



IDIOMS & PHRASES



For All
Competitive
Exams

Revised
and
Updated
Edition

Roshan Tolani



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PREFACE

Idioms and phrases are one of the most fascinating aspects of English language. They are used in all forms of language: informal and formal, spoken and written. In fact, more than language they are part of our culture.

As much of the vocabulary in everyday speech is based on idioms and phrases, learning idiomatic expressions becomes an important part of the language-learning process. Understanding and appropriate use of idioms and phrases greatly enhances the learner's language skills.

One of the main problems students have with idiomatic expressions is that it is often impossible to guess their meaning from the words they contain. They can have a literal meaning in one situation and a different idiomatic meaning in another situation. They do not always follow the normal rules of meaning and grammar.

Arihant Dictionary of Idioms and Phrases is a collection of more than 2000 idiomatic phrases that occur frequently in English. It also explains the meaning and use of these expressions in a clear and precise way. Every idiom given in this book is explained with an example based on meaningful sentence. The book includes traditional idioms and phrases, idiomatic compounds, similes and comparisons, and selected sayings and cliches.

To help the readers consolidate their learning, the words are supplemented by a number of skill-building exercises along with keys at the end of the book.

Focused study of these idiomatic expressions will teach you the type of the language that native speakers use in everyday situations. You will become more fluent in English and will be able to communicate better.

The book aims to help you not only as a comprehensive reference book but also as a valuable learning tool. It is essential for those who desire a true understanding of the English language and are preparing for various national and international competitive and entrance exams.

Roshan Tolani



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A

take sth/sb into account

remember to include sth in one's calculations, to consider sth while reviewing a situation

I hope my teacher will **take into account** the fact that I was ill just before the examination when he evaluates my test paper.

get one's act together

start organizing oneself so that one does things in an effective way

His new boss has given him one month to **get his act together**, or he loses his job.

be out of action

sth is not working or cannot be used, sb is injured or ill and cannot do things he or she usually does

I'm afraid I cannot tell you the account balance as the system is **out of action**.

be up in the air

unresolved, undecided

The future of the project is **up in the air** as the management has failed to finalize the budget.

clear the air

remove the bad feelings between people, clarify or get rid of a difficult or complex problem

The government's attitude on the issue has remained ambivalent for some time, so today's statement should **clear the air** considerably.

all in all

everything considered

She may not be brilliant, but **all in all** I think she did quite well in her exams.

Idioms & Phrases

from A to Z

comprehensive, including everything, thoroughly

Steve Job's latest book tells the story of his life from **A to Z**.

take sb aback

surprise or shock sb so much that they he or she does know how to behave for a short time

We were all quite **taken aback by** his decision to retire from test cricket.

of one's own accord

voluntarily

The managing director of the company didn't have to be asked to resign – he went **of his own accord**.

an Achilles' heel

vulnerable spot, a small fault or weakness in a person or system that can result in its failure

The corrupt minister is regarded as the government's **Achilles heel** and is expected to resign.

the acid test

a test that proves a hypothesis or validity of a product or idea

The product looks great, but will people buy it? That's **the acid test**.

across the board

happening or having an effect on people at every level and in every area

The improvement is seen **across the board**, with all divisions either recording profits or reducing losses.

a man of action

a man who prefers to do things rather than think about and discuss them

The country needs a political leader who is **a man of action**.

come of age

if sth has come of age, it has reached its full successful development, to reach the age when one is an adult and is legally responsible for his or her behaviour

After years of experimentation with colours and strokes, his painting has **come of age**.

Idioms & Phrases

alive and kicking (or alert or well)

continue to live or exist and be full of energy, to continue to be popular or successful

She hadn't met her younger sister after her marriage, and was delighted to see her **alive and kicking** at a social event last weekend.

all and sundry

people in general; everybody, without discrimination

I don't want **all and sundry** to come to know about our differences.

alpha and omega

the beginning and the end, the first and the last

The strategy to control inflation remains the **alpha and omega** of the government's economic policy.

run amok (or amuck)

be out of control and act in a wild or dangerous manner

When the police arrived, they were confronted with a group of protestors **running amuck** in the lanes of the old town.

up (raise) the ante

increase the price; increase one's demands or the risks in a situation in order to achieve a better result

The government has **upped the ante** by refusing to negotiate with the ultras until a ceasefire has been agreed.

have ants in one's pants

be extremely restless, uneasy, impatient, or anxious

The young students just can't sit still; they must have **ants in their pants**.

apple of discord

anything causing trouble, discord, or jealousy

The right to host the World Cup cricket has become an **apple of discord** between the two countries.

the apple of one's eye

the person of whom one is extremely fond, favourite

She has three children, but her disabled son is **the apple of her eye**.

Idioms & Phrases

upset the apple-cart

spoil or disrupt a plan or arrangement; disprove a theory

We had planned to hold a get-together in the evening, but bad weather **upset the apple-cart**.

seal (or stamp) of approval

an official sign of approval

The government finally agreed to give the new pension policy its **seal of approval**.

keep sth/sb at arm's length

keep sb a distance, avoiding intimacy or familiarity

He always had the feeling that she was **keeping him at arm's length**.

the long arm of the law

the far-reaching power of the authorities

It is not easy for criminals to escape **the long arm of the law** in a developed country like this.

up in arms

angry, rebellious

The employees were **up in arms** over the management's plan to discontinue five-day week policy.

armed to the teeth

fully equipped (with weapons, arguments, etc.)

The alleged tax-defaulter was ready for all their questions, and **armed to the teeth** with proof of his innocence.

have been around

have existed; have acquired a lot of worldly experience

There is nothing new about laptops – **they've been around** for years.

as and when

at the time that sth happens

Most people in the city don't own a car – they just rent one **as and when** they need it.

in the ascendant

increasingly successful or powerful

He's very much **in the ascendant** in the film world.

Idioms & Phrases

under the auspices (or banner) of sb/sth

with the backing, support, patronage of

Financial aid is being provided to the country **under the auspices of the World Bank**.

have an axe to grind

private or ulterior motive to further, often a selfish one

He should not become the chairman of the committee as he has too many **axes of his own to grind**.

the ABC of sth

the elementary or first elements; the simplest knowledge

He is keen to understand the **ABC of making investments** in a stock market.

above board

open; straight; legitimate; without concealment

The deal between the two parties was completely open and **above board**.

give a good account of

perform well, often in a challenging situation

As he could not give a very good account of himself in the interview, the company didn't **offer him a good salary**.

to take sth into account (or consideration)

bear in mind, consider, allow for

I hope they take **her age into account** when they judge her work.

ad nauseum

if sb discusses sth ad nauseum, they talk about it so much that it becomes very boring

She talks **ad nauseum** about how brilliant she was in her school days.

Adam's ale

water

If he feels tired, let him have a glass of **Adam's ale** from the tap.

Idioms & Phrases

give oneself airs

give oneself an air of superiority; behave snobbishly, as if one regards everyone else as being inferior

She should not **give herself the airs** as she's no different from the rest of us.

alter ego

another aspect of oneself, a very close friend or constant companion, a trusted advisor

Over the years the secretary has become the **alter ego** of his boss.

arm in arm

closely allied or intimate

The party cancelled former MLA's candidature as he was **arm in arm** with the opposition.

make an ass of oneself

behave in a silly way

They **made an ass of** the new colleague at the office by giving him the wrong instructions.

have/hold all the aces

be in a winning position

In the battle between chemical manufacturers and environmentalists, the activists seem to **hold all the aces**.

ad hoc

for the special purpose, impromptu

An **ad hoc** committee was formed to address health insurance problems.

high on the/sb's agenda

if a subject or plan is at the top of sb's agenda, it is the most important thing they want to discuss or deal with

The government has realized the need for placing educational reforms at the **top of its agenda**.

alma mater

the college or school that one attended

He was delighted when he was offered the position of professor of Economics at his **alma mater**.

Idioms & Phrases

cast aspersions on

criticize sb or sb's character

His opponents never missed an opportunity **to cast aspersions** on his professionalism.

lead sb astray

cause someone to make a mistake

The interrogators in the case were **led astray** by false information from one of the witnesses.

the avant-garde

the artists/writers/musicians etc. of any period whose work is very modern and very different to what has been done before

Since early fifties, the trade fair has been a major showcase for **the avant-garde**.

about to (do sth)

be on the point of doing sth

I was **about to leave** for the college when somebody knocked on the door.

according to (sb or sth)

as said or told by sb, in agreement with sth

According to the report, the crime rate in the city has gone down.

account for (sth)

provide an explanation or answer for sth

The bad weather **accounts for the** low attendance at the rally.

after all

considering the fact that sth happened, sth that is usually assumed

You don't need to call him. **After all**, he never calls you.

all of a sudden

suddenly, without advance warning

All of a sudden it became dark and the rain started.

as a matter of fact

actually

As a matter of fact, the couple has applied for a divorce.

Idioms & Phrases

as far as

to the extent or degree of sth

As far as I know the movie has got excellent reviews from the film critics.

as for

with regard to, concerning

"**As for** me, I think I will accept the offer."

as long as

provided that, on condition that

"**As long as** you promise to be careful, you can work on my computer."

as soon as

just after sth, when

He got the job offer **as soon as** he finished his graduation.

as to

with regard to, according to

"**As to** your query about accounts, I will present the required documents tomorrow."

as well

in addition, also, too

He plans to take a language course this summer **as well**.

as well as

in addition to

"Please bring your tennis racket **as well as** two balls."

arrive in a body

arrive as a group

Things became noisy when the workers entered the manager's office **in a body**.

as an aside

as a comment that is not supposed to be heard by everyone

At the marriage reception, he said **as an aside**, "The bride's dress is inappropriate for the occasion."

Idioms & Phrases

blow-by-blow account

a detailed description (of an event) given as the event takes place

The witness gave a **blow-by-blow account** of the incident.

in ages

for a very long time

Nobody has seen him work so hard **in ages**.

all up with sb

no hope is left for sb

It is **all up now with** finding any survivors – they couldn't have survived so long in these conditions.

all hell will let loose

confusion, uproar

Don't take him into the party fold or **all hell will let loose**.

as broad as it's long

the same, whatever way you look at it

She could not decide which offer to accept -- she thought the choice was just about **as broad as it was long**.

Exercise A

1. Below on the left are some idioms. Choose the correct meaning from the list on the right :

A. be up in the air

B. take sb aback

C. arm in arm

D. blow-by-blow account

A B C D

(a) 2 4 1 3 (b)

(c) 3 2 1 4 (d)

1. closely allied

2. undecided

3. a detailed description of an event

4. to surprise or shock someone

A B C D

4 3 2 1

1 2 4 3

For each of the following questions choose the one correct answer :

2. The government's attitude on the issue has remained ambivalent for some time, so today's statement shouldconsiderably.

(a) take sth/ sb into account

(b) come of age

(c) up the ante

(d) clear the air

Idioms & Phrases

3. We had planned to hold a get-together in the evening, but bad weather.....
- (a) upset the apple-cart
 - (b) had an axe to grind
 - (c) gave us the airs
 - (d) took something else into account

Tick the option that best explains the meaning of the idiom :

4. alma mater
- (a) actually
 - (b) the college or school that one attended
 - (c) for a very long time
 - (d) For the special purpose
5. alter ego
- (a) legitimate
 - (b) increasingly successful
 - (c) constant companion
 - (d) rebellious

Tick the idiom that best explains the following :

6. The person of whom one is extremely fond
- (a) alpha and omega
 - (b) the apple of one's eye
 - (c) alive and kicking
 - (d) an Achilles' heel
7. Be out of control and act in a wild or dangerous manner
- (a) come of age
 - (b) keep sb/sth at arm's length
 - (c) have ants in one's pants
 - (d) run amok

ANSWERS

1. (a) 2. (d) 3. (a) 4. (b) 5. (c) 6. (b) 7. (d)

B

be glad/happy/to see the back of sb/sth

be pleased when sb leaves or when sth ends because you did not like them

The guest became an absolute pain for the hosts and they were really pleased to see the back of him.

bend over backwards to do sth

do all in one's power (usually to achieve sth or accommodate sb)

Banks are **bending over backwards** to provide facilities to the depositors.

be in a bad way

be ill, unhappy, or in a bad state

After years of the recession, the economy of the country was **in a bad way**.

set (or start) the ball rolling

get sth started, especially a conversation or a social event

The supporters of the student leader got **the ball rolling** by shouting slogans in favour of his candidature.

get/ jump/ leap on the bandwagon

do sth because it is fashionable or profitable, join a cause or movement

Media is playing an important role in creating awareness on the issue and more and more people are **getting on the bandwagon** to denounce cigarette smoking.

(not) bat an eye/ eyelash/ eyelid

to not show any shock or surprise

When the Court pronounced the prisoner guilty of murder, the accused stood there without **batting an eyelid**.

get out of bed on the wrong side/get up on the wrong side of the bed

be in a bad or grumpy mood

His behaviour with everyone is very bad today. It seems he **got up on the wrong side of the bed!**

Idioms & Phrases

give sb a hell

scold sb harshly

The boss **gave them hell** for not finishing the project in time.

give sb the benefit of the doubt

regard sb as innocent until proven otherwise

Let's **give her the benefit of the doubt** and assume that she's right.

be a bit much

if one says sth is a bit much, he or she thinks that it is not fair or that it is more than one can deal with

I think it's **a bit much to** expect a pace bowler to bowl more than 50 overs in one day.

turn a blind eye

deliberately overlook, ignore

The principal decided to **turn a blind eye** to the students' misconduct this time with a hope that they won't do it again.

out of the blue

happens suddenly and one is not expecting it

Then one day, completely **out of the blue**, the Maoists attacked the police post and caught everyone off guard.

be above board

open; straight; legitimate; without concealment

No tricks, please. We want the deal **to be completely above board**.

push the boat out

celebrate; enjoy oneself

After the completion of the exams, the students decided **to push the boat out** and have a party.

a bone of contention

subject of argument or disagreement

A serious **bone of contention** between the landowners and the developer was the compensation price for the land.

have a bone to pick with sb

an unpleasant issue or grievance that needs discussion

The two reputed universities of the state **have a bone to pick with each other** over reservation policy for admissions.

Idioms & Phrases

be in sb's good books

be in sb's favour or good opinion

The fact that she always managed to **be in the good books** of the bosses surprised one and all.

the bottom line

in the final analysis, the most important fact in a situation

The bottom line is that pregnant women's health is at greater risk if they smoke.

get to the bottom of sth

discover the truth about a situation

It is doubtful if political interference will allow the investigators to **get to the bottom of the case**.

cross the bridge when one comes to it

resolve a problem when it occurs, rather than try to solve it in advance

"What will you do if you fail in this exam?" Answer : "I'll **cross that bridge** when I come to it."

be on the brink (or verge) of doing sth

be likely to do sth very soon

The company dismissed the reports that it was **on the brink of selling** its shares.

back to the drawing board

back to the planning stage

The client rejected all our proposals, so we had to ask the consultant to take the project **back to the drawing board**.

back to square one

return to where one started from

The Government and the Central Bank spent years strengthening the nation's economy but the slowdown shattered it, so we are **back to square one**.

by (or through) the back door

not in a direct, official, or honest way

The opposition accused the government of signing the defence deal with the neighbouring country **through the back door**.

Idioms & Phrases

take a back seat

take a less important position

The founder of the company decided to **take a back seat** and let the board members run the business.

bag and baggage

(with) all one's belongings

Tired of their tantrums, the landlady asked her tenants to vacate the house, **bag and baggage**, in a week's time.

a bag (bundle) of nerves

very nervous person

Before the interview, he was **a bundle of nerves**.

the ball is in sb's (your) court

the initiative for taking action lies with sb

His family and friends have requested him to apologise to his boss to save his job. **The ball is in his court** now.

have a ball

have a good time

It was a great weekend – we all **had a ball**.

a whole new ball game

a significant change in circumstances; a changed turn of events

After two genuine pace bowlers joined the team it was **a whole new ball game**.

banana republic

a small, poor country with a weak or dishonest government

The citizens fear that the country will become a **banana republic** if the government fails to curb corruption.

go bananas

become very angry, act crazy

She'll **go bananas** if she sees the house in this condition.

bang on

be exactly correct

You said the Congress will get 240 seats, didn't you? You were **bang on**.

Idioms & Phrases

go with a bang

very exciting and successful

We take part in the events organized by this group, because they **go with a real bang**.

bark up the wrong tree

waste one's efforts by pursuing the wrong thing or path

It was a very sensitive case and yet for over one year the police kept **barking up the wrong tree**.

back to basics

start to give your attention to the simplest and most important matters after ignoring them for a while

The President's economic package has failed to win the financial institutions' trust and he will have to get **back to basics**.

with bated breath

feel very excited or anxious while you are waiting

The audience watched the circus artists' antics **with bated breath**.

pass (or hand) on the baton

give responsibility for sth important to another person

The governor of the Central Bank resigns this month, **passing on the baton** to one of his closest associates.

baying for blood

want sb to be hurt or punished

The victims' families could be seen **baying for blood** of the assaulters during the trial.

hand (or keep) sb/sth at bay

prevent sth or sb unpleasant from coming too near to one or harming one

The area was hit by a serious epidemic, but luckily he could **keep himself at bay**.

beat a hasty retreat

run away; abandon sth (speedily), to leave a place because it is dangerous or unpleasant

The courier boy **beat a hasty retreat** when he heard the dog's furious barking from the back of the house.

Idioms & Phrases

beat about (or around) the bush

approach indirectly, in a roundabout way, or too cautiously

You will have to learn to speak clearly about what you want. You won't get anywhere if you keep **beating about the bush**.

work like a beaver

work very energetically and hard

Ahead of the festival, she **worked like a beaver** to clean out all the closets.

a bed of roses

easy option, a comfortable or luxurious position

She found that taking care of old parents was not a **bed of roses**.

make a beeline for

go quickly and directly to sb or sth

As soon as the employees heard about the news of scrapping of the bonus policy, they **made a beeline for** the boss's office.

bell the cat

do a dangerous job

Someone has to **bell the cat** and tell the commissioner that his own son started the violence.

belle of the ball

be the most attractive woman at party or similar event

She wore a dress made by the country's most valued designer and could easily be picked up as the **belle of the ball** that evening.

below the belt

cruel and unfair

Ahead of the elections, politicians won't hesitate to aim **below the belt**.

tighten one's belt

spend less than you did before because you have less money

Most people need to **tighten their belt** during economic slowdown.

Idioms & Phrases

make the best of sth

try to think and act in a positive way when one has to accept a situation which one do not like but cannot change

He got admission in a college where he did not have any of his former friends with him but he decided to **make the best of it**.

a safe bet

fair assumption; reasonable guess; opinion or view that is likely to prove correct

The party president decided that the 75-year-old sitting legislator was still **a safe bet** for re-election.

better late than never

it is better for sb or sth to be late than never to arrive or to happen

All of us have been waiting for you for two hours—but **better late than never**.

get (have) the better of sb

become superior to or master sb or sth; win out

The boy from the small town was determined to have **the better of his** competitors.

better half (or part)

husband or wife, the larger amount or majority of sth

I think a two-bed flat would suit us but I'd better confirm it with my **better half**.

beyond a shadow of doubt

without any doubt; indubitably

His guilt is now proved **beyond a shadow of doubt**.

bide one's time

wait for the opportune moment

The police officer sat quietly in front of the murderer's hiding place, **biding his time**.

a big cheese (fish/gun/shot)

important person

Apparently her father is **a big cheese** in one of the major banks.

Idioms & Phrases

big deal

matter of importance, sth you say to show that you do not think that sth is either important or interesting

Winning a scholarship is no **big deal** for him.

fit (or fill) the bill

be exactly suitable for a particular situation

The country hit by terrorism needs a strong leader, and the new Prime Minister just doesn't **fit the bill**.

foot the bill

pay the bill

It was a splendid party and I'm glad that I don't have to **foot** that particular **bill**.

a bird in the hand

sth in one's possession, often modest but better than nothing

It may not be the best of jobs, but it's a **bird in the hand** and you should not give it up till you can find a better one.

a bird's eye view

an overview

This book gives you a **bird's eye view** of the Indian industry since British times.

birds of a feather

people with similar tastes, interests and background

According to the surprising finding of the report, there is no guarantee that people who are **birds of a feather** will prove to be good life partners.

bits and pieces

miscellaneous, mainly small objects

After the accident, there were **bits and pieces** of the wreckage spread all over the road.

do one's bit

assist; make an individual contribution to an overall effort

When survival is the critical issue, everyone has to **do one's bit**.

Idioms & Phrases

bite the dust

die; disintegrate

Five hundred more people lost their jobs when another IT firm **bit the dust**.

bite the hand that feeds one

show ingratitude, turn against a benefactor

The institution offered me a scholarship, so I shouldn't **bite the hand that feeds me** and criticize its policies.

bite off more than one can chew

try to do more than one is able to do

By accepting two part-time jobs, he is clearly **biting off more than he can chew**.

bite (or hold) one's tongue

refrain from saying sth one wants to say, because the moment is inappropriate

The lady officer has a very quick temper and often fails to **bite her tongue** in an argument.

the black sheep (of a family)

the least reputable member of a group; a disgrace

My cousin was **the black sheep**. Eventually, he migrated to the Middle East to avoid jail here.

in black and white

formally, on paper and in writing

He asked his old mother not to worry as the terms of the land agreement were spelled out **in black and white**.

a blank cheque

complete authority or unrestricted freedom of action or a free hand

Several people expressed their concern when the Chairman desired to give **the blank cheque** for the company's future in the hands of the 25-year-old director.

draw a blank

be unable to get information, think of sth, or achieve sth

We've requested hundreds of private schools to join the 'low-cost education' campaign, but so far we've **drawn a blank**.

Idioms & Phrases

a blast from the past

sth that suddenly and strongly makes you remember a previous time in your life

Watching that movie again was **a real blast from the past**.

blaze a trail

pursue a line of research that points the way to great discoveries

The medical college has **blazed a trail** in developing new techniques for treating blindness.

a blessing in disguise

misfortune which turns out to have advantages; good outcome from evil situation, etc

Losing that job turned out to be **a blessing in disguise** for him as it forced him to plunge into business.

a blind alley

a dead end; a position without hope of progress or success

The latest scientific theory may turn out to be **a blind alley**.

a blind date

an arranged meeting for two people who have never met each other before, in order to try to start a romantic relationship

She agreed to go on **a blind date** with one of her friend's former boyfriend.

a blind spot

subject about which one is ignorant or biased

Languages are **my blind spot**—I always fumbled at Marathi.

in the blink (the twinkling) of an eye

in an instant

In the blink of an eye the robber disappeared from the bank with lakhs of rupees.

a new kid on the block

Sb who is new in a place or organization and has many things to learn about it

Realizing that he was **the new kid on the block** in his organization, he was determined to prove himself.

Idioms & Phrases

blood, sweat and tears

a lot of effort and suffering

Our freedom is the result of over hundred years' of **blood, sweat and tears**.

have blood on one's hands

be responsible for sb's death

The champions of these riots **have the blood of many thousands of** people on their hands.

in sb's blood

part of one's genetic inheritance

The whole family is good in business; **it's in their blood**.

new blood

new people in an organization who will provide new ideas and energy

It's time the Prime Minister brings some **new blood** into the government.

there's bad blood between

feelings of hate between people because of arguments in the past

The villagers say the arson attack may have been the result of **bad blood between** the two families.

blow hot and cold

to sometimes like or be interested in sth or sb and sometimes not

Her father kept **blowing hot and cold** about the idea of going abroad for education.

once in a blue moon

very rarely

I don't know why I bought that music system—I use it **once in a blue moon**.

a blue-eyed boy

a man who is liked and admired by sb in authority

He gets the charge of all the assignments except the finance, which is kept for **the blue-eyed boy**.

Idioms & Phrases

call sb's bluff

expose sb's deception, invite a showdown

Some opposition parliamentarians kept threatening to resign on the issue, and eventually the Prime Minister decided it was time to **call their bluff**.

spare (or save) sb's blushes

do sth to prevent sb feeling embarrassed

Sitapathi **saved the team's blushes** by scoring the only century in the test series.

be in the same boat

be in the same unpleasant situation as other people

When he lost his job, he twittered that it was not bad to know he was **in the same boat** as about three lakh others in the country.

rock the boat

do or say sth that causes problems

The government asked the Home Minister not to take firm action on protesters as it certainly doesn't want anything to **rock the boat** just before the election.

body and soul

with all one's effort and ability

She dedicated herself to medical study, **body and soul**.

a bolt from the blue

unexpected happening; complete surprise

The sudden uprising in many parts of the country was a complete **bolt from the blue** for the government.

make no bones about sth

be open and frank about sth

He **made no bones about his** dissatisfaction with the teaching in the college.

bring sb to book

make sb accountable for his conduct, punish sb

It was frustrating for the victims' kin as the police and the court failed to **bring anyone to book** for the crime.