

INSTRUCTOR'S EDITION

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THINKING CRITICALLY

Eleventh Edition

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Thinking Passage

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X

Born May 19, 1925 as Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, the son of an activist Baptist preacher, Malcolm X saw racial injustice and violence from a very young age. His father, Earl Little, was outspoken in his support for Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey; as a result, the family was the target of harassment and was forced to move frequently. In 1931, Earl Little's body was found on the town's trolley tracks. Although the local police dismissed it as an accident, Earl Little's death was believed to have been a murder committed by white supremacists. Malcolm dropped out of high school after a teacher's contemptuous discouragement of his ambitions to become a lawyer. For the next several years, he moved between Boston and New York, becoming profitably involved in various criminal activities. After a conviction for burglary in Boston, he was sentenced to prison. There he began writing letters to former friends as well as to various government officials. His frustration in trying to express his ideas led him to a course of self-education, described in the following excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. After his release from prison, Malcolm converted to Islam and rose to prominence in the Nation of Islam. A pilgrimage that he made to Saudi Arabia led him to begin working toward healing and reconciliation for Americans of all races. Unfortunately, the enemies he had made and the fears he had provoked did not leave Malcolm X much time to share this message. Three assassins gunned him down as he spoke at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on February 15, 1965.

From The Autobiography of Malcolm X

by Malcolm X with Alex Haley

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

Source: From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, copyright © 1964 by Alex Haley and Malcolm X. Copyright © 1965 by Alex Haley and Betty Shabazz. Used by permission of Random House, Inc. and The Random House Group Ltd.

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. . . .

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. . . . That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. . . . 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. . . .

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

In describing how he worked toward the goals of becoming literate and knowledgeable, Malcolm X touches on a variety of important issues related to developing thinking and language abilities. We can analyze some of the issues raised by answering the following questions:

1. Malcolm X describes the process of how learning words from a dictionary sparked a hunger for learning that led to his being able to "pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying." Explain the importance of his hunger for knowledge in terms of how it impacted his life.
2. Malcolm X envied one of the other inmates, Bimbi, because his stock of knowledge enabled him to take charge of any conversation he was in. Explain why knowledge—and our ability to use it—leads to power in our dealings with others. Describe a situation from your own experience in which having

expert knowledge about a subject enabled you to influence the thinking of other people.

3. Malcolm X also states about pursuing his studies in prison that “up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.” Explain what you think he means by this statement.

An Organized Approach to Making Decisions

Identifying and reaching the goals in our lives involves making informed, intelligent decisions. Many of the decisions we make are sound and thoughtful, but we may also find that some of the decisions we make turn out poorly, undermining our efforts to achieve the things we most want in life. Many of our poor decisions involve relatively minor issues—for example, selecting an unappealing dish in a restaurant, agreeing to go out on a blind date, taking a course that does not meet our expectations. Although these decisions may result in unpleasant consequences, the discomfort is neither life-threatening nor long-lasting (although a disappointing course may seem to last forever!). However, there are many more significant decisions in our lives in which poor choices can result in considerably more damaging and far-reaching consequences. For example, one reason that the current divorce rate in the United States stands at approximately 50 percent (for first marriages) is the poor decisions people make before or after the vows “till death do us part.” Similarly, the fact that many employed adults wake up in the morning unhappy about going to their jobs, anxiously waiting for the end of the day and the conclusion of the week so they are free to do what they really want to do, suggests that somewhere along the line they made poor career decisions, or they felt trapped by circumstances they couldn’t control. Our jobs should be much more than a way to earn a paycheck—they should be vehicles for using our professional skills, opportunities for expressing our creative talents, stimulants to our personal growth and intellectual development, and experiences that provide us with feelings of fulfillment and self-esteem. In the final analysis, our careers are central elements of our lives and important dimensions of our life-portraits. Our career decision is one that we’d better try to get right!

An important part of becoming an educated thinker is learning to make effective decisions. Let’s explore the process of making effective decisions.



Thinking Activity 1.3

ANALYZING A PREVIOUS DECISION

1. Think back on an important decision that you made that turned out well, and describe the experience as specifically as possible.