



THE CONNMAN

A SHORT STORY FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS

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Introduction

What is a conman?

Do these people exist in your country?

Where do they operate?

Have you ever encountered one?

The Conman

Harry was a conman.

He didn't have a regular job. His job was to take money off other hard-working people. He did this a few hours a day, and he was good at it.

Every evening he would go to one of the train stations in London. He never went to the same train station more than once every two weeks. There were so many stations and so many people commuting back home that it was simple.

"Easy pickings," Harry said to himself.

This evening, he was in Paddington Station. It was just before six pm, and Harry was strolling around waiting for his mark. Harry knew how to pick out a good mark. He could spot a fool a mile away.

He surveyed the station, his eyes moving from one person to another.

Maybe that man just there? He was young, around late-twenties. But he was talking into his mobile phone. He was no good.

Or the couple strolling to the station exit. But there was something about the woman. Something that told Harry no one could trick her. She was too sharp, too clever.

Then he spotted him. The perfect mark.

Another man, older than the first. Maybe around forty or so. He was probably married, maybe one or two kids. And something about the look on his face. He looked gullible. He looked like he would believe any story anyone told him.

Harry changed his facial expression and approached him.

"Excuse me, I —"

The man raised his head to look at Harry. His eyes were wide open.

"I hate to trouble you —"

The man shook his head in quick, rapid movements. "What is it?"

"It's so embarrassing," said Harry. "I've been robbed. A pickpocket. He —" Harry jerked his head to the other side of the train station forecourt.

"A pickpocket?" said the man. His eyebrows knitted together in concern.

Inside his head, Harry was grinning to himself. This man was perfect. Wait until he met all his mates down the pub. He couldn't wait to tell them of the easy mark he had found this evening. And a Friday too. The perfect end to a perfect week.

"Yes," said Harry. "I think he saw me as I was buying a cup of coffee just over there." There was a busy coffee shop to the side of the station. People spilling in and out as they bought hot drinks to take on the train home.

"You have to be really careful around here," said the younger man. "So many thieves in this station. It happened to a friend of mine."

"Really?" said Harry. He was in no mood to hear about this man's friend. He didn't care about anything in this man's life at all. And it was too risky getting into lengthy conversations with people.

If he just spoke to someone for a short time — two or three minutes max — then they usually could not remember anything about him.

They might go to the police and say: I've been robbed! Someone tricked me!

But when the police asked what the thief looked like, they could not remember. They had no idea at all.

And Harry looked like every other man at the train station. Mid-fifties, dark blue suit, greying hair. He was nondescript. He could be anyone.

The man in front of Harry continued speaking.

"Yeah, my friend — he was in this exact same train station. He had no idea who had robbed him, it was so quick. Maybe when he was buying a ticket — who knows?"

"Well, that's terrible," said Harry and offered the man a look of sympathy.

The man nodded back at Harry. He had brilliant blue eyes. The eyes of an honest man.

"What did he take from you?" he asked Harry.

"Who?" asked Harry.

"The thief. The pickpocket."

"Oh," said Harry. "He took everything. My phone, my wallet — and that has all my money in it. He even took my house keys."

The man shook his head, his lips pressed together in concern.

"That's terrible," he said. "Did you tell a policeman?"

Harry faltered for a second, then found his voice. "Ah, no. No, I — I didn't —"

The man was twisting his head left and right. "There's one." He touched Harry's arm, turned him to face a policeman strolling across the station, his hands held together behind his back.

Harry tensed. He didn't want to involve the police. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to the police. None of his old pals in the pub spoke to them. They didn't trust them.

"I think you should tell that policeman," said the man. "After all, you have been robbed. You're a victim of crime."

This was becoming too difficult. All Harry wanted was to find his mark, give him a story, then walk off with some cash. He didn't want all this attention.

"Actually," he said. "You know what — forget it. I'll call my wife. She can help me."

The man gazed at Harry. His honest face beaming back at him. "I'm only trying to help you."

"I don't want your help," said Harry, rather too quickly. "I can deal with it myself." He pulled his arm free of the man's hand.

The man looked back at him with an expression of surprise.

"Good evening to you," said Harry. And he walked away.

He kept on walking, not looking back. That man was trying to be too careful. There was no way Harry could talk to the police. Not in his line of work.

He marched to the other side of the station and stopped by a news kiosk. People bought newspapers and rushed off to catch their train.

Harry gazed around the station, trying to make out a new mark. A new sucker waiting for him.

But maybe time for a quick smoke. Harry put his hand inside his jacket pocket to find his cigarettes. Not in that pocket. He looked in the other one. Not there.

Harry tapped the side pockets. Nothing. Everything gone.

His hands reached down to his trouser pockets. But they were all empty too.

He had been robbed!

His phone, his wallet. Even his cigarettes.

Robbed in broad daylight.

Reading Comprehension Questions

What is Harry's job? What does he do?

Where does Harry work?

Where is Harry working at the time of the story? What time is it? What day is it?

Describe Harry's appearance. What does he look like?

How many people did Harry look at before finding his mark?

Why did he choose the last one?

What did Harry tell the man?

How did the man respond?

Did Harry think the man is a good target to rob? Or a bad one?

Where did Harry say he was robbed?

What story does the man tell Harry?

Is Harry sympathetic to the man and his story?

Why does he not want to talk to the man for too long?

What does the man ask Harry? How does Harry respond?

What does the man suggest Harry do next?

Does Harry want to comply with this suggestion?

How does Harry get away from the man?

Where does Harry go next? What does he do there?

What does he discover at the end?

Essential Vocabulary

You should go through all the vocabulary in the story. The more vocabulary you know, the better you can express yourself in English.

This is the process for learning new vocabulary:

1. Find any new words you do not know in the story.
2. Write them down in your vocabulary notebook.
3. Use a dictionary and find out the meanings of all the new words.
4. Write the meanings down next to the new word in your vocabulary notebook.
5. Use the new word in a sentence of your own. Write the new sentence down in your notebook too.

It should look something like this:

Regular – usual, ordinary or by habit. Something that is done at the same time or at the same place in a pattern.

I try to eat all my meals at a regular time.

Discussion Questions

What do you think about Harry's job? Do you have people like this in your country? Talk about them if you can.

Harry talks about 'the perfect mark'. A mark is slang for the best victim for a conman. Someone who is easy to cheat. What do you think makes 'the perfect mark'?

Why does Harry work in train stations? Why are they such a good place for his line of work?

In your imagination, what do you know of Harry's life? Do you think he is married? Has children? Is he smart or stupid?

In your country, do you have conmen? Do you have conwomen? Where do they work? What tricks do they use?

How can the police find these people? What methods can they use?

Can modern technology help us to stop these criminals? How?

Do you think you could be easily fooled by a conman? Why/why not?

If you were a conman, what trick would you use against people?

How could conmen use their skills for something good?

Operation Clean-Up

This is a group activity.

Get into groups of four or five students. Read the situation and task below:

The Situation

You are a special task force, employed by the police to put a stop to all the pickpockets and conmen that operate in the train station.

The police cannot do anything about it. They need some special procedure put into place to ensure that the public is safe and do not have their valuables stolen.

Your Task

You must come up with some special actions to make sure that the public can use the train station without fear of meeting a pickpocket or a conman.

In your group, try to think of three different things that you can put into action and keep the public safe.

When you have three different actions, then you need to present them to the class.

Now Vote!

After all the groups have presented their ideas, all the class can vote for the best group/idea.

Each student can vote one time and then you can find the best plan to beat the pickpockets and conmen in the train station.

Role Play

This is a role play activity.

There are two characters in the role play:

1. Harry

You are Harry from the story at the beginning of the lesson. You will use all of Harry's lines in the story as your part of the role play.

2. The Man

You are the man that Harry approaches in the train station. Use all of the man's lines as your part in the role play.

Use all the lines of dialogue spoken in the story above and use these as part of your role play dialogue. You will need to add your own lines too.

Act out the story above using all the words the characters say plus your own words.

Practice for a while and then show the class.

Alibi

This is a game activity.

A crime has been committed in Paddington Train Station. A man was tricked by a conman who told him his own wallet had been stolen. The man handed over some money then realised he had been cheated by a conman.

The police have found four bad guys from the station. These bad guys are well-known to the police and so they have brought them into the station for questioning.

The crime took place in Paddington Train Station on a Friday evening at 6:15pm. Each of the bad guys was in the train station at that time, but of course, they don't want to tell the police that.

The four bad guys are divided into two pairs. Each pair has come up with an alibi to show they were not in the train station on the night in question.

Pair A

You both have an alibi of going to the cinema together.
You need to think about your story so that the police don't catch you out.
What movie did you go and see?
What time did the movie start?
Where were you sitting?
Did you have any snacks at the cinema?
What did you do after?

Pair B

You both have an alibi of going to a restaurant together.
You need to think about your story so that the police don't catch you out.
What restaurant did you go to?
Where is the restaurant?
What kind of food is in the restaurant?
What did you eat?
Who paid?

Each pair has ten minutes to get their story straight. They must come up with a foolproof story so the police don't catch you out.

The Interrogation

All the bad guys wait outside the class. One by one, they come in and the police interview them. The police are all the other students in the class.

The police can ask any question they like – but they must try to find out that their alibi is not true. After each person is interviewed they go to the back of the classroom.

At the end of all the interviews, the police have to decide which alibi is true.

Writing

You have been the victim of a crime of Paddington Train Station.

You need to write a letter of complaint to Paddington Train Station Police and explain what happened. Make up a story of a crime that was committed against you.

Then demand what actions the police will take to stop these kinds of crimes happening in the future.

When you have finished your letter, you can submit it to your teacher or read it out in class.

Teacher's Notes

Introduction

Write the word 'conman' on the board and ask for a definition. If you have a dictionary in the class, get one of the students to use this and look the word up.
Go through all the questions and ask the students.

The Conman

Read through the whole story.
Get as many students as you can to read a little of the story.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Go through all the questions one by one and get the students to answer them.
You can do this as a whole class activity. Or divide the students into small groups or pairs. Or let them work individually.
But make sure that all the questions are answered. If there is any confusion, continue asking your own relevant questions until there is clarity of the whole story.

Essential Vocabulary

This is something the students should do on their own.
Let each student go through all the story and find any new words. They then need to write all the new words in their vocabulary notebooks and find the meanings.
Then they need to create a sentence of their own using the new word.
This is an essential part of their English-learning experience. It will help them in their speaking and writing later on in the other exercises.
You could do this in class or as homework.

Discussion Questions

These are all designed for discussion and conversation.
Ask the questions to the students as one class. You may find that there could be a difference of opinion, in which case challenge this difference and ask for more details.

Operation Clean-Up

This is an activity for small groups.
Each group must come up with three ideas to help stop the high number of pickpockets and conmen in the train station.

You may need to go round the class to offer suggestions or encourage more details in their ideas.

When the students are ready, they present their ideas and plans to the class.

At the end of the exercise, you can have a vote. Write down all the ideas from all the groups on the board. Then one by one let the students vote for the best idea.

Tell them they cannot vote for their own group!

Role Play

This is a role play exercise.

Take all the lines from the story and put them in order like a movie script.

The students can add their own lines as they wish.

Then each pair practices their role play. When they are ready, show the class.

Alibi

This is a whole class activity.

The emphasis of this exercise should be fun. It should be a very high energy activity.

It is based on the story at the beginning of the lesson.

Four people who are known to the police have been brought into the police station. They are suspects of a spate of thefts that have taken place in Paddington Train Station.

The four suspects have split into two pairs.

Pair one says they went to the cinema together.

Pair two says they went to a restaurant together.

The object of the game is to find out which story is false. Actually, neither story is true but the students must ask questions until they find out who is lying.

Bring the suspects into the class one by one and let the other students ask them questions.

For example, a good question to ask the pair that went to the cinema would be:

Was your friend sitting to your left or right in the cinema?

The first student may say the left, but the second student brought in later, may say the right. Then you know the story could be false.

This should be a lot of fun for the students as they try to catch the suspects out.

Writing

This is self-explanatory.

You can do this as a class exercise but probably better for homework.
The students can read their letters out in class. Or you can mark them privately.

Credits

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