

## Item #1—Mythology and Legend

### Achilles' Heel

This term is from Greek Mythology. According to myth, when Achilles was a baby, his mother dipped him in the River Styx because the waters from this river gave immortality to humans. His mother held him by his heel, so that was the only place on his body not touched by the water. From then on, Achilles' heel was his one area of vulnerability. Eventually, Achilles was killed during the Trojan War when a poisoned arrow struck his heel.

Today, the term has come to refer to a person's *area of particular vulnerability*.

### Examples

Her inability to resist rich desserts was her Achilles' heel, keeping her from losing the ten pounds she wanted to lose.

The politician's desire to be liked by everyone was his Achilles' heel, preventing him from taking a strong stand on any issue and leading to his defeat in the election.

## Item #2—Literature

### Pound of Flesh

This phrase comes from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. In this play, Shylock, a moneylender, agrees to finance a fleet of ships for a young merchant, Antonio. In the contract, Shylock demands a pound of Antonio's flesh as payment should anything happen to the ships. When the ships are lost at sea, Shylock insists that he must have a pound of flesh, as the contract demanded. Antonio is spared only because of a technicality: the contract did not say Shylock was entitled to any of Antonio's blood. Thus, he cannot take a pound of Antonio's flesh unless he can do so bloodlessly, an impossibility.

This phrase is used to describe someone's *insistence on being repaid*, even if the repayment will destroy or harm the debtor.

#### Examples

“Sure, that initial low rate for a credit card is tempting for a college freshman, but eventually, the company will want their pound of flesh when you get over your head in debt.”

When I agreed to do my friend's outdoor chores if he would lend me some money, I had no way of knowing I would sprain my ankle the next day. I couldn't believe he demanded his pound of flesh and insisted that I do the work even though I was in such pain.

### Item #3—Language and Idioms

## Sacred Cow

In Hinduism, cows are considered to be sacred; thus, cows are not to be harmed, and certainly not killed for food. If a cow wanders into a shop, the merchant can only try to lure it out with food; he is not allowed to interfere with it by prodding or poking, even if it is breaking everything in his shop.

The idiom “Sacred Cow” refers to *something that cannot be interfered with or harmed* in any way.

### Examples

Although the square-dancing club never attracts more than one or two members, it is Ms. Green’s sacred cow, and she refuses to even consider discontinuing the club.

When budget cuts are called for because the company is losing money, employees know not to suggest abandoning the annual company picnic. That event is a sacred cow as far as the chairman of the board is concerned.

## Item #4—History, Culture, Ideas

### Crossing the Rubicon

After defeating the Gauls in the Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar was ordered home by his enemies in the Senate, so he traveled south toward Italy. The Rubicon was the river forming the northern boundary of Italy. By Roman law, a general was forbidden from crossing into Italy with an army. Nevertheless, Caesar led his army across the river, making civil war inevitable. After Caesar crossed the Rubicon, there was no turning back for him and his troops.

To cross the Rubicon is to take *an irreversible step*, often involving some danger.

#### Examples

When I told my boss exactly what I thought of her, I knew I had crossed the Rubicon and would soon be seeking employment elsewhere.

When we announced our intention to be the state champions, the members of our team felt we had crossed the Rubicon and that all our efforts would need to be directed toward having our best season ever.

## Item #5—The Bible

### Pearls before Swine

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonished his followers to “cast not your pearls before swine.” That is, his followers were to deliver their message to those who would appreciate it, not to those incapable of appreciating something of value. Swine, or pigs, would be unable to appreciate pearls if the jewels were given to them.

To “cast one’s pearls before swine” is to *offer something precious to someone, or a group of people, unable to appreciate the value of what they are being given.*

#### Examples

When he makes a profound point that we students just do not understand, our teacher sometimes shakes his head and mutters, “Pearls before swine.”

I gave my sister a rare, expensive first edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and she simply said, “I’ve already read that book.” I realized I was casting my pearls before swine.

## Item #6—Language and Idioms

### Once in a Blue Moon

A “blue moon” is a second full moon within the same calendar month, a phenomenon that occurs approximately every three years. It is thought that calendar makers traditionally pictured the first full moon in red and a second full moon in the same month in blue.

This phrase describes something that *occurs very rarely*.

#### Examples

I almost always turn in my homework on time, but once in a blue moon I get lazy and decide to take the consequences of skipping an assignment.

Once in a blue moon, a candidate comes along who genuinely seems to care about his or constituents more than about advancing his or her own career.

## Item #7—Literature

### Mrs. Grundy

In *Speed the Plough*, a 1798 play by Thomas Morton, Mrs. Grundy is a character who never appears on stage. However, other characters frequently ask, “What would Mrs. Grundy say?” Mrs. Grundy is a narrow-minded, conventional, prudish person.

The word “Grundyism” and the phrase “Mrs. Grundy” refer to such *an attitude of narrow-minded prudishness*.

#### Examples

My mother said, “At the risk of being a Mrs. Grundy, I really don’t think you should go out in public in that outfit.”

Interviewed about his controversial new film which was banned in several cities, the director said that he had expected Grundyism from those who were not able to appreciate the deeper, underlying message of the film.

## Item #8—Language and Idioms

### Crocodile Tears

Crocodiles were once thought to shed large tears before devouring their prey. This belief, which dates to ancient times, comes from the fact that crocodiles have small ducts in the corner of their eyes which release “tears” when the crocodile opens its jaws wide. Obviously, a cold-blooded reptile has no real feelings of sympathy for its prey.

Thus, to shed crocodile tears is *to show false sympathy for someone*.

#### Examples

Although Judy shed crocodile tears for Maria when Maria was passed over for the promotion, it was apparent that Maria’s loss was seen by Judy as an opportunity to advance her own position in the company.

The villain in the play shed crocodile tears for the hero, but the audience knew that the hero’s downfall was directly caused by the villain’s trickery.



## Item #9—Mythology and Legend

### Sirens

**In Greek mythology, Sirens were sea creatures who lured sailors to their deaths on the rocky shores by singing a beautiful, irresistible song. They are usually depicted as women, or as half-woman, half bird.**

**In modern usage, “sirens” can refer to *anything that tempts a person away from safety and toward a destructive path*. A “siren song” is the *temptation used to lure a person*.**

### Examples

**In his *Speech in the Virginia Convention*, Patrick Henry urged his listeners not to be fooled by an “illusion of hope,” saying, “We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts.” He is comparing false hope both to the sirens and to Circe, who turned Odysseus’ men into swine.**

**I had intended to stay home and study for finals, but the siren song of my friends describing all the fun we could have at the lake was too much for me to resist.**

## Item #10—History, Culture, Ideas

### Read the Riot Act

Under English Common Law, an unruly crowd had to be read the Riot Act before action could be taken, to force them to disperse.

To “read the riot act” is to issue a *stern warning* that if unacceptable behavior does not cease, *severe consequences will follow*.

#### Examples

After asking us to be quiet several times, my father stormed upstairs and read us the riot act. After this, we knew it was really time to go to sleep.

Upset over his colleagues’ refusal to take action on the issue, the senator read the riot act to the assembly, reminding them that their inaction would likely cost their party the next election.