpectedly Dark Origins

## A Blockbuster

What it means today: A highly successful movie produced in Hollywood.

Where it came from: The term “blockbuster” was, at one point in time, far more literal. Originating during WWII, a blockbuster referred to a large metal cylinder packed with high explosives dropped by the British Airforce. These bombs, weighing in at well over a ton, were named for their ability to raze entire city blocks. It wouldn’t be until long after the war ended that the term would gain its modern connection to Hollywood.

Famed for their massive size and potency, the Germans nicknamed them “Wohnblockknacker,” and the name stuck. In 2017, one of these bombs was found intact, embedded in a neighborhood in the German town of Frankfurt. The discovery led to the evacuation of around 70,000 people during the bomb’s disposal. Horrifyingly enough, this isn’t the first time one of these bombs has been found intact. Prior to the Frankfurt bomb, another of these massive devices was located in the Italian city of Vicenza.

Though today, the phrase’s implication is still that of a successful hit, its violent connotation has been all but lost to the hands of time.

## Highway Robbery

What it means today: Feeling as though you are being heavily overcharged for a product or service.

Where it came from: During the 16th century, the English countryside was plagued by a rash of robberies. Gangs of organized highwaymen roamed about, searching for opportunities to ambush unsuspecting travelers and lighten their purses. These thieves weren’t exactly Robin Hood and his merry men, and getting caught by them was far more likely to lead to death than a silly musical number from some men in tights.

These ambushes ranged in severity from straight-up murdering unassuming passersby for their cash to strong-arming travelers into paying fake tolls to pass varying sections of land. Over time, as these gangs became less common, the meaning faded from the words. While it may not be fun to get overcharged by the fancy new coffee shop, it’s not very likely that the barista behind the counter will steal your wallet at knifepoint

## Riding Shotgun

What it means today: Laying claim to the front passenger seat in a vehicle for a trip.

Where it came from: As America expanded westward, wagon trains rumbled toward new lands. Safety became a primary concern for lengthy journeys through territory fraught with danger from vicious wild animals to equally brutal robbers. In those days, sitting next to the driver came with more responsibility than playing amateur DJ for the rest of the car. The forward passenger was expected to be able to fend off danger when it arose to keep the driver safe and in control.

Wagons of the era were equipped with, at best, rudimentary shocks, and roads weren’t exactly the smoothest. Taking an accurate shot to drive off a bear or thief while standing on the seat of a swaying wagon wasn’t a real possibility. The rider in the passenger’s seat was tasked with carrying a gun or guns in order to help keep the driver safe. They started with rifles, but many quickly chose to swap to guns that fired groups of pellets instead. The scattered nature of rounds fired by a shotgun increased the chance that the shot would hit the target. These early shotguns were often referred to as “Coach Guns” since they were primarily used by the passenger riding at the front of stagecoaches.

Thankfully for would-be passengers everywhere, however, calling shotgun in the modern era is more likely to have the volunteer serve as the keeper of the snacks than the guard with the gun.

## A Baker’s Dozen

What it means today: When buying a dozen of something, getting a 13th of that item for free.

Where it came from: In 13th-century England, bakers were held to a high standard when it came to food production. Shortchanging a customer on their purchase of a loaf might mean a hefty fine, time in the stocks, or a beating. Understandably looking to avoid this, bakers would often include small, extra loaves with each purchase to ensure that they weren’t shortchanging a customer.

Ensuring customers got exactly what they paid for was more of an art than a science in those days. While a machine might measure exact portions today to make certain that every loaf is the same, measuring ingredients was done by hand in the 13th century. Weights and sizes could vary from loaf to loaf, and those variances could cause a customer to be shortchanged if they received more undersized loaves than oversized ones. This led to the practice of adding the 13th loaf, as adding a whole extra loaf was an almost surefire way to avoid being accused of shortchanging a customer.

Over time, although the laws changed and the cooking methods became more exact, customers came to expect that 13th loaf. The practice slowly spread as a promotional tool to other industries looking to drum up business. But today, while giving someone a little extra bang for their buck might be a great sales tactic, failing to do so definitely won’t see you flogged.[[](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/Bakers-dozen.html)

## Bite the Bullet

What it means today: To endure pain or unpleasantness in order to complete a task.

Where it came from: In the middle of a war, a battlefield isn’t the most pleasant place to be. This was even more true before the invention of modern anesthetics when the best a battlefield doctor could be expected to prescribe for a bullet wound was for the injured man to keep a stiff upper lip.

Even after it became commonplace to bring ether with the company doctor, availability on the front lines of a battle was often limited at best, meaning that a soldier who got injured had few options to deaden the pain. The best option to help was to give them something to bite down on, and, lacking materials on the front lines, it was common to use whatever option was in high supply.

If there was one thing the front lines weren’t often lacking, it was bullets, so they were all too often what was offered up to be bitten down on while a surgeon went to work. Thankfully for today’s soldiers, modern anesthetics carried by medics are far more effective, so while we’ve kept the idiom, the practice has vanished from modern battlefields.

## To Pull Someone’s Leg

What it means today: To lightheartedly tease or prank someone.

Where it came from: While the phrase today might have humorous or lighthearted connotations, in 18th and 19th-century London, those words were far more literal. Thieves in the city often worked in pairs. While the first member would be responsible for grabbing the goods, the second member was responsible for tripping up their target. The tripper would employ any means necessary to make their target stumble, up to and including simply grabbing them by the leg and yanking until they fell.

Over time, the practice of thieves tripping an unsuspecting target to give their friends a chance to steal their wallet largely went by the wayside. The crooks of today are often more comfortable with digital means of theft. While we may no longer need to watch our ankles for wayward hands as we walk through the city, we kept the phrase. And with the negative connections all but gone from the words, the idiom was able to take on its more modern and lighthearted meaning.

## Meet a Deadline

What it means today: To have a time limit on something that you are doing.

Where it came from: Today’s meaning may carry the weight of getting fired when your report isn’t submitted on time, but you can rest easy knowing that your deadlines aren’t as bad as they could be. During the Civil War, prisoners taken on the battlefield would need to be stored in makeshift prisons where the walls were more suggestions than structures. In order to keep captured soldiers from fleeing, lines were marked around the outside of these holding areas. Any prisoner caught stepping over the line was subject to immediate execution.

These lines, referred to as deadlines, were often little more than a series of sticks laid out in the dirt or boards stood up in a line. Most prisoners steered well clear of these markers to avoid potential misunderstandings with their captors. Fired or not, you can take heart knowing that your boss is unlikely to open fire on you if your work isn’t turned in before the end of business on Friday.

## To Be as Mad as a Hatter

What it means today: To act crazy or insane.

Where it came from: Today, one isn’t very likely to encounter a hatter. There isn’t much demand for handmade hats, and even for those who make them, insanity isn’t what one would call a well-known issue. Looking back several centuries, however, this definitely wasn’t the case. Before modern machines and materials made the practice of making hats by hand out of date, traditional headpieces were often made by skilled artisans. Unfortunately for them, one of the primary methods of stiffening fabric to make structured caps was the introduction of strong chemicals like mercury.

While short-term exposure to the chemicals wasn’t too damaging, those who spent their lives in near-daily contact began to experience side effects. These could range from shaking hands and speech disorders to visual and auditory hallucinations. Before the effects of the chemicals were fully understood, people noticed that being in the hat-making industry seemed to cause irrational behavior, giving rise to the phrase.

The hats of today no longer use these dangerous chemicals in production, and the craft is more likely to be handled by a machine than a human. As a result, though the idiom has stuck with the English language, the maddening effects the substance had on the period’s once-harrowed hatters have thankfully become an issue of the past.

## Show Your True Colors

What it means today: To reveal how you truly feel about something or someone.

Where it came from: The advent of modern radio communication made identifying a boat at sea far easier than it once was. In the days before a quick call could confirm whether the ship across from you was on your side or not, the most common way to tell was to look at the flag flying on its mast. These flags were referred to as a ship’s colors.

Unfortunately for seafaring crews, a common tactic to get close and take down an enemy by surprise was to hang false colors from your ship while approaching. After the distance was closed, it was all too easy to pull down your opponent’s flag and throw yours up as you opened fire. The effects of these surprise attacks could be devastating and rob a ship of any chance to counter before the battle drew to a quick close.

While the phrase may have lost its naval connotations, the act today is still regarded as one that takes others by surprise.

## Paint the Town Red

What it means today: To spend a night out enjoying oneself accompanied by friends.

Where it came from: While there is some uncertainty about the phrase’s exact origins, the most common attribution comes from a story about a misbehaving nobleman. The tale tells the story of a high-class gentleman who, after an evening of drinking with some friends, decided to cause mayhem all over town. While such an outing is hardly unheard of on a night out, the man and his friends weren’t just making too much noise after curfew.

Their spree included property damage and vandalism. It came to a head when the men located several buckets filled with red paint. The following morning, residents of the normally quiet hamlet were shocked to find several doors, walls, and a city toll booth sporting a new rosy hue.

While the tradition of a night on the town with friends hasn’t faded, partying with your friends today is more likely to leave you with a light hangover than with a bill for several thousand dollars in damages and fines for defacing public property—we hope!