Idioms describing people

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1 Match each idiom with its precise meaning.

1 have your heart in the right place	____	a behave in an exaggerated way
2 be as hard as nails	____	b be extremely unsympathetic
3 be a nasty piece of work	____	c have conventional, non-extreme views
4 be an awkward customer	____	d irritate someone repeatedly
5 be an odd-ball	____	e be peculiar or unconventional
6 be over the top	____	f stay calm under pressure
7 be middle-of-the-road	____	g be difficult to deal with
8 have your head in the clouds	____	h have kind intentions despite appearances
9 keep your head	____	i be unpleasant and potentially harmful
10 get on someone's nerves	____	j be disconnected from practical reality

2 Choose the most appropriate idiom for the tone and context.

1 Friendly reassurance about a strict but caring person: *her heart is in the right place / she is as hard as nails*.

2 Strong criticism of an unpleasant manipulator: *a nasty piece of work / an odd-ball*.

3 Informal description of exaggerated behaviour: *over the top / middle-of-the-road*.

4 Description of calm conduct in a crisis: *kept his head / had his head in the clouds*.

5 Description of conventional political views: *middle-of-the-road / round the bend*.

6 Mildly critical description of an unconventional person: *an odd-ball / as good as gold*.

7 Description of repeated irritation: *gets on my nerves / has a head for heights*.

8 Description of an uncooperative client: *an awkward customer / top of the class*.

3 Correct the idiom mistake in each sentence.

1 She has **a gold heart** and helps everyone. _____

2 He kept **the head** during the evacuation. _____

3 My neighbour gets **in my nerves**. _____

4 Lana is head and **head** above the other applicants. _____

5 Stop burying **the head** in the sand. _____

6 His heart is **on** the right place. _____

7 She has a good head **of** figures. _____

8 Their reaction was completely **above the top**. _____

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4 Complete the character sketch with idioms from the box.

an odd-ball | as hard as nails | gets on their nerves | has a heart of gold | has his head in the clouds | keeps his head | middle-of-the-road | over the top | the right place | an awkward customer

Karel can appear **1** _____, but he actually **2** _____. His heart is in **3** _____, even when his advice sounds severe. His brother is **4** _____ whose unusual clothes and dramatic stories are often **5** _____. Their sister takes conventional, **6** _____ positions. At work, Karel sometimes **7** _____ and proposes impractical schemes, but in a real emergency he **8** _____. One client is **9** _____ who repeatedly changes the brief and **10** _____.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

Idiom, evaluation and register

Person idioms rarely give neutral information. Their imagery packages description and evaluation together: *a heart of gold* praises generosity, whereas *a nasty piece of work* strongly condemns someone. Because the evaluation is compressed, an idiom can sound more definite than the available evidence supports. Register matters too. Expressions such as *big-head* and *round the bend* are informal, and the latter can be offensive when it treats mental health as a joke. Skilled users recognise both fixed wording and pragmatic effect. They choose an expression that suits the relationship, qualify it when necessary, and avoid converting one action into a permanent identity.

1 What do person idioms usually combine? _____

2 How do the two example idioms differ in evaluation? _____

3 Why can idioms sound too definite? _____

4 What register are *big-head* and *round the bend*? _____

5 Why can one of these expressions be offensive? _____

6 What three choices characterise skilled idiom use? _____

6 Rewrite the description using an idiom. Keep the meaning.

1 She has kind intentions, although she seems strict. _____

2 He stayed calm while everyone else panicked. _____

3 They refuse to confront the growing problem. _____

4 Her work is much better than anyone else's. _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a **120-150 word** character sketch using at least six idioms. Balance vivid language with evidence, and comment briefly on the tone or register of two expressions.

[ ] Preserve fixed idiom forms. [ ] Explain connotation. [ ] Avoid demeaning or unsupported labels.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise meanings

1 **h** 2 **b** 3 **i** 4 **g** 5 **e** 6 **a** 7 **c** 8 **j** 9 **f** 10 **d**

2 Tone and context

1 **her heart is in the right place** 2 **a nasty piece of work** 3 **over the top** 4 **kept his head** 5 **middle-of-the-road** 6 **an odd-ball** 7 **gets on my nerves** 8 **an awkward customer**

3 Corrections

1 a heart of gold 2 his head 3 on my nerves 4 head and shoulders 5 your head 6 in the right place 7 for figures 8 over the top

4 Character sketch

1 **as hard as nails** 2 **has a heart of gold** 3 **the right place** 4 **an odd-ball** 5 **over the top** 6 **middle-of-the-road** 7 **has his head in the clouds** 8 **keeps his head** 9 **an awkward customer** 10 **gets on their nerves**

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 Description and evaluation.
2 One praises generosity; the other strongly condemns.
3 They compress evaluation and may exceed the evidence.
4 Informal.
5 It can trivialise mental health.
6 Match the relationship, qualify when needed and avoid turning one action into a permanent identity.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 Her **heart is in the right place**. 2 He **kept his head**. 3 They **bury their heads in the sand**. 4 Her work is **head and shoulders above** everyone else's.

Over to you: Answers will vary. Check fixed form, register, evidence and sensitivity.