

Legal & Law

Idioms

after the fact

- after something (a crime etc.) has occurred

We were told, after the fact, that the company would not pay compensation to the fire victims.

an act of God

- an event or accident due to natural causes for which no human is responsible and which could not have been avoided by planning ahead (a storm, an earthquake, a volcano etc.)

The insurance company refused to pay the money because they said that the forest fire was an act of God.

assemble a case (against someone)

- gather the evidence needed to make a legal case against someone

The prosecution was unable to assemble a case against the man.

assume liability

- accept the responsibility for paying the cost of something

The business refused to assume liability for the dangerous products.

at arms length

- at a distance, a transaction in which each person (who is not related to you) acts in their own self-interest

We purchased the property at arm's length and were not involved in any management decisions.

bail (someone) out

- pay a sum of money that allows someone to get out of jail while waiting for a trial

The family of the accused criminal paid much money to bail him out.

beyond a reasonable doubt

- a legal phrase meaning that something is almost certain

The judge sent the man to jail because he believed, beyond a reasonable doubt, that he had committed the crime.

bona fide

- "in good faith" (from Latin), without any element of dishonesty or fraud

The mediator asked the two sides in the dispute to make a bona fide effort to solve the dispute.

a breach of promise

- the breaking of a promise which may also be a breach of contract

The couple was accused of breach of promise when they broke the contract to buy the condominium.

a breach of the peace

- causing a disturbance, violent or disorderly behavior

The man was charged with breach of the peace when he began fighting with the store clerk.

break the law

- fail to obey the law

The woman was forced to quit her job after it was discovered that she had broken the law.

build a case (against someone)

- gather the evidence needed to make a legal case against someone

The legal team was working hard to build a case against the suspected car thief.

burden of proof

- the necessity to prove a disputed fact as required by the laws of evidence

The burden of proof during the trial fell on the man who had accused his employee of theft.

(do something) by the book

- follow all the rules when you do something

Our lawyer is very good and he does everything by the book.

a case of mistaken identity

- incorrectly identify someone

The young man was arrested in a case of mistaken identity.

causing a disturbance

- an offence committed by fighting/screaming/shouting/swearing or being drunk in public

Several of the fans were arrested for causing a disturbance after the football game.

caveat emptor

- "let the buyer beware" (from Latin), a buyer of something is responsible to examine the goods that he or she has purchased

Caveat emptor is a good concept to remember when you are buying a used car.

to cease and desist

- a legal phrase which means to stop doing something and not start again - often used in the form of a cease and desist order

The woman's husband was given a cease and desist order to stop bothering her.

circumstantial evidence

- indirect evidence

My court case was difficult to win as most of my evidence was circumstantial evidence.

citizen's arrest

- an arrest which may be made by somebody without a warrant when somebody commits a crime

The local politician tried to make a citizen's arrest of the violent beggar.

civil action

- legal action that deals with private or civil matters

The couple decided to take civil action over their complaints about their neighbor's dog.

civil law

- the area of the law which deals with civil/private matters such as violations of contracts (different from criminal law)

The lawyer had much experience in civil law and almost none in criminal law.

class action lawsuit

- a lawsuit on behalf of a group of persons in a similar situation or who have suffered a similar wrong

The workers filed a class action lawsuit against the company for damage to their health.

come by (something) honestly

- get something honestly

The woman came by a large amount of money honestly but many people wondered where it had come from.

come clean (with someone/about something)

- be completely honest with someone or confess something to someone

The man decided to come clean with the police and he confessed everything about the crime.

commercial law

- the area of law that governs commerce/trade/merchandising

The lawyer has specialized in commercial law since he first became a lawyer.

common law

- the law that is not written in statutes but is based on custom and court decisions of the past (most often with its origin in the old unwritten law of England)

Through research into previous cases of common law we were able to make a decision on how to proceed with our case.

common property

- real property owned by a group of tenants in a condominium or subdivision which everyone has the right to use, land that is owned by the government which everyone can use

The bicycles were common property and anyone in the apartment complex could use them.

community property

- property belonging jointly to a married couple or acquired during their marriage

The couple decided to divide some of their community property and give it to their children before they left to do volunteer work overseas.

comparitive negligence

- in a civil lawsuit where the fault (negligence) of the two parties is taken into account in assessing damages

The judge determined that it was a case of comparative negligence and the landlord and the tenant were both forced to pay damages.

conclusive evidence

- evidence that is so strong that it proves the point in question beyond reasonable doubt

The witness offered conclusive evidence that led to the conviction of the criminal.

conditional sale

- a contract where the title to the goods being sold will not go to the purchaser until a certain condition is fulfilled

The sale of the house was a conditional sale and I had to talk to my bank manager before the deal was complete.

consecutive sentences

- sentences that are given to someone and which run one immediately after another

The criminal was given three consecutive sentences for the murder of the young girls.

contempt of court

- disobedience of the orders and authority of the court, disrespect for the court process

The judge ordered the man to be held in contempt of court when he was several hours late for the trial.

crack down on (someone or something)

- enforce a rule or law more strictly

The police recently decided to crack down on speeding cars.

criminal law

- the law that is concerned with crimes by people against the state/society with the function to punish the offender

The university law department had one of the best criminal law libraries in the country.

dangerous offender

- a person who has been convicted of a violent or sexual crime and is a continuing threat to others

Several dangerous offenders escaped from the prison last week.

disorderly conduct

- disturbing the peace

The football fans were charged with disorderly conduct after the fight during the game.

disturbing the peace

- disorderly/violent /threatening conduct, an interruption of the peace and tranquillity of the community

Two men were arrested for disturbing the peace when they got into a fight in front of the shopping mall.

draw up an agreement/contract

- put something into writing, prepare a written statement

I spent several hours with my lawyer trying to draw up an agreement to buy the small business.

due process (of law)

- the rights that each individual has to be protected by the law

Although the man was accused of theft by his employer, he knew that he was entitled to due process of law and would have no problems proving his innocence.

examination for discovery

- an oral examination that is taken under oath in which each side to a lawsuit has the right to examine the other side's witnesses before a trial or hearing

The man spent several hours in an examination for discovery session in connection with his case.

expert witness

- an expert or specialist whose opinions are used as evidence in a trial or hearing

The lawyer called in an expert witness to discuss the handwriting of the accused man.

extenuating circumstances

- special circumstances that explain an irregular or improper way of doing something

Because of extenuating circumstances, the man was able to avoid going to jail for stealing the money.

false arrest

- unlawful physical detention

It was a case of false arrest when the man was arrested as a suspect in the robbery.

false pretenses

- intentionally misrepresent facts to cheat or defraud someone

The woman was acting under false pretenses when she went to the bank and asked for a loan.

false witness

- a person who deliberately offers inaccurate evidence

The man was accused of being a false witness after he testified at the trial.

fee simple

- absolute title or ownership of real estate

The property was sold fee simple by the woman.

for cause

- reasons which the law accepts as justified

The man was fired from his job for cause after several violations of his contract.

free and clear

- own something fully with no money owed or other restrictions on the item or property

My parents own their home free and clear.

give notice

- inform an employer, employee, landlord or tenant that a contractual agreement will end

The woman gave notice that she will leave her job next month.

go into effect

- a law or rule becomes effective or in use

The new parking law will go into effect at midnight.

go legit

- begin a legitimate (honest) business after having been operating an illegal business

The brothers decided to go legit and get the proper licenses for their small business.

go on record

- make an official statement rather than an informal one

The mayor of the city plans to go on record as being opposed to the new convention center.

goods and chattels

- personal property (as opposed to land and buildings)

All of the goods and chattels of the man were seized by the bank to pay for the bad loan.

grace period

- a period of time (often about 30 days) after the due date for something

I was given a 30-day grace period in which to pay the speeding ticket.

gray area

- an area of a subject that is not clearly defined

Smoking outside of public buildings is a gray area that the smoking law does not deal with.

grounded in fact

- based on facts

The decisions that were made during the legal discussions were grounded in fact.

grounds for (something)

- a cause or reason for legal action such as a lawsuit

The fact that the woman had lied to her employer was grounds for her being quickly fired from the company.

have a brush with the law

- have a brief experience or encounter with the law

The man had a brush with the law when he was a teenager.

have a case (against someone)

- have lots of evidence that can be used against someone

The police do not have a case against the young woman.

(do not) have a leg to stand on

- do not have the facts to support or win an argument or a legal charge that is made against you (usually used in the negative)

The apartment manager tried to evict the young family but he didn't have a leg to stand on and he lost the case in court.

have a run-in with (the law/someone)

- have a bad or unpleasant encounter with the law/someone

The couple had a run-in with the law when they were on their holiday.

have (someone) dead to rights

- prove someone absolutely guilty

The police had the man dead to rights when they videotaped him stealing the car.

have (someone) in one's pocket

- have control over someone

The businessmen have the mayor of the city in their pocket.

have the right to (do something)

- have the freedom or legal right to do something

The lawyer did not have the right to ask personal questions during the trial.

a hung jury

- a jury that is divided and unable to agree on a verdict

There was a hung jury after the trial of the pop star.

implicate (someone) in (something)

- suggest that someone is involved in something

The president of the company was implicated in the scandal over the expense account.

in abeyance

- the temporary suspension of an activity or a ruling

My grandfather's estate settlement was in abeyance while the lawyers looked at his will in more detail.

in accordance with (something)

- conforming to something

The new contract was written in accordance with the new employment law.

in arrears

- late or overdue (usually for bills and money)

My account at the department store was in arrears so the manager phoned me.

in bad faith

- insincerity, with bad or dishonest intentions, the intention to deceive someone

The manager was acting in bad faith when she refused to give the documents to the other department.

in consideration of (something)

- after thinking about something

In consideration of the amount of time that I had spent on the case I charged a lot of money for my services.

in/have custody of (someone or something)

- being guarded or protected by someone or some group

The police put the man in custody last night.

in debt

- owing money

The woman is in debt to the furniture store.

in dispute

- something that is in disagreement

Most parts of the agreement are not in dispute.

in effect

- a law that is necessary to obey

The new law has been in effect for three months now.

in favor of

- in agreement with

The members of the panel voted in favor of postponing the meeting.

in good faith

- with good and honest intentions

I went to the mediation session in good faith to try and resolve the dispute.

in kind

- in goods rather than in money

We were paid in kind for our time planning for the convention.

in lieu of (something)

- instead of something

In lieu of being paid for our overtime work we were given extra time off.

in perpetuity

- forever, eternally

The man was promised by the city that he would receive a discount on his water bill in perpetuity.

in person

- personally, yourself

The man was asked to appear in the courtroom in person.

in plain English/language

- in simple and easy to understand language

The legal contract was written in plain English so that we could easily understand it.

in private

- secretly, not openly or in public

The discussion between the two judges took place in private.

in public

- openly so others can see, not secretly

The new smoking law does not permit smoking in public.

in receipt of (something)

- having received something

My lawyer was already in receipt of the documents when he phoned me.

in reference to (something)

- concerning/regarding/about something

The letter was in reference to my earlier request for legal advice.

in (someone's) name

- in someone's ownership, as someone's property

We put the property in my name so that it would be easier to get a loan on it.

in the act of (doing something)

- while doing something

The man was arrested in the act of stealing money from the cash register in the store.

in the right

- on the legal or moral side of an issue, not guilty

I believed that I was in the right so I decided to take the case to court.

in the wrong

- on the illegal or wrong side of an issue, guilty

The man was in the wrong and was easily found guilty by the court.

in trouble with the law

- due to be punished by the law

The teenager has often been in trouble with the law.

in trust of (someone)

- under the responsibility or care of someone

The money was given to the child in trust of his grandparents.

invasion of privacy

- the act of doing something so that someone loses his or her privacy

Some people think that it is an invasion of privacy when there are video cameras in public places.

invest someone with the power or legal right to (do something)

- give someone the power or right to do something

The police were invested with the power to enforce the decision of the court.

jump bail

- fail to appear in court and therefore give up the money that you paid for bail

The criminal jumped bail and went to another city to hide.

last will and testament

- one's will (especially its latest edition) - a will is the legal term to describe what a person wants to do with his or her property after they die

I went to a lawyer in order to write my last will and testament.

law-abiding

- obeying the law

The couple were law-abiding citizens who never had any problems with the law.

a law unto oneself

- someone who makes his or her own laws or rules

The manager was a law unto herself and thought that she could do whatever she liked.

lay down the law

- state firmly what the rules or laws are for something

We decided to lay down the law regarding time off from work without pay for our employees.

a leading question

- a question to a witness designed to suggest or produce the reply desired by the questioner

The lawyer asked the witness a leading question but she didn't answer it in the way that the lawyer had expected.

legal age

- the age when a person can do things such as buy cigarettes or when they are responsible for their actions

The young men were not of legal age and were unable to buy any cigarettes.

let (someone) go

- free someone from prison or from an arrest

The courts decided to let the man go because there was no evidence to keep him in prison.

lodge a complaint (against someone)

- make a complaint against someone

The man decided to lodge a complaint against the company that had built the apartment building.

a matter of record

- a fact or event that is kept officially as a legal record

It was a matter of record how much the mayor had spent on the foreign trip.

mineral rights

- the right to take minerals or money from the minerals on one's property

The farmer owned all of the mineral rights on his property.

moral turpitude

- behavior that is contrary to accepted rules of behavior

The judge accused the lawyer of moral turpitude after his questionable tactics to defend his client.

next of kin

- someone's closest relative or relatives

The police notified the next of kin of the woman who was killed in the car accident.

null and void

- worthless, canceled

The check which was written by the company was null and void.

of one's own free will/accord

- by one's own choice

The woman signed the contract to buy the car of her own free will.

off the record

- unofficial, informal

The judge told the lawyers off the record what they could expect the lawsuit to settle for.

offensive weapon

- any weapon capable of being used to cause physical injury or harm

The young man with the knife was charged with carrying an offensive weapon.

on condition that

- providing that

The man was not sent to prison on condition that he do volunteer work in the community.

on probation

- serving a period of probation - probation is when a person who is guilty of a crime is allowed to be free but is supervised by the government

The man was on probation for robbing a small store last year.

on record

- an official recorded statement or fact that everyone may know

The businessman was on record as having refused to accept any illegal money.

out on bail

- released from jail after you pay the bail bond money - the bail bond is the money that you must pay to guarantee that you will appear in court

The man was out on bail while he was waiting for his trial.

out on parole

- out of jail but being supervised by the police

While the criminal was out on parole he was forced to meet with a social worker every two weeks.

pay one's debt (to society)

- serve a sentence for a crime (usually in prison)

The man was forced to pay his debt to society by going to prison for three years.

a peeping Tom

- someone who looks into someone's window (usually a woman) and watches them

There were several reports of a peeping Tom near our apartment building.

penalty clause

- a section in a contract specifying an amount to be paid if the contract is not fulfilled

There is a penalty clause in our apartment rental agreement if we decide to move out early.

post mortem

- a medical examination of a body made after death to determine the cause of death

The authorities performed a post mortem on the dead man to try and determine the cause of his death.

power of attorney

- a legal document granting authority for one person to act as another's representative

The woman was given power of attorney over her mother's business.

a preliminary hearing

- a hearing before a judge to determine if there is enough evidence to charge someone with a crime

The man appeared at a preliminary hearing to determine the nature of the crime.

prima facie

- "at first view" (from Latin), something is assumed to be true in the absence of evidence to the contrary

Prima facie it appeared that the man had enough evidence to take legal action against his employer.

privy to something

- have unique or special knowledge about something

I was not privy to the conversation regarding the new business plan so I was unable to comment on it.

punitive damages

- extra damages awarded to someone in order to punish them and to deter others

The patient was awarded a large amount of money as punitive damages in his lawsuit against the hospital.

put (something) down in black and white

- write something down, make or draw up a contract

I put my strategy for the meeting down in black and white.

quid pro quo

- "something for something" (from Latin), mutual concessions made by the parties in a transaction

The government and the teachers gave up some of their contract demands in a quid pro quo effort to solve their dispute.

the responsible party

- the party that is legally or morally obliged to do something or accept the blame for something

The responsible party was forced to compensate the victims of his crimes.

run afoul of the law

- get into trouble with the law

The young man ran afoul of the law and was taken into police custody.

serve notice on (someone)

- deliver a legal announcement or document to someone

The company served notice on the union that they would be closing their factory next year.

set (someone) free

- release someone from prison or captivity

The police set the man free when they decided that there was not enough evidence to keep him in prison.

to show cause

- to give a reason or explanation for something

The lawyer was asked to show cause as to why the man was guilty of the crime.

to show good faith

- to demonstrate good intentions or good will

We always show good faith when we meet the opposing side in our contract negotiations.

to sign on the dotted line

- to put your signature on a contract or other important document

We went to the lawyer's office to sign on the dotted line of the contract to start the new business.

signed, sealed and delivered

- formally and officially sign something

The contract was signed, sealed and delivered before we went home for the evening.

to skip bail

- to fail to appear in court and therefore give up the money that you paid for bail

The amount of bail was set very high so the accused criminal would not skip bail.

small/fine print

- the part of a document or contract that may contain important information but is not easily noticed because the print is small

It is a good idea to read the small print before you buy most products.

stand one's ground

- stand up for one's rights

I stood my ground and refused to do anything that was not honest and the right thing to do.

the straight and narrow

- a straight and law-abiding route through life

The young man was back on the straight and narrow after his discussions with the police officer and social worker.

to stretch the truth

- to misrepresent the truth (a little)

The witness was stretching the truth when she told the judge her excuse for the crime.

subject to (something)

- depending on something

The sale of the house is subject to our getting a report from the housing inspector.

take effect

- a law or rule becomes effective or in use

There is a new law related to Internet advertising that will soon take effect.

take the law into one's own hands

- try to administer the law on your own

The transit supervisor was taking the law into his own hands when he tried to arrest the man.

take precedence over (someone or something)

- have the right to come before someone or something else

The protection of children and the family takes precedence over the laws regarding evicting people from an apartment after they have a baby.

to the letter

- precisely, exactly

The lawyer always suggests that his clients follow the judge's decisions to the letter.

trumped-up

- false and exaggerated, invented by fraud or criminal deception

The business owner was arrested on trumped-up charges.

turn a blind eye to (someone or something)

- pretend not to see someone or something that may be troublesome

The police often turn a blind eye to people when they cross the street on a red light.

(to be) under a cloud (of suspicion)

- to be suspected of doing something wrong or illegal

The manager of the coffee shop was fired from her job under a cloud of suspicion.

under age

- below the legal age to do something

The boy was under age and was not able to buy any cigarettes.

under arrest

- arrested by the police before being charged with a crime

The man was placed under arrest for stealing a car.

vicarious liability

- the liability of one person through the act of another

It was a case of vicarious liability when the man was charged because of his friend's behavior.

with impunity

- without risk of punishment

The man was able to continue to abuse his position and clients with impunity.

with no strings attached

- with no obligations attached

The man was forced to agree to the terms of the agreement with no strings attached.