

LESSON PLAN

TWO STORIES ABOUT THE LETTER X AND HOW IT GOT INTO THE ALPHABET

ABOUT THE STORIES

- These stories come from *Rootabaga Pigeons*, a book for children by American writer Carl Sandburg. Sandburg won three Pulitzer Prizes, two for his poetry and another for a history of President Abraham Lincoln. His most famous poems are about Chicago where he worked as a reporter for a time.
- *Rootabaga Pigeons* was published in 1923. The stories make use of repetition and nonsense words. These tales use a mixture of poetic words and language connected to rural parts of America. Such words include *oyster*, the name of an ocean animal; *ax*, a tool used to split wood and *timber*, wood that is used in building.

PREPARE TO LISTEN

Story 1: *Pig Wisps*

Get students' attention

- This can be done in the students' native language or English.
- Ask: "Did you ever forget something important? Give an example."
- Ask, "How do you feel when that happens?"

Connect to students' experiences

- Tell students, "Today we are reading a story about someone who had trouble remembering things. Can you give me an example of something it is important to remember?"
- Ask students, "When you want to remember something, what do you do?" Write some student ideas on the board to refer to after hearing the story.

Story 2: *Kiss Me*

Get students' attention

- Ask, "What kinds of cats do you know?" Help students name both household cats and larger cats in the wild.
- Ask, "Did you ever know someone who didn't like their name? What did they do about it?"

Connect to students' experiences

- Tell students, "Today we are reading a story about a young woman who doesn't like her name. After you hear the story maybe you can give an idea about a new name for her."
- Continue, "There are wild cats in the story we will read. Listen to see if you can tell how the people in the story feel about the cats."

WATCH AND REVIEW THE VIDEO

Check understanding with specific questions (add your own as necessary)

Story 1: *Pig Wisps*

- Ask, "What did the oyster king know?" (How to open oysters and take out the pearls)
- Ask, "Who is Shovel Ears and what is his problem?" (He is the oyster king's son and he could not take out the pearls.)
- Ask, "What did Pig Wisps have to remember?" (To get a soup bone at the butcher shop)
- Ask, "How did Pig Wisps help Shovel Ears?" (She taught him to cross his fingers to remember things.)

Story 2: *Kiss Me*

- Ask, "Who is Kiss Me's father?" (Her father is the lumber king.)
- Ask, "What did Kiss Me do when people called her by that name?" (She ran away.)
- Ask, "What was Kiss Me doing when she got lost?" (She was hunting wildcats.)
- Ask, "Who did the lumber king ask for help finding Kiss Me?" (Flax Eyes)

Talk more about the story

Story 1: *Pig Wisps*

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- Ask students what they liked, what made them laugh, what parts they want to read again.
- Ask, “What did the people who change the alphabet do?” (They added the letter X to the alphabet.”
- Ask: “Are there any stories like this in your own language?”

Talk more about the story

Story 2: *Kiss Me*

- Ask students what they liked, what made them laugh, what parts they want to read again.
- Ask, “How did Flax Eyes answer the lumber king’s call for help?”
- Ask, “What did the people who change the alphabet do at the wedding of Flax Eyes and Kiss me?” (They came with wildcat claws crossed just like the letter X.)

1. Writing activity

Set up/materials

- Have writing materials available for students to use. Begin by asking students to think about the shapes of the letters of the alphabet in English. Show a graphic of the alphabet as seen below.

How to

- Ask students to think of the shape of one letter and imagine a story about how that letter was added to the alphabet.
- Have students share their stories in a small group, then choose one to act out by reading parts of it aloud as the different characters.

Variation

- Ask students to write a story with a letter of the alphabet as the hero of the story. It can be a male, female, or non-gendered character.
- Have students read the story aloud in class or to a younger sibling. Place the students’ stories on the wall of the classroom or hallway or on a digital bulletin board to share with others in the school.

LETTER X STORIES

AMERICAN STORIES

Letters - Pronunciation

Aa	Bb	Cc	Dd	Ee	Ff
<i>ey</i>	<i>bee</i>	<i>see</i>	<i>dee</i>	<i>ee</i>	<i>ef</i>
Gg	Hh	Ii	Jj	Kk	Ll
<i>djee</i>	<i>eitch</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>jay</i>	<i>kay</i>	<i>el</i>
Mm	Nn	Oo	Pp	Qq	Rr
<i>em</i>	<i>en</i>	<i>oh</i>	<i>pee</i>	<i>kiew</i>	<i>ar</i>
Ss	Tt	Uu	Vv	Ww	Xx
<i>es</i>	<i>tee</i>	<i>yew</i>	<i>vee</i>	<i>dubbl-yew</i>	<i>ex</i>
Yy	Zz				
<i>wai</i>	<i>zee</i>				

2. Change the Story Ending

Set up/materials

- In the *Kiss Me* story, Kiss Me and Flax Eyes get married. Ask students to imagine that Kiss Me does not really need Flax Eyes to “save” her.

How to

- Have students form small groups. Hand out writing materials for one student in each group.
- Ask students to think about the difference in the main character from the beginning of the story – Kiss Me does not want anyone to kiss her – to the end of the story, when she marries Flax Eyes. Then ask students to imagine Kiss Me politely (or otherwise) refusing Flax Eyes’ offer to get married.
- Ask students to write a conversation between Flax Eyes and Kiss Me after he throws the wildcats away. They can start with:

Flax Eyes: The wildcats are gone. Will you marry me?

Kiss Me:

Variation

- Have students form pairs and take turns reading each their group’s conversations aloud.
- Have students write their own ending to the *Kiss Me* story or the *Pig Wisps* story.

CHECK UNDERSTANDING

1. Quiz

Give students the printed quiz at the end of this lesson guide, have them use the online quiz, or simply write the questions on the board. If you want to test only their listening skills, say the questions but do not write them.

Questions:

1. What problem did Shovel Ears have?
2. How did Pig Wisps help herself remember the soup bone?
3. Why did Kiss Me go out into the forest?
4. What did the lumber king ask Flax Eyes to do?

Answer key:

1. He forgot to take the pearls out of the oysters.
2. She crossed her fingers on the way to the butcher shop.
3. She wanted to hunt wildcats.
4. He asked Flax Eyes to save Kiss Me in a snowstorm.

QUIZ

1. Shovel ears could not
 to take out
the pearls.



2. Pig Wisps
her fingers.



3. Kiss Me went out to hunt
 in the forest.



4. The lumber king asked
Flax Eyes to
Kiss Me.



Word bank: save, remember,
wildcats, crossed

<https://learningenglish.voanews.com>

WORDS IN THIS STORY

alphabet – *n.* the letters of a language arranged in their usual order

pearl – *n.* a dense smooth shiny gem formed as an abnormal growth in the body of a mollusk usually around something foreign (such as a grain of sand) that enters its shell

braid – *n.* a length of cord, ribbon, or hair formed of three or more strands woven together

twist – *v.* to unite by winding one thread, strand, or wire around another

butcher shop – *n.* a store where meat is specially cut and sold

soup – *n.* a liquid food with a meat, fish, or vegetable stock as a base and often containing pieces of solid food

bump – *v.* to strike or knock with force or violence

ax – *n.* a tool used for cutting wood

knock – *v.* (with down) to push toward the ground; to push someone off their feet

lazy – *adj.* not willing to act or work; willing to move little or not at all

claw – *n.* a sharp usually slender and curved nail on the toe of an animal (as a cat or bird)

TWO STORIES ABOUT THE LETTER X

BY CARL SANDBURG

PIG WISPS

There was an oyster king far in the south who knew how to open oysters and pick out the pearls.

He grew rich and all kinds of money came rolling in on him because he was a great oyster opener and knew how to pick out the pearls.

The son of this oyster king was named Shovel Ears. And it was hard for him to remember.

“He knows how to open oysters, but he forgets to pick out the pearls,” said the father of Shovel Ears.

“He is learning to remember worse and worse and to forget better and better,” said the father of Shovel Ears.



Now in that same place was a little girl with two braids of hair twisted down her back, making a playful face and saying, “Here we come – where from?”

And her mother called her Pig Wisps.

Twice a week, Pig Wisps ran to the butcher shop for a soup bone. Before starting, she crossed her fingers and then the whole way to the butcher shop kept her fingers crossed.

If she saw playmates who asked her to a game like cross-tag or jackstones or all-around-the-mulberry-bush, she told them, “My fingers are crossed, and I am running to the butcher shop for a soup bone.”

One morning running to the butcher shop she bumped into a big, strange boy and knocked him flat on the sidewalk.

“Did you look where you were running?” she asked him.

“I forgot again,” said Shovel Ears. “I remember worse and worse. I forget better and better.”

“Cross your fingers like this,” said Pig Wisps, showing him how.

He ran to the butcher shop with her, watching her keep her fingers crossed until the butcher gave her the soup bone.

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“After I get it then the soup bone reminds me to go home with it,” she told him. “But until I get the soup bone, I keep my fingers crossed.”

Shovel Ears went to his father and began helping his father open oysters. Shovel Ears kept his fingers crossed to make him remember to pick out the pearls.

He picked a hundred buckets of pearls the first day and brought his father the longest slippery, shining rope of pearls ever seen in that oyster country.

“How do you do it?” his father asked.

“It is the crossed fingers—like this,” said Shovel Ears, crossing his fingers like the letter X. “This is the way to remember better and forget worse.”

It was then the oyster king went and told the people who change the alphabets just what happened.



When the people who change the alphabets heard, they decided to put in a new letter, the letter X, near the end of the alphabet, the sign of the crossed fingers.

On the day Pig Wisps and Shovel Ears were to marry, the people who change the alphabets all came to the ceremony with their fingers crossed.

Pig Wisps and Shovel Ears stood up at the ceremony. They crossed their fingers. They told each other they would remember their promises.

And Pig Wisps had two ropes of pearls twisted down her back, making a playful face and saying, “Here we come – where from?”

KISS ME

Many years ago, when pigs climbed chimneys and chased cats up into the trees, there was a lumber king who lived in a river city with many wildcats in the timber nearby.

The lumber king said, “I am losing my hair and my teeth, and I am tired of many things; my only joy is a daughter who is a dancing shaft of light on the ax handles of morning.”

She was quick and wild, the lumber king’s daughter. She had never kissed. Not her mother nor father nor any sweetheart ever. Proud she was. They called her Kiss Me.

She did not like that name, Kiss Me. They never called her that when she was listening. If she happened to be listening, they called her Find Me, Lose Me, Get Me. They never spoke of kisses because they knew she would run away.

But, when she was not listening, they asked, “Where is Kiss Me to-day?” Or they would say, “Every morning Kiss Me gets more beautiful—I wonder if she will ever get a kiss from a man good enough to kiss her.”

One day Kiss Me was lost. She went out on a horse with a gun to hunt wildcats in the forest. She was gone all day. All night she was out in a snowstorm with a horse and a gun hunting wildcats. The blowing snow was worse on the second day.

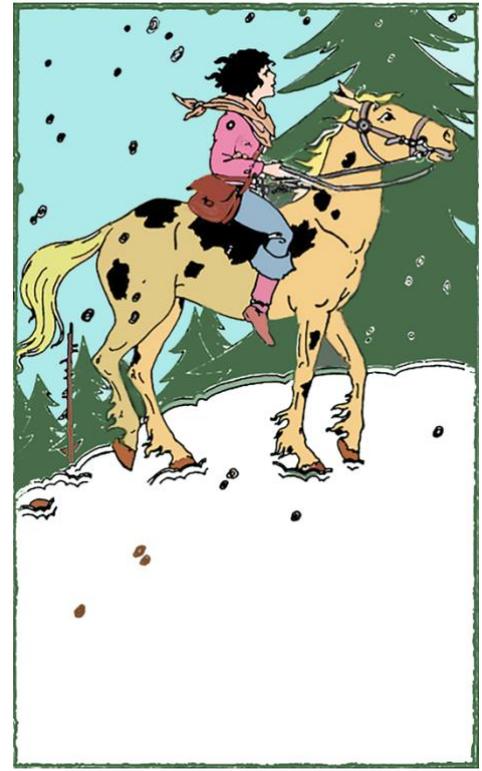
It was then the lumber king called in a long, loose, young man with a leather face and hay in his hair. The king said, “Flax Eyes, you are the laziest, most careless man in the river lumber country—go out in the snowstorm now, among the wildcats, where Kiss Me is fighting for her life—and save her.”

“I am the hero. I am the man who knows how. I am the man who has been waiting for this chance,” said Flax Eyes.

On a horse, with a gun, out into the snowstorm Flax Eyes rode that day. Far away he rode to where Kiss Me, the quick wild Kiss Me, was standing with her back against a big rock fighting off the wildcats.

In that country the snowstorms make the wildcats wilder—and Kiss Me was tired of shooting wildcats, tired of fighting in the snow, and almost ready to let the wildcats have her.

Then Flax Eyes came. The wildcats jumped at him, and he threw them off. More wildcats came, jumping straight at his face. He took hold of those wildcats by the necks and threw them over the big rock, up into the trees, away into the snow and the wind.



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At last, he took all the wildcats one by one and threw them so far, they could not return. He put Kiss Me on her horse, rode back to the lumber king and said lazy and careless, "This is us."

The lumber king saw the face of Flax Eyes was all covered with cross marks like the letter X. And the lumber king saw the wildcats had torn the shirt off Flax Eyes and on the skin of his chest, shoulders, arms, were the cross marks of the wildcats' claws, cross marks like the letter X.

So, the king went to the people who change the alphabets and they put the cross marks of the wildcats' claws, the letter X, near the end of the alphabet.

At the wedding of Kiss Me and Flax Eyes, the people who change the alphabets came with wildcat claws crossed just like the letter X.

Mario Ritter, Jr. adapted this public domain story by Carl Sandburg for VOA Learning English.