

Legal English Study Material: Idioms and Key Legal Terms

Legal English

Essential Idioms and Legal Terminology

This material is designed to aid Law students in mastering common idioms, particularly in a legal context, and to provide a quick reference for fundamental legal terms.

Part I: Legal Idioms for Advocacy and Drafting

Idioms are fixed phrases with a figurative meaning, often different from the literal meaning of the individual words. Mastering them enhances clarity, eloquence, and understanding of legal discourse.

	Idiom	Meaning	Legal Example
1	All and sundry	Everyone, without exception.	The curfew order applies to all and sundry within municipal limits.
2	Alpha and Omega	The beginning and the end; the essential core.	Due process is the alpha and omega of criminal justice.
3	Apple of discord	The cause of a dispute.	The ancestral house became the apple of discord in the partition suit.
4	Apple of one's eye	Someone/something very precious.	The child— apple of both parents' eye —was central to the custody petition.
5	As a matter of fact	Actually; in truth.	As a matter of fact , the accused was in police custody on the relevant date.
6	At sixes and sevens	In confusion or disorder.	The registry records were at sixes and sevens , delaying the hearing.
7	At one's fingertips	Easily accessible (knowledge/information).	A good counsel has leading precedents at her fingertips .
8	Bone of contention	The point being disputed.	Title to Survey No. 42 was the bone of contention between the parties.

9	Be a party to	To be involved in (a contract, suit, or wrongdoing).	He was a party to the conspiracy under Section 120B IPC.
10	Bear a grudge against	To hold resentment.	The witness admitted he bore a grudge against the accused, affecting credibility.
11	Beat about the bush	Avoid the main point.	Counsel, do not beat about the bush —address the charge sheet.
12	Blow hot and cold	Be inconsistent/vacillate.	The appellant cannot blow hot and cold by accepting benefits yet denying liability.
13	Blow one's own trumpet	Boast about oneself.	Instead of blowing his own trumpet , counsel should cite binding authority.
14	Bring to book	Hold to account/punish.	The vigilance department brought the errant officer to book .
15	Bring to the ground	Defeat/demolish.	The forged sale deed was brought to the ground by cross-examination.
16	Bring to a standstill	Halt completely.	The strike brought court functioning to a standstill .
17	Burn one's fingers	Suffer loss through risky action.	Investors burned their fingers in the Ponzi scheme prosecution.
18	Burn the midnight oil	Work late into the night.	The juniors burned the midnight oil drafting the writ petition.
19	Build castles in the air	Make unrealistic plans.	A verbal promise without consideration is castles in the air —legally unenforceable.
20	By leaps and bounds	Very rapidly.	E-filing adoption has grown by leaps and bounds across High Courts.
21	Cast a spell	Strongly captivate or sway.	The prosecutor's summing up seemed to cast a spell on the jury.
22	Caught red-handed	Caught in the act.	The accused was caught red-handed with stolen ornaments.
23	Every now and then	Occasionally.	Every now and then , the Code of Criminal Procedure sees targeted amendments.
24	Fair and square	Honest and just; also "clear and indisputable."	The tender process was found fair and square .

25	Far and near/ wide	Everywhere; widely.	The landmark ruling was discussed far and wide among practitioners.
26	Fight tooth and nail	Fight very fiercely.	The union fought tooth and nail against the retrenchment order.
27	Get off scot-free	Escape punishment.	Due to hostile witnesses, the accused got off scot-free .
28	Get rid of	Eliminate.	The amendment aims to get rid of obsolete provisions.
29	Give one's word	Promise/assure.	The State gave its word to file an affidavit within a week.
30	Go astray	Deviate from the correct path.	The investigation went astray due to an erroneous FSL report.
31	Hand in hand	Together; in close cooperation.	Fundamental rights and duties go hand in hand .
32	Hand in glove	In collusion (often illegal).	The contractor acted hand in glove with officials to rig bids.
33	Hang in the balance	Outcome uncertain.	The convict's fate hangs in the balance pending mercy petition.
34	Heart and soul	With total dedication.	She put her heart and soul into the pro bono defence.
35	In a nutshell	Very briefly.	In a nutshell , the issue is limitation under Section 5.
36	In black and white	In writing; formally recorded.	Put the settlement terms in black and white .
37	In full swing	At peak activity.	Trial is in full swing ; adjournment is declined.
33	In the midst of	In the middle of.	The company was in the midst of arbitration when insolvency began.
39	In the twinkling of an eye	Very quickly.	The interim stay was vacated in the twinkling of an eye .
40	Keep aloof from	Remain uninvolved.	Judges must keep aloof from political controversies.

41	Keep in the dark	Withhold information from.	The insurer kept the claimant in the dark about survey findings.
42	Keep one's promise	Honour a commitment.	The State failed to keep its promise made to the Court.
43	Leave no stone unturned	Try every possible method.	Police left no stone unturned to trace the missing child.
44	Make a mountain out of a molehill	Exaggerate a small matter.	A minor irregularity was made into a mountain out of a molehill in the complaint.
45	Make both ends meet	Manage on limited income.	Young lawyers struggle to make both ends meet during pupillage.
46	Move heaven and earth	Do everything possible.	The petitioner moved heaven and earth to secure bail.
47	Nip in the bud	Stop early before it grows.	The court nipped vexatious litigation in the bud with costs.
48	Now and then	From time to time.	Now and then , guidelines on arrest are reiterated by the Court.
49	Null and void	Invalid; without legal effect.	The agreement was declared null and void for illegality.
50	Nook and corner	Every part/place.	Search teams combed every nook and corner of the premises.
51	Of one's own accord	Voluntarily.	The accused surrendered of his own accord .
52	On the verge of	About to; close to happening.	The company was on the verge of insolvency when the suit was filed.
53	Over and over again	Repeatedly.	The circular was violated over and over again by the authority.
54	Part and parcel	An essential component.	Cross-examination is part and parcel of a fair trial.
55	Put on paper	Write/formalise.	Parties put the settlement on paper to avoid future disputes.
56	Rain cats and dogs	Rain very heavily.	It rained cats and dogs , and the Lok Adalat was adjourned due to flooding.

57	Stand in one's way	Obstruct.	No technicality should stand in the way of substantive justice.
58	Swim with the tide	Follow popular opinion.	A judge must not merely swim with the tide of public sentiment.
59	Take a bird's-eye view	Look from a high-level perspective.	Taking a bird's-eye view of the scheme, the Court upheld its validity.
60	Take up arms	Resort to armed conflict.	Incitement to take up arms against the State is a grave offence.
61	To the best of one's ability	As well as one can.	The amicus curiae assisted the Court to the best of her ability .
62	To the letter	Exactly as written/ instructed.	The consent decree must be complied with to the letter .
63	To the point	Direct and relevant.	Keep submissions to the point ; avoid unnecessary citations.
64	To turn a deaf ear	Ignore deliberately.	Authorities turned a deaf ear to repeated RTI requests.
65	Turn a new leaf	Reform one's conduct.	After rehabilitation, the offender turned a new leaf .
66	Under the pretext of	Using a false excuse.	The accused entered the house under the pretext of meter inspection.
67	Under lock and key	Securely locked; in custody.	The case property is kept under lock and key .
68	Yeoman's service	Excellent, loyal service.	Legal aid clinics rendered yeoman's service during the pandemic.

Part II: Key Legal Terminology (Meaning and Example)

This section lists fundamental terms with their precise meaning and an illustrative legal context.

A - E

Accused

Meaning: Person charged with an offence.

Example: The **accused** pleaded not guilty to the charges under Section 420 IPC.

Accomplice

Meaning: A partner in crime who intentionally assists.

Example: The court warned that **accomplice** testimony requires corroboration.

Arrest

Meaning: Lawful deprivation of liberty by authority.

Example: The SHO **arrested** the suspect with a valid arrest warrant.

Amendment

Meaning: Formal change to a law or pleading.

Example: An **amendment** to the plaint was allowed under Order VI Rule 17 CPC.

Adjournment

Meaning: Postponement of a hearing to another date/time.

Example: **Adjournment** was refused as the matter was already part-heard.

Award

Meaning: Decision of an arbitrator/tribunal; or amount granted as damages/compensation.

Example: The arbitral **award** was challenged under Section 34 of the Arbitration Act.

Arbitration

Meaning: Private dispute resolution by arbitrator(s) chosen by parties.

Example: The construction dispute went to **arbitration** per the contract clause.

Agreement

Meaning: A mutual understanding; becomes a contract when legally enforceable.

Example: A non-disclosure **agreement** bound both parties to confidentiality.

Approver

Meaning: An accomplice who turns state witness.

Example: The **approver's** testimony implicated the kingpin of the racket.

Bail

Meaning: Release of an accused from custody on conditions/surety.

Example: **Bail** was granted subject to a ₹50,000 bond and weekly reporting.

Bench

Meaning: The judge(s) constituting a court for a case.

Example: A Division **Bench** referred the question to a larger Bench.

Bond

Meaning: Written undertaking to do/abstain from an act, often with penalty.

Example: The surety executed a **bond** guaranteeing the accused's appearance.

Breach of contract

Meaning: Failure to perform a contractual promise.

Example: Late delivery constituted a **breach of contract**, attracting damages.

Consent

Meaning: Free, informed agreement without coercion, fraud, etc.

Example: The compromise decree recorded the parties' **consent**.

Contract

Meaning: Enforceable agreement with offer, acceptance, consideration, and capacity.

Example: The supply **contract** contained an arbitration clause.

Contempt

Meaning: Act that lowers authority of court or disobeys its orders.

Example: Tweets scandalising the judiciary invited **contempt** proceedings.

Counterclaim

Meaning: Defendant's independent claim against the plaintiff in the same suit.

Example: The tenant filed a **counterclaim** for repair costs.

Counsel

Meaning: Advocate representing a party.

Example: Senior **counsel** argued for the petitioner.

Compromise

Meaning: Settlement by mutual concessions; may be recorded as decree/order.

Example: The suit ended in a **compromise** before the mediator.

Coercion

Meaning: Forcing consent by threat or unlawful detention.

Example: The release deed was set aside as obtained by **coercion**.

Claim

Meaning: Demand for a legal right or relief.

Example: The insurer repudiated the **claim** as time-barred.

Damages

Meaning: Monetary compensation for loss caused by breach/tort.

Example: The court awarded liquidated **damages** per the contract.

Decree

Meaning: Formal adjudication conclusively determining rights in a civil suit.

Example: A preliminary **decree** for partition was passed.

Defamation

Meaning: Publication of a false statement harming reputation.

Example: The editor faced a **defamation** suit for the article.

Defendant

Meaning: Party against whom a civil suit is filed.

Example: The **defendant** filed a written statement denying liability.

Defense (Defence)

Meaning: Reasons/pleas to defeat a claim or charge.

Example: **Alibi** was the primary **defence** to the theft charge.

Document

Meaning: Any matter expressed/recorded upon any substance.

Example: The contract **document** was exhibited as Ex. P-1.

Distress

Meaning: Seizure of property to compel payment/performance (older remedy).

Example: Rent was recovered by **distress** under the statute.

Divorce

Meaning: Dissolution of marriage by decree or mutual consent.

Example: A decree of **divorce** by mutual consent was granted.

Evidence

Meaning: Testimony, documents, and material objects used to prove/disprove facts.

Example: Electronic **evidence** was admitted under Section 65B certificate.

Estoppel

Meaning: Rule preventing a person from denying what they previously represented.

Example: The tenant was **estopped** from disputing the landlord's title.

Equity

Meaning: Principles of fairness supplementing strict law.

Example: **Equity** requires restitution when enrichment is unjust.

Execution

Meaning: Enforcement of a decree/order.

Example: The decree-holder sought **execution** by attachment of property.

F - P

Fraud

Meaning: Intentional deception to secure unfair advantage.

Example: The sale deed was voidable as it was obtained by **fraud**.

Hearsay

Meaning: Second-hand statement offered to prove truth of its contents.

Example: The **hearsay** portion of the testimony was excluded.

Homicide

Meaning: Killing of a human being—may be lawful/unlawful.

Example: The charge was culpable **homicide** not amounting to murder.

Injunction

Meaning: Court order restraining or compelling an act.

Example: An interim **injunction** restrained demolition of the shop.

Insolvency

Meaning: Legal state of inability to pay debts as they fall due.

Example: The company entered CIRP under the **Insolvency** Code.

Instrument

Meaning: Formal legal document creating, transferring, or recording rights.

Example: The mortgage **instrument** was duly stamped and registered.

Issue

Meaning: A disputed point of fact/law framed for trial.

Example: **Issues** were framed regarding title and limitation.

Judgment

Meaning: Statement of reasons and decision of a court.

Example: The trial court's **judgment** decreed the suit with costs.

Jurisdiction

Meaning: Court's power to hear a matter.

Example: Only the commercial court had **jurisdiction** over the dispute.

Jurisprudence

Meaning: Study/philosophy of law and legal systems.

Example: The judgment surveyed comparative **jurisprudence** on privacy.

Jury

Meaning: Body of laypersons deciding facts (rare in India).

Example: In common-law countries, **juries** return a verdict of guilty/not guilty.

Justice

Meaning: Fair, impartial application of law; also a judge (as a title).

Example: **Justice** must not only be done but seen to be done.

Juvenile

Meaning: Person under the age defined by law (generally under 18).

Example: The **juvenile** was produced before the JJB, not a regular court.

Kidnapping

Meaning: Taking away a person without lawful authority/consent.

Example: He was charged with **kidnapping** a minor from lawful guardianship.

Lawyer

Meaning: Person authorised to practise law; advocate.

Example: The **lawyer** filed a vakalatnama to appear for the respondent.

Liability

Meaning: Legal responsibility for an act/omission.

Example: The principal was vicariously **liable** for the driver's negligence.

Litigation

Meaning: Process of taking legal action through courts.

Example: Prolonged **litigation** exhausted the firm's resources.

Maintenance

Meaning: Financial support to spouse/child/parent as ordered by law.

Example: Interim **maintenance** was granted to the wife under the CrPC.

Minor

Meaning: Person under age of majority (usually 18).

Example: A **minor's** contract is void except for necessities.

Murder

Meaning: The gravest form of unlawful homicide with requisite intent.

Example: The accused was convicted of **murder** under Section 302 IPC.

Mortgage

Meaning: Transfer of an interest in immovable property to secure a debt.

Example: On default, the bank enforced the equitable **mortgage**.

Negligence

Meaning: Breach of a duty of care causing damage.

Example: Medical **negligence** was established by expert evidence.

Notification

Meaning: Official government communication published in the Gazette.

Example: A **notification** fixed the minimum wage for the sector.

Notice

Meaning: Formal intimation/communication of a fact or requirement.

Example: A 15-day **notice** to quit was served on the tenant.

Oath

Meaning: Solemn declaration to speak truth/perform duties.

Example: Witnesses gave evidence on **oath** before the court.

Objection

Meaning: Formal protest against evidence/procedure.

Example: **Objection**—leading question—was sustained by the court.

Partnership

Meaning: Relationship between persons carrying on business for profit.

Example: **Partners** are jointly and severally liable for firm debts.

Partition

Meaning: Division of joint property into separate shares.

Example: A preliminary decree for **partition** was passed among coparceners.

Perjury

Meaning: Knowingly giving false evidence on oath.

Example: The witness faced **perjury** charges for contradictory affidavits.

Petition

Meaning: Formal application to a court/authority seeking relief.

Example: A writ **petition** challenged the cancellation of license.

Petitioner

Meaning: Person who files a petition.

Example: The **petitioner** sought mandamus against the authorities.

Plaintiff

Meaning: Person who brings a civil suit.

Example: The **plaintiff** claimed specific performance of the agreement.

Plaint

Meaning: The statement instituting a civil suit.

Example: The **plaint** disclosed a cause of action and was duly verified.

Pleadings

Meaning: Written statements of parties' material facts.

Example: New facts cannot be proved if they are outside the **pleadings**.

Privity (of contract)

Meaning: Only parties to a contract can sue/enforce it (with exceptions).

Example: The sub-contractor lacked **privity** with the employer.

Pre-emption

Meaning: Right to purchase property before it is sold to another.

Example: A co-sharer sued for **pre-emption** of the sale.

Proviso

Meaning: Clause creating an exception/condition, typically beginning "Provided that...".

Example: The **proviso** to Section 5 extends limitation for sufficient cause.

Prosecutor

Meaning: Lawyer who conducts a criminal case for the State.

Example: The public **prosecutor** opposed the bail application.

Prosecution

Meaning: Proceedings to prove a criminal charge.

Example: The **prosecution** examined ten witnesses.

Procedure

Meaning: Rules governing how cases are conducted.

Example: Criminal **procedure** mandates supply of charge-sheet to the accused.

Presumption

Meaning: Rule allowing a court to assume a fact until rebutted.

Example: There is a **presumption** of innocence in criminal law.

Punishment

Meaning: Sanction imposed upon conviction.

Example: The **punishment** prescribed includes imprisonment and fine.

R - W

Right

Meaning: Legally recognised claim enforceable by law.

Example: The **right** to be heard is part of natural justice.

Remedy

Meaning: Means to enforce a right or redress a wrong.

Example: **Remedies** include damages, injunction, and specific performance.

Remand

Meaning: Send a case/accused back—either to custody or to lower court.

Example: The accused was **remanded** to judicial custody for 14 days.

Redemption

Meaning: Mortgagor's right to recover property on repayment.

Example: The suit sought **redemption** of the mortgaged house.

Respondent

Meaning: Party who answers a petition/appeal.

Example: The **respondent** supported the tribunal's order.

Regulation

Meaning: Delegated legislation made by an authority under a statute.

Example: **Regulations** under the Act set safety standards.

Rule

Meaning: Detailed provision often made under a statute.

Example: **Rule 7** prescribes the format of applications.

Sentence

Meaning: Punishment pronounced by a criminal court after conviction.

Example: A **sentence** of rigorous imprisonment for five years was imposed.

Settlement

Meaning: Agreed resolution of a dispute.

Example: The parties reached a **settlement** through mediation.

Statute

Meaning: Act of the legislature.

Example: The **statute** expressly bars civil court jurisdiction.

Summons

Meaning: The written command to appear.

Example: **Summons** were issued to the defendant for final hearing.

Surety

Meaning: Person who guarantees another's obligation.

Example: The **surety** became liable when the accused absconded.

Title

Meaning: Legal ownership or evidence of ownership.

Example: The plaintiff sought declaration of **title** and injunction.

Transfer

Meaning: Conveyance of property/interest from one to another.

Example: **Transfer** of shares required board approval under the Articles.

Tort

Meaning: Civil wrong (other than breach of contract) causing legal damage.

Example: Defendant was liable in **tort** for nuisance.

Trespass

Meaning: Unlawful interference with person, land, or goods.

Example: Walking across the field without permission amounted to **trespass**.

Trial

Meaning: Judicial examination of issues of fact/law.

Example: The criminal **trial** commenced with framing of charge.

Vicarious (liability)

Meaning: Liability imposed on one for acts of another.

Example: The corporation bore **vicarious liability** for the driver's negligence.

Verdict

Meaning: Decision of a jury on facts; the decision/outcome.

Example: The jury returned a **verdict** of not guilty.

Void

Meaning: Having no legal effect from the outset.

Example: A marriage within prohibited degrees is **void**.

Voidable

Meaning: Valid until avoided by the aggrieved party.

Example: A contract induced by misrepresentation is **voidable** at the option of the deceived party.

Warrant

Meaning: Judicial authorisation (e.g., arrest/search).

Example: A search **warrant** was executed at the warehouse.

Witness

Meaning: Person who gives evidence in a proceeding.

Example: The eyewitness identified the **witness** in court.

Will

Meaning: Testamentary document disposing of property after death.

Example: The **will** was probated by the District Judge.

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