

Before You Read

from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Connect to the Autobiography

Think about a book you read that changed the way you see the world. What was the book? When did you read it?

Partner Talk With a partner, talk about a book that opened a new world for you. How did the book change the way you see life?

Build Background

This excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes a turning point in Malcolm X's life.

- Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska.
- Malcolm's father, the Reverend Earl Little, died when Malcolm was six years old. Malcolm went to live with his older half-sister in Boston. There, he became involved in petty crimes. He was jailed for robbery from 1946 to 1952.
- While in prison, he converted to the Muslim religion and became a member of the Nation of Islam, changing his name to Malcolm X.

Vocabulary

circulation (sur'kyə lā'shən) *n.* the sharing of printed materials, such as books and newspapers, among readers (p. 645). *Nobody could check out the library book until it was put into circulation.*

emphasis (em'fəsis) *n.* special weight or importance (p. 646). *Most librarians place an emphasis on the importance of reading.*

rehabilitation (rē'hə bil'ə tā'shən) *n.* the act of restoring to good health or useful activity (p. 646). *Because she had been very ill, Tanya's rehabilitation took many months.*

maximum (mak'sə məm) *n.* greatest possible amount or number (p. 646). *Our team did so well that we won the maximum number of prizes allowed under the rules of the contest.*

Meet the Authors



Malcolm X

Dedicated to Civil Rights

Devoted to attaining civil rights for African Americans, Malcolm X was a leader who instilled racial pride in African Americans. Malcolm X was born in 1925 and died in 1965, the year *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published.



Alex Haley

A Successful Collaboration

Alex Haley became a writer while serving in the U.S. Coast Guard. Haley and Malcolm X worked together to compose *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Malcolm X and Alex Haley, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u5.

Set Purposes for Reading

BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, why did Malcolm X work so hard to improve his ability to read and write? How did his positive actions help him become who he wanted to be?

Literary Element Author's Purpose

The **author's purpose** is the author's reason for writing. An author might write to entertain, to inform or explain, to persuade, or for a combination of these purposes. For example, an author might write an autobiography to share the story of his or her life. However, the author's purpose might also be to entertain readers with funny anecdotes or to persuade them to make changes in their own lives.

If you understand the author's intentions, you can better understand the text and form your own opinions about what you are reading. As you read, ask yourself, what ideas does the author express? What details does the author include? This will help you decide whether the author is trying to entertain, inform, explain, or persuade.

Reading Strategy Question

When you **question**, you ask yourself about what you are reading. You may ask questions about what you don't understand, or you may ask questions about whether certain information is important.

Asking questions will help you monitor your comprehension. When you ask questions, you can focus on specific ideas and reread for the information that you need to understand the text.

To generate questions, stop after every paragraph or two as you read. Ask yourself questions to make sure that you understand what you've read. Then reread to find the information that you need to answer the questions. Use a graphic organizer like the one below to keep track of your questions.

Passage from Text	Questions
"... to acquire some kind of a homemade education."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do the authors mean by "homemade"?• Who is going to teach him?••

Learning Objectives

For pages 640–647

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing author's purpose.

Reading: Questioning.

TRY IT

Question Suppose that you are meeting a friend at a school play. You arrive late and the play has started. What questions do you ask your friend to help you understand what is going on?

from The Autobiography of **MALCOLM X**

Malcolm X with Alex Haley

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.¹ In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler² out there—I had commanded 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,³ 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 impression is due entirely to my prison studies.



Malcolm X giving a speech in the early 1960s

Question What questions might you ask yourself about the kind of impression Malcolm X is making on others?

1 **Elijah Muhammad** (i lī'jə moo ham'əd) (1897–1975) was the leader of the Black Muslim movement in the United States.

2 By calling himself an **articulate hustler**, Malcolm X is saying that he had been a small-time criminal who could speak clearly and expressively.

3 To "**pull your coat about a cat**" is slang for "let me stop and tell you about a man."

It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Bimbi⁴ first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversations he was in, and I had tried to emulate⁵ 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

4 *Bimbi* is an inmate.

5 When you *emulate* someone, you try to become as good as or better than that person.

Author's Purpose Why do the authors write about Malcolm X's motivation to pursue learning?

Visual Vocabulary

An *aardvark* is a burrow-dwelling mammal that has a long, sticky tongue and powerful claws and feeds on ants and termites. It is native to southern and east-central Africa.



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 Reginald⁶—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.

The Norfolk Prison Colony's library was in the school building. A variety of classes was taught there by instructors who came from such places as Harvard and Boston universities. The weekly debates between inmate teams were also held in the school building. You would be astonished to know how worked up convict debaters and audiences would get over subjects like "Should Babies Be Fed Milk?"

Available on the prison library's shelves were books on just about every general subject. Much of the big private collection

Author's Purpose Why do the authors describe reading in such powerful, positive terms?

BQ **BIG Question**
How has reading changed Malcolm X's life?

⁶ *Ella* and *Reginald* are Malcolm X's sister and brother.

that Parkhurst⁷ had willed to the prison was still in crates and boxes in the back of the library—thousands of old books. Some of them looked ancient: covers faded, old-time parchment-looking binding. Parkhurst, I've mentioned, seemed to have been principally interested in history and religion. He had the money and the special interest to have a lot of books that you wouldn't have in general **circulation**. Any college library would have been lucky to get that collection.

Malcolm X with his daughter



⁷ **Parkhurst** was a wealthy man who was interested in the education and training of prisoners.

Vocabulary

circulation (sur' kyə lā' shən) *n.* the sharing of printed materials, such as books and newspapers, among readers

As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy **emphasis** on **rehabilitation**, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and *understand*.

I read more in my room than in the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted **maximum** number of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten P.M. I would be outraged with the "lights out." It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.⁸

Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when "lights out" came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approaching foot-steps, I jumped into bed and feigned⁹ sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes—until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets, I had slept less than that.

⁸ Something **engrossing** grabs and holds a person's attention.

⁹ A person who **feigned** sleep was awake but tried to look as if he or she were asleep.

Vocabulary

emphasis (em'fə.sis) *n.* special weight or importance

rehabilitation (rē'hə bil'ə tā'shən) *n.* the act of restoring to good health or useful activity

maximum (mak'sə.məm) *n.* greatest possible amount or number

Author's Purpose Why do the authors remind readers about Malcolm X's life on the streets?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. What motivates Malcolm X to improve his reading and writing skills? [Recall]
2. What does Malcolm X mean when he says "it was inevitable" that he began to read and understand books? Explain. [Interpret]
3. What can you infer about prison life from Malcolm X's description of inmates getting "worked up" over a debate? [Infer]
4. **Literary Element** Author's Purpose Why did the authors write about Malcolm X's life? Give details to support your answer. [Analyze]
5. **Reading Strategy** Question Review your graphic organizer. What questions could you ask about the books that Malcolm X read at the Norfolk Prison Colony? [Connect]
6. **BQ** BIG Question Think about the work Malcolm X did to master reading. How important was this action in changing his life? Explain. [Evaluate]

Vocabulary Practice

On a separate sheet of paper, write the vocabulary word that correctly completes each sentence.

circulation **emphasis**

rehabilitation **maximum**

1. Tired of students arriving late, Mrs. Thomas placed great _____ on getting to the library on time.
2. After she injured her knee, Mia required many weeks of _____.
3. You can't check out the book, because it was taken out of _____.
4. What is the _____ amount of time I should spend on homework?

Writing

Write a Letter Imagine that you have a younger friend, relative, or neighbor who is having trouble reading and has lost interest in learning to do so. Write a letter to persuade your friend that it is important and worthwhile to learn to read. What can he or she gain from reading? Include examples and persuasive techniques to make your argument more convincing.

TIP

Inferring

To answer question 3, you have to use your knowledge and clues from what you read to make a good guess. Here are some tips to help you infer.

- Start by finding the details in the excerpt describing inmates getting "worked up" over a debate.
- Read the description carefully, looking for clues to help you guess. Ask yourself, what were the inmates debating? Why did they get so "worked up"?
- Consider why inmates would get excited about a debate. What is missing from the inmates' lives?

FOLDABLES Study Organizer

Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.



Literature Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u5.

