



American Expression E0148 By the skin of your teeth

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

"By the skin of your teeth" is an idiomatic expression that is used to describe a narrow escape or a situation in which someone barely manages to succeed or survive. It implies that the outcome was achieved with only a very small margin or a slim chance of success. The phrase suggests that the person's success or survival was achieved by the smallest possible margin or by a fortunate turn of events.

The origin of this expression can be traced back to the biblical book of Job, where Job says, "My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth" (Job 19:20). It suggests a sense of clinging on to life or success with the thinnest of margins.

When someone says they "escaped by the skin of their teeth," they are emphasizing that their victory or survival was incredibly close and they were fortunate to overcome the odds. It implies that they faced significant challenges or obstacles, and their success was achieved despite those obstacles.

The phrase is commonly used in situations where someone narrowly avoids a negative outcome, such as surviving a dangerous situation or barely passing an exam or competition. It can also be used to describe a close victory in sports or a near miss in an accident.

The expression "by the skin of your teeth" is often used figuratively rather than literally. It is a vivid way of expressing the intensity and precariousness of a situation. It conveys the idea that the outcome was uncertain until the very last moment and that any small deviation could have led to failure or disaster.

However, it is worth noting that the phrase is not to be taken literally, as teeth do not have skin. It is simply an idiomatic expression that has been used for centuries to convey a sense of narrowly escaping a challenging or dangerous situation.

In conclusion, "by the skin of your teeth" is an idiom used to describe a situation in which someone narrowly escapes a negative outcome or achieves success with the smallest margin or chance of success. It underscores the intensity and precariousness of the situation, emphasizing the person's good fortune or resilience in overcoming obstacles.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of a personal experience or a story where you or someone you know escaped a challenging situation by the skin of your teeth? How did it feel to come so close to failure or danger?
2. What are some common scenarios in which the phrase "by the skin of your teeth" is often used? Can you think of any examples from sports, academics, or everyday life where someone narrowly avoided a negative outcome?
3. In your opinion, is it more satisfying to achieve success by a wide margin or by the skin of your teeth? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each situation?
4. How do you think the phrase "by the skin of your teeth" reflects the importance of perseverance and resilience in overcoming challenges? Can you share any examples where determination and persistence played a crucial role in achieving success?
5. In what ways can the phrase "by the skin of your teeth" be applied to larger life experiences or societal challenges? Can you think of any historical events or societal issues where the outcome was determined by the narrowest of margins? How does this phrase relate to the concept of "close calls" or critical moments in history?