

# The importance of being earnest

READING

LEVEL  
Advanced

NUMBER  
C1\_2027R\_EN

LANGUAGE  
English



lingoda

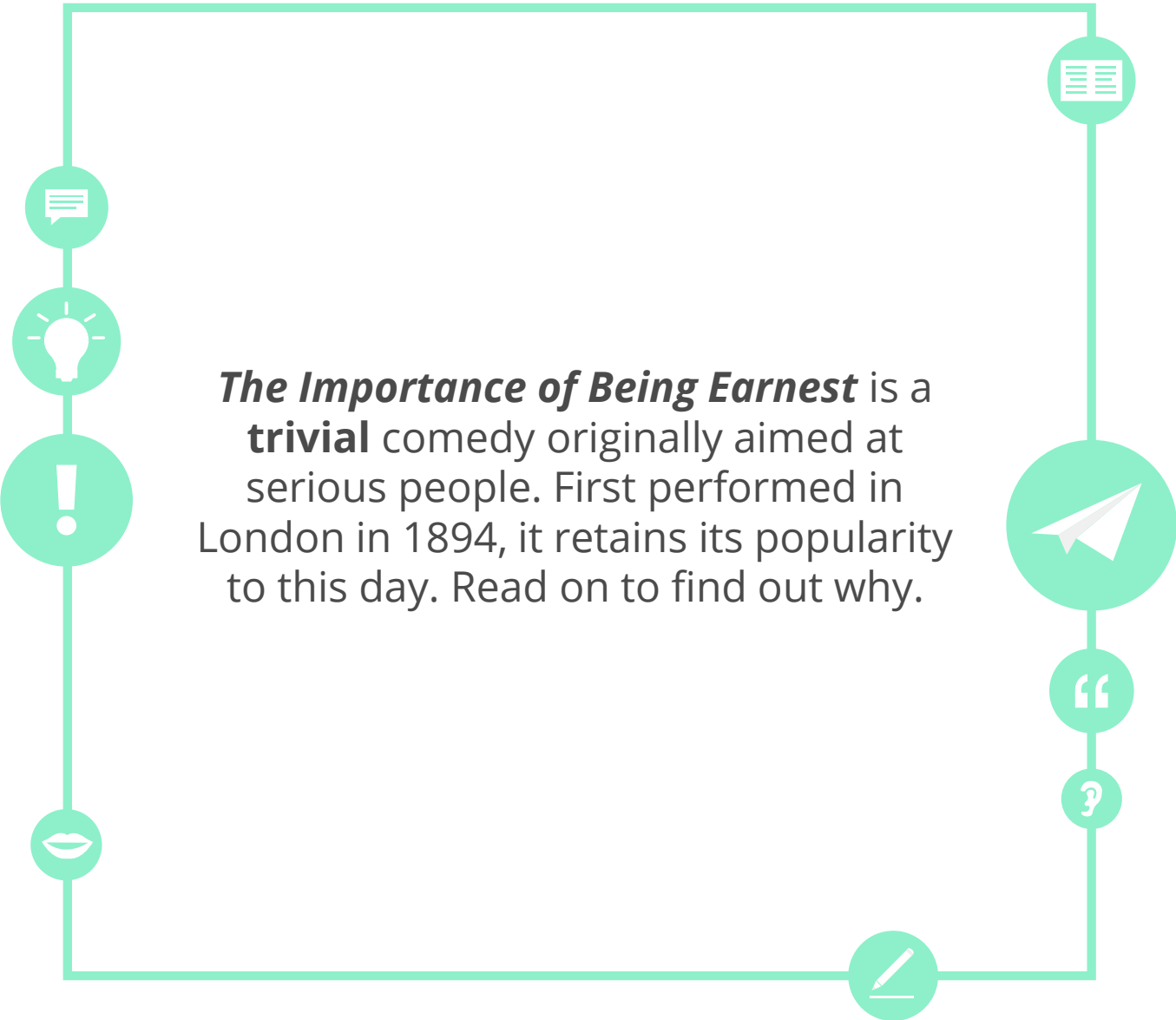




## Goals

- Can read and understand a complex literary excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Can identify and explain specific features of the play and evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of a sedentary lifestyle.





***The Importance of Being Earnest*** is a **trivial** comedy originally aimed at serious people. First performed in London in 1894, it retains its popularity to this day. Read on to find out why.



## Plays and playwrights

Have you ever read a play? Are there any famous playwrights from your country?





## Oscar Wilde

Have you heard of either *The Importance of Being Earnest*, or Oscar Wilde? Can you guess what the play might be about from the title?





## Vocabulary



The rain didn't **cease** all day.

I'm not great at cooking – it's certainly not my **forte**.



He lay around **languidly**, not doing much of anything.

You shouldn't **flirt** with married women.





## Vocabulary



They have a **lax** attitude towards security.

I want to marry her – I'm going to **propose**.



I was **frantic** with worry.

I gave him my **consent** to marry her.





## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

### Characters from the excerpt (order of appearance):

Algernon Moncrieff

Lane, manservant

John (Jack/Ernest) Worthing, J.P.

### ACT ONE

Scene: Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. **Lane** is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, **Algernon** enters.

**Algernon.** Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

**Lane.** I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.







## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Algernon.** I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

**Lane.** Yes, sir.

**Algernon.** And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

**Lane.** Yes, sir. [Hands them on a salver.]

**Algernon.** [Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] Oh! ...by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.





## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Lane.** Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

**Algernon.** Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

**Lane.** I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

**Algernon.** Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?



## ***The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde**

**Lane.** I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

**Algernon.** [Languidly.] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

**Lane.** No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

**Algernon.** Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

**Lane.** Thank you, sir. [**Lane** goes out.]

**Algernon.** Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

[Enter **Lane**.]



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Lane.** Mr. Ernest Worthing.

[Enter **Jack**.]

[**Lane** goes out.]

**Algernon.** How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

**Jack.** Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

**Algernon.** [Stiffly.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

**Jack.** [Sitting down on the sofa.] In the country.

**Algernon.** What on earth do you do there?



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Jack.** [Pulling off his gloves.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

**Algernon.** And who are the people you amuse?

**Jack.** [Airily.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

**Algernon.** Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

**Jack.** Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

**Algernon.** How immensely you must amuse them! [Goes over and takes sandwich.] By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

**Jack.** Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Algernon.** Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

**Jack.** How perfectly delightful!

**Algernon.** Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

**Jack.** May I ask why?

**Algernon.** My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

**Jack.** I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

**Algernon.** I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business.

**Jack.** How utterly unromantic you are!



## True or False?

	TRUE	FALSE
1. Lane is Algernon's maid.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Lane thought it impolite to listen to Algernon's playing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Algernon is angry that the servants drank his champagne.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Algernon is not interested in Lane's personal life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Algernon thinks it is amusing in the country.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Jack has come to propose marriage to someone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## Frivolous lifestyles

**In what ways so far has the text implied that Algernon and Jack lead frivolous lifestyles?**



languidly

champagne

cucumber  
sandwiches

extravagance





## Reading a play

**How is reading a play different to reading fiction?**

stage directions

*tone of voice*

descriptions

*body language*

imagination



## Imagining the characters

**Compared to fiction, there is little description of the characters in a play. Can you imagine what Algernon and the other characters look like? And how they sound? Practise reading a few lines from the play again.**





## Discuss in-depth



What do you think of the way the butler, Lane, is treated by the other characters? Read back over the sections where he is addressed.

What points do you think the play is trying to make about social class?



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Algernon.** I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

**Jack.** I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

**Algernon.** Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—**[Jack** puts out his hand to take a sandwich. **Algernon** at once interferes.] Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [Takes one and eats it.]



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Jack.** Well, you have been eating them all the time.

**Algernon.** That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. [Takes plate from below.] Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

**Jack.** [Advancing to table and helping himself.] And very good bread and butter it is too.

**Algernon.** Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

**Jack.** Why on earth do you say that?

**Algernon.** Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.



## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

**Jack.** Oh, that is nonsense!

**Algernon.** It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

**Jack.** Your consent!

**Algernon.** My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. [Rings bell.]

**Jack.** Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.





## *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

[Enter **Lane**.]

**Algernon**. Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

**Lane**. Yes, sir. [**Lane** goes out.]

**Jack**. Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

**Algernon**. Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard-up.

**Jack**. There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

[Enter **Lane** with the cigarette case on a salver. **Algernon** takes it at once. **Lane** goes out.]



## *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde

**Algernon.** I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. [Opens case and examines it.] However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

**Jack.** Of course it's mine. [Moving to him.] You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

**Algernon.** Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

**Jack.** I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

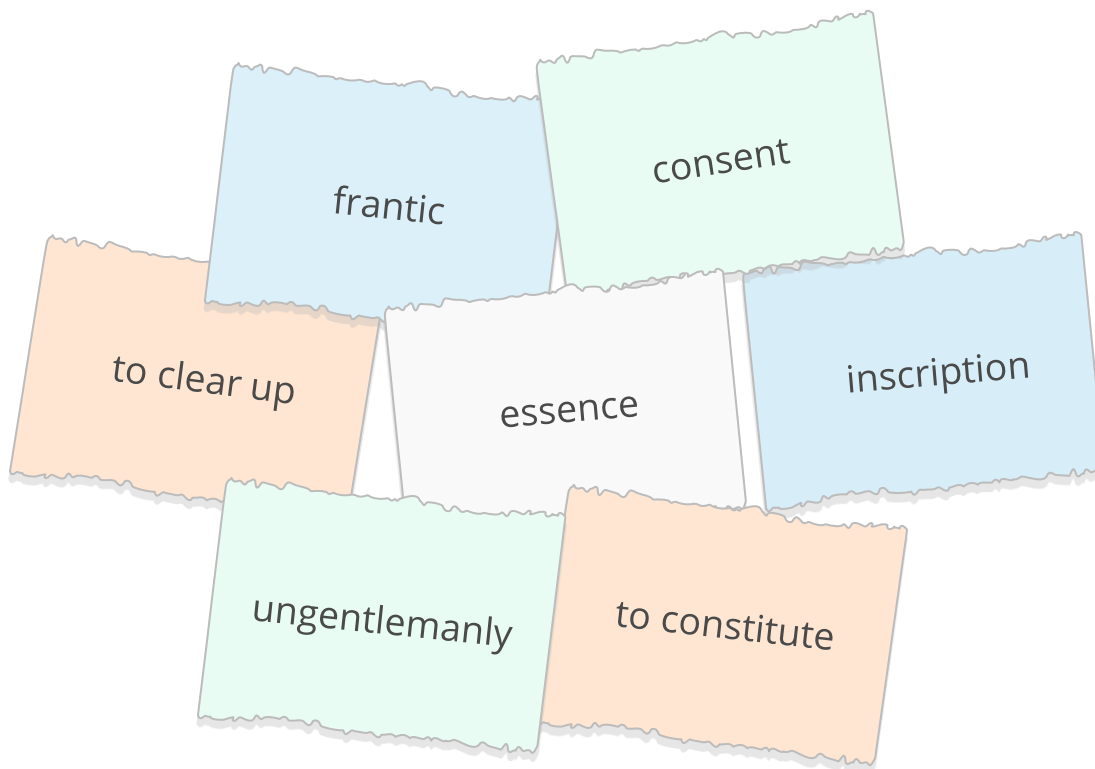
**Algernon.** Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.





## Vocabulary

**In what order did these words appear in the play? What were they referring to?**





## Marriage

**Marriage is mentioned quite often in the text. What are the characters' ideas of marriage? Do they align with your idea of marriage?**





## The play

**Would you like to  
continue reading the  
play? Or see it performed  
on stage?**

**How do you feel about  
reading something which  
is meant to be performed?**



## Sedentary lifestyles

**Do you think the play suggests that the characters live sedentary lifestyles?**



1

What are the benefits and drawbacks of living a sedentary lifestyle?

2

Do you think the play is trying to say anything about this kind of lifestyle?

3

Do you think having a sedentary lifestyle is a product of the modern era or has it always been present?



## Reflect on the lesson

Take a moment to review any new **vocabulary, phrases, language structures** or **grammar points** you have come across for the first time in this lesson.

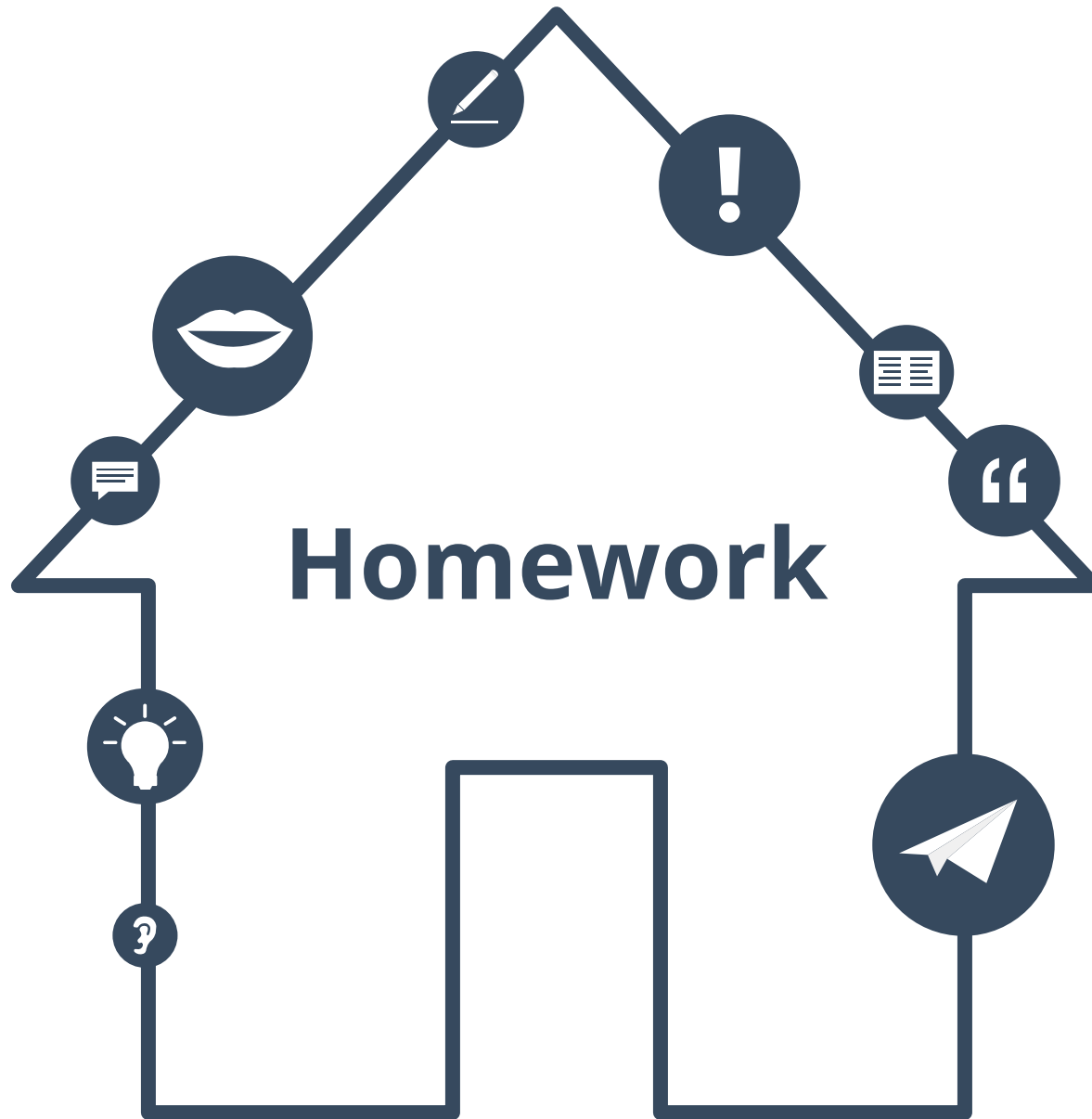
Review them with your teacher one more time to make sure you don't forget!





## Answer key

**Exercise p. 15**  
1F, 2T, 3F, 4T, 5F, 6T





## Transform this from direct to reported speech

**Algernon.** And who are the people you amuse?

**Jack.** [Airily.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

**Algernon.** Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

**Jack.** Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.





[illegible]



## Homework answer key

### Exercise p. 24

Algernon asked Jack who the people were that he amused. Jack replied airily that they were neighbours.

Algernon asked if Jack had nice neighbours in his part of Shropshire.

Jack said that they were perfectly horrid and that he never spoke to any of them.



## About this material

Find out more at  
[www.lingoda.com](http://www.lingoda.com)



This material is provided by

**lingoda**

### **lingoda** Who are we?



Why learn English online?



What kinds of English classes do we offer?



Who are our English teachers?



How do our English certificates work?



We also have a language blog!