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You don't need to read an entire English book to learn. A good English short story is often enough!Stories are all about going beyond reality, and these classics will not only improve your English reading but also open your mind to different worlds.Contents1. "The Tortoise and the Hare" by AesopThis classic fable (story) is about a very slow tortoise (turtle) and a speedy hare (rabbit). The tortoise challenges the hare to a race. The hare laughs at the idea that a tortoise could run faster than him, but the race ends with a surprising result.You have ever heard the English expression, "Slow and steady wins the race"? This story is the basis for that common phrase. You can read it for free, along with a number of other stories in this list! 2. "The Ant and the Grasshopper" by AesopThis is another great story that teaches a lesson that's written for kids but adults can enjoy, too. The story tells of a grasshopper who lounges around all summer while his friend the ant prepares for the winter. When winter comes, the two friends end up in very different situations!The more is that those who save up during the good times will get to enjoy the better times are had. 3. "White Wing: The Tale of the Doves and the Hunter" This very short story from the 19th century was so greatly written in Sanskrit an ancient language. When a group of doves is caught in a hunter's net, they must work together as a team to escape from the hunter's clutches. You can listen to a reading of the story as you read along on this website. 4. "Royal Servant" In this story, an old man sets out to ask an African king to dig some wells in his village when their water runs dry. But first, he teaches the king a lesson in humility by showing him how all people help each other. Read the story to see how the clever old man gets the king to do as he asks! 5. "Emily's Secret" This is a modern-day story about a little girl with a big secret she can't tell anyone about. When her teacher finds out her secret, they work together to fix the issue.This story is a good choice for absolute beginners, because it uses only the present tense. It's also written in very basic English with simple vocabulary and short sentences. 6. "The Bogey Beast" by Flora Annie SteelThe woman in this story finds a pot of treasure on her walk home. As she carries it home, the treasure keeps changing, becoming things of lesser value.However, the woman's enthusiasm makes her see only the positive after each change, which would have upset anyone else. Her positive personality tries to make every negative situation seem like a gift!This story shows how important it is to look at things from a positive point of view. Instead of being disappointed in what we don't have, this story reminds us to view what we do have as blessings. 7. "Love Is in the Air" This modern story is about a young woman Penny who is anxious about going to her family's annual reunion barbecue. But despite screaming children and arguing cousins, Penny ends up happy that she came to the reunion when she starts a conversation with a handsome man.The story is written in simple English, using only the present tense, so it's perfect for beginners. 8. "The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse" by Beatrix PotterThis classic children's story is about two mice, one from the country and one from the city. Both mice think that the other mouse is so lucky to live in what they think is a wonderful place!The two mice decide to visit each other in their homes. It turns out that the country mouse has a difficult time in the city, and the city mouse struggles in the country. In the end, they realize that they believed the old English saying, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." In other words, each mouse thought the other had a better life, only to discover that they actually prefer their own life! 9. "Paul Bunyan" adapted by George GrogThe story of Paul Bunyan has been around in the United States for many years. He's the symbol of American frontier life, showing the ideal strength, work ethic and good morality that Americans work hard to imitate.Paul Bunyan is considered a legend, so stories about him are full of unusual details, such as eating 50 eggs in one day and being so big that he caused an earthquake. It can be a pretty funny read, with characters such as a blue ox and a reversible dog.This version of the story is also meant to be read out loud, so it's fast-paced and entertaining. This website has an audio recording with the story, which you can play at slower or faster speeds. 10. "Cinderella" by Charles PerraultYou may already know the story of Cinderella, whether you saw the Disney movie or read a children's book of it.However, there are actually many different versions of "Cinderella." This one by Charles Perrault is the most well-known and is often the version told to children."Cinderella" is a beloved story because it describes how a kind and hard-working person was able to get a happy ending. Even though Cinderella's stepsisters treated her awfully, Cinderella herself remained gentle and humble. It goes to show that even though you may experience hardships, it's important to stay kind, forgiving and mindful. 11. "Little Red Riding Hood" Adapted by the British CouncilThis is a story that every English-speaking child knows. It's about a little girl who meets a wolf in the forest while going to see her sick grandmother. The wolf pretends to be her grandmother in order to trick the little girl.This story is presented by the British Council as a video with the text clearly spoken. You can then play a game to rearrange the sentences below the video into the correct order. Read the text of the story in a PDF file and answer some activity questions (then check your answers with the provided answer sheet).This website has many other stories you can read and listen to, like "Circus Story" by Sue Clarke, which is an excellent option for learning animal vocabulary, and even adaptations of Shakespeare plays for younger readers. 12. "The Lottery" by Shirley JacksonEvery year, the small town in this story holds an event known as "The Lottery." During this event, someone from the community is randomly chosen.What are they chosen for? You'll have to read the story to find out!You may have heard of the term "mob mentality" and how it can allow for some pretty surprising (and terrible) things to happen. This classic story looks at society, and how much evil people are willing to overlook to keep their society stable. This is considered to be one of the most famous short stories in American literature. It's a great example of what is known as a dystopian society, where people live in a frightening way. To learn more, check out this TED-Ed video that tells you how to recognize a dystopia. 13. "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde"The Happy Prince" is a story that explores compassion in society, serving as a fairy tale and a fable at once. It's about a prince who is only allowed to see beauty and comfort in his life. When he dies, he's turned into a golden statue in his city, where he discovers that others actually live their lives in poverty and darkness. With the help of a swallow (a type of bird), the prince manages to help people even after death.Since the story is old, much of the English is outdated (not used in modern English). Still, if you have a good grasp of the English language, you can use this story to give yourself a great reading challenge. 14. "The Night Train at Deoli" by Ruskin BondRuskin Bond used to spend summers at his grandmother's house in Dehradun, India. While taking the train, he always had to pass through a small station called Deoli. No one used to get down at the station and nothing happened there.Until one day, when he sees a girl selling fruit and is unable to forget her.Ruskin Bond is a writer who can communicate deep feelings in a simple way. This story is about our attachment to strangers and why we cherish (value or appreciate deeply) them even though we might never meet them again. 15. "There Will Come Soft Rains" by Ray BradburyThis classic story by science-fiction author Ray Bradbury, Earth has been destroyed by war and no one lives on it anymore. Still, the robots and the machines continue to function and serve human beings who have long ago died. The title is taken from a poem that describes how nature will continue its work long after humanity is gone. But in this story, we see that nature plays a supporting role and the machines are the ones who have taken its place.They continue their work without any human or natural assistance. This shows how technology has replaced nature in our lives and how it can both destroy us and carry on without humanity itself. 16. "Orientation" by Daniel Orozco This is a humorous story in which the speaker explains the office policies to a new employee while gossiping about the staff. It's extremely easy to read, as the sentences are short and the vocabulary is simple.Many working English learners will relate to this story, as it explains the silly, nonsensical moments of modern office life. Modern workplaces often feel like theaters where we pretend to work rather than get actual work done. The speaker exposes this reality that few would ever admit to.He over-explains everything from the view out the office window to the intimate details of everyone's life—from the overworked loner to the secret serial killer. It talks about the things that go unsaid; how people at the office know about the deep secrets of our home life, but don't discuss them. 17. "Paper Menagerie" by Ken LiuJack's mother can make paper animals come to life. In the beginning, Jack loves them and spends hours with his mom. But once he grows up, his mother's inability to speak English keeps Jack from talking to her.When his mother tries to talk to him through her creations, he kills them and collects them in a box. After a tragic loss, he finally gets to know her story through a hidden message that he should have read a long time ago. The story is a simple narration that touches on complex issues, like leaving your home country and the conflicts that can occur within families when different cultures and languages collide. 18. "The Missing Mail" by R.K. NarayanThanappa is the village mailman, who is good friends with Ramanujan and his family. He learns about a failed marriage and helps Ramanujan's daughter get engaged to a suitable match.Just before the wedding, Thanappa receives a tragic letter about Ramanujan's brother. To spare them heartache, he decides not to deliver the letter.The story explores the idea that despite the best intentions, our actions can cause more harm to our loved ones than we ever intended. If you like this and want to read more by R.K. Narayan, check out the other stories in the author's "Malgudi Days" short story collection. "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt VonnegutThe year is 2081, and everyone has been made equal by force. Every person who is superior in any way has been handicapped (something that prevents a person's full use of their abilities) by the government. Intelligent people are distracted by disturbing noises. Good dancers have to wear weights so that they don't dance too well. Attractive people wear ugly masks so they don't look better than anyone else.However, one day there is a rebellion, and everything changes for a brief instant. Technology is always supposed to make us better. But in this case, we see that it can be used to disable our talents. Moreover, the writer shows us how the mindless use of a single value like equality can create more suffering for everyone. 20. "The School" by Donald BarthelmeAt first, the trees die. Then the snakes, followed by the tropical fish. Then the class gets a puppy, and... well, you can see where things are going.And that's just the beginning of the series of unfortunate events at the school in this short story, narrated by a teacher. The story is absurd (ridiculous to the point of being silly), even though the topic is serious. By the end, the kids start asking difficult questions about death that the adults don't quite know how to answer.This story leaves a lot of things unsaid, which means you'll need to "read between the lines," or look closer at the text to understand what's really happening. 21. "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaidn "Girl," a mother tells her daughter how to live her life properly. The mother instructs the girl to do all the household chores, in very specific ways, making it seem like that's her only duty in life.Sometimes the mother tells the girl how to attract attention, not to talk to boys and to always keep away from men. Other times, the mother hints that the girl will need to be attractive to men to live a good life.This story doesn't feel like a story. There's no plot, and nothing really happens. But read closely, and you'll see an important message about how girls are taught to live restricted lives since childhood. 22. "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" by Rudyard Kipling"Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" is a classic tale about a mongoose who regularly visits a family in India. The family feeds him, and lets him live in their house, but they worry that he might bite someone. One day, when a cobra comes to their house, the mongoose kills it. This event helps the family, but humans don't accept him. He is punished for acting out his natural emotions.But the way he handles his rage, in the end, makes him look more mature than most human beings. Nominated for the Hugo award, many readers have connected with Sly since they can see similarities in their own lives. 23. "The Boarded Window" by Ambrose Bierce "The Boarded Window" is a horror story about a man who has to deal with his wife's death. The setting is a remote cabin in the wilderness in Cincinnati, and he feels helpless as she gets sick.There's an interesting twist to this story, and the ending will get you thinking (and maybe feeling a bit disturbed).If you enjoy older stories with a little suspense, this will be a good challenge for you. It talks about the event that made a hermit decide to live alone for decades, with a mysterious window boarded up in his cabin. It also uses a lot of psychology and symbolism, so you may want to read the story more than once to understand everything it has to say. 28. "The Monkey's Paw" by W.W. JacobsBe careful what you wish for! One man finds this out the hard way when he brings a magical monkey's paw home from India. This paw is supposed to grant three wishes to three people. People start to wish on it, only to realize that our wishes can have severe consequences.The characters in this story immediately regret when their wishes come true. Even though they get what they wanted, it comes at a large cost!This short story is from the early 1900s and uses some outdated English, but it's still easy to follow. It reminds us that there are no shortcuts in life, and to be wary if something seems too good to be true. 29. "A Tiny Feast" by Chris AdrianThis story centers around Titania and Oberon, two fairy characters from Shakespeare's famous play, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The two fairies are having a rough time in their marriage when they find a human child. They decide to adopt him, hoping that he'll help them save their relationship. However, the child develops a deadly, modern disease and the fairies have no idea what to do since they have never known illness or death.This is a tragic tale about how they try to understand something they've never seen before and their deep love for a stranger who is so unlike them. The story explores the grief of parenthood and the uncertainty of knowing whether your child will ever even know you. 30. "The Story of an Hour" by Kate ChopinThis story, written by a woman, is a sad look inside an unhappy marriage. Mrs. Mallard is a woman with heart troubles. When her husband dies, the people who come to give her this news tell it to her gently, so she doesn't have a shock.Mrs. Mallard busts into tears and locks herself in her room. At first, she's upset by the news. But the more she considers it, the more excited she becomes about the idea of the freedom that would come from her husband's death.What happens, then, when her husband comes home after an hour, alive and well?The story explores the conflicting range of the human emotions of grief and hope in a short span, and the impact it can have on a person's mind and body. 31. "The Zero Meter Diving Team" by Jim ShepherdThe Chernobyl nuclear disaster was one of the deadliest accidents of the twentieth century. This is a story about that event seen through the eyes of a father and his sons, who were all unfortunate enough to be close to the disaster area.The story exposes the whole system of corruption that led to a massive explosion taking innocent lives and poisoning multiple generations. The technical vocabulary and foreign words make this text a little more difficult. However, its plot is relatively easy to follow.The story is divided into small parts that make it both easy and exciting to read. Its various events show what it was like to live in the former Soviet Union. And just like any other good story, it's also about human relationships and how they change due to historic events. 32. "The Velvetine Rabbit" by Margery WilliamsA simple, stuffed rabbit toy is given to a young boy as a Christmas present. At first, the rabbit isn't noticed, as the boy is distracted by much fancier gifts. While being ignored, the rabbit begins to wonder what it means to be "real."One day, a certain event brings the rabbit into contact with the boy, and changes the toy's life forever:Have you ever loved a toy or doll so much, that you treated it as if it were alive? This story shows the power of love from a very unexpected viewpoint: that of a fluffy stuffed rabbit. It also highlights the importance of self-value, being true to yourself and finding strength in those who love you. 33. "The Friday Everything Changed" by Anne HartTradition is important in this school, where the boys always go to fetch water for the class. The girls are teased for being "weaker," and are last to get other privileges, like having the first choice of magazines. One day, a girl asks the teacher why girls aren't allowed to get the water, as well. This one question causes a big reaction and leads to a huge change. The girl's courage surprises everyone, but it also inspires other girls to stand up for themselves. One act from one brave person can lead to change and inspire others. The story reflects on gender equality and how important it is to fight for fairness. Just because something is accepted as "normal," doesn't mean it is right! 34. "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest HemingwayAt a Spanish train station, an American man and a young woman wait for a train that would take them to the city of Madrid. The woman sees some faraway hills and compares them to "white elephants." This starts a conversation between the two of them, but what they discuss seems to have a deeper meaning.This is another very well-known story that asks you to "read between the lines" to find the hidden meaning behind the text. Much of the story is a back-and-forth dialogue between two people, but you can tell a lot about them just from what they say to each other.There's a lot of symbolism that you can analyze in this story, along with context clues. Once you realize what the real topic of the characters' conversation is, you can figure out the quiet, sadder meaning behind it. How to Use Short Stories to Improve Your EnglishShort stories are effective in helping English learners to practice all four aspects of language learning: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Here's how you can make the most out of short stories as an English learner: Use illustrations to enhance your experience: Some short stories come with illustrations that you can use to guess what the story is about. You can even write your own caption or description of the picture. When you finish the story, go back to your image description. How did you do?Listen to recordings of stories: Here in the digital age, it's possible to find wonderful short stories online in audio or video form. If you find a video with English-language subtitles, you can read while also listening to how a native speaker pronounces words.FluentU has a few short story videos paired with reading tools, as well as many other options for training your listening and reading skills.Explore stories related to a theme: Do you like ghost stories? Science fiction? Romance? If you're learning about food or cooking, find a short story with a lot of food in the vocabulary.Choose the right reading level: Make sure that you always challenge yourself! One easy way to tell if a story is just right for you is to use the "five-finger test." Hold up your fist as you read a paragraph, and put up one finger for each word you don't know. If you have all five fingers up before the end of the paragraph, try to find an easier text.Practice "active reading": Your reading will only help you learn if you read actively.You're reading actively when you're paying very close attention to the story, its words and its meanings. Writing with a notebook nearby and in a place with no distractions can help you focus on active reading.Choose only a few words to look up: You may be tempted to stop for every unknown word, but it's actually better to try to figure out its meaning from context clues. This means looking at everything else in the sentence or paragraph to try and guess the meaning of the word. Only look up words that you can't figure out even with context clues.Summarize the story: When you've finished reading the story, retell it in your own words or write a summary of it. This will help you to practice any new words you learned, and make sure that you understood the story well. If you're struggling, read the story again and take notes as you read.Take breaks: Just because these stories are short, doesn't mean you need to read them in one sitting! If you find it hard to focus or you're struggling to understand the story, take a break. It's okay to read it one paragraph at a time.Discuss the stories with others: Talk about the story with your teacher, classmates, language partners or friends. If you read something you don't understand, write down your questions to ask during the discussion. Share your own opinions about the language, culture and messages within the story.If you want more people to talk to about the stories, try joining an online book group! For example, Goodreads has a few groups that specifically focus on reading and discussing short stories.I hope you have fun with these English short stories while improving your English language skills.Happy reading! 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