

Young Portrait Explorers: Sequoyah



Learning Objective: Learn about Sequoyah (c. 1770 – 1843), creator of the Cherokee **syllabary** (symbols used like an alphabet), and practice your writing skills.

Portrait Discussion:

Look at the portrait of Sequoyah. Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the painting to the bottom.

Objects: Notice the objects in this portrait. Can you spot the following: a feather pen, an **inkwell** (small jar used to hold ink for writing), a pipe, a medal, and something with writing on it? What clues might these objects provide about Sequoyah's life?

Can you read the writing Sequoyah presents? *Some of the symbols might look familiar, but not all. This is the Cherokee **syllabary** – the symbols Sequoyah created to form a written version of the Cherokee language. Each symbol represents a sound or syllable. Just like the letters in an alphabet, the symbols can be combined to form words. The Cherokee **Nation** (a North American Indian people or community) has a rich tradition of storytelling but did not use a written language until the 1800s, when Sequoyah introduced his syllabary. Soon after, Cherokee history, traditions, and laws were put down in writing.*

Pose: Do you think Sequoyah is sitting or standing? Can you try posing like he does? Pay attention to what he is doing with his hands – they help us to understand his story. With one hand, he holds the syllabary. With the other hand, he points at it. We might expect Sequoyah to be reading, but notice how his eyes look out from the painting. He is showing us his creation and maybe even teaching us to read it.

As you pose like Sequoyah, imagine yourself in his place. He spent many years creating his syllabary, and then he taught it to others. He wanted everyone to be able to read and write in Cherokee. What words do you think he might have used to teach? Why do you think **literacy** (the ability to read and write) was so important to Sequoyah? Do you know how to read and write? What kind of things do you like to read? What do you write?

Historical Context: *It took Sequoyah twelve years to create the Cherokee syllabary. At first, his friends and family did not believe in his project. But he did not get discouraged and eventually developed a set of 86 symbols. His work with young students, including his six-year-old daughter, convinced Cherokee leaders to adopt the written language in 1825. Within a few years, Cherokee laws, books, and even a newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, had been published using Sequoyah's syllabary.*

Related Children's Book:

Sequoyah: The Cherokee Man Who Gave His People Writing by James Rumford

Activity: Write in Cherokee

Materials:

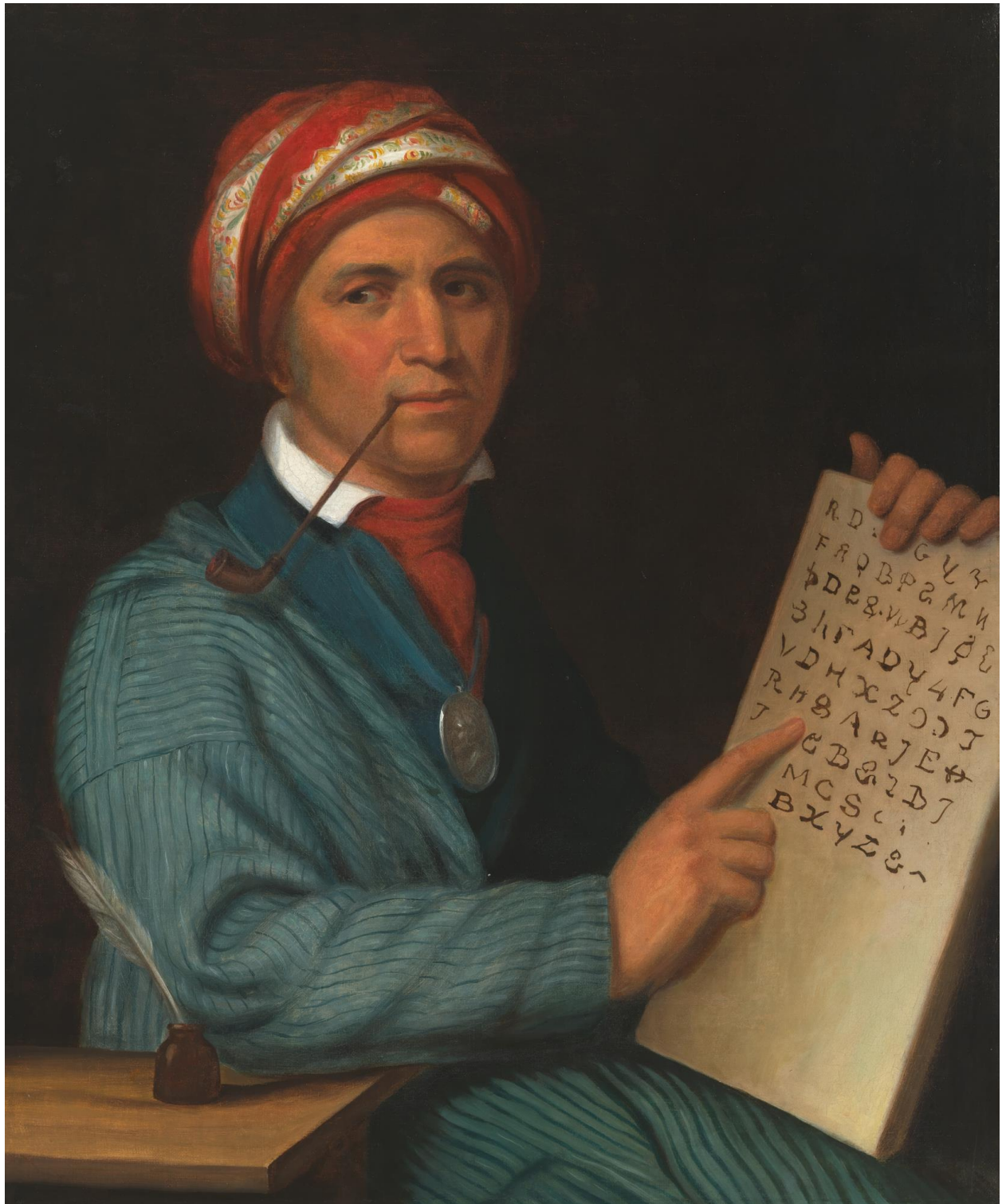
Pen or pencil

Paper

Copy of the Cherokee syllabary (below)

Instruction:

- Beginner activity: Practice writing or tracing a few symbols from the syllabary.
- Advanced activity: Write your name in Cherokee. Not all English sounds exist in Cherokee, so pick similar sounds if needed.



Sequoyah by Henry Inman, after Charles Bird King, oil on canvas, c. 1830.
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Find the portrait on our website, here: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.79.174

CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

D _a	R _e	T _i	Ꭰ _o	Ꭱ _u	i _v
Ꭶ _{ga} Ꭷ _{ka}	Ꭸ _{ge}	Ꭹ _{gi}	Ꭺ _{go}	Ꭻ _{gu}	Ꭼ _{gv}
Ꭽ _{ha}	Ꭾ _{he}	Ꭿ _{hi}	Ꮀ _{ho}	Ꮁ _{hu}	Ꮂ _{hv}
Ꮇ _{la}	Ꮊ _{le}	Ꮋ _{li}	Ꮌ _{lo}	Ꮍ _{lu}	Ꮎ _{lv}
Ꮏ _{ma}	Ꮌ _{me}	Ꮎ _{mi}	Ꮏ _{mo}	Ꮐ _{mu}	Ꮑ _{mv}
Ꮒ _{na} Ꮓ _{hna} Ꮔ _{nah}	Ꮖ _{ne}	Ꮗ _{ni}	Ꮘ _{no}	Ꮙ _{nu}	Ꮚ _{nv}
Ꮝ _{qua}	Ꮛ _{que}	Ꮜ _{qui}	Ꮝ _{quo}	Ꮞ _{quu}	Ꮟ _{quv}
Ꮠ _{sa} Ꮡ _s	Ꮤ _{se}	Ꮥ _{si}	Ꮦ _{so}	Ꮧ _{su}	Ꮨ _{sv}
Ꮢ _{da} Ꮣ _{ta}	Ꮦ _{de} Ꮧ _{te}	Ꮩ _{di} Ꮪ _{ti}	Ꮫ _{do}	Ꮬ _{du}	Ꮭ _{dv}
Ꮮ _{dla} Ꮯ _{tla}	Ꮯ _{tle}	Ꮰ _{tli}	Ꮱ _{tlo}	Ꮲ _{tlu}	Ꮳ _{tlv}
Ꮳ _{tla}	Ꮴ _{tse}	Ꮵ _{tli}	Ꮶ _{tso}	Ꮷ _{tsu}	Ꮸ _{tsv}
Ꮹ _{wa}	Ꮺ _{we}	Ꮻ _{wi}	Ꮼ _{wo}	Ꮽ _{wu}	Ꮾ _{wv}
Ꮿ _{ya}	Ᏸ _{ye}	Ᏹ _{yi}	Ᏺ _{yo}	Ᏻ _{yu}	Ᏼ _{yv}

SOUNDS REPRESENTED BY VOWELS

a, as a in father, or short as a in rival
e, as a in plate, or short as e in met
i, as i in pique, or short as i in pit

o, as o in note, approaching aw in law
u, as oo in fool, or short as u in pull
v, as u in but, nasalized

CONSONANT SOUNDS

'g' is nearly as in English, but approaching 'k'. 'd' nearly as in English, but approaching to t. 'h,' 'k,' 'l,' 'm,' 'n,' 'q,' 's,' 't,' 'w,' and 'y' as in English. Syllables beginning with 'g' except 'ga' have sometimes the power of 'k.' 'go,' 'du,' and 'dv' are sometimes sounded 'to,' 'tu,' and 'tv,' and syllables written with 'tl' except 'tla' sometimes vary to 'dl.'

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