

## An Integrated Skills Lesson Plan for “Just off Main Street” by Elmaz Abinader

In “Just off Main Street,” author, poet, and performance artist Elmaz Abinader, an Arab-American, explores the challenges individuals from different ethnic backgrounds face when they try to adjust to mainstream American culture. She describes how her family’s traditional culture differed from the American culture she engaged in outside her home and how those differences enabled her to create the unique subject matter of her writings. She explains how her experiences brought her to appreciate qualities that were singularly hers as an Arab-American, and she provides readers with a “magic door” to pass through as they share in these experiences. This essay can open “doors” for students who may also experience the enjoyment and confusion of living in two worlds—on both sides of the door.

### Description:

This lesson plan is designed for EFL instructors who teach high intermediate to advanced English language learners. It is based on an authentic, contemporary essay by an accomplished American writer. The lesson plan includes various tasks and activities designed to assist you, the instructor, in developing your students’ English language skills as well as increasing their understanding of American culture. Students will study Abinader’s essay, complete tasks both individually and in pairs or groups, and participate in activities that develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The lesson is divided into five steps: Preparing to Read, Reading the Text, Understanding the Text, Making Connections Beyond the Text, and Integrating Language Skills.

### Step 1: Preparing to Read “Just off Main Street” (15 minutes)

To prepare your students to read Abinader’s essay, follow the suggested steps below.

#### A. Introduce the Subject: Neighborhoods we lived in as children.

Explain to your students that they will read an essay called “Just off Main Street” by Elmaz Abinader, who writes about growing up as an Arab-American in the state of Pennsylvania. In her essay, Abinader reflects on her childhood and her family and how different she was from the Americans in her hometown. She begins her essay by describing the street that she lived on, Main Street, in her small American hometown. Ask your students to think about their hometowns or the place where they grew up. Then ask them the following questions:

1. Do you have a main street or a central square in your hometown? What does it look like? What is its name?

2. What kinds of businesses or buildings can you find there? Do you know anyone who owns a business there? What type of business is it? Is it family-owned? Who works there?
3. How far away do you live from this area of your town? How often do you visit it? Why do you go there?
4. When you were growing up, did you have large family gatherings, dinners, or parties at your home? Who came to these family occasions? What kind of food was served? What kinds of activities took place when your relatives visited?

## B. Introduce the Lesson

Explain to your students that they will first read Abinader's essay completely one time. Tell them that they might not fully understand this essay the first time they read it, but after reading it again and analyzing the essay, they will gain a better understanding of the writer's message and will experience opportunities to communicate in English and improve their language skills.

### Step 2: Reading the Text *(30–40 minutes depending on students' abilities)*

Give your students photocopies of the essay (and Glossary) from this issue of the *Forum*. You can also have students access the essay online at: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/>. Note: the online version does not have the numbered paragraphs and Glossary mentioned in some exercises below.

#### A. Review with your students the during-reading tasks below. Then ask them to complete the tasks as they read the essay silently.

1. Circle unfamiliar words or expressions.
2. Underline ideas they do not understand.
3. Make notes in the margins about sections of the essay they would like to discuss or ask about.

#### B. Ask your students to read the definitions of their circled words in the Glossary provided or to look up the unfamiliar words in a dictionary. If they have access to the Internet, students can use one of the following on-line dictionary sites.

- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: [www.bartleby.com/61](http://www.bartleby.com/61)
- Merriam-Webster On-line–The Language Center: [www.m-w.com/](http://www.m-w.com/)

#### C. Ask your students to carefully read the essay a second time for better understanding.

### Step 3: Understanding the Text *(20 minutes)*

You may assign the following questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework. To prepare your students for oral discussion, follow the steps listed below.

1. Arrange your students into pairs or groups of three to four students.
  - a. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to read the questions aloud.
  - b. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to record the answers.
  - c. Ask each group to choose other members to present the answers to the class.
2. Give your students a fixed time period to discuss the questions and complete the tasks in Step 3 before presenting their responses to the class.
3. Call on each group to present their responses to the class.

#### A. Comprehension Questions (15–20 minutes)

1. What is the name of Abinader’s hometown and her home state?
2. What businesses does her family own on Main Street?
3. What similarities did Abinader say she shared with the girls in her class at school?
4. What event occurred in Abinader’s house on Wednesdays?
5. What chores did Abinader and her brothers and sisters do after school?
6. What language did Abinader’s family speak in their home?
7. What kinds of activities took place when Abinader’s relatives came to visit her family?
8. Where did Abinader go to college?
9. What subjects did Abinader write about at the beginning of her writing career?
10. What is the title of Maxine Hong Kingston’s book that “made the difference” for Abinader?
11. What advice does Abinader give to young writers?

#### B. Vocabulary and Idioms (15 minutes)

Explain to your students that scanning is a reading skill that is useful for quickly finding specific information such as new vocabulary words or idiomatic expressions. To scan, students should read through a text quickly as they search for specific words, expressions, names, or numbers. Ask your students to practice the skill of scanning as they complete the tasks in this section.

1. Throughout her essay, Abinader refers to a *door* that separates her family life from the American world outside this door. In paragraph 1, she states that: “...my house had a magic door.” Why do you think the door is magical? Scan paragraph 4 to find a synonym—a word that is similar in meaning—for this door.
2. Abinader includes many descriptive images—pictures she creates with words—of her childhood. In paragraph 4, she provides the reader with a visual image of her braided hair “trying to explode into a kinky mop.” In your own words, describe the picture these words create for the reader. Scan the essay to find other examples of images that the reader can imagine seeing, smelling, or feeling.

3. In paragraph 22, Abinader writes that “as a writer, [she] was also an activist.” What part of speech is the word *activist*? What is the verb form of this word? Using the context in the paragraphs surrounding this word, write a definition for *activist*. Then explain in what ways Abinader’s writing acts to inform her readers about her cultural background.
4. Abinader states in paragraph 23 that she “found a community.” The general meaning of *community* is a group of people who live together in a town or area, who are from the same race or belong to the same religion, or who share similar interests. Write a definition for *community* that explains specifically what this word represents for Abinader.

### C. Dictionary Practice (15 minutes)

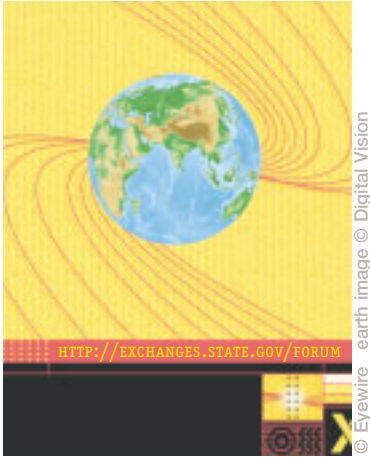
Tell your students that they will practice using the dictionary as they complete the tasks in this section. They may use the on-line dictionary sites listed under Step 2.

1. Find the word *mitigated* in paragraph 8. Write a definition of this word based on your understanding of the meaning of the passage surrounding it. Then use a dictionary to find the meaning of *mitigated* and compare your definition to the one in the dictionary. What part of speech is *mitigated*? What are the noun and adjective forms of this word?
2. Scan paragraph 15 to find the word *exotic*. What part of speech is this word? Use a dictionary to find the meaning of *exotic* as it is used in the paragraph. Now scan paragraph 16 to find *exoticize*. What part of speech is this word? Using your understanding of *exotic* and the context (the words surrounding *exoticize*), write a definition for *exoticize*.
3. In paragraph 15, the reader learns that Abinader “announced her heritage” in several ways. Use the dictionary to find the definition of *heritage*. In her essay, what examples does Abinader provide of her heritage? *Heritage* is formed from the base word *heir*, a person who receives the money or property of a person who has died. Use the dictionary to find other words that are formed from *heir*. Write sentences with these new words to show their varied meanings.

### D. Discussion Questions (15 minutes)

For instructions on how to present these questions for oral discussion, refer to the steps provided above for part A, *Comprehension Questions*.

1. Abinader has divided her essay into two parts: “Crossing the Threshold,” and “Making a Writer.” What is a threshold? Why do you think she titled the first part of her essay, “Crossing the Threshold?” What experiences did she have to deal with as a young school girl on the other side of the threshold, outside her home?
2. As a child, Abinader felt she was different from her classmates at All Saints School. Make a list the differences she describes. Then discuss why she felt separated from her classmates.



## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

### Elmaz Abinader

<http://www.california.com/~elmaza/>

This website provides biographical and professional information on Elmaz Abinader and information about her literary works and performance art.

### Aljadid magazine

<http://www.aljadid.com/>

"A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts," this online magazine contains articles written by Arab-American authors on a variety of subjects. The site includes book reviews, cultural briefings, features and essays, and travel information.

### Oum Khathoum

<http://almashriq.hiof.no/egypt/700/780/umKoulthoum/>

This website presents a great deal of information on Oum Khathoum, possibly the most popular and influential female singer and performer in the Arab world.

### Toni Morrison

<http://almaz.com/nobel/literature/1993a.html>

Dedicated to Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, this website contains information about her writings, thoughts, and personal influences.

### 100 Questions and Answers about Arab-Americans: A Journalist's Guide

<http://www.freep.com/jobspage/arabs/>

An informative website devoted to questions about Arab-Americans, this site contains numerous questions in several categories as well as answers to those questions.

3. In paragraph 5, Abinader describes how "the context of the world changed" when she passed through her front door and entered her house. In what ways did her world change? What does this door symbolize for Abinader?
4. What do you think Abinader felt about her cultural heritage as a young girl? When did her feelings about her heritage change? How do you think she views being an Arab-American now?
5. Toward the end of her essay, Abinader writes that "I find that my love of writing is interwoven with my responsibility to write." What do you think she means by this statement?

## Step 4: Making Connections Beyond the Text (15–20 minutes)

You may assign questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework.

1. Abinader writes that her parents taught her (and her siblings) three very important principles by which to guide their lives. What are these principles? What principles did your parents teach you when you were a child? What principles will you pass on to your own children and grandchildren?
2. Abinader recalls the many types of foods she enjoyed eating as a child, such as Arabic bread, triangles of spinach pie, *baba ghanouj*, *kibbe*, and bulgar wheat patties. Describe some foods that are unique to your culture. Why are they important to you and your family? Can you describe how to make some of these foods?
3. The *Syria-Lebanese Room* at Abinader's college made a lasting impression on her. Imagine that you are able to create a similar room to illustrate your own culture. Describe in detail what objects you would place in the room and how they would be displayed.
4. What do you think an individual from one ethnic minority might experience growing up among a different ethnic majority, as Abinader did? How might these experiences strengthen or weaken that individual? Discuss the possibilities.
5. Abinader describes the influence that other writers have had on her life. She mentions Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison as two writers whose works have inspired her. Are there any people who have influenced your life? Think of an individual who has had an effect on the way you think or act. Describe how you have been influenced.

## Step 5: Integrating Language Skills

You may assign your students one of the following projects or ask them to choose a project to complete individually or in a group of three or four students. Ask your students to complete their projects as written reports or to prepare oral presentations.

1. Make a poster that illustrates your heritage. Locate yourself in the center of the poster. If you have a photo of yourself, paste it in the center of the

poster. If you do not have a photo, you can draw a picture of yourself. Add information about your heritage to the poster. Include the following kinds of information:

- your family members and important ancestors.
- your cultural or ethnic background.
- special customs, foods, music, etc.
- your values.
- your religious beliefs.

Prepare a presentation of your Heritage Poster to your classmates.

2. Choose one book that you have read that has been important to your life. Think about what is important about that book and how it has influenced you. Prepare a report to give orally or in written form in which you discuss the main ideas in the book you chose and the ways in which that book has influenced your life. Include the author's full name and the title of the book in your report.
3. Write a story in English about someone who has faced a problem in his or her younger years. Put as much detail into your story as possible. Include information about the person's family and friends as background information for the reader. Describe where the story takes place and when. Explain why the problem occurred. Discuss how this person dealt with the problem and describe the solution he or she found to solve the problem. Be prepared to read or tell your story to your class.
4. Use the Internet or library resources to find more information about one of the subjects below.
  - Elmaz Abinader
  - Oum Khalthoum
  - Arab-Americans
  - Maxine Hong Kingston
  - Toni Morrison

Then write a report or prepare a presentation of your findings for your classmates.

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