
Lesson 1: Corey Plays It By Ear

(Corey is working full time as a financial analyst and is also taking computer classes in the evening. Now he's talking to his roommate Jared just before he leaves for his evening class.)

Jared: Where do you go for your class, Corey?

Corey: The computer science building. It's in the new north **wing**.

Jared: How's it going so far?

Corey: Well, I really like it, but I'm not sure that I'm going to be able **to make it** to the end of the program.

Jared: **Get serious!** You're not saying that you're going to **flunk out**, are you?

Corey: No. It's just that I've been so busy with my job right now that I don't have time to prepare. I feel like I'm **winging it** every time I go to class.

Jared: Well, maybe you're **overdoing it** with your job plus a class each quarter.

Corey: Probably. And I'm not really good with computers. On the other hand, once I do **catch on**, I remember things pretty well. So I think I'm going to **play it by ear** for the next couple of weeks. Then I might decide to drop this class and take it later at a better time.

Extra Idiom

to make it = to arrive somewhere *or* to succeed

Exercise 1:1

Directions: Reread the dialogue and put the letter of the best meaning next to each of the idioms below.

1. ____ a wing (of a building)
 2. ____ to wing it
 3. ____ Get serious!
 4. ____ to flunk out
 5. ____ to overdo it
 6. ____ to catch on (to something)
 7. ____ to play it by ear
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- a. to act at each moment in a situation by adjusting to changes in the situation; to be continually flexible in a changing situation
 - b. suddenly to understand (something)
 - c. Be serious! Stop joking!
 - d. to do too much; to do more than is good or necessary
 - e. to be forced to leave a school or an academic program because of too many failing grades
 - f. a smaller section (of a building) attached to the main central section
 - g. to attempt something without preparation in a case where preparation is considered necessary or beneficial

Exercise 1:2

Directions: Reread the dialogue and put “True” or “False” next to each of the following sentences.

1. _____ Corey’s classes are held in the computer science building.
2. _____ Jared thinks that Corey will **flunk out** of his computer program.
3. _____ Corey has already **flunked out** of one school.
4. _____ Corey will make a decision about staying in his class based on what happens in the next couple of weeks.
5. _____ Corey **catches on** to his computer class topics very quickly.

Exercise 1:3

Directions: Put an X next to the best answer for each question below.

1. The east **wing** of the White House is
 - a. _____ in the center of the White House.
 - b. _____ on one side of the White House.

2. “**Winging it**” is
 - a. _____ always a bad idea.
 - b. _____ sometimes necessary in an emergency.

3. Who can successfully **wing** a presentation if he’s asked at the last moment?
 - a. _____ An experienced speaker who knows a lot about his subject.
 - b. _____ A flight attendant who has just flown from Paris to Dakar to New York.

4. If a student **flunks out** of a school,
- _____ he needs to get better grades the next quarter or semester.
 - _____ there is no “next time” because he cannot continue at this school.
5. When do people usually **catch on to** something?
- _____ After they watch an experienced person do it several times.
 - _____ While they are commuting to their workplace.
6. If I **overdo it** when I prepare food for the party,
- _____ the partygoers will be unhappy to see so much food.
 - _____ the partygoers will probably be happy, but I may be exhausted.
7. If I have been **overdoing it** when I exercise, I probably
- _____ should stop being so lazy.
 - _____ should try to do less when I exercise.
8. In order **to play things by ear** successfully, a person must be
- _____ competent and flexible.
 - _____ ready to follow instructions exactly.
9. Who **plays things by ear**?
- _____ A teacher who is constantly modifying her lesson plans, going faster or slower, depending on the needs of her students.
 - _____ A bus driver who must be at each bus stop at a scheduled time.
10. If I say, “**Get serious**” to my sister, I probably think that
- _____ she is joking.
 - _____ she is lying.

Exercise 1:4

Directions: Put the best idiom from Exercise 1:1 into each blank space below.

1. Some big hospitals have a maternity _____ for women who are having babies and a cardiac wing for heart patients.
2. When baby birds leave their parents' nest, they must start flying with no preparation (no flying classes); they need to _____ it.
3. Some people can play music "by ear." That means that they don't need to look at sheet music when they play new music. As they play one note, their ears tell them which note to go to next and, when they play the next note, their ears tell them again where to put their fingers next. They play it (the music) _____ ear.
4. Don't _____ it during your first few exercise sessions. You need to increase the length and difficulty of your exercises very gradually.
5. In the movie *Ghost*, Sam tells his girlfriend Molly that the art critic for *The New York Times* probably _____ out of art school. He means that, if the art critic were really talented, he would be producing art instead of analyzing the art created by other people.
6. In the movie *Ghost*, when Sam notices that there is too much money in a bank account, his friend Carl asks Sam what he will do that evening. He wants to be able to tell Willy Lopez where Sam will be that night. That way, Willy Lopez will be able to steal Sam's password to the bank account. But Sam doesn't _____ on to what Carl is really thinking.
7. When people travel to another country, some of them prefer to travel with an organized tour, but others prefer to make only a few reservations and then play _____ by _____ most of the time. Which do you prefer?
8. Buckingham Palace in London has both a north wing and a south _____, but my house is too small to have any kind of a _____.
9. When we say that we will play something _____ ear, we emphasize that we are prepared to make decisions based on future events, that we will remain flexible so that we can adjust our actions to future events. But when we say that we will _____ it, we emphasize that we are doing something with no preparation at all (in a situation where we normally should be prepared).

10. At first, I thought he was serious, but then I caught _____ to his jokes.
11. “Winging _____” is never a wonderful idea, but sometimes it is necessary. For example, a few years ago, in the United States, a doctor was flying his own private plane when he had a heart attack. His passenger, his wife, didn’t know how to fly a plane, but she was able to contact an airport control tower and get instructions on how to land the plane. She had to _____ it, but she survived her crash landing.
12. If you tell me that you’re going to _____ it at your job interview, I’ll say, “Get _____!” because I know that you must be joking.
13. Did you ever _____ a presentation in school? Did the teacher catch _____ to the fact that you had not prepared as you should have?
14. Very few people ever flunk _____ of Harvard. Harvard works very hard to be sure that the people that it has chosen so carefully will succeed.
15. When actors and actresses overdo _____, they no longer seem believable.
16. Have you ever read a story about the detective Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson? In these stories, Sherlock Holmes always catches _____ to the solution to the mystery before Dr. Watson does.
17. You learned your own native language by catching _____ to the meaning of words that your parents spoke to you. Have you learned many English words by catching on _____ their meanings or have you learned most words by looking them up in a dictionary?
18. In an emergency, an airline pilot may need to _____ it by _____ if an emergency is very unusual and the normal techniques that he has been taught to use are not working.
19. If your English teacher leaves all her materials at home by mistake, do you think that she should wing _____ in class, teaching the material as well as she can, or should she just buy some candy and have a party during class time that day? Explain your opinion.
20. At Christmastime, some people in the United States put large displays of Christmas lights in their front yards. Some spend enormous amounts of time and energy on this. I think that they are probably _____ it, but I still enjoy looking at their displays.