A E I OU sometimes Y

How Come Y is Only Sometimes a Vowel?

Once upon the earliest of school times, six teachers taught in a one-room school deep in an apple-tree woods.

Each morning, they hiked to school, carrying lunch pails and knapsacks full of books. Miss A led the way followed by Miss E, Miss I, Miss O, and Miss U. Miss Y walked at the end… sometimes.

"How I love being a teacher!" Miss A would say.

"Teaching is the most beautiful job!" said Miss E.

"No job is more important than being a teacher!" sang Miss I.

"I could never imagine doing anything else!" said Miss O.

"My job brings me joy every day!" said Miss U.

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“Teaching is OK,” Miss Y said. “Sometimes.”

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

“Sometimes that teacher really gets on my nerves,” Miss A would say.

“Sometimes I wish she didn’t teach here at all,” added Miss E.

The school day began at eight o’clock. After attendance, Miss A taught math, but since numbers greater than one hundred didn't exist yet, the lessons were short. Next came Miss E’s social studies class, though with most of the world still undiscovered, there wasn't much to teach. Miss I’s science lessons were even shorter. The world was so new, scientists knew very little about rocks, plants, or animals.

Miss O’s music class, Miss U’s art lesson, and Miss Y’s PE period each lasted just ten minutes. At the time, only three musical notes were known, people could only draw animals, and PE mostly meant running around the school twice. No one knew what else to do.

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 the rest of the school day playing in the apple tree woods.

The First Written Word

During lunch one day, the six teachers discussed the subject of subjects. While they sat on a long log and watched the children play, Miss U said, “Our students have too much free time.”

“If we had more numbers we could do longer multiplication and division problems during math period,” said Miss A.

“If someone discovered another continent or two our social studies lessons could be longer,” said Miss E.

“Or if someone would name all the bugs and wildflowers in the woods my science lessons would stretch out a bit," said Miss I.

“Too much play time leads to trouble,” said Miss O.

“Sometimes,” said Miss Y.

Miss A took a bite of her apple. “What we really need are whole new subjects to teach.”

“But what could we teach that we're not already teaching,” Miss E asked.

Sometimes Miss Y had remarkable ideas. And the one she now had would become one of the most important ideas in the history of education.

She looked up at the sky, where the sun burned brightly.

"*Sun,*" she said. "That's our word for the white circle moving across the sky."

Just then, a snake slithered out from under the log where the teachers were sitting.

"*Sss,*" hissed the snake.

Miss Y picked up a stick and drew the snake's windy shape in the dirt.

"So suppose when we see this shape, we say the snake's sound…*Sss.*"

"Why would we want to do that, Miss Y?" asked Miss A.

"Sometimes you make no sense at all," said Miss E

Miss I took a sip from her teacup.

"*Cup,*" said Miss Y. "That has the same *uh* sound as the word *sun.*"

Next to the S in the dirt, she drew the shape of the cup.

"I still don't get it," said Miss O.

"I don't allow doodling in my art class," said Miss U.

At that moment, a ladybug buzzed by. "*Nnn!*"

buzzed its wings.

Miss Y drew the shape of the ladybug's back in the dust, after the S and U.

"*Nnn*," she said. "That's the sound a ladybug makes when it flies. So when we see this shape, we can say the same thing—*nnn*."

The other five teachers stared at her puzzled.

"Miss Y, why are showing us these things?" said Miss A.

"What does this have to do with teaching?" asked Miss E.

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

Miss Y placed the end of her stick under the S shape.

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

She moved her stick slowly under the sounds.

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

"Again," said Miss Y. "This time smoother."

"*Sssuuunnn*," they said together.

Miss Y smiled. “And you've just read the very first written word…*sun.*”

The six teachers stared at the word in the dirt.

“So we did," said Miss A.

"But why can’t we just draw the sun to mean *sun?*" Miss E asked.

"That would be much easier,” said Miss I.

Miss Y shook her head. “Because those same sounds can be used to write other words. Watch this.”

Now 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.

“This shape can make the sound *fff*," she said. "So this word says *fff…uuh…nnn. Fun."*

"*Fun*!" said Miss A.

"Like the fun the children are having as they play in the woods.” said Miss E.

"Fun! The second word ever written that we can read," said Miss I.

"How fun!" said Miss O.

Miss U took a fan from her lunch pail and began fanning herself.

While she did, Miss Y 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.

“If this shape makes the sound *ah*," she said. "then our third word is *fan.”*

"Hooray!" said Miss A

“Let me try one,” said Miss E.

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

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

“Bravo,” said Miss O. “Now we have six sounds.”

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

“We can also teach them how write the sounds,” said Miss E. “That subject will be *writing.*”

“And the student must know which sound to use spell each word,” added Miss I. “We'll call that *spelling.*”

“Our school day is filling up fast,” said Miss O.

“Yahoo!" said Miss U. "Aren't we brilliant teachers?”

“Sometimes,” said Miss Y.

The Alphibet

A week after the six teachers began teaching reading, writing, and spelling they gathered once again on the log for lunch.

"Teaching our students the letters *s, u, n, f, a,* and *t* is going well," said Miss A.

"But there aren't many words using those letters to read," said Miss E.

"Or to write and spell," added Miss I.

"What we need is more letters," said Miss O.

"Right, teaching the same old ones over and over gets boring," said Miss U.

"Sometimes," said Miss Y.

As the teacher talked, an old yellow dog wandered into the yard and began sniffing the log.

"I know three more sounds we need," said Miss A.

First, she drew a shape in dirt that looked like a ball followed by a bat the children were playing with.

d

"This will say *duh*," she said.

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

o

"And this will say *ah*."

Finally she drew a shape like the squirrel perched in a nearby tree, with his tail hanging down.

g

"This sound says *guh*," Miss A said. "So what do we have?"

She pointed to the three shapes:

dog

"*Duh..ahh…guh*!" the other teachers said. "*Dog*!"

"Ruff! Ruff!" went the dog.

"Yes sirree!" said Miss E. "Making up letters is a hoot. I'll have a try at one."

She scratched out the first sound in *dog* and replaced it with a straight line like the log they were sitting on.

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

"*Lll…ahh…guh,"* went the others. "*Log."*

"And a backward *duh* sound can say *buh*," added Miss U. "So now we can also write *bog*, *bag, and bug*."

b

"And why not add a *iii* sound," said Miss I.

She drew a short pole in the dirt.

I

“Now we can write big, bit, fit, fin, fig, sit, and dig,” she said.

“Ruff! Ruff!” the dog barked again.

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By the end of that historic lunch period, Miss A, Miss E, Miss I, Miss O, and Miss U had created twenty-five letters and had written hundreds of words in a notebook.

As for Miss Y, she sometimes played with the children, and sometimes she took a nap. The last letter the five teachers drew was Z, which was the sound she made when she dozed off…*zzz*.

“And that’s all the letters we will need,” said Miss A, as lunchtime ended.

“Here’s our longest word yet,” Miss E said.

Then she wrote in the dirt:

zigzag

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

abcdefghıjklmnopqrstuvwxz

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

Fat pıg swam ın pond.

Miss A, E, I, O and U gave names to the letters. For five of them, they simply used their own: *a, e, i, o, and u.*

That afternoon, a boy named Albert Fibet became the first student to recite all twenty-five letters without looking at the cards. He had made up a simple song to help him remember them.

From that day on, the row of letters was known as the *alfibet*, and the children, while playing in the apple tree woods, often sang his tune, *The Alfibet Song*.

It's a song still sung in schools to this very day.

The Vowels

One afternoon, while walking home through the apple tree words, Miss A said. “Teaching the *alfibet* is a big hit with the children!”

“Twenty-five letters, twenty-five sounds,” said Miss E. “That makes many many words to teach.”

“Adding the subjects of reading, writing, and spelling fills up the day nicely,” said Miss I.

“I even invented a game called a *spelling bee* to add a little fun to the afternoon,” said Miss O.

“Yes, three-thirty in the afternoon is just the right time to quit lessons for the day,” said Miss U.

“Sometimes,” said Miss Y.

The teachers walked a little farther before Miss E

said, “Today, one of my students stumped me. She asked how to spell the word *me*."

"*Me*?" the others said as one.

"Since none of the twenty-five letters says *ee*, I had to think fast," Miss E went on. "I told her that the most important letter, the letter--E--has two sounds. It can say *eh,* and it can also say the sound of my name—*ee*. So *me* is spelled *M-E*.”

Miss O stopped walking. “Not fair” she said. If your letter can have two sounds, then so can mine. The letter O will say both *ah* and my name *oh*.”

“And the letter I will say both *ih* and the sound of my name,” said Miss I “That’s how we can spell the word *I*. Just say my name…*I*”

“Well, if your letters get two sounds, then mine can too,” said Miss U. “*Uh and you*. That’s how we can spell the word you. Just a plain *U*. See how easy spelling can be.”

“Sometimes,” said Miss Y.

So it was decided, 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. These special letters were called *vowels*, named after the school’s endlessly howling cat, Vowel.

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Many happy weeks of teaching passed until one day

while the teachers were again eating lunch on the log, Miss Y found the chicken wishbone in her lunch pail. She held it up and said, “Sometimes I feel I should have a letter named after me.”

The other teachers frowned.

“Sometimes my letter can say *ee* and sometimes it can say my name,” Miss Y went on. “And it can look like this…like a wishbone.”

"Why should *you* get a letter?" asked Miss A. "Besides, there's not enough room above the blackboard for another one.”

"You don't deserve a letter," said Miss E. "You only sometimes help around this school."

“Sometimes you don’t even show up, and we have to teach your class,” said Miss I.

“And you sometimes napped while we made up most of the *alfibet*,” added Miss O.

“You’re lazy and wishy-washy,” said Miss U.

Miss Y scowled. “Maybe so. But sometimes having a letter Y would be useful, like in *try, sky*, or *my*. And it would come in handy for spelling words like *candy, happy,* and *softly*.”

Miss A, Miss E, Miss I, Miss O, and Miss U huddled at the end of the log. After whispering and nodding, they turned back toward Miss Y.

“Okay," said Miss A. "Since letters were your idea in

the first place, we've agreed to add the letter Y to our alfibet."

"Y can be the twenty-sixth letter," said Miss E. "But only on one condition."

"Since you're so wishy-washy," said Miss I. "your letter will be wishy-washy too.

"Sometimes Y will be a vowel like in the word *why*," said Miss O.

"And sometimes Y will be just a regular letter, like in *yes*," said Miss U.

Miss Y stomped her foot. "Well, sometimes I like you, and sometimes I think the five of you are completely unfair."

From that day on, the six teachers had no trouble filling the school day with lessons. The students kept building words with the twenty-six alfibet letters. They wrote stories using those words, and every Friday, they took a spelling test to prove they knew how to spell them.

To this day, the six teachers are remembered in schools across the land. Visit any classroom and ask a student to recite the vowel letters. If they had been paying attention in class, they'll say,

"A, E, I, O, U … and sometimes Y."