

Idioms and Metaphors

Sometimes readers will come across idioms and metaphors in scientific writing. *Idioms* have figurative meanings that are different from their literal meanings. For example, the figurative meaning of “it’s raining cats and dogs” is “it’s raining heavily.” *Metaphors* compare one thing to another without using the words “like” or “as.” For example, “Since both idioms and metaphors cannot be interpreted literally, they may be difficult for some students to understand if English is not their first language.”

Below are some idioms and metaphors that may appear in scientific writing.

Idioms

Phrase	Meaning
back to the drawing board	when something fails and it’s time to start over
the best of both worlds	all the advantages
blessing in disguise	something good that isn’t recognized at first
far cry from	very different from
give the benefit of the doubt	to believe someone’s statement, without proof
keep something at bay	keep something away
final straw	the final problem in a series of problems
see eye to eye	when people agree on something
take with a grain of salt	not to take what someone says too seriously
bells and whistles	all the features of a new product
on the same wavelength	to have the same ideas and opinions
reinvent the wheel	waste time doing something that has already been done effectively
in tune with someone	to have the same ideas and opinions as someone
the bottom line	the most essential or key information
well-oiled machine	something that functions very well
light years ahead	a long way in front of something in terms of development
cutting edge	at the forefront of progress
not rocket science	not hard to understand
down to a science	able to do something well
a flash in the pan	something showy that initially impresses but lacks real results

Metaphors

We live in an elegant universe.
The cosmos is a string symphony.
Genes are selfish.
There is an endless battle between thermodynamics and gravity.

Metaphors in scientific writing are not wrong! They help the reader to understand new concepts, as long as the intended audience understands them. Here’s a good discussion of the value of metaphors:

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/life-unbounded/in-defense-of-metaphors-in-science-writing/>

This brief handout is just a starting point (← *metaphor!*). We’d welcome your examples of idioms and metaphors that you have encountered in the scientific literature, and whether they were useful to you or made your reading more difficult. Write to us at psywc@uw.edu.