

Grade 3: Unit 2, Week 5 Being a Writer

Read Aloud: **Sequoyah: The Gift of Writing** by Justine Fontes

Wonderful Words: *assure, future, etch, isolate, contain*

Sequoyah: The Gift of Writing

Young Sequoyah

Some time around 1773, a Cherokee woman named Wuh-teh gave birth to a son named Sequoyah. No one knows the exact date of his birth, because the Cherokee did not keep written records.

Wuh-teh lived with her son in Taskigi, in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Sequoyah's father was a fur trader from Virginia who left Wuh-teh to raise her son alone. Young Sequoyah walked with a limp, but no one knows for sure how he got it.

A Cherokee boy hunted and fished with the men of his village. He played games that involved running, throwing, and shooting with a bow and arrow. Sequoyah knew he could never be the fastest runner or the best hunter. Still, he must have longed for some way to gain acceptance from his friends.

When Sequoyah was young, the United States was growing. Settlers were taking his nation's lands. They brought along such things as guns and books, which were unknown to the Native Americans.

The settlers and the Native Americans signed treaties. These assured the Native Americans that they would be able to stay on their lands. The Cherokee called these treaties "talking leaves" because they contained promises that blew away with the wind. Before long the Cherokee land would be gone.

The Cherokee worried about the nation's future. How could they hold onto their lands? Sequoyah worried too. What could be done about the “talking leaves”? He didn't have the answer then, but he would soon.

Sequoyah moved to a farm in Georgia and became a silversmith. He learned how to melt silver, and then mold it into jewelry and useful objects like buckles and spoons.

Silversmiths often etched their names on their work. One day someone asked Sequoyah to sign his work.

Sequoyah went to a Cherokee chief who showed Sequoyah how to write his name in English. It was then that Sequoyah decided to find a way to write in Cherokee.

He drew a picture for every word he knew. He filled piles of birch bark scrolls with his charcoal drawings.

Sequoyah's Gift

By this time Sequoyah had married and had children. His wife thought his work was foolish. She wanted him to work on their farm. She could not understand why he cared so much about the Cherokee language.

When the War of 1812 began, Sequoyah joined the U.S. Army. As a soldier, Sequoyah saw how useful writing could be. Soldiers wrote letters home to their families. They read maps, lists, and orders. Sequoyah wanted his people to be able to do the same.

When Sequoyah returned home, he found that his wife had burned all his scrolls. Now, she thought, he would have to work on the farm. Instead, Sequoyah built a cabin in the woods. He found more birch bark and began his work again.

Sequoyah knew that if he drew a picture for every word, it would take a long time. It would also take a long time for someone to learn. So he decided to create an alphabet based on the sounds in the Cherokee language. Putting the right sounds in the correct order could create any word.

Sequoyah tried to isolate every single sound that made up the Cherokee language. He spent more and more time at work in his cabin. His youngest child and only daughter, Ayoka, often joined him. She seemed to understand that her father's work was important.

In 1821, after twelve long years, Sequoyah finished the alphabet. He had created a symbol to stand for each sound in the Cherokee language. The alphabet contains 86 symbols. Sadly, only Ayoka shared his excitement.

Sequoyah knew that his people were in trouble. Cherokee chiefs had signed many treaties, but the Cherokee nation kept losing more land to gold seekers.

Sequoyah hoped his alphabet might help his nation communicate with the settlers. Would the Cherokee chiefs see the value of his gift? Would they understand how it could help them? Sequoyah took young Ayoka with him to a tribal council meeting to find out.

The Tribal Council

No one knows for sure what happened at the tribal council. However, many people think that Ayoka used her father's alphabet to write down what the chiefs said. Her father was in another room so he could not hear them.

Then Sequoyah came in and read aloud what Ayoka had written. The chiefs were pleased. Their spoken words had been turned into written words.

Sequoyah must have been pleased. It was the acceptance he had hoped for. Every chief wanted his smartest people to learn Sequoyah's alphabet. From 1821 to 1822, Sequoyah traveled to Cherokee towns to teach it. Many Cherokee learned to read and write in just two weeks.

Those who learned to read and write taught it to others. In this way, the language spread.

Elders wrote down all the legends, stories, songs, prayers, cures, and recipes they could recall. People wrote letters to one another. Scholars today study those letters to learn how the Cherokee lived.

assure

Define: When you **assure** someone, you give them a promise.

Example: Our teacher **assured** us that we would all get turns to visit the classroom library.

Ask: When have you been **assured** of good weather?

future

Define: The **future** is what is going to happen in the time that's coming up; the time after today.

Example: I'm going to get better grades in the **future**.

Ask: What are your plans for the **future** weekend?

etch

Define: To **etch** is to make a design on metal using a sharp object.

Example: My grandfather's watch has his name **etched** on the back.

Ask: How is a name that is **etched** different from a name written in pen?

isolate

Define: To **isolate** is to separate or to set apart.

Example: The sick boy was **isolated** in the clinic.

Ask: Why is it a good idea to **isolate** someone who has chicken pox?

contain

Define: To **contain** something is to hold it inside.

Example: My social studies report **contained** facts about the Everglades National Park.

Ask: What objects are **contained** in your backpack?