

## Geek-in-chief

**Level:** Intermediate–advanced

**Timing:** 90 minutes plus

**Summary:** A lesson about Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo. In this lesson, students will:

1. discuss women in top positions;
2. study a text about Marissa Mayer;
3. examine the language used to describe her;
4. discuss character traits in relation to themselves and also their ideal boss;
5. watch an interview with Marissa Mayer.

**Material needed:** One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the vocabulary record per student

**Group size:** Any

### Overview

This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based around an original article first published in Business Spotlight Issue 6/2014.

### Warmer

This task aims to introduce the topic of businesswomen in top positions. Students must try to come up with the names of five CEOs and consider the number of top positions that are occupied by women.

### Key words

Students read the definitions and find the key words in the article. Paragraph numbers are provided as an aid. The definitions are listed in the order that the words and phrases appear in the article.

This task can be divided up between students, with one half doing words 1 to 9 and the other half doing 10 to 18. After they have found the words, they should share their answers with each other.

**Extension:** Many of these words have other, more common, meanings. Have students discuss these words, e.g. *drive*, *code*, *pick*.

**Key:**

1. *dwindled*; 2. *alienated*; 3. *pick*; 4. *degrees*; 5. *geeky*; 6. *code*;
7. *mentoring*; 8. *conspicuously*; 9. *dismissive*; 10. *militant*

- drive*; 11. *demoralized*; 12. *collaborative*; 13. *dismissed*;
14. *loyalty*; 15. *acquisition*; 16. *dismal*; 17. *revenue*;
18. *demanding*

### Understanding the article

Students answer the questions (where possible, without referring to the article but, of course, they may look back when they need to) and then discuss their answers.

**Key:**

1. *39 years old*
2. *symbolic systems and computer science*
3. *Stanford*
4. *Google*
5. *1994*
6. *2012*
7. *She was 5 months pregnant.*
8. *She had a nursery built next to her office and the baby and his nanny came to work with her.*
9. *Its value dropped dramatically from \$128 billion to \$5 billion between 2000 and 2001. Yahoo had had three CEOs in three years.*
10. *She bought start-ups to get key employees (acqui-hiring), and she oversaw the relaunch of Flickr and the update of Yahoo Mail, as well as the acquisition of Tumblr.*

### Expressions

Students match the expressions and idioms from the article with their meanings, find them in the article to see how they are used and, then, use some or all of them in sentences of their own.

**Key:**

- 1.e; 2.d; 3.b; 4.g; 5.f, 6.h; 7.a; 8.i; 9.c

### Character traits

a. Students go back through the article and find all the words used to describe Mayer's character. They should discuss whether the words are positive, negative or both.

**Key:**

<i>positive</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>both</i>
<i>warm, friendly, charismatic, intelligent, funny, a natural teacher, a multi-tasker</i>	<i>cold, abrupt, brusque, a dictator</i>	<i>geeky, shy, ambitious</i>

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b. In the article, a lot of other negative things are said about Mayer. Get students to underline or highlight these statements and opinions.

### Key:

- *Her leadership style is sometimes questioned.*
- *What you see is not always what you get.*
- *She has a cool, abrupt manner in company meetings.*
- *Some colleagues question her ability as a leader.*
- *She alienates people.*
- *She jumps to conclusions.*
- *She always thinks she's right.*
- *She's a dictator with a top-down style.*
- *She began spending 'conspicuously'.*
- *She's "one of those mothers we don't like very much."*
- *In meetings, she is not the friendly, funny woman people are used to seeing in her public appearances.*
- *People feel so dismissed by her.*
- *"If you're on her team she protects and helps you. If not, she may not play as nicely."*
- *She has not developed her business side.*
- *She does not take the financial side of her job seriously enough.*
- *She doesn't understand the value of clients, ad revenue or agencies.*

### Teaching and learning strategy: putting a positive spin on language

In business English in particular, a trend has developed over the past few years of avoiding any overtly negative words and phrases. Hence, we no longer talk about *problems* but, instead, we have *challenges*. Our work is not *difficult* but *demanding*.

In class, try to come up with further examples and try to highlight them when you come across them in articles.

Point out to students that the ability to use less direct language is useful in many business contexts, for example in meetings and appraisals.

## Discussion

Students discuss the questions in class.

## Webquest

The videos can be watched in class or at home and then discussed in the following class.

## Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

## Related topics on onestopenglish

The following Business Spotlight lesson plan looks more closely at the idea of shyness and introversion in the world of work, and also focuses in on character traits: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/quiet-please/553425.article>.

This Business Spotlight lesson is about women at work and women's rights:

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/a-new-revolution/551449.article>.

This Business Spotlight lesson examines whether women need quotas to get to the top: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/do-women-need-quotas-to-get-to-the-top/550704.article>.

There are a number of other onestopenglish lessons on the topics of women's rights and women at work. Below is a selection.

- Emmeline Pankhurst and female suffrage: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/teenagers/a-time-to-travel/pdf-content/a-time-to-travel-england-suffer-and-suffrage-lesson-plan/553448.article>
- European football's first female professional team manager: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/news-lessons/weekly-topical-news-lessons/2014-weekly-news-lessons-archive/weekly-news-lesson-390-29th-may-2014-european-footballs-first-female-professional-team-manager/553613.article>
- Rwandan women set up a popular ice-cream business: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/news-lessons/weekly-topical-news-lessons/2014-weekly-news-lessons-archive/weekly-news-lesson-389-22nd-may-2014-rwandan-women-whip-up-popular-ice-cream-business/553605.article>

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### 1 Warmer

a. Write the names of five CEOs of international companies.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

b. How many large or global companies with female CEOs can you name?

c. How many of the top managerial positions in your company are held by women?

### 2 Key words

Read the definitions and find the key words in the article. The paragraph numbers will help you.

1. became gradually less or smaller over a period of time until almost nothing remained (para 3)
2. made someone dislike you (para 3)
3. choose something over other things (para 4)
4. qualifications that you get from a university (para 4)
5. only interested in computers and thought to be boring (para 4)
6. write instructions for a computer (para 4)
7. an experienced person teaching a less experienced person about their job or a particular subject (para 5)
8. in a very noticeable way (para 5)
9. reacting to something in a way that shows you do not think it is worth paying attention to (para 6)
  
10. the energy and determination that make you try hard to achieve something (para 6)
11. lost hope or confidence (para 7)
12. involving people or groups working together to produce something (para 8)
13. unimportant and not respected (para 9)
14. support that you always give to someone or something because of your feelings of duty and respect towards them (para 10)
15. the process of one company buying another (para 11)
16. bad, not giving cause for hope or enthusiasm (para 12)
17. income from business activities (para 13)
18. needing a lot of time, ability and energy (para 14)

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by Margaret Davis



© Getty Images

**She causes a stir wherever she appears. But, hidden behind the warmth, is a brusque manner. Margaret Davis introduces the ambitious Yahoo boss whose leadership style is sometimes questioned, even by her colleagues.**

- 1 With Marissa Mayer, what you see is not always what you get. The charismatic, young CEO of Yahoo is known for her warm and friendly public presentations. Yet the people who work with her are often surprised by her cool, abrupt manner in company meetings.
- 2 Mayer is one of a rare breed – a female executive in the male-dominated tech industry. Hired in 1999 as employee number 20 at Google, the company's first woman engineer, Mayer held a variety of top positions at the internet giant before leaving to become CEO of the struggling Yahoo in 2012. At 37, she was the youngest CEO in Yahoo's history.
- 3 As an intelligent, attractive and ambitious woman, Mayer was always certain to attract attention, not all of it positive. Google was happy to use her to promote the company but, when the attention turned too personal — with *Vogue* magazine covering her 2009 wedding to internet investor Zachary Bogue — Mayer's support dwindled. Some colleagues questioned her ability as a leader: "While she did a lot of good and useful things, she alienated people because she jumped to conclusions about products and she was not always right but she always thought

she was right," one Google executive told *Vanity Fair* magazine. Another described Mayer as "a dictator, with a top-down style."

4 Born on 30 May, 1975, she is the daughter of an art teacher and an environmental engineer. A top student in high school, she took part in a variety of after-school activities, including ballet, swimming, piano lessons, skating and debating. "It was a very well-rounded childhood, with lots of different opportunities," Mayer told *Vogue*. "My mom will say she set out to overstimulate me – surround me with way too many things and let me pick. As a result, I've always been a multitasker. I've always liked a lot of variety." She was accepted by ten different universities, including Harvard, Yale and Stanford, graduating from Stanford with degrees in symbolic systems and computer science, specializing in artificial intelligence. At Google, Mayer was known for 100-hour working weeks and for sleeping only four hours a night. "I don't really believe in burnout," she told a New York audience in 2013. Mayer claims she didn't plan to become one of the leading figures in Silicon Valley. "I didn't set out to be at the top of technology companies. I'm just geeky and shy and I like to code," she explained to *Vogue*.

5 Described by her biographer, *Business Insider* reporter Nicholas Carlson, as "a natural teacher", Mayer continued to teach at Stanford during her first years at Google, as well as starting a mentoring programme at the company. When Google went public in 2004, Mayer and other Google employees became millionaires. Mayer began spending "conspicuously", Carlson says, buying a \$5 million penthouse at the Four Seasons Hotel in San Francisco, as well as a house near the Google campus in Mountain View, California. She also began giving elaborate parties at both homes.

6 In 2012, in a PBS documentary called *Makers*, about women leaders, Mayer was dismissive of the influence of feminism on her career. "I don't think I have sort of the militant drive and chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that," she said.

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- 7 Mayer's appointment as CEO of Yahoo in 2012 made her the youngest woman at the head of a Fortune 500 company. Yahoo, founded in 1994, was worth \$128 billion at its peak in 2000. Then, the internet bubble burst and, within a year, the company was worth just under \$5 billion. By 2012, Yahoo had had three CEOs in as many years – one of them, Carol Bartz, was fired over the phone. Not surprisingly, Yahoo's employees were demoralized and the company was not introducing new products. Enter Marissa Mayer. Already well known, she added to her own legend by announcing that she was five months pregnant when she joined the company. Mayer went back to work two weeks after giving birth, along with her baby and his nanny. (A nursery had been built next to her office in the meantime.) Two months later, she told a conference of women in business: "The baby's been way easier than everyone made it out to be." The response from Lisa Belkin of *The Huffington Post* was typical: "Putting 'baby' and 'easy' in the same sentence turns you into one of those mothers we don't like very much."
- 8 In February of 2013, Mayer ended flexible employment agreements that had permitted some Yahoo employees to do their jobs from home, alienating working mothers both inside and outside the company. Mayer defended the policy a few months later at the Great Place to Work Conference. "People are more productive when they're alone," she admitted, "but they're more collaborative and innovative when they're together. Some of the best ideas come from pulling two different ideas together." The policy affects about 200 of the company's 12,000 employees, according to *Fortune* magazine.
- 9 In her early days at Yahoo, Mayer worked hard to learn as much about the company as possible, holding meetings with employees, where she asked detailed questions. Not everyone was enthusiastic about her methods. One former Yahoo executive says he warned team members that, in meetings, Mayer was not the friendly, funny woman they were used to seeing in her public appearances. "Despite the warning, people – very experienced people with decades of experience – walked out and said, 'That was the worst meeting of my entire career,'" he told *Vanity Fair*. "She will bring a tub of blueberries to a meeting and just stare at you, popping blueberries into her mouth. People feel so dismissed."

10 Yet Mayer inspires loyalty among younger colleagues, especially those whom she has mentored. "If you're on her team, she protects you and helps you. If not, she may not play as nicely," one of her young employees told *Vanity Fair*.

11 During her first year at Yahoo, Mayer made a number of business deals, buying tech start-ups in order to get their engineers, then shutting the companies down, a practice known as "acqui-hiring." Yahoo's new weather app for cell phones won an Apple design award in 2013. Mayer also oversaw the relaunch of the photo-sharing site Flickr, the update of Yahoo Mail and the acquisition of social-media site Tumblr. With Yahoo News and Yahoo Screen, Mayer wants to attract young users via movies and concerts. She says Yahoo aims to "make the world's daily habits inspiring and entertaining."

12 But, after disappointing second-quarter results in 2014, some observers say the strategy isn't working. "Things aren't getting better," financial analyst Colin Gillis told *The New York Times*. "The core business is still dismal."

13 Display advertising is one area where Yahoo has been losing revenue to Google and Facebook. Although Mayer has a strong product and engineering background, her critics say she has not yet developed her business side. Indeed, some of them claim she does not take the financial side of her job seriously enough. The fact that she was two hours late to a dinner with advertising executives in Cannes in June – Mayer says she overslept – is proof of this, the critics say. "It is another instance where she demonstrated that she doesn't understand the value of clients, ad revenue or agencies," an advertising executive told *The Wall Street Journal*. Mayer herself told *Bloomberg News* that her friend Aaron Levie, CEO of the cloud company, Box, tweeted that "the only actual news in this story is that Marissa does sleep."

14 What Mayer needs most at the moment is the time to grow into her demanding new role. Time, however, is in short supply in Silicon Valley – even for those who hardly sleep.

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### 3 Understanding the article

Answer the questions (where possible, without referring to the article) and discuss your answers.

1. How old is Marissa Mayer at the time of the article?
2. What did she study at university?
3. Which university did she attend?
4. Where did she work from 1999 to 2012?
5. When was Yahoo founded?
6. When did Marissa Mayer join Yahoo?
7. What was unusual about Mayer's personal situation when she became CEO?
8. How did she deal with having a baby and working?
9. What happened to Yahoo between 2000 and 2001?
10. What business deals did Mayer make when she became CEO of Yahoo?

### 4 Expressions

Match the expressions 1 to 9 with their meanings a to i. Find the expressions in the article to see how they are used. Then, use them in sentences of your own.

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. a rare breed                 | a. at its most successful or powerful point   |
| 2. jump to conclusions          | b. controlled by management   |
| 3. top-down                     | c. have a baby  |
| 4. set out                      | d. judge or decide something without having all the facts   |
| 5. go public                    | e. a person with characteristics not often found among their kind   |
| 6. have a chip on your shoulder | f. become a company in which anyone can invest  |
| 7. at its peak                  | g. have the intention of doing something  |
| 8. the bubble bursts            | h. be likely to become angry or offended very easily, especially about something that other people think should not upset you |
| 9. give birth                   | i. a very successful time comes to an end   |

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### 5 Character traits

- a. What character traits of Marissa Mayer's are mentioned in the article? Write them here and decide whether they are positive or negative (or both).

positive	negative	both

- b. What other negative things do people say about her? Underline the statements and opinions in the text.
- c. You will see that most of the statements and opinions you have identified are negatively written. Can you rewrite them so that they have a positive spin?

For example, *She has not developed her business side* > *She still has the potential to develop her business side.*

### 6 Discussion

How would you describe yourself ...

- ... to friends?
- ... at a job interview?
- ... in an online profile?

How would you like others to describe you?

What character traits would your ideal boss have?

Talk about the challenges facing women in leading positions compared to men in similar positions.

### 7 Webquest

Watch the Makers video with Marissa Mayer here: <http://www.makers.com/marissa-mayer>.

Listen to her talk about why she's not a feminist here: <http://on.aol.com/video/marissa-mayer--distance-from--feminism--517275744>.

