

Catch Word #45 – Caught red-handed

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone!

Jessie: Hi! I hope everyone's having a great day (or night)!

Maura: This is Maura ...

Jessie: and Jessie ...

Maura: And we're here at Culips with your Catch Word podcast.

Jessie: And our Catch Word podcast is when we take a word or a phrase, we talk about its meaning, we give you some synonyms, and some examples of how you can use it.

Maura: Exactly! So, today's expression is ...

Jessie: to be **caught red-handed**.

Maura: Yeah, to be **caught red-handed**. So, to be **caught red-handed** means that you were caught doing something.

Jessie: Right, so somebody saw you doing something – usually bad.

Maura: Yeah, it's usually not a good thing, right. So they saw you doing something or they have a lot of evidence, a lot of proof, that it was obviously you that did it.

Jessie: Right. So, if somebody caught you taking their wallet out of their pocket, maybe they turned around and they saw you with your hand in their pocket, you could say that you were **caught red-handed** stealing their wallet.

Maura: Exactly, because you were in the moment of doing it and they saw you, so it's obvious that you were doing it.

Jessie: Right! So the phrase being **caught red-handed**, it actually is quite an old phrase. It probably was first used in Scotland, and it was actually pretty serious, because it was about murdering somebody.

Maura: Right, yeah.

- Jessie: And if you murdered somebody, you might get blood on your hands. So your hands would be red, and if someone saw your red hands, they would know that you were the murderer.
- Maura: Right. If you have the blood on your hands of the person who was killed, then probably you killed that person.
- Jessie: Exactly, but today we can use this in a more **light-hearted** way too.
- Maura: Yeah, it's not always so serious as murder.
- Jessie: Exactly. Even if, maybe, you decided you wanted to borrow my shoes without asking and I saw you wearing them, I could say, "Hey! I **caught you red-handed!** You're borrowing my shoes without asking."
- Maura: Exactly. It's obvious that I took your shoes.
- Jessie: Right. But in that case it's not so serious.
- Maura: Yes, and I would never do that without asking.
- Jessie: Well, you can borrow my shoes any time.
- Maura: Thank you, that's so nice of you.
- Jessie: You know, there was a time when I was **caught red-handed**.
- Maura: What happened?
- Jessie: Well, it was when I was a little kid, and my parents used to keep some **snacks**, like chips and nachos, in the cupboard.
- Maura: Right, OK ...
- Jessie: And they put it on the top shelf so I couldn't reach it.
- Maura: Right ...

- Jessie: And one day I got home from school a little bit before my dad came home from work, so I brought a chair and I climbed up on the chair, and I got the nachos down from the top shelf, and I ate a few nachos, and then I put it back, and then I said, "Great, my dad will never know." And then when he came home, he looked at me and he said, "Hey you've been eating nachos," and I thought maybe he was **psychic**, because how did he know I was doing that?
- Maura: Yeah ...
- Jessie: But you know what? Now that I think back, I probably had orange nacho cheese all over my mouth.
- Maura: That's a really funny story.
- Jessie: So I got **caught red-handed** eating the **snacks**.
- Maura: Yeah for sure! With orange powder all over your face.
- Jessie: But, man, at the time, I thought he could read my mind. I couldn't imagine how he knew.
- Maura: You didn't realize that you left behind some important evidence.
- Jessie: Nope.
- Maura: And there's another, similar expression to this one, that's also not serious.
- Jessie: Right. And it would apply to my **snack** situation as well.
- Maura: It would definitely apply to that story, Jessie. What is the synonym?
- Jessie: Well, the synonym is to get **caught with your hand in the cookie jar**.
- Maura: Yeah, to get **caught with your hand in the cookie jar**.
- Jessie: To get **caught with your hand in the cookie jar**.
- Maura: Right, so you could imagine that a child, like Jessie, wasn't supposed to eat cookies, but the child wanted cookies and went to go get some, put their hand in the **cookie jar**, and then their parents saw them, so they were **caught red-handed**.

- Jessie: Right. So to **get caught with your hand in the cookie jar** usually means to get caught taking something that you're not supposed to take.
- Maura: Right. So, in this case, you're stealing something or taking something.
- Jessie: Right. And this could be serious as well. Maybe if somebody was stealing supplies from their job, from the office, and somebody caught them doing it, we could say they got **caught with their hand in the cookie jar**.
- Maura: Right, but it's not usually used for serious crimes that you go to prison for.
- Jessie: No, it's usually used for something less serious, or even something not serious at all.
- Maura: Right. Maybe you're joking around with your friends or, like we said, something that a child would do.
- Jessie: Exactly.
- Maura: OK, good. So what's another similar expression to **to be caught red-handed** or to get **caught with your hand in the cookie jar**?
- Jessie: Well, another expression we use is the **smoking gun**.
- Maura: Yeah, it sounds serious, the **smoking gun**.
- Jessie: Well, it can be serious. The **smoking gun** is the evidence that you did something.
- Maura: Right, so it's a little bit different because it doesn't mean you were **caught in the act**, but the evidence and the proof is there.
- Jessie: Right. If you shoot somebody, then there's going to be smoke coming out of the gun after, so even if the police don't see you fire the bullet, if they see that smoke, they know that you shot the gun.
- Maura: Exactly, so the **smoking gun** is the evidence that you did the murder.
- Jessie: Right, it's the proof. So, from our earlier example, when you got **caught red-handed** wearing my shoes, the shoes themselves were the **smoking gun**.
- Maura: Exactly, so the shoes were the evidence that I took them.
- Jessie: Exactly.

- Maura: And another little interesting fact about this **smoking gun** is that it was first used in **Sherlock Holmes**, in the 19th century.
- Jessie: Really?
- Maura: Yeah, and I think there's a new movie about **Sherlock Holmes** coming out, maybe this year.
- Jessie: Maybe it will have a **smoking gun** in it.
- Maura: I think it will definitely have a **smoking gun**. OK, so let's go back over our expressions one more time.
- Jessie: Right, so we have **to be caught red-handed**, which means to be caught doing something that you're not supposed to do.
- Maura: Right, and then we had **to get caught with your hand in the cookie jar**, which has the same meaning, but is usually used for lighter things, nothing serious like a murder.
- Jessie: Right, and it's usually used for taking something you're not supposed to take.
- Maura: Good. And then we had **smoking gun**.
- Jessie: And the **smoking gun** is the proof that you did something wrong.
- Maura: OK, good! If you want to learn more about these expressions, you can go to our website and check out the Lipservice, where we have even more explanations about these expressions.
- Jessie: And you can visit our website at Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com.
- Maura: OK! We'll talk to you later, bye!
- Jessie: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Caught red-handed

To be caught red-handed is to be caught doing something that you're not supposed to do. There are two ways to be **caught red-handed**:

- Someone sees you doing something that you're not supposed to be doing.

OR

- There is really clear proof that you did something you weren't supposed to do, so it's obvious that you did it, even though no one actually saw you doing it.

For the first example, imagine that you're at work and you're really hungry, so you decide to take some of your co-worker's lunch out of the refrigerator without asking. (You shouldn't do that!) Now imagine that as you're standing in the kitchen eating your co-worker's sandwich, he walks in and sees you. You just got **caught red-handed** stealing your co-worker's lunch!

But you don't necessarily have to be seen actually *doing* something to be **caught red-handed**. If your co-worker walked in after you'd already finished eating the sandwich, and he saw mustard and sandwich crumbs all over your shirt, he would still know that it was you who ate his sandwich, so you would still be **caught red-handed**.

Here's one more example:

Tania: I think my roommate has been using my toothbrush ...

Marta: That's terrible! The next time you hear her brushing her teeth, you should open the bathroom door and **catch her red-handed**!

As you can see, the phrase **caught red-handed** can be used in different ways depending on the sentence. In this example, if Tania **catches her roommate red-handed**, then Tania's roommate will be **caught red-handed**. The grammar of the phrase depends on the way it's used in the sentence.

Caught with one's hand in the cookie jar

Getting **caught with your hand in the cookie jar** is a lot like getting caught red-handed, except that the meaning is a little more specific. The term caught red-handed can apply to getting caught doing anything you're not supposed to do, but getting **caught with your hand in the cookie jar** specifically applies to getting caught taking something that you're not supposed to take. The idiom comes from the idea of a child literally getting caught taking a cookie when they're not supposed to be taking one.

In this episode, Maura and Jessie gave an example of someone stealing office supplies from their job, and getting caught doing it.

Here's another example:

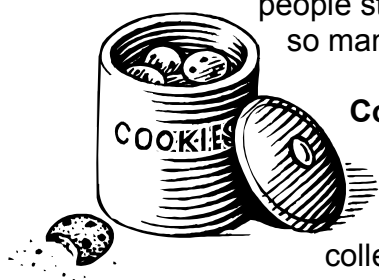
Maggie: Did you read about that bank employee who got **caught with his hand in the cookie jar**?

Scott: Yeah, he'd been stealing money from people's accounts at the bank for over two years before they finally **caught him red-handed**!

In the example above, Maggie and Scott are talking about a fairly serious crime (stealing from customers' bank accounts), but you can tell that they're talking about it in a not very serious way, because the phrase **caught with one's hand in the cookie jar** is very informal and light-hearted.

Cookie jars

A lot of people used to keep homemade cookies in special jars, called **cookie jars**. Some people still do, but **cookie jars** aren't as common today, especially because so many people buy cookies from the store in boxes or bags!



Cookie jars come in all different shapes and sizes. Some are just big round jars, but some are shaped and painted like teddy bears, chickens, or pretty much anything! Some even look like giant cookies. There are people who like **cookie jars** so much that they collect them as a hobby!

The smoking gun

As Jessie and Maura talked about in the podcast, the term **the smoking gun** is related to the expressions to be caught red-handed and to be caught with your hand in the cookie jar. **The smoking gun** is the evidence, the proof, that you did something.

In our example from earlier in this Lipservice about eating your co-worker's lunch, the mustard and crumbs on your shirt were **the smoking gun** that told your co-worker you had eaten his sandwich.



Here a few more examples:

Tania: My roommate used up all the chocolate chips!

Marta: Are you sure?

Tania: Yes! The cookies were **the smoking gun**! I came home and found a whole bunch in the kitchen - fresh from the oven and full of chocolate chips!

Maggie: How did the police catch that bank employee who had been stealing money from people's bank accounts?

Scott: **The smoking gun** was in his email account. He had sent an email to his girlfriend telling her about everything that he had done!

Sherlock Holmes

Before smokeless gunpowder was invented in the late 1800s, shooting a gun created a lot of smoke, so it was easy to tell if a gun had just been fired, because you could see the smoke coming out of it. Modern guns don't create smoke when they're fired.

Do you remember from the podcast where Maura said the term *the smoking gun* was first used? It was in a **Sherlock Holmes** novel by the British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The novel was written in the late 1800s, but **Sherlock Holmes** is still a very famous character today! There have been many movies and TV shows about the great detective.

As Maura mentioned during the podcast, there's even a new **Sherlock Holmes** movie (called **Sherlock Holmes**) being released soon. So if you like mysteries and detective stories, be on the lookout for it!



Caught in the act

Caught in the act is another way to say caught red-handed or caught with your hand in the cookie jar. The meaning of the expression **caught in the act** is pretty much exactly the same as caught red-handed. It means to be caught doing something that you're not supposed to be doing.

Here is an example:

Tania: I got in a big fight with my roommate this morning.

Marta: What happened?

Tania: She was using my toothbrush! While she was brushing her teeth, I quickly opened the bathroom door, and I **caught her in the act**!

Light-hearted

During the podcast, Jessie mentioned that the term caught red-handed is often used in a **light-hearted** way. As you could probably tell by listening to the conversation, **light-hearted** means cheerful, carefree, and not too serious. People usually use the term **light-hearted** to describe a thing rather than a person, although you could use it to describe a person too, if they were in a particularly good mood. Jessie and Maura used the term to describe the way that people use the phrase 'caught red-handed' - they use it in a **light-hearted** way. This expression is also often used to describe things like movies, jokes, or other things. Lots of books and magazine articles have titles like, "A **Light-Hearted** Look at _____." (Type it into Google and see how many results you get!) These kinds

of books or articles can be about anything, but they will almost always be written in a fun, non-serious tone.

Here's a great example of a good use of the term **light-hearted** from something that Harp said the other day:

Harp: At Culips, we like to take a **light-hearted** approach to ESL. We have a lot of fun making our podcasts and we hope that our listeners have a lot of fun learning from them!

Psychic

When Jessie told the story about sneakily eating some snacks as a child, she said she thought that her father was **psychic**, because he knew what she had done even though he hadn't been there. **Psychic** means able to "hear" what someone is thinking or to know things that would usually be impossible to know. The term can also be used as a noun to describe a person with these abilities. Some people believe in **psychics** and some people don't. There are people who claim to be **psychics** who say that they can speak to the dead, or see the future, or read people's minds. As a kid, Jessie thought that her father could read her mind (could tell exactly what she was thinking) because he knew that she had eaten the snacks!

Here's an example that uses the term **psychic** – first as an adjective, then as a noun:

Tim: Hey, do you want to order pizza tonight?

Beth: You must be **psychic**! I was just thinking about how good pizza would taste right now.

Tim: Nope, I'm not a **psychic**. I just know that you love pizza!

Snacks

Jessie told a story about how her parents used to keep **snacks**, like nachos and chips (short for potato chips), in the cupboard when she was young. Nachos and potato chips are very popular **snacks** in many parts of the world! Jessie's favourite nachos are the ones covered in bright orange, cheese-flavoured powder. She was caught with her hand in the cookie jar when her dad came home and saw the powder all over her face!



Have you ever been caught red-handed, caught with your hand in the cookie jar, or caught in the act? If you have a good story, we'd love to hear about it. Post a comment in response to this episode!

Quiz (see the answers at the end of this Lipservice)**1. Which expression would correctly complete the following sentence?**

You'd better be careful if you decide to borrow your friend's shoes without asking, or you might get _____.

- a) caught red-handed
- b) caught with red hands
- c) caught with your hand in the cookies
- d) shot with a smoking gun

2. Which of the following is a synonym for the term *smoking gun*?

- a) detective
- b) idea
- c) proof
- d) suspicion

3. What does it mean to get *caught with your hand in the cookie jar*?

- a) to get accused of something that you didn't do
- b) to get caught taking something you shouldn't be taking
- c) to get caught talking to someone you shouldn't be talking to
- d) to get your hand stuck in a jar

4. Who was the main character in the detective novel that first introduced the idiom *the smoking gun*?

- a) Nancy Drew
- b) Shaun Horner
- c) Shelly Homes
- d) Sherlock Holmes

5. When the term was first used in Scotland, if someone was *caught red-handed*, what had they done?
- a) burned their hand
 - b) killed someone
 - c) slapped someone
 - d) stolen something
6. Fill in the blank:
Three similar expressions are: *caught red-handed*, *caught with your hand in the cookie jar*, and *caught in the* _____.
- a) act
 - b) action
 - c) smoking gun
 - d) snack
7. Which of the following is a correct way to describe a film that's funny, silly, and not very serious?
- a) a light-hearted movie
 - b) a light-headed movie
 - c) a light-tasting movie
 - d) a lighthouse movie

Answers: 1.a 2.c 3.b 4.d 5.b 6.a 7. a