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**Literature**  
Teaching Unit  
*Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide*



The Importance of  
Being Earnest

by Oscar Wilde

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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# Literature Teaching Unit

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# The Importance of Being Earnest

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. discuss Wilde's style of writing and contrast the style of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with the style of another comedy with which the student is familiar.
2. identify four targets of Wilde's satire and analyze the treatment of these targets.
3. write a short paper explaining the enduring popularity of Wilde's plays.
4. identify and discuss the following terms:
  - satire
  - farce
  - comedy of manners
  - art for art's sake
5. identify the irony between the elegant, suave demeanor of the characters and their absurd conversations and behavior.
6. identify the pun central to the play and analyze its meaning.
7. discuss the play in the context of a Victorian England audience.

# The Importance of Being Earnest

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How did you respond to the characters and plot in this play? Did it bother you that the plot was improbable and the characters unbelievable? Why?
2. Identify at least three scenes that were comic, and explain what created the humor.
3. Identify three people or institutions that Wilde mocks. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being mild amusement and 5 being bitter denunciation, how strong is Wilde's criticism of his targets? Use at least two specific, supporting details to explain your analysis of each.
4. Why is this play popular with audiences? Why do you suppose the play is as popular today as it was when it was written nearly one hundred years ago?
5. Steve Martin, a well-known actor, director, and comedian, has adapted a number of classic books, including *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Roxanne*) and *Silas Marner* (*A Simple Twist of Fate*), and made them into popular movies with contemporary settings. What changes do you think he would make so he could adapt this book into a contemporary movie?
6. Compare and contrast this play with popular comedies of today. What generalizations can you make about comedies and the time periods in which they are produced?
7. What is the significance of the play's title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Is this an appropriate title for the play? Why or why not?
8. The subtitle of this work is "a trivial play for serious people." What do you think Wilde meant by that? Who did Wilde expect his audience to be, and how do you think he felt toward them? Remember that Wilde was writing during the final years of Queen Victoria's reign.

# The Importance of Being Earnest

## Act One

### VOCABULARY

**apoplexy** – stroke  
**conduce** – contribute  
**cynical** – distrustful of human nature and its motives  
**domesticity** – shortened, familiar form  
**expurgations** – removals of objectionable elements  
**forte** – strong point  
**glibly** – nonchalantly, with easy lack of concern  
**indecorous** – unseemly, not proper  
**invariably** – in an unchanging manner  
**lax** – not strict, loose  
**metaphysical** – abstract, theoretical  
**profligate** – dissolute, immoral  
**propounding** – putting forward for consideration  
**purple** – high ranks  
**salver** – serving tray  
**semi-recumbent** – half lying down  
**sententiously** – in a pompously moralizing manner  
**surmised** – guessed  
**tedious** – boring, tiresomely dull

1. Much of the humor in this play arises from the incongruity within conversations, and even within sentences. At the beginning of the act, what statement of Algernon's appears incongruous? Why?

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2. Another cause of much of the humor is inverted expectation. That is, the reader is set up to hear a conventional piece of wisdom, but the character delivers a line that is quite the opposite of what is expected. Why are the first two lines in the play examples of that?

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16. We are told that the death of Lady Harbury’s husband has altered her. In what way has our expectation been inverted?

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17. Earlier, we learned that Jack was in love with Gwendolen, and we now learn that Gwendolen is also in love with Jack. What first caused Gwendolen to love Jack?

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18. In Lady Bracknell’s interview of Jack, she takes a satiric shot at education in England. What does she say of it?

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19. Why does Lady Bracknell conclude that Jack is not a suitable husband for Gwendolen? Why does this matter so much to her?

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20. Although the conversation seems normal, what is the absurdity of the characters’ concerns about the conditions surrounding Jack’s discovery as a foundling?

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21. In Wilde’s view, style is paramount. How does Algernon’s response to Jack regarding cleverness emphasize that?

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**Act Three**

## VOCABULARY

**apprised** – informed  
**credulity** – willingness to believe too readily  
**effrontery** – disrespectful boldness  
**insuperable** – incapable of being overcome  
**irrevocable** – unalterable  
**ostentatiously** – showily  
**Oxonian** – graduate of Oxford University  
**quails** – cowers  
**solicitors** – lawyers  
**tutelage** – state of being under a guardian

1. What comment of Gwendolen's at the beginning of Act Three once again brings up the importance of style? What does this illustrate about her character?

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2. Although both girls forgive Jack and Algvy for having deceived them, what do they say remains as an "insuperable barrier" to marriage? (Act III)

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3. Why does Lady Bracknell say that Mr. Bunbury "seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians"? (Act III)

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4. Although Lady Bracknell is initially against Algernon's engagement to Cecily, what wins her over?

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