

School-Related Idioms: Studying, Tests, and Classroom Life

From primary grades through university life, education provides English with a rich vocabulary of metaphors, phrasal verbs, and informal expressions. Whether describing long study hours, exam results, or attendance habits, these school-related idioms are essential for following everyday conversations about learning and work.

This reference categorizes the most common American idioms for school life, studying, tests, and classroom culture.

Studying & Diligence

Native speakers rarely say “I am going to study intensely.” Instead, they rely on a family of book- and work-related idioms:

- **Hit the books:** To begin studying seriously, especially when preparing for an exam or deadline.
‣ “I can’t go to the movies tonight; I really need to hit the books.”
- **Crack the books:** To open a book to study (often used in the negative to describe someone who neglects their schoolwork).
‣ “He barely cracked the books all semester, but he somehow managed to pass.”
- **Have one’s nose in the books:** To be completely absorbed in studying or reading. In the singular (nose in a book), it often describes reading for pleasure.
- **Keep one’s nose to the grindstone:** To work steadily, hard, and continuously without distraction.
- **Burn the midnight oil:** To stay up late into the night working or studying, alluding to old oil lamps.
- **Pull an all-nighter:** To stay awake an entire night without sleeping to complete a paper or cram for a test.

- **Cram session:** An intensive, last-minute study session right before an exam, often done collaboratively in a group.

Classroom Verbs: Submitting Work

In American classrooms, instructors and students rarely use the formal verb submit. Instead, three common separable phrasal verbs dominate:

- **Turn in / Hand in:** To submit completed assignments or essays to an instructor.
 - » “Don’t forget to turn in your homework before you leave today.”
- **Pass in / Pass forward:** Used when students inside the classroom hand papers physically toward the front of the room or collect them row-by-row.
- **Hand back / Pass back:** The reciprocal action used by the teacher when returning graded work to students.

Tests, Quizzes & Performance

In standard usage, teachers give tests, while students take tests. When the results arrive, these idioms describe the outcome:

Types of Assessments

- **Pop quiz:** An unannounced, surprise quiz designed to check whether students completed reading assignments.
- **Midterms & Finals:** Comprehensive exams given halfway through or at the very end of an academic term.
- **Make-up test:** A rescheduled exam allowed for a student who missed the original test due to illness or an excused absence.
- **Open-book test:** An exam where students are permitted to consult notes, textbooks, or reference sheets.

Describing Grades & Test Results

- **Ace a test:** To earn a top grade (typically an 'A') or pass with ease.
 - » “She aced the biology midterm without breaking a sweat.”
- **Bomb a test:** To perform exceptionally poorly or fail completely.
 - » “I thought I was prepared, but I completely bombed the history exam.”
- **Flunk:** To fail an exam or course entirely (“He flunked algebra”), or used transitively when a teacher assigns a failing grade (“The teacher flunked him for plagiarizing”).
- **Flunk out:** To be formally dismissed from a school or college due to continuous failing grades.

Student Stereotypes & Roles

Colloquial English features several vivid labels for academic behavior:

- **Straight-A student:** Someone who earns the highest possible marks across all classes.
- **Teacher's pet:** A student who appears to be favored by the instructor, often through fawning or excessive eagerness.
- **A brain / Brainy:** Informal slang for an intellectually sharp or academically gifted person.
- **A walking encyclopedia:** Someone who possesses a massive store of factual knowledge and recall.
- **High school / College dropout:** A person who leaves an academic program permanently before completing their degree.

Nuance Note: “In School” vs. “At School”

Non-native speakers frequently mix up the prepositions in and at when describing school:

- **In School (Status / Role):** Refers to whether someone is currently enrolled as a student. If someone on the street asks what you do for a living, replying “I’m in school” means you are attending university or secondary school.
- **At School (Physical Location):** Refers to being physically located on the campus grounds or inside the school building at that exact moment (“He can’t take your call right now; he’s at school”).

Skipping Class & Attendance

When attendance is mandatory, unexcused absences are described using these informal terms:

- **Play hooky:** A classic colloquial phrase meaning to stay away from school or work without permission, often to enjoy free time or good weather.
- **Cut class / Skip class:** Deliberately deciding not to attend a specific lecture or period.
- **Ditch school:** Leaving the school campus entirely during class hours.