



Learn English Through Stories

F Series

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Be Prepared

By Ruskin Bond (Revised)

I was a Boy Scout once, though you'd never have guessed it from my knot-tying skills—or lack thereof. I couldn't tell a slip knot from a granny knot, nor a reef knot from a thief knot. The only thing I knew about a thief knot was that it was supposedly for tying up thieves, should you catch one. I've never caught a thief in my life, and even if I did, I wouldn't know what to do with one. I'd probably let him go with a stern warning and suggest he join the Boy Scouts to reform his ways.

“Be prepared!” That's the Boy Scout motto, and it's a fine one, too. The trouble is, I've never been particularly prepared for anything. Exams sneak up on me, journeys find me without a map, and if the roof blew off my room, I'd probably be standing there in my socks, wondering where my umbrella was. I've given speeches where halfway through, my mind goes blank, leaving me mumbling nonsense. Once, I even turned up to a friend's wedding in my pyjamas, having somehow forgotten to change into the suit I'd painstakingly prepared.

So how, you might ask, did someone as impractical as me survive as a Boy Scout? It's a fair question, and the answer lies in a curious twist of fate and a case of mistaken identity.

It all started with a rumour that spread through our junior school like wildfire. Somehow, the word got around that I was a brilliant cook. Now, I had never cooked so much as a boiled egg in my life, but I had spent an awful lot of time at the school tuck shop, offering unsolicited advice to Chimpu, the man who ran it. I'd linger there, suggesting he make spicier samosas, sweeter jalebis, crispier tikkis, and tastier pakoras. Chimpu, bless his patient soul, would occasionally reward my meddling with a free samosa or two. Naturally, I considered him a friend and benefactor.

This tuck-shop reputation somehow translated into me being awarded a cookery badge and put in charge of our Boy Scout troop's rations. I was as surprised as anyone, but I wasn't about to argue with a badge. Our troop consisted of about twenty boys, all eager for adventure, and during the summer break, our Scoutmaster, Mr. Oliver, decided to take us on a camping expedition to Taradevi, a temple-crowned mountain a few miles outside Shimla. It was a beautiful spot, with rolling hills, pine forests, and crisp mountain air that made you feel alive.

That first night at camp, the real test began. The other Scouts set to work peeling potatoes, skinning onions, shelling peas, and pounding masalas, all under my supposed expertise. When everything was ready, they turned to me, their newly minted cookery expert, and asked what to do next.

I froze for a moment, then decided to fake it with confidence. “Put everything in that big degchi,” I ordered, pointing to the large cooking pot. “Pour half a tin of ghee over the lot. Add some nettle leaves, and cook for half an hour.”

The boys followed my instructions without question, and soon the pot was simmering over the fire. When it was done, everyone gathered around for a taste. The silence that followed was deafening. The dish wasn’t bad, exactly, but it wasn’t good either. “It lacks something,” one of the Scouts said, wrinkling his nose.

“More salt,” I suggested, trying to sound authoritative. More salt was added, but it still wasn’t right. “Add a cup of sugar,” I said, hoping sweetness might save the day. The sugar went in, but the dish still lacked... something.

“We forgot tomatoes,” one of the boys pointed out.

“Never mind,” I said, undeterred. “We have tomato sauce. Add a bottle of that!”

Another Scout piped up, “How about some vinegar?”

“Just the thing!” I declared. “Add a cup of vinegar!”

The tasters grimaced. “Now it’s too sour,” one of them said.

“What jam did we bring?” I asked, grasping at straws.

“Gooseberry jam,” someone replied.

“Perfect! Empty the bottle!”

By some miracle, the final concoction was a hit. The Scouts devoured it, and even Mr. Oliver, who had no idea what culinary chaos had gone into it, seemed to enjoy it. “What’s this called?” he asked, wiping his mouth.

I thought quickly. “It’s an all-Indian sweet-and-sour jam-potato curry,” I said grandly.

“For short, just call it Bond bhujjia,” one of the boys chimed in, and everyone laughed. I had earned my cookery badge, fair and square—or so I thought.

Poor Mr. Oliver wasn't exactly cut out to be a Scoutmaster, any more than I was meant to be a Scout. He was a kind man, but his enthusiasm often outstripped his organizational skills. The next day, he announced he would teach us the art of tracking. He set off into the forest with a half-hour head start, leaving behind a trail of broken twigs, chicken feathers, pine cones, and chestnuts for us to follow. The plan was simple: we were to track him down and find him.

Unfortunately, we were terrible trackers. We started off well enough, spotting the twigs and feathers, but then we stumbled upon a crystal-clear pool nestled in the forest. It was too tempting to resist. Forgetting all about Mr. Oliver, we stripped off our uniforms and dove in, splashing and laughing in the cool water. Some of us lounged on the grassy banks, soaking up the sunshine. Hours passed, and by the time we remembered our mission, we were hungry and decided to head back to camp to prepare dinner. Naturally, it was Bond bhujia again, with a few new ingredients thrown in for variety.

As dusk fell, we began to worry about Mr. Oliver. He still hadn't returned. Just as we were starting to panic, he limped into camp, supported by two local villagers. Apparently, he had waited for us at the far end of the forest for hours, growing increasingly frustrated. When we didn't show up, he tried to retrace his steps using his own trail, but in the fading light, he got hopelessly lost. The villagers, returning from the temple, found him wandering and kindly escorted him back to camp.

Mr. Oliver was furious. "You lot are a disgrace!" he fumed. "Hand over your badges—all of them!" We sheepishly surrendered our good-conduct badges, and I had to part with my precious cookery badge. Mr. Oliver stuffed them all into his haversack, muttering about our lack of discipline.

An hour later, as we were settling into our sleeping bags, Mr. Oliver's voice rang out. "Where's dinner?"

"We've had ours, sir," one of the boys replied. "Everything's finished."

"Where's Bond? He's supposed to be the cook. Bond, get up and make me an omelette!"

"I can't, sir," I said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Why not?"

"You have my badge. Not allowed to cook without it. Scout rule, sir."

Mr. Oliver sputtered. "I've never heard of such a rule!"

System: "You're right, I made that up," I admitted, relenting. "But I'll make you an omelette anyway."

I whipped up a grand omelette, garnishing it with dandelion leaves and a chili for extra flair. Mr. Oliver took one bite and declared, "Never had such an omelette before."

"Would you like another, sir?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, Bond, tomorrow," he said, softening a bit. "We'll breakfast early."

But breakfast never happened. In the early hours of the morning, a bear wandered into our camp, rummaging through our stores and sending our biggest degchi rolling down the hillside. In the chaos, the bear stumbled into Mr. Oliver's tent, emerging with his dressing gown tangled around its legs. It was a comical sight, but we weren't laughing. The bear loped off into the forest, still draped in the gown, and we thought it best to let it keep its prize.

We packed up camp at first light, badges or no badges, and headed back to Shimla, our Scoutmaster grumbling all the way. As for me, I never did master those knots, but I learned one thing: sometimes, being unprepared can lead to the best adventures.

2. Comprehension

Question 1: What is the Boy Scout motto mentioned in the story?

Question 2: Why was the narrator given a cookery badge?

Question 3: Where did the Scout troop go for their camping expedition?

Question 4: What did the narrator tell the Scouts to put in the degchi for their first meal?

Question 5: What did the Scouts call the dish they made?

Question 6: Why did Mr. Oliver get lost in the forest?

Question 7: Who helped Mr. Oliver return to the camp?

Question 8: Why did the narrator refuse to cook an omelette at first?

Question 9: What did the bear take from the camp?

Question 10: Why did the Scouts pack up camp early?

Answers

Answer 1: The Boy Scout motto is "Be prepared!"

Answer 2: He was given a cookery badge because of a rumour that he was a good cook, based on his time at the tuck shop.

Answer 3: They went to Taradevi, a temple-crowned mountain near Shimla.

Answer 4: He told them to put potatoes, onions, peas, ghee, nettle leaves, and later added salt, sugar, tomato sauce, vinegar, and gooseberry jam.

Answer 5: They called it "Bond bhujjia."

Answer 6: He got lost because the Scouts didn't follow his trail, and he couldn't find his way back in the dark.

Answer 7: Two local villagers helped him return to the camp.

Answer 8: He said he couldn't cook because Mr. Oliver took his cookery badge, claiming it was a Scout rule.

Answer 9: The bear took Mr. Oliver's dressing gown.

Answer 10: They packed up early because a bear disrupted the camp, destroying their provisions and causing chaos.

3. Grammar Page

Reported Speech

Read the sentences.

*I'm in the middle of a meeting now.
I'll call you back this afternoon.
You can meet my secretary if something urgent has come up.
I'll certainly give your message to my secretary.
Will you meet me tomorrow?*



What did the manager tell you?

He said that he was in the middle of a meeting then.

He said that he would call me back that afternoon.

He said that I could meet his secretary if something urgent had come up.

He said that he would certainly give my message to his secretary.

He asked me if I would meet him the next day.

The words of a speaker can be reported in one of two ways:

✦ We can quote the actual words of the speaker. This is called **Direct Speech**. We can use inverted commas with suitable reporting verbs (say, tell, ask, report, order, advise, etc.) to quote the actual words spoken by the speaker.

He said, "I'm in the middle of a meeting now."
"I'll call you back this afternoon."
"You can meet my secretary if something urgent has come up."
"I'll certainly give your message to my secretary."
"Will you meet me tomorrow?"

✦ We often report what somebody said without giving their exact words. This is called **Indirect Speech**. We do not use quotation marks to enclose what the person said and it doesn't have to be the actual words of the speaker.

He said that he was in the middle of a meeting then.

He said that he would call me back that afternoon.

He said that I could meet his secretary if something urgent had come up.

He said that he would certainly give my message to his secretary.

He asked if I would meet him the next day.