

Lesson One

To ring-fence (To prohibit money intended for a specific purpose being spent on another purpose)

Examples:

- **Treasury Minister:**
*Just because we have **ring-fenced** education and health against cuts, it doesn't mean we cannot strive to make efficiency savings within those departments.*
- *Parents are dismayed that the Headmaster has **ring-fenced** £500,000 for a new science block rather than investing it in the employment of better teachers. Surely, this is more crucial to the success of the school if it wants to maintain its place at the cutting edge of independent education.*

To rise to the bait (To get angry with someone who is teasing and provoking you with the sole purpose of getting you annoyed)

Examples:

- *I'm not going to **rise to the bait**, so there's no point in resorting to nasty comments. Your unpleasant, silly behaviour will be your downfall. Mark my words.*
- *Perhaps I shouldn't have told him that if he were to step down as managing director, nobody would mourn his loss. Fortunately, he didn't **rise to the bait**.*

"I don't/can't blame you!" ("I understand why you think that way/did that thing")

Examples:

- **A:** *I'm fed up with Peter taking liberties with me. I know everyone thinks I have a big chip on my shoulder, but I've had enough and I'm leaving him.*
B: ***I don't blame you!***
- ***You can't blame us** for firing him. He hardly ever met deadlines and had a spate of affairs with some of our female clients.*

To take the biscuit (To be the worst or most extreme example)--*a light-hearted negative expression,*)

Examples:

- *When it comes to whingeing, Tom **takes the biscuit**. He's even worse than your mother, who is also somewhat prone to making an unnecessary fuss.*
- *A: Asking her father for specific advice about the business might have sparked debate amongst her partners, but inviting him to meetings really does **take the biscuit**, don't you think?*
B: Well, you can't blame her really. Who else can she turn to?

To boycott, a boycott (To stop trading/having relations with a particular company, shop or country; an agreement not to trade/have relations with a company/shop/country etc.--*usually as a punishment or way of making a protest,*)

Examples:

- *In my youth, I was proud to have convinced my parents to **boycott** South African goods during its regime of apartheid, but now in my old age, I have mellowed and can't be bothered with half the world's problems.*
- *I'm not sure that there is such a gulf, as is claimed, between those governments that believe in military intervention against Iran and others that would prefer to implement a trade **boycott**. Neither will lead to a satisfactory conclusion.*

Role reversal (A situation where jobs or expected behaviour are swapped/reversed)

Examples:

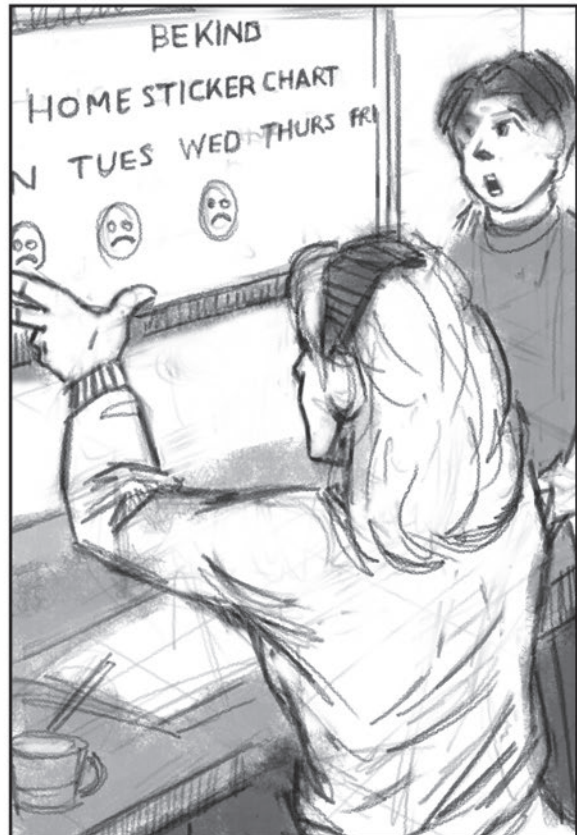
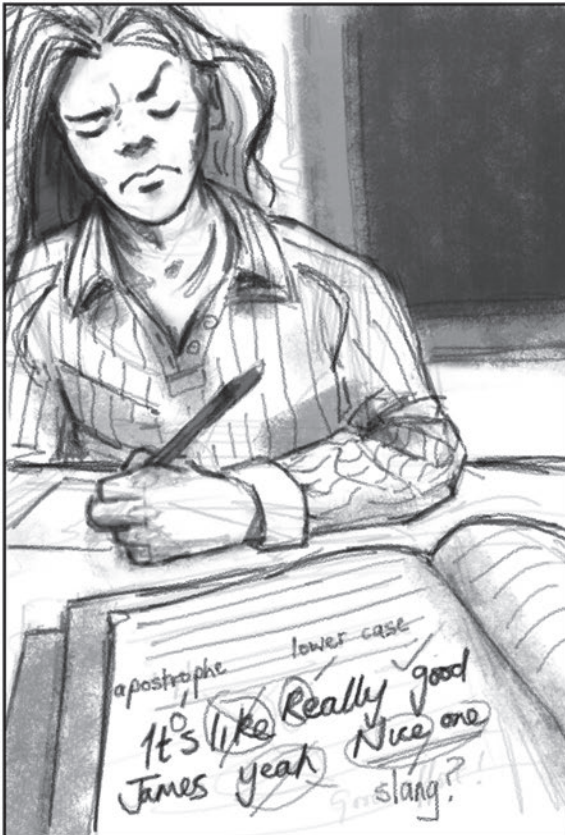
- *I've lost track of how many times I've had to correct my son's teacher on his poor grammar and non-existent punctuation, and he's always giving me handy tips on how to stop him bickering with his sister. It's a complete **role reversal** between teacher and parent.*
- *It's clear that Patricia, the younger one of the two sisters, acts a lot more responsibly and is evidently more reliable when the family have problems to sort out. Her elder sister Gillian, however, is much more immature and can be vindictive towards Patricia. Gillian clearly struggles with this **role reversal**, which has unfortunately taken its toll on their relationship.*

Done and dusted (Finished, completed--*describing a situation where action has been taken and a problem has been resolved or a deal made*)

Examples:

- A: That was a gruelling meeting which I wasn't looking forward to at all, but I'm glad we took the bull by the horns and got to the bottom of the problem.
B: Yes, and it does feel great that it's all **done and dusted** and out of the way.
- The deal is **done and dusted** at last. I'm so happy about that. It seemed we were just plodding on, getting nowhere.

"I've lost track of how many times I've had to correct my son's teacher on his poor grammar and non-existent punctuation, and he's always giving me handy tips on how to stop him bickering with his sister. It's a complete **role reversal** between teacher and parent." (see page 60)



An ordeal (A difficult experience, a hard time)

Examples:

- *It has, to say the least, been a bit of an **ordeal**. I'm trying to banish these unpleasant memories to the back of my mind. But I no longer want to be in the limelight; I'm moving to Scotland.*
- A: *I wouldn't like to go through that **ordeal** again; it left me seething.*
B: *Well, you'd better brace yourself: I've booked you in with the same counsellor next week.*

To sneer at (To look at/speak to someone in a superior manner; to show that one considers an idea below one's social standing/capabilities)

Examples:

- *When I suggested to my husband that we practise some role reversal with him doing the housework and me watching the television all evening, he simply **sneered at** me. Why should he lift a finger?*
- *My mother and I rallied around my grandmother when she became ill and incapacitated, but my sister, on the other hand, **sneered at** the very idea of having to wash our grandmother's clothes and clean her house. She's not renowned for being all that nice, my sister.*

Much of a muchness (Not really different; more or less the same--often negative)

Examples:

- *I can't really decide which of these guys will make a better mayor. They're **much of a muchness** to me. They both come out with ridiculous promises to change things. I think I'll go with the flow and see which one has the nicer smile on Election Day.*
- A: *She's not my cup of tea. I prefer the doctor we had before, don't you?*
B: *Don't ask me; they're all **much of a muchness**. They take liberties where they can and try to fob you off with cheap medication.*

Lesson Two

Gloomy, gloom (Dark and depressing; a state of darkness and depression--*often referring to the future*)

Examples:

- *It was all looking **gloomy** for the economy at the time of the Government bailouts, but now the banks are making a killing once again; quite a feat when you think how many of the smaller ones were left in tatters by the credit crunch.*
- *The bad winter this year wreaked havoc on the livelihoods of many local farmers, but it's not all doom and **gloom**. Those who are not so set in their ways have opened their minds to attracting other means of income through tourism and selling their products online.*

To sit through (To stay until the end of something very boring or of poor quality)

Examples:

- *I don't blame our daughter Sofia for opting out of violin lessons next year and for us it will be heaven. But commiserations: you have another three years of school concerts to **sit through**.*
- A: *I dread the thought of **sitting through** more dinner parties with them, having to listen to their bickering.*
B: *It is rather a daunting prospect, isn't it? Just turn a blind eye to it.*

Excruciating (Extremely painful--*sometimes used figuratively when something is painfully bad or embarrassing*)

Examples:

- *I hope you never have to go through the very unpleasant ordeal of kidney stones. The pain is **excruciating**.*
- *His first play was dreadful, but his latest one really takes the biscuit. Having to sit through it in the theatre for three hours was **excruciating**.*

Corny (Unoriginal and unsophisticated; too sentimental)

Examples:

- *I think Johnson was lured into the world of comedy writing by the prospect of fame and fortune. But his scripts are **corny**, full of clichés and in stark contrast to his earlier stunning historical dramas.*

- Every year on our wedding anniversary my husband is prone to making **corny** and fake declarations of love, but I don't bat an eyelid. I know he's just trying to make up for a year of not pulling his weight around the house.

To close ranks (To support colleagues/partners when they come under attack, even if they are in the wrong--often used negatively as a way of criticising such support)

Examples:

- If you are thinking of complaining about the Finance Director to the other members of the Board, you should be aware that you will have your work cut out. They will simply **close ranks** and stifle any form of criticism.
- When anyone queries why the NHS budget has not been ring-fenced, Government ministers **close ranks**. It's all a big cover-up of the blunders the Conservative Party made in promising the impossible to the voting public before they came into power.



A: "I dread the thought of **sitting through** more dinner parties with them, having to listen to their bickering.

B: It is rather a daunting prospect, isn't it? Just turn a blind eye to it."

(see page 63)

To humour (To be nice to someone and pretend to take them seriously in order to please them or keep them content; to say “yes” just for peace and quiet)

Examples:

- **A:** *I know you think I'm being petty with half the things I complain about, but I don't think you take in a word I say. You just **humour** me.*
- **B:** *Yes, dear.*
- **Humouring** him with flattering comments about the quality of his work may have clinched the deal. Done and dusted!

To come to one's senses (To become rational after a period of doubt and uncertainty)

Examples:

- *They tried to rope my son into joining their gang because they know how vulnerable and easily led he is. At first my husband and I were worried, but fortunately he has **come to his senses** and rejected them.*
- *He has been lured away from the city by a beautiful woman renowned for her temper tantrums. I don't know what to do to make him **come to his senses**.*

To have a/the knack for (To have a special skill for doing something--sometimes used humorously/sarcastically to describe a skill for doing something wrong--see 2nd example below)

Examples:

- *Pete's sudden appearance with a bag of tools was a godsend. I don't really **have the knack for** fixing things and DIY (do-it-yourself).*
- *She's not vindictive; she just has a **real knack for** not thinking about what she's saying. But you can't blame people for getting upset.*

The penny has dropped (A situation or concept has been understood only after a long period of not understanding)

Examples:

- *For the last month she has had many strange cravings during the night, but **the penny** doesn't seem to have **dropped** with her husband that she is pregnant. Maybe he has banished the idea of his wife ever getting pregnant again after a spate of miscarriages.*

- The reason why he's looking so glum is that **the penny** has finally **dropped**. He was wrong to stick to his guns; continuing the business in the current economic climate is like flogging a dead horse.

Detractor (A person who doesn't like someone or their work/beliefs--*generally used in the plural*)

Examples:

- She had a few **detractors** who tried to organise a boycott of her concerts, but her friends and genuine fans closed ranks and the show went ahead unhampered.
- Even though his **detractors** will claim he was a hardliner, he never resorted to underhand tactics to get what he wanted.

Lesson Three

To rekindle (To relight or revive--*usually refers to one's passion for something or someone*)

Examples:

- *I was right to be a little bit wary of taking up a new sport at my age. I clearly didn't have the knack for golf. Instead, I decided to **rekindle** my passion for tennis, which I played as a youngster.*
- *Since my youngest son left home to go to university, my husband and I have found time to **rekindle** our love for each other. I know it sounds corny, but it has been an uplifting experience for us both.*

To ruffle someone's feathers (To annoy/upset)

Examples:

- *His feathers were definitely **ruffled** when you stole his thunder. Mind you, there was no need for him to get on his high horse about it.*
- *You clearly **ruffled** the Headmaster's feathers by bringing up the palaver of last year's exams. Let's hope he steps down soon before he loses his marbles completely.*

Red tape (Bureaucracy)

Examples:

- *These two schemes the Government are considering implementing are much of a muchness. Neither will cut through the **red tape** which has hampered the smooth running of the recruitment industry in recent years. The whole system needs overhauling.*
- *At last the penny seems to have dropped: the Mayor now realises his detractors have a point. There's too much **red tape** in local government administration.*

To read between the lines (To understand that there are meanings which don't appear on the surface/are not explicitly stated)

Examples:

- ***Reading between the lines**, he doesn't seem to relish the idea of rekindling their relationship. Perhaps letting her move back in with him was not the shrewdest of decisions.*

- Their true intention with the release of this statement is to fob us off. **Read between the lines** and you'll see what I mean. But we must stick to our guns.

Uncanny (Unusual and inexplicable, mysterious--*generally used to describe a situation, often a coincidence, or someone's ability, rather than an individual person. One would not say, for example, "He is uncanny."*)

Examples:

- A: It's **uncanny** how every person we've taken on in summer interviews has not lived up to our expectations.
B: We'll have our work cut out in July, then.
- He has the **uncanny** knack of clinching victory with a goal in the dying seconds of the game.

To pass the buck (To refuse to take any responsibility when things go wrong and to blame others for it--*note the expression "the buck stops with me" which means "I accept that I, and no one else, must take responsibility for anything that goes wrong"*)

Examples:

- The England manager **passed the buck**, blaming many of his players for not pulling their weight. His unwillingness to take responsibility does not bode well for the future of the team, but the Football Association don't want to ruffle his feathers.
- I'd just like to chip in by saying that all the directors on the board understand that the **buck stops with us**. If we're not out of the woods by this time next year, our jobs will be on the line.

To do away with (To get rid of)

Examples:

- Every in-coming politician, local or national, promises **to do away with** red tape until it dawns on them that they are the red tape.
- Many parents at the school sneered at the Headmaster's idea of **doing away with** spelling correction. He said it might wreak havoc with the pupils' confidence as they progress into adulthood. Reading between the lines, I think what he really means is that he wants to reduce the workload for his staff. I despair!

Rule of thumb (A principle based on experience rather than theory)

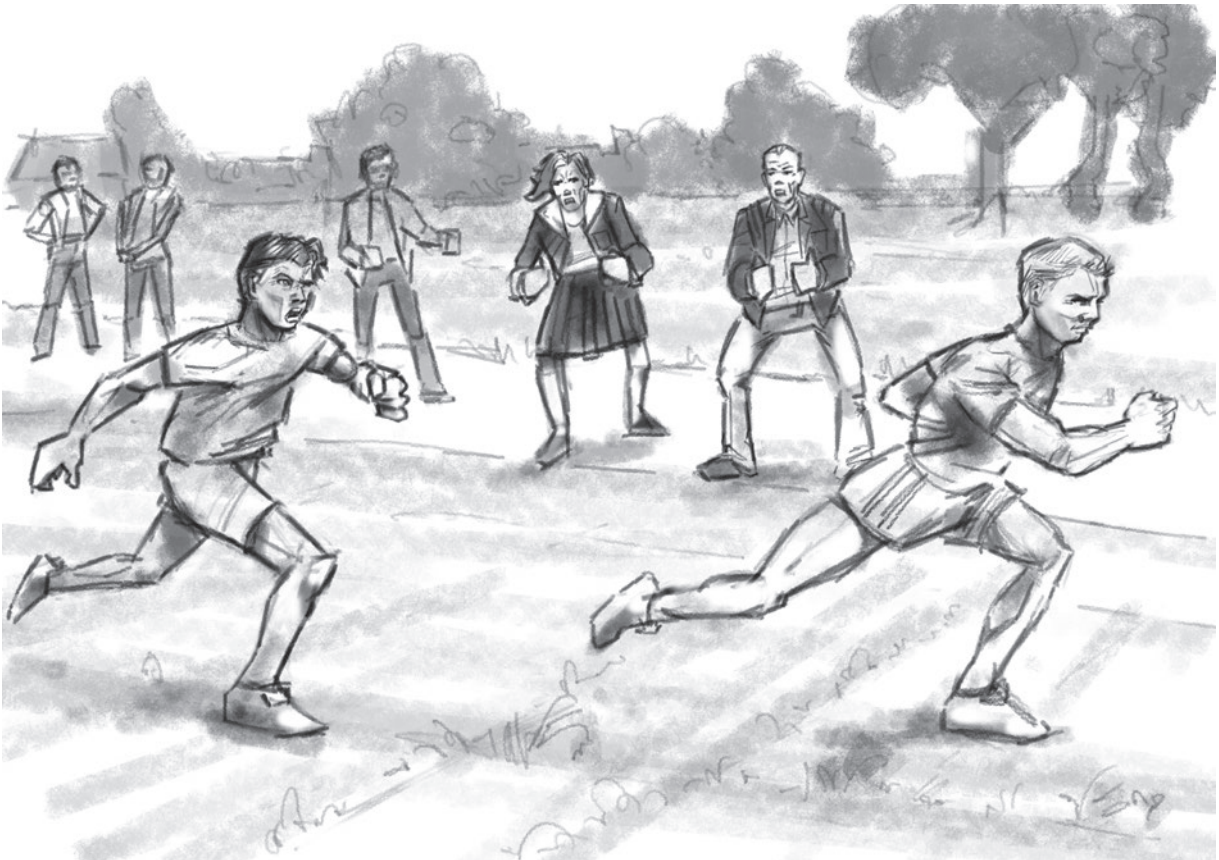
Examples:

- *There is one **rule of thumb** I always stick to: I never rekindle old relationships.*
- *Whatever problems come my mum's way, she will always plod on regardless. Being positive and cheerful at all times is a **rule of thumb** which has stood her in good stead over the years.*

To spur on (To encourage, to inspire; to make someone/a group of people try harder)

Examples:

- *Even though we were clearly the underdogs, our supporters **spurred us on** to victory.*
- *I have always strived for excellence in everything I do because I was constantly **spurred on** by my parents, who believed in me. This was in stark contrast to the way they were brought up themselves. [\(see picture below\)](#)*



To peak (To achieve a maximum of development/standard/readiness at a specific period of time)

Examples:

- *We're all on tenterhooks to see how he did in his exams. I do hope he didn't **peak** too early in his preparation and revision.*
- *As a young tennis star she **peaked** at fourteen. After that, I'm afraid, relentless coaching and physical conditioning stifled her progress in professional competitions. Great pity.*

Chapter Five in Use

TWO MOTHERS HAVING A CHAT OUTSIDE THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL

HELEN: *Hello Alison, how are you? Haven't seen you for ages.*

ALISON: *I'm fine, thanks. I've been very busy looking at secondary schools for my eldest, Joshua. It's been quite an **ordeal**, I can tell you*

HELEN: *Which one did you go for?*

ALISON: *Well, they're all **much of a muchness** in the end. We've had to **sit through** so many parents' evenings listening to boring head teacher speeches.*

HELEN: *...with their **corny** jokes?*

ALISON: *Absolutely! I can see you've been through the same thing.*

HELEN: *Oh yes, an **excruciating** experience, and one which I don't relish having to go through again for my youngest, Katherine.*

ALISON: *Anyway, in the end we opted for the local boys' Catholic school, St. Dominic's. It has an excellent academic record and the boys are taught discipline. But I've been amazed at how many parents at Josh's current school – mothers actually, more than fathers – have **sneered at** my husband and me because of our decision. One mother even told me that she thought religious schools should be **done away with**.*

HELEN: *I can imagine who that was. Well, I **don't blame you** at all. One **rule of thumb** I stick to is that I don't comment on what other people decide for their children.*

ALISON: *Mind you, I have to say there's a lot of **red tape** you have to cut through to get into religious schools. And some of the questions you have to answer, like "How many times do you pray a day?" That really **takes the biscuit**. Anyway, it's all **done and dusted** now. St. Dominic's is where he's going...And what have you been up to? Sorry, it's all been about me.*

HELEN: *Oh don't worry, I understand. We've been fine, actually. Gerry has **rekindled** his love for tennis...he **has a knack for** racket sports. And I've taken up writing short stories while Gerry cooks for the kids...a bit of **role reversal** there. My sister is a professional writer and her success has **spurred me on** to have a go at it myself.*

ALISON: *And has she read any of your stuff?*

HELEN: *Bits and pieces...but I prefer her not to; she tends to **humour** me, and more to the point has an **uncanny** habit of subtly telling me where my writing is just not good enough. This really gets*

to me and I'm afraid I often **rise to the bait**.

ALISON: *Oh, here come our kids, laughing together. How nice! Let's continue this chat tomorrow. I'm fascinated to hear more about your writing.*

HELEN: *Liar!*

ALISON: *Ha ha! OK ...see you tomorrow.*

ARTICLE IN A FINANCIAL MAGAZINE

The outlook for the British economy

*I have to start off by saying that it's very difficult not to be **gloomy** when it comes to both the short and long terms for the economy in the UK.*

*The Chancellor, Francis Hopkins, who in the UK is ultimately responsible for all financial aspects of Government, has his **detractors**, and, to be honest, it can be very hard to **read between the lines** when assessing his statements. What is he really trying to tell us? He seems very ready to **pass the buck** and blame everybody else apart from his own Government for creating such a large deficit. And yet he has **ring-fenced** the budgets of certain departments from cutbacks to expenditure – departments which have wasted huge amounts of money for many years. Does he realise this? Has the **penny dropped**? One wonders.*

*It is time for him and the Prime Minister to **come to their senses**. It's no good simply **closing ranks** when Government policy is criticised or when a cabinet minister's **feathers** have been **ruffled**.*

*Not only do we need to see a clear, well-structured approach to dealing with the deficit, but also optimistic and inspiring policies to promote economic growth in all parts of the country. Why, for example, have so many multinational companies **boycotted** northern regions of England, where rents are cheap and corporation tax low? Business, especially international business, is so focused on London, a great business-friendly city, I agree...but one which has surely **peaked**.*

*I told you I was going to be **gloomy**.*

Chapter Five: Exercise

CHOOSE THE CORRECT WORD FROM THOSE IN GREEN

Answers on page 139

- A: One ^a(*detractor/rule of thumb/ordeal/boycott*) I try to stick to is that if someone consistently ^b(*comes to their senses/drops the penny/reads between the lines/ruffles my feathers*), I cut them out of my life. I don't want anything to do with them.

B: That's a bit over the top, don't you think? You must admit, you do tend to ^c(*rise to the bait/sneer/pass the buck/take the biscuit*) a bit too easily.
- A: It was absolutely ^a(*excruciating/gloomy/corny/done and dusted*) having to listen to her 10-year-old son "play" the violin.

B: Oh yes...and it was even more ^b(*a boycott/a detractor/of an ordeal/uncanny*) watching her daughter in the school play.

A: When she asks us what we thought of their performances, we will just have to ^c(*rekindle/humour/ruffle/sneer*) her and say how wonderfully talented both her children are.
- The Prime Minister has said that there will be no cuts to the defence budget. This money has been ^a(*humoured/boycotted/ring-fenced/done away with*). But ^b(*reading between the lines/reversing the roles/taking the biscuit/closing ranks*), some members of his cabinet regret this decision. It is clear to see that even at this early stage in his premiership, he has his ^c(*ordeals/red tape/rule of thumb/detractors*).
- I've always known that John has a ^a(*rule of thumb/knack/peak/ring-fence*) for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, but telling the boss that he didn't like his ^b(*corny/uncanny/gloomy/rekindling*) jokes was really ^c(*reading between the lines/coming to his senses/taking the biscuit/dropping the penny*).
- I dread having to ^a(*rise to the bait/spur on/sit through/boycott*) another board meeting, when everyone knows all the directors are going to ^b(*ruffle their feathers/pass the buck/ring-fence/rise to the bait*) and blame the state of the economy for the company's misfortunes. I ask myself, "When are they going to ^c(*come to their senses/read between the lines/take the biscuit/reverse the roles*) and take some responsibility?"
- A: In her retirement, my mum has ^a(*peaked/rekindled/humoured/sneered at*) her passion for gardening. She was ^b(*done and dusted/boycotted/spurred on/ring-fenced*) by my dad, who has offered to take over kitchen and housework duties.

B: How interesting! A bit of ^c(*passing the buck/red tape/closing ranks/role reversal*) there?

7. A: I've decided to ^a(boycott/ring-fence/sit through/spur on) my local so-called independent baker, who keeps whingeing about people using supermarkets instead of individual shops. He wants to charge me £4 for a loaf of bread. I'm not paying it.
 B: I ^b(would reverse the roles/ruffle his feathers/have a knack/don't blame you). I have told my butcher the very same thing many times, but I don't think ^c(it's an ordeal/the penny has dropped/it's done and dusted/he has passed the buck).
8. It's ^a(gloomy/much of a muchness/uncanny/corny) how every time I think there may be a chance that at least one of my bosses is taking my side, they all ^b(close ranks/sneer/rise to the bait/read between the lines) and ^c(rekindle/sneer at/sit through/do away with) me.
9. A: I still can't decide who to vote for. All the parties are ^a(an ordeal/done and dusted/much of a muchness/taking the biscuit).
 B: I totally agree. If I had my way, I would ^b(pass the buck/humour/sneer at/ do away with) all of them. I could sort out all of the country's problems in ten minutes. There we are, all ^c(done and dusted/boycotted/much of a muchness/the penny has dropped)!
10. A: I tell you what: cutting the ^a(ordeal/red tape/detractors/boycotts) which local businesses have to comply with these days will contribute greatly to lifting the current ^b(rule of thumb/ordeal/gloom/bait) surrounding local enterprise.
 B: Oh, it would indeed. And it's such a shame to see good businesses struggling to survive through no fault of their own. Many of them should be ^c(sneering/peaking/spurring on/rising to the bait) at this time of year, just before Christmas.