



American Expression E2629 On the cards

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

The phrase “on the cards” is an idiomatic expression used to describe something that is likely to happen or is being considered as a strong possibility. When people say that something is on the cards, they mean that it seems probable based on current signs, plans, or circumstances. The expression suggests that events are not random but are unfolding in a way that makes a certain outcome foreseeable. It carries a tone of expectation rather than certainty, implying that while nothing is guaranteed, the direction seems clear.

The origin of the phrase is commonly linked to fortune-telling practices involving playing cards or tarot cards. In such traditions, a reader would lay out cards to predict a person’s future. If a particular event appeared in the layout, it was literally “on the cards,” indicating that it was destined or highly likely. Over time, this literal reference evolved into a figurative expression used in everyday language, detached from actual card reading but retaining the idea of prediction and probability.

In modern usage, “on the cards” often appears in discussions about plans, relationships, career moves, or social changes. For example, someone might say that a promotion is on the cards if their performance reviews have been excellent and management has hinted at advancement. Similarly, a couple might feel that marriage is on the cards if they have been together for years and have openly discussed their future. In these contexts, the phrase communicates a sense of anticipation grounded in observable trends or conversations.

The expression can also be used in broader contexts, such as politics, economics, or global events. Analysts might say that a policy shift is on the cards if public opinion and legislative debates are moving in a particular direction. Sports commentators might suggest that a team’s victory is on the cards if they are dominating the match. In each case, the phrase reflects a reading of signs and patterns, much like interpreting symbolic cards spread on a table.

An interesting feature of “on the cards” is its balance between hope and realism. It does not assert that something will definitely occur, but it signals that the odds are leaning that way. This nuance makes it useful in conversation because it avoids absolute predictions while still expressing confidence. It leaves room for change, acknowledging that circumstances can shift even when outcomes seem likely.

Culturally, the phrase is more common in British English than in American English, where similar ideas might be expressed with phrases like “in the works” or “likely to happen.” Nevertheless, it is widely understood in many English-speaking contexts due to global media and communication. Its slightly poetic tone gives it a distinctive flavor compared to more straightforward expressions of probability.

In conclusion, “on the cards” captures the human tendency to look for patterns and predict what might come next. Rooted in the imagery of card reading yet fully integrated into modern speech, it conveys likelihood without certainty and expectation without guarantee. By suggesting that the signs point toward a particular outcome, the phrase allows speakers to express anticipation while still respecting the unpredictability of life.

Questions for Discussion

1. What kinds of situations in your life have felt “on the cards,” and what signs made you think so?
 2. How does saying something is “on the cards” change the tone of a conversation compared to saying it is certain or guaranteed?
 3. Do you think people are naturally inclined to look for signs that something is likely to happen, and why?
 4. In what ways can believing that something is “on the cards” influence your decisions or behavior?
 5. Is there a difference between hopeful expectation and realistic probability when we say something is “on the cards,” and how can we tell the difference?
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