

Content-Based

ESL Reading Passages

Grades 6-10

20 High-Interest Topics x 3 Proficiency Levels

60 Passages with Vocabulary, Comprehension & Language Activities

Science

History

Social Topics

Beginning

Simple vocabulary & sentences

Intermediate

Academic vocabulary & compound sentences

Advanced

Complex text & critical thinking

UM Printables

Premium Educational Resources

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Overview

This resource contains 60 content-based ESL reading passages designed for grades 6-10. Twenty high-interest topics spanning science, history, and social studies are each presented at three proficiency levels: Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced. Each passage includes vocabulary pre-teaching, leveled comprehension questions, and a language focus activity.

How to Use This Resource

- 1. Assess Student Level:** Use the Student Proficiency Self-Assessment Scale to determine each learner's starting level.
- 2. Pre-Teach Vocabulary:** Begin each topic with the vocabulary pre-teach section to build background knowledge and reduce barriers to comprehension.
- 3. Assign the Passage:** Match students to the appropriate level passage. Differentiated instruction allows multiple students to engage with the same topic at their own level.
- 4. Check Comprehension:** Use the leveled questions to assess understanding. Beginning questions focus on literal comprehension, Intermediate on inferential thinking, and Advanced on critical analysis.
- 5. Language Focus Activity:** Each passage includes a grammar or language activity tied to the passage content, reinforcing both content knowledge and language skills.
- 6. Monitor Progress:** Use the self-assessment scale periodically to track growth and adjust level placements.

Level Differentiation

Beginning (Level 1): Short passages (100-150 words) with simple sentence structures, high-frequency vocabulary, and visual vocabulary support. Questions focus on literal comprehension (who, what, where, when). Language focus targets basic grammar structures.

Intermediate (Level 2): Medium passages (150-250 words) with compound sentences, academic vocabulary, and contextual clues. Questions require inferential thinking and making connections. Language focus addresses intermediate grammar.

Advanced (Level 3): Longer passages (250-350 words) with complex sentence structures, academic and content-specific vocabulary, and nuanced language. Questions demand critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation. Language focus covers advanced structures.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) Approach

Content-based instruction integrates language learning with subject-matter learning. Rather than teaching language in isolation, students develop their English proficiency while engaging with meaningful academic content. This approach: increases motivation by connecting language to real-world topics; builds background knowledge essential for academic success; provides natural

context for vocabulary and grammar development; prepares students for mainstream content classes; and supports both language acquisition and cognitive development.

Assessment Tips

Use comprehension questions as both formative and summative assessments. The language focus activity can serve as a quick check of grammar understanding. Compare student responses across levels to monitor growth. Encourage students to self-assess using the proficiency scale before and after each unit. Consider having students move between levels as they progress; a student might be Advanced in one topic but Intermediate in another.

Suggested Pacing

Each topic can be completed in 2-3 class periods:

Day 1: Vocabulary pre-teach + reading passage (assigned level)

Day 2: Comprehension questions + discussion

Day 3: Language focus activity + review + self-assessment

For a full 20-topic curriculum, plan for approximately 40-60 class periods.

Student Proficiency Self-Assessment Scale

Use this scale to help determine which level of passage is right for you. Read each description and check the box that best describes your abilities. Be honest; choosing the right level will help you learn better!

Beginning

- ☐ I can understand simple sentences about familiar topics.
- ☐ I know basic English vocabulary (everyday words).
- ☐ I can answer who, what, where, and when questions.
- ☐ I can write simple sentences with help.
- ☐ I need vocabulary support before reading.

Intermediate

- ☐ I can understand paragraphs with some new vocabulary.
- ☐ I can figure out word meanings from context clues.
- ☐ I can answer how and why questions about what I read.
- ☐ I can write compound sentences on my own.
- ☐ I can connect what I read to what I already know.

Advanced

- ☐ I can understand long passages with academic vocabulary.
- ☐ I can identify the author's purpose and point of view.
- ☐ I can analyze, evaluate, and make inferences about texts.
- ☐ I can write complex sentences with varied structures.
- ☐ I can discuss and debate ideas from what I read.

How to Score:

Count the number of checkboxes you marked in each level section.

If you marked **4-5 boxes in Beginning**: Start with Beginning passages.

Topic 11: Digital Citizenship

Social | Grades 6-10 | Three Leveled Passages

Vocabulary Pre-Teach

Study these key words before reading. They appear in all three levels of the passage.

privacy	The right to keep personal information secret.
cyberbullying	Using the internet to hurt or scare someone.
internet	A global network that connects computers.
footprint	The mark or trace left behind by a person.
responsibility	Being accountable for your actions.

Beginning Level — Digital Citizenship

Reading Passage

Being a good digital citizen is important. A digital citizen uses the internet safely and kindly. When you go online, you leave a footprint. This is a digital footprint. It shows what you do on the internet. You must protect your privacy. Do not share personal information with strangers. Also, you should show responsibility. Never be a cyberbully. Cyberbullying is using the internet to hurt someone's feelings. Treat people online the same way you treat them in person. Be smart and be kind on the internet!

Comprehension Questions

1. What is a digital citizen?
2. What is a digital footprint?
3. How can you protect your privacy online?
4. What is cyberbullying?

Language Focus: Imperatives

Rewrite the sentences as imperative commands (give advice).

1. You should protect your privacy. → _____
2. You should not share personal information. → _____

3. You must be kind to others online. → _____

4. You should not be a cyberbully. → _____

Intermediate Level — Digital Citizenship

Reading Passage

Digital citizenship is about using technology responsibly and safely. Every time you post a photo, send a message, or visit a website, you create a digital footprint. Once something is online, it is very difficult to delete, so you must think before you post. Protecting your privacy is crucial. Never share your home address, phone number, or passwords with people you do not know. Unfortunately, the internet can also be used for harm. Cyberbullying is a serious problem where people use social media to tease, threaten, or embarrass others. A good digital citizen shows responsibility by standing up to cyberbullying and respecting others' privacy online.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why is it difficult to erase your digital footprint?
2. What kinds of information should stay private?
3. What is cyberbullying?
4. How can a digital citizen stand up to cyberbullying?

Language Focus: Should / Shouldn't for Advice

Complete the sentences with should or shouldn't.

1. You _____ think before you post something online.
2. You _____ share your password with strangers.
3. People _____ report cyberbullying when they see it.
4. A good digital citizen _____ respect others' privacy.

Advanced Level — Digital Citizenship

Reading Passage

Digital citizenship encompasses the norms of appropriate, responsible technology use. In the 21st century, managing one's digital footprint is paramount, as online actions leave permanent records that can impact future academic and professional opportunities. Privacy management requires a critical understanding of data collection algorithms and user agreements. Moreover, the proliferation of digital platforms has exacerbated cyberbullying, necessitating robust legal and social frameworks to protect vulnerable users. Ethical digital citizenship also involves evaluating digital media for misinformation, respecting intellectual property, and recognizing the digital divide that limits equitable access to technology. Ultimately, fostering responsible digital citizens is essential for cultivating a safe, inclusive, and informed digital society.

Comprehension Questions

1. Why is managing a digital footprint so important for the future?
2. What does privacy management entail beyond simply not sharing information?
3. How has the proliferation of digital platforms affected cyberbullying?
4. What is the digital divide?

Language Focus: Modals of Deduction and Possibility

Complete the sentences with must, might, could, or can't.

1. If you posted something years ago, it _____ still be online.
2. She _____ not know about the cyberbullying; we should tell her.
3. They _____ be careful; sharing passwords is very risky.
4. This website _____ be collecting our data without us knowing.

Topic 18: Ancient Greece

History | Grades 6-10 | Three Leveled Passages

Vocabulary Pre-Teach

Study these key words before reading. They appear in all three levels of the passage.

democracy	A government where people vote to make decisions.
philosophy	The study of the nature of knowledge, reality, and existence.
city-state	An independent city and the surrounding land it controls.
mythology	A collection of traditional stories about gods and heroes.
Olympics	An ancient sports competition held in honor of Zeus.

Beginning Level — Ancient Greece

Reading Passage

Ancient Greece was a powerful civilization. It was not one big country. It was made of many city-states. A city-state is a city and the land around it. Athens and Sparta were famous city-states. Athens was the birthplace of democracy. In a democracy, the people vote to make decisions. Sparta was known for its strong army. The Greeks also had rich mythology. They told stories about gods and goddesses like Zeus. Every four years, the Greeks held the Olympics. Athletes from different city-states competed in sports to honor the gods.

Comprehension Questions

1. What was a city-state?
2. Which city-state was the birthplace of democracy?
3. What was Sparta known for?
4. Why did the Greeks hold the Olympics?

Language Focus: There was / There were

Complete the sentences with there was or there were.

1. _____ many city-states in Ancient Greece.
2. _____ a powerful army in Sparta.

3. _____ a competition called the Olympics.

4. _____ many stories in Greek mythology.

Intermediate Level — Ancient Greece

Reading Passage

Ancient Greece was a civilization that greatly influenced the modern world. It consisted of independent city-states, called polis. The two most famous were Athens and Sparta. Athens is famous for inventing democracy, where male citizens could vote on laws. Sparta, on the other hand, was a militaristic society where boys trained as soldiers from a young age. The Greeks also developed philosophy, with great thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who asked questions about life and knowledge. Greek mythology featured gods like Zeus and Athena, and these stories explained natural events. Additionally, the Greeks started the Olympic Games, which brought rivals together in peaceful athletic competitions.

Comprehension Questions

1. How did Athens and Sparta differ from each other?
2. Who were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle?
3. What was the purpose of Greek mythology?
4. What made the Olympic Games special for the Greek city-states?

Language Focus: Comparative and Superlative Adjectives

Complete the sentences with the correct form of the adjective in parentheses.

1. Athens was _____ (democratic) than Sparta.
2. Sparta had the _____ (strong) army in Greece.
3. Philosophy is one of the _____ (important) Greek inventions.
4. The Olympic Games were _____ (peaceful) than wars.

Advanced Level — Ancient Greece

Reading Passage

Ancient Greece, a conglomeration of independent poleis, bequeathed foundational principles to Western civilization. The Athenian experiment with direct democracy established a precedent for civic participation, contrasting sharply with the Spartan oligarchic militarism. Intellectually, the Hellenic world catalyzed philosophical inquiry, transitioning from mythological explanations to rationalist paradigms championed by figures like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Furthermore, the pan-Hellenic Olympic Games served not merely as athletic contests but as mechanisms for cultural cohesion and diplomatic truces among warring factions. The enduring legacy of Greek architecture, literature, and political theory underscores the civilization's profound impact on subsequent epochs of human history.

Comprehension Questions

1. How did the Spartan system contrast with the Athenian system?
2. What intellectual shift did the Hellenic world catalyze?
3. Beyond athletics, what was the function of the Olympic Games?
4. Why is the legacy of Ancient Greece considered enduring?

Language Focus: Relative Clauses (Defining and Non-Defining)

Combine the sentences using a relative pronoun (who, which, where). Add commas for non-defining clauses.

1. Athens was a city-state. The people there voted on laws. (where)
2. Socrates was a philosopher. He asked difficult questions. (who)
3. The Olympic Games were events. They brought rivals together. (which)
4. Zeus was a god. The Greeks worshipped him. (who)

Topic 19: The Ocean

Science | Grades 6-10 | Three Leveled Passages

Vocabulary Pre-Teach

Study these key words before reading. They appear in all three levels of the passage.

current	A steady flow of water in a particular direction.
tide	The rise and fall of the sea level caused by the moon.
marine	Related to the sea or ocean.
depth	How deep something is.
salinity	The amount of salt in water.

Beginning Level — The Ocean

Reading Passage

The ocean is a huge body of salt water. It covers most of the Earth. The ocean is very deep in some places. Many amazing marine animals live there, like fish, whales, and dolphins. The water in the ocean is not still; it moves. A current is water that flows like a river inside the ocean. The moon pulls on the ocean water to make the tides. The tide comes in and goes out every day. The ocean has high salinity, which means it is very salty. The ocean is important because it gives us food and controls the weather.

Comprehension Questions

1. What covers most of the Earth?
2. What is an ocean current?
3. What causes the tides?
4. Why is the ocean important?

Language Focus: Superlative Adjectives

Fill in the blank with the correct superlative form of the adjective.

1. The ocean is the _____ (large) habitat on Earth.
2. The blue whale is the _____ (big) marine animal.

Topic 11: Digital Citizenship

Beginning

1. Someone who uses the internet safely and kindly
2. A trace of what you do online
3. Don't share personal information with strangers
4. Using the internet to hurt someone

Intermediate

1. Because once something is online, it is hard to delete
2. Home address, phone number, or passwords
3. Using social media to tease, threaten, or embarrass others
4. By reporting it and respecting others' privacy

Advanced

1. Online actions leave permanent records affecting future opportunities
 2. Understanding data collection algorithms and user agreements
 3. It has exacerbated it, requiring robust frameworks
 4. A gap limiting equitable access to technology
-

Topic 12: The Human Body

Beginning

1. Holds the body up
2. They help the body move
3. Digests food
4. A cell

Intermediate

1. Protects organs and gives shape
2. The circulatory system
3. By breaking down food into energy
4. The basic building blocks of life

Advanced

1. A state of stable internal balance
 2. They maintain cellular respiration by delivering O₂ and removing CO₂
 3. They coordinate responses to stimuli
 4. Pathogenic infections or metabolic dysfunction
-

Topic 13: The Roman Empire

Beginning

1. A group of powerful men who advised leaders
2. To carry water
3. Gladiators
4. It was strong and conquered many lands

Intermediate

1. After civil wars, it was ruled by an emperor
2. Arches, concrete, and aqueducts
3. They allowed the army to move quickly

4. Its laws, Latin, or architecture

Advanced

1. Decades of civil strife
 2. Aqueducts brought fresh water to cities
 3. Internal corruption, economic deficits, and pressure from Germanic tribes
 4. The Eastern Empire persisted, and legal/linguistic heritage remained
-

Topic 14: Endangered Species

Beginning

1. A species no longer exists
2. The natural home of an animal or plant
3. For their tusks
4. Protecting animals and their habitats

Intermediate

1. Habitat destruction
2. Habitats change faster than animals can adapt
3. Creating protected areas and enforcing laws
4. To save animals and restore their populations

Advanced

1. Habitat degradation, overexploitation, and pollution
 2. It disrupts trophic cascades and ecological balance
 3. In-situ preserves in natural habitats; ex-situ uses captive breeding
 4. It reconciles human needs with ecological preservation
-

Topic 15: World Religions

Beginning

1. A system of beliefs
2. In a church
3. To be kind, help others, and live good lives
4. Because people share many values even with different beliefs

Intermediate

1. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism
2. The Quran
3. In synagogues
4. Helping the poor and treating others with respect

Advanced

1. Abrahamic faiths are monotheistic; Dharmic religions focus on dharma/karma
 2. Dharma is duty; karma is action
 3. As both a unifying force and a catalyst for conflict
 4. To mitigate intolerance and promote pluralism
-

Topic 16: The American Revolution

Beginning

1. Great Britain

2. They had to pay high taxes and had no say
3. Freedom
4. George Washington

Intermediate

1. They were taxed without having a voice in Parliament
2. Thomas Jefferson
3. With assistance from France
4. It is the supreme law of the United States

Advanced

1. The Enlightenment
 2. They imposed taxes without colonial representation
 3. They provided necessary military and financial support
 4. A federal republic with checks and balances
-

Topic 17: Recycling & Conservation

Beginning

1. To a landfill
2. Taking old things and making them into new things
3. Paper, plastic, glass, metal
4. Saving water and electricity

Intermediate

1. By turning old materials into new products
2. Turning off lights and fixing leaky faucets
3. They are sustainable and don't run out
4. To protect the planet for the next generation

Advanced

1. Overflowing landfills and microplastic pollution
 2. By prioritizing recycling and repurposing materials
 3. It offers sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels
 4. Systemic policy reforms and individual behavioral shifts
-

Topic 18: Ancient Greece

Beginning

1. A city and the land around it
2. Athens
3. Its strong army
4. To honor the gods

Intermediate

1. Athens had democracy; Sparta was militaristic
2. Great thinkers/philosophers
3. To explain natural events
4. They brought rivals together peacefully

Advanced

1. Sparta was oligarchic and militaristic; Athens had direct democracy

2. From mythological explanations to rationalist paradigms
 3. Cultural cohesion and diplomatic truces
 4. Its impact on architecture, literature, and political theory
-

Topic 19: The Ocean

Beginning

1. The ocean
2. Water that flows like a river inside the ocean
3. The moon pulling on the water
4. It gives us food and controls the weather

Intermediate

1. Wind drives surface currents; temperature/salinity drive deep currents
2. The sea level rises and falls twice a day
3. By absorbing heat and carbon dioxide
4. For the survival of marine species and human life

Advanced

1. Wind shear and density gradients; it distributes thermal energy
 2. By sequestering anthropogenic CO₂
 3. Ocean acidification, which threatens calcifying organisms
 4. Overfishing and plastic pollution
-

Topic 20: Human Rights

Beginning

1. Basic things people need to live with respect
2. Unfair treatment based on race, gender, or religion
3. The United Nations
4. Treating everyone fairly

Intermediate

1. Life, freedom from slavery, education
2. To promote equality and prevent discrimination after World War II
3. No, they are still violated
4. By helping people learn about and defend their rights

Advanced

1. Entitlements that cannot be taken away
 2. Cultural relativism and geopolitical resistance
 3. By suppressing civil and political freedoms
 4. Robust international law, independent judiciaries, and vigilant civil society
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