

Everyday French idioms and what they really mean

French 4 (high school) · Lesson

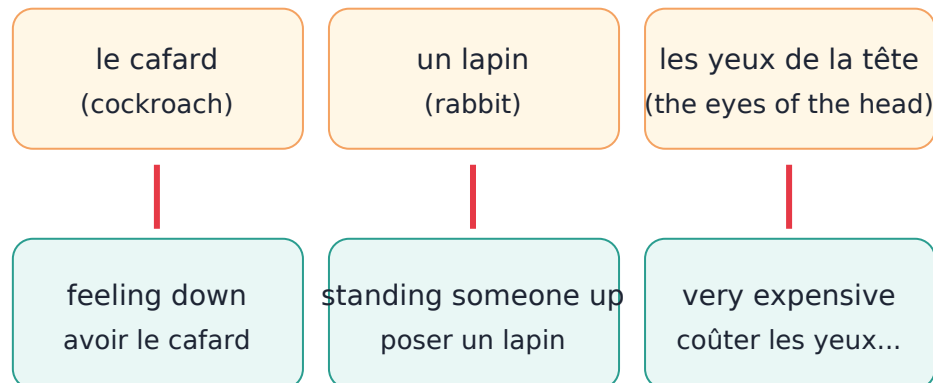
Quick answer: French idioms are fixed expressions whose meaning cannot be guessed from the separate words. Avoir le cafard means to feel down, poser un lapin means to stand someone up, and coûter les yeux de la tête means to cost a fortune. Learn each idiom as one block, conjugate its verb normally, and never translate it word for word.

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons

What is an idiom, and why can't it be translated word for word?

Definition

An idiom (une expression idiomatique) is a fixed group of words whose meaning is different from the meaning of its parts. English has plenty, such as *to kick the bucket*, and French has just as many. If you translate them literally, the result is funny but wrong.

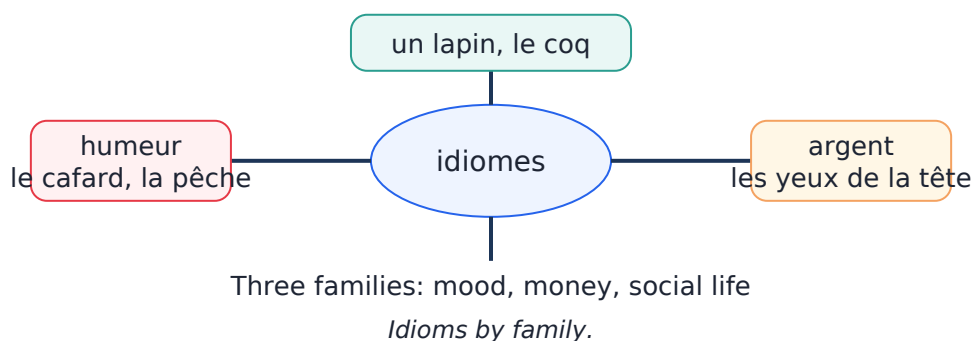


Literal words on top, real meaning below.

Which idioms should a French 4 student know first?

Idiom	Meaning	Example
avoir le cafard	to feel down	Après le match, Idriss avait le cafard.
poser un lapin à quelqu'un	to stand someone up	Maëlle m'a posé un lapin devant le cinéma.

Idiom	Meaning	Example
coûter les yeux de la tête	to cost a fortune	Ce manteau coûte les yeux de la tête.
avoir la pêche	to be full of energy	Ce matin, j'ai la pêche !
tomber dans les pommes	to faint	Il a vu le sang et il est tombé dans les pommes.
donner sa langue au chat	to give up guessing	Je donne ma langue au chat : c'est qui ?
sauter du coq à l'âne	to jump from topic to topic	Grand-père saute toujours du coq à l'âne.
mettre son grain de sel	to butt in	Il met son grain de sel partout.



How do you use an idiom in a sentence?

Rule

Keep the fixed words in the same order. Conjugate the verb for the subject and the tense, and place object pronouns before the verb as usual. With *poser un lapin*, the person who is stood up is an indirect object: à quelqu'un, me, lui.

Examples

- Elle m'a posé un lapin hier. — She stood me up yesterday.
- Nous avons le cafard en novembre. — We felt blue in November.
- Ces baskets coûtaient les yeux de la tête. — Those sneakers cost a fortune.

Common mistake

English speakers translate piece by piece: J'ai un cockroach or Il a posé moi un lapin. Memorize the whole block, then add the pronoun in front of the verb: Il m'a posé un lapin. Also watch the false friend *un cafard*: it really is a cockroach, so context decides.

Culture note

French teenagers swap idioms in texts and on the school bus, and a well-placed one makes a speaker sound natural. Many come from farm and kitchen life, which is why animals and food appear so often.

Zoé's tip

Draw the silly literal picture for each idiom, then write the real meaning under it. The funny image makes the expression stick.

Key points to remember

- An idiom keeps its words in a fixed order; only the verb and the pronouns change.
- Avoir le cafard = to feel blue; poser un lapin à quelqu'un = to stand someone up.
- Coûter les yeux de la tête = to cost an arm and a leg.
- Many French idioms use animals (cafard, lapin, chat, canard, coq, âne) but the animal is never the point.
- Idioms belong to everyday spoken French; use them with friends and teachers, less in formal writing.

Everyday French Idioms and What They Really Mean: frequently asked questions

What does avoir le cafard mean in French?

It means to feel down or gloomy. Literally, un cafard is a cockroach, but in this idiom the insect only symbolizes a dark mood. You can say it about yourself or someone else: Elle a le cafard.

What does poser un lapin mean?

It means to stand someone up, that is, to not show up for a meeting without warning. The person left waiting is the indirect object: Il m'a posé un lapin.

How do you say that something is very expensive in French?

Use coûter les yeux de la tête, or the shorter coûter un bras. Both mean to cost a fortune, like the English cost an arm and a leg.

Can I translate French idioms word for word?

No. Word-for-word translation usually gives nonsense or the wrong meaning. Learn the idiom as one unit with its real meaning, then conjugate the verb as usual.

Are idioms too informal for school writing?

Most everyday idioms are fine in speaking and in friendly writing. In a formal essay, use them

sparingly, and prefer a neutral verb when your teacher expects formal French.