

AUDIENCE ENRICHMENT GUIDE DRAFT

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Set the stage for a powerful and entertaining live theatre experience! The Grand Theatre's 2025-26 Season Audience Enrichment Guides are designed to enrich and provide context for educators and students to engage more deeply with the production, both before and after visiting the Grand Theatre.

Each guide contains a range of material such as:

- Background information on the play and artists involved
- Plot synopsis, character lists, themes, curriculum connections
- Exciting insights specific to each production
- Classroom activities and reflection questions to guide discussions

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

Live theatre requires an audience, so everyone has an important role to play! As we welcome you to the Grand Theatre, here are some **theatre etiquette tips** to remember:

- Before the performance:
 - Please **arrive early**, enabling enough time to find your school's assigned seats.
 - We are a **scent-free environment** that **values respectful behaviour**.
 - **Avoid bringing backpacks/large bulky items** as they will need to remain in the lobby and can not come with you to your seat (due to emergency exit regulations).
 - While there is no dress code, we respectfully ask that **hats are removed**.
 - *Have an open mind and let the performance surprise you!*
- During the performance:
 - Please **turn off your cell phone**/electronic devices. Vibrations, sounds, and screen light during the performance is very distracting for the performers and other audience members.
 - Please remember that **only bottled water** is allowed in the theatre; **no food** during the show.
 - **Using cameras or recording devices during a performance is never permitted.**
 - When the lights dim, that's your cue to stop talking and turn your attention to the stage to enjoy the show.
 - If you **must leave your seat**, wait for an **appropriate break** in the show and quietly head towards the closest exit. An usher will help you.
 - Clap, cheer, laugh, and **feel!** **Make sure your reactions are respectful to those on stage and around you in the audience.** Theatre is LIVE, so remember *you can be seen and heard!*
- After the performance:
 - **Remain in your seats** until your teacher/chaperone instructs you to leave. Exit the theatre in an orderly fashion. Please **take all belongings and any garbage with you.**
 - Take a moment to reflect: What new ideas or perspectives are you leaving with?
 - Theatre is meant to be shared! Tell someone about your experience!

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Meet Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, two close friends who have one solution to all of their problems—lying!

Both lead double lives: Jack uses the fake persona of 'Ernest' to escape his responsibilities, while Algernon invents an imaginary friend to dodge social obligations. But when both men fall in love with eligible ladies, they must untangle a web of lies, misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and hilarious situations to win their hearts. Will they be able to keep up the ruse?

Considered one of Wilde's best works, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a guaranteed laugh-out-loud chaos of troubles and mix-ups from start to finish. With its clever humour and playful commentary of Victorian society, the play has remained a staple for over a century.

Running Time: 2h 35m, including one intermission.

Age recommendation: 10+

Content Advisory

This play contains mild sexuality. Production elements include theatrical fog and haze.

Themes

- Identity and Self-Discovery
- Love and Romance
- Morality
- Class and Social Status
- Gender Roles and Social Expectations
- Queer Identity, Performance of Gender

Curriculum Connections

The Arts

- Dance, Grade 1-8
 - A2, A3
- Dance, Grade 9 (ATC1O)
Dance, Grade 10 (ATC2O)
Dance, Grade 11 (ATC3M/ACT3O)
Dance, Grade 12 (ATC4M/ATC4E)
 - B1, B2, B3, C2
- Drama, Grade 1-8
 - B2, B3

- Drama, Grade 9 (ADA1O)
Drama, Grade 10 (ADA2O)
Drama, Grade 11 (ADA3M/ADA3O)
Drama, Grade 12 (ADA4M/ADA4E)
 - o B1, B2, B3, C1, C2, C3
- Exploring and Creating in the Arts, Grade 11 (AEA3O)
Exploring and Creating in the Arts, Grade 12 (AEA4O)
 - o A1, A2, B1, B2, B3, B4, C1, C2, C3
- Music, Grade 1-8
 - o C2, C3
- Music, Grade 9 (AMU1O)
Music, Grade 10 (AMU2O)
Music, Grade 11 (AMU3M/AMU3O)
Music, Grade 12 (AMU4M/AMU4E)
 - o B1, B2, B3, B4, C2, C3
- Visual Arts, Grade 1-8
 - o D2, D3
- Visual Arts, Grade 9 (AVI1O)
Visual Arts, Grade 10 (AVI2O)
Visual Arts, Grade 11 (AVI3M/AVI3O)
Visual Arts, Grade 12 (AVI4M/AVI4E)
 - o B1, B2, B3, C2, C3

Canadian and World Studies

- History - World History since the Fifteenth Century, Grade 12 (CHY4U/CHY4C)
 - o D2, D3
- History - Adventures in World History, Grade 12 (CHM4E)
 - o C1, C4

English

- English, Grade 9 (ENL1W)
 - o A1, A3, B1, C1, C2, C3, D1, D2)
- English, Grade 10 (ENG2D/ENG2P)
English, Grade 11 (ENG3U/ENG3C/ENG3E)
English, Grade 12 (ENG4U/ENG4C/ENG4E)
 - o A1 Listening to Understand: A1.1-9; A2 Speaking to Communicate: A2.4-7; A3 Reflecting on Skills and Strategies: A3.2; B1 Reading for Meaning: B1.2, B1.5-8; B2 Understanding Form

and Style: B2.2-3; B3 Reading with Fluency: B3.2-3; B4 Reflecting on Skills and Strategies: B4.2; C1 Developing and Organizing Content: C1.3; C2 Using Knowledge of Form and Style: C2.1-3; D1 Understanding Media Texts: D1.1-6; D2 Understanding Media Forms, Conventions, and Techniques: D2.1-2

- Presentation and Speaking Skills, Grade 11 (EPS3O)
 - A1 Identifying Elements of Effective Presentations: A1.1-5; A2 Assessing Presentations: A2.1-5
- The Writer's Craft, Grade 12 (EWC4U/EWC4C)
 - A1 Writing, Writers, and the Writing Life: A1.1-6; B1 Exploring Ideas, Forms and Styles: B1.1

English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development

- English as a Second Language, ESL Level 1 (ESLAO)
- English as a Second Language, ESL Level 2, (ESLBO)
- English as a Second Language, ESL Level 3, (ESLCO)
- English as a Second Language, ESL Level 4, (ESLDO)
 - A1 Developing Listening Comprehension: A1.1-2; Socio-cultural Competence and Media Literacy; D4 Developing Media Knowledge and Skills: D4.1-2

Social Sciences and Humanities

- Equity Studies - Gender Studies, Grade 11 (HSG3M)
 - A1, B1, B2, B3, C1, C2
- Equity Studies - Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice, Grade 12 (HSE4M)
 - A1, B2
- Family Studies - Dynamics of Human Relationships, Grade 11 (HHD3O)
 - B2, B3
- General Social Sciences - Challenge and Change in Society, Grade 12 (HSB4U)
 - B2, C2, C3
- Philosophy - Philosophy: The Big Questions, Grade 11 (HZB3M)
 - D1
- Philosophy - Philosophy: Questions and Theories, Grade 12 (HZE4U)
 - B2, D1, D2, D3

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Jack Worthing - The play's protagonist and a seemingly responsible country gentleman who goes by "Jack" in Hertfordshire, yet lives a double life as "Ernest" in London. He was found in a handbag as a baby and is guardian to Cecily. Jack is in love with his friend Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen.

Algernon Moncrieff - A charming, idle, and selfish bachelor who invents an imaginary friend, "Bunbury," to escape social duties. Best friend to Jack, nephew of Lady Bracknell, and cousin of Gwendolen. Algernon falls for Cecily.

Gwendolen Fairfax - Algernon's sophisticated and pretentious cousin and Lady Bracknell's daughter. She is in love with Jack - but only if his name is Ernest.

Cecily Cardew - Jack's imaginative, romantic and juvenile ward. Obsessed with "Ernest" (Jack's fictional brother), whom she invents an elaborate romance with.

Lady Bracknell - Gwendolen's domineering mother and Algernon's aunt. Lady Bracknell married well, and her primary goal in life is to see her daughter do the same. Highly quotable, she is a satire of the hypocrisy and snobbishness of the British aristocracy.

Miss Prism - Cecily's strict but secretly sentimental governess whose over-the-top severe pronouncements inspire laughter. This puritan once mistakenly exchanged a baby for a manuscript. She entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.

Rev. Canon Chasuble D.D - The rector on Jack's estate. Both Jack and Algernon ask this "Doctor of Divinity" to christen them with the name "Ernest." He is secretly fond of Miss Prism.

Lane - Algernon's manservant. When the play opens, Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon's practice of "Bunburying."

Merriman - The butler at the Manor House, Jack's country estate.

Lady Stella Clinton - *A historical drag artist who exists outside the play's primary action serving as an interpretive guide.*

Vesta Tilley - *A Victorian-era drag artist who exists outside the play's primary action serving as an interpretive guide.*

PLOT SYNOPSIS

ACT 1

The play opens in Algernon Moncrieff's luxurious flat on Half Moon Street, where he instructs his manservant, Lane, to prepare for the arrival his aunt, Lady Bracknell - who has specifically requested cucumber sandwiches. Algernon is soon joined by his best friend, Jack, introduced as 'Ernest Worthing.' Upon hearing that Lady Bracknell will be accompanied by her daughter, Gwendolen, Jack confesses his love for Gwendolen to Algernon. However, Algernon refuses to give his blessing until Jack explains the mention of a mysterious 'Cecily' - a name Algernon discovered engraved inside a cigarette case Jack accidentally left behind. Jack claims Cecily is merely his elderly aunt residing in Tunbridge Wells. However, this lie quickly unravels against the inscription - "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack" - forcing Jack to confess his dual identity: 'Jack' in the country and 'Ernest' in the city. Algernon cheekily labels this act of deception as 'Bunburying' - a charade that he, too, is an expert at.

Amidst Algernon and Jack's conversation, Lady Bracknell arrives with her daughter and is immediately displeased by the absence of cucumber sandwiches. Algernon manages to dodge a later engagement by invoking his sick, imaginary friend, 'Mr. Bunbury,' while Jack seizes Lady Bracknell's distraction to propose to Gwendolen. She enthusiastically accepts, disclosing her obsession with the name 'Ernest' and firmly stating she could never marry a man with a different name - leaving Jack unsettled. Bursting into the room and opposing the engagement, Lady Bracknell questions Jack about his background. When she discovers he was found in a handbag at the Victoria station cloakroom as an infant and adopted by Mr. Thomas Cardew, she forbids her daughter from marrying him.

After Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen depart, Algernon reveals his eagerness to meet Cecily - whom Jack has falsely convinced about the existence of his fictional brother Ernest. Shortly after, Gwendolen returns, expressing even deeper affection for Jack after hearing about his background from her mother.

ACT 2

Act II begins at the garden of Jack's country estate, the Manor House, where Cecily distracts her governess, Miss Prism, from German studies. They are soon joined by Dr. Chasuble, and Miss Prism readily seizes the chance to accompany him on a walk. Cecily, having been alone for only a moment, is quickly accompanied by the butler, Merriman, who announces Algernon's arrival, masquerading as 'Ernest.' Cecily is instantly captivated by his arrival, and together they head into the house. Shortly after, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return, followed by Jack who is dressed in mourning attire and announces the death of his brother, 'Ernest's. When Cecily reappears, she is puzzled by the contradiction, while Jack, realizing Algernon has impersonated his fictional brother, is secretly furious.

Meanwhile, Algernon expresses his admiration for Cecily and proposes to her. Amusingly, Cecily shares that she had adored him long before they met, ever since her uncle spoke of his brother. She reveals her dream of

marrying someone named Ernest which makes Algernon uneasy – since that is not his real name. Eager to adopt the name 'Ernest' through christening, Algernon heads out to find Dr. Chasuble – who is a country reverend – while Gwendolen pays Jack a surprise visit. Cecily and Gwendolen make each other's acquaintance and grow fond of one another. However, as they talk, they realize that they have both been fallen for the same man: Ernest Worthing. They quickly realized that they have both been deceived by Jack and Algernon and demand for more details only to find that 'Ernest' is fictional.

Jack and Algernon, now distressed, argue over their supposed solution – being christened with the name Ernest.

ACT 3

The final act opens in the morning room at the Manor House. Gwendolen and Cecily confront the men about their lies and are amused to learn that Jack and Algernon are willing to be christened as 'Ernest' for their sake. Shortly after, Lady Bracknell enters amidst the commotion and Algernon announces Bunbury's sudden death. He and Jack then reestablish their engagements to Cecily and Gwendolen; however, Lady Bracknell strongly objects. Her resistance to Algernon's engagement begins to waver upon learning that Cecily is heir to a great fortune. Jack, determined to win Gwendolen's hand, declares that as Cecily's guardian, he will only give his consent to her engagement if Lady Bracknell grants hers for his marriage to Gwendolen.

Dr Chasuble interrupts, announcing that the christenings are ready, but his mention of Miss Prism sends Lady Bracknell into a frenzy. After joining them, Miss Prism is confronted about the baby she left Lord Bracknell's house with, twenty-eight years ago. She confesses to mistakenly placing the baby in a handbag – intended for a manuscript - and leaving it in a railway station cloakroom. Shocked, Jack disappears and returns with the very handbag, confirming Miss Prism's story.

After some chaos, Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is her sister, Mrs. Moncrief's, son – making him Algernon's elder brother. Lady Bracknell discloses that, as the eldest son, Jack was already naturally christened with his father's name, which, after searching the army lists, discovers is 'Ernest John' - making Jack has been 'Ernest' all along. With everything resolved, they all embrace their happy ending and Jack finally realizes the importance of being earnest.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Oscar Wilde: His Life and Work

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at school, he developed his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in aestheticism (a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone). Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.

In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was slow to take off, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous!



Oscar Wilde in 1882

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of posing as a sodomite, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty.

Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

The Victorian Era

The Victorian era in British history, was the period between approximately 1820 and 1914, corresponding roughly to the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901).

Victorian society was hierarchically structured with gender and class being the main organizers. As suggested by the sexual double standard, gender was considered biologically based and determinative of an individual's potential and character. Additionally, Victorian gender ideology was based on the "doctrine of separate spheres." This concept delineated distinct roles for men and women where men belonged in the public sphere, while women remained in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women ran households and raised families.

Class was determined by economic and cultural status such as income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behaviour, politics, and leisure activities. The working class (about 70-80% of the population) got its income from wages, while the middle class made its income from salaries and profit, and grew rapidly during the 19th century (from 15-25% of the population). The very small and wealthy upper class generated its income from property, rent, and interest as they had titles, wealth, and land. This elite minority owned most of the land in Britain and controlled local, national, and imperial politics.



'A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881,' an oil painting by English artist William Powell Frith



Oscar Wilde cartoon:
London Charivari, March 5, 1892

Did You Know? *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comedy of manners...

This refers to a witty, satirical play which mocks aristocratic society. Comedy of Manners was usually written by sophisticated authors for members of their social class and historically thrived in periods and societies that combined material prosperity and moral latitude. Oscar Wilde revived the comedy of manners, following the Restoration period, by writing an immensely popular, funny criticism of Victorian aristocracy. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde attacks Victorian complacency by displaying the foibles of society for ridicule and for his audience's amusement.

Creative Insights: A Peak into Alistair Newton's Production

During the Victorian era - a society in which queer identity was heavily stigmatized - queer coding emerged as a subtle yet powerful theatrical device. In this production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Director Alistair Newton, draws attention to the play's underlying queer subtext by introducing two new characters inspired by real historical performers: Lady Stella Clinton and Vesta Tilley. Lady Stella Clinton, a historical drag artist, famously attended theatres and social events dressed in women's clothing and was charged with "conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence." However, the jury ultimately ruled that cross-dressing was not, in itself, unlawful. Vesta Tilley, one of the most renowned male impersonators of the Victorian and Edwardian music hall era, gained widespread popularity for her gender-bending performances. Rather than being inserted into the narrative, these characters exist outside the play's primary action, serving as interpretive guides that frame and deepen the audience's engagement with Wilde's subversive wit and the era's coded expressions of queer identity.

Director Interview Video with Alistair Newton coming soon!

VICTORIAN VOCABULARY: TERMS AT A GLANCE

This section defines some potentially unfamiliar words used in the show. Use them to [write a scene!](#)

Apoplexy: a loss of consciousness from the lack of oxygen in the brain

Capacious: large in the amount that can be contained

Earnestness: sincere and intense conviction.

Effrontery: audacious behavior that you have no right to

| GWENDOLEN: They're looking at us. What **effrontery!**

Equanimity: steadiness of mind under stress

Expurgation: the deletion of parts considered objectionable or harmful

Forte: an asset of special worth or utility

Heretical: departing from accepted beliefs or standards

Insuperable: impossible to surmount

Misanthrope: someone who dislikes people in general

| MISS PRISM: You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A **misanthrope** I can understand—a womanthrope, never!

Neologism: a newly invented word or phrase

Perambulator: a small wheeled vehicle in which a baby is pushed around

Portmanteau: a large travelling bag made of stiff leather

Profligate: unrestrained by convention or morality

Quixotic: not sensible about practical matters

| ALGERNON. Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?
CECILY. It is rather **Quixotic** of you.

Recumbent: lying down; in a position of comfort or rest

Salver: a tray for serving food or drinks

Sententious: abounding in or given to pompous or aphoristic moralizing

Terminus: either end of a railroad or bus route

CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Pre-Show - Whether you have a few minutes or a whole class period, here are a few ways to thoughtfully engage with the themes, history and characters of *The Importance of Being Earnest* before watching the production.

If You Have 15 Minutes: Think-Pair-Share

Question: Why might someone choose to present a false identity instead of being their authentic self?

- **Think:** Reflect and jot down your thoughts.
- **Pair:** Share with a partner. What do you agree on? What surprised you?
- **Share:** Share key takeaways with the class

If You Have 30 Minutes: You're the Casting Director

- Familiarize yourself with the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by either reading the play or reviewing the character breakdown on page 6. Paying special note to the adjectives used to describe the characters, start to visualize what they may look like on stage.
- Now, you're the casting director of the Grand Theatre's production. Cast the show using the headshots provided on the attached worksheet by writing the character's name above the actor you think is best suited for the role.
- Fill in the bullet points under each headshot with a list of adjectives that further describe the character. **Bonus challenge:** Can you draw a line to connect characters who share romantic feelings?

If You Have 1 Hour: Scandalous Scenes

- **Prompt:** Break the class into small groups. Have everyone read through the 'Terms at a Glance' and list of Victorian-themed scandal prompts below. Together, select one prompt per group and at least two related terms.
- **Create:** Ensuring that there are as many characters as group members, write a short scene that reveals and reacts to your scandal. Incorporate as much Victorian-era vocabulary as possible.
- **Present:** Read scenes aloud to the class, then reflect on how scandal makes for good comedy.
- "Young ward defies their guardian with improper action"
- "Unassuming side character forced into the spotlight"

Scene Prompts - Here is a list of Victorian-themed scandals:

| | |
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| "Mistaken identity ruins a tea party" | "Confession of unexpected romantic feelings" |
| "Discovery of unknown familial relations" | "Shocking refusal to perform societal expectations" |
| "Innocent mistake with life-altering consequences" | "Truth behind a long-standing lie is revealed" |

Post-Show - Having watched *The Importance of Being Earnest*, use these questions and activities to deepen your understanding of the story's message and reflect on how the show made you feel:

If You Have 15 Minutes: Think-Pair-Share

Question: If you could step into the shoes of one character, who would it be? Would you make any different choices and if so, how might they change the story?

- **Think:** Reflect and jot down your thoughts.
- **Pair:** Share with a partner. What do you agree on? What surprised you?
- **Share:** Share key takeaways with the class

If You Have 30 Minutes: Character Deep Dive

- **Brainstorm:** Pick a character and list 3 big secrets or feelings the character hides during the play.
- **Prepare:** Write a letter, diary entry, or social media post from that character's perspective revealing those secrets or feelings.
- **Discuss:** Display and read others' work.
 - How is the plot impacted by having such complex characters?
 - How do these hidden layers add depth to the story?

If You Have 1 Hour: Character Courtroom

- **Assign:** Divide class into groups, each representing a key character (Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell, etc.).
- **Prepare:** Together, choose three examples of actions or choices your character made (e.g. living a double life, lying about identity, confessing romantic feelings). Build a case "defending" or "prosecuting" your character's choices.
- **Present:** Hold a mock trial where each (group of) characters are questioned, allowing the class to explore motivations and moral ambiguity.

REFERENCES

Citadel Theatre: *The Importance of Being Earnest* Enrichment Guide

<https://citadeltheatre.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/THE-IMPORTANCE-OF-BEING-EARNEST-ENIRCHMENT-GUIDE.pdf>

CONTACT US

If you have any questions about this Audience Enrichment Guide or Education at the Grand Theatre, please reach out to ...



Visit our website for future events and
information!



We look forward to seeing you!

