



Milling-related Phrases used in English Language



First come, first served ~ This was the law for millers in many countries. Because it could take days for a farmer to have his grist ground, the law was designed to prevent impatient customers (or those receiving special treatment from the miller) from queue jumping.

Wait your turn ~ When referring to the rotation of a windmill's sails, 'turn' (not 'spin') is the correct term. Farmers had to wait in line-often for days-until the windmill would 'turn' to grind his grain.

Grist for one's mill ~ Since wheat and corn are ground by 'teeth', the grinding stones 'chew' the grist into flour; thus to 'chew' over something became a thought or idea to ponder.

The daily grind ~ The repetitive nature of milling led to the concept of 'the daily (same old) grind'.

Run of the mill ~ The ordinary, daily grind.

Keep your nose to the grindstone ~ If set incorrectly, millstones could grind too hot and the flour would become cooked, emitting a burning smell. Occasionally, flour would burst into flames. The miller kept his "nose to the grindstone" to detect the temperature and condition of the meal - and because most windmills are made of wood, they could (and frequently did) burn to the ground in a matter of minutes.

Come to a grinding halt ~ If the millstones ground too close while the wind was dying, the mill would 'come to a grinding halt'. The phrase now seems to apply to bad brakes on a car, or anything that stops both suddenly and awkwardly.

Rule of thumb ~ To test the quality and grind of the flour, the miller would take a pinch of it between his thumb and finger. If too coarse, the flour would be ground again.

Put your shoulder to the wheel ~ When a miller had to turn a windmill into the wind, he 'put his shoulder to the wheel' by pushing the wheel at the bottom of the mill's tail pole. Some tail poles had a yoke for the miller's shoulder. Some millers used a horse. This saying is now taken to mean 'make an effort'.

Three sheets to the wind ~ A (four-sailed) windmill with only three of its sails covered in 'sheets' of canvas will turn clumsily because it is off balance. Thus, the term is applied to drunks.

Tilting at windmills ~ Many people mistake the term for simply looking up at windmills, but the term 'tilting' refers to the act of charging one's lance at his opponent in jousting, as was the case in Cervantes' Don Quixote. Tilting at windmills, based on the story, means to battle an invisible or imagined enemy.

Fair to middling ~ The quality of ground meal would be fair, middling, or fine. To be 'fair to middling' is to be below one's best.

Millstone round your neck ~ Millstones are very heavy and a millstone around your neck is a problem that prevents you from doing what you want to do.

Put through the mill ~ To be put through an ordeal, as corn is ground between stones.

Show your metal ~ Millstones often needed to be dressed (re-carved). When a miller hired an itinerant dresser, he could tell whether the man was experienced by noting the slivers of metal (thrown off from his carving tools) embedded in his hands. Variant of 'show your mettle'.

Take your turn ~ To 'take your turn' is to be the next person to have corn or wheat ground by the turning of the millstones.