

Idioms and proverbs

Level: TOPIK II (levels 5–6) · CEFR C1–C2 · King Sejong standard curriculum levels 5–6 · Time: A year or more at 1–2 hours a day, most of it reading and listening to real Korean

A card sheet of twelve common idioms and proverbs with literal and real meanings, example sentences and a short quiz.

Twelve expressions Koreans use every day

Learn each expression as one unit. Cover the right-hand columns and test yourself, then say the example sentences aloud.

Expression	Literally	Meaning
식은 죽 먹기 sigeun juk meokgi	eating cold porridge	something very easy
발이 넓다 bari neolda	one's feet are wide	to know a lot of people
눈이 높다 nuni nopda	one's eyes are high	to have high standards, to be picky
손이 크다 soni keuda	one's hands are big	to be generous, to make or give a lot
입이 무겁다 ibi mugeopda	one's mouth is heavy	to keep secrets well
귀가 얇다 gwiga yalda	one's ears are thin	to be easily swayed by others
미역국을 먹다 miyeokgugeul meokda	to eat seaweed soup	to fail an exam
그림의 떡 geurimui tteok	a rice cake in a picture	something you want but cannot have
티끌 모아 태산 tikkeul moa taesan	gather dust and it becomes a mountain	small amounts add up
백지장도 맞들면 낫다 baekjijangdo matdeulmyeon natda	even a sheet of paper is easier if two lift it	working together makes any task easier
가는 말이 고와야 오는 말이 곱다 ganeun mari gowaya oneun mari gopda	kind words out, kind words back	speak kindly and others will speak kindly to you
낮말은 새가 듣고 밤말은 쥐가 듣는다 nanmareun saega deutgo bammareun jwiga deunneunda	birds hear daytime words, mice hear night-time words	walls have ears; be careful what you say

Korean	Romanization	Meaning
이 정도 문제는 나한테 식은 죽 먹기야.	i jeongdo munjeneun nahante sigeun juk meokgiya.	A problem like this is a piece of cake for me.
우리 어머니는 손이 커서 음식을 항상 많이 하세요.	uri eomeonineun soni keoseo eumsigeul hangsang mani haseyo.	My mother is generous, so she always cooks a lot of food.
그 차는 너무 비싸서 나한테는 그림의 떡이다.	geu chaneun neomu bissaseo nahanteneun geurimui tteogida.	That car is so expensive that it is out of my reach.
매일 조금씩 저축하면 티끌 모아 태산이 된다.	maeil jogeumssik jeochukamyeon tikkeul moa taesani doenda.	If you save a little every day, it adds up to a lot.

Idioms suit conversation and informal writing. In a formal essay, plain and precise language is usually the safer choice.

Which expression fits?

1. 동생이 이번 시험에서 (). (My sibling failed the exam.)

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2. 민수 씨는 아는 사람이 정말 많아요. ().

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3. 그 친구한테는 비밀을 말해도 돼요. ().

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4. 광고만 보면 사고 싶어져요. 저는 ().

.....

5. 이 일은 혼자 하면 힘들지만 같이 하면 쉬워요. ().

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6. 친절하게 말하면 상대도 친절하게 대답해요. ().

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Answer key

1. 미역국을 먹었다

miyeokgugeul meogeotda

2. 발이 넓어요

bari neolbeoyo

3. 입이 무거워요

ibi mugeowoyo

4. 귀가 얇아요

gwigalbalbayo

5. 백지장도 맞들면 낫다

baekjijangdo matdeulmyeon natda

6. 가는 말이 고와야 오는 말이 곱다

ganeun mari gowaya oneun mari gopda