

Idioms with Sailing Origins

An activity of "In this race, old is bold"

The story "**In this race, old is bold**" (page 18–19, *What's Up* April 2023) tells us about a race in which the sailors must not use modern gadgets. The contest rules are a reminder that humans have been sailing for centuries. It is such a familiar part of coastal peoples' lives that we even have sailing idioms. Here are ten common ones.

1. **"feel blue"** (feel sad)
Origin: *Blue flags and a painted blue stripe on the ship's body were once used to mourn the death of an officer or captain onboard a ship.*
2. **"taken aback"** (surprised)
Origin: *Sailing boats moved backwards ("aback") when winds blew against them. This gradually came to mean being so surprised that one took a step back.*
3. **"a long shot"** (very unlikely to be true or successful)
Origin: *The cannons on sailing ships used to have poor accuracy. Being able to hit a target from afar was considered a long shot.*
4. **"pipe down"** (to be quiet)
Origin: *The piper on a ship would play his pipe to signal the captain's commands to the crew. One such tune was a signal to go down below deck to sleep.*
5. **"toe the line"** (keep to the rules)
Origin: *During inspections, the crew would stand at attention on deck. They had to have their bare toes exactly at the lines made by the deck's wood-plank floor.*
6. **"showed her true colours"** (revealed her real self)
Origin: *Ships flew colourful flags to identify themselves. Pirates would fly friendly colours to fool others. After a successful raid, they flew their true black pirate flags.*
7. **"down in the doldrums"** (depressed, frustrated)
Origin: *The doldrums are an area above the equator that has little wind. Sailboats could get stuck here for many days, causing frustration and anxiety.*
8. **"a loose cannon"** (someone who hurts others with careless words)
Origin: *The cannons onboard sailing ships were extremely large and heavy. In battle or during bad weather, they could break loose of their ropes and cause great damage.*
9. **"learn the ropes"** (become familiar with how things are done)
Origin: *A sailing ship's sails are controlled by ropes. Beginner sailors must learn how to use the ropes to manage the sails.*
10. **"run a tight ship"** (to lead very strictly)
Origin: *A "tight ship" is a vessel with everything in place and is very well maintained because of strict rules.*

Now, complete the sentences below with these idioms.

- a) These days, Amir has been _____. He has no interest in his favourite games and snacks. His parents are very concerned.
- b) "Can you please _____? I'm doing my homework!" Matthew snapped at his younger brother, who was playing noisily.
- c) The Primary 6 class teachers _____. No wonder their classrooms are always clean and neat, and everyone is punctual.
- d) Think before you speak. Words can hurt people's feelings even when you didn't mean to do so. Don't be _____!
- e) Being left out by her friends during recess made Ashira _____. But, it also helped her to realise she needed kinder friends.
- f) At first, Jared's mother spent long hours at the office in her new job. She wanted to _____ of her work quickly.
- g) After getting the help that she wanted from Lynn, Penelope _____. She ignored Lynn and did not bother to reply to Lynn's chat messages.
- h) In the army, soldiers must _____ by doing exactly what is expected of them.
- i) Peter is known to be soft-spoken and patient with everyone, so the class was _____ when he suddenly shouted at the teacher.
- j) Our school's badminton team is the underdog. Getting into the inter-school semifinals is _____, but they never give up hope.