



American Expression E2484 Long in the tooth

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The phrase “long in the tooth” is an idiomatic expression used to describe someone or something as old or aging. Originally applied to horses, it referred to the way their gums recede with age, making their teeth appear longer. Over time, this literal observation became a metaphor in the English language for aging in general, especially when someone seems past their prime.

In everyday conversation, saying someone is “getting a bit long in the tooth” can be a humorous or lighthearted way to comment on aging. It’s often used playfully, though it can also carry subtle connotations of obsolescence or decreased effectiveness. For example, a person might say an actor is too long in the tooth to play a youthful role, or a device is long in the tooth compared to modern technology.

Despite its origin, the phrase is no longer confined to animals or even to people. It can apply to objects, ideas, or institutions that are perceived as outdated or worn. A company might be described as long in the tooth if it has failed to innovate, or a fashion trend might be said to be long in the tooth when it has clearly passed its peak popularity. This flexible use adds depth to the idiom and broadens its relevance.

The tone of the phrase can vary significantly depending on the context and intent of the speaker. When used affectionately, it can soften the reality of aging and even offer a sense of earned experience or wisdom. However, it can also be used dismissively, suggesting that someone or something is no longer suitable for a task or role due to age or wear.

In professional settings, referring to someone as “long in the tooth” might be seen as disrespectful or ageist, particularly when it implies that older individuals should step aside for younger talent. This highlights the importance of sensitivity and respect in language use, especially when discussing age. While idioms add color and humor, they can also carry unintended implications.

The persistence of the phrase in modern English demonstrates how certain expressions endure, even when their literal meanings are no longer widely understood. Most people today are unaware of the phrase’s equine roots, yet the imagery remains effective and evocative. It shows how language evolves, often preserving metaphor long after the original reference fades from memory.

In conclusion, “long in the tooth” is a vivid idiom that has transcended its literal origin to capture a universal aspect of life: aging. Whether used with affection or critique, it reflects societal attitudes toward age and relevance. Its enduring presence in conversation reminds us of the power of metaphor to express human experience across time and context.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the phrase “long in the tooth” reveal about how society views aging?
2. In what contexts can this phrase be used affectionately versus disrespectfully?
3. How does the origin of this idiom help deepen our understanding of its meaning?
4. Can the phrase “long in the tooth” be fairly applied to objects or ideas, not just people?
5. What are some modern alternatives to this expression that convey similar meaning without potential ageism?