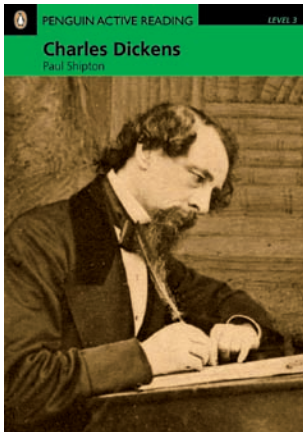




Charles Dickens

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Summary

Charles Dickens is still remembered as one of Britain's greatest writers. His novels can make people laugh at his hilarious characters and scenes, but also cry at his depiction of social injustices.

Chapter 1: Charles Dickens, born in 1812 in the south of England, did not have an easy childhood. He had to leave school and start working in a boot polish factory because his father was constantly running into heavy debts.

Chapter 2: At sixteen he got a job as an office boy and a year later he became a newspaper reporter. It was around this time that he started writing short stories – sketches – about life in London, which he published in magazines under the name of 'Boz'. As his stories sold well, he was asked to write a novel on life in the country: *The Pickwick Papers*. It was published in twenty monthly parts and it made Dickens rich and famous. The hard years were over.

Chapter 3: Life smiled at Dickens: he was a popular writer and his wife, Catherine Hogarth, had had their first son. But the death of Catherine's sister at seventeen was a heavy blow. His novels became more sombre, as can be seen in *Oliver Twist*.

Chapter 4: All of Dickens's later novels were aimed at raising awareness of the social evils in Victorian England. In *Nicholas Nickleby* he attacked bad schools, and in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, evil moneylenders. As the latter novel and *Barnaby Rudge* were published weekly, Dickens got exhausted and fell ill.

Chapter 5: Dickens decided that the best cure for his tiredness was to tour the United States with his wife but without their four children. The trip turned out to be very gratifying: crowds of people greeted him wherever he

went and what he saw gave him enough writing material for a travel book – *American Notes* – and a novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. However, neither pleased his American readers much, due to his criticism of slavery and of the growing materialism he saw in their country.

Touring the United States gave Dickens a taste for travelling. For the next few years, he and his growing family moved to Italy, then to Switzerland, and finally to France. However, neither his trips nor his fame made Dickens happy: he was slowly becoming more estranged from his wife in spite of their ten children.

Chapter 6: To Dickens, greed was also widespread in England. He believed that people should not expect the government to solve all social problems. Each individual should feel responsible for the well-being of his or her community. It was to teach this lesson that he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, one of the most famous Christmas stories in the world.

Chapter 7: For some time Dickens toyed with the idea of writing his biography, but his wife dissuaded him. Rather than disclosing family secrets, he decided to pour his past experiences into *David Copperfield*, the novel which he used to call his 'favourite son'.

Chapter 8: By 1850 the new magazine he started editing was selling 100,000 copies. In it he started publishing *Bleak House*, which describes the lives of street children in London, and *Hard Times*, a novel on the working conditions in industrial England.

Chapter 9: The pull of the past got stronger and stronger as Dickens became older. He first wrote *Little Dorrit*, a novel set in a debtors' prison like the one his father had been sent to. Then, he bought Gad's Hill Place, the house he had dreamt of since childhood. He also returned to his interest in the theatre: the play he wrote was such a success that even Queen Victoria saw it. But it also led to a turning point in his life. He fell in love with an eighteen-year-old actress and separated from his wife.

Chapter 10: Dickens's love of the theatre continued. He embarked on two very successful national tours, reading parts of his novels to crowds at theatres. Then, he launched another magazine. This time, his second historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, appeared in each issue. He was now the most famous writer in the country.

Chapter 11: His next novel, *Great Expectations*, is much more complex than *David Copperfield*, the novel it most resembles. Nobody who has read the novel can forget Abel



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Magwitch, the criminal who pays for Pip's education, or Miss Havisham and her obsession with taking revenge on men.

Chapter 12: Dickens's mood became more sombre in his last full novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. Not only was he feeling more ill and tired, he was also losing his faith in humankind. He embarked on yet two more reading tours: one to the United States, the other in his own country. While working on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* he had a stroke and died surrounded by Ellen Ternan and his children.

Background and themes

Charles Dickens lived at the height of the British Industrial Revolution. When he was born the country was mostly agrarian; when he died, it had become the most highly industrialised country in the world. But, at first, the poor did not profit much from such a quick transformation. There were great social injustices and few laws to defend them from wealthy factory and mill owners. It was partly thanks to Dickens's novels that the better-off became aware of the predicament of the poor. Laws were passed to protect the poor and countless charities did much to lessen social inequality.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- Research:** Charles Dickens was born in England in 1812. Using books or the Internet, have students look up information about what life was like in their own country in the early nineteenth century.

While reading

- Read carefully:** Apart from his job as a newspaper reporter, Charles started to write stories about life in big cities and in the country. Have students underline the titles of three stories he was able to publish and so start a Dickens bibliography.
- Discuss:** Have students talk about jobs. In Chapters 1 and 2 readers get to know all the jobs Charles did before he became a famous novelist. Have students leaf through the pages and make a list of Charles's different jobs. Which job would they like to do?

After reading

- Pair work:** John Dickens liked to spend more than he earned. In pairs, have students list all the problems that he brought his family. What advice would they give to people who do this?

- Discuss:** Books or magazines? Have students discuss the following. Dickens's first novels came out in parts in magazines that appeared once a month. Why was this so? Would you like to read a novel that way? Why/why not?

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

- Research:** During most of Dickens's life the Queen of England was Queen Victoria. Her reign was so long that the nineteenth century in England is often called the Victorian Age. Using books or the Internet, have students look up when Victoria became queen and when she died.

While reading

- Discuss:** Have students talk about changing society. *Dickens wrote his novels for two reasons: a) for readers to have fun and b) for readers to know about the problems poor people had. Is Oliver Twist fun to read? Why/why not? What did its readers learn about the country's poor? In your country, is there any writer like Dickens?*
- Discuss:** Have students talk about writers. *Which book were Dickens's readers in the port of New York waiting for? Why did they want to get the last part of the story? Can you think of any writer as popular as Dickens nowadays?*
- Pair work:** In pairs, have students look up the names of the four novels which appear in these two chapters and add them to the bibliography. Then have them discuss which they would like to read.

After reading

- Write:** Have students write a short letter to Dickens asking him not to kill Little Nell.
- Group work and role play:** In groups, have students organise an interview with Nicholas Nickleby to ask him about the terrible conditions at Squeers' school. One student can be Nicholas and the others, the reporters.

Chapters 5–6

While reading

- Discuss:** Have students talk about Dickens as a father. *In what ways was Dickens great fun as a father? Was he always great fun? How do you think his children felt when he looked through their cupboards and checked their hands? How would you feel if your father did the same?*
- Discuss:** Have students talk about Christmas. *What's Christmas-time like in your country? Do families come together as do the Cratchits in A Christmas Carol? Is it a time of food, drink and parties? Do people give presents? If you do not celebrate Christmas, what religious celebrations are there in your country?*



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- 14 Read carefully and write:** Have students go over pages 22–23 and then write the three postcards that Dickens may have sent his sister Fanny from Italy, Switzerland and Paris. They may want to find pictures for the postcards.

After reading

- 15 Film:** Walt Disney's 1983 film version of *A Christmas Carol*. Have students watch the 24-minute film or any of the many film versions of the story and write a short review.

Chapters 7–8

While reading

- 16 Research and discuss:** Have students learn about working conditions. Using books or the Internet, have students look up information about working conditions in their own country in the nineteenth century. They can also ask their grandparents about working conditions when they were young.
- 17 Discuss:** Have students talk about cities.
Do you know any city like Coketown? Are its buildings black from smoke? Is its river dark and dirty? Are there any plans to clean them?

After reading

- 18 Role play:** In pairs, have students write down the dialogue Dickens and his wife must have had on whether to publish his family secrets or not, and then have them role play it.
- 19 Write:** As if they were Dickens, have students write a letter to a newspaper editor complaining about how black and dirty their own city, or a city they may know, has become.

Chapters 9–10

While reading

- 20 Discuss:** Have students discuss the role of work in people's lives.
How many things was Dickens doing at the same time? Is it good to work so hard?
- 21 Discuss:** Have students talk about historical novels. Many people have 'learnt' about the French Revolution through the reading of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. Have students discuss the advantages and disadvantages of historical novels.
Have you read any historical novel? Did you like it? Why / why not? Are historical novels true history? Why do some people like them more than history books?

After reading

- 22 Write:** Have students think about family problems. In Victorian England it was a scandal for a man to leave his wife for a younger woman. Have students write an article in a cheap newspaper of the time about what Dickens did to his wife (pages 42–43).

- 23 Writing and artwork:** Have students design one of the ads for Dickens's national reading tour. Make them include the names of the novels which, according to your students, are the most interesting.

Chapters 11–12

While reading

- 24 Discuss:** Have students consider happy or sad endings. Have students discuss which of the two endings in *Great Expectations* they prefer.
Which of the two endings in Great Expectations do you like better? After you've read about the story, which one seems more real?
- 25 Discuss:** Have students discuss whether they like to watch films based on books that they have read.

After reading

- 26 Role play:** Have the students act out the conversation between Miss Havisham, Pip and Stella on pages 50–51. Remind them to include the 'stage directions' from the narrative.
- 27 Research:** Have students find out which films versions of Dickens's novels are available in their video shop and recommend the ones they think are most interesting to the rest of the class.
- 28 Write:** Get students to add to their bibliography all the titles of novels by Dickens they may not have included yet.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word list and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.