



# Proverbs and Sayings

## Introduction

In searching for that glint of human truth beneath a story, it can often be useful to consider proverbs and sayings. This resource is a non-exhaustive list of some English adages that might unlock those hidden layers. Does your story prove the saying or does it question its merit? It feels like there are many stories waiting to be told that have these sayings at their heart.

### A

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

Absolute power corrupts absolutely

Actions speak louder than words

Adversity makes strange bedfellows

All good things must come to an end

All is fair in love and war

All publicity is good publicity

All that glitters is not gold

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

The apple never falls far from the tree

April showers bring forth May flowers

An army marches on its stomach

As a tree bends, so shall it grow

As you make your bed, so you must lie upon it

As you sow so shall you reap

Ask a silly question and you'll get a silly answer

Attack is the best form of defence

## **B**

A bad excuse is better than none

Bad news travels fast

A bad penny always turns up

A bad workman blames his tools

Barking dogs seldom bite

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Beauty is only skin deep

Beggars can't be choosers

The best defence is a good offence

The best laid plans of mice and men go oft awry

Better safe than sorry

Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all

Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt

Big fleas have little fleas upon their back to bite them

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush

Birds of a feather flock together

Blood is thicker than water

Brevity is the soul of wit

## **C**

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link

Charity begins at home

Cheats never prosper

Cleanliness is next to godliness

Clothes don't make the man

The course of true love never did run smooth

Cowards may die many times before their death

Curiosity killed the cat

Cut your coat according to your cloth

## D

The darkest hour is just before the dawn  
Dead men tell no lies  
The Devil makes work for idle hands to do  
A diamond is forever  
A dog is a man's best friend  
Don't cast your pearls before swine  
Don't change horses in midstream  
Don't count your chickens before they're hatched  
Don't cut off your nose to spite your face  
Don't keep a dog and bark yourself  
Don't let the grass grow under your feet  
Don't look a gift horse in the mouth  
Don't put all your eggs in one basket  
Don't shut the stable door after the horse has bolted  
Don't throw good money after bad  
Don't try to teach your Grandma to suck eggs  
Don't use a sledgehammer to crack a nut  
Don't wash your dirty linen in public  
Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom  
A drowning man isn't troubled by rain

## E

The early bird catches the worm  
Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise  
Empty vessels make the most noise  
The end justifies the means  
Enough is as good as a feast  
To err is human; to forgive divine  
Every cloud has a silver lining  
Every stick has two ends  
Everyone gets their fifteen minutes of fame  
Everyone has their price  
The exception that proves the rule

An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind

## **F**

Failing to plan is planning to fail

False friends are worse than open enemies

The female of the species is more deadly than the male

Fine words butter no parsnips

Fish rot from the head down

A fool and his money are soon parted

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread

For every thing there is a season

Forewarned is forearmed

Fortune favours the bold

A friend in need is a friend indeed

A friend to everyone is a friend to no one

## **G**

Genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime

Give a man enough rope and he will hang himself

A golden key can open any door

A good beginning makes a good ending

Good fences make good neighbours

Good things come to those who wait

One good turn deserves another

Great minds think alike

## **H**

Half a loaf is better than no bread

One hand washes the other

He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches

He who goes a-borrowing, goes a-sorrowing

He who laughs last laughs longest

He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword

He who pays the piper calls the tune  
He who sups with the devil should have a long spoon  
Hell has no fury like a woman scorned  
Home is where the heart is  
Honesty is the best policy  
Honey catches more flies than vinegar  
A house divided against itself cannot stand  
A house is not a home

I

If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well  
If at first you do not succeed, try, try again  
If it ain't broke, don't fix it  
If it were not for hope the heart would break  
If the mountain will not come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain  
If the shoe fits, wear it  
If wishes were horses, beggars would ride  
If you have never seen the bottom of the tree, you cannot know how tall it stands  
If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas  
If you play with fire, you will get burned  
Ignorance is bliss  
Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery  
In a battle between elephants, the ants get squashed  
In for a penny, in for a pound  
Into every life a little rain must fall  
It isn't over until the fat lady sings  
It takes a whole village to raise a child  
It's a small world  
It's better to give than to receive  
It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all  
It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness  
It's no use crying over spilt milk  
It's the last straw that breaks the camel's back

**J**

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

**K**

One kind word can warm three winter months

Know which side your bread is buttered

Know which way the wind blows

**L**

Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone

Laughter is the best medicine

Learn a language, and you will avoid a war

A leopard can't change its spots

Let sleeping dogs lie

Lightning never strikes twice in the same place

Like the pot calling the kettle black

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing

A little of what you fancy does you good

The longest day must have an end

**M**

Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun

Make a virtue of necessity

Make hay while the sun shines

Man does not live by bread alone

A man who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client

One man's trash is another man's treasure

Many a true word is spoken in jest

Marry in haste, repent at leisure

Measure a thousand times and cut once

Men's evil manners live in brass; their virtues we write in water

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow

A mill cannot grind with the water that is past

Misery loves company

More haste, less speed

## **N**

Necessity is the mother of invention

Never give a sucker an even break

Never judge a book by its cover

Never look a gift horse in the mouth

No man can paddle two canoes at the same time

No man is an island

A nod is as good as a wink

Nothing is certain but death and taxes

Nothing succeeds like success

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

## **O**

The only way to find a friend is to be one

Opportunity doesn't knock until you build a door

Opportunity never knocks twice at any man's door

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings

## **P**

The pen is mightier than the sword

A penny saved is a penny earned

People who live in glass houses should not throw stones

A picture is worth a thousand words

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely

Pride comes before a fall

The proof of the pudding is in the eating

## **R**

Religion is the opium of the people

Revenge is a dish best served cold

A rising tide lifts all boats

The road to hell is paved with good intentions  
A rolling stone gathers no moss  
Rome wasn't built in one day  
A rose by any other name would smell as sweet

## S

Seek and you shall find  
A ship in a harbour is safe, but that's not what a ship is for  
The shoemaker always wears the worst shoes  
Shrouds have no pockets  
A stitch in time saves nine  
Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them  
Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt you  
A stitch in time saves nine  
One swallow doesn't make a summer

## T

Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves  
There's more than one way to kill a cat  
There's no fool like an old fool  
There's no place like home  
There's no such thing as a free lunch  
There's no such thing as bad publicity  
There's one law for the rich and another law for the poor  
A thing of beauty is a joy forever  
A throne is only a bench covered with velvet  
Tomorrow is another day  
To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive  
Truth is stranger than fiction  
Two heads are better than one  
Two is company, but three is a crowd  
Two wrongs don't make a right



**U**

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown

United we stand, divided we fall

Unity is strength

**V**

Variety is the spice of life

Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate things

**W**

A watched pot never boils

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

What goes around, comes around

What you lose on the swings you gain on the roundabouts

What is learnt in the cradle lasts to the tombs

What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve over

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade

When the cat is away, the mice will play

When the going gets tough, the tough get going

Where there is a will there is a way

A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle

Worrying never did anyone any good

**Y**

You are what you eat

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink

You can't get blood out of a stone

You can't have your cake and eat it too

You can't hold with the hare and run with the hounds

You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear

You can't teach an old dog new tricks

You can't unscramble eggs

Youth is wasted on the young

**Z**

Zeal without knowledge is fire without light



# ENDNOTE

## Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. He has been placed or listed in various writing competitions including Bath, Flash 500, the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, Reflex and Leicester Writes. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

## Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: <https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources>

## Services and Courses:

Information about my [courses](#) and [editorial services](#) can also be found on my website.



Support me on Ko-fi

As a workshop facilitator, I am committed to opening up writing opportunities to people from all backgrounds based on ability to write rather than ability to pay. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance pay-what-you-can and free spots exclusively from my own pocket. So, if you've downloaded this resource and are in a position to support narrowing the access gap to creative writing opportunities, I would be very grateful if you would consider buying me a virtual coffee\*.

*\*Any money donated to my [Ko-fi page](#) will be used to fund free and reduced-price places for my Write Beyond The Lightbulb courses, as well as to provide free editing and mentoring opportunities for low-income writers, and to support other opportunities that seek to level the playing field.*