



American Expression E1177 Throw a monkey wrench in the works

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

The expression "throw a monkey wrench in the works" is a colorful idiom that carries the idea of disruption and interference in a smooth-running process or plan. It originates from the world of mechanics and engineering, where a literal monkey wrench (a type of adjustable wrench) can be a tool for making adjustments but can also cause unexpected issues if misused. When we use this idiom, we are not referring to an actual tool but rather to an unexpected obstacle or problem that disrupts a carefully laid-out plan or system.

Imagine a well-oiled machine operating smoothly, representing a plan or process in action. Everything is working as intended, and progress is being made. Now, picture someone tossing a monkey wrench into the machine's gears. This action immediately halts the machine's operation, creates chaos, and demands immediate attention to remove the obstruction and fix any damage caused.

The idiom "throw a monkey wrench in the works" captures this disruptive scenario and is used when something unexpected and problematic derails a situation. It signifies a sudden and often unforeseen interruption, causing delays, complications, or even the failure of a previously functioning system or plan.

One key aspect of this idiom is the element of surprise. Just as you wouldn't expect someone to throw a wrench into a smoothly running machine, you typically don't anticipate the interference or obstacle that "throws a monkey wrench in the works." This surprise factor magnifies the impact of the disruption, as it catches people off guard and forces them to shift their focus from progress to problem-solving.

Furthermore, the expression highlights the idea that the interference is not a minor hiccup but a significant issue. It's not a mere speed bump that can be easily overcome; rather, it is a wrench that jams the gears and brings everything to a grinding halt. This emphasizes the disruptive nature of the obstacle, which can be particularly frustrating when you're trying to accomplish a goal or execute a plan.

"Throwing a monkey wrench in the works" can have consequences beyond immediate disruptions. It can lead to ripple effects, affecting other interconnected processes or causing a chain reaction of problems. This makes the idiom a vivid way to describe situations where one unexpected event can have far-reaching and negative impacts.

In conclusion, "throw a monkey wrench in the works" is a colorful and vivid idiom that vividly illustrates the concept of disruption and interference in a previously functioning system or plan. It emphasizes the element of surprise, the significant nature of the interference, and the potential for cascading consequences. This idiom is frequently used to describe situations where unexpected obstacles or problems derail progress and require immediate attention and problem-solving.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you share an example from your personal or professional life where someone or something unexpectedly "threw a monkey wrench in the works," causing a disruption or delay in your plans or projects?
2. How does the idiom "throw a monkey wrench in the works" capture the sense of surprise and significant disruption that can occur when unforeseen obstacles or problems arise in our daily lives or work environments?
3. In what ways can the unexpected interference described by this idiom have long-lasting or cascading effects on a project, plan, or organization? Can you think of a real-world scenario where a single disruption had widespread consequences?
4. When dealing with disruptions that "throw a monkey wrench in the works," what strategies or approaches have you found effective in mitigating the negative impacts and getting back on track?
5. How does the use of vivid idiomatic expressions like "throw a monkey wrench in the works" contribute to effective communication and storytelling, particularly when describing challenges or setbacks in a narrative or conversation?