

For Advanced Students of English as a Foreign Language

# ILLUSTRATED AMERICAN IDIOMS



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Advanced Level  
Functional Activities  
for Development of Vocabulary

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stop here

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ALL THUMBS

# ALL THUMBS

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**DEFINITION:** Awkward, especially with one's hands; clumsy

## ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Walter tried to fix the broken table but couldn't. He was all thumbs.*

(Paraphrase: He had trouble fixing the table because he was awkward with his hands.)

- *When it comes to using a hammer and saw, I'm all thumbs.*

(Paraphrase: I'm quite clumsy with a hammer and saw.)

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to give examples of skills in which they are all thumbs.*



**AT LOGGERHEADS**

# AT LOGGERHEADS

**DEFINITION:** In a quarrel; in a fight; opposing each other

## ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Marvin and Madge are at loggerheads again. They don't seem to agree on anything.*

(Paraphrase: They are opposing each other because of their constant disagreement on matters.)

- *The two politicians have been at loggerheads for 20 years over the issue of a highway construction.*

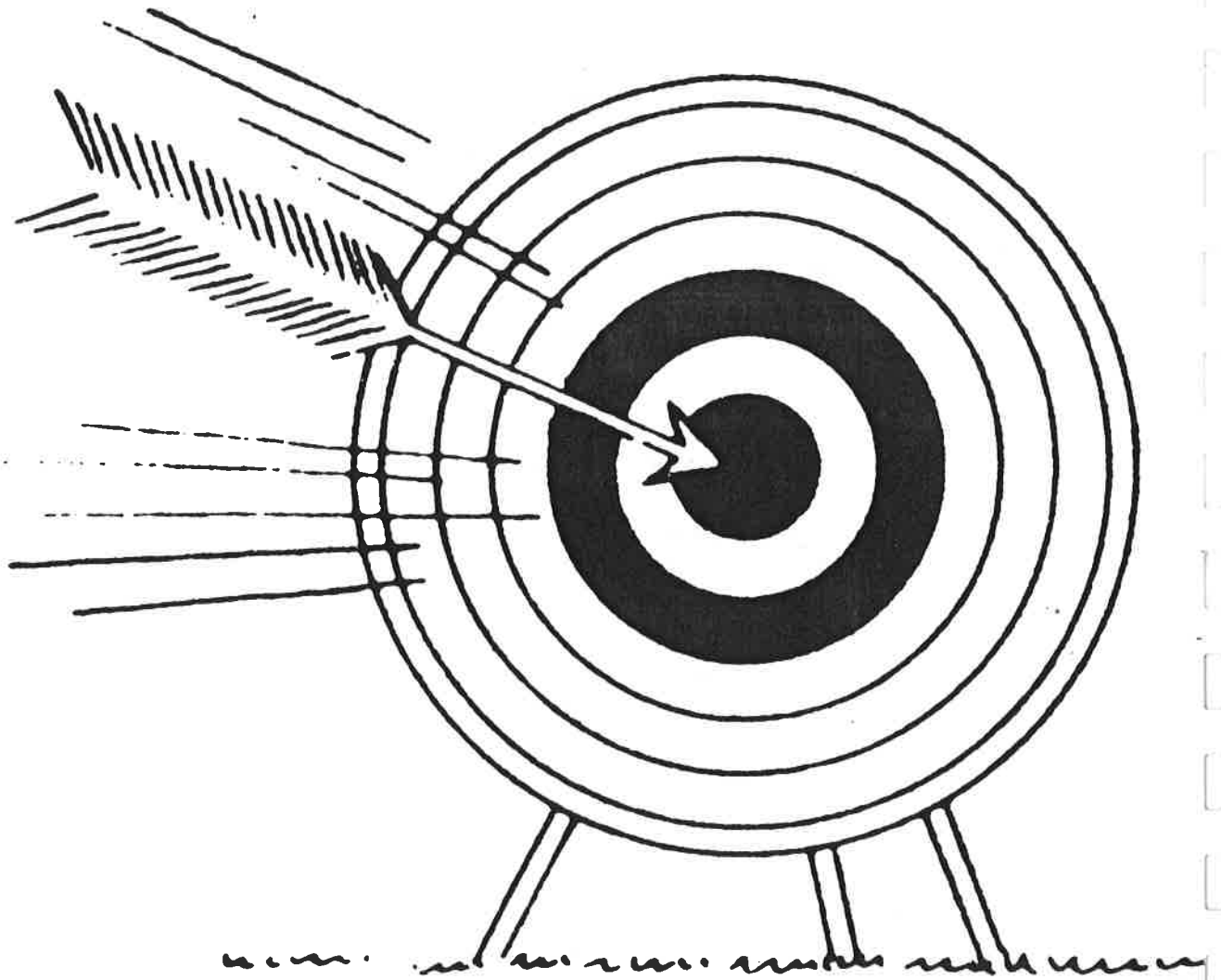
(Paraphrase: They have been opposing each other for 20 years on a political question.)

## RELATED EXPRESSION

**AT ODDS** = *In conflict or disagreement, opposed*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to decide whether or not the following situations describe people at loggerheads or at odds.*

1. *A newly married couple disagreeing about religion.*
2. *Neighbors opposed to a couple that has a dog that barks a lot.*
3. *Three people planning a trip to Hawaii to go water skiing.*
4. *Governors of neighboring states opposed to one of the President's plans for fighting inflation.*
5. *A husband and a wife who repeatedly cannot agree on the way they should decorate the living room of their house.*
6. *A teacher and a pupil discussing the results of the pupil's latest examination.*
7. *Two employees of the same company opposing each other with regard to the need for membership in a labor union.*
8. *A mother and a daughter in disagreement about whether the girl is old enough to have dates with boys.*
9. *A father and a son opposed to the mother's desire to purchase a new sofa for the living room rather than a sailboat.*



**BE ON TARGET**

## **(to) BE ON TARGET**

**DEFINITION:** To achieve a desired goal; to be correct in one's analysis or assessment of something

### **ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES**

- *Sam says that he is on target in his law career.*

(Paraphrase: He believes that he has achieved his desired goal.)

- *Your remark concerning the budget was right on target.*

(Paraphrase: Your assessment of the budget was entirely correct.)

### **RELATED EXPRESSIONS**

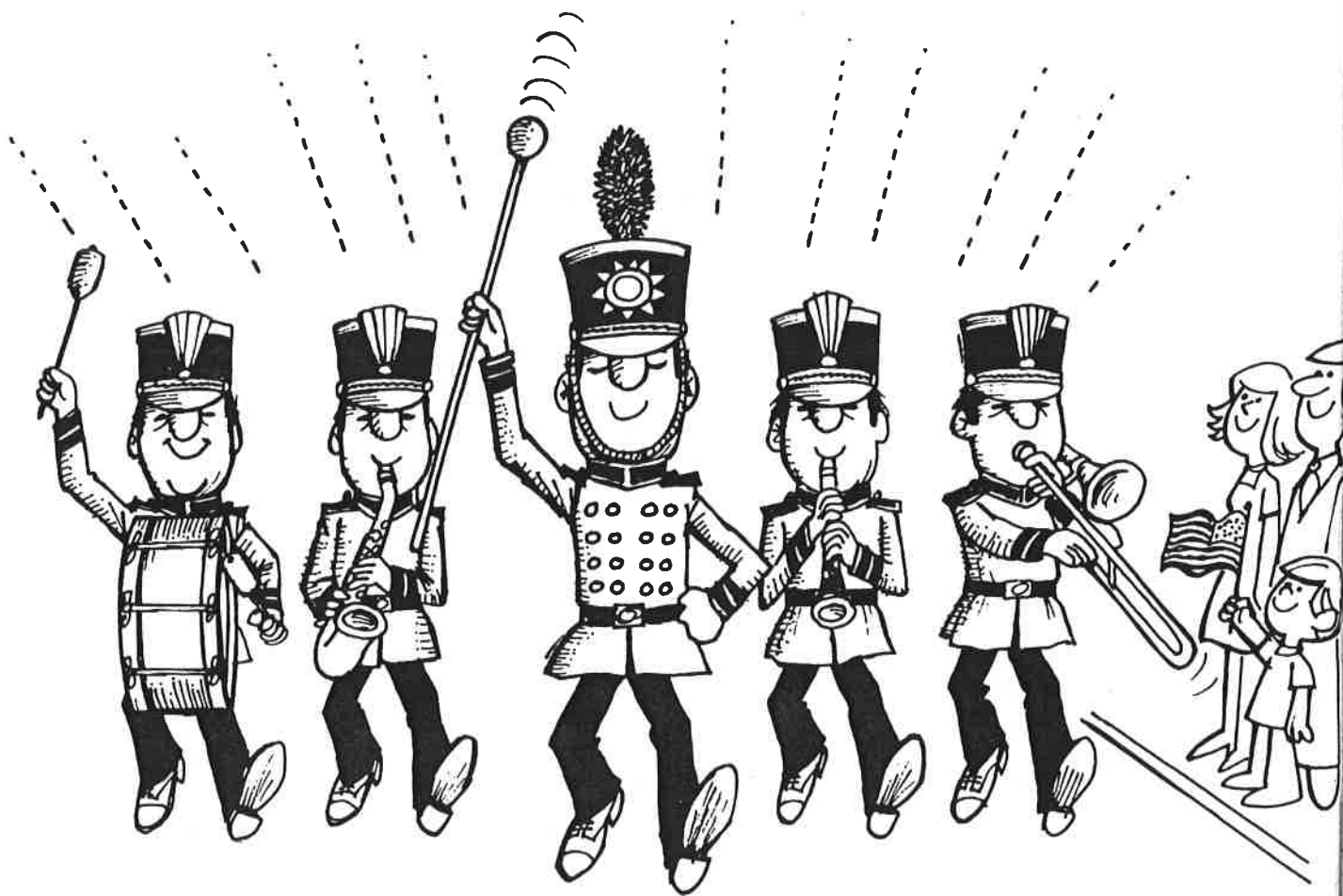
**BE ON THE BEAM** = *To do well in one's endeavors; to be correct, just right*

**HIT THE BULL'S EYE** = *To hit the target; to achieve a desired goal*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to decide which of the following is on target, or on the beam.*

1. *A student who answers every question on a test correctly.*
2. *A basketball player who makes only 15 percent of his shots.*
3. *A man 29 years of age who becomes the president of his own company.*
- \*4. *A lawyer who wins over 85 percent of her cases in court.*
5. *A 15-year old girl who wins three gold medals in the Olympics.*
6. *An overweight woman who begins many diet programs but never finishes them.*
7. *A professor of astronomy who discovers a new star.*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to describe persons that they feel are on the beam or on target, telling why they think so.*



**BEAT THE BAND**

## (to) BEAT THE BAND

**DEFINITION:** At great speed; with a great deal of noise or commotion; with a great deal of effort (Used after *TO*)

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *The police car was going down the highway to beat the band.*

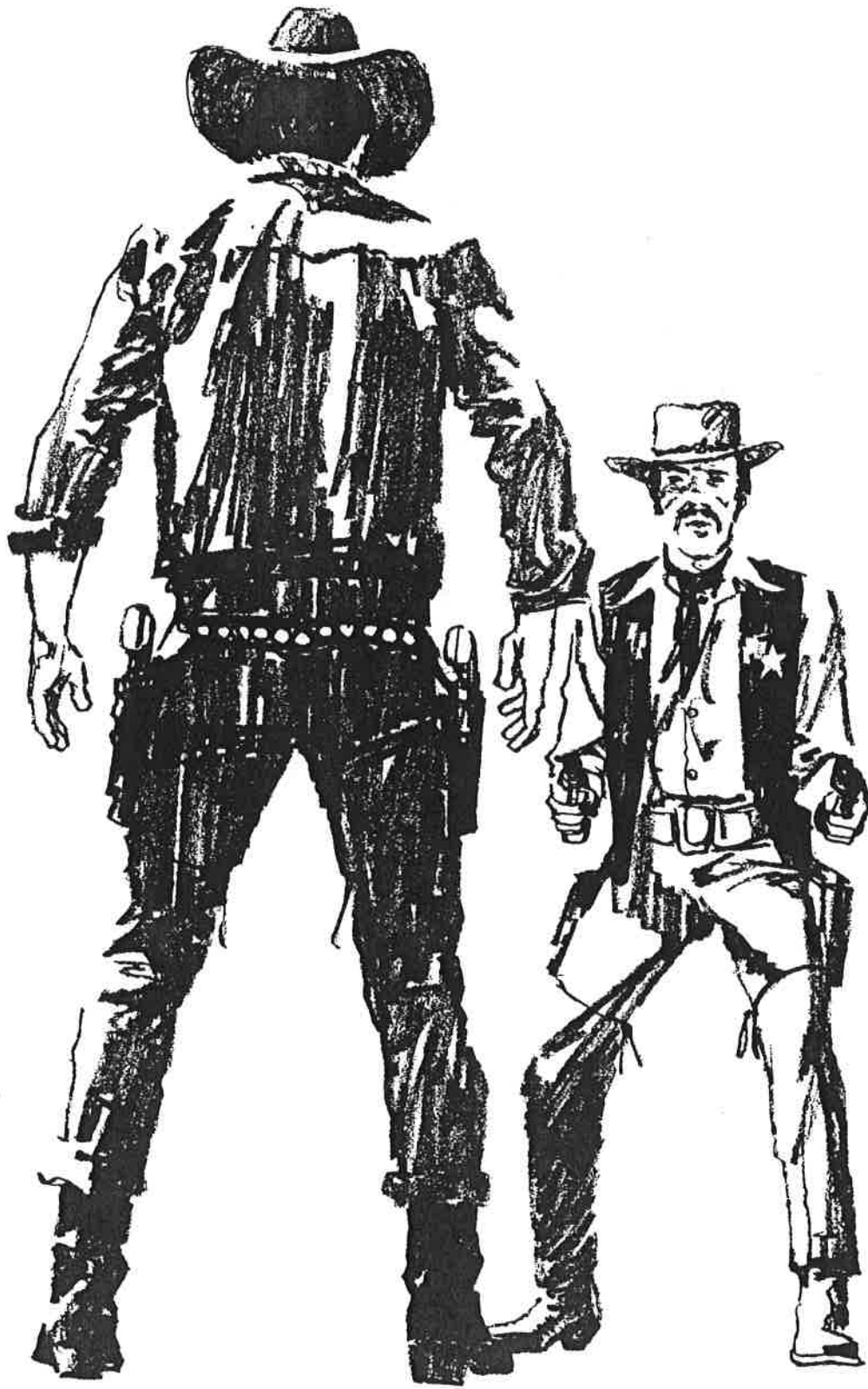
(Paraphrase: It was going at full speed.)

- *After the team scored two goals in ten minutes, the spectators cheered, shouted, and clapped their hands to beat the band.*

(Paraphrase: The spectators indicated their approval as loud as they could.)

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to indicate which of the following situations might cause a beat the band reaction and express how it might be manifested.*

1. *A small boy who thinks he sees a ghost in the attic. (What might he do?)*
2. *An ambulance going to the scene of a train accident. (How might it go?)*
3. *A friend who has just received the news that he has just won \$150,000 in the state lottery. (How might he react?)*
4. *A hunter who has just come face to face with a bear in the woods. (What might the hunter do?)*
5. *A worker who suddenly discovers that he only has a few minutes to finish a job that the boss considers very important. (What might the worker do?)*
6. *A swimmer who is caught in a strong undercurrent and fears he is about to drown. (What might his reaction be?)*
7. *A gathering of movie fans when their favorite movie star suddenly appears. (How might they react?)*



**BEAT TO THE DRAW**

**(to) BEAT TO THE DRAW**  
**or**  
**(to) BEAT TO THE PUNCH**

**DEFINITION:** To do something before another person has a chance to do it

**ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES**

● *I had hoped to get that job in New Orleans, but Jake beat me to the draw.*

(Paraphrase: Jake applied and got the job before I did.)

● *Leah wanted to buy that painting by Orsky, but Janice beat her to the punch.*

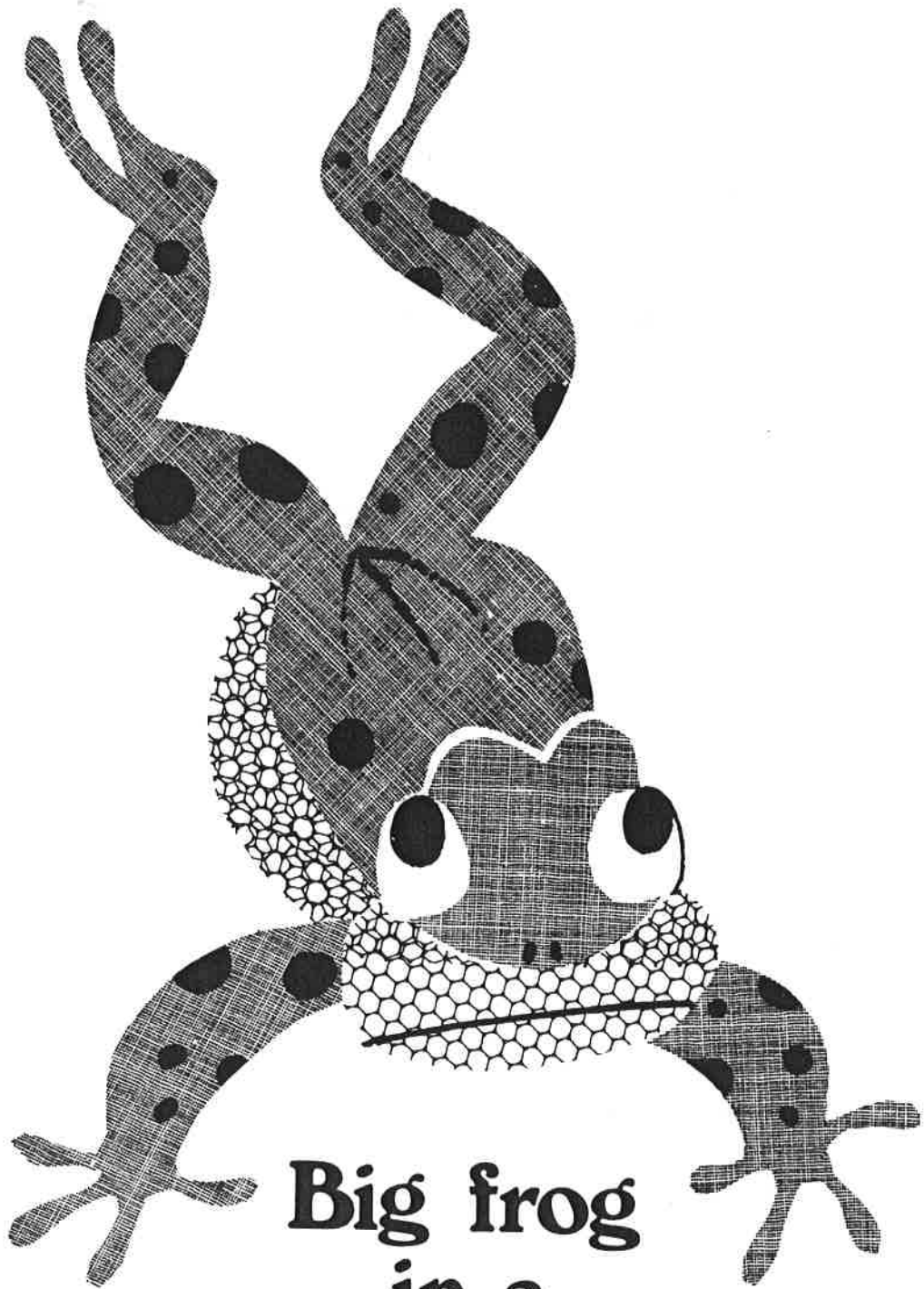
(Paraphrase: Leah couldn't buy the painting because Janice bought it first.)

**SYNONYMOUS EXPRESSION**

**GET THE JUMP ON** = *To get ahead of; to have an advantage over*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to use the idiom and synonymous expression to express the following:*

1. **DEJECTION.** *Begin the utterance with*
  - (a) *I didn't have a chance ...*
  - (b) *I can't believe it ...*
  - (c) *I'm so depressed ...*
2. **ELATION.** *Begin the utterance with*
  - (a) *Oh, happy day ...*
  - (b) *I've got good news ...!*
  - (c) *Did you hear what happened to me ...?*
3. **SYMPATHY.** *Begin the utterance with*
  - (a) *I'm sorry to hear that ...*
  - (b) *It's too bad that ...*
  - (c) *What a shame ...!*
4. **DETERMINATION.** *Begin the utterance with*
  - (a) *I've made up my mind that ...*
  - (b) *This time I won't ...*
  - (c) *Let's not let ...*



**Big frog  
in a  
small pond**

# BIG FROG (FISH) IN A SMALL POND

**DEFINITION:** Someone who is considered to be important in a small place or position; a leader in a small group

## ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *In his hometown, he was a big frog in a small pond, but after he moved to a large city, he was just one person among many millions.*

(Paraphrase: In his hometown he was respected and honored, but in the large city no one knew him.)

- *Grant preferred being president of a small company—a big frog in a small pond—rather than becoming a vice-president of a large corporation at a larger salary.*

(Paraphrase: More money couldn't lure him away from the honor and respect of his position as head of a small company.)

## RELATED EXPRESSIONS

**THE MAN** = *The boss, the leader, the most important person in an organization*

**BIG CHEESE**  
**BIG GUN**  
**BIG SHOT**  
**BIG WIG**  
**BIG WHEEL**

} *A person with a great deal of power or influence;  
a high official*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to name some powerful or influential persons in their own country and to characterize each by using the idiom or related expressions. Students might say something such as:*

*The (big shot) in my town/city, is (name of person) because he/she controls/runs the*

*or*

*(Name of person) thinks he/she is a (big gun) in my town/city/country, but he/she is only a big frog in a small pond.*

**WE'RE  
TOOTING  
OUR OWN  
HORN**



## (to) BLOW (TOOT) ONE'S OWN HORN

**DEFINITION:** To praise oneself; to call attention to one's skill, intelligence, or success; to boast

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Poor Charlie! He's always tooting his own horn about how good he is at golf.*

(Paraphrase: He's always praising his own skill at golf.)

- *The person who habitually blows his own horn soon loses friends.* †

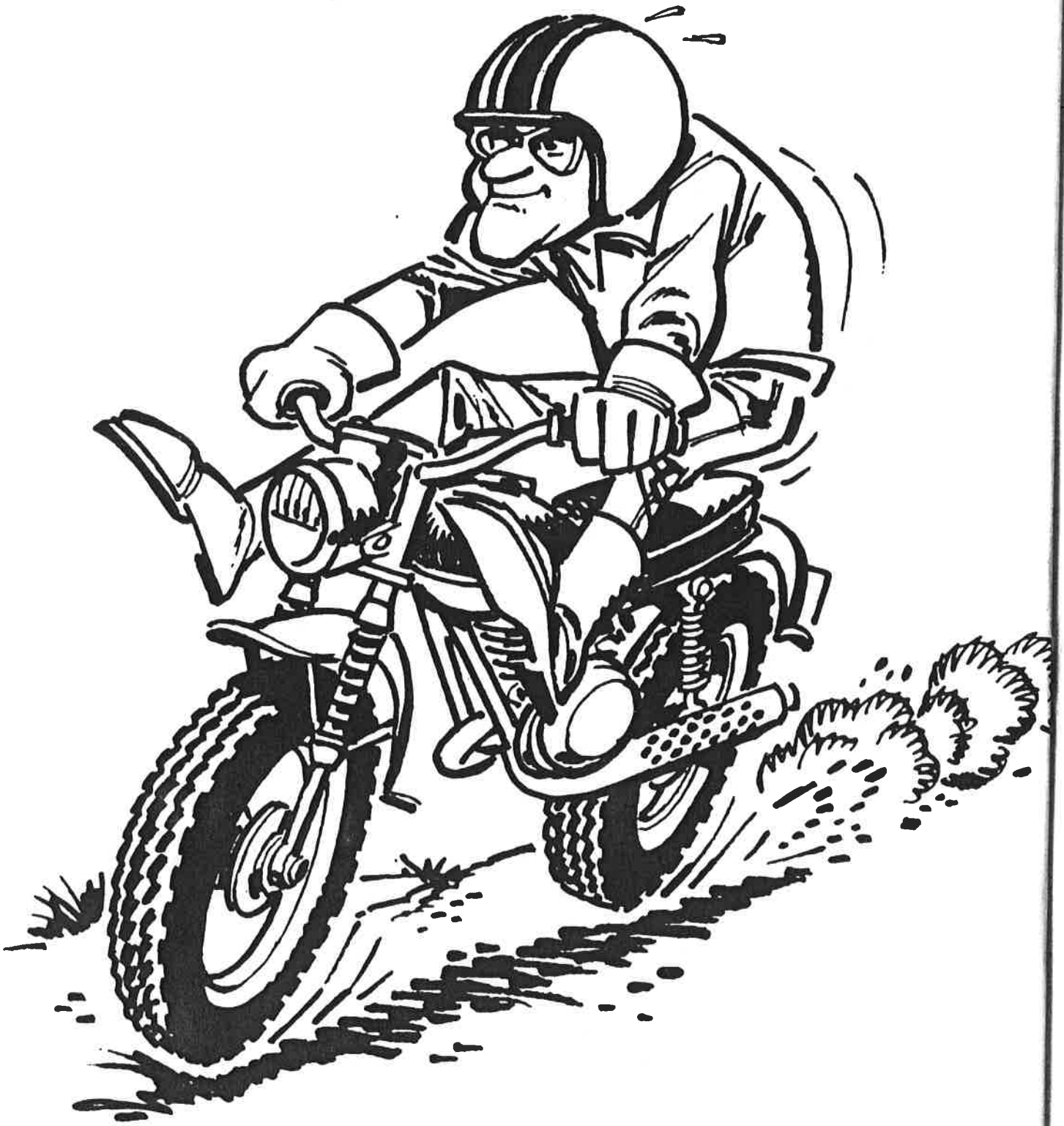
(Paraphrase: One who is always boasting alienates friends.)

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Ask students to discuss when it is permissible (if ever) to blow or toot one's own horn.

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Ask students to describe persons that they have known who habitually blew or tooted their own horn, what they boasted about, and how people reacted to them.

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Ask students which of the following speakers sound as if they are blowing or tooting their own horn.

1. "Boy! I really showed Sam how to play tennis. I beat him in three straight sets. He didn't have a chance!"
2. "I doubt that I will do very well on my French test. I haven't studied for two weeks."
3. "I finally got to watch TV last night. There were so many telephone interruptions that I thought that I would miss my favorite program."
4. "It's a good thing you had me there to help you plant your garden. You really needed help. I don't think you know anything about gardening, do you?"
5. "That was the best pie I ever made—and I've made a lot of good ones. But, I really had the right touch on that one. Everything turned out perfectly."
6. "How about that! Have you ever seen a better job of painting? I'm really getting good! Maybe I should become a professional."
7. "Did you ever see such a bad job of typing? I simply can't seem to do a neat job anymore!"



**BURN RUBBER**

## **(to) BURN RUBBER**

**DEFINITION 1:** To start up a car or motorcycle from a dead stop so fast that the rubber of the tires leaves a mark on the road

### **ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES**

- *Every Saturday they burn a lot of rubber at the motorcycle races.*

(Paraphrase: The motorcycle tires leave a lot of rubber marks on the racetrack or There are many fast starts at the racetrack on Saturdays.)

- *Everytime that he leaves a stop sign, my brother likes to burn rubber.*

(Paraphrase: He starts his car fast and leaves a rubber mark on the pavement.)

**DEFINITION 2:** To leave in a hurry (on foot or by vehicle)

### **ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES**

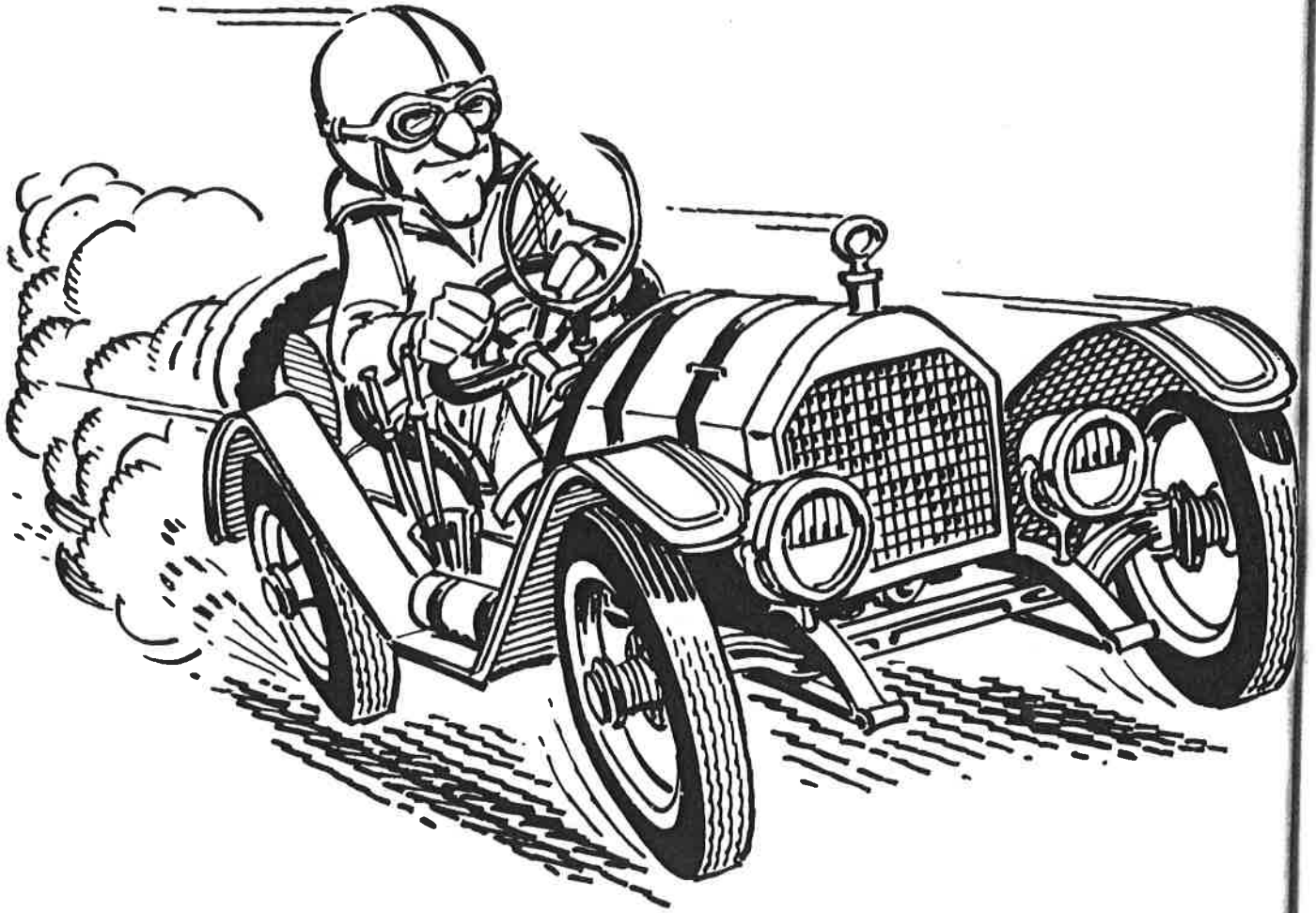
- *If we expect to get to the airport on time, we'll have to burn rubber.*

(Paraphrase: We'll have to leave in a hurry in order to be on time.)

- *"Let's burn rubber!" the leader shouted as all the drivers ran toward their motorcycles.*

(Paraphrase: Let's leave in a hurry!)

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Ask students to (1) discuss the wisdom of burning rubber and (2) cite occasions when they have had to do so.



**BURN UP THE ROAD**

## (to) BURN UP THE ROAD

**DEFINITION:** To drive a car very fast.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *He was so eager to get to the game that he burned up the road all the way.*

(Paraphrase: He drove at high speed because he was impatient to get to the game.)

- *One of the reasons for all the recent car accidents is the large number of speed demons burning up the road.*

(Paraphrase: Motorists driving too fast are one of the principal causes of accidents.)

### RELATED EXPRESSION

**DRIVE LIKE A WILD MAN** = *To drive very fast, carelessly, or recklessly*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to decide in which of the following situations it might be necessary to burn up the road.*

1. *A husband driving his wife to the train station.*
2. *A family driving to the country to visit relatives.*
3. *A police car chasing another car driven by two bank robbers.*
4. *A truck delivering packages to homes in a small town.*
5. *A doctor called to the scene of a serious car accident.*
6. *An army general going to a dinner party at the home of a politician.*
7. *A young man on a motorcycle bringing news to a city of a broken dam and flood waters.*
8. *Four young men returning home after a day spent fishing at a nearby lake.*
9. *A worried mother taking her very sick child by car to the doctor's office.*



BUTT IN

## (to) BUTT IN

**DEFINITION:** To interfere in other people's business; join in with what other people are doing without asking or being asked

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Mother had just started to explain to Jane how to fix her sweater when Alice butted in.*

(Paraphrase: Alice interfered when Mother started explaining something to Jane.)

- *Let's go into the other room so Albert won't butt in.*

(Paraphrase: Let's go into another room to avoid Albert's interference.)

### SYNONYMOUS EXPRESSIONS

**HORN IN** = *To come in without invitation; interfere*

**STICK ONE'S NOSE INTO** = *To meddle in things not one's business; interfere (somewhat impolitely)*

\***FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to describe experiences that they have had dealing with someone who butted or horned in or stuck his/her nose into other people's business.*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to describe any habitual "buttinsky" (one who butts in) they have known and how other people reacted to him or her.*



**BY WORD OF MOUTH**

# BY WORD OF MOUTH

**DEFINITION:** From person to person by the spoken word; orally

## ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *I didn't read about it but heard the news by word of mouth.*

(Paraphrase: I heard the news as it was passed from one person to me.)

- *He only got the message by word of mouth.*

(Paraphrase: He only heard it as it was passed from person to person.)

## SYNONYMOUS EXPRESSION

**BY THE GRAPEVINE** = *Informal way (often secret) of transmitting information; gossip, or rumors from person to person (usually orally)*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to discuss some of the dangers or disadvantages of receiving news or information by word of mouth or by the grapevine.*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to complete the following sentences.*

1. *I heard about Mary's \_\_\_\_\_ by word of mouth. I hope it's true!*
2. *I don't know whether to believe that Mark has \_\_\_\_\_ or not. I heard it by the grapevine.*
3. *Do you think, really, that Agnes \_\_\_\_\_? We only heard it by word of mouth.*
4. *Would you say that it's true what they're saying about the President's \_\_\_\_\_? We only heard it by the grapevine.*
5. *How about that story of the big \_\_\_\_\_ over in Chicago! I heard by word of mouth that it really happened!*
6. *Someone claims that \_\_\_\_\_. But, personally, I have my doubts since the news only came by the grapevine.*
7. *Several people have told me by word of mouth that the story about \_\_\_\_\_ is true because many people saw it.*



**CALL THE SHOTS**

## (to) CALL THE SHOTS

**DEFINITION:** To give orders; to be in charge; to direct; control

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *I like a leader who knows how to call the shots.*

(Paraphrase: I like a leader that takes control.)

- *When Jeff began to call the shots, everything got better.*

(Paraphrase: Matters improved after Jeff began to give orders.)

### SYNONYMOUS EXPRESSIONS

**CALL THE TUNE**  
**RUN THE SHOW** } *To be in control; to give orders or directions*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to decide who is calling the shots or the tune or running the show in the following situations.*

1. *A group of soldiers in which there is a major, a general, and a captain.*
2. *A teacher, students, and the director of the school.*
3. *The two drivers of automobiles involved in an accident and a motorcycle policeman at the scene.*
4. *Two doctors, three nurses and a patient in a hospital operating room.*
5. *A mother, a father, and two teen-aged children on a vacation trip.*
6. *A department head, a supervisor, and the president of the company discussing new employment policies.*
7. *A policeman, a lawyer and his client, and a judge at a trial in traffic court.*



## CHICKEN

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**DEFINITION:** Cowardly, easily scared

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Don't be so chicken! There's nothing to be afraid of!*

(Paraphrase: Don't be so cowardly!)

- *Avery was too chicken to ride a motorcycle.*

(Paraphrase: He was afraid to ride a motorcycle.)

## RELATED EXPRESSIONS

CHICKEN-LIVERED	=	} easily scared, cowardly
LILY-LIVERED	=	
YELLOW-BELLIED	=	} cowardly; extremely timid
SCAREDY-CAT	}	
FRAIDY-CAT		

## (to) CHICKEN OUT

**DEFINITION:** To stop doing something because of fear; to decide not to do something after having first made a decision to do it

### ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES

- *Steve used to drive racing cars but he chickened out last year.*

(Paraphrase: He stopped driving because he lost his nerve.)

- *My sister was going to begin sky-diving lessons this afternoon but she chickened out this morning.*

(Paraphrase: She changed her mind at the last minute because of fear.)

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Ask students to use the appropriate idiom or synonymous expression in the following situations.

1. **DISGUST AT A FRIEND**
  - (a) *who won't go water skiing with you*
  - (b) *who changes his or her mind about taking flying lessons with you*
  - (c) *who won't stand up for his or her rights as a taxpayer*
2. **DISAPPOINTMENT AT YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER**
  - (a) *who doesn't want to explore a cave with you*
  - (b) *who refuses to spend the night in a haunted house with you*
  - (c) *who decides not to learn to ride horses because of the fear of falling off*
3. **ANNOYANCE OR ANGER AT YOURSELF**
  - (a) *because you didn't finish a course in deep-sea diving*
  - (b) *because you have a fear of water and can't learn to swim*
  - (c) *because you changed your mind about becoming a policeman (policewoman)*



CLOWN AROUND

## **(to) CLOWN AROUND**

**DEFINITION:** To act or behave like a clown; to act silly; to not pursue a task with the intention of succeeding

### **ILLUSTRATIVE SENTENCES**

- *My roommate is seldom serious about anything. He's always clowning around.*

(Paraphrase: He acts silly most of the time.)

- *The team began to clown around and soon lost the game.*

(Paraphrase: They lost because they didn't take the game seriously.)

### **RELATED EXPRESSION**

**MESS AROUND** = *To engage in idle or purposeless activity*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to think of times when they preferred to clown around or mess around rather than to be serious or apply themselves to a task.*

**FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** *Ask students to decide which of the following could be examples of clowning or messing around.*

1. *Two boys throwing water on each other rather than washing their father's car.*
2. *A group of young people wandering around the beach of a resort town.*
3. *Three men playing cards instead of cleaning the building they are supposed to clean.*
4. *Four people playing golf together on Sunday afternoon.*
5. *A farmer planting corn all day long on a very hot day.*
6. *A group of boys performing a number of physical feats to make a group of girls laugh.*



**COME OUT OF ONE'S SHELL**