



## Go for the Gold! 15 Activities for Teaching the Olympics

by *Kip Cates*

The Olympic Games are a global event held every 4 years that bring together 10,000 athletes from 200 countries for 2 weeks of drama, excitement, and sport. The Olympics are an international media event watched by students of English around the world and a great topic for English language classrooms that can generate lots of language learning and language practice!

A thematic English lesson designed around the Olympics can engage students in reading about Olympic history, writing about inspiring athletes, and debating Olympic issues. It can also promote global awareness, open students' eyes to the diversity of our multicultural world, and encourage students to share their thoughts—in English—about Olympic ideals of fairness, equality, inclusion, sportsmanship, and international understanding.

This summer's Olympics, postponed from 2020 due to COVID-19, have been complicated by debates on the possibility of safely holding the Games during a global pandemic. Regardless of whether they'll be held as scheduled, in scaled-down form, or even cancelled, the Olympics remain a high interest topic worth teaching at any time.

### Classroom Activities

For those who decide to teach about the Olympics, there's a wealth of activities to experiment with, ranging from quizzes, card games, and debates to presentations, readings, and research. Following are some of the activities I use in my classes. Feel free to try these out, adapt them, or improve them as necessary!

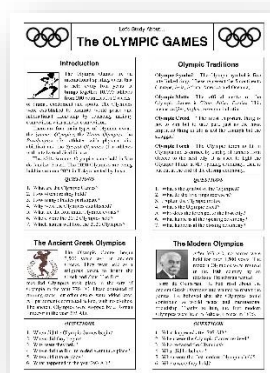
#### 1. Quiz About the Olympic Games

I begin my unit by putting students in pairs or groups and giving them an Olympic quiz. This ensures an energetic start to the class, gets students working together, and gives them a chance to share what they know. Why not test yourself? (Answers at the end of the article).

Quiz About the Olympic Games: True or False?	
<p>1. ____ The Olympic Games are held every 6 years.</p> <p>2. ____ The Olympic symbol is 4 rings.</p> <p>3. ____ The Olympic Games originated in ancient Rome.</p> <p>4. ____ The modern Olympics began in 1946.</p>	<p>5. ____ The modern Olympic Games were started by an American.</p> <p>6. ____ The Olympic torch relay begins in Greece.</p> <p>7. ____ The 2016 Olympics were held in London, England.</p> <p>8. ____ The 2020 Olympics are scheduled for Tokyo.</p>

## 2. Studying About the Olympics

After stimulating students' interest with a quiz, it's time to have them learn about Olympic history, Olympic traditions, and Olympic events. To do this, I designed a reading passage handout (Appendix A).



## 3. List of Summer Olympics

Once students have a basic idea about the Olympics, it's time to focus on actual events. To do this, I first have students brainstorm the dates, host cities, and host nations of past summer Olympics. Next, I pass out a list I created of all summer Olympics from 1896 to 2028 (Appendix B).

Students always enjoy scanning this list to see the host cities, host nations, and athlete numbers. The list can be used for both pair practice of *wh-* questions as well as for student research tasks. For example:

*Language Practice (Wh– questions)*

- Where were the Olympic Games held in 1912 ?
- When did Mexico City host the Olympic Games?
- Which country hosted the Olympics in 1952 ?
- How many countries took part in the Olympics in 1896 ?
- How many athletes took part in the Olympics in 2016 ?

*Research Homework: Profile One Olympic Event*

Have students choose one of the Olympics from the list, research it, then write a report to explain what they learned:

- a) *Background*: Explain the background to this Olympics.
- b) *People*: What famous athletes took part?
- c) *Events*: What interesting events or issues happened?
- d) *Comments*: Why did you choose this? What did you learn?
- e) *Sources*: List the books and websites you used for research.

#### **4. Inspiring Olympic Athletes**

The Olympics provide teachers with a great chance to have students learn about and discuss inspiring Olympic athletes. This can be done in various ways. Here are two ideas I use in my classes.

*Research Homework: Profile An Olympic Athlete*

Give students a list of noted Olympic athletes from different countries. Have them choose one, do research, then write a profile or give a presentation. Some examples:

***Noted Olympic Athletes***

- Jessie Owens
- Abebe Bikila
- Olga Korbut
- Spiridon Louis
- Cathy Freeman
- Sohn Kee-Chung
- Yusra Mardini
- Kip Keino
- Tommie Smith

***Research Questions***

- a) *Background*: Who were they? What's their background?
- b) *Sport*: What sport did they take part in? What events?
- c) *Achievement*: Why are they famous? What did they do?
- d) *Comments*: Why did you choose them? What did you learn?

## Athlete Profile Cards

Another way to engage students is to hand out athlete profiles. I use a set of “Inspiring Athlete” cards (Appendix C) that I created for my classes. Here’s what to do:

- Put students in groups and have them each choose 1 athlete card
- Give them 5 minutes to memorize the information on their card
- Then give them 3 minutes each to:
  - a) introduce their athlete to the group (in their own words)
  - b) explain what they learned, felt or were surprised at

## 5. Olympic Issues

The Olympics are dedicated to ideals such as peace and friendship. Unfortunately, they’ve been troubled by problems and controversies throughout their history. The social and global issues involving the Olympics can be divided into eight categories:

war	politics	sexism	racism
money	drugs	fairness	terrorism

To have students learn about these, you can

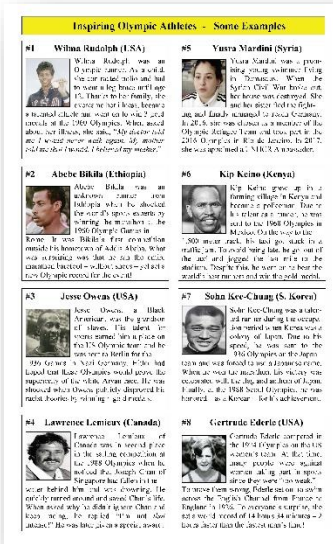
- assign each issue to a pair or team of students to research, or
- provide students with examples of each category using “issue strips,” such as those in the “Olympic Issues” handout (Appendix D). These can be used for reading practice, class discussion or research tasks.

## 6. Critical Thinking: Three Ways to Count Olympic Medals

At each Olympics, the media, national governments, and excited fans eagerly count the number of medals won by each country. A basic count, however, is simplistic. To promote critical thinking, use the “Olympic Medals” handout (Appendix E) to have students guess, then discuss, the top 10 medal winning nations listed by medal count, medals per capita, and medals adjusted for GDP (Gross Domestic Product).

## 7. Olympic Debate

To have students think more deeply about the Olympics, why not engage them in a lively debate on the following theme? Just divide them into teams and have them brainstorm ideas like the following.



Topic: “Do the Olympic Games promote international understanding or only narrow nationalism?”

International Understanding	Narrow Nationalism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• it’s a global event watched by the whole world</li><li>• it brings together athletes from around the globe</li><li>• it features peaceful competition that replaces war</li><li>• it’s a multicultural festival of our shared humanity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• it’s based on national rivalry: <i>Who got the most medals?</i></li><li>• many spectators only cheer for their own country</li><li>• Olympic competition promotes an “us vs them” mentality</li><li>• athletes compete, so they can’t socialize or be friends</li></ul>

A second debate, if desired, could address the current COVID controversy and engage students in debating the question:

“Should this summer’s Tokyo Olympics be held during a global pandemic?”

## Extension Activities

### 1. Countries, Flags, and Anthems

At each Olympics, students will encounter a rich variety of foreign countries, national flags, and national anthems.

- *Flags*: Teach students to identify world flags, study their designs, and explain the story behind selected flags.
- *Anthems*: Teach students to identify national anthems, discuss their lyrics, and study the story behind each song.
- *Countries*: Have students locate some of the nations taking part on a world map and study their peoples and cultures.

### 2. Host City and Host Country

Have students study the host city and country, then share what they learn via posters and reports. For the 2020 Olympics (to be held 23 July–8 August 2021), study Tokyo and Japan. For the 2022 Winter Olympics (to be held 4–20 February 2022), study Beijing and China.

### 3. Adopt a Country

Have students form pairs and adopt a foreign nation as “their country” to research, report on in class, and cheer on during the Games.

## 4. Sports English and Olympic Events

Teach vocabulary related to “Sports English,” then have students research and report on the origins, history, rules, and traditions of selected Olympic sports.

**OLYMPIC WORKSHEET**

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Your class: \_\_\_\_\_

**I. Olympic Athletes from Around the World**  
Choose an interesting athlete from each region, research them and explain why you chose them.

Region	Person	Country	Sport	Reason
1. Asia				
2. Africa				
3. Middle East				
4. Latin America				
5. Europe				

**II. Good Sportsmanship**  
During the Olympics, find two examples of good sportsmanship.

Name	Country	Example of good sportsmanship
1.		
2.		

**III. Scandals and Controversies**  
During the Olympics, find two examples of a scandal or a controversy.

Name	Country	Scandal or controversy
1.		
2.		

**IV. Trans-National Athletes and Coaches**  
Some countries have, and, impact on how athletes from other countries to help them win Olympic medals. Find two examples of athletes in one country's team who are actually from another country.

Name	Sport	Olympic Country	Original country
1.			
2.			

**V. Olympic Flags**  
During the Olympic Games, you can see the national flag of many different nations. Choose 2 interesting flags, draw them in the boxes below and research what these patterns stand for.

Country	Flag	Meaning
1.		
2.		

## 5. Olympic Worksheet

If you'd like to keep students active during the Games, give them an Olympic Worksheet (Appendix F) to fill in day by day. The worksheet I designed has data hunts, sports matching, interviews, media literacy, and more!

## 6. Quotes About the Olympics

Engage students with Olympic ideals and issues through inspiring and thought-provoking quotes by Olympic athletes. See Appendix G for a small sample. Have students read the quotes, choose the two they like best, then discuss—in pairs or groups—the quotes they chose and why.

## 7. Other International Sports Events

The Olympics is the world's most famous international sports event. Yet, it's not the only one. Have students research, write about, and present on other global sports events. Examples could include:

<p><b>Global Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commonwealth Games</li> <li>X Games</li> <li>World Masters Games</li> </ul>	<p><b>Regional Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asian Games</li> <li>African Games</li> <li>Nordic Games</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identity-Themed Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Gay Games</li> <li>The Maccabiah Games</li> <li>World Indigenous Games</li> </ul>	<p><b>Specific Sports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FIFA World Cup (soccer)</li> <li>Wimbledon (tennis)</li> <li>Rugby World Cup (rugby)</li> </ul>

See: Wikipedia's "[List of multi-sport events](#)"

## 8. Redesign the Olympics

Finally, if you have advanced students, why not challenge them to consider and discuss ways to redesign the Olympics (see Appendix H, “Redesign the Olympics” handout).

## Conclusion

The Olympics provide English language instructors with a “teachable moment” for promoting language skills, global awareness, critical thinking, and international understanding. By teaching this theme, we can help students view the Olympics not just as an aggressive “nation vs. nation” competition but as a global celebration of sporting achievement by athletes from around the world. I hope the activities listed here prove useful for Tokyo 2020 and future Olympics. For more activities, do an online search for “teaching about the Olympics” or [contact me](#) for a copy of my “Teaching the Olympics” PowerPoint presentation.

## Resources

### Books

- [\*The Olympic Experience in Your School\*](#), by S. Clark (2004)
- [\*The Games: A Global History of the Olympics\*](#), by D. Goldblatt (2018)
- [\*What are the Summer Olympics?\*](#), by G. Herman (2016)

### Websites

- [Olympics.com](#) (official Olympics website; International Olympics Committee)
- [Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games](#) (official Tokyo 2020 Olympics website; International Olympics Committee)
- [Olympic Games](#) (Wikipedia)

### Online Videos (YouTube)

- [“The Olympics | Olympic Facts For Kids | Sports | Made by Red Cat Reading”](#) (7 minutes)
- [“Olympic Opening Ceremonies - A journey through time”](#) (4 minutes)

The Olympic Games Quiz Answers	
1. False (every 4 years)	5. False (by a Frenchman)
2. False (5 rings)	6. True
3. False (in ancient Greece)	7. False (in Rio de Janeiro)
4. False (in 1896)	8. True

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