

Talking Leaves

By ReadWorks

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Can you imagine a world without a writing system for your language? It may be hard to picture it now, but in the year 1809, a man named Sequoyah lived in such a world. Sequoyah was a member of a Native American tribe, the Cherokee. The Cherokee people speak their own language, but for hundreds of years they did not have a system of writing. This meant that Cherokee business owners could not keep written records. Cherokee soldiers fighting far from home could not write letters to their families. Without a writing system, the Cherokee had no newspapers or books.

Sequoyah was probably born around the year 1770, though no one knows for sure. He lived with his mother in a small village in the mountains of Tennessee. He did not go to school. Instead, he helped his mother work in the garden and tend cattle.

Even though Sequoyah did not go to school, he was very smart. As an adult, Sequoyah taught himself how to make jewelry out of silver. He also became a blacksmith, using heat to shape metal into arrow points, knives, and shovels. He sold the things he made and became a well-known businessman in his town.

People came from all over to buy the beautiful objects Sequoyah made. Sometimes, English-speaking people came to his shop. Sequoyah noticed that these people had a special way of communicating with one another: they used marks on paper to record their thoughts and ideas. Sequoyah called these pieces of paper “talking leaves.” He began to wonder why people who spoke Cherokee did not have a way to write down their words.

In 1809, Sequoyah decided he would invent a way to write the Cherokee language. His friends and family thought he was crazy. They said that it could not be done. They said it was a waste of time. Many people believed the Cherokee language did not need to be written down. The Cherokee tribe had grown strong and powerful without the use of writing—why did they need it now? But Sequoyah did not listen. He was determined to give the Cherokee their own “talking leaves.”

Sequoyah set out to create a new writing system for the Cherokee language. At first Sequoyah tried to create a different symbol for every word in the Cherokee language—and there are thousands of words! He soon realized it would be too hard for people to remember so many symbols. Sequoyah came up with a new idea: he would make a picture to represent each syllable. After much hard work, Sequoyah had created 85 symbols, one for each syllable in the Cherokee language. His work was complete.

Now that Sequoyah had invented a way to write the Cherokee language, he needed to see if it worked. He helped his daughter Ayoka learn each symbol. Together they practiced saying words to each other and writing them down. Even though she was only 6 years old, Ayoka learned to read and write very quickly. Sequoyah’s invention was a success!

Sequoyah was excited to teach other Cherokee people how to read and write. He traveled from town to town offering to teach anyone who was interested. Sequoyah was disappointed to find that almost nobody wanted to learn to read or write. He had to come up with a new plan.

Sequoyah brought Ayoka with him to a nearby village and met with the local leaders. He told Ayoka to leave the room, then asked each person to say one word. He wrote all their words down and called Ayoka back into the room. When she read each word perfectly, the local leaders were convinced that it was possible to write their language. They decided to let Sequoyah teach reading and writing to the people of their village.

Before long, Sequoyah’s writing system had spread far and wide. Cherokee people living in all different parts of the country learned to read and write. They published books and newspapers. They wrote down speeches and laws. In 1825, Cherokee leaders made Sequoyah’s system the official written language of the Cherokee people. Sequoyah was given a medal in recognition for all his hard work.

To this day, Cherokee speakers still use Sequoyah’s writing system. In some parts of the United States, you can see street signs and billboards written in both English and Cherokee. Sequoyah will always be remembered for his important contribution to the Cherokee people.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did Sequoyah invent?

- A a writing system for the Cherokee language
- B a type of silver jewelry for Cherokee ceremonies
- C a new language for the Cherokee to speak
- D street signs and billboards in Cherokee and English

2. The effect of Sequoyah's meeting with the village leaders was that they allowed him to teach reading and writing to the people of their village. Before the meeting, almost no one was interested in learning Sequoyah's writing system. What caused the village leaders to change their minds?

- A Sequoyah travelled from town to town offering to teach people to read and write.
- B Sequoyah's daughter read the words the leaders said while she was out of the room.
- C Sequoyah created 85 symbols, one for each syllable in the Cherokee language.
- D Sequoyah helped his daughter Ayoka learn each symbol in Sequoyah's writing system.

3. At first, Sequoyah had a hard time getting people to use his writing system. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A "He traveled from town to town offering to teach anyone who was interested."
- B "When she read each word perfectly, the local leaders were convinced that it was possible to write their language."
- C "Sequoyah was disappointed to find that almost nobody wanted to learn to read or write."
- D "They decided to let Sequoyah teach reading and writing to the people of their village."

4. Read the following sentence: "The Cherokee tribe had grown strong and powerful without the use of writing—why did they need it now?"

Whose voice does this statement represent?

- A English-speaking people
- B Sequoyah's daughter
- C Sequoyah
- D many of the Cherokee

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A the life of a Cherokee man named Sequoyah
- B the invention of the Cherokee writing system
- C why the Cherokee did not have a writing system
- D how Sequoyah taught his daughter to write the Cherokee language

6. Read the following sentences: "Sequoyah set out to create a new writing system for the Cherokee language. At first Sequoyah tried to create a different **symbol** for every word in the Cherokee language—and there are thousands of words! He soon realized it would be too hard for people to remember so many symbols. Sequoyah came up with a new idea: he would make a picture to represent each syllable."

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**symbol**" mean?

- A a type of communication that uses hand gestures
- B a way of doing something that follows a set of rules
- C a shape or picture that is used to represent something
- D a sound that is used to represent something

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Sequoyah's friends and family told him that he was crazy to try to invent a Cherokee writing system, _____ he did not let that stop him from trying.

- A but
- B therefore
- C obviously
- D meanwhile

8. What did Sequoyah call "talking leaves"?

9. How did Sequoyah initially try to write the Cherokee language, and why did he abandon this idea?

10. Perseverance is the quality that allows a person to keep trying to do something, even though it is difficult. Explain how Sequoyah showed determination and perseverance while inventing a written language system for the Cherokee language. Support your answer using information from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 760

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- B a type of silver jewelry for Cherokee ceremonies
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- A Sequoyah travelled from town to town offering to teach people to read and write.
- B **Sequoyah's daughter read the words the leaders said while she was out of the room.**
- C Sequoyah created 85 symbols, one for each syllable in the Cherokee language.
- D Sequoyah helped his daughter Ayoka learn each symbol in Sequoyah's writing system.

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8. What did Sequoyah call "talking leaves"?

Suggested answer: Sequoyah called the pieces of paper that English-speaking people marked to record thoughts and ideas "talking leaves."

9. How did Sequoyah initially try to write the Cherokee language, and why did he abandon this idea?

Suggested answer: Sequoyah initially tried to create a different symbol for every word in the Cherokee language. He abandoned this idea because it would be too difficult for people to remember so many symbols.

10. Perseverance is the quality that allows a person to keep trying to do something, even though it is difficult. Explain how Sequoyah showed determination and perseverance while inventing a written language system for the Cherokee language. Support your answer using information from the passage.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. Students should give valid examples from the passage that show Sequoyah's determination and perseverance. Examples can include:

- Sequoyah did not give up on inventing Cherokee writing even when his family said he was crazy.
- Sequoyah came up with a second writing system when he realized that one symbol per word would be too difficult for people to remember.
- Sequoyah did not give up on teaching people to read and write when they initially turned him down.