“Black and white,” “rock n’ roll,” “salt and pepper.”

You know these types of phrases, right?

They’re called binomials (or “binomial expressions” or “binomial pairs”).

Binomials are AWESOME! And here’s why:

• They make you sound more natural in English.
• You can express a lot with only 3 words, like with idioms.
• They can help you stop using the same phrases again and again.

Today, you’re going to learn 29 of the most common binomials in English.

By the way, there are so many binomials in English — how did I choose which ones to include?

A lot of coursebooks and websites just list random binomials — many of them are old-fashioned and out of date.

So I used an online corpus* to find the binomials that you’ll actually need — you know, the ones that people actually use in real life (not in a coursebook writer’s head).

This will save you time by giving you the most useful binomials in English! (You’re welcome.)
1. Binomials to Describe Good Things

A lot of binomials are happy little things — like my cat, Freya:

So there are a lot more positive binomials in English than negative ones.

Peace and quiet

What does it mean?

Have you ever needed to escape to the countryside?

To get away from the noise and chaos and stress of the big city?

To just relax and enjoy the peace and quiet?

“Peace and quiet” means “freedom from chaos, stress and noise.”

How can I use it?

OK. I’ve just researched the way this phrase is used, and I’ve found something interesting.

Most of the verbs that are used with “peace and quiet” are verbs that either mean “want” or “look for”:
So I guess this means that peace and quiet is something we often want, but don’t always get.

If you’re a parent, you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about.

Done and dusted

What does it mean?

This is usually for some sort of project, and it simply means “finished — completely finished. So finished that we can go home now.”

How can I use it?

This is almost always used with “be.”

Now that the accounts are done and dusted for the year, do you fancy a pint?

And that’s it! The red team win the penalty shootout! They’ve won the championship! It’s all done and dusted! Now the football is finally over, and we can get on with our lives!
Safe and sound

What does it mean?

This means “safe and out of danger.”

How can I use it?

We can use this phrase for people:

_There he is, safe and sound in his hammock._
Short and sweet

What does it mean?

This means “short but also rather nice.”

Or sometimes “short but relevant to the situation.”

How can I use it?

I can specifically remember the first time I heard this phrase in context.

I was a kid at a classical music concert in Abu Dhabi. (My childhood was interesting. I’ll explain another time.)

It was my dad’s job to introduce the musicians. He went up on stage, said about 5 sentences, then sat down and then the musicians started the concert.

As he was sitting down, he just said:

“There you go — short and sweet!”

We can also say “short but sweet.”

Neat and tidy

What does it mean?

This means “neat.” And “tidy.” Exactly what you’d expect!

How can I use it?

This one’s often used as an adjective:

Can you deliver my doughnuts in a nice, neat-and-tidy package, please?

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Or with “be”:

*Humphrey’s desk is always neat and tidy. Don’t touch anything — he’ll kill you.*

And often with “keep”:

*Yeah — he likes to keep the garden neat and tidy. He’s good at it, but I think he might need to get out a bit more.*

2. **Binomials to Describe Bad Things**

Some binomials are used to describe bad situations.

**Wear and tear**

**What does it mean?**

So you’ve bought some new clothes!

They’re fresh, crisp and new. It feels great, doesn’t it?

But what about those same clothes a year later?

Although you take good care of them, they still fade, get a little broken and just don’t look as good.

Well, that’s wear and tear.

**How can I use it?**

We often use this to show how nice something is:
For sale: Giant, elephant-shaped, leather sofa. No signs of wear and tear.

Or how not-nice something is:

I love this book. I’ve read it about 7 times.

Yes — it’s certainly showing a lot of wear and tear.

By the way — here’s a good example of wear and tear from my collection:

![Worn book with cover damage](image)

High and dry

What does it mean?

This is when you’re in a situation where you feel helpless. You’re stuck in a situation you don’t want to be in, and it’s usually because you’re missing something that can get you out of that situation.

How can I use it?

We often use this with the verb “leave”:

You can’t pick me up? I’m in the middle of nowhere — there’s no bus for 7 hours. Don’t leave me high and dry like this!

It was too late when I noticed that there was no toilet paper, leaving me high and dry.

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Down and out

What does it mean?

That guy you see begging in the street.

He’s got no money, no home. He’s not doing well at all.

Well, he’s down and out.
How can I use it?

It basically works like an adjective:

Tony? Don’t ask about Tony. He’s basically **down and out** these days.

I’ve never seen so many **down-and-out** people in one place. I thought this was supposed to be a wealthy country.

### 3. Binomials to Describe … Things

Some binomials don’t describe anything particularly good or bad — sometimes they just describe … things.

#### Black and white

**What does it mean?**

It means the colours: black and white. That’s all!

**How can I use it?**

Well, you can simply use it to talk about the colours:

*Back in the ’80s, we had a **black-and-white** TV.*

*Daddy? Was the internet in **black and white** when you were a kid?*

But we can also use it to talk about how a situation isn’t so simple.

You know those people who look at a complicated situation, and they think they can just describe it very simply?
Like when they think that all librarians are evil people because they met a couple of bad librarians once.

That’s when you can accuse them of **black-and-white thinking**.

Or you could say:

*C’mon! Don’t look at everything in black and white.*

The world’s a complicated place!

**Rock and roll**

**What does it mean?**

We all know what this means.

**How can I use it?**

I think we all know how to use this, right?

I just wanted to include it because it’s a great example of a binomial in English we all use — even in other languages.

But let’s have an example anyway:

*Rock and roll is a genre that simply refuses to die!*

**Salt and pepper**

**What does it mean?**

Again — we know what this means. It’s that white stuff and black stuff you put on your food. We usually use it in little pots like this:
How can I use it?

In exactly the kinds of ways you’d imagine using it.

Pass the salt and pepper, would you?

*If you put salt and pepper on Brussels sprouts, they still taste horrible.*
4. Binomials for the Good and Bad Sides of Something

There’s something very useful that binomials in English can do.

They can talk about the good side and the bad side of something at the same time.

So sometimes, they act as a sort of scale when you want to show balance.

Make or break

What does it mean?

This one’s a bit tricky.

I guess a really clear way to explain it is with that terrifyingly popular show. I think it’s called “X Factor.”

Basically, you have all these people who want to become successful performers.

Now, the 3 minutes they get on stage (or however long they get) is possibly the most important 3 minutes they’ll have in their career, right?

Why?

That’s because this performance will either “make” them (so they’ll be successful and rich and able to have as much cake as they like) or “break” them (they’ll look stupid in front of everyone and go back to working as a waiter. Or lion tamer. Or whatever they were doing before).

How can I use it?

It’s often used as a verb, and it’s commonly used to talk about love, money and careers.
Something can:

- Make or break a deal
- Make or break a career
- Make or break the economy
- Make or break your marriage
- Make or break you

**Ups and downs**

**What does it mean?**

This one means “both good and bad experiences.”

Although there are bad experiences involved in this one, it’s mostly positive. There’s the feeling that “yes, we’ve gone through some bad times, but we’re still here and alive! It’s been good for us!”

That sort of thing.

**How can I use it?**

We can basically use this in any situation that involves good and bad experiences together.

It can be something big, like life:

(*Life is full of ups and downs!*)

Or something small, like your last trip:

(*How was your holiday in Alaska?*

*Well, we had our ups and downs.*)

And we often use it to describe relationships:
How’s it going with Andy?

Well, we have our ups and downs. But we’re still going strong!

Live and learn

What does it mean?

It means that we learn from our mistakes. So making mistakes is fine. Because now we’ve learned something.

Hooray!

How can I use it?

It’s very common to use this phrase just by itself:

I didn’t know you could take your own food and drink into this cinema! I’ve been buying their overpriced popcorn for years! Oh, well. Live and learn.

OK. I mentioned his ex to him, and he went crazy. I won’t be doing that again. Live and learn.

Pros and cons

What does it mean?

This means “the good and bad sides of something.”

How can I use it?

Well, before we make a decision we should probably:

- Weigh up the pros and cons
- Discuss the pros and cons
- Explore the pros and cons
- Examine the pros and cons

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That sort of thing.

You can also ask about them:

*What would you say are the **pros and cons** of working as a lion tamer?*
Rain or shine

What does it mean?

This means “under any circumstances.”

How can I use it?

This one has a feeling of determination.

You’ve got to get to your best friend’s wedding, and NOTHING is going to stop you!

Or you’re going on your dream holiday camel riding through the Sahara (because you like weird holidays). Nothing will stop you — it’s your dream!

We also often use this phrase with “come”:

*I’m going to my best friend’s wedding, come rain or shine.*

*I’ll be camel riding through the Sahara next week — come rain or shine.*

(Particularly funny because we’re talking about a place without much rain.)

Dos and don’ts

What does it mean?

Dos and don’ts are basically rules.

They’re usually not formal rules and are often not particularly strict.

How can I use it?

Unless someone asks you to write up a “dos and don’ts” list, then you probably won’t need to use this phrase much.
But you will see them around in written English — usually as a sign somewhere public, like a swimming pool, a library, a hostel or a workplace kitchen — anywhere that might have informal rules.

Dos:

- Wash up after yourself.
- Turn the lights off when you leave the room.
- Label any food you put in the fridge.

Don’ts:

- Leave old food in the fridge.
- Put wet spoons in the sugar.
- Use Humphrey’s mug — he’ll kill you.

5. Binomials in English for Amounts, Duration, Direction, Etc.

These binomials describe how you do something, how something happens or how something is.

They deal with the “hows”: how much, how big, how often, how soon, how carefully, etc.

By and large

What does it mean?

“By and large” basically means “after considering everything…”

We have a similar phrase for this: “on the whole.”

How can I use it?

This means “mostly.” We can use it to describe anything that’s almost 100%.

Anything that is measurable and not just black and white.
He said he’d work hard this year and, by and large, he has.

We need all the help we can get from the government but, by and large, they haven’t been helpful.

How’s the new job? Well, by and large, it’s OK. Shame about all the paperwork.

**On and off**

**What does it mean?**

You can use this for anything that happens, then stops happening, then starts again, then stops again, and so on.

**How can I use it?**

You can say that you’ve been writing your first novel on and off recently.

Or that they’ve been arguing on and off for most of their relationship.

Or that he took all the money he earned from lion taming and lived in a hotel in Gibraltar on and off for about 10 years.

Notice that we can put this after the verb or after the object.

We can also use it with “for” and “since”:

He’s been working for the circus on and off since he was a kid.
Far and wide

What does it mean?

This phrase means “over a large area,” or “a lot of places in a large area.”

How can I use it?

Of course, we can use this one to talk about physical areas, so we often use it with verbs like “search,” “reach” and “travel”:

_They searched far and wide for the missing dog. In the end, they found him hiding in the garden._

_He travelled far and wide looking for the answer to the universe. He gave up and opened a café in Ipswich._

_People came from far and wide to see the pig-monkey._

We can also talk about how things like rumours, information and discussion can spread far and wide.

Loud and clear

What does it mean?

This doesn’t mean “loud,” but it means “clear.”

In fact, it means “very clear.”

How can I use it?

This phrase is usually used to talk about an instruction, a message or a signal.
He’s given us a **loud and clear** signal — no more ice cream in the swimming pool.

**More or less**

**What does it mean?**

This means “approximately” but doesn’t sound as scientific.

(By the way, I’d recommend avoiding using approximately in most situations — it sounds a little too scientific for most situations.)

**How can I use it?**

You can use this in any of the situations that you’d use the word “about” (meaning “approximately”).

*There were* **more or less** 300 people at the wedding. *They must’ve spent a fortune!*

*We were* **more or less** a mile from the house when it started raining.

It can also be quite funny if you use it with something less about numbers and more about opinions:

*He’s* **more or less** a complete idiot. *I have no idea how he won.***

**Give or take**

**What does it mean?**

Good news! This is more or less the same as “more or less.”
How can I use it?

You can use this one for the same types of situations as “more or less,” but it usually goes at the end of the sentence:

*There were about 200 people at the wedding, give or take.*

That’s because it’s often used more as an afterthought:

*My YouTube channel’s exploded! I’ve got 10,000 subscribers, give or take.*

You can also make it a little more accurate by adding how much you’re giving or taking:

*I had about 8 cups of tea last night — give or take 2.*

= “I had somewhere between 6 and 10 cups of tea last night.”

Little by little

What does it mean?

You can probably guess the meaning of this one.

It means “gradually” — the opposite of “suddenly.”

How can I use it?

Because it’s a long(ish) phrase, it really works best at the end of a clause:

*We watched his music writing get better and better, little by little.*

Or at the beginning:

*Little by little, he lost his enthusiasm for Sandra Bullock films. Especially the romantic comedies.*

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Sooner or later

What does it mean?

The meaning of this one’s pretty logical. It literally means “sooner or later.”

How can I use it?

You can use this phrase when you want to tell someone, “For sure, something is happening, but I just don’t know when.”

Sometimes there’s a feeling of “it’s happening — and there’s nothing we can do about it!”
Step by step

What does it mean?

This is a combination of “gradually,” “carefully” and “regularly.”

How can I use it?

Have you ever tried to construct something from Ikea?

Nightmare, isn’t it?

You try to follow the instructions step by step, but your cupboard still ends up looking like a broken chair.

You should’ve read the step-by-step instructions more carefully. That’s why your cupboard looks like a chair.

Yeah, thanks for that.

Although it’s most common to use this phrase with instructions, we can also use it for any sort of process:

He plans to take over the world, step by step. He’s starting with Norway.
Now and then
What does it mean?
“Sometimes.”

Yep — this just means “sometimes.”

How can I use it?
We can use this before or after SV0 (usually after).

What’s SV0? Click here.

He’s not a big drinker, but he enjoys a cocktail now and then.

Football? No — I’m not a big fan. I might watch a match now and then, though. If it’s on.

All in all
What does it mean?
This one means “looking at everything about a situation all together.”

How can I use it?
Let’s look at some examples!

How was your trip?

All in all, it was all right. But there were a few problems with the sharks.

Yep — learning a language can be a challenge, but all in all, it’s a rewarding experience.