Although many people today are familiar with Webster’s Dictionary, not everyone knows about the person—Noah Webster—who first wrote American dictionaries. This selection describes Webster’s work. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

**Noah Webster:**

**The Word Watcher**

*by Bernard Weiss*

**The Schoolmaster to America**

The next time you use a dictionary, you may notice the name *Webster* on the cover. Noah Webster was the man who wrote the first American dictionary. He also wrote textbooks for American children. Because of this, Noah became known as the “schoolmaster to America.”

Noah Webster was born in 1758 and died in 1843. As a boy, he lived on a small farm in the colony of Connecticut. There Noah went to the village school. When he was sixteen, he entered Yale College. At this time the colonies were getting impatient with their treatment by England. Noah and his friends held military drills so that they would be ready to fight if they had to. (Once, George Washington stopped at Yale to observe the young men in training.) Before Noah was graduated, he served as a volunteer in the American Revolution. After the Revolution he went back to finish college.

After leaving college, Noah began teaching. He loved to teach and was always eager to find better ways of helping children learn. He thought quite a lot about spelling and pronunciation; it seemed to him that the old rules and the old books should not be used. In his opinion, the new nation, which had just broken away from England, should have its own language and its own books. A properly written spelling book, he thought, could do more to spread the American language across the country than any other kind of book. It should help people learn the letters in the alphabet before they learned how to read. It should show the pronunciation people used daily, and it should give the spelling of words that reflected the way they were pronounced.

Finally Noah pulled all his ideas together, and in 1783 he published his speller, which soon became famous. It had a thin blue wrapper and was called *The American Spelling Book* or the *Blue-Backed Speller*. Included in it were abbreviations and the names of cities and countries. Later Noah added pictures and fables to the speller.

Through such stories, Noah tried to give advice to boys and girls. He stressed manners, good habits, and success.

Even Noah was surprised at the welcome people gave his speller. It wasn’t long before the book could be found in homes and schools all over America. People who could not get copies of it were disappointed.

Because of the speller, spelling bees became very popular. They were often held in schoolrooms and were attended by young and old alike. Schools would compete with each other. Or people often had them just for fun or to pass time. Sometimes a whole town might be so interested in a bee that everyone would stay up far into the night.

Many of Noah Webster’s ideas about spelling and syllabication are still used. Words like *cluster*, *habit*, and *nation* are now broken into syllables like this: *clus-ter*, *hab-it*, and *na-tion*. In Webster’s time, these words were broken in this way: *clu-ster*, *ha-bit*, *na-ti-on*. Webster said that it would be easier to spell and pronounce words if words were divided as closely as possible to the way they were pronounced.
Webster also tried to take out extra letters when they seemed pointless. He took out the u from such words as honor and favor. Today the English still spell these words with a u: honour, favour. He also removed a letter from the words music and logic, which had been spelled musick and logick.

After Noah published his speller, he wrote other books. One of them was a reader that gave the history and described the geography of the American nation. The reader also contained stories and gave boys and girls advice to help them study and read better.

The Dictionaries

Noah Webster loved to work with words. He realized that American English and British English were different, and he wanted to write a dictionary of American English. His great knowledge of many subjects enabled him to write accurate definitions. For example, he knew much about medicine and law. His knowledge of foreign languages helped him find the sources of English words. Among the languages he knew were German, Old English, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Hebrew, and Arabic. By the end of his life, he had mastered twenty alphabets and twenty languages.

But Noah Webster had traits more important than his interest in words and his knowledge of many subjects. He had patience and determination. He continued his work even though people disagreed with him. At first he thought the job would take from three to five years, but he did not actually finish his work until about twenty years later! During that time he wrote three dictionaries. He completed and published the third and largest one in 1828.

Noah labored hard to complete his third dictionary. Finally the day came when his huge task was about to be completed. His own words tell how he felt:

When I had come to the last word, I was seized with a trembling, which made it somewhat difficult to hold my pen steady for writing. The cause seems to have been the thought that I was so near the end of my labors. But I summoned strength to finish the last word, and then walking about the room a few minutes, I recovered.

Noah Webster’s work gave America the first dictionaries of American English. He is thought of as our lexicographer, or dictionary author. His word histories, his careful definitions, and his remarks about rules for spelling and for pronouncing words have added much to the science of lexicography.

A modern unabridged dictionary has far more words than the seventy thousand in Webster’s dictionary of 1828. But Noah Webster worked alone. Today many people take part in the work of making a dictionary. We can almost trace the growth of our language in the growth of the dictionary started by Noah Webster.

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1. Why was Noah Webster called the “schoolmaster to America”?

A He wrote books that were used all over the country.
B He taught in many different places around the United States.
C He came up with many new ideas about education.
D He knew so much about so many different subjects.

2. Which fact about Webster’s early life helps to explain his later attitude about spelling?

A He grew up on a small farm.
B He entered college at an early age.
C He thought America should be independent.
D He met George Washington at Yale College.

3. Why did Noah Webster decide to write a spelling book?

A He knew it was too expensive to keep getting books from England.
B He thought that America needed its own language and books.
C He had never been very good at spelling as a child.
D He was upset that Americans were such bad spellers.

4. According to the selection, what was one result of *The American Spelling Book* being used in schools?

A Americans started to read many more books.
B Many people started taking part in spelling bees.
C Students became more interested in owning dictionaries.
D English became the most popular language in the United States.
5. Which of the following belongs in the empty box of the graphic organizer below?

![Graphic Organizer]

- published in 1783
- new ideas about spelling and syllabication
- largest published in 1828
- word histories definitions spelling rules

A  Blue-Backed Speller
B  The American Spelling Book
C  dictionary of American English
D  dictionary of British English

6. The selection states that “Noah Webster had traits more important than his interest in words and his knowledge of many subjects.” What does the word traits mean?

A  difficulties
B  opinions
C  qualities
D  topics

7. According to the selection, what lasting effect did Webster have on language in America?

A  He invented new pronunciations for words.
B  He simplified the way that many words were spelled.
C  He started the practice of dividing words into syllables.
D  He removed many outdated words from the language.
8. Why was Noah Webster able to work on his dictionary without any help from other people?
   
   A  He looked up a lot of information from other dictionaries.
   
   B  He included definitions for a very limited number of words.
   
   C  He knew a lot of information about many different subjects.
   
   D  He could invent his own rules about spelling and pronunciation.

9. Which of the following relationships is most similar to the relationship below?
    
    Noah Webster : words
    
    A  fish : ocean
    
    B  football player : helmet
    
    C  swimmer : exercise
    
    D  gardener : plants

End of Set

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## Answers to
**Grade 7 Reading Comprehension Sample Items**

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