

INTERACTIVE  
ENGLISH

LESSON 1.1

# An Experience With Language

PERSONAL  
ACADEMIC  
NOTEBOOK



ACADEMIC  
SYSTEMS

INTERACTIVE ENGLISH

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PERSONAL  
ACADEMIC  
NOTEBOOK



ACADEMIC  
SYSTEMS

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### LESSON 1.1

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## LESSON 1.1

# An Experience with Language



This chapter will help you explore and write about a personal experience you have had with language. Your experiences with language greatly

influence your identity. You will use these materials to supplement the writing you do online in **Explore**, **Revise**, **Edit**, and **Conclude**.

### EXPLORE

Experienced writers know that writing is easier when they first explore to discover what they

already know about a particular subject. The more deeply they consider a subject, the more they have to write about.

### QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

One way to explore your experiences with language is to consider questions such as the ones that follow. Take time to respond thoughtfully to each one and to any others that occur to you.

If you have not written your responses online, write them in the space provided below. When you read what you've written, you will see you have many ideas about the role language plays in your life.

♦ Who always listens to me? Who never listens?

♦ Who am I as a writer? As a reader? As a talker?

♦ What do I remember about how I used language when I was younger?

♦ Can memories of past experiences influence the present?

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT

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Experienced writers often think productively by keeping in mind the subject they will write about. To explore your ideas effectively, take a moment to consider the writing assignment.

Exploring your development as a user of language can help you understand the ways you use language today. To begin this exploration, think about some language events you remember, experiences that made a strong impression on you.

You may have very early memories of learning to talk or of learning to read or write, or you may remember being read to or reading to others. You almost certainly can remember moments when you used language to argue with your parents or confide in a friend. In the more recent past, you may recall using language to present reports in class, to negotiate with a boss, to write friends or relatives who live far away. All of these remembered experiences are language experiences—some positive and successful and pleasurable, others perhaps unpleasant or even painful to remember.

**Recall one particular language experience from your past. Write an essay in which you describe this experience in detail, and explain how it has affected you as a user of language.**

## READING TO EXPLORE

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One of the best ways to explore language experiences is by reading what other authors write about their language experiences. These readings

may help you recollect a memory about language, perhaps one you might not have thought worth writing down or one buried and, until now, forgotten.



**Know the Author.** Helen Keller (1880-1968) was born a healthy baby, but before she was two years old and just after she had begun to speak, she became ill with a “brain fever” that left her blind and deaf. She grew up wild and unruly until Anne Sullivan, who herself had been half-blind before surgery, became her teacher. When she grew up, Keller became a writer, a world traveler, and a lifelong advocate for the disabled. The following reading, taken from Keller’s autobiography, tells how she began to make the journey into the world of language. The story is also told in the play and film *The Miracle Worker*, by William Gibson.

**Prepare to Read.**

**Watch for** the way vivid descriptions and images help readers visualize an event.

**Your Reading Goal** is to respond to the language experience Keller describes.

**Prepare to Make Reading Notes.** As you read, quickly mark several sentences that impress you. Perhaps you will select one because you just “like it.” Another may confuse you. A third may remind you of an experience in your life. A chart for your reading notes follows this selection.

## MY MOST IMPORTANT DAY

*by Helen Keller*

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. 1

I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between the two lives which this day connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old. 2

On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother’s signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps. The afternoon sun penetrated the mass of honeysuckle that covered the porch, and fell on my upturned face. My fingers lingered almost unconsciously on the familiar leaves and blossoms which had just come forth to greet the sweet southern spring. I did not know what the future held of marvel or surprise for me. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks and a deep languor had succeeded this passionate struggle. 3

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before 4

my education began, only I was without compass and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was. "Light! Give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

I felt approaching footsteps. I stretched out my hand to one I supposed to be my mother. Someone took it, and I was caught up  
5 and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me.

The morning after my teacher came, she led me into her room and gave me a doll. The little blind children at the Perkins Institution had sent it, and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word "d-o-l-l." I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly,  
6 I was filled with childish pleasure and pride. Running downstairs to my mother, I held up my hand and made the letters for doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation. In the days that followed, I learned to spell a great many words without realizing it, among them pin, hat, cup and a few verbs like sit, stand, and walk. But my teacher had been with me several weeks before I understood that everything has a name.

One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is *mug* and "w-a-t-e-r" is *water*, but I persisted in confusing the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts  
7 and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no particular feeling of tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and the thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.



We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water, and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, and set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.



## Activity One: Reading Notes

Use the space below to write your responses to the sentences you marked. Copy each sentence into the column on the left. Then in the right column, explain why you marked it and what you thought about it.

As an example, here are reading notes done by one student. When you have finished making your reading notes, discuss them with a partner if possible.

Author Says	My Response
I stood there dumb, expectant.	Why would she call herself dumb? I would never call myself stupid. There's something funny about that word here. So I looked it up in the dictionary, and found out it means lacking ability to speak. Then I see that word is used only to describe animals or inanimate objects. I guess she felt like an animal or a thing, and wasn't calling herself "dumb"—as in stupid—after all.

Author Says

My Response

## Activity Two: An Experienced Reader's Thoughts While Reading

Experienced readers often begin the process of understanding what they read by noting their first reactions, but they also pay close attention to what the author emphasizes.

In the left column below, an experienced reader

describes her developing understanding of the Helen Keller selection. As you read this description, imagine you are hearing this reader think aloud as she reads. The right column tells you what the reader did. These are reading strategies you can use now and later.

As I read about "My Most Important Day," I notice Helen Keller starts with specifics: a particular day and a person's name and exactly how she feels. She is "filled with wonder" and then she tells why she feels this way—because of the "immeasurable contrast" between two lives. I don't exactly know what she means, so I try to connect it with important days that I have had...hmmm, maybe like the day my husband asked for a divorce: one day I was a wife, the next day I was a single mom. Whew! These were "immeasurable contrasts" for me. What kind of contrasts did she have? And then I read she was only 7. I feel for this child, and so I want to find out what's happening. She says she has been very angry and bitter and was now without energy. Why? Someone comes up to her, but how can she be confused about whether or not it was her mother? Now I

### **Notice the focus on the title and setting.**

This reader carefully read the first paragraph or two to set the scene in her mind.

This reader actively connected her own memory of an "important day" with Keller's experience. **Finding a personal connection to the author's story can help you understand a piece of writing.**

remember—she is both deaf and blind. So that's her first meeting with Anne Sullivan. What is it like to be hugged by someone you can't see or hear? What's going to happen between these two? I read a little faster now, skipping some words to get down to the part where she tells what happens. Okay she gets a doll, and she learns many words. She calls herself learning them “monkey like,” and the word surprises me, I am not sure I understand what she means. But I go on, because I know this paragraph is not going to tell me what happened.

Ahhh by paragraph 7, I see it. She starts, “One day.” Now I slow down. Oh, I see. The doll is important. She breaks it, a handmade toy (I go back and check quickly to be sure I have it right—yes handmade by blind children for her) and worse, she feels delighted, no remorse. This does not sound like how I want a 7-year-old to be. Now what?

Helen Keller and Miss Sullivan walk down the path, and the smell of honeysuckle reminds me again she is deaf and blind. Smell and sun—those are the only ways she knows

This reader skimmed some parts and read more carefully when she found the part she was looking for. **Skip and skim as you hunt for parts of the essay that answer your questions.**

This reader recalled what she knew about how seven-year-olds should (or do) behave to understand Keller's strange behavior. **Common sense gained from experience guides readers when characters act in unexpected ways.**

the world. I am shocked. What's going to happen? The feel of water on her hand, and the link between that cool wetness and a fingerspelled word in her hand. Contact!! Language and sensation. Her two worlds.

The story ends well: she goes out "eager to learn." It sounds almost simple, but it can't have been! I wish I knew more about how it happened. And then I feel sad for her when she tries to put the doll together again. Now I see a new importance in that doll: when she broke it, she didn't care. But after she understood "w-a-t-e-r" she felt remorse. Those two parts of her life, the "immeasurable contrast."

Here the reader uses the details of Keller's description to remind herself about the character and to rev up her interest in what will happen. **Active reading helps readers concentrate.**

This reader connects all the important parts of the story and gains another meaning for the phrase "immeasurable contrast." **Reflect on what you have read when you reach the end of an essay.**

The experienced reader used several strategies to understand the essay.

- ◆ What do you understand about the reading now that you didn't before?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ◆ What strategies can you borrow?



## On Your Own: Reading Strategies to Use Now and Later

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One of the quickest ways to learn a new skill is to learn from others. Strengthen your reading by borrowing one or more reading strategies from the experienced reader.

1. Read the title and the first two paragraphs to set the scene in your mind.
2. Associate an event in your own life with the event described in the story.

3. Use your imagination to relate to the main character.

4. Notice words or phrases that are repeated several times, and reflect on their meaning when you finish the reading.

Read the next selection with a partner if possible. Discuss what you learned from trying this new reading strategy.



## READING SELECTION TWO

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**Know the Author.** Malcolm X (1925-1965) was born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska. He spent much of his boyhood in foster homes, and left school after the eighth grade. He became, as he says, an “articulate hustler” in the fast life of Harlem. After he was convicted of burglary, he went to prison. While there, he transformed his life, discovering the religion of Islam and the world of books. He was assassinated in 1965 while preparing to give one of the speeches for which he had become famous.

Malcolm X collaborated with Alex Haley to write *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. A film by the same name portrays Malcolm X's life. The follow-

ing selection focuses on some of Malcolm X's experiences while in prison.

### **Prepare to Read.**

**Watch for** the vivid description with which Malcolm X conveys how he “learned some words.”

**Your Reading Goal** is to respond to the language experiences Malcolm X describes.

**Prepare to Make Reading Notes.** As you read, quickly mark three sentences that stand out for you. A chart for your reading notes follows the reading selection.

## PRISON STUDIES

*by Malcolm X with Alex Haley*

1 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 commanded attention when I said some-  
2 thing. 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—"

3 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.

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 conversations he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences  
4 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  
5 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  
6 know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

7 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, 8  
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 9  
remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary 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 Bs. That was the way I started 10  
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. 11  
You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors...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 were taught there by instructors who came from such places as Harvard and Boston universities. The weekly 12  
debates between inmate teams were also held in the school building. You would be astonished to know how worked up convict