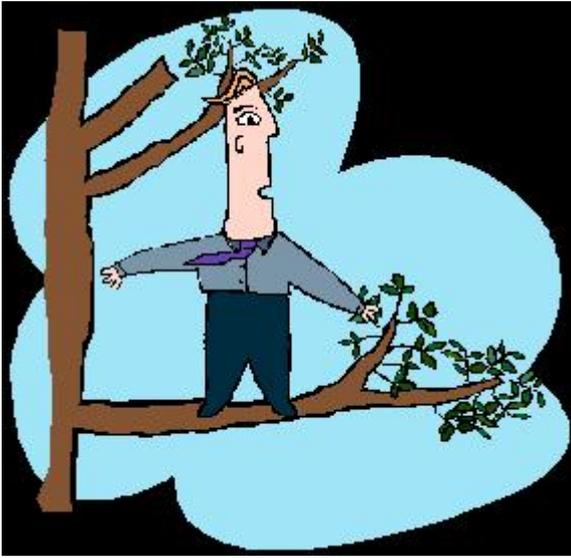


# Out on a limb



*Back for another topical lesson in the phrases we love to use (and overuse). Here's some origins of a few you've likely had a go with once or twice. If I'm overestimating, I'm sure I'm pretty close!*

**A miss is as good as a mile** – While the exact phrase, “a miss is as good as a mile,” seems to be American in origin, there are similar phrases that predate it.



*I'm thinking he would have preferred the mile.*

The Scottish James Kelly wrote, “An Inch of a miss is as good as a spaw.” This is found in the 1721 *A Complete Collection of Scottish Proverbs*. It is likely that Kelly meant “span.” A span is the distance between the thumb and pinky of a man when the hand is held flat and the fingers are stretched. It is

thought that the distance is about nine inches.

The phrase is found in the British Isles even earlier, in 1619. William Camden wrote "An ynche in a misse is as good as an ell" in *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine*. An ell is an obsolete British measurement that was about 45 inches.

The exact phrase "a miss is as good as a mile," seem to first be found in print in the American work, *The American Museum, Volume 3, 1788*. It says, "A smart repartee... will carry you through with eclat such as, 'a miss is as good as a mile.'" "

**By the skin of my teeth** – An ancient origin, it appeared first in the *Geneva Bible* of 1560 and was copied in the *King James Bible* of 1611:



*Forget the skin...look at those teeth!*

Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they spake against me. All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me. My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth. *Job, Chapter 19, verses 18–20, part of the lamentations of Job to God about his dreadful situation.*

The English phrase was a direct translation of the original Hebrew, so it is very ancient indeed.

Since teeth don't have skin, the phrase is hard to make sense of; Bible translators and commentators have struggled with it down the centuries. The *Douay-Rheims Bible* has instead "My

bone hath cleaved to my skin, and nothing but lips are left about my teeth.” Other writers have suggested that the reference is to the gums. Modern versions often imply that Job meant the same by it as we do today by adopting our modern standard form with *by* in place of *with*. The *World English Bible*, for example, has “I have escaped by the skin of my teeth”.

With such scholarly incomprehension, we can hardly blame English speakers for possibly having misunderstood it. As usual with idioms, we just have to accept that people mean by it what they mean by it.

**Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades** – The expression means that unless you are exactly right, you are wrong. Being nearly right is not good enough in this case.



*Only one of these allows you to keep playing when you hit.*

In the game of horseshoes, points are awarded for ringing the post with the horseshoe, but you can also score if you are less than a horseshoe’s width from the post. It is probably not necessary to explain why close counts with a hand grenade.

The expression, oddly enough, is attributed to baseball legend Frank Robinson, who, in 1973, answered a question with the statement: “Close don’t count. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.” That makes it the “youngest” popular expression we’ve researched.

*Having fun? Check out the “Out on a limb” category off to the right for more origins of your favorite phrases.*