In 2008, a man who lived in Detroit named Jerrold Foke, whom everyone called “Uncle Jerrold,” came up with an unusual idea. Foke was an amateur linguist, a person who studies words and language. Foke realized that for a long time, there had only been 26 letters in the alphabet. Foke thought it might be time for a new letter to be added. So, he consulted another alphabet, called the phonetic alphabet—which is like an alphabet for sounds—and found a letter he liked. It looks like an upside-down, lowercase “e” (“ə”) and is pronounced “uh,” like the noise you make when you’re confused. It is called the “schwa.”

Jerrold had a good reason for wanting to add a new letter to the alphabet. He thought that if English got a new letter, then people might be able to make new words. He reasoned that if people made new words, they might be able to communicate better. If they were able to communicate better, they might get along better. Plus, he thought, people might enjoy making new words. There are lots of things in the English language for which there is no word. Why not use the schwa to make words to describe these things?

Jerrold began telling everyone he knew about the schwa. He requested that friends help him make new words using the schwa. People would use the schwa to make an “uh” sound in the word. His friends thought this was a pretty good idea.

Jerrold lived in a hotel in downtown Detroit. Every day, when he went down to the lobby, someone he knew would tell him a new word he’d made. One person gave him the word “fundzalow” spelled with the schwa. The definition of “fundzalow” is to not have much money. If you were to use it in a sentence, you might say, “Hey, I’m sorry I can’t pay you back—my fundzalow.” Jerrold began working “fundzalow” into everyday conversations, hoping it would catch on.
In an effort to spread the schwa still farther, Jerrold began to spend some of his days standing in Campus Martius Plaza, in the center of town, with a sign that said “Have you heard about the schwa?” People would approach him and he would explain his quest. He liked to share some of the words he and his friends had made, and then invite these people to make their own schwa-based words. Some people did so enthusiastically, while others were more skeptical about the schwa’s potential. When people asked Jerrold where the schwa should go in the alphabet, he’d always say, “In the front.” When people asked him why, he’d say, “Because that’s where it belongs.”

At the same time, Uncle Jerrold was writing short stories. Many of the short stories included words that were made from the schwa. Jerrold would self-publish these stories, printing them out, and binding them with string into a small book. At the same time, he was trying to convince publishing houses to publish a novel that he had written. He reasoned that if the novel, which included schwa words, was published by a major publisher, the schwa would then, by default, be added to the English language. Since there is no authoritative organization that decides which letters are part of English and which aren’t, he figured that having a publisher publish the word was as close to an official acceptance as he was likely to get.

One day, a reporter wrote a story about Jerrold and the schwa for a local newspaper. Shortly after, several colleges in the area called Jerrold and asked him to come and talk about the schwa to some of their linguistics students. Jerrold was very pleased. While not all of the professors agreed the schwa should be part of the English alphabet—some thought there were quite enough letters already, thank you—the idea of someone adding a word intrigued them and they happily listened to Jerrold’s ideas. Jerrold was happy because the lectures gave him a wider audience to spread the schwa to. To his delight, some of these students have shared new schwa-based words with him.

Even five years after he had his idea, Jerrold was continuing to push for the schwa’s inclusion. While a publisher had not published his novel, the letter had been getting wider usage throughout the Detroit area, and Jerrold came to be considered the leading regional authority on the schwa and its uses. While he continued to work at his day job—as a sailor—he often thought of pursuing writing full-time.

Because of Jerrold’s work, people have been encouraged to make their own words, whether using the schwa or not. His goal of increasing communication between different people remains one that is greatly valued.
1. What is the schwa?

A a letter that Jerrold Foke wants to add to the English alphabet  
B a book that Jerrold Foke is trying to get published  
C a debate between two groups about language and the alphabet  
D a new word that someone introduces to a language and tries to spread

2. What does the passage describe?

A The passage describes a lecture that Jerrold gave to a college linguistics class.  
B The passage describes all the letters in the phonetic alphabet and what their sounds are.  
C The passage describes many different hotels and plazas found in the city of Detroit.  
D The passage describes the schwa and what someone has done to increase its use.

3. Jerrold has written and self-published stories using words with the schwa. He has spoken about the schwa in college classes. He has spent days standing in Campus Martius Plaza with a sign reading, “Have you heard about the schwa?”

What can be concluded from this information?

A Jerrold is more interested in being a sailor than in being a full-time writer.  
B Jerrold has done a lot to increase the use of the schwa.  
C Jerrold does not care about whether the schwa becomes widely used.  
D Some people do not think that the schwa should be added to the English alphabet.

4. How can people’s attitudes toward making the schwa part of the English alphabet be described?

A completely supportive  
B completely negative  
C completely excited  
D mixed

5. What is this passage mostly about?

A how Jerrold Foke got the nickname “Uncle Jerrold”  
B the short stories written by Jerrold Foke and the novel he is trying to get published  
C what a man in Detroit has done to spread the use of the schwa  
D the importance of improving communication between people
6. Read the following sentences: “He reasoned that if people made new words, they might be able to *communicate* better. If they were able to *communicate* better, they might get along better.”

What does the word “communicate” mean above?

A  give and receive information  
B  watch over and defend from danger  
C  provide money to someone  
D  lead a healthy life

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Jerrold wants to add a new letter to the English alphabet, ________ not everyone thinks a new letter is necessary.

A  therefore  
B  but  
C  so  
D  soon

8. What sound does the schwa make?

______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________
9. What is the “good reason” Jerrold had for wanting to add a new letter to the alphabet?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

10. Should the schwa become part of the English alphabet? Explain why or why not, using evidence from the passage.

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1040

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- A therefore
- B but
- C so
- D soon

8. What sound does the schwa make?

**Suggested answer:** The schwa makes an “uh” sound.

9. What is the “good reason” Jerrold had for wanting to add a new letter to the alphabet?

**Suggested answer:** The “good reason” is that a new letter might allow people to communicate better.

10. Should the schwa become part of the English alphabet? Explain why or why not, using evidence from the passage.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by evidence from the passage. Students may agree with Jerrold that the schwa should be added to the English alphabet because it would allow for the creation of new words and better communication. On the other hand, students may argue against adding the schwa to the English alphabet. They may side with the linguistics professors who believe that the English alphabet already has enough letters, and point out that new words can be created without new letters.