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# **VERY EASY TRUE STORIES**

**A PICTURE-BASED  
FIRST READER**

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**by Sandra Heyer**



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# Introduction

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*Very Easy True Stories* is a first reader for students of English as a Second Language (ESL). It is for absolute beginners who are familiar with the Roman alphabet, as well as for students with well-developed speaking and listening skills but low-level literacy skills. The stories are written in the present tense, in the simplest and most concrete language possible.

*Very Easy True Stories* contains fourteen units, each centered on a story that was adapted from a newspaper or magazine article. In answer to those students who think that some stories are too amazing to be true: *Yes, the stories are true.* The penguin really does do his own shopping, and the man really did find \$2,000 in his fast-food bag. All of the stories were verified by reputable news sources.

Each unit is divided into three sections: Pre-Reading, Reading, and Post-Reading Exercises. Following are some suggestions for using each of the sections. Teachers new to the field might find these suggestions especially helpful. Please keep in mind that these are only suggestions. Teachers should, of course, feel free to adapt these strategies to best suit their teaching styles and their students' learning styles.

## PRE-READING

The pre-reading drawing introduces the theme of the story. It also facilitates teaching of essential vocabulary and prompts students to recall knowledge and experiences that will help them understand the story. Here is one possible sequence of steps for using the pre-reading drawing.

### 1. With the help of the pre-reading drawing, elicit the vocabulary of the story.

Ask students to turn to the pre-reading drawing in their books. (Or make a transparency of the pre-reading page, and show it on the overhead projector.) Ask students, "What do you see?" Write their responses on the board, on flash cards, or directly on the transparency. (Some teachers advocate printing in block letters, rather than in upper- and lowercase letters, since block printing is easier for students to copy.) As you write, say the words slowly to model correct pronunciation. Students copy the words onto the picture in their books.

If all the students are absolute beginners, it is unlikely they will be able to supply the vocabulary for the pre-reading drawing. Instead of asking students, "What do you see?" begin by simply labeling the items and actions depicted in the drawing and slowly pro-

nouncing the words. Say only five or six words. That's plenty for beginners. Resist the inclination to talk to yourself as you label ("Let's see . . . and over here there's a . . .").

### 2. Tell students what the story is about.

Point to the title of the story and read it aloud slowly. Then connect the vocabulary of the pre-reading drawing to the title. For example, say, "This story is about a penguin," as you point to the penguin in the drawing. Say, "The penguin goes shopping," and point to the word "shopping" in the title. As students progress through the book, try to stop at "This story is about . . .," and see if students can use the pre-reading drawing and the title of the story to make predictions about the story.

## READING

Following is one possible sequence of steps in reading the story:

### 1. Read the story aloud to the students.

Ask students to turn to the second and third pages of the unit, which are in comic-strip format. Tell students to look at just the drawings for now, not at the words beneath the drawings. The purpose of this first reading is to give students a global, not a word-for-word, understanding of the story.

Read the story aloud as students look at the drawings. Begin by saying, "Number one," and slowly read the sentence that the first drawing illustrates. Then say, "Number two," and read the appropriate sentence. Continue in this manner. Saying the numbers of the pictures while telling the story ensures that all eyes are on the same picture.

If your students are absolute beginners, you might need to break the story down into even smaller chunks of meaning when you tell it. In Unit 1, for example, the second sentence is, "He lives with a family in Japan." Instead of reading the sentence exactly as it is written, you might point to the man in the drawing and say, "Father" (or "Papa," if that is a cognate for your students), point to the woman and say, "Mother" (or "Mama"), and point to the child and say, "Child." Circle the trio with your finger and say, "Family." Digress again to explain "Japan" by pointing to Japan on a world map or by drawing a sketch on the board. Then go back to picture 2 and say, "He" (pointing to Rara) "lives with a family" (pointing to the family) "in Japan" (pointing to Japan on a world map).

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You will probably want to walk away from the pictures from time to time and act out some scenes, perhaps with the help of props. (The teacher who field-tested "Shopping Day" came to class with a backpack, fish cut out of paper, and a shopping basket borrowed from a local supermarket.)

Some of the stories build suspense. You might stop short of the last few sentences when reading those stories aloud and let students—silently—read how the story ends.

## **2. Read the story a second time.**

This time, however, instruct students to look at the words beneath the pictures.

## **3. Give students time to read the story silently.**

Some students will be ready to go to the fourth page and read the story in text form. Other students will need to read the story in comic-strip format so that they can go back and forth between the words and the pictures to check their understanding.

## **4. Present the story in a different way.**

If students have a global understanding of the story but need practice mastering its language, you might try one of these activities:

- Read the story aloud, but this time, make "mistakes." ("Rara is a dog. He lives with a family in New York. Every Tuesday Rara goes shopping.") Pause after each sentence, letting students speak in chorus to correct the mistake, rather than calling on individuals. A variation of this technique is to make mistakes in only *some* of the sentences. Students say "Yes" if the sentence is correct, "No" if it isn't. (Some teachers like to give each student two differently colored index cards. On one card "YES" is printed; on the other card "NO" is printed. After hearing each sentence, students hold up the card with their answer.)

- Read the story aloud, sentence by sentence, and ask the entire class to repeat, echoing your pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm.

- Read sentences from the story at random. Students call out the number of each corresponding picture.

- Say key words in the story. Students scan to find the words and circle them; they can verify their work by checking with a partner.

### **Teaching Young Students**

If you teach young students, you may need to use one of the four activities above instead of, not in addi-

tion to, having students read the story on their own. Adults understand that looking at the pictures while hearing the story is a helpful pre-reading step; children see it as an end unto itself. Middle school students who participated in field-testing *Very Easy True Stories* were somewhat puzzled by the teacher's request that they read the story silently. They had just heard the story, and they knew how it ended. Why would they want to read it? When, however, reading the story was made into a game, they were enthusiastic readers. They especially liked identifying mistakes in the teacher's version of the story and scanning for key words (an activity which they turned into a race to see who could find the words first).

### **Teaching Absolute Beginners**

*Very Easy True Stories* was field-tested in several ESL environments. One of those environments was a class of zero-level adult learners, all native speakers of Spanish. Before beginning Unit 1, the teacher told his students—in Spanish—that they were going to hear and read a story. He told his students not to worry about understanding every word, but to try to get the gist of the story. He said that in the course of reading the story, maybe they'd learn a couple of new words, and that would be great! Those few words in Spanish instantly changed the atmosphere in the classroom: The students went from looking apprehensive to looking relaxed in a matter of seconds. Their goal had changed from the impossible to the possible—instead of trying to understand every word, they were just going to enjoy the story and maybe pick up a few new words (a goal they did, in fact, accomplish).

If you have absolute beginners in your class, it is well worth the effort to find people—more advanced students in the same class, perhaps, or in another class in your program—to make a similar announcement in your students' native languages. When you do find native speakers to make the announcement, consider asking them to write it for you so you'll be able to encourage future students in their native languages.

### **THE POST-READING EXERCISES**

#### **Pronunciation**

In some units, the exercise section begins with a pronunciation exercise. This exercise groups words in the story according to their accented vowel sound. Students, especially those whose first language is phonetic, are usually surprised to discover that the five English vowels make more than five sounds. In the course of the book, the pronunciation exercises acquaint students with thirteen vowel sounds. The purpose of the exercises is simply to make students aware that these

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sounds exist in English, not to drill students into pronouncing the sounds perfectly. (In fact, doing so would probably be a disservice. Keep in mind that some vowels make one sound when they are stressed, as they are in the exercise, but change to the neutral vowel /ə/ when they are in an unstressed position. Consider how the pronunciation of the “a” in “and” changes when “and” is put in an unstressed position: “cream and sugar.”)

### Spelling

This exercise is a dictation exercise. For absolute beginners, write the words on the board so that they can copy them. More advanced students like to work this exercise like a puzzle, trying to figure out the word from the letters given and announcing it before the teacher can say it.

### Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Writing

Students can complete these exercises individually, in pairs, in small groups, or with the whole class. The exercises can be completed in class or assigned as homework. At the back of the book there is an answer key to the exercises.

### Discussion

These exercises personalize the themes of the stories. They are written at a level parallel to that of the readings; that is, they assume that students speak and write about as well as they read. As a result, these exercises introduce no new vocabulary; the vocabulary consists solely of words recycled from the story. If, however, your students are fairly proficient speakers, you will probably want to encourage them to talk about the stories, asking them, for example, if they, like Mrs. Zimmer, have ever been stranded, or if, like Erik, they have ever gotten lost in a big city.

You could let the discussion lead into a writing activity, using the Language Experience Approach. Briefly, the Language Experience Approach consists of these steps:

1. The student orally relates a story or experience.
2. The teacher writes the student's words (sitting next to the student so the student can see what is being written).

3. The teacher reads the story.

4. The student reads the story.

These steps can be done as a group activity, which is ideal for multilevel classes. In order for students as a group to be able to dictate sentences, though, you will have to first create a group experience, such as a field trip, or draw on a situation the students have in common. For example, students in a class of young adults separated into two groups after reading the story “Neighbors.” The men were given a blank piece of paper with the heading “The Perfect Wife” and the women were given a blank piece of paper with the heading “The Perfect Husband.” The men collaborated to make a list of the attributes of a perfect wife, dictating their sentences to a teacher's aide (“She is a good cook.” “She has long hair.”), while the women dictated their sentences to the teacher. The two groups then came together to read one another's lists.

Keep in mind that the first step in the Language Experience Approach is an oral one. If your students are zero-level speakers of English, you will not want to venture from the controlled speaking exercises in the book.

Students in a beginning ESL class can have a wide range of experience with English, as you may know only too well. Some students are at zero-level in all the skills areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Other students may have well-developed speaking and listening skills, but low-level literacy skills. Another group may have studied English in their native countries, perhaps for years, and are fairly proficient readers and writers, but were placed in a beginning class because they are unable to speak or understand spoken English. So, you may have to tamper with the exercises—to adjust them up or down, to skip some, or to add some of your own. Both the exercises and reading selections are intended to build students' confidence along with their reading skills. Above all, it is hoped that reading *Very Easy True Stories* will be a pleasure, for both you and your students.

*Very Easy True Stories* is the first book in the *True Stories* reading series. It is followed by *Easy True Stories*, *True Stories in the News*, *More True Stories*, and *Even More True Stories*.

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# UNIT 1

## Shopping Day

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### 1. PRE-READING

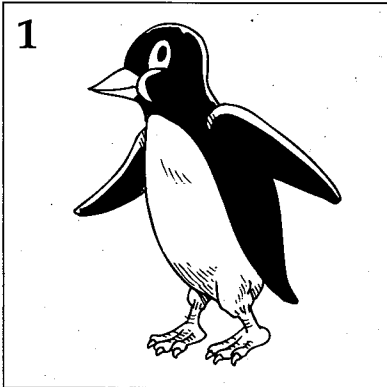
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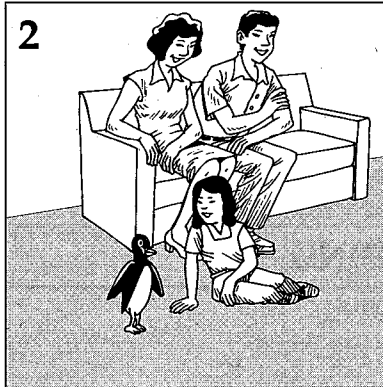
- Look at the picture. What do you see?
- Say the words.
- Watch your teacher write the words.
- Copy the words onto the picture.

## 2. READING

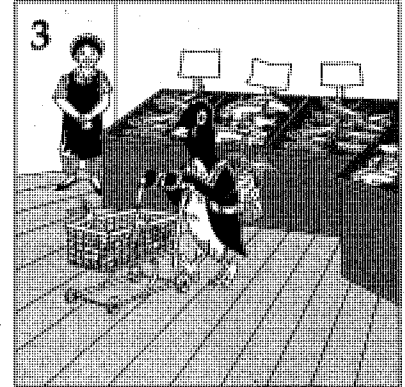
- Listen to your teacher read the story. Look at the pictures.
- Listen to your teacher read the story again. Look at the words. Read the story.



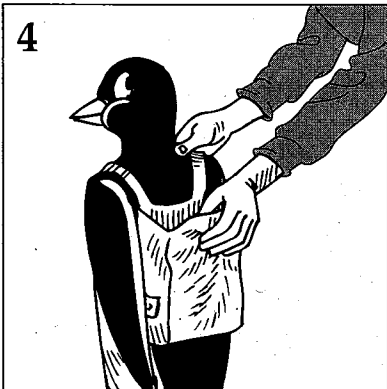
Rara is a penguin.



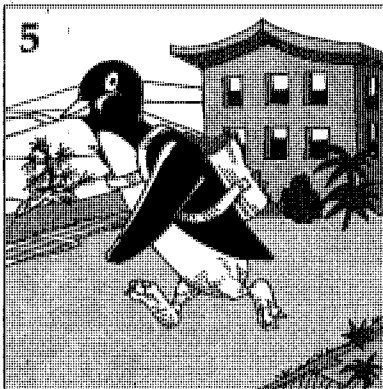
He lives with a family in Japan.



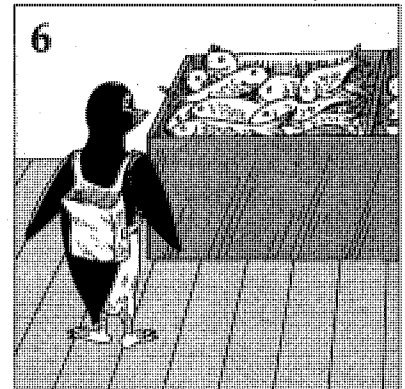
Every Monday Rara goes shopping.



Rara's family puts a backpack on Rara's back.



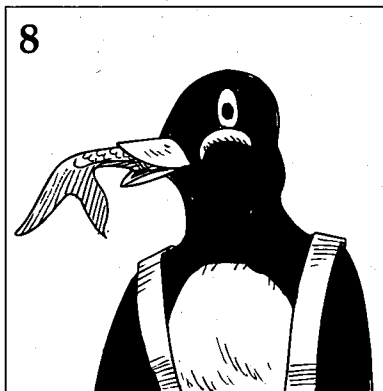
Rara walks to the fish market.



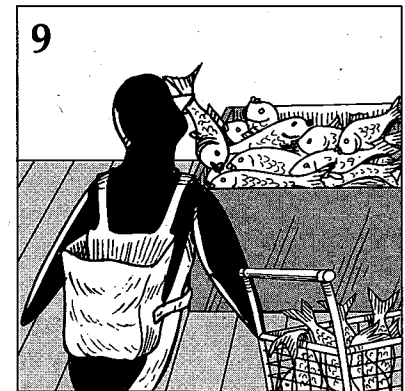
He looks at the fish at the market.



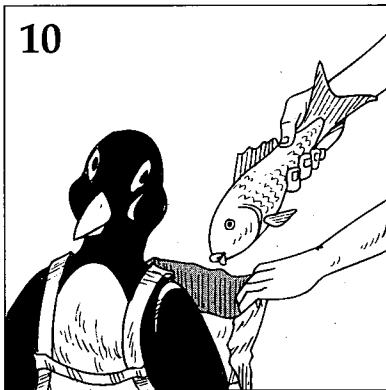
He takes 12 small fish.



He eats the 12 fish.



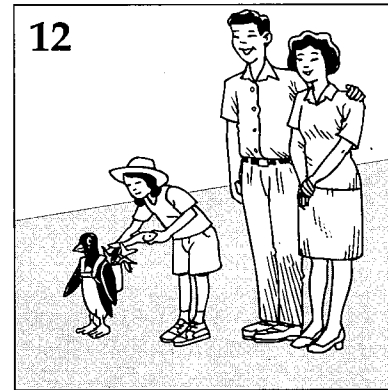
Rara takes some fish for his family.



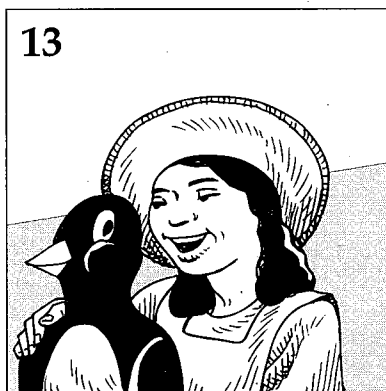
A woman puts the fish  
in Rara's backpack.



Rara walks home  
with the fish.



Rara's family takes their  
fish out of his backpack.

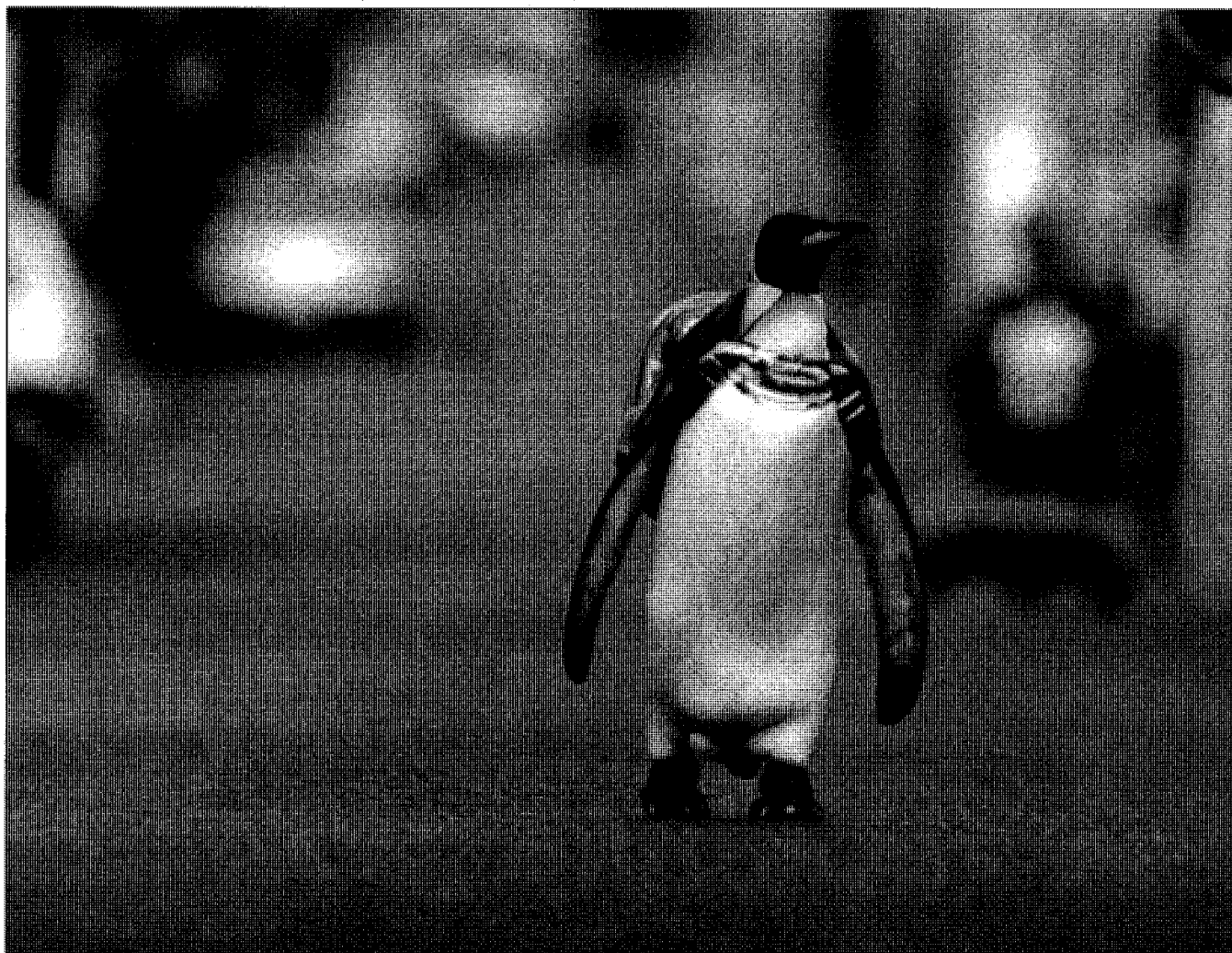


"Good penguin!"  
Rara's family says.  
"Thank you, Rara!"



- Read the story again.

## Shopping Day



**R**ara is a penguin. He lives with a family in Japan.

Every Monday Rara goes shopping. Rara's family puts a backpack on Rara's back. Rara walks to the fish market. He looks at the fish at the market. He takes 12 small fish. He eats the 12 fish.

Rara takes some fish for his family. A woman puts the fish in Rara's backpack. Rara walks home with the fish.

Rara's family takes their fish out of his backpack. "Good penguin!" Rara's family says. "Thank you, Rara!"

### 3. PRONUNCIATION

Listen to your teacher. Say the words.

is  
his  
fish  
with  
in

a  
of  
some  
Monday

put  
look  
good  
woman

### 4. SPELLING

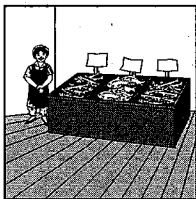
Listen to your teacher say the words. Write the missing letters. Then copy the words.

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. f <u>a</u> mil <u>y</u> <u>family</u> | 5. lo <u>o</u> k      _____           |
| 2. M <u>o</u> nd <u>a</u> y      _____   | 6. tak <u>e</u> _____                 |
| 3. ba <u>o</u> k      _____              | 7. h <u>o</u> me      _____           |
| 4. wa <u>o</u> k      _____              | 8. t <u>o</u> a <u>o</u> k      _____ |

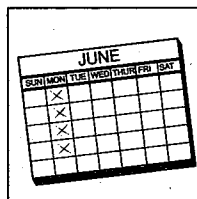
### 5. VOCABULARY

What do you see in the pictures? Write the words.

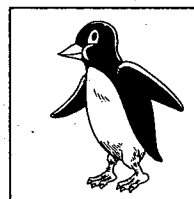
penguin  
backpack



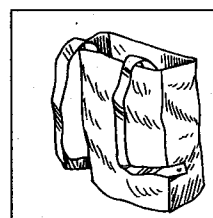
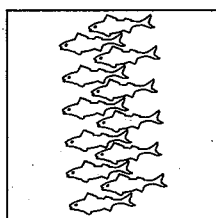
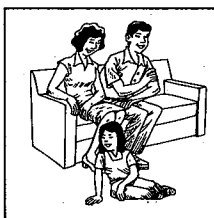
12 small fish  
fish market



every Monday  
a family in Japan



1. fish market      2. \_\_\_\_\_      3. \_\_\_\_\_



4. \_\_\_\_\_      5. \_\_\_\_\_      6. \_\_\_\_\_

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## 6. COMPREHENSION

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Which sentence is correct? Circle a or b.

1.  a. Rara lives with a family in Japan.  
b. Rara lives at a market in Japan.
2. a. Every day Rara goes shopping.  
b. Every Monday Rara goes shopping.
3. a. Rara looks at the fish at the market.  
b. Rara looks at the backpacks at the market.
4. a. Rara eats two small fish.  
b. Rara eats twelve small fish.
5. a. Rara takes some fish for a woman.  
b. Rara takes some fish for his family.
6. a. "Thank you!" Rara's family says.  
b. "How are you?" Rara's family says.

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## 7. WRITING

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Write the sentences correctly.

1. Raraisapenguin.  
Rara is a penguin.
2. EveryMondayRaragoesshopping.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Hewalkstothe fishmarket.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Heeats12fishatthemarket.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Hetakesomefishforhisfamily.  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Hewalkshomewiththefish.  
\_\_\_\_\_