

# Aesop's Fables

## Stories and analogies for training and communications

Aesop's Fables date from the 6th century B.C. Aesop was supposedly a Phrygian slave, and met his end when thrown over a cliff at Delphi for being ugly and deformed. Whatever the story of Aesop, the fables that bear his name (Aesop collected the fables, he didn't write them) contain timeless lessons. Aesop's Fables also gave rise to and reflect many of today's expressions and clichés. Aesop's Fables total more than 300. Here are the best of Aesop's Fables.

### **The dog in a manger (If you don't need it, don't keep it from others who do)**

A dog was lying in a manger of hay which had been provided for the cattle to eat, but when they approached he angrily growled and prevented them from getting near, to which they remarked, "He doesn't need it himself, yet he won't let us have it, the selfish beast."

### **Mercury and the woodman (Honesty is the best policy)**

A woodman lost his axe into the river when it glanced off a tree he was felling. Mercury (the God) appeared while the man was lamenting his loss, and on hearing his tale dived into the river, and recovered a golden axe. "That's not mine," said the woodman, so Mercury returned it to the river, resurfacing this time with a silver axe. "That's not mine," again said the woodman, and again Mercury returned it to the river, resurfacing this time with the woodman's own axe. "That's mine," said the grateful woodman. Mercury promptly rewarded the man for his honesty by giving him the golden and silver axes as well. On hearing the woodman's tale, an envious friend set out to do as the woodman had done, visiting the same spot and deliberately losing his axe in the river. Just as before, Mercury appeared and dived in to recover the lost axe. When Mercury produced a golden axe, the man greedily stretched out for it claiming, "That's mine." Mercury, not pleased with the man's dishonesty, held on to the golden axe, and refused to recover the original.

### **The fox and the grapes (Sour grapes)**

A hungry fox passed below a fine bunch of grapes hanging high from a vine. After trying in vain to jump and reach them he gave up, saying to himself as he walked off, "The grapes looked ripe, but I see now they are quite sour."

### **The spendthrift and the swallow (One swallow does not make a summer)**

A man who had wasted his fortune had nothing left but the clothes he wore. On seeing a swallow one spring morning, he decided the weather would be warmer, so he sold his coat. The weather, however, turned colder the next day and killed the swallow. When the shivering man saw the dead swallow he moaned, "Thanks to you I am freezing."

### **Wolf in sheep's clothing (Be careful what you wish for)**

A wolf devised a plan to dress in a sheepskin to prey upon a flock. Mingling with the sheep he fooled the sheep and the shepherd, too, and was penned in for the night. That night the shepherd wanted some mutton for his table and, mistaking the wolf for a sheep, promptly dispatched him with a knife there and then.

### **The crow and the pitcher (Necessity is the mother of invention)**

A thirsty crow found a pitcher containing some water, albeit too little and low to reach. As it seemed she would die within sight of the remedy, the crow struck upon an idea to drop pebbles into the pitcher. The water level rose and the crow was able to drink.

### **The north wind and the sun (Persuasion is better than force)**

The north wind and the sun argued which was the stronger. On seeing a traveler, they agreed a suitable test would be to strip him of his cloak. First the wind blew with all his might, but the more he blew, the more the man wrapped the cloak tightly around himself. When the sun's turn came, he gently beamed at the man, who loosened the cloak. The sun shone brighter still, and the man threw off his cloak.

### **The fir tree and the bramble (Better poverty without a care than the obligations of wealth)**

A fir tree boasted to a bramble, "Poor you, no use at all, while I am big and strong, and useful for all sorts, like when men need me to build houses." But the bramble replied, "You wait until they come with their axes to chop you down - you'll wish you were a bramble and not a fir."

### **The gnat and the bull (Don't over-estimate your own importance)**

A gnat settled on a bull's horn. After a while the gnat asked the bull, "Do you mind if I go now?" The bull replied, unconcerned, "It's all the same to me. I didn't notice you when you came, and I won't notice when you've gone."

### **The slave and the lion (Good deeds are rewarded)**

A slave escaped and sought refuge in the wilderness, where he hid in a cave, which happened to be a lion's lair. When the lion returned the shocked slave expected the worst, but the lion meekly offered him an injured paw. The slave removed a thorn, and the lion and he became great friends, sharing the cave for some while. After a time the slave longed to return to society and bade the lion farewell. When he entered the town he was recognized and thrown in jail, and his master decided to make a public example of him by throwing him to the wild animals in the arena. On the fateful day the slave was cast among the beasts, including one enormous fierce lion. The lion approached the petrified slave, and the spectators gasped - but the lion quietly lay down at the slave's feet. It was his lion friend from the cave. The audience demanded clemency for such a show of loyalty and the governor duly gave them both their freedom.

### **The milkmaid and her pail (Don't count your chickens)**

After milking the farmer's cows, a milkmaid was carrying the pail of milk on her head to the dairy and thinking to herself, "With the cream that I shall get from this milk I can make some butter, which I'll take to market and sell. I'll buy some eggs with the money, and when hatched I'll have some chickens for a poultry yard. I can sell the poultry, and with the money I'll buy a fine gown to wear to the fair. All the young men will admire me and make advances, but I shall toss my head and dismiss them". At which, lost in her ambitious thoughts, she did toss her head, dropping the pail and the milk on the ground, dashing her dreams.

### **The fox, the goat, and the well (Look before you leap)**

A fox fell into a well and was stuck there. A passing goat saw the fox and asked if the water tasted good. "It's the best water you'll ever taste," said the fox, at which the goat promptly jumped into the well to drink. On realizing he was stuck, too, the goat agreed that the fox could climb up and over him out of the well and then help the goat out. The fox duly climbed up and over the goat to his freedom, but left the goat stranded.

### **The dog and the meat (Be satisfied with what you have or you may lose it)**

A dog with a fine slab of meat in his mouth crossed a bridge over a river and saw his reflection in the water. Thinking it to be another dog with a larger piece of meat he let go his own and dived at the other dog to take it. He surfaced with nothing and his dinner washed away in the current.

### **The lion and the ass (Might is right)**

A lion and an ass went hunting and agreed that the ass would run down the prey and the lion would kill it, which worked as planned. The lion divided the carcass into three and announced, "I will take the first portion because I am king of the beasts; the second is my half of what remains, and the third you'll give to me or you'll be sorry."

### **The man and the satyr (Blow hot and cold)**

A man and a satyr (a half-man, half-goat woodland creature from Greek and Roman mythology) lived together as friends until one winter's day the man blew into his hands and explained to the curious satyr that he needed to warm them. When the man later blew on his porridge to cool it, the confused satyr got up from the table and said goodbye, as he could not be friends with a man who blows hot and cold with the same breath.

### **The crab and his mother (Lead by example, not by words)**

A mother crab criticized her son for walking sideways, whereupon the son asked his mother to show him how to walk straight. Of course the mother crab was unable to walk any straighter than her son, and soon apologized for criticizing what she herself was guilty of, too.

### **The father and his quarrelling sons (Divide and rule/United we stand)**

A father, whose sons constantly quarreled, asked them to bring him a bundle of sticks and then challenged each in turn to break the bundle over their knees, which they found impossible. He then split the bundle and showed how each individual stick could easily be broken. "United you are strong; quarrelling and separated, you are weak," he said.

### **The bathing boy (Give help in a crisis, not criticism)**

A boy, who had strayed out of his depth, began to drown in a river, when a passing stranger saw him and began to scold him for being reckless. "Please help me out first, then by all means scold me afterwards," pleaded the boy.

### **The farmer and the stork (You'll be treated according to the company you keep)**

A farmer set traps to catch cranes, which were pests and were eating his crops. Inspecting the traps he found a number of cranes, and also a stork, which pleaded to be let go, because storks are not pests and do not take the crops. But the farmer refused, saying, "I don't care who you are - you're with the cranes who ruin my crops and so you'll suffer just the same as them."

### **The birds, the beasts, and the bat (Treachery never pays)**

While the birds and the beasts were at war against each other, the bat continually changed sides according to whichever was winning. During the war neither the birds nor the beasts paid much attention to the bat, and when peace was restored no one would have anything to do with him because of his treachery.

### **The miller, his son, and the ass (If you try to please everyone you will achieve nothing)**

A miller and his son were taking their ass to sell at market, when they passed a group of girls, who laughed at how foolish the miller was to have an ass and yet be walking. So the miller put his son on the ass. Further down the road they passed some old people who scolded the miller for allowing his young son to ride, when he should be riding himself. So the miller removed his son and mounted the ass himself. Further along the road, they passed some travelers who said that if he wanted to sell the ass the two of them should carry him or he'd be exhausted and worthless. So the miller and his son bound the ass's legs to a pole and carried him. When they approached the town the people laughed at the sight of them, so loud that the noise frightened the ass, who kicked out and fell off a bridge into the river and drowned. The embarrassed miller and son went home with nothing, save the lesson that you will achieve nothing by trying to please everyone.

### **The bee and Jupiter (Evil wishes rebound)**

A queen bee flew up to mount Olympus with fresh honey for the God Jupiter, who was so pleased that he granted the bee a wish for anything it desired. The queen bee asked for all bees to be given stings, to kill the people who took their honey. Jupiter gave the bees their stings, but as he loved mankind and was not pleased at this request, he made the bee sting so that when used, it killed the bee.

### **The oak and the reeds (Go with the flow)**

A mighty oak tree was uprooted by a gale and fell across a stream into some reeds. "How have you reeds, so frail, survived, when I, so strong, have been felled?" asked the oak tree. "You were stubborn and wouldn't bend," replied the reeds, "whereas we yield and allow the gale to pass harmlessly by."

### **The shepherd boy and the wolf (Cry wolf - no one believes a liar even when he tells the truth)**

A shepherd boy tending his flock one night amused himself by shouting to the local villagers, "Wolf, wolf!" when there was none, just to see them come running. He repeated the trick and each time the villagers came to help, just to find the boy had tricked them again. Later that night a wolf really did come. The boy again called "Wolf, wolf!", but believing it to be another trick, no one came, leaving the wolf free to kill all the sheep it wanted.

### **The eagle and the cocks (Pride comes before a fall)**

Two cockerels fought over who should rule the farmyard, and the beaten one skulked away to hide in a barn. The victor flew to the roof and crowed loudly about his success. An eagle heard the crowing and swooped down, taking him off, at which the other cockerel returned to rule the yard.

### **The farmer and the fox (Revenge can rebound on the avenger)**

A farmer captured a fox that had been taking his chickens. As revenge the farmer tied some dry grass to the fox's tail and set it alight, then let the fox go. The fox ran straight into the farmer's corn fields which were ready for harvesting, destroying all of his crop.

### **The one-eyed stag (Misfortune often comes from where you least expect it)**

A stag, blind in one eye, always grazed by the sea, so that he could keep a look out for approaching hounds, believing this to be the only threat. He never bothered to turn his good eye to the sea, so when sailors from a ship came ashore he never noticed them, until he was shot with their arrow, fatally wounding him.

### **The lioness and the vixen (Quality, not quantity)**

A lioness and a vixen were comparing their young. The vixen said how beautiful her litter of cubs was, and remarked sneeringly that the lioness only ever had one cub. "Ah yes," said the lioness, "but that one is a lion..."

### **The apes and the travelers (Think before you speak/Discretion is the better part of valor)**

Two travelers, one who always lied and one who always spoke the truth, came upon the land of apes and were captured. Brought before the king of the apes, and asked for their opinion of the king ape and his subjects, the untruthful traveler praised the king to be a powerful and impressive monarch, and all his subjects to be completely worthy of their master. The king ape was delighted and gave the traveler a fine gift. The second traveler thought to himself that if his friend had benefited by lying, so he would be benefit still more by telling the truth, and when asked his opinion replied that he thought the king to

be a great ape, and all his subjects great apes too. The ape king was so enraged he ordered the poor traveler to be taken away and killed.

### **The rich man and the tanner (Given time you can get used to anything)**

A rich man moved nearby a tanner and soon found the smell of the tannery so bad that he asked the tanner to relocate his business. The rich man repeated his demands for while, but the tanner delayed and procrastinated so long that eventually the rich man became used to the smell and never mentioned it again.

### **The hare and the tortoise (Slow and steady wins the race)**

A hare derided a tortoise for being so slow, and the tortoise challenged the hare to a race, to which the amused hare agreed. After the race started the hare soon found himself far ahead, and so decided to rest, but fell fast asleep. When he awoke he dashed to the finish, but found that the plodding tortoise had comfortably beaten him to it.

### **The lion and the bulls (Divide and conquer)**

A lion watched three bulls that stood together in a field and realized he could not kill any of them while they remained together, so he planted jealousies in their minds, which soon developed into arguments, which split them apart. Alone, each bull offered too little resistance and the lion killed them all, one by one.

### **The mouse and the bull (The battle is not always in favor to the strong)**

A mouse bit a bull on the nose and slipped into a hole in a wall before the bull could react. The bull charged at the wall without making any impression, time and again, until he had worn himself out, at which the mouse darted out and bit the exhausted bull on the nose again. The bull could do nothing except fume with anger. "You big ones don't always win," squeaked the mouse from his hole. "Sometimes we little ones come off best."

### **The hare and the hound (Winning often depends on who most wants to)**

A hound spotted a hare and gave chase. After some distance the hound began to gain, but then gave up the chase. As the hound returned home a farmer commented that the little hare had been too much for the hound, who replied, "It's one thing to run for your dinner, but quite another to run for your life."

### **The ass and the mule (Share a load or you'll end up carrying it all)**

A man loaded his ass and his mule for a journey, but after traveling for a while the ass began to weaken, so he asked the stronger mule to carry some of his load. The mule refused, and in due course the ass collapsed and died. The mule was then forced to carry the ass's load, and also the skin of the poor ass. The mule could only just manage the painful load, and realized his failure to help a little at first had caused a much greater suffering to himself.

### **The soldier and the horse (Look after what is of value)**

A soldier tended his horse well during the wars and the horse served him well. At the end of the wars the soldier treated the horse badly, with little food, no shelter, and heavy drudging work. War broke out again and the soldier went to use the horse as before, but the wretched beast collapsed, saying that the poor treatment had turned him into an ass, and he would not be restored to a trusty steed in just a moment.

### **The oxen and the butchers (Accept what is inevitable)**

A group of oxen were set on avenging their treatment by the butchers and plotted to kill them with their horns, until an old wise ox spoke out: "We may hate and fear the butchers, but they do what they must do expertly, and if we kill them, man will still eat beef, so then other less skilled men will cause us far greater suffering."

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