

Helping Your Students Speak Well: Sing Gilbert & Sullivan

Gilbert & Sullivan wrote clever, engaging, lyrics in modern opera. This song poses a very difficult task indeed. One that most students have never faced. Give them a chance. Have some fun with this. Hand out the lyrics. Please view the live version on YouTube. Then play the music only version and have them sing along.

I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General

Gilbert and Sullivan from the *Pirates of Penzance*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major-General%27s_Song

I am the very model of a modern Major-General,
 I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral,
 I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
 From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical;
 I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical,
 I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,
 About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o' news, (bothered for a rhyme)
 With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.

I'm very good at integral and differential calculus;
 I know the scientific names of beings animalculous:
 In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
 I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

I know our mythic history, King Arthur's and Sir Caradoc's;
 I answer hard acrostics, I've a pretty taste for paradox,
 I quote in elegiacs all the crimes of Heliogabalus,
 In conics I can floor peculiarities parabolous;
 I can tell undoubted Raphaels from Gerard Dows and Zoffanies,
 I know the croaking chorus from The Frogs of Aristophanes!
 Then I can hum a fugue of which I've heard the music's din afore, (bothered for a rhyme)
 And whistle all the airs from that infernal nonsense Pinafore.

Then I can write a washing bill in Babylonian cuneiform,
 And tell you ev'ry detail of Caractacus's uniform:
 In short, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
 I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

In fact, when I know what is meant by "mamelon" and "ravelin",
 When I can tell at sight a Mauser rifle from a javelin,
 When such affairs as sorties and surprises I'm more wary at,
 And when I know precisely what is meant by "commissariat",
 When I have learnt what progress has been made in modern gunnery,
 When I know more of tactics than a novice in a nunnery –
 In short, when I've a smattering of elemental strategy – (bothered for a rhyme)
 You'll say a better Major-General has never sat a gee.

For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventury,
 Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century;
 But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,
 I am the very model of a modern Major-General.

On YouTube

Live opera with very fast version at the end. Starts at 49 seconds.
<https://youtu.be/zSGWoXDFM64?t=49s>

Version with good recording for singing
<https://youtu.be/Z2OcbGqbpU>

Definitions (a few)

animalculous: Small animal.

Heliogabalus: A Roman emperor from 218 to 222

Gerrit Dou: A Dutch Golden Age painter

Johan Zoffany: A German neoclassical painter

Aristophanes: A comic playwright of ancient Athens

Caratacus: A first-century British chieftain of the Catuvellauni tribe

Mamelon: French name for a fort at Gordon's Hill

Ravelin: A triangular fortification or detached outwork, located in front of the innerworks of a fortress

Gee: A command to horse and "gee" was a nickname for a horse in Gilbert's time. So the Major-General has never ridden a horse.