Abe Lincoln wasn’t an educated kid. Nor was he particularly handsome, and he certainly wasn’t rich. In fact, his family was poor. He was born in a one-room log cabin. Along with his older sister, Sarah, Abe was helping with planting and farm chores before he was six. By the time he was eight, he was cutting down trees and splitting them to make fences. He even helped build his family’s log cabin. Abe was tall and strong and a hard worker, but farming wasn’t really what he wanted to do.

Abe wanted to go to school. He was passionate about reading and learning. His dad, Thomas, kept him too busy on the farm to attend school for more than a few weeks here and there. Maybe because Thomas could barely read or write, he didn’t believe Abe needed more than basic reading, writing, and math. So how did a kid like that become president of the United States?
Abe had qualities other than the best grades, good looks, or money. He listened to people. He knew how to get along. He tried to step into other people’s shoes and understand their points of view. He was good-natured, too. Rather than get angry or upset, he’d use humor to put himself and others at ease. For example, if people teased him about how long his legs were, he’d explain they were simply long enough to reach the ground.

He developed compassion for others at an early age. He knew what it was like to suffer loss. His little brother died when Abe was three. His mom passed away when he was nine. On top of that, Abe and his dad didn’t get along very well. His older sister, Sarah, was his best friend. But when Abe was still a teenager, she passed away, too.

When Abe was ten, his dad married Sarah Bush Johnston, who had two daughters and a son. She treated all the kids equally. Abe and his stepmother became very
close. His stepmother brought not only love, care, and nourishment but also supplies that the Lincolns hadn’t had before, like nice furniture and dishes—and, most important to Abe, books.

**Abe Lincoln’s Favorite Snacks**

*Abe loved fruit best of all. He also enjoyed corn bread and corn cakes, which may have been because his family grew a lot of corn on their farm. He particularly liked gingerbread cookies—made with sorghum flour and ginger—that were sturdy enough to survive stuffing some in his pocket.*

Abe loved stories. He loved hearing them, reading them, and telling them. Even with the books his stepmother brought—*The Thousand and One Nights, The Pilgrim’s Progress, Robinson Crusoe,* and a few others—his family didn’t have many, so he borrowed whatever he could. However, that meant walking several miles because none of his neighbors lived nearby.

Borrowing books also meant he was responsible for them. Once, he borrowed a biography of George Washington from his neighbor Josiah Crawford. The book was ruined in a rainstorm. Abe returned it and, not having any money, asked how he could pay for it. He spent three full days working in Mr. Crawford’s field.
Abraham Lincoln

Abe’s stepmother encouraged his passion for learning and convinced his dad to let him go to school on occasion. He happily walked the four miles to school. He enjoyed being around other kids and amused them with his stories. Even though he was shy, he liked getting to know people, so he forced himself to talk. Once he started a story, he didn’t feel nervous. His trademark line as he grew up was, “That reminds me of a story. . . .”

Abe was friendly as well as funny. He once helped a girl in a spelling bee when she got stuck on the word defied. Unsure what came after the f, she hesitated. Abe pointed at his eye to indicate i, and she spelled the world correctly.

**Abe Lincoln: Animal Lover**

Abe had compassion for animals as well as people. When he was almost eight, he shot a wild turkey. He knew hunting was necessary, but he hated shooting an animal and never did so again. He also stopped other boys from smashing turtles against trees or putting hot coals on their backs because it was just plain cruel. He even had empathy for ants, saying that life was precious to them just as it is to people.

Although he was a serious student, Abe enjoyed being a kidder, judging from the rhymes he wrote in his notebooks:

*trademark*: something associated with a person
*defied*: refused to obey
Abraham Lincoln
his hand and pen
he will be good but
God knows When

Abraham Lincoln is my name
And with my pen I wrote the same
I wrote in both haste and speed
and left it here for fools to read

At school, he didn’t like bickering or fighting, but he didn’t mind a fair wrestling match. Wrestling simply involved seeing who could get someone on the ground first, not punching or kicking. Abe always won because he tended to be the tallest and the strongest. It’s said he won three hundred matches before being defeated. Whether that’s true or not, he was by all accounts an excellent wrestler and is one of the presidents in the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.
Because his family didn’t have money for schoolbooks, Abe put pieces of paper together to make his own “books.” He wrote basic math facts and lists of weights and measures so he could study them. He liked to write poetry. Neighbors who couldn’t write at all dictated their letters to him. Mostly, Abe loved reading. When he was about twelve, he said, “My best friend is the man who’ll get me a book I ain’t read.”

dictated: spoke words to be written down
Abe Lincoln’s Reading Hints

Abe read books over and over. Some thought this was because he was slow, but he was making sure he understood what he read and sometimes even memorizing it. His other trick was to read aloud. When asked why, he explained, “When I read aloud, two senses catch the idea: first, I see what I read; second, I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better.”

Unfortunately, if Abe’s dad caught him reading when he was supposed to be doing chores, he would punish him, sometimes harshly. Abe resented it. All he was doing was trying to learn.

Abe and his dad had different personalities, beliefs, and desires. Abe’s dad preferred spending time with his new stepson, John. He’d leave Abe to do the heavy work on the farm while he and John went off hunting together. That only made Abe want to leave the farm more than ever. He vowed that he’d learn as much as he could and do something special with his life. And that’s exactly what he did.