



American Expression E1313 Go off the rails

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"Go off the rails" is an idiomatic expression that conveys the idea of losing control or deviating from a planned or expected course of action. This phrase is often used to describe situations or individuals who experience a sudden and significant disruption, leading to chaos, unpredictability, or failure.

The origin of this phrase can be traced back to the literal sense of train travel. Train tracks serve as a well-defined and structured pathway for trains to travel safely and efficiently. When a train goes off the rails, it is a catastrophic event where the train derails, departing from its intended path and potentially causing destruction or harm. This literal usage of the phrase provides a vivid image of what happens when something goes awry.

In a metaphorical sense, "going off the rails" signifies a situation where a person, project, plan, or system strays from its established and expected trajectory. This deviation can occur for various reasons, such as unexpected obstacles, poor decision-making, loss of focus, or a breakdown in control. When a project goes off the rails, it means that it has encountered significant problems, often leading to delays, budget overruns, or a failure to achieve its intended goals.

Individuals can also "go off the rails" in their personal lives. This typically refers to a person who experiences a dramatic change in behavior or lifestyle that deviates from their normal or expected patterns. For example, someone who was once responsible and diligent in their work may suddenly start making reckless decisions and neglecting their responsibilities, signaling that they have gone off the rails in their personal or professional life.

One of the key elements of "going off the rails" is the sense of losing control. It implies that the situation or individual is no longer following a rational or organized path. This loss of control can lead to a cascade of negative consequences and a sense of chaos. It often requires significant effort and intervention to regain control and get back on track.

It's important to note that "going off the rails" does not always carry a negative connotation. Sometimes, it can be a necessary step for growth and transformation. People who feel trapped in monotonous routines or unfulfilling situations may intentionally go off the rails to break free from their limitations and explore new possibilities. This can lead to personal discoveries, creative breakthroughs, and a renewed sense of purpose.

In conclusion, "going off the rails" is a colorful idiom that vividly illustrates the idea of losing control or deviating from a planned course of action, often resulting in chaos or unpredictability. Whether describing a derailing project, a person's dramatic behavior change, or a deliberate departure from the norm, this phrase underscores the importance of maintaining control and adapting to unforeseen circumstances in our journey through life. It serves as a reminder that sometimes, even in moments of disruption, there is potential for growth and positive change.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you share a personal experience or a situation where you felt like things were "going off the rails," and how did you handle it or regain control?
 2. In the context of project management or work, what are some common signs that a project may be at risk of "going off the rails," and what strategies can be employed to prevent or address such situations?
 3. How does the fear of "going off the rails" impact decision-making, and have you ever witnessed someone making impulsive choices to avoid this feeling, only to create more problems?
 4. Can you provide an example from history or current events where a society or organization appeared to be "going off the rails," and what were the consequences of that deviation from the established path?
 5. When is it appropriate or beneficial for individuals or organizations to intentionally "go off the rails" as a means of fostering innovation, creativity, or personal growth?
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