

 Prestwick House

# Instant Short Story Pack



**Each pack contains:**

- Objectives
- Full Text of Story
- Student Questions
- Activities and Graphic Organizers
- Teacher Answer Guide

## *To Build a Fire*

BY JACK LONDON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, 3, 4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2, 4



## Objectives:

After completing the activities in this packet, the student will be able to:

- determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text (RL.9-10.2; 11-12.2),
- analyze how complex characters...interact with other characters,...advance the plot [and] develop the theme (RL.9-10.3),
- determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings (RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4), and
- analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place) (RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4).

## Time:

1-2 class periods

## Materials:

✓ 1 copy of each handout per student:

- **Handout #1** (3 pages) – Purpose-setting and Motivational Activities
- **Handout #2** (17 pages) – Text of Story
- **Handout #3** (2 pages) – Student Questions
- **Handout #4** (14 pages) – Activities and Graphic Organizers

✓ Teacher Answer Guide

## Procedure:

1. Reproduce all handouts.
2. Distribute **Handouts #1** and **#2**.
  - Allow students to read the short biography of London (approximately 10 minutes).
  - Read and discuss the information about London's work and ideas (approximately 20 minutes).
  - Assign the story to be read for homework OR
  - Allow students to read the story in class and perform the two **As you read...**activities.
3. Distribute **Handout #3**.
4. Give students time to read the questions (approximately 5 minutes).
5. Review with students what each question is asking for and what type of information is required for a thorough answer (e.g., references to prior knowledge, quotations from the story, additional reading or research, etc.).
6. Distribute **Handout #4**.
7. Walk the class through Question 1, demonstrating that in order to address a complex issue, it is often helpful to divide it into smaller subtopics. Students can then use the ideas generated by each subtopic to build a complete and thoughtful answer to the full question.
8. Have students answer the questions.

Jack London

## *To Build a Fire*

Jack London's "To Build a Fire," is an extremely popular story for high school textbooks and anthologies. Two versions of the tale exist, one published in May of 1902 and a revision published in August 1908. The first version appeared in *The Youth's Companion*, a magazine intended for what today would be called a young-adult readership. The 1908 version is the one most often included in anthologies—and the one presented here.

Both versions tell the story of a young prospector traveling to camp. In the 1902 version, however, the protagonist has a name—Tom Vincent. The weather is not as dangerously cold. The traveler is not accompanied by a dog, and he does not die at the end. Instead, he suffers irreparable frostbite but lives as a warning to other inexperienced young men and women not to act foolishly and to listen to the advice of those who are older and wiser.

In issuing his 1908 version, published in *The Century Magazine*, London turned his boys' moralistic adventure story into an exploration of the principles of naturalism.

They key changes London made to emphasize his new focus on naturalism include:

- turning the protagonist into a nameless everyman;
- intensifying the cold to highlight the apparent cruelty of nature;
- ending the story with the protagonist's death;
- contrasting the man's supposed knowledge and skill with the dog's wiser instinct.

London's language is fairly straightforward and shouldn't pose a significant problem for you. He does provide a few scientific explanations for some of the circumstances of the story: Why is it noon on a clear day and there is no sunlight? Why is it so brutally cold—even for the arctic? What exactly causes the snow to fall from the tree? Certainly, you can understand the plot, the characters, and London's theme without the science, but these details are perfect illustrations of naturalism at work in literature.

"To Build a Fire" does not lose any of its adventure or suspense between the 1902 and 1908 versions. But in stripping away the moral story of a youth's foolishness and instead telling the story of a person in a situation, London actually increases reader sympathy for the characters and understanding of the circumstances they find themselves in.

Jack London

## *To Build a Fire*

Lexile Measure: 970L

DAY HAD BROKEN cold and grey, exceedingly cold and grey, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth bank, where a dim and little-traveled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the skyline and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hairline was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

Jack London

---

*To Build a Fire***STUDENT QUESTIONS:**

---

1. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4) London devotes a good portion of the opening paragraph of his story to describing the conditions under which the man is traveling. What season of the year is it? What time of day? What are the weather conditions on this day? Quote the specific words or phrases in the paragraph that provide this information.

What do the words London uses to establish his setting suggest will be the tone of this story? How do they suggest this?

2. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2; 11-12.2) What scientific facts and astronomical event is London describing in the following passages?

Day had broken cold and grey, exceedingly cold and grey...It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. ...It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

. . .

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow.

. . .

...the tree under which he had [built his fire] carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out!

What purpose does London accomplish with these references to science?

**ACTIVITIES AND GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS:**

Jack London, *To Build a Fire*

**Question 1: London devotes a good portion of the opening paragraph of his story to describing the conditions under which the man is traveling. What season of the year is it? What time of day? What are the weather conditions on this day? Quote the specific words or phrases in the paragraph that provide this information.**

**What do the words London uses to establish his setting suggest will be the tone of this story? How do they suggest this?**

STEP 1: Choose the words and phrases from the opening paragraph that provide *specific and literal* facts about the setting. Then, consider how each fact helps you shape or adjust your overall understanding of the setting.

Word or Phrase	Literal Significance
cold/exceedingly cold	physical temperature; implies that it is uncomfortable, maybe even dangerous
grey	visual description; dark; colorless
There was no sun nor hint of sun...	it's nighttime? cloudy? London says it's "grey"...also, "Day had broken..." so it can't be nighttime.

Even if you run out of chart space, continue listing and explaining literal details of the setting.

Write a sentence or two in which you offer an objective summary of the setting.

---



---



---