



American Expression E1922 At sixes and sevens

IOTS Publishing Team  
International Online Teachers Society  
Since 2011

"At sixes and sevens" is an idiomatic expression that is used to describe a state of confusion, disorder, or disarray. When a situation or a group of people is said to be "at sixes and sevens," it implies that things are in a state of chaos or uncertainty, and there is a lack of organization or clear direction.

The origin of this phrase is somewhat unclear, but it has been in use for several centuries. One theory suggests that it originated from the ranks and positions of the City of London's ancient trade guilds. The Worshipful Company of Skinners and The Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors were both established in 1327, and their precedence alternated each year. In the year that one of these companies held the higher rank, the other was "at sixes and sevens." Over time, this term evolved to represent confusion or disorder.

"At sixes and sevens" can be applied to a wide range of situations. For example, imagine a classroom full of students who are all talking loudly, not paying attention to the teacher, and causing a ruckus. In this case, the classroom is "at sixes and sevens" because there is no order, and chaos prevails.

In a more personal context, you might use this expression to describe someone who is feeling overwhelmed and disorganized. For instance, if a person is juggling multiple responsibilities at work and home, and they can't seem to prioritize or manage their tasks effectively, they might say that they are "at sixes and sevens."

This idiom can also be used to describe the disarray of physical spaces. If you walk into a room that is cluttered with disorganized piles of books, papers, and miscellaneous items, you could say that the room is "at sixes and sevens."

Additionally, "at sixes and sevens" can be employed to depict the state of a group or organization that is experiencing internal conflicts or disagreements. For instance, a board of directors that is divided on a crucial decision and can't come to a consensus might be described as being "at sixes and sevens."

Resolving a situation or restoring order when it is "at sixes and sevens" often requires clear communication, organization, and problem-solving. In the classroom example, the teacher might need to establish classroom rules and enforce discipline to regain control. In a personal context, an individual might need to prioritize tasks, create to-do lists, and seek support or guidance to regain a sense of order and reduce confusion.

In conclusion, "at sixes and sevens" is a colorful idiom that effectively communicates a state of confusion, disorder, or disarray. It is used to describe situations where there is a lack of organization, clarity, or direction, and it underscores the need for efforts to restore order and bring about a sense of coherence.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where everything seemed to be "at sixes and sevens"? What caused the confusion or disorder, and how did you go about resolving it or restoring order?
2. In your opinion, what are some common factors that can lead to organizations or groups being "at sixes and sevens" internally, with members in disagreement or conflict? How can such situations be effectively managed or mitigated?
3. How does the idiom "at sixes and sevens" reflect the human experience of dealing with chaos and disarray, whether in personal life, work, or society at large? Are there any valuable lessons or insights to be gained from navigating such situations?
4. Can you share a memorable literary or cinematic example where a fictional character or setting was portrayed as being "at sixes and sevens"? How did this chaos contribute to the storyline, and was order eventually restored?
5. In what ways can individuals or organizations proactively prevent situations from becoming "at sixes and sevens"? What strategies or practices can help maintain order and clarity in various aspects of life, such as time management, communication, and decision-making?