

Jim Knudsen

Readers' Forum 3

ACTIVE ENGLISH

Readings in the Liberal Arts
and Humanities



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READERS' FORUM

Readers' Forum is a series of four books that make up a comprehensive, sequential course that promises students a high level of English proficiency, enabling them to read English-language newspapers, magazines, books, and online material with complete confidence and to fully participate in serious conversations and discussions.

The *Readers' Forum* books naturally reinforce and enhance one another. They have similar formats and develop all of the essential language and active-reading skills. In some cases, their general subjects and topics, vocabulary, and concepts overlap, but with the topics and concepts discussed in greater detail and looked at from different perspectives, using a more advanced vocabulary and syntax, in succeeding volumes. To expand students' knowledge and expose them to different writing styles, the books' readings all include pertinent background information and abundant short quotations and citations from various media, academic, and classic sources.

Though designed to be used in sequence as a complete and intensive course, the *Readers' Forum* books all stand on their own as well. Each can be effectively adapted to fit the demands of specific teaching and learning situations. Here, in brief, are the four *Readers' Forum* volumes.

Simply English: An Introduction to Today's Key Concepts is the "preface" to the series. Its essays are short (under 300 words) and accessible, written in simplified, but natural English. *Simply English* introduces beginning or low-intermediate-level students to important current-English topics and concepts and familiarizes them with essential words and phrases, giving them the fundamentals they need to smoothly step up to subsequent *Readers' Forum* volumes.

How-To English: Advice for a Better Life is for intermediate-level students. Its 400-450-word readings offer step-by-step advice and instructions on how to perform (and talk about) difficult but essential daily tasks, set and achieve personal goals, and work for a better world.

Everyday English: Current Topics to Read and Talk About is intended for high-intermediate-level students. Its 500-word readings explore a wide variety of today's most interesting topics and pressing issues, public and private, local and global.

Active English: Readings in the Liberal Arts and Humanities is for advanced students. Its 750-800-word readings take up more sophisticated topics related to culture, art, history, ethics, and ideas. Its more challenging exercises and activities further develop the active-reading and critical-thinking skills students have attained through completion of the previous books in the series and serve as an all-round "study guide" for higher-level English-language-proficiency tests like TOEFL and SAT.

To the Student

If your teacher has selected this book for you to read and study this year, it might mean that you have already worked your way step by step through the first three volumes of the *Readers' Forum* series and are now ready for this final “challenge,” *Active English*. And I would be very happy if that were the case.

But if it isn't, the fact that you have been assigned this textbook means that you are an advanced student of English. You already have well-developed reading, listening, and writing skills. You no doubt have a quite large active English vocabulary. You can probably speak English pretty well, too. What's more, you are interested in reading about and discussing cultural and social issues that require a large measure of knowledge, sharp critical-thinking skills, and broad understanding to comprehend.

But most importantly, your being assigned this textbook shows that your teacher believes that you are intellectually ambitious. You're not satisfied with your current English “level” and want to not only improve but to perfect your language skills, to expand and solidify your vocabulary, to broaden your knowledge, to become an even more astute thinker, and to deepen your understanding of the world we live in.

Lucky you! What you want is precisely what *Active English* can give you.

The essays in *Active English* are long (800 words) and written in a high level of academic, literate English. The vocabulary is “difficult” and the sentence structure and syntax are complex. The readings deal with subjects—literature, linguistics, psychology, history, evolution, paleontology, sociology—that are of interest to anyone like you who aspires to “culture,” who likes to be fascinated as well as inspired, who finds “the humanities” exciting and essential, who aims for what used to be called “the good life.” All this, and with challenging, improving, and motivating activities to boot.

So as I said, *Active English* is just what you want and need. Welcome aboard.

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GETTING READY TO READ:
Follow the instructions for
each activity below.

I KEY WORDS PREVIEW

Match these **KEY WORDS** from today’s essay with the dictionary definitions below. Write the words on the lines. Then highlight the words as you come across them in the reading.

abhor	abstention	arbitrarily	humility
lavishly	miserly	mortifying	tenacious

1. *adjective*: of a person who hoards money and spends very little of it; stingy

2. *adverb*: spending and celebrating in a rich, luxurious way; elaborately

3. *noun*: the quality of being modest and self-effacing

4. *adjective*: deeply embarrassing; shameful; disgraceful

5. *adjective*: doing something longer than expected; strong-willed; resolute

6. *noun*: doing without something, usually for dietary or religious reasons; forgoing

7. *verb*: hate; detest

8. *adverb*: done without planning or reason; randomly

II KEY CONCEPTS PREVIEW

Match these **KEY CONCEPTS** from today's reading with their definitions below. Write the concepts on the lines.

the Bard novella omniscient narrator paradigm protagonist spoiler alert

1. the teller of a story who sees everything, including the characters' thoughts

2. a piece of fiction, longer than a short story but shorter than a novel

3. a nickname for the English playwright and poet William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

4. the main character in a story, movie, or drama

5. a critic's warning that his/her review will reveal the ending of a book or movie

6. a typical example or model of something; archetype; exemplar

III THINKING AHEAD

Read these questions and then look for the answers to them as you read today's essay.

1. What is Hannukah and what does it celebrate?
2. What is Ramadan and what does it commemorate and emphasize?
3. What does the holiday known as Kwanzaa encourage African Americans to do?
4. Why wasn't Christmas such a major or popular holiday in England and America in the early 1800s?
5. Who was Charles Dickens and why was he so fond of and nostalgic about Christmas?
6. What had happened in 1843 to make Charles Dickens "in no mood for celebration?"
7. Why was Dickens faced with bankruptcy in 1843?
8. Who is Ebenezer Scrooge and, at first, what does he think of Christmas?
9. How does Scrooge change over the course of the story, "A Christmas Carol"?
10. How did Charles Dickens "invent" Christmas?

TODAY'S READING

Read this essay carefully.



Charles Dickens (1812-1870), portrait from the 1860s

[1] December is a month filled with holidays, both sacred and secular. Hannukah (or Chanukah, a “moveable feast” that can also occur in late November) is a Hebrew holiday that marks a landmark event in Jewish history. In 165 B.C., or so the story goes, a small band of tenacious Jewish fighters recaptured the Holy Temple of Jerusalem from their powerful Greek oppressors. Ramadan, another moveable feast that also sometimes falls at year’s end, is a month-long Muslim festival whose roots go back 1,500 years. Ramadan commemorates the revealing by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad of the first verses of the Qur’an. It stresses fasting and other forms of abstention as a way to “cleanse the soul” and to practice patience and humility. And then there’s Kwanzaa, the newest December holiday, which originated in the 1960s during America’s fight for civil rights. Kwanzaa’s African-American founders initially saw the holiday as an alternative to Christmas—which they regarded as “a white religion” that had no meaning for blacks. But this radical (and justifiably angry) stance was later moderated. Today, Kwanzaa is a festive occasion that encourages black Americans to take pride in their African cultural and historical roots.

[2] Of course, Christmas is the best known and most widely celebrated of December holidays, one that holds a special place warring in the hearts and minds of Christians everywhere—one that, as we saw earlier, can even inspire warring soldiers to lay down their arms. But Christmas wasn’t always the special occasion it is today. In fact, in the early 1800s, Christmas in England and America had almost disappeared as a public and private celebration. Many people saw Christmas as a “pagan” or primitive tradition, contending that the date for Christmas, December 25, had been arbitrarily set and had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ (and historians today say they were right). British Puritans had even tried to get Parliament to ban the holiday because of its un-Christian-like drinking and reveling. And the British and American “gentry” (and those who emulated them) simply thought Christmas common and “low class.”

[3] But then along came Charles Dickens (1812-1870) who, next to “the Bard,” ranks as the greatest author ever to write in English. Dickens loved Christmas. His family had observed it lavishly when Charles was a boy (that is, until his father was locked up in a prison for debtors).

These nostalgic memories stayed with him. (A) This is especially true of “A Christmas Carol,” a novella that Dickens wrote in 1843, though at the time, the 39-year-old Dickens was in no mood for celebration. After publishing half a dozen enormously popular comic novels, his latest works had been ignored by the reading public and panned by the critics. He was even contemplating giving up writing altogether. To add insult to injury, Dickens, always a big spender with a large household to support, had huge debts and was facing the mortifying prospect of bankruptcy. 35

[4] But Dickens pulled himself together and in just six feverish weeks completed “A Christmas Carol.” This is the immortal tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, the bitter, miserly, malicious old-man protagonist whose favorite expression is “Bah! Humbug!” by which Scrooge means, “I hate the world and everyone in it.” And what does Scrooge abhor most? Christmas! As the story’s omniscient narrator tells us, Scrooge believes that “Every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding.” But thanks to the midnight visits of three spirits—the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future—Scrooge changes. (Spoiler alert!) Much to everyone’s surprise, Scrooge becomes cheerful, generous, and kind. He sees Christmas as Dickens saw it, as a time “when people bury their past animosities in their present happiness.” 40 45

[5] “A Christmas Carol” came out just in time for Christmas. It sold out overnight and was reprinted several times, allowing Dickens to pay off all his debts. It revived Dickens’s reputation and rekindled his passion for writing. And its vision of Christmas “began the transformation of the holiday into the most significant celebration of the Christian calendar,” as Les Standiford writes in his book, *The Man Who Invented Christmas*. The foods featured in the story; the falling snow that makes for a dream-like “white” Christmas; the emphasis on goodwill and charity—all of these created an image in the minds of the story’s readers that compelled them to see the “true meaning of Christmas” as Dickens defined it. Dickens’s most recent biographer, Peter Ackroyd, put it like this: “Christmas was for him the paradigm of an ideal human society, a society held together by mutual respect and mutual responsibility—with plenty of turkey and mince pies thrown in.” And despite the crass commercialism that now attends it, that’s what Christmas still is. 50 55

sacred = holy; spiritual; religious
secular = everyday; normal; non-religious
contending = professing; arguing;
 believing; announcing
malicious = mean; cruel

*Christmas lights on Oxford street,
 November 22, 2009, in London
 ©Patrick Wang / Shutterstock.com*



READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY BUILDING:

Follow the instructions for each activity below.

I INTERPRETING WORDS AND PHRASES IN CONTEXT

Complete each sentence below with the correct choice.

1. The underlined adjective “landmark” in paragraph 1 means
(A) milestone (B) mythological (C) mysterious (D) momentary
2. The underlined adverb “justifiably” in paragraph 1 indicates that the author of today’s reading thinks that the initial radical stance of Kwanzaa’s creators was
(A) understandable (B) exaggerated (C) illegal (D) mistaken
3. When something is “moderated” as the word is used in paragraph 1, that something is
(A) made less formal
(B) softened so as not to sound so harsh
(C) given a completely new meaning and purpose
(D) simplified to make it easier to understand
4. The underlined noun “reveling” in paragraph 2 is based on the verb “revel,” which means to
(A) speak out against something (B) hold non-religious celebrations
(C) enjoy oneself in a lively, noisy way (D) eat too much
5. The underlined phrase “To add insult to injury” in paragraph 3 can be replaced with
(A) By the way (B) At the same time
(C) More often than not (D) To make matters worse
6. The underlined word “petty” in paragraph 4 could be replaced by all of these EXCEPT
(A) small-minded (B) hostile (C) trivial (D) paltry

II GETTING DETAILS, UNDERSTANDING IDEAS

Read the sentences below. Check [x] the sentences that are true or that can be reasonably inferred from the information in the essay.

1. [] By using the phrase “or so the story goes” to talk about the event in Jewish history that Hannukah celebrates, the author suggests that the story may not be historically accurate.
2. [] At first, the creators of Kwanzaa hoped that the new holiday would replace Christmas in the hearts and minds of African Americans.
3. [] The word “pagan” as used in paragraph 2 most likely means “too modern.”
4. [] The Parliament of Great Britain refused to ban Christmas because it is an indisputable fact that December 25 is the correct date of birth for Jesus Christ.
5. [] Puritans were Christians who had very strong religious feelings and ideas and who lived simple, sober lives.
6. [] In the early 1800s, being unable to repay one’s debts, as Charles Dickens’s father was unable to do, was a punishable crime.
7. [] Dickens was an unmarried man who went out a lot and tended to spend more than he earned.

8. [] In “A Christmas Carol,” the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future showed Scrooge something that either frightened or impressed him into changing his attitude toward Christmas and life in general.
9. [] It is implied that after the success of “A Christmas Carol,” Dickens went on to write more novels and journalism.
10. [] The underlined adjective “crass” in paragraph 5 indicates that the author of the essay thinks that the advertising and profit-making that attend Christmas are mindless and tasteless.

III IN YOUR OWN WORDS

On the lines below, write your own short, but full-sentence answers to these questions about some other important words and concepts in today’s essay.

1. Why are Hannukah and Ramadan called “moveable feasts”?

2. What is meant by “fasting”?

3. Who are “the gentry”?

4. What does the word “panned” as used in paragraph 3 mean?

5. What are “nostalgic memories”?

6. The word “Scrooge” is now an everyday English noun. What does it mean?

7. What is “charity”?

8. What can be said about “turkey and mince pies” in relation to Christmas?

IV PARAGRAPH CONSTRUCTION

Which sentence below should be added to paragraph 3 at position (A)?

1. Dickens was an energetic writer who was not only a novelist, but who also wrote journalism and edited two popular magazines.
2. Dickens never forgot how much fun he had had as a young boy at Christmastime, and he never forgave his father for destroying those memories.
3. In his fiction and journalism, Dickens brought his love of Christmas to unforgettable life.
4. If Dickens hadn't loved Christmas so much, he may never have written any fiction or journalism at all.

V ESSAY EXPANSION AND IMPROVEMENT

Listed below are six pieces of information. Put a [+] sign by the information that might be added to the essay to make it more interesting and informative for the reader and a [-] sign by the information that doesn't really belong in the essay. (This is an "opinion" activity with no real "correct" answers.)

- A. [] Martin Luther King was the acknowledged leader of the fight for civil rights in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.
- B. [] In the late 1500s and 1600s, many Puritans left England for the "New World" in America to escape religious discrimination.
- C. [] For several years in a row when Dickens was a boy, it snowed in December so that the boy came to associate Christmas with snow.
- D. [] Dickens had a wife, ten children, several needy in-laws, and various others who made demands on his income.
- E. [] Ebenezer had a partner named Jacob Marley who had recently died, leaving Scrooge in sole charge of the business.
- F. [] One biographer says that while Dickens was writing "A Christmas Carol," he "wept and laughed" and predicted that it would "make a great uproar."

VI KEY WORDS IN ACTION



Fill in the blank in each sentence below with the correct form of one of the **KEY WORDS** on page 80. Listen to check your answers.

1. Budget cuts won't allow us to have a _____ office Christmas party this year like the big one we had last year.
2. Don't ask Peter for any kind of financial help. You know what a cheapskate and _____ he is.
3. I admire foreign sumo wrestlers' _____ and ability to overcome so much culture shock.
4. I have gout, and my doctor says that I have to _____ from alcohol and fatty foods.
5. _____ by his failure to live up to his boasts, Jim cut off all relations with his old friends.

6. I can't help but look on the candidate with _____ and disgust. He goes against everything I believe in.
7. The students protested against the professor's _____ grading system, which they claim is unfair and not at all objective.
8. Though our old classmate Toru is now rich and famous, he is not a bit stuck-up. He's still as friendly and _____ as he always was.

VII MAKING CONVERSATION



Fill in each blank below with one of the **KEY CONCEPTS** on page 81. Change the form where needed. Listen to check your answers. Then practice the conversations with a partner.

1. A: This year marks the 400th anniversary of _____ death.
B: I know. I'm even thinking about going to London to see some of the special productions of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe Theatre.
2. A: I hear you're writing a novel.
B: Well, at only 100 pages, it's more of a _____ than a novel.
3. A: Who's the _____ in your story?
B: I am. It's totally autobiographical.
4. A: Our current political election model isn't working.
B: I agree. We need to come up with a more efficient _____.
5. A: Writers today don't use the _____ as much as the classic, 19th-century novelists did.
B: No, today's storytellers seem to prefer first-person narrators.
6. A: Did you read that review of Murakami's new novel?
B: No, I skipped it. The reviewer prefaced it with a _____, and I didn't want to know the ending.

VIII LISTEN AND WRITE

As you listen to the short talk, fill in the blanks below.



Many _____ complain about how _____ and even Christmas-card makers _____ "Xmas" for Christmas, as in "Merry Xmas!" "It's anti-religious," they say. "It _____ Christmas and makes it even more _____ than it already is." One _____ recently _____ called the use of "Xmas" a "_____ against Jesus Christ." Well, it turns out that he had no _____ what he was talking about—_____. The "X" in "Xmas" is, in fact, an _____ Greek _____ for "Chi," which actually means "Christ." In the old _____ days, monks _____ "Christ" with "X" to save time when they _____ lengthy _____ texts.