

A E I O U sometimes Y

How Come Y is Only
Sometimes a Vowel?
by Douglas Evans

Six Teachers

In the early days of schools, when classrooms were few and blackboards were new, six teachers taught in a one-room school deep in an apple-tree woods.

Each morning, they hiked to school in single file, swinging their lunch pails. Tall Madame A led the way, bright and brisk. Elegant Madame E glided behind her with perfect posture. Skinny Madame I skipped along, humming a tune. Round and rosy Madame O came next, giggling with each merry step, while calm Madame U followed her with slow, steady strides.

As for wishy-washy Madame Y, she trailed behind them all... sometimes.

“How I love being a teacher!” said Madame A.

“Teaching, the beautiful profession,” sighed Madame E.

"Teaching is fun!" said Madame I, twirling, "Teaching is thrilling!"

“It's the most important job in the world!” giggled Madame O.

“I can't imagine doing anything else,” said Madame U. “Even on rainy Fridays.”

Madame Y shrugged and kicked a pebble.

“Teaching's...okay,” she muttered. “Sometimes.”

As you might have guessed, Madame Y wasn't popular with the others. She only sometimes helped clean the little school. She only sometimes took recess duty. Sometimes she dozed during staff meetings, and sometimes she didn't come to school at all.

“That teacher is a nuisance,” grumbled Madame A.

"We simply must do something about her wishy-washiness,” sniffed Miss E.



The School Day

School began each day at eight o'clock. After attendance, Madame A taught math. But since numbers greater than one hundred didn't exist yet, her lessons were short. Next came Madame E's social studies class. With most of the world still undiscovered, there wasn't much for her to teach either. Madame I's science lessons were even shorter. The world was so new that people knew very little about rocks, plants, and animals.

Madame O's music class, Madame U's art lesson, and Madame Y's P.E. period each lasted just ten minutes. At the time, only three musical notes were known, people knew how to draw only animals, and P.E. meant running around the school twice. Sometimes, Madame Y even skipped doing that.

As for reading, writing, and spelling, those subjects weren't taught at all. The reason was simple. There was no alphabet. Without letters, there were no words to write, no words to spell, and nothing to read. So, from ten in the morning until three in the afternoon, the children spent their school day playing in the apple tree woods.

The First Written Word

One day at lunch, the six teachers sat on a log to discuss the subject of subjects. Vowel, the school's tabby cat, named for her nonstop yowling, lay curled at their feet.

"Our students have too much free time," said Madame U.

"If we had more numbers," said Madame A, "I could teach longer multiplication problems."

“And if explorers could discover another continent or two, my social studies lessons would be longer,” added Madame E.

“Too much play time leads to trouble,” said Madame I.

“Sometimes,” said Madame Y.

“Yowl!” went Vowel, her tail twitching.

“What we need are new subjects to teach,” said Madame A.

She picked up a stick. The idea forming in her head would become one of the most important in education history.

She looked up at the sky, where the sun blazed bright.

“Sun,” she said. “That’s our word for the white circle moving across the sky.”

At that moment, a snake slithered out from under the log on which the teachers sat.

“*Sss*,” hissed the snake.

“*Sss*,” said Madame A. “That’s the first sound we hear in both snake and sun.”

With her stick, she drew the snake's windy shape in the dirt.



“So, suppose when we see this shape,” she said, “we say the sound...*Sss*.”

Madame Y shook her head. “Why would we want to do that?” she asked

Madame E took a slow sip from her teacup.

“Cup,” said Madame A. “The next sound in sun is *uh*, just like in cup.”

Beside the S in the dirt, she drew the shape of a cup.



"I still don't get it," said Madame I.

"Doodling is not allowed in my art class," said Madame U.

Just then, a ladybug zipped past.

"*Nnnnn!*" buzzed its wings.

After the S and U, Madame A drew the curve of the ladybug's back in the dust.



"*Nnn,*" she said. "And that's the sound a ladybug makes when it flies. So when we see this shape, we'll say...*nnn.*"

The other five teachers stared at her, puzzled.

"Madame A, why are you showing us these things?" asked Madame E.

"What does this have to do with teaching?" asked Madame I.

"*Sss, uh, and nnn,*" said Madame O. "Am I supposed to teach noisemaking for music class?"

Without a word, Madame A placed the tip of her stick under the S shape.

"Now say the sound each shape makes," she said. "Blend them as you go."



She moved her stick slowly beneath the three sounds.

The others followed. "*Sss...uuuh...nnn.*"

"Again," said Madame A. "This time smoother."

"*Sssuuunnn*," they said together.

"Yowl!" cried Vowel.

Madame A smiled. "And you've just read the very first written word...*sun*."

The six teachers stared at the word in the dirt.

Madame O laughed. "So we did!"

"But why can't we simply draw the sun to mean sun?" Madame Y asked.

"That would be much easier."

Madame A waved her stick. "Because those same sounds can be used to write *other* words. Watch this."

The teacher scratched out the S in the dirt. In its place, she drew the shape of her walking cane with a short line across the top.



"Suppose this shape makes the sound *fff*," she said. "So this word says *fff...uuh...nnn. Fun*."

Madame O laughed some more. "Like the fun the children have in the woods," she said.

"How fun!" said Madame I.

Madame E took a fan from her lunch pail and began fanning herself.

While she did, Madame A scratched out the U in the dirt and drew a new shape, one that looked like an apple with a worm crawling up its side.

a

“Suppose this shape makes the sound *ah*,” she said. “Then our third word is *fan*.”

The other teachers clapped with joy.

“Let me try one,” said Madame I.

She erased the *n* and drew a new shape. This one looked like the toy swords two boys were holding in a play-fight.

+

“That says *ttt*,” she said. “So this word is *fat*.”

“Bravo!” said Madame O. “Now we have six sounds.”

“And we can teach those sounds to our students,” said Madame A. “We’ll call the new subject *reading*.”

“We’ll also teach them how to write the sounds,” said Madame E. “That subject will be *writing*.”

“And students must know which sounds make each word,” added Madame I. “We’ll call that *spelling*.”

“Reading, writing, and spelling,” said Madame O. “Our school day is filling up fast.”

“Yahoo!” cried Madame U. “Aren’t we brilliant teachers?”

“Sometimes,” said Madame Y.

“Yowl!” cried the cat.

The Alphabet

A week later, the six teachers again sat on the log, eating lunch. Vowel had climbed up a nearby apple tree.

“Teaching the letters *s, u, n, f, a,* and *t* is going well,” said Madame A.

“But there are simply not enough words to read that use those letters,” said Madame E.

“Or to write and spell,” added Madame I.

“What we need,” said Madame O, “is more letters.”

As the teacher chattered, an old yellow dog wandered into the yard. It began sniffing the log.

Madame U picked up the drawing stick. “I know three new sounds we can teach,” she said.

In the dirt, she drew a shape that looked like a child’s ball and bat.

d

“This one says *duh*,” she said.

Next, she drew a simple round shape like the hole in the log.

o

“And this one says *ah*.”

Finally, she sketched Vowel crouched in the apple tree, her tail dangling down.

g

"This sound says *guh*," said Madame U. "So what do we have?"

d-o-g

"*Duh...ahh...guh!*" the other teachers chanted. "Dog!"

"Ruff! Ruff!" barked the dog.

"Yowl," cried the cat from the branch above.

"Making up letters is simply thrilling," said Madame E. "Let me try one!"

She scratched out the *duh* sound and replaced it with a straight line, like the trunk of a tree.

l

"This one will say *lll*," she said.

"*Lll...ahh...guh*," said the others. "Log!"

They all roared with laughter.

"And a backward *duh* sound can say *buh*," added Madame E. "Now we can write *bog*, *bag*, and *bug*."

b

“And why not add an *ih* sound,” said Madame I.

She drew a short pole in the dirt.



“Now we can write words like *big*, *bit*, and *dig*.”

By the end of that legendary lunch period, Madame A, Madame E, Madame I, Madame O, and Madame U had created twenty-five letters. They had also filled a notebook with hundreds of new words.

As for Madame Y, sometimes she played tag with the children, and sometimes she took a nap. The last letter the teachers drew was Z, the very sound Madame Y made as she dozed off beneath the apple tree.

Zzz...

* * *

When the children arrived at school the next morning, they were delighted to see twenty-five cards thumbtacked above the blackboard:

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Later, they read words made from the sounds. They even wrote the world’s very first sentence:

Fat pig sat in mud.

Madame A, E, I, O, and U were so proud of their twenty-five letters, they named each of them. They gave five of the letters their own names: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*.

That afternoon, a boy named Albert Fibet became the first student to recite

all twenty-five letters without peeking at the cards. To help himself remember, he'd made up a simple song. After that, the row of letters was called the *alfibet*, and Albert's catchy became *The Alfibet Song*.

Children still sing it today.

The Vowels

One morning, while walking to school through the apple tree woods, Madame A said. "Teaching the alfibet is a big hit with the children!"

"Twenty-five letters, twenty-five sounds," said Madame E. "Simply marvelous!"

Madame I did a quick hopscotch step. "Adding the subjects of reading, writing, and spelling fills up the day quite nicely," she said

"Ho ho!" laughed Madame O. "I even invented a game called a *spelling bee* to add some fun to the afternoon."

"And ending lessons at three o'clock feels just right," said Madame U.

"Sometimes," Madame Y grumbled.

The teachers walked a little farther before Madame E said, "Yesterday, one of my students stumped me. She asked how to spell the word *me*."

"*Me*?" the others said.

"Exactly," Madame E said. "And since none of our twenty-five letters says *ee*, I had to think fast. I simply told her the most common letter, the letter E, has two sounds. It can say *eh*, and it can also say *ee*, just like my name. So me is spelled *M-E*."

Madame A stopped in her tracks. "Well then, if your letter can have two

sounds, so can mine," she said. "The letter A will say both *a* and my name...*ay*."

"And the letter I will say both *ih* and *eye*," added Madame I. "That's how we'll spell the word I. Just say my name...I"

"So, O will say both *ah* and my name *oh*," said Miss O with a grin.

"And if all your letters get two sounds, mine can, too," said Madame U. "*Uh* and *you*. That's how we'll also spell the word you. Just the letter U. See? Spelling can be easy."

"Sometimes," muttered Madame Y.

By the time the teachers reached the school, it was settled. The five letters named after the five teachers--A, E, I, O, and U-- would each have two sounds, a short one and a long one that said their own names. These special letters were called vowels, named, of course, after the school's famous yowling cat.

Sometimes Y

Many happy weeks of teaching passed. But one day, as the six teachers again ate lunch on the log, Madame Y pulled a chicken wishbone from her lunch pail.

"Sometimes I wish I had a letter named after me," she said. "It can look like this bone."

Y

The other teachers frowned.

"Why should you get a letter?" asked Madame A.

"You simply haven't earned one," said Madame E.

"You only *sometimes* teach reading, writing, and spelling," said Madame I.

"You're lazy and wishy-washy," added Madame O.

"Besides, there's no room above the blackboard for another letter card," said Madame U.

Madame Y shrugged. "Sometimes a letter Y might come in handy," she said. "It could say *eye* like in *try*, *sky*, or *my*. Or it could say *ee* like in *candy*, *happy*, and *wiggly*."

Madame A, Madame E, Madame I, Madame O, and Madame U huddled at the end of the log. After some whispering, nodding, and a few raised eyebrows, they turned back to Madame Y.

"Okay," said Madame A. "We've agreed to add the letter Y to the alfabet."

"After all, you're one of us," said Madame E. "You're a teacher, and that's a good thing."

"Y can be the twenty-sixth letter..." said Madame I, "on one condition."

"Because you're so wishy-washy," said Madame O, "your letter will be wishy-washy, too."

"Sometimes Y will be a vowel like in *why*," said Madame U. "And sometimes Y will be just a regular letter, like in *yes*. But make no mistake...A, E, I, O, and U are the true vowels."

Madame Y gave another shrug. "Well, sometimes I like you...and sometimes I think the five of you are totally unfair."

* * *

After that, the six teachers had no trouble filling the school day with lessons.

The students built words using all twenty-six letters of the *alfibet*. They wrote wonderful stories with those words, and every Friday, they took a spelling test to prove they knew how to spell them.

To this day, the lunchtime deal with Madame Y is remembered in schools across the land. Visit any classroom and ask the students to name the vowels. If they've been paying attention to their teacher, they'll say:

“A, E, I, O, U ... and sometimes Y.”