



American Expression E1331 It does not hold a candle

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The phrase "It does not hold a candle" is an idiomatic expression used in the English language to convey the idea that something or someone is inferior or inadequate in comparison to another. It is a figurative way of saying that one thing cannot match the excellence, quality, or performance of another. To understand this phrase fully, let's break it down.

The origin of this expression can be traced back to a time before electricity when candles were the primary source of light. In this context, holding a candle was a job given to an assistant or apprentice. The assistant's role was to hold a candle to provide additional light for a skilled worker, such as a craftsman or a painter, during their work. The person holding the candle played a supportive, but ultimately subordinate, role.

In the modern usage of the phrase, the literal act of holding a candle has been replaced by a metaphorical one. When someone says, "It does not hold a candle," they are suggesting that the subject being discussed is not even comparable to the other. It implies that the first thing lacks the qualities, abilities, or standards exhibited by the second.

For example, if you were discussing two athletes, one of whom is an Olympic gold medalist and the other is an amateur, you might say, "The amateur athlete does not hold a candle to the Olympic champion." In this context, it is clear that the amateur athlete's skills and achievements are far inferior to those of the Olympic champion.

The phrase can also be used in non-competitive situations. For instance, if someone is describing their favorite book and mentions another book they recently read, they might say, "The new book I read does not hold a candle to my all-time favorite." In this case, it's not about competition but rather a comparison of quality and personal preference.

"It does not hold a candle" is a powerful way to convey the notion of significant disparity or inadequacy. It underscores the vast difference between two things, whether it's in terms of skill, quality, excellence, or any other attribute. It is a concise and vivid way to express that one thing falls far short of another in a particular aspect.

In conclusion, the phrase "It does not hold a candle" is a rich and evocative idiom that draws on the historical practice of assistants holding candles to illuminate the work of skilled professionals. It serves as a striking way to emphasize the vast difference in quality, ability, or excellence between two things, making it a valuable tool for expressing strong comparisons and conveying a sense of inferiority or inadequacy.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of a personal experience or situation where you felt something or someone "did not hold a candle" to another? What was the context, and how did it make you feel?
2. In what types of conversations or discussions do you find the phrase "It does not hold a candle" most commonly used? Are there specific areas or fields where this expression is particularly relevant?
3. How does the historical origin of this phrase, involving apprentices holding candles for skilled workers, enhance its figurative meaning today? Do you think the metaphor still holds power in modern contexts?
4. Can you provide an example from literature, film, or pop culture where the phrase "It does not hold a candle" was used effectively to highlight the disparity between two things or individuals? What impact did it have on the narrative or the audience's perception?
5. In what ways might the use of idiomatic expressions like "It does not hold a candle" affect communication and understanding in cross-cultural or international contexts? Are there equivalent phrases in other languages that convey a similar concept?