

15 Idioms for Periods of Time

By Mark Nichol



A body of idiomatic words and expressions vividly denote brief periods of time or otherwise refer to various durations. Here's a sampling of such terms.

1. **After hours:** In the evening or at night, or late in the day (referring to standard daytime hours that most businesses are open)
2. **Banker's hours:** A relatively short duration (from the onetime tradition that banks were open for a limited number of hours compared to other businesses; therefore, one who keeps banker's hours has a light work schedule)
3. **Bat/wink/twinkling of an eye:** variations of an idiom referring to a period of time so brief that it passes while one's eyelid moves
4. **Eleventh hour:** occurring late in a given time frame (from the fact that the eleventh hour is the last in the day before midnight)
5. **Flash:** an instant (from the fact that a flash of flame is short lived)
6. **Heartbeat:** an instant (from the duration between one heartbeat and the next); usually seen in the expression "in a heartbeat"; by contrast, a phrase beginning "a heartbeat away from" refers to someone being in line for promotion if the heart of that person's immediate superior stops beating — that is, if the other person dies
7. **Jiffy:** an instant (perhaps from slang for *lightning*); also shortened to *jiff*
8. **New York minute:** a brief time (from the notion that minutes in the hectic milieu of New York City pass more quickly than those in more relaxed locales)
9. **On the hour:** at the beginning of every hour
10. **Shake:** a very short period; usually employed in the phrase "two shakes" (a truncation of the idiom "two shakes of a lamb's tail," alluding to the typically rapid motion of the young animal's tail)
11. **Small hours:** the early morning (from the low numbers on the clock that indicate the time during that period)
12. **Split second:** a fraction of a second (from the notion that a second can be split, or subdivided); a split is also a fraction of the total elapsed time for a race
13. **Tick:** a moment (from the ticking of a clock); a tick is literally a mark used for measure, as on a clock
14. **Trice:** a short period of time (from a word meaning "pull"); often seen in the phrase "in a trice"
15. **Witching hour:** midnight or the middle of the night (with the connotation that unsettling or unusual things happen then, from the superstition that witches are about at that time)