



Test Your Reading Skills

The Businessman and the Fisherman

Level: Advanced (C1-C2)

1. Check that you understand these vocabulary words:

enough	centrally	retire	seaside
immediate needs	resting	pier	concerned
sweat	deep in thought	badly-dressed	fleet
congratulated	processor	profit	middleman
rewarding	distribution	eventually	wander

2. Work with a partner. Read the text, fill in the gaps, put the parts in the right order, then discuss the questions on the following page:

-----X-----
 A well-dressed businessman – a tourist – was at the _____ of a _____ village when a small boat with just one _____ fisherman appeared. Inside the small boat were several large tuna. The businessman _____ the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked him how long it had taken to catch them. The fisherman replied, “Not long.” The businessman then asked him

-----X-----
 why he didn’t stay out longer and catch more fish, to which the fisherman replied, “I have _____ to support my family’s _____.” The businessman then asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?” The fisherman said, “I sleep late,

-----X-----
 fish a little, play with my children, rest with my wife, then _____ into the village each evening where I have a glass of wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and _____ life.” The businessman looked _____ and told him, “I’m a very successful businessman and may be able to help you. You

-----X-----
 should spend more time fishing, and with the extra money buy a bigger boat. With the _____ from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, and _____ you would have a whole _____ of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a _____

-----X-----
 you would sell directly to the _____, and finally open your own factory. You would control the product, processing, and _____. Of course, you would need to leave this village and move to the big city, then possibly even a different country,

-----X-----
 where you would run your growing business _____.” The fisherman asked, “But how long would all this take?” The businessman replied, “Fifteen to twenty years, I guess.” “But what then?” asked the fisherman, _____ on the warm sand. The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part!

-----X-----
 When the time is right you could launch your company on the stock market and become very rich. I feel sure you would make millions!” “Millions?” said the fisherman, “And then what?” The businessman wiped the _____ from his forehead and smiled, “Then you would _____. Move to a small coastal fishing village

-----X-----
 where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, rest with your wife, then wander into the village each evening and have a glass of wine and play guitar with your friends.” “But I’m doing that now,” said the fisherman, and the businessman walked away _____.

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Adapted from a story by Heinrich Böll: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anekdote_zur_Senkung_der_Arbeitsmoral



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Discussion Questions

1. What are the main themes of the story?
2. What is the moral of the story? What lesson does the author want the reader to take away from it?
3. Who is right, in your opinion? Who do you identify with the most – the businessman or the fisherman? Why?
4. How did you react to the ending of the story? Were you surprised or moved, for example? Why? / Why not?
5. What are the pros and cons of each man's point of view? Compare each man's position.
6. Would this story be the same if both characters were women? If not, how would it be different?
7. Is the fisherman saying that it is wrong to plan for the future? Isn't he being irresponsible? What about when he is too old to work? What about his family?
8. Should we be happy with what we have, or have ambition and strive for more / a better life?
9. Is it wrong to take pleasure in our achievements – setting a goal; striving for it; and achieving it?
10. Is the story biased in favour of either person? How does the narrative achieve this?
11. Can money buy happiness? What is the relationship between money and happiness?
12. What does the story mean to you? Does it make you want to change your way of life? How could you do this? Do you want to?
13. What is your ultimate goal – or end-game – in life?
14. Are you happy to accept the rat race: learn, earn, rest, then die? Can you imagine a different, more fulfilling way of life? Describe it. If not, why not?
15. Do you live in the moment, like the fisherman? What does it mean to do this? Have you ever tried it? How can we do this? What are the benefits/drawbacks of this?



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Answers

Exercise answers:

Here is the full text, with gap-fill words in boxes:

A well-dressed businessman – a tourist – was at the **pier** of a **seaside** village when a small boat with just one **badly-dressed** fisherman appeared. Inside the small boat were several large tuna. The businessman **congratulated** the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked him how long it had taken to catch them. The fisherman replied, “Not long.” The businessman then asked him why he didn’t stay out longer and catch more fish, to which the fisherman replied, “I have **enough** to support my family’s **immediate needs**.”

The businessman then asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?” The fisherman said, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, rest with my wife, then **wander** into the village each evening where I have a glass of wine and play guitar with my friends. I have a full and **rewarding** life.” The businessman looked **concerned** and told him, “I’m a very successful businessman and may be able to help you.

You should spend more time fishing, and with the extra money buy a bigger boat. With the **profit** from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, and **eventually** you would have a whole **fleet** of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a **middleman** you would sell directly to the **processor**, and finally open your own factory. You would control the product, processing, and **distribution**. Of course, you would need to leave this village and move to the big city, then possibly even a different country, where you would run your growing business **centrally**.” The fisherman asked, “But how long would all this take?” The businessman replied, “Fifteen to twenty years, I guess.” “But what then?” asked the fisherman, **resting** on the warm sand.

The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part! When the time is right you could launch your company on the stock market and become very rich. I feel sure you would make millions!” “Millions?” said the fisherman, “And then what?” The businessman wiped the **sweat** from his forehead and smiled, “Then you would **retire**. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, rest with your wife, then wander into the village each evening and have a glass of wine and play guitar with your friends.”

“But I’m doing that now,” said the fisherman, and the businessman walked away **deep in thought**.

Discussion question answers will vary. Suggested answers to selected questions:

1. Here are some of the themes that can be found in the story:
 - The fisherman may be saying to the businessman, “Why don’t you rest now, when your ultimate goal is to be able to make enough money to retire, i.e. to rest?” This paradox dates back to *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch, written in the late 1st century AD.
 - Quality time spent with family vs. time spent at work.
 - The fisherman lives in the moment, while the businessman lives in the future.



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- Both characters are polar extremes; we need to find balance in our lives between both positions; the dream could be to live on the beach, but with a nice modern home, clean clothes, and MONEY; there could be a third character who represents a third more moderate position – a middle-way. Can we compromise? e.g. a four-day working week.
5. The reader can get a negative impression of the businessman from the story (see below). Here are some arguments in favour of the businessman's point of view:
- He creates jobs for many people, not only his family; the fisherman only looks after his own family.
 - The fisherman is a stereotype of the anti-materialist who is happy with his poor lot – but poverty is not fun.
 - Human beings have higher needs than only food and subsistence, see for example Maslow's hierarchy of needs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs
10. The story can be seen to be biased in favour of the fisherman's point of view because:
- The businessman is shown as enquiring, while the fisherman has a fixed position that remains unchallenged.
 - The ending shows the businessman's position to be untenable, but without examining the fisherman's position. He appears to be living a life without money, but where does he live, for example? How does he pay the bills? We don't know his living conditions. How does he manage for heat, light, water, electricity, healthcare, hygiene (e.g. cleaning clothes, home, etc), entertainment, and so on?
 - What happens when disaster strikes – his boat is stolen, the fish supply dries up/is poisoned, etc. There is no mention of insurance!
 - There is a lack of variety: "Fish for dinner again, dear?" ...and for every meal? The fisherman's family's immediate needs are met – but the family will be hungry again soon, and human beings crave variety in everyday life.

Free image: <https://pixabay.com/en/fisherman-boat-in-le-lake-myanmar-239487/>