

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

**Level:** Intermediate upwards

**Timing:** 90 minutes plus

**Material needed:** One copy of the student worksheet and Vocabulary record per student

**Group size:** Any

### Overview

This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based around an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* Issue 6/2013. The article is about a famous US whistle-blower from the 1970's, Karen Silkwood.

The tasks in the worksheet check the students' understanding of the article and the language used. The worksheet also provides extra questions for discussion as well as a research task.

The teacher's notes provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys and extension tasks (for in class or as homework).

### Lead-in

Discussing these two questions will help students to understand the concept of whistle-blowing, which is essential to the understanding of the article and questions in the lesson plan.

After a brief discussion, encourage the students to look up the definition of the word and its related derivatives, expressions and usage.

**Key:**

*A whistle-blower is someone who reports dishonest or illegal activities within an organization to someone in authority.*

*A whistle is a small metal or plastic object that you put in your mouth and blow to make a high sound. It can be used for drawing attention to something or someone.*

*The whistle-blower here will be the person who, figuratively, makes a loud noise (by blowing the metaphorical whistle) to make others aware that something is not right.*

### Key words

There are two parts to this task. Both require the students to write the key words next to the meanings. The first eight words are provided while the second eight need to be found in the article.

**Key a:**

1. fuel; 2. lab technician; 3. radiation; 4. spill; 5. shut down; 6. contaminated; 7. union; 8. violations

**Key b:**

9. exposure; 10. faulty; 11. proof; 12. offence; 13. coroner; 14. sedatives; 15. speculation; 16. damages

### Language – understanding expressions

Students are asked to look more closely at three expressions from the article.

**Key:**

1. b
2. life
3. *This is when making money is seen as more important (usually to the employer and company owners) than the well-being of their employees or others. There may be accidents and people may get injured or sick as a result.*
4. *manipulated; Figures were being adjusted, tweaked and changed to make them look better for the company.*

### What are the questions?

Instead of answering comprehension questions, students are given the answers and asked to write questions that could be asked to get those answers. Check the questions, especially for word order and grammar errors, before the students take turns in asking and answering them aloud to make sure their questions really work. There will always be more than one possible correct question for each answer.

**Key (possible answers):**

1. *What was Karen Silkwood's position at Kerr-McGee?*
2. *Where was the Kerr-McGee factory located?*
3. *What did the company Kerr-McGee produce?*
4. *When did Karen Silkwood start working for Kerr-McGee?*
5. *To what was she elected after she became more active at work?*
6. *What did Karen Silkwood steal from Kerr-McGee?*
7. *What could be made with the missing plutonium?*
8. *How did she officially die?*
9. *What did the coroner find in Karen Silkwood's blood?*
10. *Who ordered an autopsy on Karen Silkwood?*
11. *Who received damages from Kerr-McGee?*
12. *Who played the role of Karen Silkwood in the 1983 film?*

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### Teaching and learning strategy: Writing the questions rather than answering questions

Asking comprehension questions about an article this length may simply lead to the students easily finding and copying one line out of the text for each answer. This rather unchallenging task might soon become boring. So instead of asking students to give answers, ask them to decide which questions could be asked to provide the information / answers that are given.

Doing this requires more attention to the language, especially grammar and word order, and will get the students thinking and exercising their English skills more than just repeating what they have read.

This is an ideal pair work task as the students can discuss their questions before writing them. Students can write the questions in a different order to how the answers are set out. Once the questions are written they can be handed to another pair of students. The second pair should not only try to match the questions to the answers, they should also check if the questions really are correct and make sense.

### Dilemmas for discussion

Here the students are provided with four work-related dilemmas to read and discuss. Once they have discussed all or some of the dilemmas given, they could come up with further examples of their own – perhaps something that really is bothering them at work, or just something they may have heard about somewhere.

### Webquest

Ask the students to search for information about a more recent whistle-blower, Edward Snowden. Ask them to make notes about the main points in each whistle-blowing case and then compare the two situations by looking for any similarities or differences.

### Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all the new and useful vocabulary they have learned during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

### Related topics on onestopenglish

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics go to the following lesson plans in the Business section on onestopenglish:

Business Spotlight: Who can you trust?

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/who-can-you-trust/>

Business Spotlight: Henry Ford's \$5 pay offer

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/henry-fords-5-pay-offer/552690.article>

Business tasks: Decisions

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-tasks/decisions/>

You may also find topical and relevant *Guardian* news lessons here on onestopenglish:

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/news-lessons/>

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### 1 Lead-in

Answer the questions below.

What is a whistle-blower?

Where do you think the word comes from?

### 2 Key words

a. Write these words from the article next to the definitions below.

contaminated  
shut down

fuel  
spill

lab technician  
union

radiation  
violations

1. a substance that produces heat or power when it is burned \_\_\_\_\_
2. someone with technical training whose job involves using special equipment in a laboratory \_\_\_\_\_
3. a form of energy produced during a nuclear reaction that is used for making electrical power but can also kill or harm humans who receive too much of it \_\_\_\_\_
4. an amount of liquid that has accidentally flowed out of its container \_\_\_\_\_
5. to close something, usually permanently, or to stop it from operating \_\_\_\_\_
6. made dirty, polluted or poisonous by the addition of a chemical, waste or infection \_\_\_\_\_
7. an organization that represents the workers in a particular industry and tries to improve pay, conditions etc \_\_\_\_\_
8. actions that are in opposition to a law, agreement, principle etc \_\_\_\_\_

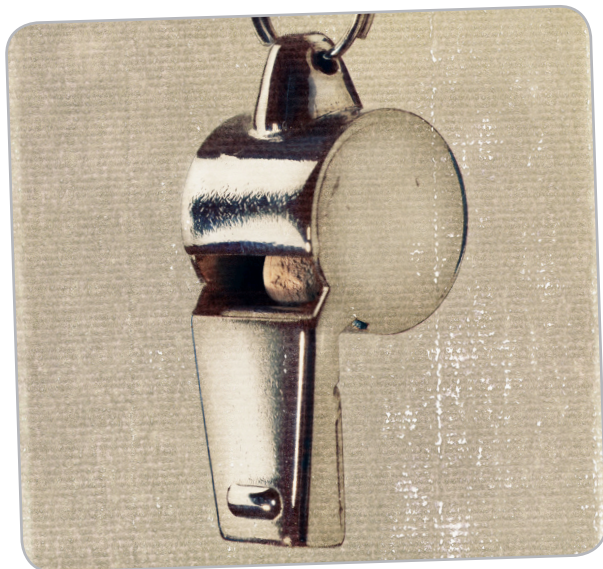
b. Read the definitions below and find the words in the article.

9. not working correctly or made correctly \_\_\_\_\_
10. the state of being put into a situation in which something harmful or dangerous might affect you \_\_\_\_\_
11. information or evidence that shows that something is definitely true or definitely exists \_\_\_\_\_
12. a crime or illegal activity for which there is a punishment \_\_\_\_\_
13. someone whose job is to decide officially how a person died, especially if they died in a sudden or violent way \_\_\_\_\_
14. drugs that make people calmer, or make them sleep \_\_\_\_\_
15. ideas or discussion about why something has happened or what might happen \_\_\_\_\_
16. money that a court orders you to pay someone because you have harmed them \_\_\_\_\_

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

by Vicki Sussens



**Her role in exposing the scandalous business practices in the atomic industry cost Karen Silkwood her life. Vicki Sussens reports on a courageous union activist from Crescent, Oklahoma.**

#### Background

Karen Silkwood (1946–74) is regarded as a whistle-blower who paid the ultimate price. In 1972, she started work at the Kerr-McGee Cimarron factory in Crescent, near Oklahoma City, which produced nuclear fuel. As a lab technician, she polished fuel rods filled with plutonium and checked them for quality. At the time, staff knew radiation was unhealthy, but weren't informed it could cause cancer.

#### The problem

In 1974, Kerr-McGee fell behind on a major contract and pushed its staff to work longer hours. Mistakes increased and so did radiation spills. The factory didn't shut down after accidents. In July, Silkwood was contaminated for the first time. Worried that the firm was putting profits before safety, she became more active in the union and was elected to the bargaining committee. She started collecting cases of safety violations. These included exposure to contamination, faulty respiratory equipment and rods being improperly stored. She also discovered

that data was being manipulated to allow faulty fuel rods to pass quality control.

#### The solution

In September, Silkwood reported the cases to the union's national office in Washington, DC. They told her that exposure to plutonium could cause cancer and that the faulty rods could cause a nuclear disaster. They wanted more proof and Silkwood offered to get it. The union told *New York Times* journalist David Burnham they had a story for him.

#### What happened next

To provide proof, Silkwood stole documents, which was a major federal offence. Then she discovered that 18 kilograms of plutonium were missing, enough to make three nuclear bombs. On 5th November, she found she was contaminated and underwent decontamination. The next day, she again tested positive although she hadn't worked in a lab. Other tests found her home was contaminated, and that she had both inhaled and ingested plutonium. Kerr-McGee officials accused her of contaminating herself to embarrass the firm. But Silkwood was frightened and told her family she planned to leave the company. Her national union contact, Steve Wodka, decided it was time to blow the whistle. On 13th November, on her way to take documents to Wodka and the journalist Burnham, she was killed when her car went off the road. Although witnesses claimed she had left with documents, none were found in her car. The coroner discovered sedatives in her blood and the official version was that she had fallen asleep at the wheel. Speculation that she had been forced off the road was never confirmed. An autopsy ordered by the Atomic Energy Commission found she could not have contaminated herself because the plutonium in her body came from a restricted area of the plant. This mystery was never solved. In 1986, after a long legal battle, Kerr-McGee paid damages to the Silkwood family for having contaminated Karen. Silkwood's story became a powerful force for the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The hugely successful film, *Silkwood*, with Meryl Streep playing Karen Silkwood, came out in 1983.

© *Business Spotlight*, 6/2013, [www.business-spotlight.de](http://www.business-spotlight.de)

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### 3 Language – understanding expressions

Answer the questions using information from the article to help you.

1. What is *the ultimate price*? (para 1)
  - a. one million dollars
  - b. death
  - c. freedom
2. Complete this definition: When someone pays the ultimate price, they pay with their \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Explain what *putting profits before safety* means. (para 2)  
What might happen when a company or business does this?
4. Which word will complete this sentence from the article? *She also discovered that data was being \_\_\_\_\_.* (para 2)  
What does it mean?

### 4 What are the questions?

Write questions that you could ask about the article to get the answers below.

e.g. For answer '1974', a possible question could be, *When did Karen Silkwood die?*

1. A lab technician. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Near Oklahoma City. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Nuclear fuel. \_\_\_\_\_
4. 1972. \_\_\_\_\_
5. The union bargaining committee. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Documents. \_\_\_\_\_
7. Three nuclear bombs. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Falling asleep at the wheel. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Sedatives. \_\_\_\_\_
10. The Atomic Energy Commission. \_\_\_\_\_
11. The Silkwood family. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Meryl Streep. \_\_\_\_\_

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### 5 Dilemmas for discussion

Read and discuss these dilemmas and then come up with a fifth work-related dilemma of your own.

What would you do in these situations?

1. Your colleague called in sick and has been off work now for a week. Because of this you have to do her work as well as your own. Yesterday evening on TV you saw her sitting in the front row at a fashion event that was being reported live on the local news.
2. You see Diana stealing money from the till. It's not the first time you have seen her do this. Her husband has left her with three children and you know she doesn't have enough money for her oldest son's school skiing trip.
3. You told Wolfgang about your idea for a new marketing campaign. He later presented your idea to your boss as his own idea. The campaign won an award and Wolfgang received a cash prize for it. Wolfgang is married to your boss's cousin.
4. Your neighbour sells his organic fruit and vegetables at the weekly market. You have seen him spray his fruit and veg with pesticides after hours. He gives half of his profit to the local hospice.

5. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### 6 Webquest

Search for information about a more recent whistle-blower, Edward Snowden.

Put together the basic facts and compare his case and situation to that of Karen Silkwood.

## Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

### Vocabulary record: Whistle-blower Karen Silkwood

verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
manipulate			
	spill		
		contaminated	
			actively

Vocabulary record