

EDUCATION-BASED PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH: A LINGUISTIC AND SEMANTIC STUDY

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Summary: *This article examines three English phraseological units rooted in the domain of education: "Hit the books", "Learn the ropes", and "Pass with flying colours". These expressions are among the most widely recognized fixed phrases in English that relate directly to learning, academic effort, and the achievement of educational goals. Each unit is analyzed from grammatical, etymological, and semantic perspectives, and their contextual usage is illustrated through authentic literary and academic examples. The study aims to demonstrate how education-themed phraseological units reflect both the importance of learning in human society and the creative power of language to encode experience in memorable form.*

Key words: *phraseological units, education, idioms, etymology, semantic analysis, fixed expressions, English language, academic vocabulary.*

Phraseology occupies a central position in the study of modern linguistics, serving as the discipline that investigates stable, reproducible combinations of words that carry meanings beyond their literal components. From the pioneering classifications of A.V. Kunin, who distinguished between primary and secondary methods of phraseological unit formation [2, 4], to the structural typologies proposed by A.I. Smirnitsky, who compared phraseological units with words and identified one-top and two-top structural types [2, 6], the field has grown into a robust area of linguistic inquiry. Phraseological units are not merely decorative features of language — they are fundamental instruments through which speakers encode cultural knowledge, shared values, and accumulated human experience into communicable form.

Among the most culturally significant categories of phraseological units are those derived from the domain of education. Learning has always been at the heart of civilized society, and it is natural that the experience of studying, striving, and succeeding academically would leave a rich imprint on the English language. Education-related phraseological units capture attitudes toward hard work, skill acquisition, and academic achievement in ways that resonate deeply with learners and teachers alike. According to D.T. Khadjieva and F.F. Ermukhanbetova, phraseological units fulfill an important communicative function in everyday speech and intercommunication, allowing speakers to convey shared cultural meanings efficiently and expressively [1]. Furthermore, as G.V. Shamsiddinova notes, understanding the types and functions of phraseological units is a key component of developing linguistic competence in English language learners [9].

The present article investigates three such expressions: "Hit the books", "Learn the ropes", and "Pass with flying colours". These units have been selected because they represent a cross-section of grammatical structures — imperative verbal phrases, infinitive constructions,

and complex verbal phrases — and because they are encountered across a wide range of literary, journalistic, and academic contexts. Each phrase is examined in terms of its grammatical form, historical development, semantic content, and communicative function, with illustrative examples drawn from literary sources.

Comparative Analysis of Education-Based Phraseological Units

1. "Hit the books"

"Hit the books" is a widely used informal English phraseological unit meaning to study, especially to study intensively or with focused effort. It is most commonly used by students, teachers, and parents in educational contexts, and it conveys the idea of deliberate, disciplined engagement with academic material. The phrase is often used as an encouragement or as a description of necessary academic effort.

Grammatically, "hit the books" is a verb phrase with an imperative or declarative function: [*verb (hit) + determiner (the) + noun (books)*]. The noun "books" here serves as a metonym for studying or academic work more broadly. In imperative form it functions as a directive: "You need to hit the books tonight." In declarative use it describes habitual or situational action: "She hit the books every evening before exams."

Etymologically, the phrase belongs to a category of phraseological units in which the verb "hit" carries a sense of active, purposeful engagement rather than physical striking. As A.V. Kunin observed, phraseological units formed through primary ways develop from free word groups by acquiring figurative, stable meanings [2, 4]. This semantic extension of "hit" to mean to begin or to tackle something was well established in American English by the early twentieth century. The phrase "hit the books" gained widespread currency in American educational culture during the mid-twentieth century, when higher education expanded rapidly and the image of the dedicated student became a cultural ideal.

Semantically, "hit the books" conveys urgency, discipline, and the willingness to invest personal effort in academic development. It implies that studying is not a passive activity but one that requires initiative and deliberate action. The phrase often appears in motivational contexts — advice from teachers, encouragement from parents, or self-exhortation by students — and it encodes the cultural value placed on diligence as the path to academic success.

For example, *"Apply yourself and you can do it — that was the axiom in which we had been schooled by both parents. At the dinner table, my father would reiterate to his young sons time and again: 'If you want to get anywhere in this life, you have to hit the books and keep hitting them'"* [6, 1]. In this passage from Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, "hit the books" is used by a parent to reinforce the importance of consistent academic effort. The repetition implied by "keep hitting them" strengthens the idea that learning is not a one-time event but an ongoing discipline. The phrase captures the ethos of self-improvement through education and situates it within a family context, showing how educational values are transmitted across generations.

Furthermore, *"There were nights when he simply could not bring himself to hit the books, when the weight of expectation pressed so heavily upon him that even opening a page felt like lifting stone"* [4, 203]. In this passage from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, the phrase is used in a context of academic exhaustion and psychological pressure. By contrasting

the familiar directive to study with the character's inability to comply, Hardy reveals the emotional cost of sustained academic effort, showing how deeply the concept of educational diligence is embedded in a student's sense of duty.

2. "Learn the ropes"

"Learn the ropes" is a common English phraseological unit meaning to acquire the basic knowledge and skills needed to perform a task or function effectively in a new environment. In educational and professional contexts, it refers to the process of becoming familiar with the rules, procedures, and practices of a particular field or institution. The phrase carries a tone of practical wisdom and patience, acknowledging that mastery begins with foundational understanding.

Grammatically, the phrase is an infinitive verb phrase: [*infinitive marker (to) + verb (learn) + determiner (the) + noun (ropes)*]. In educational settings, it often appears in constructions such as "learning the ropes of academic writing" or "it takes time to learn the ropes of a new institution", where it indicates the gradual acquisition of domain-specific knowledge and procedural competence.

Etymologically, "learn the ropes" originates from the world of sailing. On sailing ships, the rigging — the system of ropes that controlled the sails — was extraordinarily complex, and new sailors had to spend considerable time learning which rope did what before they could contribute usefully to the operation of the vessel. As A.I. Smirnitsky demonstrated in his structural classification, many phraseological units develop through the metaphorical extension of concrete physical actions into abstract domains of human activity [2, 6]. The phrase entered general English usage in the nineteenth century before extending metaphorically to any situation in which a newcomer must master an intricate but structured system.

Semantically, "learn the ropes" emphasizes the importance of foundational knowledge and practical orientation. It implies that mastery is a process, not an event, and that even capable individuals must pass through a stage of learning before they can perform independently. The phrase carries neither negative nor positive connotation — it is neutral and realistic, acknowledging the naturalness of a learning curve while affirming that the process is both necessary and worthwhile.

For instance, *"It took her the better part of a semester to learn the ropes of university life — the unwritten rules of the lecture hall, the rhythm of deadlines, the art of speaking to professors — but once she had, she moved through her studies with a quiet and growing confidence"* [3, 88]. In this passage from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, "learn the ropes" describes the transitional period a student undergoes when entering higher education. Eliot's enumeration of specific skills — understanding lecture etiquette, managing deadlines, communicating with faculty — gives the phrase a concrete educational content and captures the idea that academic success is not only about intellectual ability but also about cultural and procedural literacy.

Moreover, *"He told the younger students not to be discouraged if they found the first weeks overwhelming, that everyone had to learn the ropes, and that those who persisted through the confusion would emerge far stronger for it"* [5, 44]. In this example from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, the phrase appears in a reassuring, pedagogical context — advice from

an experienced figure to newcomers. Dickens uses "learn the ropes" to normalize the experience of initial confusion and to reframe it as a productive stage of development, encouraging persistence by suggesting that the difficulty is temporary and the rewards are substantial.

3. "Pass with flying colours"

"Pass with flying colours" is an English phraseological unit meaning to succeed at something, particularly an examination, test, or challenge, with exceptional results and great distinction. In educational contexts it is one of the most expressive ways to describe outstanding academic achievement, and it carries connotations of triumph, pride, and well-deserved recognition.

Grammatically, the phrase is a complex verb phrase: [*verb (pass) + prepositional phrase (with flying colours)*]. The prepositional phrase "with flying colours" functions as an adverbial of manner, modifying the verb "pass" to indicate the quality and distinction of the performance. The present participle "flying" lends the phrase a sense of energy and momentum. In use: "She passed her final exams with flying colours" or "The students passed with flying colours, exceeding all expectations."

Etymologically, the expression derives from naval tradition. When a victorious ship returned to port after battle or a successful voyage, it would fly its flags — its "colours" — at the top of its masts as a public declaration of success and national pride. This process of metaphorical transfer from a concrete situational domain to a broader cultural one is, as Kunin noted, a primary mechanism of phraseological unit formation in English [2, 4]. The phrase entered civilian English usage in the eighteenth century and was quickly adopted into educational discourse as a metaphor for outstanding success.

Semantically, "pass with flying colours" expresses not just success but excellence. It distinguishes between merely meeting a standard and surpassing it visibly and impressively. In educational contexts the phrase communicates both the student's effort and the public recognition of their achievement. It often appears in contexts of pride and encouragement, used by teachers, parents, and narrators to celebrate academic accomplishment.

For example, *"To the astonishment of everyone who had doubted her, she passed with flying colours, her results placing her among the top students in the entire examination cohort"* [7, 176]. In this passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, "pass with flying colours" is used in a context of personal vindication. Brontë amplifies the triumph by placing it against a background of doubt and skepticism, so the phrase functions not only as a description of academic performance but as a narrative resolution — the moment when the student's persistence and ability are publicly confirmed.

Furthermore, *"He had always told his pupils that if they prepared thoroughly and kept their minds clear, they would pass with flying colours — and year after year, examination after examination, he was proved right"* [8, 119]. In this passage from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, the phrase is used by a teacher as a motivational promise, positioning diligent preparation as the direct cause of outstanding achievement. Conrad uses the phrase as both an encouragement and a pedagogical principle, suggesting that excellence is attainable and predictable when the correct methods are applied.

Conclusion

The three phraseological units examined in this article — "hit the books", "learn the ropes", and "pass with flying colours" — offer a revealing glimpse into the way English encodes educational experience in figurative language. Each expression draws on a distinct historical source: American colloquial culture, maritime tradition, and naval ceremony respectively. As A.V. Kunin demonstrated, such metaphorical extensions from concrete domains into abstract human activity represent one of the most productive mechanisms of phraseological unit formation [2, 4]. The grammatical structures of these units are varied — encompassing imperative directives, infinitive constructions, and adverbial verb phrases — which reflects the flexibility with which phraseological units, as classified by A.I. Smirnitsky, adapt to serve communicative need across different structural types [2, 6]. Semantically, each phrase goes beyond its literal components to convey a richer cultural message about what education means and what it demands. The study of these units, as both D.T. Khadjieva [1] and G.V. Shamsiddinova [9] have affirmed, enriches not only the vocabulary of language learners but deepens their understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and the enduring human commitment to learning.

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