

From FLORENCE LANGUAG-E (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)  
(ed) Gary Goshgarian, Harter Collins  
1995

# Homemade Education\*

MALCOLM X

It was said that he was the only man in America who could start a race riot—or stop one. A one-time street hustler, Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little in 1925, rose to become one of the most articulate, fiery, and powerful leaders of black America during the 1960s. His writings and lectures taught African-Americans that by acting they could take control over their own destiny. Becoming an orthodox Muslim in 1964, Malcolm X began to distance himself from the teachings of black Muslims. The next year, while addressing a rally in Harlem, he was gunned down by rival members of the Black Muslim movement.

In 1946, Malcolm X was arrested for robbery. During the seven years he spent in prison, he discovered not only the religion of Islam, but also the world of language. Like Eudora Welty, he became obsessed with the written word and gravitated toward books, which he called "intellectual vitamins." The piece below is his account of coming to language—an inspiring glimpse of one man's struggle to find self-expression and the power of words. This excerpt comes from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), an absorbing personal narrative written with the assistance of novelist Alex Haley, author of the bestselling novel *Roots* (1976). In 1992, Spike Lee directed the popular movie, *Malcolm X*, based on the autobiography.

I've never been one for inaction. Everything I've ever felt strongly about, I've done something about. I guess that's why, unable to do anything else, I soon began writing to people I had known in the hustling world, such as Sammy the Pimp, John Hughes, the gambling house owner, the thief jumpsteady, and several dope peddlers. I wrote them all about Allah and Islam and Mr. Elijah Muhammad. I had no idea where most of them lived. I addressed their letters in care of the Harlem or Roxbury bars and clubs where I'd known them.

I never got a single reply. The average hustler and criminal was too uneducated to write a letter. I have known many slick sharp-looking hustlers, who would have you think they had an interest in Wall Street; privately, they would get someone else to read a letter if they received one. Besides, neither would I have replied to anyone writing me something as wild as "the white man is the devil."

\*Editor's title.

What certainly went on the Harlem and Roxbury wires was that Detroit Red was going crazy in str, or else he was trying some hype to shake up the warden's office.

During the years that I stayed in the Norfolk Prison Colony, never did any official directly say anything to me about those letters, although, of course, they all passed through the prison censorship. I'm sure, however, they monitored what I wrote to add to the files which every state and federal prison keeps on the conversion of Negro inmates by the teachings of Mr. Elijah Muhammad.

But at that time, I felt that the real reason was that the white man knew that he was the devil.

Later on, I even wrote to the Mayor of Boston, to the Governor of Massachusetts, and to Harry S. Truman. They never answered; they probably never even saw my letters. I handscratched to them how the white man's society was responsible for the black man's condition in this wilderness of North America. 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 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 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 conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate 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.

- 14 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.
- 15 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 "armadillo" 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.
- 16 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 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.
- 17 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 . . . 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.

### Topical Considerations

1. What exactly motivated Malcolm X to "get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words"?
2. Explain how Malcolm X could be the "most articulate hustler" on the street yet be unable to write simple English that was articulate and functional?
3. Why does the author compare the dictionary to a miniature encyclopedia?
4. In your own words summarize what Malcolm X meant when he said, "In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life." Can you in any way relate to his sense of freedom here? Have you ever had a similarly intense learning experience? If so, what was it like?
5. Would this essay be likely to inspire an illiterate person to learn to read? Why or why not?

6. How are Malcolm X and Eudora Welty's attitudes toward books, language, and learning similar? How are they different?
7. Having read this essay, do you feel that studying a dictionary is or is not an effective way to improve language skills?
8. What do you think Malcolm X hoped his readers would learn from this essay? How do you think he wanted them to respond?

### Rhetorical Considerations

1. What is the point of view in this selection? Is it consistent throughout? Is it effective? Why or why not?
2. Consider the introductory paragraph. What would you say is its function? Does it establish the thesis and controlling idea of the essay? Did it capture your attention? Did it make you want to read on? Explain.
3. What is your reaction to the example of slang at the end of paragraph 8? Is it effective? What does it add to the essay? What does it illustrate? What would be the effect of eliminating it?
4. What do you remember best about this piece? As best you can, explain the reasons.

### Writing Assignments

1. Think of situations where you lacked the language skills you needed to communicate effectively. It may have been a college interview, writing a letter to a friend, or expressing your ideas in class. Write an essay explaining the circumstance—how it made you feel and how you solved or coped with the problem. The tone of the piece could be serious, or dramatic, or even humorous.
2. Most students probably take literacy for granted. But imagine that you were illiterate for a brief period—that is, you could not read or write. Brainstorm and make an extensive list of all the things you could not do. Selecting one or more of those items, write a personal essay on what it is like to be illiterate. You might try adopting the point of view of an illiterate young parent or successful salesperson who had kept his or her illiteracy a secret.
3. Do a little research to find out what kinds of services your community offers to adults who want to learn to read. You might start by contacting Town Hall, the Department of Education, and reading clinics. After gathering information, write an essay outlining what is available and whether or not you feel such is adequate.
4. Read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as the basis for a research paper on his literacy experience. In particular, describe how Malcolm X's determination to read led him to become the powerful writer and orator he was.