

Idioms, metaphors and proverbs in everyday French

French B2 (upper intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: French figurative language includes comparisons, metaphors, idioms and proverbs. Idioms such as *avoir le cœur sur la main* or *poser un lapin* are fixed phrases whose meaning differs from their words. Learn them as complete units and never change their nouns or word order.

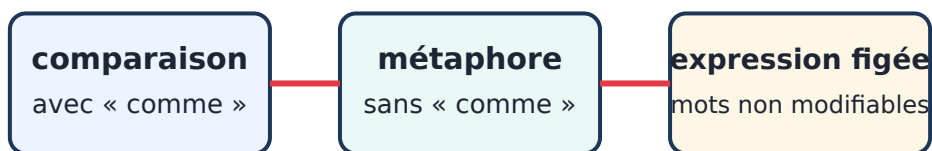
Level: French B2 (CEFR upper intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B2, Reading

What is figurative language, and why not translate it word for word?

A sentence is figurative when its words do not mean what they literally say. *Il pleut des cordes* does not describe ropes; it says the rain is heavy. Translating each word gives nonsense, so figurative expressions must be learned as whole units.

Definition

Une comparaison links two ideas with *comme*, *tel* or *pareil* à. Une métaphore drops the link word: *Cette ville est un poumon vert*. Une expression figée is a ready-made image whose words cannot change.



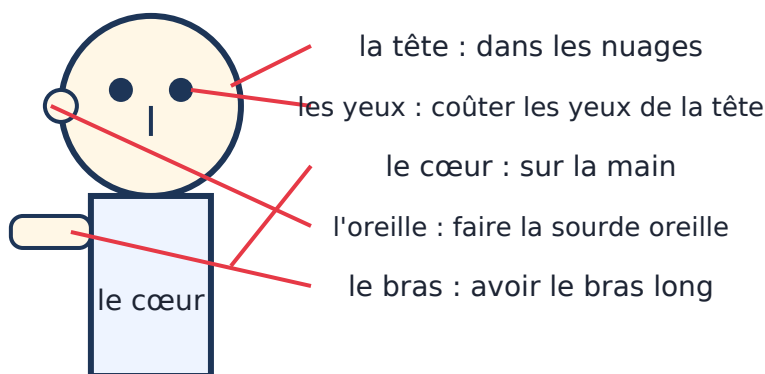
Plus on avance, plus le sens est fixe.

From a free image to a fixed expression.

Which idioms use parts of the body?

Idiom	Literal image	Meaning
<i>avoir le cœur sur la main</i>	heart on the hand	to be generous

Idiom	Literal image	Meaning
coûter les yeux de la tête	to cost the eyes of the head	to cost a fortune
avoir la tête dans les nuages	head in the clouds	to daydream
faire la sourde oreille	to make the deaf ear	to pretend not to hear
avoir le bras long	to have a long arm	to have influence
se mettre le doigt dans l'œil	finger in the eye	to be completely wrong



Five body parts, five idioms.

Which idioms use animals?

Idiom	Meaning
poser un lapin à quelqu'un	to stand someone up
avoir le cafard	to feel down
avoir d'autres chats à fouetter	to have bigger fish to fry
donner sa langue au chat	to give up guessing
avoir une faim de loup	to be ravenous

Watch out

An idiom is frozen: never replace a noun with a synonym. Avoir le cafard is correct; avoir le cancrelat means nothing. Also check the construction. We say coûter les yeux de la tête, not coûter des yeux.

How do proverbs work?

A proverb is a short, fixed sentence that gives advice or a general truth. In speech it often follows comme on dit or selon le proverbe.

- Petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son nid. — Little by little, success comes.
- Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide. — Once bitten, twice shy.
- L'habit ne fait pas le moine. — Appearances deceive.
- Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête. — Reckless acts bring trouble.

Culture note

Many French expressions come from rural life and old trades, which is why animals and farm images are so frequent.

Zoé's tip

Learn each idiom inside a mini-scene: picture your boss with his arm very long, and avoir le bras long sticks.

Key points to remember

- A metaphor is a comparison without comme.
- Idioms are frozen: the words cannot be replaced.
- Body parts and animals are very common sources of idioms.
- Proverbs often follow comme on dit.
- Never translate an idiom word for word.

Idioms, metaphors and proverbs in everyday French: frequently asked questions

What is the difference between a metaphor and an idiom?

A metaphor is a free image created by a writer, such as un pommier vert. An idiom is a ready-made expression shared by all speakers, whose words cannot change.

What does poser un lapin mean?

It means to stand someone up, to fail to show up to an appointment without warning. The rabbit is only an image.

Can I change words inside an idiom?

No. Idioms are fixed. You may conjugate the verb or adapt the pronoun, but you cannot replace nouns with synonyms.

How do I introduce a proverb politely?

Use comme on dit, selon le proverbe or le proverbe dit que. In writing, put it between quotation marks.

Why are animals so common in French idioms?

Many expressions come from farm and village life, where animals were everywhere, so their traits became images for human behavior.