



THE CONMAN

A SHORT STORY FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Conman.....	4
Reading Comprehension Questions.....	10
The Conman – story and reading comprehension questions.....	13
Essential Vocabulary.....	23
Discussion Questions.....	25
Operation Clean-Up.....	28
Role Play.....	30
Alibi.....	32
Writing.....	35
Reading Comprehension Questions -- Answers.....	36
Credits.....	40

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.

On this particular evening, Harry found himself in Paddington Station. It was just before six pm, and Harry was strolling around waiting for his next target.

Harry had a knack for picking 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.

No way he would have the time to fall for Harry's old tricks.

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 adjusted his facial expression and approached the man.

"Excuse me, I —"

The man looked up, his eyes widened.

"I hate to trouble you —" Harry continued.

The man shook his head rapidly. "What is it?"

"It's so embarrassing," said Harry. "I've been robbed. A pickpocket. He got me over there." Harry gestured to the other side of the train station forecourt.

"A pickpocket?" said the man, his eyebrows creased 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 nearby. People spilt 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 usually they couldn't 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 couldn't remember a thing. 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, offering the man a genuine look of concern.

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

“What did he take from you?” the man inquired.

“Who?” asked Harry.

“The thief — the pickpocket,” said the man.

“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 twisted his head left and right. "There's one."

He grabbed Harry's arm and turned him around 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've been robbed. You're a victim of crime."

This was becoming too difficult.

All Harry wanted to do was find his mark, give him a story, and then walk off with some cash. He didn't want all this trouble.

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

The man gazed back 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

1. What is the name of this story?
2. Who is the main character in the story?
3. What is Harry's job? What does he do?
4. Where does Harry work? What kind of places does he usually go to most evenings?
5. Why does Harry change the location every evening?
6. Where is Harry working at the time of the story?
7. What time is it?
8. What is Harry good at?
9. Who does he see first?
10. Why does he reject this mark?
11. What other marks does Harry see?
12. Why does Harry reject this couple as possible marks?
13. Who is the third and final mark Harry sees?
14. Why does he settle on the third mark?
15. What story did Harry tell the man?
16. How did the man respond?

17. Did Harry think the man is a good target to rob? Or a bad one?
18. What does Harry plan to do later in the evening?
19. Where did Harry say he was robbed?
20. What day is it in the story?
21. What warning does the man give to Harry?
22. Does Harry want to hear the man's story?
23. How long does Harry usually speak to one of his marks?
24. Describe Harry's appearance. What does he look like?
25. Is Harry sympathetic to the man and his story?
26. Why does he not want to talk to the man for too long?
27. What story does the man tell Harry?
28. Is Harry sympathetic to the man's story?
29. What does the man ask Harry?
30. How does Harry respond?
31. What colour are the man's eyes?
32. What does Harry associate this colour with?
33. What does the man advise Harry to do?
34. Does Harry want to talk to the police? Why not?
35. Which part of Harry's body does the man touch with his hand?

36. Who do they see in the station?
37. Is Harry glad to see this person?
38. Why not?
39. What reason does the man give for Harry to talk to the policeman?
40. Does Harry want to comply with this suggestion?
41. Who does Harry say he will call?
42. How does Harry get away from the man?
43. How does the man react?
44. Does Harry leave?
45. Does Harry look at the man again?
46. Where does Harry go next?
47. What does he do there?
48. What does Harry want to do next?
49. What is he looking for?
50. Can he find his things?
51. What has happened to Harry?
52. How does Harry feel about being robbed in the station?
Is he outraged? Or just accepts it?

The Conman – story and reading comprehension questions

Section 1

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.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What is the name of this story?
2. Who is the main character in the story?
3. What is Harry's job? What does he do?
4. Where does Harry work? What kind of places does he usually go to most evenings?
5. Why does Harry change the location every evening?

Section 2

On this particular evening, Harry found himself in Paddington Station. It was just before six pm, and Harry was strolling around waiting for his next target.

Harry had a knack for picking 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.

No way he would have the time to fall for Harry's old tricks.

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.

Reading Comprehension Questions

6. Where is Harry working at the time of the story?
7. What time is it?
8. What is Harry good at?

9. Who does he see first?
10. Why does he reject this mark?
11. What other marks does Harry see?
12. Why does Harry reject this couple as possible marks?

Section 3

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 adjusted his facial expression and approached the man.

“Excuse me, I —”

The man looked up, his eyes widened.

“I hate to trouble you —” Harry continued.

The man shook his head rapidly. “What is it?”

“It’s so embarrassing,” said Harry. “I’ve been robbed. A pickpocket. He got me over there.” Harry gestured to the other side of the train station forecourt.

“A pickpocket?” said the man, his eyebrows creased in concern.

Reading Comprehension Questions

13. Who is the third and final mark Harry sees?
14. Why does he settle on the third mark?
15. What story did Harry tell the man?
16. How did the man respond?

Section 4

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 nearby. People spilt 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."

Reading Comprehension Questions

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

18. What does Harry plan to do later in the evening?

19. Where did Harry say he was robbed?

20. What day is it in the story?

21. What warning does the man give to Harry?

Section 5

“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 usually they couldn’t 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 couldn’t remember a thing. 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.

Reading Comprehension Questions

- 22. Does Harry want to hear the man's story?
- 23. How long does Harry usually speak to one of his marks?
- 24. Describe Harry's appearance. What does he look like?
- 25. Is Harry sympathetic to the man and his story?
- 26. Why does he not want to talk to the man for too long?

Section 6

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, offering the man a genuine look of concern.

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

"What did he take from you?" the man inquired.

"Who?" asked Harry.

"The thief — the pickpocket," said the man.

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

Reading Comprehension Questions

- 27. What story does the man tell Harry?
- 28. Is Harry sympathetic to the man’s story?
- 29. What does the man ask Harry?
- 30. How does Harry respond?
- 31. What colour are the man’s eyes?
- 32. What does Harry associate this colour with?

Section 7

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 twisted his head left and right. "There's one."

He grabbed Harry's arm and turned him around 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.

Reading Comprehension Questions

33. What does the man advise Harry to do?

34. Does Harry want to talk to the police? Why not?

35. Which part of Harry's body does the man touch with his hand?

36. Who do they see in the station?

37. Is Harry glad to see this person?

38. Why not?

Section 8

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

This was becoming too difficult.

All Harry wanted to do was find his mark, give him a story, and then walk off with some cash. He didn't want all this trouble.

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

The man gazed back 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."

Reading Comprehension Questions

39. What reason does the man give for Harry to talk to the policeman?

40. Does Harry want to comply with this suggestion?

41. Who does Harry say he will call?

Section 9

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.

Reading Comprehension Questions

- 42. How does Harry get away from the man?
- 43. How does the man react?
- 44. Does Harry leave?
- 45. Does Harry look at the man again?
- 46. Where does Harry go next?
- 47. What does he do there?

Section 10

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

- 48. What does Harry want to do next?
- 49. What is he looking for?
- 50. Can he find his things?
- 51. What has happened to Harry?
- 52. How does Harry feel about being robbed in the station? Is he outraged? Or just accepts it?

Essential Vocabulary

conman	regular job	hard-working
commuting	easy pickings	knack
fool	mark	gullible
facial expression	pickpocket	forecourt
thieves	lengthy conversation	nondescript
robbed	wallet	house keys
policeman	victim of crime	difficult
cash	trouble	help
line of work	smoke	cigarettes
broad daylight		

Exercise

Write down all the words and phrases in your vocabulary notebook. Look in your dictionary and find the meaning of each word. Write the definition next to each word.

Then make up your own sentences using each word or phrase.

For example:

Conman — *a man who cheats or tricks someone by gaining their trust and persuading them to believe something that is not true.*

Mark — *a person who is easily deceived or taken advantage of.*

Then write a sentence of your own that uses the new word or phrase correctly.

A conman knocked on our door and talked about fixing our roof. But we knew he was trying to cheat us.

The pickpocket stood by the side of the bank, looking out for an easy mark.

Do this with all the vocabulary and, over time, this will help improve all your English skills — reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Discussion Questions

What kind of person is Harry do you think?

Try to describe him and his life.

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

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 of a conman. Someone easy to cheat. What do you think makes 'the perfect mark'?

How does Harry choose his marks?

What methods does Harry use to trick his targets?

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

Harry approaches the man in the story.

What does Harry think about this man?

Why does he believe he is an easy mark?

Harry seems very concerned about being in contact with the police.

Why is this so, do you think?

Has Harry had any involvement with the police before?

Has Harry been arrested before? What for?

Do you think Harry has been in prison before?

What happens at the end of the story?

What kind of lesson can we learn from this?

Do you think Harry could learn anything from this?

Of course, Harry is breaking the law. But is there any reason why he is doing this kind of work?

What does the story tell us about trust in our society?

What does it tell us about the kinds of people we meet in life?

Do you think we can trust everyone we meet from day to day?

Why/why not?

Are pickpockets and conmen common in modern society today?

Why/why not?

In your country, do you have conmen? Do you have conwomen?

Where do they work? What tricks do they use?

What can honest people do to protect themselves against conmen?

What can we all do together to prevent pickpockets or conmen in our towns or cities?

Can we work together to stop them? How?

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?

Why do conmen do this kind of work? Is it only for money? Or for other reasons?

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 at 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 does 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, 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 at 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 at 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 at 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 suspects from the station. These suspects 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 suspects was in the train station at that time, but of course, they don't want to tell the police that.

The four suspects 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 for 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 suspects 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 at 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 from happening in the future.

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

Reading Comprehension Questions — Answers

1. What is the name of this story?

The name of this story is The Conman.

2. Who is the main character in the story?

The main character in the story is Harry.

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

Harry is a conman. He tricks people to get their money.

4. Where does Harry work? What kind of places does he usually go to most evenings?

He works at train stations in London, choosing a different one each evening.

5. Why does Harry change the location every evening?

So he doesn't get noticed or caught — he never goes to the same station more than once every two weeks.

6. Where is Harry working at the time of the story?

Harry is working in Paddington Station in London at the time of the story.

7. What time is it?

It is just before 6 p.m.

8. What is Harry good at?

He's good at spotting people who are easy to trick — he can pick

out a "mark" easily.

9. Who does he see first?

The first person he sees is a young man in his late twenties talking on a mobile phone.

10. Why does he reject this mark?

He rejects the man because the man is on his phone and probably won't fall for Harry's tricks because he is too busy.

11. What other marks does Harry see?

Harry sees a couple walking to the station exit.

12. Why does Harry reject this couple as possible marks?

He rejects them because he thinks the woman is too clever.

13. Who is the third and final mark Harry sees?

The third mark that Harry sees is a man aged around forty.

14. Why does he settle on the third mark?

Because the man looks gullible. He looks like he would believe anything Harry told him.

15. What story did Harry tell the man?

He said that he had been robbed by a pickpocket while buying coffee.

16. How did the man respond?

The man responds with an expression of concern.

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

He thinks the man is a good target — the perfect mark.

18. What does Harry plan to do later in the evening?

He plans to go to the pub and tell all his friends about how he found the perfect mark.

19. Where did Harry say he was robbed?

Harry says he was robbed near the coffee shop in the station.

20. What day is it in the story?

It is Friday.

21. What warning does the man give to Harry?

He says there are many thieves in the station and it happened to a friend of his too.

22. Does Harry want to hear the man's story?

No, he does not.

23. How long does Harry usually speak to one of his marks?

He usually only talks to them for between two and three minutes max.

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

Mid-fifties, dark blue suit, greying hair — very average and forgettable.

25. Is Harry sympathetic to the man and his story?

No, he doesn't care about the man's life or his stories.

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

Because long conversations make it easier for people to remember him and describe him to the police.

27. What story does the man tell Harry?

His friend was also robbed in the same station and didn't know how it happened.

28. Is Harry sympathetic to the man's story?

He pretends to be, but inside he doesn't care.

29. What does the man ask Harry?

He asks what the thief took from him.

30. How does Harry respond?

He says the thief took his phone, wallet, and even his house keys.

31. What colour are the man's eyes?

The man's eyes are brilliant blue.

32. What does Harry associate this colour with?

The eyes of an honest man.

33. What does the man advise Harry to do?

He advises him to talk to a policeman and report the crime.

34. Does Harry want to talk to the police? Why not?

No, he doesn't trust the police and doesn't want to risk getting caught.

35. Which part of Harry's body does the man touch with his hand?

The man grabs Harry's arm.

36. Who do they see in the station?

They see a policeman walking across the station.

37. Is Harry glad to see this person?

No, he is not.

38. Why not?

Because he's a conman and wants nothing to do with the police.

39. What reason does the man give for Harry to talk to the policeman?

Because Harry is a "victim of crime" and should report the robbery.

40. Does Harry want to comply with this suggestion?

No, he doesn't.

41. Who does Harry say he will call?

He says he will call his wife.

42. How does Harry get away from the man?

He pulls his arm away and walks off quickly.

43. How does the man react?

He looks surprised.

44. Does Harry leave?

Yes, he does.

45. Does Harry look at the man again?

No, he doesn't.

46. Where does Harry go next?

To the other side of the station, near a news kiosk.

47. What does he do there?

He looks for a new mark.

48. What does Harry want to do next?

He wants to have a smoke.

49. What is he looking for?

He is looking for his cigarettes.

50. Can he find his things?

No, he can't.

51. What has happened to Harry?

He has been robbed.

52. How does Harry feel about being robbed in the station? Is he outraged? Or just accepts it?

He seems shocked and outraged — he had no idea he was being robbed and it happened in broad daylight.

Credits

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