



American Expression E2519 Make an ass

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The expression “make an ass” is an idiomatic way of saying that someone has made a fool of themselves through their words, actions, or behavior. It draws on the traditional image of an “ass,” meaning a donkey, which has long been symbolically associated with stubbornness, foolishness, or lack of awareness. When someone “makes an ass” of themselves, they do something clumsy, embarrassing, or thoughtless that damages their dignity in the eyes of others.

This phrase is most often used in social contexts where pride or self-image is at stake. For example, a person might attempt to impress others with exaggerated stories but instead expose their dishonesty, thus making an ass of themselves. Similarly, someone who becomes overly argumentative in a discussion without having the facts might end up looking foolish. In both cases, the phrase highlights how quickly confidence can turn into humiliation when judgment lapses.

The idiom also carries a cautionary undertone. To say “don’t make an ass of yourself” is essentially a warning to act with restraint, humility, and consideration. It reminds us that impulsive or reckless actions can have lasting consequences for reputation. Because dignity and respect are hard-earned but easily lost, the phrase acts as a social check against arrogance and carelessness.

Culturally, the link between donkeys and foolishness is deeply rooted in literature and folklore. Donkeys have been portrayed as stubborn or comical creatures in fables, plays, and stories for centuries. Shakespeare, for instance, often used the image of the ass to represent foolish characters blinded by pride. This long-standing symbolism reinforces why the idiom has remained widely understood across generations.

In professional settings, the phrase has special relevance. Overconfidence during presentations, lack of preparation in meetings, or dismissive attitudes toward colleagues can all lead to situations where someone makes an ass of themselves. In such contexts, the fallout may be more than personal embarrassment—it can harm credibility, trust, and opportunities for advancement. Thus, the idiom underscores the importance of self-awareness and preparation in public and professional life.

On a personal level, reflecting on times when one has made an ass of themselves can be humbling but also instructive. Mistakes and embarrassments can become powerful lessons in self-control, empathy, and authenticity. They remind us that nobody is immune to error, but that growth often comes from recognizing and correcting these moments. The phrase therefore, while humorous in tone, also offers a pathway to maturity.

In conclusion, to “make an ass” is to behave foolishly or embarrassingly in a way that undermines one’s dignity. Though it may sting in the moment, such experiences can serve as reminders of the importance of humility, careful judgment, and respect for others. By being mindful of our actions and words, we can avoid unnecessary embarrassment and carry ourselves with the dignity that earns genuine respect rather than ridicule.

Questions for Discussion

1. What kinds of situations most often cause people to make an ass of themselves?
2. How does pride or overconfidence contribute to embarrassing mistakes?
3. Why do you think the donkey has historically symbolized foolishness in language and literature?
4. Can making an ass of oneself sometimes lead to valuable personal growth or humility?
5. What strategies can help someone avoid making an ass of themselves in professional or social settings?