

A E I O U sometimes **Y**

How Come Y is Only Sometimes a Vowel?



In early school times, six teachers lived in a cozy red cottage by an apple tree woods. Each teacher had a duty to do in the little house. Madame A cooked the meals and Madame E washed the dishes. Madame I cleaned the floors and Madame O did the laundry. Madame U tended the garden, and Madame Y made the beds, sometimes.

The six teachers taught in a six-room schoolhouse at the edge of the woods. Each morning they hiked in single file to their classrooms. Madame A was the line leader. Next came Madame E, Madame I, Madame O, Madame U, and finally Madame Y, sometimes.

“Hurray!” Madame A would say. “It’s great going to school each day.”

“Yes, sirree,” said Madame E. “I agree!”

“My, oh, my!” said Madame I. “And I”

“Yo!” said Madame O. “I also think so.”

“Wahoo!” said Madame U. “Me, too!”

“School’s okay to try,” said Madame Y. “Sometimes.”

The school day started at eight o’clock. After attendance, the six teachers taught mathematics. Numbers over one hundred were yet unknown, so math period was very short. Next came social studies, and with most of the world still undiscovered, that period was even shorter.

As for reading, writing, and spelling, those subjects weren’t even taught, and the reason was simple. There was no alphabet. This meant for the remainder of the school day, ten in the morning until three in the afternoon, the students had recess.

One day on the way home, Madame A brought up the subject of subjects.

“Teachers need more to teach!” she said. “There are not enough subjects to fill the school day.”

“If we had additional numbers we could do more multiplication and division during math period,” said Madame E.

“To improve our social study lessons, someone should discover another continent or build another city,” said Madame I.

“Our students have too much recess time,” said Madame O.

“And too much recess leads to trouble,” said Madame U.

“Sometimes,” Madame Y mumbled.

That night, the six teachers had spaghetti for dinner. Madame A and Madame E sat on one side of the table while Madame I and Madame O sat on the other. Madame U sat at one end and Madame Y sat at the other end, sometimes. Sometimes she sat under the table and sulked.

The teachers were still discussing the day’s lessons, when Madame I cried, “Look at my noodle!”

The others stared at Madame I’s plate. A noodle lay there in a zigzag shape.

“*Zigzag!*” said Madame I.

“*Zigzag?*” said the other teachers. They were about to hear the most important idea in the history of education.

“I hear the *zzz* sound at the start of *zigzag*,” Madame I said. “*Zzz.*”

“So,” said Madame O.

“So here’s what we can teach our students,” Madame I went on. “Every time they see the zigzag shape they will say *zzz*.”

“But we can’t bring noodles to school every day,” said Madame A.

“Sometimes we can.” said Madame Y.

Madame I took a pencil from her pocket. On a paper napkin she drew a zigzag line.

“See. I can draw the shape,” she said. “And I will call this shape a *Z*.”

Now Madame I, who was quite thin, studied a candlestick in the center of the table. Beside the *zigzag* shape on the napkin, she drew a short straight line.

“Enough doodling during dinner,” Madame U protested.

“Oh, let her,” said Madame O. “I’m curious what she’s doing.”

Madame I raised her pencil. “Let-hers!” she said. “That’s what we will name these shapes. And whenever we see this second let-her, a short stick, we’ll say *i*. I will call it an *I*, after myself.”

As she spoke, the teachers’ fat cat, Vowel, leaped onto the table.

Again, Madame I began to draw. After the let-her *I*, she drew the cat's round bottom with its curly tail hanging down.

"The third let-her will say *ggg*, and I'll call it a *G!*" she said. "Now let's all say the three let-hers together."

"*Zzz-iii-ggg*," the teachers chorused. "*Zig.*"

"What's a *zig?*" said Madame U.

"Sometimes I think you're batty, Madame I," said Madame Y.

Madame A stared at a meatball on her plate. A sliver of cheese was stuck to its side. "I think I understand," she said.

Here Madame A took the pencil and drew a second *Z* on the napkin. Beside it, she drew a circle with a short line attached.

"This let-her will say *aaa*, and I'll call it an *A*," she said. "Now if I add another *G*, we see the entire word *zigzag*."

"Yes, sirree!" said Madame E. "*Zigzag!* The first written word in history."

"My, oh, my!" said Madame I. "Tomorrow we can teach our students how to read *zigzag!*"

"Yo! And how to spell *zigzag*," said Madame O. "*Z-I-G-Z-A-G! Zigzag!*"

“Wahoo!” said Madame U. “And if our students are going to write *zigzag*, they must learn proper handwriting.”

“*Zigzag, zigzag*,” Madame Y muttered. “Sometimes I understand what you are talking about and sometimes I don’t”

The next morning at school, the six teachers wrote the let-hers *Z, I, A, and G* on cards and tacked them above their classroom blackboards. After social studies period, they taught how to read, spell, and write the word *zigzag*.

“Let’s think of more let-hers to teach,” Madame A said on the way home.

Madame E pointed to a snake in the grass. “A wavy line will say *sss*, and I’ll call it an *S*.”

Madame U saw Madame E smile. “And the shape of a smile will say *uh*,” she said. “I’ll name that let-her *U* after me.”

Madame E saw Madame Y frown. “And an upside down smile shape will say *nnn*,” she said. “I’ll call that let-her an *N*.” She pointed to the sky. “*S-U-N* spells *sun*.”

A dog ran past, wagging its tail.

“Two *U*’s stuck together will be a *double-U*,” said Madame A. “*W-A-G* spells *wag*.”

A man ran by, chasing the dog.

“And two *N*’s together will be a *double-N*,” said Madame O. “No, maybe I’ll call it an *M* instead. *M-A-N* spells man.”

“Sometimes I think naming let-hers is silly,” said Madame Y.

By the following morning, the teachers had made up twenty-five let-hers. They arranged them in hundreds of ways to write hundreds of words. Sometimes Madame Y helped and sometimes she didn’t. When the teachers arrived in their classrooms, they wrote the let-hers on cards and posted them above the blackboards in this order:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x z

A boy named Albert Fibet became the first student to recite all twenty-five let-hers without looking. From then on, the row of let-hers became known as the *alfibet*.

That afternoon, the teachers hiked home singing a song they just made up called *The ABC Song*.

“Hurray! Teaching the alfibet was a hit!” said Madame A. “Twenty-five let-hers, twenty-five sounds.”

“Yes sirree!” said Madame E. “But a student put me in a pickle. She asked how to spell *me*. Since none of the twenty-five let-hers said *ee*, I had to think quickly. I told her that the let-her *E* has two sounds, both *eh* and the sound of my name—*ee*. *M-E* spells *me*.”

Madame O stopped walking. “Yo! If your let-her can have two sounds, so can mine,” she insisted. “The let-her O will say both *ah* and *oh*.”

“My, oh, my! And the let-her *I* will say *i* and *eye*,” Madame I declared. “To spell the word I, just say my name—*I*”

“Sometimes...,” Madam Y began. But she forgot what she was going to say and said no more.

So it was decided that the five let-hers named after the five teachers A, E, I, O, and U each had two sounds, a short sound and a long sound. They named these special let-hers *vowels*, after their cat.

Many weeks of teaching past until one night the teachers had chicken for dinner. Madame Y found the chicken wishbone and held it up.

“Sometimes I think it would be fun to have a let-her named after me,” she said.

The other teachers lowered their drumsticks and chicken wings.

“Sometimes Y can say *ee* and sometimes it can say *eye*,” Madame Y went on. “My let-her can look like this wishbone.”

“Madame Y, why should you have a let-her?” said Madame A.

“You only sometimes help around the house and sometimes help at school,” said Madame E.

“You’re wishy-washy,” said Madame I.

“Sometimes you helped make the *alfibet*, and sometimes you just griped,” said Madame U.

Madame Y scowled. “But sometimes you’ll need my let-her Y. Try spelling *try* without it. Y will come in handy spelling *handy*.”

Madame A, Madame E, Madame I, Madame O, and Madame U huddled in the corner. At length, they looked toward Madame Y.

“We’ve agreed to add the let-her Y to our *alfibet*,” said Madame A.

“Y can be the twenty-sixth let-her,” said Madame E. “But on one condition.”

“Since you’re wishy-washy, Madame Y, your let-her will be wishy-washy,” said Madame I.

“*Sometimes* Y will be a vowel,” said Madame O.

“And *sometimes* Y will be one of the common let-hers,” said Madame U.

Madame Y stomped her foot. “Sometimes I like the you, and sometimes I do not.”

From that day on, the six teachers had no trouble filling the school day with lessons. They wrote many words with the twenty-six *alfibet* let-hers. They wrote many

stories with the words, and filled many books with the stories.

To this day, the six teachers are remembered in grade schools across the land. Visit a classroom and ask the students to recite the vowel letters. If they had been paying attention during English, they will reply, “A, E, I, O, U ... and sometimes Y.”