

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Part 2 (second part of Act 1)

Author: Daniel Barber

Level: Upper intermediate

Age: Young adults / Adults

Duration: Approx. 90 minutes

Aims: In this lesson, the students will:

1. explore the themes of marriage proposals and what parents want in a son- or daughter-in-law;
2. think about the characters of Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen;
3. listen for gist and detail;
4. practise identifying sentence stress in dialogue;
5. explore the character, interests and habits of the main characters.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (full audio); Track 2 (extract) and Track 3 (extract) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of the script per student (for optional follow-up activity only)

Summary: Two young gentlemen use false names to live double lives. These convenient secret identities become a problem, however, when they both fall in love at the same time. As the situation develops, it becomes more and more complicated for these fun-loving men. The story is told in eight parts. In Part 2, Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen, arrive. Jack will need Algernon's help if he is going to propose to Gwendolen away from her mother.

Activity 1

Aim: to remind students of the story so far

1. Ask students to tell you the name of the play that they started listening to in the last lesson and the main characters' names. Explain that before they listen to the next part, they are going to see how much they remember from Part 1. Explain that they are going to do a quiz in which they need to be the first to respond. When they want to answer, they will need to use their 'buzzers'. Demonstrate an imaginary buzzer by pressing the desk in front of you and saying 'bzz' loudly. Invite the class to try out their buzzers. What noise do their buzzers make? Tell students that they must wait to be nominated by you before they can give their answer.

Note: Depending on the size of the group, you may want to divide the class into teams.

2. Ask the following questions. Only award a point if the person has buzzed clearly and waited to be nominated. The winner is the student or team with the most points. You could award the winner a cucumber sandwich!

Quiz

1. Whose house are the characters in? *Algernon's*
2. What is the servant's name? *Lane*
3. What is Jack's real name? *Jack!*
4. What name does Algernon call Jack? *Ernest*
5. Who has eaten something? *Algernon*
6. What did he eat? *cucumber sandwiches*
7. What did Jack eat? *nothing, Algernon refused him any sandwiches*
8. Who is going to visit soon? *Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen*
9. What is Algernon's relationship to Lady Bracknell? *he is her nephew, she is his aunt*
10. What is Algernon's relationship to Gwendolen? *They are cousins*
11. Why has Jack come to London? *to propose to Gwendolen*
12. What are the men's plans for the evening? *to dine together*
13. What does Algernon call the act of inventing a person to give you an excuse to escape? *Bunburying*
14. What is wrong with Bunbury? *He is sick / an invalid*
15. What is Jack's aunt called? *he doesn't have an aunt*
16. Who is Cecily? *Jack's ward – Jack is her guardian*

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17. How did Algernon discover Jack's secret?
the inscription on Jack's cigarette case

18. What does Jack tell people, his relationship with 'Ernest' is? *he tells them 'Ernest' is his younger brother*

Activity 2

Aim: to explore the themes of marriage proposals and what parents want in a son- or daughter-in-law

1. Create a table on the board with two columns. Give the columns the following headings:

- *What people look for in a future husband or wife.*
- *What parents look for in a future son- or daughter-in-law.*

Ask the class for one quality that they might want to see in a future husband or wife. Accept all answers (except rude ones) but ask them to justify their answers. Reformulate any ideas using natural English. For example, *she must be funny* could be written as *good sense of humour*. Likely answers could include: *sense of humour, steady income, good job, good looks, caring, kind, patient, reliable, protective, a good cook, intelligent, common interests, good parenting skills.*

Note: Depending on the age, gender mix and cultural background of your learners, some of their ideas may differ considerably from what you may consider acceptable. A sensible policy here would be to question their ideas if they are sexist, but to do so calmly and without lecturing.

2. Now make sure the students can use these phrases correctly, by asking them to categorize them according to whether you would use *be* or *have* to describe the quality. A fun way to do this is to have the students make two big cards, one with 'HAVE' written on it, and one with 'BE'. Call out the phrases on the board one by one, and each time, the students choose which one of the cards to raise. When you have done this, point to phrases on the board and nominate individuals to say the sentence correctly, for example, *He must be caring* or *She must have a good sense of humour.*

3. Wrap up with a brief class chat about marriage proposals and in-laws:

- *How important is it that your parents approve of your husband or wife? Why?*
- *Do arranged marriages take place in your country? (An arranged marriage is organized by the parents of the man and woman, instead of the man and woman choosing to marry each other.)*
- *Why might it have been important in England in the 19th century for parents to make sure their future sons- and daughters-in-law were suitable?*

Activity 3

Aim: to listen for gist

1. Direct students to Activity 3 on the worksheet. Explain that this is a summary of the next part of the story but that it contains five errors. Give them two minutes to read it and try to guess which information might not be correct.

2. Play Track 1 (full audio). Ask students to underline the errors.

3. When the recording is finished, put the students in pairs to compare their answers. Ask them to rewrite the erroneous sentences.

4. Go through the answers with the whole class. Encourage discussion as to the best way to rewrite the erroneous sentences.

Key:

1. *Lady Bracknell is not hungry (she ate beforehand) and there are no more cucumber sandwiches.*
2. *Algernon informs Lady Bracknell that he cannot come to dinner because his friend Bunbury is feeling unwell.*
3. *Gwendolen tells Jack that she has loved him since before she met him (after hearing his name).*
4. *Lady Bracknell tells Gwendolen to leave (and wait in the carriage).*
5. *She seems satisfied with most, but not all of his answers to her questions. She disapproves of the location of his town house.*

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Activity 4

Aims: to listen for detail to ensure understanding of key details essential to the comprehension of the end of the play

1. Direct the students to Activity 4 on the worksheet. Ask them to form small groups of three or four to discuss the significance of the five words on the worksheet and how they relate to Jack's unusual past. You should check their understanding of *cloakroom* (a room in a theatre, station etc where people can leave their coats).
2. Play Track 2 (extract) for students to check their answers.
3. Students stay in their groups. Tell them to write a mini biography called 'Jack Worthing's Mysterious Past'. Give the students five to ten minutes for this, then invite volunteers to read their mini-biographies aloud for the class to compare and check their own.

Activity 5

Aims: to practise identifying sentence stress in a dialogue; to gain confidence in reading a script aloud

1. Write the first two lines of the dialogue in Activity 5 on the board. Nominate students to suggest words which might be stressed. Ask why they think those words. Possible stressed words include: *Algernon, mentioned, friend, Ernest, knew, would, love, Do, really, love, Gwendolen*.
2. Put students into pairs and ask them to go through the rest of the dialogue marking the words that they think may be stressed. When they have finished, encourage them to test their ideas by reading the dialogues aloud and listening to whether they sound natural.
3. Play Track 3 (extract) so that the students can compare their dialogues to the way the actors on the recording say it. When it has finished, invite the students to ask questions or make observations.

Note: The reason for giving students a chance to ask questions is that there will undoubtedly be some variation in what the students think and the way the actors choose to say

the dialogue. This is because there is some flexibility in which words to choose, and also subjectivity in determining whether a word has been stressed. In this dialogue there is emphatic stress (e.g. *It is a wonderful name*), contrastive stress (*But your name is Ernest*) and there is the natural sentence stress that tends to emphasise key information such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs over grammatical information contained in prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, etc.

Activity 6

Aims: to practise speaking; to finish the lesson with a fun, productive task

1. Ask the students whether Jack smokes and ask if they can remember Lady Bracknell's reaction. Ask if this is the expected reaction. Now explain that the class is going to do a role-play called 'The Worst In-Laws'. Put the students into small groups of three or four. Explain that they will be asking questions as the parents of prospective sons- and daughters-in law, and they need to write at least 10 questions to ask these people. Give them five minutes to do this and visit the groups to check their questions and offer suggestions.
2. Write on the board one of the groups' questions (e.g. *What school did you go to?*). Invite the students to suggest the worst possible answer a prospective son- or daughter-in-law could give. If necessary, offer a suggestion, such as: *My parents don't believe in education, they believe in television*. Then ask the class to suggest a positive reaction to this poor response, for example: *I am so relieved – school is such a bad influence on children*.
3. Reorganize the groupings so that everyone is in new groups of three or four. They should each take turns to be the prospective son- or daughter-in-law while the other two or three become the parents. Explain that the parents should 'interrogate' the young person with their questions. The son- or daughter-in-law should respond with the answers that are least likely to make them popular, but the parents-in-law should try to see the positive side of the answers.

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4. Give the class enough time for most of the students to take the part of the person being interviewed. As they do the role-play, go around the class and listen to the interviews, making notes of any interesting uses of language or notable errors. Pay special attention to the personal qualities as studied in Activity 2. When they have finished, nominate each group to report to the class which of them made the worst in-law. Finally, report on their use of English during the activity.

Follow-up task

Hand out the script to the students. Ask them to read the script to identify things that Lady Bracknell says that are unexpected or contrary to normal opinion. An early example comes when she mentions that Lady Harbury, who has recently become a widow, is looking 20 years younger, when normally you would expect the death of a husband to age someone.

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Activity 3

Read this summary of Part 2 of the play. Underline five errors.

Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen, arrive at Algernon's house. They both sit down together with Algernon. Lady Bracknell is quite hungry and has a cucumber sandwich. Algernon informs her that he cannot come to dinner that evening at her house because he is feeling unwell. Algernon takes his aunt to the music room because he wants to give Jack some privacy with Gwendolen.

Jack tells Gwendolen that he loves her and she tells him that she has loved him ever since she first met him. Then he proposes to her, but just at that same moment, Lady Bracknell walks in. Lady Bracknell explains that unless *she* says that Gwendolen is engaged, she is *not* engaged. She tells Gwendolen to be quiet while she asks Jack some questions. She seems satisfied with all his answers to her questions except the last. The last question concerns his parents, and when he tells her his story, she decides that he cannot marry her daughter.

Worksheet

Listen. Rewrite the sentences so that they match the information in the audio.

Activity 4

In groups, discuss how the following words are connected to Jack's past.

a black leather handbag

Victoria Station

cloakroom

Mr. Thomas Cardew

Worthing

Listen and check your ideas.

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Activity 5

In pairs, underline the words that you think are stressed in the following dialogue.

Worksheet

Gwendolen: When Algernon mentioned he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I would love you.

Jack: Do you really love me, Gwendolen?

Gwendolen: Very much!

Jack: Darling! You don't know how happy you have made me.

Gwendolen: My own Ernest!

Jack: But could you love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

Gwendolen: But your name *is* Ernest.

Jack: Yes, I know it is. But what if it was something else? Couldn't you love me then?

Gwendolen: [*Cleverly*] Ah! But you *are* called Ernest, so there is no reason to think about you not being called Ernest.

Jack: Personally, darling, I don't really like the name Ernest ... I don't think the name suits me.

Gwendolen: It suits you perfectly. It is a wonderful name. It is musical.

Jack: Well, really, Gwendolen, I think there are a lot of nicer names. I think that Jack, for instance, is a charming name.

Listen and check your ideas. Practice saying the dialogue with your partner.

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Script

Track 1

- [Lane enters]*
- Lane:** Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax are here, sir.
[Algernon goes forward to meet them. Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen enter]
- Lady Bracknell:** Good afternoon, dear Algernon. I hope you are behaving very well.
- Algernon:** I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.
- Lady Bracknell:** Feeling very well is not the same as behaving very well. In fact, the two things rarely go together.
- Algernon:** *[To Gwendolen]* Good heavens, you are smart!
- Gwendolen:** I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr Worthing?
- Jack:** You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.
- Gwendolen:** Oh! I hope I am not perfect. There would be no room for development and I intend to develop in every direction. *[Gwendolen and Jack sit down together in a corner of the room]*
- Lady Bracknell:** I am sorry if we are a little late, Algernon, but I had to visit Lady Harbury. I hadn't seen her since her poor husband died. She has changed very much; she looks quite twenty years younger. And now I'll have a cup of tea and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.
- Algernon:** Certainly, Aunt Augusta. *[Going over to the tea table]*
- Lady Bracknell:** Will you come and sit here, Gwendolen?
- Gwendolen:** Thanks, Mama, I'm quite comfortable over here.
- Algernon:** *[Picking up the empty plate of sandwiches in horror]* Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.
- Lane:** *[Seriously]* There were no cucumbers in the market this morning, sir. I went there twice.
- Algernon:** No cucumbers?
- Lane:** No, sir.
- Algernon:** Thank you, Lane. You may go.
- Lane:** Thank you, sir. *[Goes off]*
- Algernon:** I am very upset that there were no cucumbers, Aunt Augusta.
- Lady Bracknell:** It doesn't matter, Algernon. I had some crumpets with Lady Harbury.
- Algernon:** I hear that her hair has turned quite blonde from grief.
- Lady Bracknell:** It certainly has changed its colour. I do not know why, of course. *[Algernon takes her a cup of tea]* Thank you. I've got quite a treat for you at dinner tonight, Algernon. I am going to seat you next to Mary Farquhar. She is such a nice woman and she is so sweet to her husband. It's delightful to watch them.
- Algernon:** I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I cannot dine with you tonight after all.
- Lady Bracknell:** *[Frowning]* I hope you can, Algernon. There will be thirteen people at the dining table if you aren't there. That is unlucky. Your uncle will have to eat upstairs. Fortunately, he often has to do that.

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Script

- Algernon:** It is terribly disappointing to me, but I've had a **telegram** to say that my poor friend Bunbury is very ill again. [*Smiling quickly at Jack*] They think I should be with him.
- Lady Bracknell:** It is very strange. Mr Bunbury seems to suffer from very bad health.
- Algernon:** Yes, indeed. He is a permanent invalid.
- Lady Bracknell:** Well, Algernon, I think **it's about time** that Mr Bunbury decides whether he is going to live or die. I don't sympathize with invalids. Illness should not be encouraged in others. One should be healthy. Could you ask Mr Bunbury not to be ill on Saturday? I am holding a reception and I want you to organize the music. People talk during performances of music and I want to encourage them to talk, particularly since it is the end of the London season and they have nearly run out of things to say.
- Algernon:** I'll speak to Bunbury, Aunt Augusta, if he is still conscious. I think I can promise you that he will be well by Saturday. Of course, the music is a problem. You see, if one plays good music, people don't listen and if one plays bad music, people don't talk. But I will show you the programme of music I have chosen, if you will come into the music room for a moment.
- Lady Bracknell:** Thank you, Algernon. It is very thoughtful of you. [*Lady Bracknell and Algernon go into the music room, Gwendolen remains behind*]
- Jack:** It's been a charming day, Miss Fairfax.
- Gwendolen:** Please don't talk about the weather, Mr Worthing. When people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain they mean something else and I get nervous.
- Jack:** I do mean something else.
- Gwendolen:** I thought so. In fact, I am never wrong.
- Jack:** I would like to talk to you about the 'something else' while Lady Bracknell is out of the room.
- Gwendolen:** Then talk about it quickly. Mama often comes back into a room suddenly.
- Jack:** [*Nervously*] Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you, I have admired you more than any girl ... I have met ever since ... I met you.
- Gwendolen:** Yes, I am quite well aware of that. I was always fascinated by you – even before I met you. [*Jack looks at her in amazement*] We live in an age of ideals – any expensive monthly magazine will tell you that – and my ideal has always been to love someone called Ernest. When Algernon mentioned he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I would love you.
- Jack:** Do you really love me, Gwendolen?
- Gwendolen:** Very much!
- Jack:** Darling! You don't know how happy you have made me.
- Gwendolen:** My own Ernest!
- Jack:** But could you love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

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Script

- Gwendolen:** But your name is Ernest.
- Jack:** Yes, I know it is. But what if it was something else? Couldn't you love me then?
- Gwendolen:** *[Cleverly]* Ah! But you are called Ernest, so there is no reason to think about you not being called Ernest.
- Jack:** Personally, darling, I don't really like the name Ernest ... I don't think the name suits me.
- Gwendolen:** It suits you perfectly. It is a wonderful name. It is musical.
- Jack:** Well, really, Gwendolen, I think there are a lot of nicer names. I think that Jack, for instance, is a charming name.
- Gwendolen:** Jack? ... No, there is very little music in the name Jack. It does not excite me. I have known several Jacks and they all were very ordinary. I feel pity for any woman who is married to a man called Jack. I think the only really good name is Ernest.
- Jack:** Gwendolen, I must get **baptized** at once ... I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to lose.
- Gwendolen:** *[Shocked]* Married, Mr Worthing?
- Jack:** Well ... you know that I love you and you told me, Miss Fairfax, that you love me.
- Gwendolen:** I do love you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said about marriage.
- Jack:** Well ... may I propose to you now?
- Gwendolen:** I think that this would be an excellent time to propose to me. And I will tell you now that I will accept you so that you aren't worried.
- Jack:** Gwendolen!
- Gwendolen:** Yes, Mr Worthing? What are you going to say to me?
- Jack:** You know what I am going to say to you.
- Gwendolen:** Yes, but you haven't said it.
- Jack:** Gwendolen, will you marry me? *[Going down on his knees]*
- Gwendolen:** Yes, of course I will. You have taken a long time to ask. I am afraid you have had very little experience of proposing.
- Jack:** My dear, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.
- Gwendolen:** Yes, but men often practise proposing. My brother, Gerald, often proposes to people. All my friends tell me. What wonderful blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite blue. I hope you will always look at me like that, especially when there are other people in the room. *[Lady Bracknell enters]*
- Lady Bracknell:** Mr Worthing! Get up from that position. It is not respectable to behave like that.
- Gwendolen:** Mama! *[Jack tries to stand up but Gwendolen makes him stay in a kneeling position]* Please go away. Mr Worthing has not finished yet.
- Lady Bracknell:** Finished what, may I ask?
- Gwendolen:** I am engaged to be married to Mr Worthing, Mama. *[Jack stands up]*

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Script

Lady Bracknell: Pardon me, you are not engaged to anyone, Gwendolen. When you are engaged to someone, I, or your father, will inform you of the fact. An engagement should come as a surprise to a young girl. A pleasant surprise or an unpleasant surprise. It is not something that she is allowed to arrange for herself. And now, I have a few questions to ask you, Mr Worthing. While I am asking these questions, you, Gwendolen, will wait for me in the **carriage**.

Gwendolen: Mama!

Lady Bracknell: Wait in the carriage, Gwendolen! *[Gwendolen goes to the door. She and Jack kiss their hands and pretend to blow the kisses to each other behind Lady Bracknell's back. Lady Bracknell looks around for the cause of the noise. Finally she turns round and sees them. Frowning]* Gwendolen, I said wait for me in the carriage!

Gwendolen: Yes, Mama. *[Going off, looking back at Jack]*

Lady Bracknell: You can sit down, Mr Worthing. *[Looks in her pocket for a notebook and pencil]*

Jack: Thank you, Lady Bracknell, I prefer to stand.

Lady Bracknell: *[Notebook and pencil in hand]* I must tell you that you are not on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the Duchess of Bolton. We work together during the season. However, I am quite ready to add your name to the list if your answers are satisfactory. Do you smoke?

Jack: Well, yes, I do smoke.

Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an **occupation**. There are far too many men in London who don't have an occupation. How old are you?

Jack: Twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell: That's a very good age to get married. I have always believed that a man who wants to get married should know everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: *[After hesitating]* I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I approve of ignorance. I don't approve of modern education. Fortunately, in England at least, education has no effect at all. What is your income?

Jack: It's between seven and eight thousand pounds a year.

Lady Bracknell: *[Making a note in her book]* Do you earn this income from land that you own or from investments?

Jack: From investments.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory. Owning land is neither profitable nor pleasurable – it costs money to look after it when one is alive and then there are taxes when one is dead. That's all I can say about land.

Jack: I have a country house with some land, but I don't depend upon it for my income.

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Script

Lady Bracknell: A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that doesn't matter. I hope you have a house in town. Gwendolen must have a house in town.

Jack: Well, I do have a town house in Belgrave Square but it is rented to Lady Bloxham.

Lady Bracknell: Lady Bloxham? I don't know her.

Jack: Oh, she doesn't go out very much; she's very old.

Lady Bracknell: She's not necessarily respectable even if she is old. What number Belgrave Square?

Jack: 149.

Lady Bracknell: *[Shaking her head disapprovingly]* But that is the unfashionable side of the street. However, that could easily be changed.

Jack: Do you mean the fashion or the side?

Lady Bracknell: *[Very disapprovingly]* Both, if necessary. Now, let us discuss less important details. Are your parents living?

Jack: I have lost both my parents.

Lady Bracknell: To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, is unfortunate; to lose both seems like carelessness. Who was your father? He must have been a wealthy man. Was he a businessman or an aristocrat?

Jack: I am afraid I don't know. Lady Bracknell, I said that I had lost my parents. In fact, my parents lost me ... I don't know who I am. I was ... well, I was found.

Lady Bracknell: Found?

Jack: The **late** Mr Thomas Cardew, a very kind and charitable old gentleman, found me and called me 'Worthing' because he had a train ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time. Worthing is a seaside town.

Lady Bracknell: Where did the kind gentleman who had a train ticket for this seaside town find you?

Jack: *[Seriously]* In a handbag.

Lady Bracknell: A handbag?

Jack: *[Very seriously]* Yes, Lady Bracknell. I was in a handbag – a large, black leather handbag – an ordinary handbag with handles.

Lady Bracknell: Where did Mr Thomas Cardew find this ordinary handbag?

Jack: In the **cloakroom** at Victoria Station, here in London. It was a mistake. It was given to him instead of his own bag.

Lady Bracknell: In the cloakroom at Victoria Station?

Jack: Yes.

Lady Bracknell: Mr Worthing, I am shocked by what you have just told me. I do not think it is right to be born in a handbag, even if it has handles. And I do not think it is right to be found in a handbag in a cloakroom at a railway station. It is not the way to become a respectable gentleman with a good position in society.

Jack: What is your advice, Lady Bracknell? I would, of course, do anything to make Gwendolen happy.

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Script

Lady Bracknell: My advice to you, Mr Worthing, is this – try to find some relations as soon as possible. And try to find at least one parent.

Jack: Well, I don't see how I could possibly do that. I can show you the handbag. It is in a wardrobe at home. I really think that should satisfy you, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: Me, sir! It has nothing to do with me! Do you really think that Lord Bracknell would allow our only daughter to marry the son of a cloakroom and form a relationship with a piece of luggage? Goodbye, Mr Worthing! *[Lady Bracknell leaves the room with great dignity]*

Jack: Goodbye!

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Glossary

telegram a message that you send by telegraph – a method of communicating by sending electric signals through wires or by radio waves – used especially in the past for short urgent messages

reception a formal party to welcome someone or to celebrate something

ideal the best example of something that you can think of or imagine

baptized (to baptize someone) to perform a religious ceremony during which a baby is made a member of the Christian religion and given a name

carriage a vehicle with wheels that is pulled by horses, especially one used in the past before cars were invented

occupation something that you do in your free time. A more usual meaning of occupation is job.

investment money used in a way that may earn you more money, for example money used for buying property or shares in a company

late used for talking about someone who has died, especially recently

cloakroom a room in a theatre, station etc where people can leave their coats, bags and other possessions while they are in the building

dignity the impressive behaviour of someone who controls their emotions in a difficult situation.

Useful phrases

it's about time used for saying that someone should do something soon