

To Build a Fire by Jack London

from To Build a Fire and Other Stories

This Level 1 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at http://www.rdlthai.com/ellsa_buildfire1.html

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1. SYNOPSIS

1a) Synopsis

In winter months, the northern parts of Canada and Alaska receive very little sunlight and become dangerously cold—so cold that a man could freeze to death if he is not careful. This is the Arctic: one of the coldest places on earth. The Newcomer is an inexperienced young man who comes to this frozen land in search of gold. He has been warned about the dangers of the cold, but goes out on a trip anyway. He is hoping to find a way to send logs down the Yukon River once spring arrives and the ice melts. He has also been warned not to travel alone in such cold, but he goes anyway, with only his dog for a companion. As the story begins, they are hurrying to get back to their camp and rejoin the man's friends. After the dog falls through some ice, the Newcomer begins to worry about the dangers of the cold and of frostbite, when it is so cold that a person's skin freezes. He stops to build a fire and eat some lunch.

Soon, however, he decides to continue on his way back to camp and follows a creek to check for any open water and his future plan for the logs. Suddenly, the man falls through the ice. He knows he will need to build another fire or die. He is wet and cold but succeeds in starting a second fire. Foolishly, however, he builds the fire under a pine tree covered in snow. The heat from the fire melts some of the snow in the tree and sends a huge fall of snow from the tree right on the fire. The fire goes out. He tries to start yet another fire. It is so cold, however, that he has a lot of trouble trying to light the fire. His hands are so cold they have no feeling. He cannot even feel his matches. Finally, holding the matches with his teeth, he gets another fire started, but his hands are so cold that he cannot control them and the fire goes out. He even tries to kill his dog to use the warm body to keep him from freezing. But it is too late. Finally, the dog watches him die.

1b) Vocab checkpoint

- **Newcomer (noun)** A newcomer is a person who has just joined an established group of people, a club or a community. It is used from the perspective of the group towards its new member.

- **inexperienced (adjective)** Inexperienced means that a person has little or no firsthand knowledge of a particular activity, profession or way of life.

- **in search of (adverbial phrase)** In search of is often used in place of the -ing form of the verb "to search". It emphasizes an established practice rather than a casual, spontaneous activity. This sentence could be written as: The Newcomer is an inexperienced young man who comes to this frozen land searching for gold.
- **logs (noun)** A log is a tree that has been cut down and stripped of its branches. This way the log is prepared for transporting down the river to saw mills (factories where the logs are cut). This method of transporting logs is often referred to as "floating": logs are floated down the river.
- **frostbite (noun)** Frostbite is a very severe (serious) medical condition (freezing of the skin) caused by extreme exposure to cold weather or ice. Frostbite usually affects fingers and toes first, but can easily spread into the body if left unattended. It can cause gangrene, in which the body parts die and must be amputated (cut off) to protect the person's life.
- **creek (noun)** A creek is a tributary (smaller branch) of a river.
- **open water (noun phrase)** Open, in this case, can mean free flowing or not frozen. Open water is often used to refer to a stretch of water away from the riverbank or shore. In *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane, you saw how four men struggled against the open water of the sea, or open sea.
- **Foolishly (adverb)** A foolish person allows little regard for danger or for protecting him or herself against dangerous conditions. A foolish person may be intelligent, though sometimes foolishness may be compared with words like stupid and idiotic, which indicate that a person may not be intelligent, or may behave according to impulse.
- **feeling (noun)** Feeling, as a noun, refers here to the sensation of touch in the human body. When a person has frostbite, feeling is the first sensation to be lost. We often use the word numb (pronounced num) to describe loss of feeling.
- **feel (verb)** Even though feel is connected to the internal sensation of feeling which disappears when body parts become numb, we also use it, as a verb, to describe the outward sensation of being able to discern (recognize) the presence of an object by touch. This is the meaning used here. Feel may also be used to describe other emotional or physical sensations (or feelings).

2. PRE-STORY

2a) The Cold

As residents of South East Asia, many of you who read *To Build a Fire* by Jack London have never seen snow except in photographs or on television. Many of you have never experienced weather that is cold enough for it to snow. But you

still have some sense of what it means to be cold.

First, think of some cold things that you know about. Try and think of ten things and their names in English. Next, try to remember the time in your life when you were the coldest.

- An early morning shower in the cool season?
- A windy time after a swim?
- Maybe you got wet in a rainstorm and had to go inside an air-conditioned building?
- A holiday in a cold country?

2b) Fire

Do you like fires?

Do you like to build fires?

Suppose you are camping and it is getting cold at night. You should build a fire. How do you build a good fire?

Think about a sequence of 5 simple steps to make a nice warm fire that will burn all night.

Write them down using these sequencers.

1. First, you should...
2. Next, you should...
3. After that, you need to...
4. Then, you...
5. Finally...

Compare your instructions with someone else.

3. IN-STORY

3a) There are 4 main types of conflict which drive a story. They can be defined like this:

man vs. man one person against another person

man vs. society a person against the society he lives in or finds himself in

man vs. nature a person the forces of nature, such as his environment

man vs. himself two elements within a person fighting for power

The 4 types of conflict are sometimes further classified as being either EXTERNAL or INTERNAL.

Which of the above conflicts would you say are EXTERNAL?
Which of the conflicts are INTERNAL?

Many stories may have several kinds of conflict. What 2 types of conflict can you identify in To Build a Fire:

- 1) in which the man struggles to survive against the deadly cold;
- 2) in which the Newcomer is constantly fighting his own foolishness for taking so many risks in such extreme cold and not following the advice of people with more experience?

Which of these two conflicts is the most important to the plot?

3b) The external conflict: Man vs. The Cold—a lexical hunt

- The main conflict in To Build a Fire is man against the cold.
- How many words or phrases can you find in the story that relate to the word cold or the feeling of being cold?
- Check only pages 42-46.
- All the words and phrases occur by then.
- Can you find 20 examples? After you have finished, check the answer key.

3c) The internal conflict: Man vs. His Own Stupidity

Can you find some quotes from the story in which London actually states that his character is not very intelligent.

Search pages 42-46 carefully. After you have finished, check the answer key.

4. EXERCISES

4a) Freezing to Death

In what order does the Newcomer freeze to death?
Rearrange the following details from the story.

- He notices that his feet are numb.
- He wishes he had worn a nose guard to keep his nose warm.
- The man sees his spit (water from his mouth) freeze in the air.
- He takes a mitten off to eat his lunch and his hand goes numb very quickly.
- He starts to feel sleepy.
- His toes and nose actually start to freeze.

- He dies.
- Tobacco juice freezes on his lips.
- He begins to feel warm.

Check your answers in the answer key

4b) Rewriting the story in sequence

Now, use the lines above to write a short narrative paragraph which tells how the man froze to death step-by-step. Use the following narrative sequencers to help keep the story together. You may use some of them more than once (next, then, after that).

First...
 Next...
 Then...
 After that...
 Finally...

5. FOLLOW-UP

5a) Advice: write a short story

In the story *The Newcomer* failed to listen to the advice of the Old Timer and it cost him his life.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you did not listen to the advice or a warning from an older person and had a problem?

- What did they warn you about or what advice did they give you?
- What happened to you to make you realize that they were right?
- Try to remember the words that were actually used and try to recreate the conflict, using conflict ideas from the In-story exercises.

5b) Imaginary dialogs

Instinctive knowledge is not a character or conflict feature that is easy to write about in relation to human experience. It is interesting to note though, that top animation feature producers, like Disney, use animal characterization and conflict very effectively indeed. They portray the emotions of animals very well, in relation to how the animal is likely to feel, based on human knowledge of animal behavior.

In order to build up conflict details, it is necessary to concentrate on the characters involved in the conflict. Imagine that the dog in the story can talk.

- What advice would the dog give the man?
- Would the man listen to the advice?
- How would the man respond to the dog?

Retell the story as a dialog between the man and the dog. Here are the key incidents in the story to guide you.

- The dog is cold and would like a fire.
- The man makes the dog test the ice and the dog falls through the ice.
- The man leaves the first fire, but the dog doesn't want to go.
- The man falls through the ice.
- The man builds a second fire.
- Snow falls on the second fire.
- The man tries to build a third fire, but fails.
- The man tries to kill the dog.
- The dog watches the man die.

Try to recreate some of the stronger parts of the dialog in a short story.

ANSWER KEY

3b) The external conflict: Man vs. The Cold—a lexical hunt—answers

- ice (pg 42, pa 2)
- great cold (pg 42, pa 3)
- winter (pg 42, pa 3)
- 50 degrees below zero (pg 42, pa 4)
- 80 degrees of frost (pg 42, pa 4)
- bite of frost (frostbite) (pg 42, pa 4)
- snow (pg 42, pa 5)
- colder (pg 43, top)
- ice (pg 43, pa 1)
- freeze (pg 43, pa 1)
- frosty air (pg 43, pa 2)
- freezing point (32 degrees Fahrenheit, 0 degrees Celsius) (pg 43, pa 3)
- very cold (pg 43, pa 4)
- cold air (pg 43, pa 4)
- as cold as this (pg 43, pa 5)
- frozen (pg 43, pa 6)
- numb (pg 44, pa 2)
- painful (pg 44, pa 2)
- snow-covered (pg 44, pa 4)
- low temperature (pg 46, pa 1)

3c) The internal conflict: Man vs. His Own Stupidity—answers

- The trouble with him was that he was not able to imagine. (pg 42 pa 4 and all of pa 4)
- He was not much of a thinker. (pg 44, pa 1)
- Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts. (p 44, pa 1)
- He laughed at his own foolishness (pg 45, pa 4)

4a) In what order does the Newcomer freeze to death? Answers

The correct sequence is: 3, 8, 2, 4, 1, 6, 9, 5, 7

- The man sees his spit (water from his mouth) freeze in the air. (pg 42, pa 5)
- Tobacco juice freezes on his lips. (pg 43, pa 5)
- He wishes he had worn a nose guard to keep his nose warm. (pg 44, pa 2)
- He takes a mitten off to eat his lunch and his hand goes numb very quickly. (pg 45, pa 3)
- He notices that his feet are numb. (pg 45, pa 4)
- His toes and nose actually start to freeze. (pg 47, top)
- He begins to feel warm. (pg 51, pa 2)
- He starts to feel sleepy. (pg 51, pa 3)