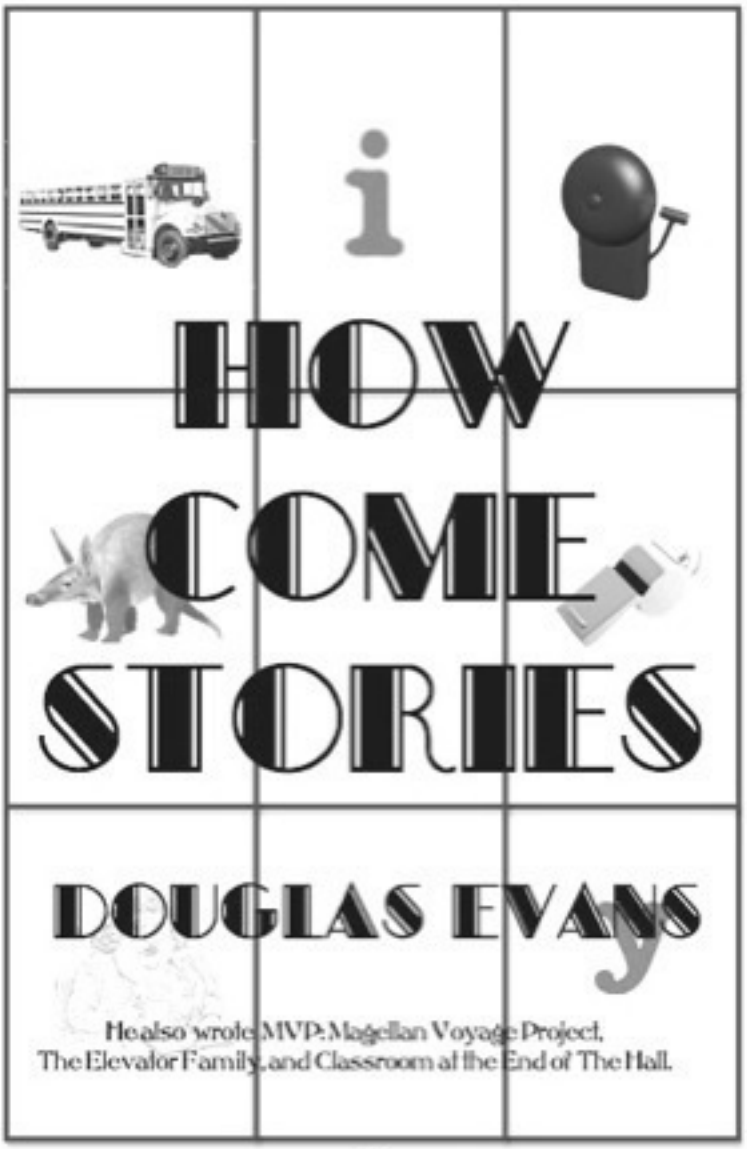
HOW COME STORIES

DOUGLAS EVANS


HOW
COME
STORIES
DOUGLAS EVANS
He also wrote MVP: Magellan Voyage Project,
The Elevator Family, and Classroom at the End of The Hall.

WT Melon

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How Come a Bell Starts the School Day?

In school years of yore, school days of yesterday, when school halls were miles long, and wild animals roamed the hallways, a girl named Gig was sent to the office.

Gig was having a fidgety day. With the temperature outside cold and the classroom heat turned up high, she found it impossible not to wiggle and jiggle, wriggle and squiggle in her chair.

"Gig, stay still!" her man-teacher scolded. "Don't fiddle about. Don't fidget."

But still Gig bounced and flounced in her seat.

In those long ago school times, teachers carried tall, crooked rods called teaching staffs. The modern term staff, meaning people who work in schools, comes from these long, bent poles.

Now, as Gig continued to rock in her chair, the man-teacher pointed his staff at her. "Gig, go to the office," he said. "You've been fidgeting too much today."

Gig went pale. She looked toward the closed classroom door. Who knew what creatures could be lurking on the other side? If a student had left the playground door open that morning, any number of wild beasts could have wandered into the school. Yesterday, a fifth-grader had spotted a blue-lined lion by the Boys' Room, and a first-grader spied a comma-covered leopard outside the lunchroom. Just that morning during PE class, Gig's class had heard the toe-curling roar of a ferocious chalky bear.

"I'll be good," Gig pleaded to her teacher. "I'll stay still. I'll never fidget again in my life." And to prove her point she sat up as rigid as a ruler.

The man-teacher checked the clock. "It's noon, Gig, and the animals nap at this hour. A giant rhinothesaurus or a three-holed noteboar won't harm a student during naptime."

“What about the humpbacked mathjackal that carried off the kindergartner last week?” asked Gig.

“That young lad should have known better than to pull the mathjackal’s tail,” said the man teacher, banging his pole on the floor. “Now off with you. You have plenty of time to get to the office before any creature wakes up. Beside the exercise will be good for your fidgetiness.”

Gig slid from her seat. Now she wasn’t fidgety. She was scared stiff. Her classmates watched in horror as she stepped toward the doorway. She opened it a crack and peeped into the hall.

“Hello? Hello?” she called out.

The teacher waved his staff. “Go!” he shouted, and the girl was out the door.

Alone, Gig stood in the long straight hallway. She peered down to the office, a small white dot over a mile away. Never in her years at school had she been in the hall without her teacher and class. The thought of meeting an eraser-bottom hippophant or a yellow-scaled pencil lizard, even during nap hour, was enough to keep any student from asking to get a drink of water or use the restroom while in class.

The hallway clock told Gig that it was a ten past twelve. “In fifty minutes the wild beasts will be on the prowl again,” she said. “Should I run to the office? No, the

noise could awaken the beasts. Should I tiptoe? No, the beasts would wake up before I get halfway there."

Gig decided to slide her sneakers along the tiled floor, silently but quickly. She began her journey. Step, slide, step, slide.

Before reaching the next classroom, she stopped. Each classroom door was set a few feet back from the hallway. This left a dark space between the hall and classroom.

"Wild things like to doze in those dark nooks," Gig told herself.

Noiselessly, she leaned forward. She peered around the corner toward the classroom door.

"Phew, the place is empty," she whispered. "But there are many more classrooms to pass before I reach the office, and time is running out."

Gig started again. Step, slide, step, slide. At each classroom entrance, she stopped and checked the dark area. Step, slide, step, slide. By the time she had past twelve classrooms, the gym, and the library she was exhausted.

"I need a drink," she said. "I need some water."

Across the hall and ahead several yards stood a drinking fountain. Without looking at the floor, she

hurried toward it. That was a mistake. After five steps, she tripped over something large, lumpy, and furry.

"Yaaaaar!" went the thing, leaping to its four clawed feet.

"Yaaaaah!" yelled Gig, for she was staring into the yellow eyes of a scissor-toothed tiger, known as the fiercest animal to roam the hallway.

Thick yellow fur rose on the tiger's arched back. Its eyes narrowed. The beast opened its jaws, slashing the air with a pair of foot-long silver fangs.

"Yaaaaar!" it went again.

"Yaaaaah!" Gig repeated, expecting the blades to slice her into scraps at any second.

"Yaaaaaar!"

"Yaaaaaah!" went Gig.

"Stop! Stop!" said the tiger, and this so surprised Gig that she nearly fell over backward.

"Stop?" she uttered. "Stop what?"

The tiger lowered its furry head. "Stop scaring me."

"Scaring you?" said Gig. "You're a scissor-toothed tiger. You're the one who's doing the scaring."

The tiger mewed like a kitten. "A scissor-toothed tiger wouldn't hurt an eraser-crumb flea," it said. "It's you students who are scary. Every time you approach one of us animals you scream."

"But I screamed because you growled at me," said Gig.

"And I growled because you screamed at me. Have you ever stood in front of a mirror and seen yourself screaming? It's a very scary thing."

Gig thought for a moment. "Is this true with all the wild animals that wander the hall? The blue-lined lions and the comma-covered leopards? Do they growl because students startle them?"

The scissor-toothed tiger nodded, flailing its silver fangs. "It's also true with the eraser-bottom hippophant and the yellow-scaled pencil lizard. Once a new glue gnu I knew was migrating south and spotted the open playground door. To save walking around the long school, it took a short cut through this hall. But a kindergarten saw the spiral-horned animal and screamed. Frightened, the new glue gnu turned around and began migrating northward instead."

Gig thought some more. "What I need is a warning signal," she said. "I need a way of warning animals that I'm walking down the hall. That way I won't startle them and they won't frighten me."

Next to the drinking fountain was the small janitor's room. Gig peered inside. Animal traps, nets, and cages hung on the walls.

“How senseless those animal traps now seem,” she said.

Her eyes fell upon a brass bell on the janitor’s workbench. She grabbed it by the wooden handle and waved it up and down. Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

“From here to the office I’ll ring this bell,” she said to the tiger. Ding-ring! Ding-ring! “That way all the beasts will know that fidgety Gig is coming.”

The scissor-toothed tiger yawned again. “And I can go back to sleep,” it said. “There’s still twenty minutes left in the nap hour.”

Waving the bell, Gig started down the hall once more. Ding-ring! Ding-ring! Her pace was faster.

“Here I come, giant rhinothesaurus’s and three-holed noteboars,” she called out. Ding-ring! Ding-ring! “Don’t be startled mathjackle. It’s just me, Gig, on her way to the office for fidgeting too much.” Ding-ring! Ding-ring!

Gig passed many more classroom doorways. She spotted a red-snouted ink slurper in one and a thumbtack-o’-pine in another, but neither growled at her. A checkered cheating cheetah even looked up and smiled.

Ding-ring! Ding-ring! “The bell works well,” Gig said. “My arm is getting tired, but it beats being devoured.”

When Gig finally reached the office, the principal made her sit on a stool for the rest of the day. This gave her more time to think.

"I'll be the first student at school tomorrow," she said. "I'll march up and down the long hall ringing my bell. That will warn any animal that the students are arriving shortly."

Gig's bell idea was helpful. From the morning she started ringing the bell, not another student startled a wild beast and not another wild beast startled a student.

One morning Gig thought of hanging a bigger bell above the school roof. After that, she simply pulled a rope and--Ding-ding! Ding-ding!-- the bell rang throughout the school and across the playground.

"Good thing you sent me to the office for fidgeting," she told her man-teacher. "Now every morning the students will know when it's safe to come inside."

Even today, a bell rings at the start of the school day. No blue-lined lions or comma-covered leopards have been spotted in any hallway in any school for over a century, but bells still ring. Red-snouted ink slurpers and checkered cheating cheetahs might not enter schools anymore, but it's best to be certain just in case.

How Come A School Bus is Yellow?

Once upon a school time long long ago, schools were without color. Classrooms, playgrounds, teachers, and students appeared in black, white, and shades of gray.

A first-grade boy named Red found the first color on a class field trip. His class rode to the light gray countryside in an ash gray school bus. While hiking along a dark gray creek looking for white crayfish, Red lifted a black rock and spotted the patch of color.

"Teacher, look what I found," he yelled. "Isn't it beautiful?"

The first-grade teacher was a wise and wonderful woman. She inspected the color and said, "Excellent, Red. I've never seen anything like it before. Let's name it *red*

after you. We'll take a bit of it back to our classroom to put in the science corner."

The teacher scooped up an ounce of *red* and placed it in a jar.

Moments later, a girl named Blue found a second spot of color inside a hollow tree.

"Look teacher! What is it?" Blue shouted.

"I don't know, Blue, but let's name it *blue* after you."

The wise and wonderful teacher scooped up an ounce of *blue* and placed it in a jar. "And we'll take it back to our classroom and put it in the science corner."

No sooner had this happen than a boy named Yellow called out, "Over here, Teacher. Look what I found inside a bird's nest."

The teacher named this third color *yellow* and collected a sample of it as well. "This has been a rewarding field trip, class," she said. "Red, Blue, and Yellow have found three exciting items for our science corner."

Back in the black and white classroom, the wise and wonderful teacher passed a piece of white paper to each student. She opened the three jars and dropped a dab of red, blue, and yellow on each sheet.

"Let's experiment," she said. "Use your fingers to spread the red, blue, and yellow around your paper. See what pictures you can make?"

The first graders went to work. With both hands, they pushed the three colors around their papers. Blue used her thumb to smear a blue strip at the top of her page for a sky. Yellow painted a yellow sun in the top corner of his paper with his pinkie.

"Look here!" a boy named Orange called out. "A bit of red mixed with a bit of yellow and a new color appeared."

"Excellent, Orange" said the teacher. "What a bright, happy color that is. We'll call it *orange.*"

"I mixed blue and yellow," said a girl named Green.

"And Green made *green*," said the teacher.

A boy named Purple held up ten purple fingers. "And red and blue makes this color that we can call *purple*."

The wise and wonderful teacher smiled. "I have an idea," she said. Taking a large piece of stiff white cardboard, she cut out a circle. With a black felt pen, she divided the circle into six equal parts like six slices of pizza.

"Now I'll paint one section yellow, one blue, and one red," she explained. "The section between red and yellow I'll paint *orange.* Between yellow and blue I'll paint *green* and between blue and red I'll paint purple.

When the teacher was finished painting she held up the circle. "Now we have a colorful wheel," she said. "Let's call it a color wheel."

Red snatched the color wheel and began rolling it around the classroom. To everyone's delight, wherever the wet colors touched they remained. The yellow part of the wheel touched two gray pencils and turned them yellow. The green part touched the black chalkboard and turned it green. The white chairs became orange, and a gray apple on the teacher's desk turned red.

Next Blue grabbed the color wheel and rolled it outside. She made the sky blue and the sun yellow. The wheel rolled over the gray soccer field and the grass turned green. The black walls of the school became red and the flag fluttering on the flagpole turned red, white, and blue.

All day long, the first graders took turns rolling the color wheel around the school grounds. Pink, Brown, Silver, and Magenta mixed more colors and added them to the wheel. The pencil erasers became pink and the desks turned brown. On the playground there was now red and yellow rubber balls, blue tetherball poles, and a silver swing set.

When the school bell rang at the end of the day the entire school scene inside and out was bright and colorful.

"This has been an excellent day," said the wise and wonderful teacher.

"Dibs on taking the color wheel home," said Pink.

"Look, I made my hair brown," said Brown.

At that moment, the ash gray school bus drove into the parking lot. It parked in front of the red school. Next to the colorful bicycles in the silver bicycle rack, the bus looked particularly drab.

Silver grabbed the color wheel. "Let's ride home in a silver bus," he said

"The bus should be red to match the school," said Red.

"No, pink is the best color for a bus," Pink insisted.

The first graders began to bicker. During the argument, no one noticed that the color wheel had fallen to the ground.

The wheel rolled into the street, turning the traffic light green, yellow, and red. It rolled through the neighborhood, coloring the houses blue and brown. It rolled by a farm turning the tomatoes red, the corn yellow, and the carrots orange, and it rolled through a forest, painting the pine trees forever green. The animals were thankful for their new coats of brown and red. The skunk, however, proud of his black fur with the white stripe, leaped out of the way just as the color wheel rolled by.

Finally, the color wheel reached the ocean. The dull gray sea became a hundred hues of blue and purple, while the sea creatures turned colors of a dazzling variety.

In the meantime, back at the school the first graders stared at the ash gray school bus.

"Our color wheel is gone," said Blue.

"So are the colors in the science center jars," said Red.

"We'll have to ride home in a dingy gray bus," said Pink.

Yellow, however, remained silent. He was staring at his fingernails. Although he had scrubbed his hands after finger painting, a speck of yellow remained behind his thumbnail.

Holding up his thumb, the boy stepped toward the school bus. He pressed it against the bus's gray back door. At once, the entire vehicle turned a bright cheerful yellow.

The first graders cheered. Around and around, they circled the yellow school bus, admiring it from all sides.

"Yellow, you've done a good thing," said Blue.

"Our bus is the same color I made the banana in my lunchbox," said Red.

The wise and wonderful teacher nodded. "Now people can easily see the bus in the gray dawn when it brings children to school and in the gray twilight when it brings them home!" she said.

Fortunately, the colors from the first-grade color wheel were long lasting, and the world remains colorful

today. Since that long ago school time, many more schools were built and painted many different colors. The colors of books, chairs, and playgrounds have changed as well. But from that first colorful day to the present, students have enjoyed how Yellow colored the school bus so much, that it has never changed. School buses are still yellow.

How Come a School Year is Nine Months Long?

In an ancient era of schools, a boy named Pupil Come-On sat at his classroom desk. Pupil's teacher, Miss Persevere, had assigned three pages in his reading workbook to complete. Bored with the work, Pupil raised his hand and asked, "May I go to the hall for a drink?"

Miss Persevere scowled. "You know the rule about getting drinks during reading, Pupil," she said.

A smile spread across Pupil's face. He cupped his hands under his chin. "Oh, please, Miss Persevere," he said. "I am *so* thirsty. Pretty please. I haven't had a drink all day. Please. Pleeeeese."

Miss Persevere's face softened. Her shoulders slumped. "Oh, all right, Pupil," she said. "Go drink all the water you want."

Pupil Come-On was an expert pleader. His skill at begging for favors was famous throughout the school. Even the strictest teacher couldn't resist his charm. Whenever Pupil asked for something in class--more free time, a new pencil, a better chair, or an extra sheet of drawing paper--teachers always gave in to his requests.

Now Pupil rushed into the hall for a drink. But hardly had he reached the water fountain when the floor wobbled and the walls shook.

"Earthquake!" he said.

Having gone through numerous earthquake drills, Pupil knew what he should do, stand in a doorway. But with the world rocking around him, all he could manage was to stand with his legs spread like a sailor on a tossing ship.

After a long twenty seconds, the quaking stopped and Pupil tottered back to his classroom. At the door he stopped. Something was terribly wrong. Not a sound came from within the room, no student chatter or laughter. Why couldn't he hear Miss Persevere calling out orders?

Cautiously, Pupil opened the door. He took two steps forward and froze. His toes hung over the edge of a wide, crack that split the classroom from end to end.

Leaning forward, Pupil peered into the deep chasm. Billowing smoke blocked his view, but a low rumble came from far below.

"My teacher and entire class are missing," he said. "They must have fallen into this fault."

As he spoke, the *tap, tap, tap* of footsteps reached his ears. Turning, he saw a two-legged creature about the size of a kindergartner standing on the teacher's desk. Was it a person? An animal? No, it was both, a creature with the furry legs and tail of a goat, but the top half of a young boy. His ears were pointed and two short horns sprouted from his forehead. He was playing a recorder in the shape of a fountain pen while his two hoofed feet danced a jig.

"Who are you?" Pupil asked. "What are you? And why are you in my classroom."

The creature lowered his recorder. "I'm Pen, the faun, brother of Pan, Pin, and Pun," he said. "Super, the head God of Education, sent me here to deliver a message to you."

"Super sent a message for me?" said Pupil. "Does this have anything to do with this crack in my classroom?"

Pen nodded his horned head. “Flunk, the God of Failure, has taken your teacher and class to his gloomy classroom below the earth. The fissure in the floor is Flunk’s fault. Super requests that you, Pupil Come-On, journey down to Flunk’s realm and bring your classmates and Miss Persevere back to school.”

“Why is Super asking me?” Pupil asked. “I’m just an average kid who gets average grades and has average P.E. skills.”

“Because of your power of persuasion, Pupil,” replied Pen. “The twelve Gods of Education know that you are the only student who can talk Flunk into releasing his captives. The gods are impressed with your pleading ability. Digit, Goddess of Math, was in awe the time your teacher allowed you to visit the Boys’ Room five times in a single math period. And Jimmy, God of PE, will never forget how you talked your PE teacher into letting you skip warm up drills because you didn’t want to get your new tee-shirt sweaty. Yes, Pupil Come-On, no student can beat you when it comes to begging for favors.”

Pupil pointed into the smoky crack splitting his classroom. “But why should I go down there? This room is peaceful without classmates bugging me and Miss Persevere dishing out assignments.”

Pen played a short tune on his recorder before answering. "Recess, Goddess of Playgrounds, is saddened by the loss of her favorite teacher and class. She is ignoring her duties. As long as your class remains in the Under-School Ground, recesses are canceled. Playgrounds everywhere will turn to thorny swamps and no students will be allowed outside. You can imagine the drastic effect this can have on education."

Pupil checked the fault again. For the first time, he noticed a flight of wooden steps leading down into the black abyss.

"Well, OK," he said at length. "But I sure expect some extra credit or bonus points on my report card for this.

"The Gods of Education will be forever grateful, Pupil Come-On." said Pen.

Pupil lowered a sandaled foot onto the first step to start his journey downward. Step by step he descended. For over an hour he climbed down, down, down before reaching a slick, damp floor. When his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he found himself standing on the banks of a river flowing with a bubbling black liquid. Tied to the riverbank was a raft on which stood a bald, withered man. He held a pole with a stop sign attached to one end.

"Pass please," the man called to Pupil.

“Pass?” said Pupil. “Why would anyone need a pass to enter this depressing place?”

The man frowned. “My name is Crossing Guard, and I ferry no one across the River Tardy without a pass.”

Pupil lilted his head sideways. “Please take me across, Crossing Guard,” he said. He batted his eyelashes and wore his sweetest smile. “Super sent me. I’m supposed to find my class. Please. Just this once. Please. Please. Pleeeeeease.”

Crossing Guard lowered his stop sign. “Well, ok. Step onto the raft. Why not? I’ll ferry you to the far bank.”

Once across the River Tardy, Pupil followed a cinder path to a tall chain-linked fence with a locked gate. Before the gate crouched a giant black cat with two-heads.

“I’m Copycat, I’m Copycat,” the cat’s two mouths said one after the other. “I’m head of Under-School Ground security. I’m head of the Under-School Ground security. And you can’t come in. And you can’t come in.”

Pupil placed palm against palm as if praying. “Oh, please let me through the gate, Copycat. I must visit Flunk. Please let me. You can do it. Please. Pretty please.”

Copycat sat on its haunches. A blank look crossed its two faces.

"Let me through," Pupil continued. "Oh, pleeeeease. Please with a cherry on top."

The two-headed cat lifted a giant paw and opened the gate. "OK, OK. But hurry, But hurry."

Pupil Come-On ran through the fence. Following the cinder path, he made his way across a misty, gray landscape, filled with the murky ghosts of teachers past.

At length, he came to a classroom constructed of coal and lit by a single candle. Inside, his classmates sat with their heads down on desktops of shiny, black marble. At the front of the room, Miss Persevere, looking pale and frightened, sat behind a golden teachers' desk studded with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies.

Pupil stepped forward. His gaze fell upon a tall stool in a dimly-lit corner. On the stool sat a black-bearded man dressed in black armor. A large golden F gleamed on his breastplate. His black helmet shimmered in the candlelight.

"You must be Flunk," Pupil said. "I've come to take my class and teacher back to school."

Flunk pounded the F on his chest. "Welcome to my *Classroom of No Hope*, Pupil Come-On," he said. "You're in the land where the souls of dropouts and delinquents dwell. No boy or girl who enters this place can ever leave. Sit at the desk in back and put your head down."

Pupil drew in a deep breath. He knew that this must be the greatest pleading performance of him life.

"Flunk, sir," he began. "Can I *please* take my class and teacher back to our school? Please. Recess is making life miserable for students up there. Please, let us go. It's important. I beg you."

Flunk's laughter sent a chill through the air. "Your pleas won't work on me, Pupil Come-On. My dark classroom was lonely before I took your class and teacher. You and your classmates will become my aids and your teacher will be my queen."

The students moaned and Miss Persevere sobbed.

"But I beg of you, Flunk," Pupil continued. "Let me take my class back. Please. Pretty please. Be a pal. Please."

Pupil saw that the dark god was weakening, and he pressed harder.

"Pleeeeeease. You can do it. I have to take them back. Just this once. Please let me. Please with sugar on it. Pretty pretty please. I'll never ask you for another favor as long as I live. Oh, pleeeeeeeeeeease. Oh, pleeeeeeeeeeease."

Flunk dropped from his high stool. He stood with his arms folded across the F on his chest. "OK, OK, I give in," he said. "You can take your class back to school on one condition. During your returned journey, no student can

look back. If anyone takes the slightest glance backward, the entire class must stay down in my classroom forever."

"That sounds fair," said Pupil. "Let's go, everyone. We're returning to school. It's almost recesstime up above. Just don't turn around. It's that simple."

With Pupil Come-On leading the way, Miss Persevere and her students filed from the gloomy classroom. They marched up the cinder path, through the gate guarded by Copycat, and onto the banks of the Tardy River. But as the class was boarding Crossing Guard's raft, a boy named Curious turned around. He couldn't help it. He had to see what was behind him.

At once, Pupil found himself and his class sitting back in Flunk's *Classroom of No Hope*.

"Ha, I knew an entire group of students could never follow instructions during a class trip," said the God of Failure. "Now you are my aids forever, and Miss Persevere shall be my queen."

The students moaned and the teacher sobbed.

Pupil began pleading again, but it was useless. Flunk's black heart could not be softened a second time. For many weeks, Miss Persevere and her class sat in that cold, dismal classroom doing meaningless math drills and spelling worksheets. Life was dull and depressing until one

morning a silver light appeared on the teacher's golden desk.

Pupil looked forward. Pen, the faun, stood there playing his recorder.

"Pen!" Pupil shouted. "Help us! Get us out of here!"

The faun addressed the God of Failure, who sat on his stool in the corner. "Super sent me down here with a message, Flunk. He orders you to give back Miss Persevere and her students. Schools in the upper world are in trouble. Recess mopes all day long. Playgrounds remain swampy and students are skipping school because all the fun is gone."

Flunk slid from his stool. He knew he must obey the head god.

"But that's not fair," he said. "If I give back my helpers and queen what will I get in return."

"Super has agreed to cut a deal, Flunk," Pen said. "Miss Persevere's class can remain in school above for nine months. For three months of the year they will stay down here with you."

Pupil leaped to his feet. "Great deal, Flunk" he said. "How about it? Three months is better than none. Please let us go, Flunk. Pleeeeeease."

Flunk nodded and the bargain was struck.

Joyfully, Miss Persevere returned with her class to their classroom. The month was September and they stayed there through May. At the start of June, the classroom floor split open and the teacher and class marched down the steps to be with Flunk.

To this day, Recess still mopes whenever Miss Persevere's class is below in the Under-School Grounds. That's why our schools are closed during the summer months. But in September, when Miss Persevere and her class return, Recess brightens and schools reopen.

As for Pupil Come-On, the Gods of Education assured that his name would be honored forever. Even today, students often speak the name of the famous pleader when they ask teachers for favors. Listen in on a classroom and you might hear,

"Please, teacher! Come on! Pretty please. Oh, come on. Please! Please! Come ooooon!"

How Come There Are More Women Teachers?

Long, long ago, in the time of valiant knights and gallant teachers, the town of Bonus Points built a school that was as grand as any castle. The wide stone school stood in the center of town. A high stone wall with four lookout towers at each corner surrounded the school grounds. For the students to enter each morning, a strong wooden drawbridge had to be lowered across a watery moat filled with starving crocodiles.

A week after the completion of Bonus Points School, the headmaster held a staff meeting in the Great Hall.

"Now that we have a grand school we need the grandest teachers to teach here," he said. "We must select

noble teachers of the highest order. Only those of the greatest valor and skill will be permitted to teach at Bonus Points."

"Why not hold a first-class teacher tournament," suggested the deputy head. "We will invite the top teachers in the land to compete for our six classrooms."

"We'll hold contests in assignment writing, passing out papers, desk arranging, bulletin board decorating, and homework correcting," said the vice deputy head.

"The teachers will compete in playground games such as four-square and kick ball," said the assistant vice deputy head. "We'll have a championship spelling bee and flash card speed races."

"Grand idea," said the headmaster. "And the grand prizes will be teaching jobs at our school."

"Let the best teachers win!" the head, the deputy head, the vice deputy head, and the assistant vice deputy head said as one.

The next day, Herald, the school secretary, rode his horse through every village in the countryside. "Hear ye! Hear ye! Bonus Point Teacher Tournament!" he cried. "Friday at the Bonus Points school grounds. Win a chance to teach at Bonus Points School! Hear ye! Hear ye!"

Many bold and chivalrous teachers heard the call and started training for the competition. They practiced their

tetherball skills and attendance-taking techniques. They reviewed the times tables and spelling lists. They sharpened their pencils and polished their pointers.

Meanwhile, the Bonus Points Parents Club also prepared for the big day. They decorated the school grounds with bunting, banners, and long waving flags. They set up brightly colored tents to sell cupcakes and lemonade. Finally, on the day before the tournament, they erected a giant billboard on the outskirts of town. It read:

BONUS POINTS
TEACHER TOURNAMENT!
MEN AND WOMEN TEACHERS WELCOME!

"This is the grandest event ever to be held in Bonus Points," said the headmaster.

"What pomp!" said the deputy head.

"What pageantry!" said the vice deputy head.

"What thrills, spills, and chills!" cried the assistant vice deputy head.

"Bring on the teachers!" the head, the deputy head, the vice deputy head, and the assistant vice deputy head said as one.

That night a fierce storm ripped through the town. Blasts of wind whipped the banners and fluttered the flags. Thunder boomed and zigzags of lightning split the sky. But in the morning, the sun shone brightly. It was a perfect day for a teacher tournament.

Soon after breakfast, every citizen of Bonus Points lined the street leading to the school grounds. They sang songs and waved handkerchiefs in anticipation of the first teacher's arrival.

Shortly, a small boy announced, "I see one! I see a teacher! A teacher is coming."

Bells rang and whistles blew as the first teacher appeared on Main Street. Mounted on a tall dappled stallion, rode Lady T. Collywobbles, known throughout the land as an expert dodgeball player. Her coat of arms, printed on the arms of her leather coat, showed three red rubber balls. Her squire followed on a pony with a large bag of balls hanging from its saddle.

Children surged forward begging Lady Collywobbles for autographs, but the woman waved them off with a gloved hand.

"Isn't she wonderful, mother?" said a girl in the crowd. "She's my bet for being one of the winning teachers."

"It takes more than playing dodgeball to be a good teacher, dear," her mother replied.

Next, Lady Curlicue Quills rode down Main Street on a bicycle with a giant front wheel. Lady Quills was famous far and wide for her beautiful handwriting. A tall goose feather stuck out of the purple tri-cornered hat that she wore at a stylish slant on her head.

"I love your cursive M's, ma'am," a boy shouted to her. "Your capital D's are divine."

"Thank you! Thank you!" Lady Quills replied. "I hope to soon be teaching every Bonus Points student fine handwriting."

The next teacher to enter the town was Lady Wilhelmina Whatnot. She rode in a buggy drawn by two long-horned oxen. Many parents in the crowd nodded approvingly for Lady Whatnot was known for her strict classroom discipline. The teacher cracked a whip above the oxen's heads and the beasts trotted faster.

"I do hope she's one of the top six at the tournament," said a mother in the crowd.

"It takes more than being strict to make a good teacher," said her daughter.

Teacher after teacher entered the town, some on horseback, some on foot, some on roller skates, some on pogo sticks, and even one riding a unicycle while juggling. But it wasn't until the fiftieth teacher had passed that a young boy noticed something wrong.

"There's no men teachers," he cried out. "All the teachers are women. Where are the men?"

Perhaps the parents would have also wondered about the absence of men, if not at that moment trumpets blared from the top of school ground wall. The drawbridge

lowered and the headmaster's voice called through a giant megaphone, "Let the grand teacher games begin!"

The procession of teachers rode through the school ground gate. The crowd of people swarmed through after them. While the teachers did warm up drills, the spectators filled wooden grandstands that encircled the vast tournament playing field.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the first event at the north end of the field will be a freeze tag match," the headmaster announced. "At the south end will begin round one of the story telling contest."

The crowd roared as the first teachers stepped onto the grass. The cheering was so thunderous that no one heard a girl in the grandstand ask, "But where are all the men teachers? What happened to the men?"

A bell on the ramparts rang and the games commenced. Never before had the citizens of Bonus Points seen such a thrilling spectacle. The competition--whether in hopscotch, Chinese jump rope, report card writing, relay races, clay pot making, coloring, or recorder playing--was fierce and tense.

A giant scoreboard tallied the points each teacher earned. The headmaster, deputy head, vice deputy head, and assistant vice deputy head, sitting in the long judges box, served as judges. They awarded bonus points to the

teachers for participation and good sportsmanship. After the grand finale, a brutal game of capture the flag, the six teachers with the most points were the winners.

Now came the award ceremony. The school headmaster began by tapping each of the six winning teachers on the shoulder with a yardstick.

"I dub thee an official Bonus Points teacher," he said one after the other. The headmaster was about to proclaim the games over, when a boy at the top of the bleachers cried, "How come no men teachers came to the tournament?"

"Yeah, how come there are only women?" asked a girl.

The crowd began to rumble.

"Those kids have a point," a father called out. "Wouldn't it be fair to have some males teaching at our school?

"Where *are* the men teachers?" asked a mother.

The judges in the judging box shrugged. They tried not to look toward the stands.

As the protests grew, Herald, the school secretary, rode his horse onto the school grounds.

"Headmaster!" he cried out. "I've just come from the road outside of town. I discovered the reason why no men teachers attended this tournament."

“Speak, Herald,” the headmaster said. “Tell the crowd the answer to this mystery.”

Harold turned toward the grandstand. “It was the storm last night,” he said. “A bolt of lightning struck the welcome billboard we put up at the side of the road. It split the sign in two. My pages are bringing the broken billboard to the school grounds now.”

On cue, two teenagers came running across the drawbridge and through the school gate. Between them, they carried a plank of wood with words painted on it. The instant the crowd saw the sign, it became clear what harm the lightning had done. The bolt had split the sign at the letter W in the word WOMEN. The left half of the billboard must have flown away with the wind. The pages held the right half.

The deputy head stood up in the judges’ box. “Yep, we’re seeing what the traveling teachers, both men and women, saw when they arrived this morning at the outskirts of town.”

“It’s now obvious why no men teachers rode into Bonus Points,” said the vice deputy head.

“This is embarrassing,” said the assistant vice deputy head.

“And I’ve already dubbed the six teachers, so we can’t redo the tournament,” said the headmaster.

The people in the stands remained silent as they stared at the cracked billboard. Here's how the sign with the split W read:

BONUS POINTS
TEACHER TOURNAMENT!
NOMEN TEACHERS WANTED!

In following years, more schools were built and more teacher tournaments were held to fill the classrooms. But men teachers, having had their feelings hurt at Bonus Points, rarely participated in these events. Instead, they chose to teach in high schools and middle schools. Today more men teachers instruct in grades K-5, but they are still far outnumbered by women. Now you know why.

The First Playground Whistle

In school days gone by, many recesses ago, there was a public school, P.S. 100 that had the most fabulous playground in all the land. No slide slid faster, no swings swung higher, and no climbing structure was more thrilling to climb than the one on P.S. 100's playground. The playground had the cleanest asphalt, the whitest lines, the greenest grass, and the roundest red rubber balls.

The students at P.S. 100 were proud of their playground. No one dared misbehaved for fear of missing recess. Once outside, the students rarely played, but preferred to scrub the equipment, tidy up the ball closet, and mop the blacktop. Instead of hanging from the

monkey bars, the fifth graders polished them with velvet rags. A group of fourth graders whitewashed the hopscotch lines, a troop of first graders dusted the Hula Hoops, and a trio of third graders raked the sand in the sand pit.

Mrs. Spic-N-Span, a tall, stern woman, served as P.S. 100's playground monitor. At recesstime, she patrolled the playground inspecting it for wear and tear. If a leaf blew onto the blacktop, she would holler "Leaf!"

This prompted the Second Grade Sweeper Squad to rush over with wide brooms and brush it away.

If the monitor cried, "Weed!", the Fourth Grade Weed Team would charge onto the soccer field with their weeding tools.

One morning recess, however, the students at P.S. 100 had a surprise. While they vacuumed the basketball court and waxed the tetherball poles, an unfamiliar sound filled the air.

Tweet! Tweeeet! Tweet! Tweet!

The students covered their ears, for the sound was as piercing as a steaming teakettle.

Tweet! Tweeeet!

A silver snail, the size of a pencil sharpener, had crawled from the bushes onto the spotless playground.

Tweeeet! *Tweeeeet*!

In horror, the students watched as the snail slid across the asphalt. In its wake, it left a shiny trail of silvery slime.

"It's a tweet snail, children!" Mrs. Spic-N-Span shouted. "Fifth Grade Mop Squad on the double. Kindergarten Scooper get moving. A tweet snail is the worst thing to have at our school."

Jogo, a kindergarten girl with speed and determination, was today's scooper. While five fifth graders mopped up the silver goo, Jogo approached the tweet snail with a shovel. She slid it under the creature and carried it toward the bushes.

"*Tweet! Tweet*! Not *this* way!" the snail said. "I wish to eat the fresh clover at the other end of the playground. *Tweet! Tweet*! Take me *that* way. I'd dearly like some clover for my noonday. *Tweeeeet!*"

"You're just a messy tweet snail," said Jogo. "You're going back to where you came from." And she dumped the snail by a holly scrub.

But no sooner had the fifth-graders finished mopping up the snail mess, when--*Tweet! Tweet!*— the tweet snail returned to the blacktop.

Straight toward the clover it crawled, leaving a line of silver slime behind it. *Tweet! Tweet*! This time a large

marble lay in its path. Without stopping, the snail crawled over the round thing and swallowed it.

"Not good," groaned the snail. It now thrilled like a warbling bird. *Treeeeep! Treeeep! Treeeeeeeep!*

"Moppers! Scoopers!" shouted Mrs. Spic-N-Span.

Again the fifth graders raced for the mops and Jogo ran for the shovel. The kindergartner scraped up the snail and headed for the bushes

"*Treeeep! Treeeep!"* the snail trilled. "No, no, not this way. I would so much like some fresh clover. Please take me to the other end of the playground. Clover! Clover! Let me cross over. *Treep! Treeeep!*"

"Tweet snails are good for nothing, but making noise and messes." said Jogo. "You belong in the bushes." And she dumped the snail by the holly shrub.

Meanwhile, the playground dusting, sweeping, and polishing continued. The students were so busy cleaning that no one noticed a second creature, a long and skinny jump rope snake, slither onto the blacktop. It stopped by the spiral slide and coiled up like a tightly wound spring. Although this snake resembled a harmless jump rope--right down to its red, tube-shaped head and tail--it was deadly. In a single gulp, it could devour any small child who was about to grab it, hoping to skip rope.

Now, the jump rope snake lay there by the slide, checking out the possibilities for lunch. While waiting, it made up jump rope a rhyme,

"Come luscious boy; come scrumptious girl.

Come for a jump; come for a twirl."

Unfortunately, Jogo spotted the jump rope snake. "Naughty, naughty," she said. "Someone left a jump rope on our tidy playground."

The kindergartner stomped up to the snake. She bent over it. Down went her hand toward one end of the coil, the wrong end, the end that was really the snake's mouth ready to open wide.

Watching Jogo's hand, the snake made up another rhyme.

"*Skipping me will be bad for thee.*

For skipping meals is bad for me."

At this point, Mrs. Spic-N-Span stood on the soccer field checking for crab grass. She glanced toward the asphalt and spotted Jogo about to grab the coil.

"Every jump rope is hanging neatly in the ball closet," she told herself. "That means the coil can be only one thing." And at the top of her lungs she shouted, "Jump rope snake! Run Jogo! Run!"

Mrs. Spic-N-Span voice was loud, but not loud enough. Jogo's hand kept coming closer and closer to the

ravenous reptile. The snake was seconds from striking when--*Treeeep! Treeep*! *Treeeeeeeeeep!*—the tweet snail returned to the asphalt.

Jogo stood up straight. She put her hands on her hips. "Naughty, naughty," she said. "That tweet snail won't let us alone."

As Jogo ran for the shovel, the jump rope snake uncoiled. It glided toward the grass, singing a new rhyme,

"*That tweet snail picked a bad time for tweeting.*

Now none of these kids will I be eating."

Mrs. Spic-N-Span charged onto the blacktop. "My voice was not loud enough!" she said, still breathing hard. "Thank goodness the tweet snail drew Jogo's attention away from that ropy snake."

By now, the silver snail had reached the far end of the playground. It entered the patch of clover and began to eat. It trilled with delight.

Treeeep! Treeeep! *Treeeeeeeep!*

From that recess on, despite its silvery slime, the tweet snail was a welcomed guest on the playground at P.S. 100. Over the next week, however, the snail ate so much clover it grew too big for its shell. As tweet snails will, it crawled from the silver chamber to grow a bigger one.

The following recess, Jogo found the hollow shell with the marble still inside it. She attached a plastic lanyard to the shell to hang it around her neck.

"I owe a lot to the tweet snail," she said. "If not for its loud tweet, I'd be snake poop by now."

She raised the shell to her lips to give it a thank-you kiss. At the last instant, she thought of blowing into the flat, narrow end. To her delight, out came the familiar trill—

Treeeeeeeeeep!

At once, every student on the playground stopped working. Was there more slime to mop up? Did the jump rope snake return?

"That caught everyone's attention," said Mrs. Spic-N-Span. "Blowing on a tweet snail shell could be helpful."

Jogo presented the silver shell to the playground monitor. After that, whenever Mrs. Spic-N-Span saw a playground problem, she gave the shell a blast.

Treeeep!

"The slide needs waxing," she said.

Treeeep!

"I see fingerprints on the tetherball pole!"

Today, teachers still use tweet snail shells for playground whistles, although silver metal whistles molded in the same shape are more common. Whatever type of

whistle a teachers blows at recess-- *Treeeeeeeeep!*—it's thanks to a determined tweet snail of long ago, a silver snail who simply desired some clover and had to cross a very clean playground to get it.

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 Madam 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*."

How Come We Must Dot an i?

The idea of the *alfibet*, now called an alphabet, and its twenty-six *let-hers*, now called letters, spread around the world. Apart from the design of capital letters by Lady Cornelia Capital in the year 1666, the shape of the original letters has changed little to this day.

The exception is the letter *i*. In those early days of writing, the lower case *i* was the easiest letter to make, a short straight stick. But today it's a bother.

"Dot your i's, students," teachers insist. "Remember to dot your i's. The word is spelled wrong if you don't dot the *i*?"

The small *i* has changed many times from its humble beginning. The first revision came when the alphabet idea reached the shores of a small kingdom called Smiley.

A wise and jovial monarch named King Fruity-Juice ruled the land. King Fruity-Juice enjoyed a good laugh and having fun. He never tired of playing games and holding contests throughout his kingdom.

As soon as the king learned about the alphabet, he summoned the royal teacher, Sir Toot, to his chambers.

"Sir Toot, you shall teach the people of Smiley the new alphabet," he said. "Ha! Ha! It looks fun to learn."

"Excellent, your Excellency," said the tutor.

"Ha! Ha! And to set a good example for my subjects, I shall be your first student," said King Fruity-Juice.

For the next nine months, Sir Toot tutored the king. After teaching him many words to read and spell, he taught him how to write the words using the new fancy cursive handwriting that Sir Christopher Cursive had just invented.

On King Fruity-Juice's graduation day, the king again called for the royal teacher.

"Sir Toot, now sally forth throughout the Kingdom of Smiley and teach my subjects the subjects you taught me," King Fruity-Juice said.

"Excellent, your Excellency," said the tutor.

"Ha! Ha! And to make the learning more fun, I've thought up a contest," said King Fruity-Juice. "Bring me the royal handwriting pen."

With pen in hand and a sheet of paper before him, the king wrote in his best cursive handwriting:

Royal Reading Contest
The first person in the Kingdom of Smiley who can read this message will win a chest of gold. To collect your prize, bring this paper to my throne room. Then stand on one foot and shout the words King Fruity-Juice three times.

Have fun,
Your Royal Highness

"Ha! Ha! This game will be a hoot, Sir Toot," the king said. "I'll be waiting on my throne for your first reader."

"Excellent, your Excellency," said the tutor. "Lessons will begin at dawn."

That evening a royal messenger rode to Smiley Village and nailed King Fruity-Juice's document to a tree in the village square. When the people saw the squiggly black lines on the paper, they scratched their heads. But when the messenger announced that Sir Toot would be teaching everyone to read and write, the crowd became joyful.

Early the next morning, Sir Toot arrived in town with his band of teaching aids. They set up large classroom tents and began teaching the people, adults and children alike, the ABC's.

Six months after Sir Toot and his band of teaching aids started reading instruction, a small boy named Lu entered the village square. He spotted King Fruity Juice's paper posted on the tree. Filled with curiosity, he walked up to it and studied the squiggly lines.

"I saw this paper six months ago," Lu told himself. "Those squiggly marks don't look as confusing as they did back then. They're some of the words that Sir Toot taught me. And those words make sentences. I wonder what they say."

Lu ran home to retrieve his reading textbook. Soon he was back at the tree decoding the king's message. In less than an hour, he had the first line figured out.

"It's one of the king's fun contests!" he said.

More eager than ever, Lu struggled to read the handwriting. When he finished the first sentence, he leaped for joy.

"A prize! A chest of gold!" he said, dancing around the tree.

Not until night had fallen did the boy finish reading the announcement. Despite the late hour, he tore down the paper and raced for his donkey. Soon he was riding toward the castle, waving the notice in the air.

"I can win! I can read!" he shouted the entire way. "I can read and I can win!"

Lu arrived at the royal castle and rode his donkey straight into the throne room.

King Fruity-Juice sat on his throne reading a paperback book. A large chest of gold coins sparkled at his feet. When he saw Lu mounted on the donkey and waving the paper, he howled with laughter.

"Ha! Ha! Bravo, my boy!" he said. "Now all you must do is perform the last task that you read on the paper, and this gold is yours."

Trembling, Lu climbed down from the donkey. He looked at the chest and at the king's grinning face.

"Are you sure, sire sir," he said, "Do you really want me to speak those words?"

"Come! Come, my boy," said the king. "Out with it, and claim your prize. I want to get back to reading my book."

Lu held the paper with both hands. He double-checked the handwriting and stood on one foot. Then, at the top of his lungs, he shouted, "*King Frwty-Jwice*! *King Frwty-Jwice*! *King Frwty-Jwice*!"

"Haaaaw!" went the donkey.

King Fruity-Juice's smile fell. "What? What did you say?" he asked. "Are you mocking my name? How dare you. I enjoy having fun, not being made fun of."

Lu felt faint. "But…but…," he stuttered. "That's what this paper says, sire sir."

King Fruity-Juice snatched the paper from Lu's hands. He read it and read it again. After a long moment, the grin returned to his face.

"Ha! Ha! So it does, my boy," he said. "Now I see it. The *u*'s and *i*'s in my name appear as a *w*. King *Frwity-Jwice*. Ha! Ha! That's what you read. Ha! Ha! Because that's what it looks like. Take the gold, my boy. The blame is not yours, but Sir Christopher Cursive's cursive writing."

"Haaaaw!" the donkey repeated.

The next morning, King Fruity-Juice called a meeting. In attendance were Sir Toot, Sir Christopher Cursive, the Queen of Hawaii, and the director of the Smiley Ski Resort.

"Ha! Ha! A young boy from Smiley village has discovered a flaw in cursive writing," the king announced. "A *u* and *i* side-by-side look like a *w*. Ha! Therefore, if anyone writes my name in cursive, it appears as if contains two *w*'s. King *Frwity-Jwice*. Not very regal."

"The people of Hawaii have the same problem," said the Hawaiian queen. "Two *i*'s together appear as a *u*. Tourists to our islands think they are visiting *Hawau*."

"And vacationers at the Smiley Ski Resort ask me what is *skung* when I write *skiing*," added the resort director.

Sir Christopher Cursive shook his head. "I'm *ruined*," he said. "And that would appear as *rwned* if written in cursive."

"But I can solve the *i* problem," said King Fruity-Juice. "Whenever people write the letter *i*, they shall add a small mark above it."

After a moment of silence, Sir Toot said, "Excellent, your Excellency. And what shall the mark look like?"

"I've given this much thought," the king replied. "I've decided from this day forth, all the citizens of Smiley shall

add our kingdom's royal symbol above the small *i*. Ha! Ha! A tiny smiley face!"

So it was official. The lowercase *i* changed for the first time. Although the letter became harder to write, it was easier to read in Sir Toot's textbooks. From that moment on, the small *i* looked like this:

Years later, however, pirates invaded the Kingdom of Smiley. The pirate captain took one look at the letter *i* and said, "Garrr! That thar smiley face abo'e the lett'r *i* must go. Aye! Me thinks it be replaced with the jolly skull and crossbones."

Fortunately, the pirates soon abandoned Smiles to pillage elsewhere, and the land became peaceful again. The people elected a president who declared, "From now on, all small i's shall have a peace symbol floating over them."

Unfortunately, an angry dictator soon took over the country. He ordered that the mark above the *i* be changed to a tiny star.

Not long after this, a civil war broke out in Smiley and the dictator was kicked out. The new leaders wanted the star switched to a little heart.

That's how the letter *i* remained for many years. Until one day, not long ago, a third-grade girl named Mimi Mississippi was sitting at her desk practicing handwriting. The teacher had assigned her students to write their names ten times.

"And don't forget to heart you i's," the teacher said.

Mimi began writing. With great care, she drew a tiny heart above all five *i*'s in Mimi Mississippi. She was writing a third signature, when she slammed her pencil on her desktop.

"Boring!" she said. "Drawing all these hearts is a waste of time and pencil lead."

"I'm sorry, Mimi," said the teacher. "But that's how we make our *i*'s in school."

"How come?" asked Mimi.

At that moment a tiny gnat flew over Mimi's handwriting paper. It landed above the last *i* in her name that still lacked a heart.

Mimi spotted the gnat, and still angry at all the heart drawing she had to do, smashed the tiny insect with her pencil.

"Look at that!" she said. "The squashed gnat looks like a small dot above my *i* in *Mississippi*. It looks great! From now on, why can't I just stick a dot above all the *i*'s in my name?"

Mimi's teacher looked stunned. "A dot?" she said. "I don't know why not. I guess no one ever thought of that before."

Mimi began writing again. "Well, then that what I'll do,: she said. "I'll dot my *i*'s. Dot, dot, dot, dot, dot."

Soon afterward, the school principal spotted one of Mimi's book reports hanging on the hallway bulletin board.

"Look at those *i*'s!" he exclaimed. "Dots! What a brilliant ideas!"

The principal told the town mayor about Mimi's dots. The mayor suggested the idea to the state governor, who claimed it was his idea in the first place, and passed it along to a member of congress who made a law that all small i's should be dotted. The law still stands today.

The future of the *i* remains uncertain. The letter has changed many times in the past and will likely change again. In the meantime, unless you have a better idea, *be wise and dot your i's*.

The Aardvark Who Invented Homework

In long ago school times, a big-eared, tube-snouted, bristly-haired aardvark was angry. That morning when the homely mammal walked from his burrow to the termite mound, children taunted him.

"Hey, donkey ears," a boy yelled.

"Ugly puss!" a girl shouted.

The aardvark's stubby legs kept moving. "Aaar!" he said through his crooked, yellow teeth. "Those taunts make me mad. Very, very mad."

In the afternoon, when the aardvark walked from the termite mound back to his burrow, the same thing happened.

"Here comes *lardvark*," a girl yelled.

"It's a pig?" a boy called. "No, it's too ugly to be a pig."

The aardvark crawled into his dark hole angrier than ever. "Aaar, how I hate being taunted. Don't children have anything better to do than to taunt a poor aardvark?"

The weekend was worse. On those days, the children followed the aardvark from his burrow to the termite mound and from the termite mound to his burrow. There was no escaping the taunts.

"Funny-looking!"

"Hello, *Hose-nose*!"

"Ugly! Ugly! Ugly!"

"Aaar, this is bad. Very, very bad," the aardvark said. "How can I keep those children from taunting me?"

Sunday afternoon, the aardvark stood at the termite mound licking up lunch with his long sticky tongue. When he spied a boy and girl approaching, he hid behind a log. The children sat on the log, close enough for the aardvark's outsized ears to catch every word they said.

"Aren't weekends wonderful?" said the boy. "We have no schoolwork, because we have no school."

"Schoolwork is the worst," said the girl. "Especially learning spelling lists, writing book reports, and figuring division problems."

“At least during the week we have mornings and evening without schoolwork,” said the boy.

“That gives us time to taunt the aardvark,” said the girl. “Let’s go find him now. I thought up a new taunt to shout.”

After the children left, the aardvark returned to his termite feast. “Interesting. Very, very interesting,” he said. “Those children dislike schoolwork. They dislike it very, very much. This gives me an idea. A very, very tit-for-tat idea.”

On Monday morning, instead of heading straight to the termite mound, the aardvark walked to the local school, a one-room schoolhouse on a hill. At this early hour, only the teacher was present. The aardvark placed his spoon-shaped claws on a windowsill and poked his tubular snoot into the classroom. The teacher, a young woman, sat at her desk grading spelling tests.

“Good morning, teacher,” the aardvark called out. “How are lessons going?”

The young teacher sighed. “Hello, aardvark,” she said. “My student’s schoolwork is poor. They miss too many spelling words. Their book reports are badly written, and their division is a disaster. But that’s the way the world works.”

The aardvark licked his snout with his lengthy tongue. "Too bad students don't have more time to study," he said.

"Perhaps, aardvark. But the school day is busy as it is."

"Evenings are long," the aardvark hinted. "Very, very long. Too bad students couldn't learn spelling words, write reports, and figure division problems in the long evening."

"Perhaps, perhaps," said the teacher. "But schoolwork is schoolwork, and that's the way the world works."

"Weekends are much longer," the aardvark went on. "It's easy to forget spelling words and math facts after being away from school for two days."

The young teacher nodded. "Friday does seem a long time ago. But if the children aren't in school on Saturday and Sunday how can they do schoolwork?"

The aardvark leaned farther into the room. Now was his chance. Now he could say the word, the scheme, the payback idea that was bubbling in his brain all night.

"*Homework*," he whispered. "Why can't students read, write, and figure at home?"

The teacher raised her eyebrows. "Homework? Schoolwork at home? The world doesn't work that way?"

The aardvark licked up an ant crawling across the windowsill. In a low voice he said, “Right before the afternoon bell rings, you might give an assignment. Let’s say a spelling list to learn, a book report to write, or a sheet of division problems to figure.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. What then?”

“Then, instead of taunting poor aardvarks after school, the students would complete their homework in their homes.”

“Homework!” said the teacher. “Perhaps you’re on to something. What a smart aardvark you are.”

“But beware of excuses,” the aardvark said. “Children think up amazing excuses to get out of work, so I imagine they’ll come up with extra clever excuses for not doing homework.”

“I’ll give the first homework assignment this afternoon,” said the teacher.

The aardvark spotted the first student coming up the hill. “And maybe it’s best if you don’t mention that homework was my idea,” he said upon leaving.

That afternoon the aardvark left the termite mound satisfied the taunts had ended. Hardly had he started walking, however, before a boy called out, “Here comes termite breath!”

The aardvark lowered his snout to the ground. "Aaar," he went. "The teacher didn't assign enough homework."

Early the next morning, the aardvark revisited the one-room schoolhouse. With his claws upon the classroom windowsill, he hailed the young teacher.

"What was yesterday's homework assignment?" he asked.

"Ten division problems," the teacher answered. "My students complained, but that's the way the world works."

"The extra math will help," said the aardvark. "But an evening is long. Very, very long. Maybe they can do a report or two."

"Perhaps, perhaps," said the teacher.

"And don't forget what I said about homework excuses," said the aardvark. "Children are very, very good at excuses." That afternoon, the aardvark again departed the termite mound, convinced his taunting worries were over. But before he was halfway home, he heard, "Ewww! *Bombardvark*!" and a clump of mud splattered against his side.

The aardvark slunk past two girls. "More homework is needed. Much, much more."

It took two more visits to the schoolhouse before the aardvark walked all the way home without hearing a taunt.

"The children are home doing homework," he said with a snicker. "But I need to return to the school one more time. Tomorrow is Friday, and I must remind the teacher to assign lots of homework for the weekend."

The young teacher was waiting at the classroom window when the aardvark arrived. She bent over, and kissed him on his long muzzle.

"Thanks to you, aardvark, this has been my best week of teaching," she said. "Since assigning homework, my students' schoolwork has improved."

The aardvark raised his snout, hoping for another kiss. "Remember, the weekend is two days long," he said.

"Yes, and I've prepared extra homework assignments. If my students complain, I'll just tell them that's the way the world works."

"That's good," said the aardvark, as he set off for the termite mound. "The students will be busy. Very, very busy."

The aardvark lived long enough to see his homework idea spread from school to school across the country. To this day, no teacher has given away his secret.

Teachers did, however, give the aardvark a special honor. When they wanted to assign vocabulary words for homework, teachers wrote the first dictionary. They included thousands of words for their students to look up.

But the word they put at the very beginning was the name of the homely creature that came up with the homework idea in the first place. That word was *aardvark*.

How Come the Janitor's Room Is So Small?

Once there was a school janitor named Mr. Squeegee who groused about his job.

"The school hallways are too long for me to sweep," he groused to the principal.

"The chalkboards are too wide for me to wipe," he groused to the teachers.

"The lunch tables are too heavy to roll up and down," he groused to the lunch servers.

During breaks, Mr. Squeegee would sit in his janitor's room and grouse to himself. "The sinks are too large to scrub. The windows are too tall to wash, and the front steps are too steep to shovel on snow days."

The janitor's windowless room was as spacious as any classroom. Shaggy mops and brooms of various sizes hung along the walls. Stacks of yellow sponges, reams of paper towels, cases of light bulbs, boxes of trash can liners, cans of floor wax, tubs of cleaning solution, bags of dust rags, and bottles of window spray filled the high shelves.

"The trash cans are too cumbersome to carry," Mr. Squeegee went on grousing. "The desks are to bulky to move, and the gym floor is just too huge, period."

Still, no matter how much Mr. Squeegee groused he always did an excellent job of sweeping, fixing, wiping, scrubbing, and shoveling. Everything in the school was kept in working order, and the school's staff and students appreciated him very much.

On Mr. Squeegee's birthday, April 1, many students made the janitor birthday cards. Nelly Woo, a first-grader, brought Mr. Squeegee a chocolate cupcake with a single candle stuck in the middle. "Happy birthday, Mr. Squeegee," she said. "Thank you for all you've done for our school."

"The light bulbs are too high to change, and the pencil sharpeners are too low to empty," the custodian groused. "And the flagpole out front! Why, it takes me forever to raise the flag to the top of it. It's too tall!"

Not until after school, when all the students and staff had left, did Mr. Squeegee returned to his janitor's room to eat his birthday cupcake. First, he found a match and lit the candle.

"Before I eat Nelly's treat I'm going to make a birthday wish," he told himself. "I've grown old. I can't do the all work I once did. I just wish this school wasn't so big to clean. That's all." Then he blew out the candle.

The janitor ate the cupcake and washed it down with a carton of milk. Afterwards, he sat at his desk to order more light bulbs, floor wax, and paper towels. When his paperwork was finished, he turned around and got the surprise of his life. The side walls of the room, that moments ago were ten feet to his right and left, were now within arm's reach, and the back wall, that had been a good sponge throw away, could now be touched with a broom handle.

"My room has shrunk!" the janitor exclaimed. "Look how small it is!"

Mr. Squeegee leaped to his feet, nearly striking his head on the overhead lights. He ran from the hall and found more surprises. The hallway, classrooms, office, and gym had shrunk as well. The gym was now the size of the first-grade classroom; the first-grade classroom was no larger that the school office, and the office was smaller

than a coat closet. Everything inside the rooms—the desks, chairs, chalkboards, drinking fountains, and lunch tables—appeared in miniature as well.

"What's happened?" Mr. Squeegee said. "How did my school get this way?" But almost at once, he remembered. "This is my doing. I wished for a smaller school, and that's what I got. A mini-school. What have I done? The children can't learn in such a tiny cramped place."

The janitor ran from one end of the hallway to the other. This took only a few seconds.

"The classrooms are too small for a class to fit in," he said. "The desks are too short to sit behind, and the books are too tiny to read. What have I wished for? How can I undo my blunder? I must find another birthday candle to make another birthday wish. I must wish for the school to be its normal size."

Mr. Squeegee hunted through the little office and through the little library. At last, he found a little candle inside a little teacher's desk. But by the time he lit the candle with a little match, the little clock on the wall read midnight and his birthday had past.

The janitor paced the shortened hallway to think. "I've watched the children make many wishes," he told himself. "I know there's more than one way to wish. This

school must return to the size it was before anyone arrives in the morning."

Mr. Squeegee ran to the school kitchen. He found a wishbone left over from the day's chicken lunch. With thumbs and forefingers, he pinched both ends of the tiny bone.

"I need a lucky break," he said. "I wish the lunchroom would grow to the size it was yesterday."

He pulled the wishbone apart—*snap!*-- and looked around. But the lunchroom was still small.

"There are more ways to make a wish," Mr. Squeegee said, and he ran out to the playground.

Beside the swing set stood a well from which the school drew its drinking water. The well was now the size of a shoebox.

Mr. Squeegee pulled a penny from his pocket. He closed his eyes and dropped the coin into the well. "I hope this is a wishing well for I have an important wish," he said. "I wish the playground would grow to the size it was yesterday."

Mr. Squeegee opened his eyes and sighed. The playground remained one-eighth its normal size.

"But I know another way to wish," he said.

The janitor raced back into the shrunken school and entered the little first-grade classroom. There he found a

tiny bottle of blue finger paint and dumped it on a mini sheet of paper. He spread the paint around with his pinkie.

"I heard the first-grade teacher teach this wishing rhyme. *Touch blue and your wish will come true*. I wish the classroom would grow to the size it was yesterday."

The janitor looked around and frowned. The classroom was still small.

"How else do children make wishes?" he asked himself.

Mr. Squeegee crawled into the playhouse-size library. In the wee hours of the night, he sat on a little table, thumbing through a tiny book called HOW TO WISH. He tried everything he read about. He blew a cottony puff off a dandelion stem and wished upon the fluffy seeds that flew every which way. He rubbed a lamp, hoping a genie would appear. He clicked his heels together three times. But by dawn, the school was no larger.

At sunrise, Mr. Squeegee sat in his small room, sipping coffee from his miniscule coffee mug. "The children will arrive in an hour," he said. "How will I explain this puny school to them? How ashamed I am for the wish I made. Why did I grouse so much about my work?"

The janitor stepped into the hall and looked out the window. The sky had turned to purple and every star had

blinked out but one. A golden star shone above the undersized school. This was a star, known by many children as the School Star, for they see it while waiting for the school bus.

"The School Star!" Mr. Squeegee exclaimed. "I've seen children making wishes upon the School Star. It's my last chance." He crossed his fingers and toes. "Now how does the School Star rhyme go?"

After a moment of thought he began,

"Golden star, School Star, up above the school so far.

On tests today please help me pass.

And grant me any wish in class.

I wish that the hallway would stretch. I wish it were the way it was when the children left yesterday."

Nothing happened. The hallway remained unchanged.

"So a School Star wish is as worthless as a wishing well wish or a wishbone wish," the janitor said. "Now all I can do is wait for the children to arrive."

Mr. Squeegee shuffled down the hallway. He was heading into the tiny teachers' lounge, when he felt the floor move under his feet.

"I'm woozy from lack of sleep," he said.

He leaned against the hall and felt more movement. He looked forward and saw that the hallway was stretching outward.

"No, the hallway is expanding!" he shouted. "Wahoo! The School Star wish is working! Oh, but can I add to the wish?"

The janitor charged into the first-grade classroom. "And I wish this classroom would grow big, big, big," he said.

Instantly the four walls and ceiling began moving. The room was enlarging.

"Thank my lucky star!" Mr. Squeegee said.

He skipped to the playground and shouted, "And I wish the playground would stretch and stretch."

He ran to the library. "And I wish the library was eight-times this size."

He bounded to the gym. "And I wish the gym were as giant as before."

Room by room, Mr. Squeegee ran through the school, wishing desks, chairs, bulletins boards, and everything else were wider, longer, higher, and heavier. One after the other, the rooms and every item in them returned to their regular size. When he reached the office, he spotted the first school bus rolling into the parking lot.

"Just in time," he said. "The whole school is back to the way it was, just the way it should be."

Mr. Squeegee grabbed the American flag and ran out the front door. He attached the flag to the top of the stubby flagpole.

"And I wish this flagpole…I wish it would grow to twice the height it was before my selfish wish," he said.

Meanwhile, the students climbed off the school bus. They marched by the flagpole without looking up. If they had, they would have seen the flag at the top, rising higher and higher.

Nelly Woo stopped by Mr. Squeegee. "Did you like the birthday cupcake," she asked.

"Yes, indeed," the janitor answered. "And I learned that it's important to be careful with birthday wishes."

Not until morning recess did Mr. Squeegee open the door to his janitor's room. He reached for his widest broom and grinned. In his haste in wishing the school to regain its normal size, he had forgotten one thing. He never wished his room to enlarge, so it remained small.

"Now the School Star is gone," the janitor said. "But no matter. I'll enjoy this school day of cleaning and fixing, and I promise to never to grouse about my job again."

Mr. Squeegee kept his promise. From that day on, he worked about the school always wearing a smile. The

school was so spotless and well maintained that it became a model for future schools. Today schools have classrooms large enough for dozens of students and libraries that can hold many stacks of books. But as for the janitor's rooms, they remain small. Now you know the reason why.

The Thinking Cap

How come teachers say, "Put on your Thinking Caps," especially when wearing a hat in a classroom is not allowed?

The term *Thinking Cap* goes back several centuries. This was a time before students wore backpacks to school. Instead, they carried their binders, folders, and textbooks upon their heads. These stacks of school gear, carefully balanced, became known as *Thinking Caps*.

Older students, with the most books and years of practice, carried the tallest *Thinking Caps*. Sometimes they would walk the hall, balancing book piles as high as three feet. To cushion the towering loads, they often wore brightly colored felt beanies.

When the teacher said, "Put on your *Thinking Caps,"* students knew it was time to get out their books and start loading their heads. Students might still be "putting on *Thinking Caps"* today if not for a young boy named Mortar.

Mortar was about to begin first grade. Ever since he was little, Mortar had longed to start school. Each afternoon he would watch students walk past his house, balancing the tall and straight *Thinking Caps* upon their heads. Now it was his turn.

When the morning bell rang on the first day, Mortar sat at his desk with a blue beanie scrunched in his back pocket.

"Welcome, class," said Miss Hearsay, his teacher. "The first thing we'll learn today, even before saying our ABC's, is how to carry a book."

Mortar squirmed with excitement. He put on his beanie. "Give me a ton of books," he said. "I'm gonna to balance a *Thinking Cap* that's ten feet high."

Miss Hearsay smiled. She passed out a thin spelling workbook to each first grader. "We'll begin with this," she said. "Now everyone, remember to keep your chins up and shoulders back. Good posture is the key to carrying a proper *Thinking Cap*. OK, stand up and give it a try."

Mortar rose from his desk. He placed the workbook on his blue beanie. At once, it slid forward, smacking him on the nose.

"Lay the book farther back, Mortar," Miss Hearsay said. "Eyes forward. Don't slouch. Keep your head straight."

Mortar put the workbook on his head again. This time it fell backward and struck his bottom.

"Why, look at Flo, class," Miss Hearsay called out. "Good balancing, Flo. Let's see if you can take a few steps."

With arms held out like a ballet dancer, Flo, who stood in front of Mortar, stepped lightly across the classroom.

Mortar fumed and slapped the workbook on his head a third time. "That's nothing," he grumbled. "I'm going to carry the highest *Thinking Cap* in the history of the school. Just watch me." But as he spoke, the book slid off his beanie and scraped his ear.

All day long--in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom--Mortar tried balancing the book. All day long, it kept dropping to the floor.

When the afternoon bell rang, Miss Hearsay said, "OK, class, time to put on your Thinking Caps. For homework tonight do page one in your math books."

The first-graders stood. They placed a slim math book on their heads, and marched proudly out the door. Everyone but Mortar. Try as he might—*plop!*--the book slipped off his beanie again and again.

"You'll have to carry your book in your hand, Mortar," said Miss Hearsay. "We'll hope for the best tomorrow."

Mortar shivered with embarrassment. He walked from the classroom with the spelling book buried in the crook of his arm.

Out in the hallway, a fifth-grader with an English book, a social studies book, and a science book balanced on her green beanie spotted Mortar. "First-grade rookie!" she called out. "Hold that book tightly, Mortar!"

"Mortar couldn't carry a flashcard on his head," said a fourth-grader, whose *Thinking Cap* included six volumes of his favorite fantasy series.

Mortar hurried down the hall. "Tomorrow I'll show them," he told himself. "Tomorrow my *Thinking Cap* will top all others. Just wait and see."

The next morning, Mortar arrived late to school. He waited until after the bell rang, when the hallway was most crowded, to enter the hallway. Shoulders back, chin up, he walked toward his classroom.

Outside the office, a third-grader halted and pointed. "Look at that!" he called out. "Look at Mortar!"

"But it's impossible," said a second-grade girl. "Mortar's only a first-grader. How'd you do that, Mortar?"

Mortar shrugged. On his blue beanie stood a stack of books that included three math books, ten comic books, a telephone book, and volumes A-E of the World Book Encyclopedia. His *Thinking Cap* was over a foot tall!

The school principal, Mr. Knaprucker, stood in the office doorway. "Now *that* boy has talent," he said. "We need more student like Mortar at this school."

"This is nothing," Mortar replied. "As soon as my teacher passes out more books, my *Thinking Cap* will be much taller."

When Mortar entered his classroom, the first-graders grew quiet and stared.

"Good for you, Mortar," said Mrs. Hearsay. "You must have been practicing all evening."

"Mortar, your *Thinking Cap* is *so* tall," Flo called out.

Blushing, Mortar stepped into coat closet. He came out with only the blue beanie on his head. "Let's get to work," he said, taking his seat. "I need more books to stack on top of me."

At recess time, Mortar reentered the coat closet. He carried a new reading book, two fat dictionaries, an English workbook, and five chapter books from the reading corner.

He left the closet wearing a *Thinking Cap* double the height of the one that morning.

"Mortar, how does a boy your size manage a *Thinking Cap* like that?" asked Miss Hearsay.

Mortar swayed side to side. "Good posture," he replied. "And when we get more books it'll be even taller."

At noon, Mortar entered the lunchroom balancing a *Thinking Cap* that was over four-feet tall. The notebooks, writing journals, picture books, three math books, and two dictionaries swayed right and left as he tottered toward the first-grade table. Now a stringy tassel dangled from the corner of the bottom book.

"What's the tassel for, Mighty Mortar," a fifth-grader called out.

Mortar batted the strings from his face. "My *Thinking Cap* was so high I couldn't add more books," he explained. "Watch this."

Mortar tugged the tassel just hard enough so that the tower of books on top of him leaned forward without toppling over. With his other hand, he reached up and pulled his lunchbox off the top of the stack.

The entire lunchroom broke out in cheers.

"You've out done us all, Mortar," said a fourth-grader.

"That's a *Thinking Top Hat*," a fifth-grader chimed in.

"You're *so* amazing, Mortar," said Flo, from the first-grade table.

"Yes, but when I leave school today my *Thinking Cap* will be break all school records," Mortar said, and staggering under the colossal weight, he sat down to eat.

As the afternoon hours passed, the excitement in the school grew. How high would Mortar's *Thinking Cap* be when he left for home?

After the bell rang, Mrs. Hearsay called out, "OK, class, put on your *Thinking Caps*." But instead of gathering their books, the first-graders turned toward Mortar.

Mortar rose from his seat. He rubbed his neck and cracked his knuckles.

"My *Thinking Cap*?" he said casually. "Why yes, I think I'll go put on my *Thinking Cap*."

Under his classmates' eager stares, Mortar stepped into the coat closet. Minutes later, he emerged with a stack of books on his blue beanie that almost reached the classroom ceiling.

The class gasped.

"It can't be!" shouted a boy.

"Mortar's *Thinking Cap* is as tall as Mortar," called a girl.

"Mortar, you're *so* strong," said Flo.

With his legs wobbling like noodles, Mortar plodded toward classroom door.

"And I have more books at home that I'll carry to school tomorrow," he said.

"Careful, Mortar," said Mrs. Hearsay. "Don't trip."

Mortar had to pull on the tassel for his *Thinking Cap* to fit through the doorway. Sliding his feet forward, he shuffled into the hallway.

"Here he comes! There he is! Mighty Mortar!"

Students from other classes had lined the hall to wait for the first-grader. "Go, Mortar, go!" they chanted.

Slow step by slow step, Mortar moved down the hallway toward the school exit. The tassel swished across his face. The book stack swayed side to side. His knees quivered.

"You're the champ, Mortar!" said a fifth-grader, scratching his brown beanie.

A fourth-grader stood on a chair. She held a measuring tape up to the stack of books on Mortar's head.

"Five feet seven inches," she announced. "It's a new record! The tallest *Thinking Cap* in the world!"

"Go, Mortar, go!"

Mortar smiled and waved, but oh, how his necks and legs ached. The weight of the books was terrific. He

stumbled to the right and rocked to the left. Despite the pain, he had to make it out of the school.

"Mortar! Mortar! Mortar!"

Mortar reached the office and halted. Flo, from his class, stood there. A thin spiral notebook lay on her head. Giggling, she asked, "Mortar, can I walk home with you."

Mortar blushed. "Sh-sure. Do you want me to carry your book for you?"

Flo giggled some more. "Oh, Mortar, *my* notebook on top of the world's tallest *Thinking Cap*. That would be *so* cool."

The girl removed the notebook from her head and handed it to Mortar.

Mortar steadied himself and pulled the tassel. Taking careful aim, he flipped the notebook upward. It landed squarely on top of his *Thinking Cap*. But as it did, Mortar's knees buckled. The weight was too much. Mortar tipped forward, and the great tower on top of him tipped forward as well. The entire load crashed to the hallway floor.

A hush fell through the hall. The crowd of students stared at Mortar. He still wore the blue beanie. But attached to the beanie's crown was a square piece of wood. The tassel hung from the front corner of the square board. At once, it became clear. All day long, the first-grader had been balancing his books on this firm, flat platform.

A fifth-grader broke the silence. "Cheater!"

"Liar! Fraud!" others shouted.

"What a silly looking hat," said Flo.

At that moment, Mr. Knaprucker, the principal, stormed out of his office. He took one look at the books sprawled on the hallway floor and said, "That does it. One of these days, someone will get hurt by a falling *Thinking Cap*. I'm banning them from this school."

The principal returned to the office. He came out holding an odd-looking canvas bag with two straps attached to the back.

"From now on, all students will carry their books and school gear in one of these sacks I've invented," he said. "You strap it on your back. I'm naming it a *knapsack*."

So, that spelled the end of *Thinking Caps.* Although teachers still said, "Put on your *Thinking Caps*," it came to mean start loading your head with ideas. Students loaded their books in knapsacks instead.

As for Mortar, although his classmates forever thought of him as a cheater, his creation of attaching a square board to a beanie became a symbol of achievement. It was named a *mortarboard* and is still worn today. Visit any high school graduation and you'll see the graduates wearing mortarboards, complete with a tassel hanging to one side.

Graduates are proud to wear this funny-looking hat. It shows that for the past twelve years of school, they learned many things, read many books, and passed many tests. It shows that ever since first grade, they have been wearing their imaginary *Thinking Caps*.