

Humanities

Passage 5

*From How I Discovered Words: A Homemade Education by
Malcolm X*

It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon
starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education.

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to
express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote,
especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had
been the most articulate hustler out there—I had com-
manded attention when I said something. But now, trying to
write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even
functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I
would say it, something such as, "Look, daddy, let me pull
your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad—"

Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on
television, or those who read something I've said, will think
I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impres-
sion is due entirely to my prison studies. It had really begun
back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi first made me
feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken
charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emu-
late him. But every book I picked up had few sentences
which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the
words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just
skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little
idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk

Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.

I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying. In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks. I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary's first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind.

The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants. I was so fascinated that I went on—I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section

had filled a whole tablet—and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors—usually Ella and Reginald—and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

Questions

Question 1: It can be reasonably concluded from the passage that Malcolm X decides to give himself a homemade-education because

- A. there's little to do in prison
- B. he has lots of letters to write
- C. he wants to gain and hold people's attention
- D. he wants people to think he's well-educated

Question 2: Which of the following was not an obstacle to Malcolm's self-education?

- A. His handwriting was poor and laborious.
- B. The prison had no supplies for writing.

- C. He could only recognize a few words at first.
- D. He was amazed to discover how many words there were.

Question 3: When Malcolm describes the dictionary as a "miniature encyclopedia," he means that it

- A. contains pictures
- B. is organized in alphabetical order
- C. is a reference work
- D. provides information about society, politics, and history

Question 4: According to the author, the result of Malcolm's education has been to

- A. free him from self-imposed limitations
- B. free him from the drudgery of prison
- C. prepare him for a career when he gets out of prison
- D. give him a purpose in life

Question 5: Malcolm's method for study involves these steps:

- A. he writes out the meanings of words he doesn't know
- B. he copies a page from the dictionary, then reads it aloud
- C. he reviews the words with a fellow inmate
- D. he moves from topic to topic according to his mood

Question 6: Malcolm's time in prison passed quickly because of

- A. Ella and Reginald
- B. his correspondence
- C. Mr. Muhammad's teaching
- D. all of the above

Question 7: Bimbi was an important person in Malcolm's life because

- A. Malcolm envied his conversational skill
- B. Bimbi shared his dictionary with Malcolm
- C. Malcolm wanted to emulate him
- D. Bimbi spoke Chinese

Question 8: Malcolm's homemade education began when he

- A. understood the need to do legal research
- B. became frustrated by his inability to write letters
- C. had the opportunity to work in the prison library
- D. became embarrassed by not going beyond the eighth grade

Question 9: Malcolm requests a dictionary and tablets to learn new words and to

- A. improve his penmanship
- B. get a high school diploma
- C. read more rapidly
- D. see a picture of an aardvark

Question 10: To write in slang bothered Malcolm because

- A. he was compared unfavorably to Elijah Muhammad
- B. it meant that he wasn't even functional
- C. he wanted to be an articulate hustler
- D. the shizzle lost its nizzle

Answers

1. C 2. D 3. D 4. A 5. B 6. D 7. C 8. B 9. A 10. B

Commentary

In Question 1, notice how Malcolm refers to his prowess as a street hustler—he remembers how articulate he was and how easily he could “command attention.” But he realizes he can’t be as effective with street slang in his writing, and now must learn to be articulate in a new way if he still hopes to gain and hold people’s attention. In Question 3, you must not be fooled by whatever comparisons you might make between a dictionary and encyclopedia, but instead focus on what Malcolm seems to think is important. In the sentence before Malcolm mentions the term “miniature encyclopedia,” he describes how he used the dictionary to learn “about people and places and events from history.”

In Question 4, Malcolm’s education has no doubt had several benefits, but you must choose the best answer. The fact that Malcolm writes that he had never before been so truly free, while still in prison, indicates that he has overcome his own mental limitations. Questions 2 and 5 simply call for a close, careful reading of the passage.

Once you realize that two of the answer choices are correct, then you know the answer to Question 6 is choice D. Question 7 is trickier because A, B, and C are all true. But the correct answer is C. Bimbi’s importance was in that he motivated Malcolm to “emulate” him. If you’re observant, you noticed that Question 8 echoes Question 1. Pay attention as you go through the questions and you can save valuable time. The key to Question 9 is understanding why Malcolm would want a tablet. Penmanship is the only logical response (even if you hadn’t read the passage). Question 10 is straightforward. A close reading of the text makes answer B the obvious choice.