

Finding it was likely to overblow, we took in our sprit-sail, and stood by to hand the fore-sail; but making foul weather, we looked the guns were all fast, and handed the mizzen. The boat lay very broad off, so we thought it better spooning before the sea, than trying or hulling. We reefed the fore-sail and set him, we hauled aft the fore-sheet; the helm was hard a weather. The boat wore bravely. We belayed the fore-down haul; but the sail was split, and we hauled down the yard, and got the sail into the boat, and unbound all the things clear of it. It was a very fierce storm; the sea broke strange and dangerous.

—*Gulliver's Travels*—Jonathan Swift, 1726.

Reflections on the Sea

If you're reading *Gulliver's Travels* or *Moby Dick*, you could be at a loss as to what the narrators are describing if you don't know basic sailing terminology. Our language is peppered (or rather, salted) with expressions derived from life at sea. Thinking of the sea, you may picture whaling boats off Nantucket or Hawaii, warships during the Civil War, or merchant vessels carrying fertilized soil from the tropics to enrich the gardens of wealthy English farmers. However, much of the sailors' jargon that has entered and endured in our language came from the British navy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British naval and merchant ships dominated the oceans, developing their own culture with its own customs, practices, and language. In these centuries of global exploration and commerce, boys and men, many of them illiterate, went off to sea and spent years away from home under dangerous conditions. Order and discipline were important in minimizing risk as was communication aboard ship, which had to be crystal clear. For example, different pitches of the boatswain's whistle meant different things: a call for attention, dismissal, or "piping" someone aboard. Shouted instructions often did not carry well against the noise of wind and waves, but voice commands to change the direction of sails had to be carried out immediately, whether to avoid collision with other ships in naval battles, to sail through a typhoon, or to stay on course. Also important to the orderly life of a ship was proper naming, accounting for, stowing of, and using gear. Many terms remain in our language as a colorful legacy of the great sailing eras of history. Weekend sailors on the Chesapeake Bay and competitors in the heat of an America's Cup race use the same terms. And what teacher has not tried to get a classroom "shipshape" or commanded, "Pipe down?"

Reflections on the Sea

Objectives

Identify some basic terms associated with boats, ships, and sailing.

Use expressions derived from nautical sayings in context.

Materials

Student Page

Optional: cassette or CD player for music

Subjects

language arts, social studies, literature, music

Procedure

1. Read the selection from *Gulliver's Travels* aloud to students. Ask for student impressions of this almost-foreign language. Help them along by explaining some basic terminology. The main frame of a boat is its *hull*. The *bow* is the forward part of the boat from where the planks begin to curve inward. The *stern* is the wider rear end of the boat. If something is located *aft* it is toward the stern; if it is *fore* it is toward the bow. The *deck* is the planked floor that runs the length of the boat. A *hatch* is a rectangular opening in the deck. You can go *below* into the lower part of the boat, which includes the *hold*, where cargo is stored. The *gangway* is the main entrance to a boat from the side. The *masts* are the tall timbers that carry the sail. The mast closest to the bow is the *foremast*, followed by the *main mast*. If there are three masts, the third is the *mizzenmast*. (Traditionally, a sailing boat with a *bowsprit*—a large, tapered pole extending from the front of the vessel—and three masts was known as a ship. Later, a ship was

defined as a boat powered by sail or steam.) Mounted across the masts are large timbers called *yards* that support the *sails*, or *sheets*. The outer part of a yard is called the *yardarm*. The supporting timber of the *foresail* or the jib is the *boom*. The sails are held in place by lines called *rigging*. The *keel* is the structure that runs the length of the boat, supporting and uniting the boat. Most of the keel is below the waterline.

As the wind fills the sails, the part of the boat facing the wind is the *windward* side and the part sheltered from the wind is the *leeward* side. As you look forward on the boat, the lefthand side of the boat is the *port* side and the righthand side is the *starboard* side.

Some other common terms include the following:

fast—secure or fixed

foul—become entangled

list—tilt of a boat

trim—arrangement of sails to get the most wind

limey—During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, British seamen were called limeys because of the limes issued to sailors to prevent scurvy.

tack—a boat's direction with respect to the wind

2. Work with your school librarian or music teacher to get a CD or cassette for students to listen to while doing this activity. You might play classical music such as Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* or Debussy's *La Mer*. You might find recordings of traditional sea chanteys—songs sung by sailors in rhythm with their work. The music and lyrics to “Blow the Man Down” and “Sailing, Sailing” can be found in *An Illustrated Treasury of Songs*. You might also find contemporary music that will appeal to students.

3. Hand out the student page. As students work on section A independently, circulate among them to offer help with the meaning of unfamiliar expressions. The Pequod's hull was stained by the typhoons of the Pacific and the calms of the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, and Arctic oceans. “[D]arkened like a French grenadier” refers to soldiers in Napoleon's eighteenth-century campaigns in Egypt and Siberia who threw grenades in battle and became darkened with soot. The bow—the front of the boat—may have appeared bearded because of seaweed or a protective covering. The masts are the tall timbers that carry the sails,

and the reference is probably to the spires of the cathedral in Cologne, Germany, the most famous example of Romanesque architecture. The wooden decks were probably wrinkled from exposure to seawater.

In section B, students may have answers similar to these:

1. I like the cut of his jib. I like the way he looks—his clothes, his walk. The jib is the triangular sail fore of the foresail.
2. It's time to swab the deck. It's time to clean up. This was the order to clean the boat's deck with a rope mop that sometimes had a wooden handle.
3. Please stand by. This is an expression derived from the command for sailors to be ready.
4. All hands on deck. This expression derived from the captain's command to summon the entire crew.

5. I was really taken aback by what he said. This means to momentarily stop short or literally move back. When the wind suddenly shifts and comes into the sails from the front, the boat is said to be taken aback.

6. It was touch and go there for a while. This expression means you were unsure what the outcome would be. It is used to describe a boat that runs aground and then immediately recovers and floats again.

7. Now everything is on an even keel. Everything is going along smoothly. A boat is on an even keel when the keel is horizontal in the water.

8. Thar she blows. There it is. This was the cry of the spotter aboard a whaling boat upon seeing a whale.

9. In class today, Ms. Smith really lowered the boom. She gave some bad news or got angry. The boom is the timber that holds the jib sail near the bow of a boat. A sudden wind shift can quickly blow it around to knock down anyone standing in the way.

10. It's like flogging a dead horse. This commonly means belaboring a point that has already been made clear. A dead horse is what seamen called a month's work on board, for which they were paid in advance. On the last evening of the month the crew would flog a straw-stuffed horse and throw it overboard.

In section C, encourage students to be creative in writing a scene. For further reading, they might try some of the sea stories from the online *Ocean Planet* exhibit. They might try reading *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville or *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Dana. The latter contains a helpful glossary of nautical terms. Some students might enjoy a nonfiction adventure by an oceanographer/innovator such as Jacques Cousteau or Bob Ballard or an adventurer like Thor Heyerdahl.

4. Tell students that sailors can communicate between boats by *semaphore*, a system of visual signaling with flags. Have the students do library research to find out the flag symbols for the letters of the alphabet. Each student can draw and color a page-sized flag to represent a different letter of the alphabet. Place the flags around the classroom for a week or so with the letters labeled. Students can become familiar with their meaning. Then take the flags down and ask students to write out their own names in flag letters. They might create their own flag words and challenge one another to decode them.

Reflections on the Sea Student Page

What would you be doing if you were on a whaling boat for months at a time? Would you sing a sea chantey or dance the hornpipe? Or would it take you some time to get your sea legs? Perhaps you would write a letter home or create a carving out of a whale's tooth. In this activity, you might get a little closer to what the sailing experience is like.

A. Read this selection from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. It is from chapter 16, "The Ship," in which the narrator describes the whaling ship *Pequod*.

She was a boat of the old school, rather small if anything. . . . Long, seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull's complexion was darkened like a French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bow looked bearded. Her masts—cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale—her masts stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne. Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled.

In this selection, Melville describes four parts of the ship. How does he help you picture them in your own mind?

Part of ship

Description in your own words

1.

2.

3.

4.

Reflections on the Sea

Student Page

B. We use nautical expressions in everyday life. Write a sentence to explain what each of the following expressions means in your own words.

1. I like the cut of his jib.

2. It's time to swab the deck.

3. Please stand by.

4. All hands on deck.

5. I was really taken aback by what he said.

6. It was touch and go there for a while.

7. Now everything is on an even keel.

8. Thar she blows!

9. In class today, Ms. Smith really lowered the boom.

10. It's like flogging a dead horse.

C. You may have been listening to some music inspired by the sea. Perhaps you enjoy the ring of nautical expressions. Working cooperatively with a small group, use some of these terms and expressions to write dialogue for a scene of your own creation. Or use them to write some song lyrics to perform for your class.

Resources

Online resources

Visit
Ocean Planet
online at
**[http://
seawifs.gsfc.nasa.
gov/ocean_planet.html](http://seawifs.gsfc.nasa.gov/ocean_planet.html)**

Using the Exhibition Topic Outline, under Educational Materials go to Sea People Lesson Plan: Words from the Ocean; Ocean Planet Nautical Sayings; Ocean Planet Legends and Customs of the Sea; Baru Bay, Australia; and Ocean Planet: Writings and Images of the Sea. Click on "Sea People" for stories about those who live on and near the oceans. Under the Resource Page, use the Image Catalog to get photographs and illustrations of specific images suggested in the activities in this section.

Resources for students

Dana,
Richard. *Two
Years Before the Mast*. New York:
Viking, 1981.

Resources for teachers

National Gallery
of Art. *An Illustrated
Treasury of Songs*. New
York: Rizzoli, 1991.

Payne, Roger. *Among Whales*.
New York: Charles Scribner's
Sons, 1995.

*The Visual Encyclopedia of Nautical
Terms Under Sail*. New York:
Crown, 1978.