

# Charles Dickens

**Charles Dickens' novels described the life of the poor in Victorian times.**

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth in 1812. His family moved to London and by 1824 his father had been put in jail because he was in debt and could not pay people to whom he owed money. Charles' mother and younger brothers and sisters stayed in jail with his father. As Charles was old enough to work, he was employed at a warehouse where he wrote labels and stuck them on pots of paste which were used to make shoes black. The warehouse was filthy and infested with rats. At night Charles stayed at a lodging house and he visited his family on Sundays.


Three years later Charles became a solicitor's clerk. Two years after that he became a news reporter. In 1836 he wrote his first novel and continued to do so for another thirty-four years until he died.

Charles Dickens used the memories of his early life in poverty in London to make up the stories for his novels. The characters in his stories were made up from his memories of real people in his early life. Charles' stories were first published as serials in magazines and then, because they were so popular, they were made into books which you can still buy today.

Three characters that were well loved by Charles' readers in Victorian times were Oliver Twist in the novel *Oliver Twist*, Little Nell in the novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Paul Dombey in the novel *Dombey and Son*. Oliver Twist overcame a hard life of poverty but Little Nell and Paul Dombey both died. The sadness in the stories and the poor conditions in which the characters lived horrified many middle-class and upper-class people. This led to the passing of laws to improve the lives of the poor. Here are some examples of the laws.

In 1864 it was made illegal to employ children as chimneysweeps. In 1868 it was made illegal for children under eight years old to be employed on a farm. In 1869 people could no longer be put in jail for debt.

1. How old was Charles Dickens when he went to work in the warehouse?  .....

2. In which year did Charles Dickens: (a) become a solicitor's clerk  .....

(b) become a news reporter  ..... (c) die?  .....

3. What were Charles Dickens' novels about?

 .....

4. What did middle-class and upper-class people think about the stories?

 .....

5. How did Charles Dickens' books help to improve the lives of the poor?

 .....

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## Age range

- Years 3/4 (SP4/5).
- Years 5/6 (SP6/7).

## Resources

Copies of the worksheet.

## Using the worksheet

You may like to use this activity as a cross curricular exercise with your work in English. After the work has been completed, you may like to read to the class a short passage from one of Dickens' novels which introduces one of the children. For example, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* you could begin at the seventh paragraph in chapter 1 where Little Nell asks for directions and read on for a few pages until her grandfather is introduced. Alternatively you may select a short passage from either *Oliver Twist* or *Dombey and Son* which describes Oliver Twist or Paul Dombey. A reading from Dickens may be a suitable way to end a Victorian Day.



## Older students

The students can work on their own. They could work out the age of Charles Dickens when (a) he became a solicitor's clerk, (b) he became a newspaper reporter, (c) he wrote his first novel, (d) he died. You may like the students to reflect on the fact that Dickens' first writing job was writing labels. You may discuss with the students what they would like to write a story about and what experiences in their lives they might use in it.

## Outcomes

The students can:

- Extract information from a text.
- Appreciate how literature can cause changes in society.
- Perform calculations on information.
- Consider the use of experiences in the writing of stories.

## Younger students

Some of the students may need help with question five. You could ask the students how long did Dickens live. You could ask the students to write a story about one of their pets or a favourite relative as an example of writing about childhood memories.

## Outcomes

The students can:

- Extract information from a text.
- Appreciate how literature can cause changes in society.

Answers

1. 12
2. (a) 1827, (b) 1829, (c) 1870
3. The conditions in which his poor characters lived, and how they are affected by these.
4. They were horrified at the sadness and the conditions of the poor.
5. Laws were passed to improve the lives of the poor.