

# Carpe Diem | Dead Poets Society

Vocabulary Breakdown

Hollywood English Club

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Mr Keating tears a page out of a textbook and tells his students to seize the day. Dead Poets Society is full of language that is poetic, rebellious, and deeply human. This lesson covers every key term from the scene.

## 1. "O Captain, My Captain"

■ "O Captain, My Captain" is a poem by Walt Whitman written as a tribute to Abraham Lincoln after his assassination.

✓ Keating uses it to inspire his students. Later they stand on their desks and say it to him — one of cinema's most iconic moments.

▶ *"The students climbed onto their desks and whispered, one by one: O Captain, my Captain."*

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## 2. "Daring"

■ Daring means willing to take bold risks or do things others are afraid to do.

✓ Can be an adjective (a daring plan) or a noun (it took great daring). Always implies courage in the face of potential failure.

▶ *"Her daring decision to quit her job and start a business paid off within a year."*

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## 3. "Dispel Rumours"

■ To dispel rumours means to prove they are false and stop people from believing them.

✓ You dispel something by showing it to be untrue. Often used by public figures trying to control their reputation.

▶ *"The company released a statement to dispel rumours about layoffs."*

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## 4. "Fester into Facts"

■ To fester means to become worse over time. "Fester into facts" means rumours grow and harden until people believe them.

✓ A vivid metaphor. Keating warns that unchallenged assumptions become accepted truths.

▶ *"Unchallenged gossip can fester into something that feels like fact."*

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## 5. "Hellton"

■ "Hellton" is a nickname students give to Helton Academy — their strict boarding school.

✓ Simple wordplay: Hell plus the school name. Shows student resentment of rigid institutional life.

▶ *"The boys called it Hellton under their breath — never where the teachers could hear."*

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## 6. "Mental Giant"

■ A mental giant is someone with exceptional intelligence or intellectual power.

✓ Often used ironically or sarcastically to suggest someone is not particularly clever.

▶ *"Oh great, another mental giant has arrived to tell us how to do our jobs."*

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## 7. "Intellectual Equivalent"

■ An intellectual equivalent is the mental or conceptual counterpart of something physical or concrete.

✓ Keating uses it to explain how poetry connects to everything — it is the intellectual equivalent of the physical world.

▶ *"For him, a good conversation was the intellectual equivalent of a long run — exhausting and exhilarating."*

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## 8. "Kick Copies of Byron"

■ Lord Byron was a famous Romantic poet. "Kick copies of Byron" refers to physically rejecting the stuffy textbook introduction to poetry.

✓ Keating is making a dramatic point about freeing students from dry academic frameworks.

▶ *"He swept the rule book off the desk as if to say: we are not doing things that way anymore."*

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## 9. "Hymnal / Stanza"

■ A hymnal is a book of hymns — religious songs. A stanza is a grouped set of lines in a poem, like a verse.

✓ Keating borrows the language of church (hymnal) to elevate poetry to something sacred and communal.

▶ *"The class read each stanza aloud together, turning the poem into something almost hymnal."*

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## 10. "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time"

■ This is a famous poem by Robert Herrick beginning "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." It urges living fully before time runs out.

✓ Keating quotes it to introduce *Carpe Diem* — one of the most famous *carpe diem* poems in English literature.

▶ *"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time is one of the most famous examples of the carpe diem tradition."*

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## 11. "Appropriate"

■ Appropriate means suitable or proper for a particular situation or context.

✓ Often used when questioning whether something fits the occasion. Also a verb: to appropriate means to take something for yourself.

▶ *"The teacher asked if his outfit was appropriate for a formal presentation."*

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## 12. "Gather Ye Rosebuds"

■ "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" means enjoy life's pleasures and opportunities while you are young and able.

✓ From Robert Herrick's poem. Rosebuds represent the beauty and opportunity of youth — fleeting and precious.

▶ *"His grandfather always said: gather ye rosebuds — do not wait until you are too old to enjoy life."*

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## 13. "Sentiment"

■ A sentiment is a feeling or opinion, especially one expressed through words or art.

✓ Can be positive or slightly dismissive. Calling something "mere sentiment" suggests it is too emotional and not rational enough.

▶ *"The speech was full of patriotic sentiment that moved the crowd to tears."*

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## 14. "Carpe Diem"

■ *Carpe Diem* is Latin for "seize the day" — make the most of the present moment and do not waste time.

✓ From the Roman poet Horace. Now completely embedded in English. Keating uses it as the central message of his teaching.

▶ *"She pinned a card above her desk that read simply: Carpe Diem."*

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## 15. "Ding!"

■ "Ding!" is an informal sound used to signal a correct answer, like a bell in a quiz show.

✓ Keating uses it humorously to affirm when a student gets something right. Light, encouraging, and informal.

▶ *"Ding! That is exactly it," said the teacher, pointing at the student who had just guessed correctly."*

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## 16. "Food for Worms"

- "Food for worms" means dead and buried — your body returned to the earth.
  - ✓ Dark but poetic. Keating uses it to shock students into thinking about their mortality — and therefore their urgency to live fully.
    - ▶ *"He reminded them that one day, like everyone who had stood in that hall before, they would be food for worms."*
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## 17. "Peruse"

- To peruse means to read something carefully and thoroughly. Informally, it is often used to mean browse or look through.
  - ✓ Common misuse: many people use peruse to mean skim, but traditionally it means the opposite — to read with attention.
    - ▶ *"She perused the contract carefully before signing anything."*
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## 18. "Hormones"

- Hormones are chemical substances in the body that control growth, mood, sexual development, and other functions.
  - ✓ Often used informally to explain teenage behaviour, emotions, or attraction.
    - ▶ *"At 16, everything felt enormous — hormones, first love, the pressure of exams."*
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## 19. "Invincible"

- Invincible means impossible to defeat or overcome.
  - ✓ Often used to describe how youth feels from the inside — unstoppable and fearless. The irony is that youth is actually the most fragile time.
    - ▶ *"At twenty, he felt invincible. At thirty, he understood why that feeling was so dangerous."*
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## 20. "The World is Their Oyster"

- "The world is your oyster" means you have the freedom and opportunity to achieve anything you want.
  - ✓ From Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The oyster contains a pearl — the world contains possibility.
    - ▶ *"With her degree, three languages, and boundless confidence, the world was her oyster."*
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## 21. "Destined"

■ Destined means fated or certain to do or become something — as if it was decided in advance.

✓ Can be inspiring (destined for greatness) or resigned (destined to fail). Implies forces beyond individual control.

▶ *"From the moment she picked up a paintbrush as a child, she seemed destined to be an artist."*

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## 22. "Iota"

■ An iota is the smallest possible amount — often used in negative statements to mean not even a tiny bit.

✓ Iota is the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet and the smallest. "Not one iota" means absolutely nothing at all.

▶ *"He showed not one iota of remorse for what he had done."*

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## 23. "Fertilizing Daffodils"

■ "Fertilizing daffodils" is a poetic way of saying decomposing underground — being dead and returned to the earth.

✓ Keating uses dark humour to make death concrete and immediate.

▶ *"Long after we are gone and fertilizing daffodils, the words we write may still be read."*

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## 24. "Legacy"

■ A legacy is something left behind after you are gone — a contribution, memory, or impact that outlasts your life.

✓ Can be tangible (a financial inheritance) or intangible (an influence on others). Usually implies something meaningful and lasting.

▶ *"His greatest legacy was not the buildings he built but the students he inspired."*

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## 25. "Extraordinary"

■ Extraordinary means far beyond what is ordinary or expected — remarkable, unusual, exceptional.

✓ Keating tells his students that their contributions can be extraordinary. The word carries genuine weight — not just a compliment but a challenge.

▶ *"She lived an extraordinary life by any measure — three careers, four continents, and a book that changed minds."*

# Dead Poets Society: Carpe Diem

## Student Worksheet

### Part 1: Vocabulary Match

Match each word or phrase with its correct definition. Write the letter on the line.

WORDS / PHRASES	DEFINITIONS
_____ 1. carpe diem	a) To look at or examine something carefully
_____ 2. dispel	b) A very small amount — the tiniest bit
_____ 3. fester	c) Seize the day — take action and make the most of life
_____ 4. legacy	d) To put an end to a false idea or rumor
_____ 5. peruse	e) To grow worse over time, like an ignored wound or problem
_____ 6. iota	f) Too strong to be defeated or overcome
_____ 7. invincible	g) What you leave behind for future generations

### Part 2: Fill in the Blanks

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the word bank.

#### WORD BANK

carpe diem • destined • extraordinary • iota • dispel • legacy • the world is your oyster

1. She didn't show an \_\_\_\_\_ of interest in the proposal — she hated it.
2. The manager called a meeting to \_\_\_\_\_ the rumors about redundancies.
3. With a degree from that university, \_\_\_\_\_!
4. He felt he was \_\_\_\_\_ for great things from a very young age.
5. That violin performance was \_\_\_\_\_. The audience gave a standing ovation.
6. She wants her \_\_\_\_\_ to be one of kindness and service to others.
7. You're only in Paris once — \_\_\_\_\_! Go see everything.

### Part 3: The "Extra-" Prefix

The prefix **extra-** means "beyond" or "outside of." This lesson introduced **extraordinary** (beyond ordinary). Use your knowledge of this prefix to match each word with its meaning, then write your own sentence.

WORD	MEANING	YOUR SENTENCE
<b>extraordinary</b>	Beyond ordinary — remarkable	_____ —
<b>extraterrestrial</b>	Beyond Earth — from another planet	_____ —
<b>extrasensory</b>	Beyond the usual senses (e.g. a sixth sense)	_____ —
<b>extravagant</b>	Beyond what is reasonable — very excessive	_____ —

### Part 4: Poetic Ways to Say Something

This lesson introduced several poetic, metaphorical ways to describe death and the passing of time. Match each poetic expression with its plain English meaning.

POETIC EXPRESSION	PLAIN MEANING
_____ 1. food for worms	a) Take your opportunities while you can — you won't stay young forever
_____ 2. fertilizing daffodils	b) Dead and buried in the ground
_____ 3. gather ye rosebuds	c) Dead and decomposing in the earth, nourishing plants
_____ 4. the world is your oyster	d) There are many opportunities available to you — go and find them

### Part 5: Multiple Choice

Circle the correct answer.

8. What does "carpe diem" mean?
- a) Worry about the future.
  - b) Make the most of today — seize the day.
  - c) Save your energy for later.
  - d) Plan everything carefully before acting.

9. Where does the idiom "the world is your oyster" come from?
- e) A poem by Walt Whitman.
  - f) A play by Shakespeare — The Merry Wives of Windsor.
  - g) A Robert Herrick poem from 1648.
  - h) A famous speech by Abraham Lincoln.
10. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" is a metaphor for:
- i) Going to the park in spring.
  - j) Taking opportunities while you are young, because time passes quickly.
  - k) Collecting flowers for someone you love.
  - l) Following the rules of polite society.
11. When Mr. Keating says "ding!" what is he doing?
- m) Ringing a real bell.
  - n) Playfully mimicking a quiz-show buzzer to signal a wrong answer.
  - o) Signalling the end of the lesson.
  - p) Calling a student to attention.
12. "Peruse" most accurately means:
- q) To browse casually and quickly.
  - r) To ignore completely.
  - s) To read or examine something with care and attention.
  - t) To memorize something word for word.

## Part 6: True or False?

Write T (True) or F (False). If the statement is false, correct it on the line below.

13. "O Captain! My Captain!" is a poem written by Robert Herrick in honor of Abraham Lincoln.  
Answer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_
14. "Fester" describes something that gets worse over time if it is not dealt with.  
Answer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_
15. Mr. Keating considers himself a "mental giant" — someone of great intelligence.  
Answer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_
16. "The world is your oyster" means the world is a dangerous and difficult place.  
Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_

17. "Extraordinary" is made from "extra" (beyond) + "ordinary" (normal).

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_

18. Mr. Keating urges students to follow his exact path in order to live an extraordinary life.

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Correction (if false): \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 7: Scene Analysis

Answer in complete sentences.

19. Mr. Keating tells his students to look at old photographs of former students and says those boys are "food for worms." Why does he use this shocking image to inspire them?

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20. Mr. Keating says he was "the intellectual equivalent of a 98-pound weakling." Why do you think a teacher would deliberately make himself seem weak or foolish in front of his students? What effect does this have?

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21. "O Captain! My Captain!" is originally a poem about Abraham Lincoln. Why is it powerful that the students use this phrase for Mr. Keating at the end of the film?

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## Part 8: Creative Writing Challenge

Write a short speech (6–8 sentences) inspired by Mr. Keating's lesson. Imagine you are speaking to a group of young people on their last day of school. Encourage them to seize the day and make their lives extraordinary. Use at least **FIVE** vocabulary words or phrases from this lesson.

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**Which words/phrases did you use? List them here:**

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### **Bonus: Discussion Questions**

Think about these and be ready to share your ideas!

- Mr. Keating says the students will one day be "food for worms." Does thinking about death make you want to live more fully, or does it just make you feel anxious? Why?
- Have you ever had a teacher, coach, or mentor who inspired you the way Mr. Keating does? What did they do that made them so memorable?
- "The world is your oyster" — do you think this is true for everyone equally? Or does it depend on where you were born, how much money you have, or other factors?
- Carpe diem encourages living in the moment. But is always "seizing the day" realistic? Can you think of situations where careful planning matters more than spontaneity?

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Great work! Keep learning English with film and TV! ☐