

# Expected Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking Exams

Phrases and Idioms constitute an important part of all Banking and Government exams. In the recently held SSC CGL Tier I Exam, each and every paper had at least 3 direct questions on Phrases and Idioms. You can also expect to come across various idioms and phrases while attempting Reading Comprehension questions. Since the SSC CGL Tier II exam and IBPS PO exams take place in a few weeks, we are providing you the second part of Expected Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking Exams. Hope you find them useful not just for your exams, but to communicate more interestingly also. Here is a collection of idioms and phrases compiled from previous question papers and predicted by experts.

## List of Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking Exams

### 1. Be up with the lark

Meaning: To be awake and out of your bed early in the morning.

Origin: *Lark is a bird known for its beautiful, long songs and rises very early in the morning.*

Usage: His mother was surprised to see him up with the lark.

### 2. Play it by ear

Meaning: Proceed instinctively according to results and circumstances.

Origin: *This phrase originated from ‘play something by ear’ which means performing music without having to read from a score: She played violin by ear – she played it instinctively.*

Usage: **Let’s** play it by ear as they haven't given us any clear guidelines.



Sentence – **Let’s play it by ear** as they don’t have clear guidelines.

### 3. Go for the jugular

Meaning: Be aggressive or unrestrained in making an attack, to criticize someone very cruelly by talking about what you know will hurt them most.

Origin: *An animal often kills another animal by biting the jugular vein (tube that carries blood) in the neck, causing the animal to bleed to death quickly.*

Usage: The lawyer went for the jugular of the victim to prove that the charges were wrong.

### 4. Go to the dogs

Meaning: To become worse in quality or character.

Origin: *The origin of this expression is believed to be in ancient China where dogs were not permitted within the walls of cities. Consequently, stray dogs roamed the areas outside the city walls and lived off the rubbish thrown out of the city by its*

*inhabitants. Criminals and social outcast were often expelled from cities and were sent to live among the rubbish – and the dogs.*

Usage: YOU say that our country has gone to the dogs. YOU say, say and say. What do YOU do about it?

## 5. Tall tales

Meaning: Boasting.

Origin: *Tall tale is a kind of folklore with unbelievable elements, related as if it were true and factual. Stories of ancient kings where they are portrayed as superheroes are tall tales.*

Usage: His tall tales have no limits.

## 6. Armchair critic

Meaning: Someone who gives advice based on theory rather than practice.

Origin: *Armchair also means lacking or not involving practical or direct experience of a particular subject or activity.*

Usage: Don't let Radha's comments bother you. She's just an armchair critic. Buy whichever car you want.

## 7. Bury the hatchet

Meaning: End a quarrel or conflict and become friends.

Origin: *It was the custom of Native American tribes to bury their hatchets (a cutting tool) as a symbol of forgetting the fight.*

Usage: When will Tom and Jerry bury the hatchet?

### 8. **Vote with one's feet**

Meaning: To show that you do not support something.

Origin: *When the Opposition walks out of the Parliament, they vote with their feet that they oppose the decision of the government.*

Usage: When the leader spoke in favour of the management, the labourers voted with their feet.

### 9. At one's wit's end

Meaning: So worried, confused or annoyed that one does not know what to do next.

Origin: *Wit means the capacity to think and understand. When it is the end of someone's wit, they are not able to think properly.*

Usage: The sudden notice from the manager had me at my wits end.

### 10. Feather one's nest

Meaning: To make oneself rich, especially in a way that is unfair or dishonest.

Origin: *This expression originated from how birds prepare their nests for hatching.*

Usage: The corrupted officer feathered his nest quickly.

### 11. Stir up a hornet's nest

Meaning: To create a lot of trouble.

Origin: *Hornet is a wasp dangerous than bees and they aggressively guard their nests. When anyone stirs up their nest, they go for the jugular of the people nearby the nest.*

Usage: He stirred up a hornet's nest by speaking ill about the victim.



## 12. All thumbs

Meaning: Awkward and clumsy, especially with one's hands.

Origin: *This idiom is derived from a proverb in John Heywood's collection of 1546: "When he should get aught (anything), each finger is a thumb."*

Usage: She is all thumbs at drawing.

## 13. Make a beeline for someone or something

Meaning: To head straight toward someone or something.

Origin: *The flight of a bee is often straight, especially when it targets an attacker or a flower.*

Usage: It was an old custom in Europe to make a beeline for hostess before meeting anyone else.

## 14. Featherbrained

Meaning: Silly or often forgetting things.

Origin: *A bird's brain is very small. Featherbrained refers to a smaller size of the brain and related reduction in its capability.*

Usage: She is featherbrained and I have to remind her things very often.



### 15. Make a mountain out of a molehill

Meaning: To make a major issue out of a minor one, to cause something simple to seem much more difficult or important

Origin: *Treating a molehill like a mountain is unnecessary and foolish and makes the situation worse and difficult to resolve.*

Usage: Miranda made a mountain out of a molehill when Rooney broke a vase by mistake.



### 16. Wild goose chase

Meaning: A hopeless search or pursuit.



Origin: *The phrase comes from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet:*

*Romeo: Switch and spurs, switch and spurs; or I'll cry a match.*

*Mercutio: Nay, if thy wits run the wild-goose chase, I have done, for thou hast more of the wild-goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five.*

*Although chasing a wild goose seems pointless and doomed to failure,*

*Shakespeare's reference was to a 16th-century horseracing requiring riders to follow a leader in a particular formation (presumably resembling a flock of geese in flight).*

Usage: I was on a wild goose chase when I lost the address slip.

### 17. Keep a level head

Meaning: To remain calm

Sentence: It is important to keep a level head when you're dealing with a dangerous situation like this one.

### 18. Snake in the grass

Meaning: A treacherous person.

Origin: *This metaphor for treachery, alluding to a poisonous snake concealed in tall grass, was used in 37 BC by the Roman poet Virgil.*

Usage: Brutus was a snake in the grass.

### 19. Throw someone to the dogs

Meaning: To abandon someone to enemies or evil, to allow someone to be criticized or attacked in order to protect others from being criticized or attacked.

Usage: She threw herself to the dogs to save her sister's reputation.

20. Throw the baby out with the bath

Meaning: To lose the good parts when you get rid of the bad parts of something.

Usage: I lost my car keys when I was hastily throwing away my metallic earrings. I wish hadn't thrown the baby out with the bath.

21. Leave someone high and dry

Meaning: To leave someone in a difficult situation without any help.

Origin: *'High and dry' originally referred to ships that were beached. The 'dry' implies that, not only were they out of the water, but had been for some time and could be expected to remain so.*

Usage: We were left high and dry in the alien nation.



22. Be in two minds

Meaning: To be unable to decide between alternatives.

Usage: She was in two minds about accepting the job offer.





### 23. Kick someone or something to the curb

Meaning: To discard, abandon or dismiss due to being unwanted, obsolete or redundant.

Origin: *Curb means a stone edging to a pavement.*

Usage: He was kicked to the curb as a part of the company's new policy to increase efficiency.

### 24. Call it a day

Meaning: To stop some activity, to stop working and go home.

Origin: *The original phrase was call it half a day when someone left the workplace before the work day was over.*

Usage: **It's past 5 O' clock, let's call it a day.**

### 25. Go/jump through hoops

Meaning: To do a lot of difficult things before one is allowed to have or do what one wants.

Origin: *This phrase alludes to a circus animal performing tricks by jumping through hoops.*

Usage: Schools make the parents jump through hoops before they admit the children.



## 26. Gnomes of Zurich

Meaning: Big international bankers, Swiss bankers.

Origin: *Swiss bankers are popularly associated with extremely secretive policies, while gnomes in fairy tales live underground, in secret, counting their riches. Zürich is the commercial center of Switzerland.*

Usage: International monetary affairs are governed by the gnomes of Zurich.



## 27. Play ducks and drakes

Meaning: To carelessly misuse one's wealth, to behave recklessly

Origin: *Ducks and drakes* is the old English name for the pastime of skimming flat stones on the surface of water to make them bounce as many times as possible.



Usage: His mother asked him to stop playing duck and drakes and concentrate on their family business.

## 28. Play fast and loose

Meaning: Be inconstant and unreliable, to treat something or someone without enough care

Origin: *Fast-and-loose* is a cheating game played with a stick and a belt or string.

Usage: How can you trust Job who plays fast and loose with everything?



## 29. Curtain lecture

Meaning: An instance of a wife reprimanding her husband in private.

Usage: She gave me a curtain lecture last night when the party was going on.

### 30. Carve out a niche

Meaning: To successfully create or get something.

Origin: *Niche originally refers to a shallow slit, especially one in a wall to display a statue or other ornament which required a focused effort to make. Then, niche was used to mean a comfortable or suitable position in life or employment.*

Usage: You can carve out a niche with a consistent life style.



### 31. Bring the house down

Meaning: Make an audience laugh or applaud very enthusiastically.

Origin: *This hyperbolic term suggests noise loud enough to pose a threat to the building-an unlikely occurrence. In the late 1800s, British music-hall comedians punned on it: when the audience greeted a joke with silence, they said, "Don't clap so hard; you'll bring down the house (it's a very old house)."*

Usage: Louis' new play brought the house down last night.



### 32. Raining cats and dogs

Meaning: Raining heavily, *bucketing it down*

Origin: *Odin, the Norse god of storms, was often pictured with dogs and wolves, which were symbols of wind. Witches, who supposedly rode their brooms during storms, were often pictured with black cats, which became signs of heavy rain for sailors. Therefore, “raining cats and dogs” may refer to a storm with wind (dogs) and heavy rain (cats).*

Usage: No, I cannot go out now, it's raining cats and dogs.



### 33. Can't do something to save one's life

Meaning: Said to mean that you are extremely bad at doing something.

Usage: I can't cook food to save my life.

### 34. Turn a blind eye



Meaning: To pretend not to have noticed it.

Origin: *The English naval hero Admiral Horatio Nelson during the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801 deliberately raised his telescope to his blind eye, thus ensuring that he would not see any signal from his superior giving him discretion to withdraw from the battle.*

Usage: The shopkeeper turned a blind eye when the kid took one of the chocolates.



### 35. Mad as a Hatter

Meaning: Someone who is completely crazy

Origin: **“Hatter”** refers to Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter character in *Alice in Wonderland*. But, the expression has its origins in the effects of the chronic mercury poisoning commonly experienced by 18th and 19th century hat manufacturers because of the use of mercurous nitrate in felt hats!!!

Usage: Our new Creative Head seems to be mad as a hatter.





### 36. Know the Ropes

Meaning: Have experience of the appropriate procedures.

Origin: *In olden days, it was an essential maritime skill to know how to handle the ropes used to operate the ship.*

Usage: She will be our new Project Head. She knows the ropes.



### 37. Showing someone the ropes

Meaning: To explain to someone how something is done.

Origin: *Showing someone the ropes of the ship was a difficult and comprehensive task during earlier times with so many ropes acted together in various fashion to guide the ship.*

Usage: He is good at showing someone the ropes.

### 38. Extend the olive branch

Meaning: To take steps towards achieving peace with an enemy.

Origin: *It is said that a dove brought an olive branch to Noah to indicate that God's anger had died down and the flood waters had abated.*

Usage: People wish for the countries engaged in wars to extend the olive branch.



### 39. Set someone's teeth on edge

Meaning: To irritate someone.

Origin: *'To edge the teeth' described the feeling of sensitivity caused by acidic tastes.*

Usage: My new neighbour sets my teeth on edge with his *tall tales*.



#### 40. Bark up the wrong tree

Meaning: To pursue a line of thought or course of action that is misguided.

Origin: *This phrase has its origin in hunting: a dog barking at the bottom of a tree under the mistaken impression that the quarry (animal being hunted) is up the tree.*

Usage: Barking up the wrong tree will lead you nowhere.



#### 41. A shaggy dog story

Meaning: A very unlikely, ridiculous story; a plot with a high level of build-up and complicating action, only to be resolved with an anti-climax or ironic reversal, usually one that makes the entire story meaningless.

*Origin: According to Eric Partridge, an aristocratic family living in Park Lane is searching for a lost dog, and an American answers the advertisement with a shaggy dog that he has found and personally brought across the Atlantic, only to be received by the butler at the end of the story who takes one look at the dog and shuts the door in his face, saying, "But not so shaggy as that, sir!"*

Usage: **The director's new movie was a shaggy dog story.**

#### 42. **Blow one's own trumpet**

Meaning: **To boast about one's own achievements.**

*Origin: Trumpet was blown when a king or troop returned home after winning a battle.*

Usage: **I don't like** James for he blows his own trumpet.



#### 43. Take French leave

Meaning: Leave of absence without permission or without announcing one's departure.

*Origin: The Oxford English Dictionary records: "the custom (in the 18th century prevalent in France and sometimes imitated in England) of going away from a reception, etc. without taking leave of the host or hostess. Hence, jocularly, to take*

*French leave is to go away, or do anything, without permission or notice."*

*The intend of this behaviour is to leave a party without disturbing the host.*

Usage: He got fired from his job because of the French leave that he took last month.

#### 44. End in smoke

Meaning: To be destroyed or ruined figuratively or to come to nothing.

Usage: His effort to make his mother agree to his decision ended in smoke.

#### 45. Be in the swim

Meaning: To keep oneself informed and up-to-date.

Usage: People find it difficult to remain in the swim in this era of information overload.

#### 46. Loose lips sink ships

Meaning: Unguarded talk may give useful information to the enemy.

Origin: *This phrase was coined as a slogan during Second World War as part of the US Office of War Information's attempt to limit the possibility of people inadvertently giving useful information to enemy spies. The slogan was actually 'Loose Lips Might Sink Ships'.*

Usage: We lost the battle because our troops were tricked into revealing confidential information. Loose lips sink ships, you see.

#### 47. To the letter

Meaning: With adherence to every detail.

Origin: Following the instructions 'letter by letter'

Usage: He followed his mother's instructions to the letter.

48. Hold ground

Meaning: To refuse to do what someone else wants.

Usage: I held my ground when they asked me to give them the file.

49. Stand one's ground

Meaning: **To stand up for one's right.**

Usage: Though everyone discouraged him, he stood his ground.

50. Put one's foot down

Meaning: To decide something and express your decision especially when faced with opposition or disobedience.

Usage: The management put their foot down and decided to move on with the new policy.

51. Rub someone up in the wrong way

Meaning: To annoy someone without intending to.

Origin: *Be it a cat or a mat, rubbing up in the wrong way is not good. A mat and a cat's fur becomes rough. Also, a cat doesn't like rubbing it up from tail to head, it likes to be rubbed up from head to tail.*

Usage: Often we end up rubbing someone up in the wrong way. People must learn that actions must be judged by intentions also to avoid conflicts.





We hope that this post on Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking exams helps you face the English Section of your next exam confidently. What are the idioms and phrases you want to know in detail? Tell us in the comments. Also, do check out the Part-1 of Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking Exams and some other posts:

[Phrases and Idioms for SSC and Banking Exams](#)

[4 Steps to Solve Every Question of Direct Indirect Speech – For SSC, Banking Exams](#)

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