Do you know the idiom ‘bite the bullet’?
Do you know what ‘bite the bullet’ means?

When we say we will ‘bite the bullet’ we mean that we will get on with something and accept the difficulties or pain involved.

Sometimes we might use this phrase when we finally decide to do something unpleasant that we have been hesitating about or delaying.

Other phrases that mean the same thing are:
- ‘face the music’
- ‘pay the piper’
- ‘leap into the breach’.
Origins: the story

Many people believe that this phrase originates from the days before anesthetics.

It is thought that patients would be provided with a piece of wood, leather or bullets to clench between their teeth to help them endure the pain of treatment and to protect their tongues incase they bit down on it.

A *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, written by Francis Grose, references the use of biting a bullet:

‘Nightingale. A soldier who as the term is, sings out at the halberts. It is a point of honour in some regiments, among the grenadiers, never to cry out, or become nightingales, whilst under the discipline of the cat of nine tails; to avoid which, they chew a bullet.’
Origins: the story

Rudyard Kipling used the phrase figuratively, as we do now, to refer to getting on with something and having courage in *The Light That Failed*, in 1891:

“Bite on the bullet, old man, and don’t let them think you’re afraid.”

Here, Kipling’s character isn’t saying to literally bite down on a bullet, but to stay strong, have courage and maintain a stiff upper lip and get on with it so that people don’t think he’s afraid.

The notion of having a stiff upper lip is often seen as characteristic of the Victorian era in which Kipling was writing and you may come across characters who conform to this idea when you explore nineteenth century extracts and texts in your English lessons.
Examples

1. They decided to bite the bullet and tell the teacher what they had done.

2. I’m going to bite the bullet and sign myself up for the local race.
Consider

• When have you bitten the bullet?

• What made you decide to bite the bullet in that situation?

• How did you feel before your decision? How did you feel during the experience?

• How did you feel after the experience was over? Were you proud of your decision to bite the bullet? Think about what impact it had.

• When might it be useful to bite the bullet?

• Are there any times that we shouldn’t bite the bullet?