



American Expression E2265 First things first

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

"First things first" is a widely used idiom that emphasizes the importance of prioritizing tasks according to their urgency and significance. The phrase suggests that before moving on to other activities, one should focus on the most crucial or foundational tasks. This approach helps in organizing work and life efficiently, ensuring that essential duties are completed before addressing less critical ones.

The origin of "first things first" can be traced back to the 16th century, but it gained widespread popularity through Stephen R. Covey's best-selling book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," published in 1989. Covey's third habit, "Put First Things First," underscores the necessity of managing time and priorities effectively. By advocating for this principle, Covey aimed to help individuals focus on activities that align with their values and long-term goals rather than being consumed by urgent but less important tasks.

Implementing "first things first" involves distinguishing between what is urgent and what is important. Urgent tasks require immediate attention and often come with clear deadlines, while important tasks contribute to long-term objectives and personal values. The challenge lies in not letting urgent tasks overshadow important ones. To address this, time management strategies, such as Covey's Time Management Matrix, can be utilized. This matrix divides tasks into four quadrants: urgent and important, not urgent but important, urgent but not important, and neither urgent nor important. By categorizing tasks in this way, individuals can focus on what truly matters and avoid the trap of constant firefighting.

In practical terms, "first things first" can be applied in various areas of life. In the workplace, it means tackling key projects that have significant impact before getting sidetracked by minor issues or distractions. For students, it could involve prioritizing study time for major exams over less critical assignments. In personal life, it might mean addressing health and well-being before engaging in leisure activities.

The principle of "first things first" also extends to strategic planning in organizations. Companies often use it to set priorities that align with their mission and goals, ensuring that critical initiatives receive the necessary resources and attention. This approach helps organizations stay focused on their vision and achieve sustainable growth.

Adopting "first things first" requires discipline and a proactive mindset. It involves regularly reviewing and adjusting priorities based on changing circumstances and objectives. Effective use of this principle can lead to increased productivity, reduced stress, and greater fulfillment, as it ensures that the most important aspects of life and work are given the attention they deserve.

In conclusion, "first things first" is a powerful idiom that promotes prioritization and efficient time management. By focusing on what is most important, individuals and organizations can achieve their goals more effectively and lead more balanced and purposeful lives. The principle serves as a guiding framework for making conscious choices about where to direct energy and resources, ultimately leading to more meaningful and impactful outcomes.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you determine which tasks are the most important to prioritize in your daily life?
2. Can you share an example of a time when applying the "first things first" principle helped you achieve a significant goal?
3. What strategies or tools do you use to manage and organize your priorities effectively?
4. How do you handle situations where urgent tasks conflict with important tasks that align with your long-term goals?
5. In what ways can the "first things first" approach be beneficial in both personal and professional settings?