

# Helen Keller:

## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

**Name:** Helen Adams Keller

**Born:** 27th June, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, USA.

**Father's job:** Cotton Farmer and Army Officer.

**Significant event:** Helen could speak at 6 months old.

**Early childhood illness:** At 19 months old, she had a very bad fever, which left her deaf and blind.



### Did you know?

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright, but very naughty child. She had lots of temper tantrums. An inventor called Alexander Graham Bell had used a system called 'Visible Speech' for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn it. Helen went to the Perkins School for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She also learned to read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots punched onto paper).



<b>Languages learnt in braille:</b>	English, French, German, Greek and Latin
<b>As a student at Radcliffe College:</b>	First deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.
<b>As an author:</b>	Helen wrote twelve books, including her autobiography.
<b>As a traveller:</b>	Helen visited over 40 countries, speaking to audiences about the problems for blind people.
<b>Lifetime awards:</b>	Helen was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965.

Helen spent her life helping others in need and was hugely brave herself.  
She died on 1st June, 1968.

# Questions

Record your answers in complete sentences.

Look under the heading 'Early Life' for the answers.

1. In what year was Helen Keller born?

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2. What two jobs did her father do?

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3. How were Helen's eyes and ears affected after she was ill as a child?

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Look under the heading 'Did you know?' for the answers.

4. What was the name of the alphabet that Alexander Graham Bell taught?

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5. On a separate piece of paper, draw around your hand and label the part where the letters are spelled out. Label the part of the hand that can feel braille letters.

6. Why do you think Anne Sullivan taught Helen to behave first, before she taught her sign language?

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# Answers

1. In what year was Helen Keller born?

**Helen Keller was born in 1880.**

2. What two jobs did her father do?

**Her father was a cotton farmer and also an army officer.**

3. How were Helen's eyes and ears affected after she was ill as a child?

**Helen's illness made her blind (she could not see) and deaf (she could not hear).**

4. What was the name of the alphabet that Alexander Graham Bell taught?

**Alexander Graham Bell taught the 'Visible Speech' alphabet.**

5. On a separate piece of paper, draw around your hand and label the part where the letters are spelled out. Label the part of the hand that can feel braille letters.

**The hand should be labelled with the palm (centre) for spelling out and the fingertips for feeling braille letters.**

6. Why do you think Anne Sullivan taught Helen to behave first, before she taught her sign language?

**Anne Sullivan taught Helen to behave first so that she could be calm and concentrate in her lessons.**

7. Name the five languages that Helen learned using braille.

**Helen used braille to learn English, French, German, Latin and Greek in braille.**

8. What sort of book might an autobiography be?

**An autobiography is an account of someone's life that they write themselves.**

9. If you could not see or hear anything, what ideas from the text could help you to learn at school? Give reasons for your answer.

**Pupil's own response.**

# Helen Keller:

## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

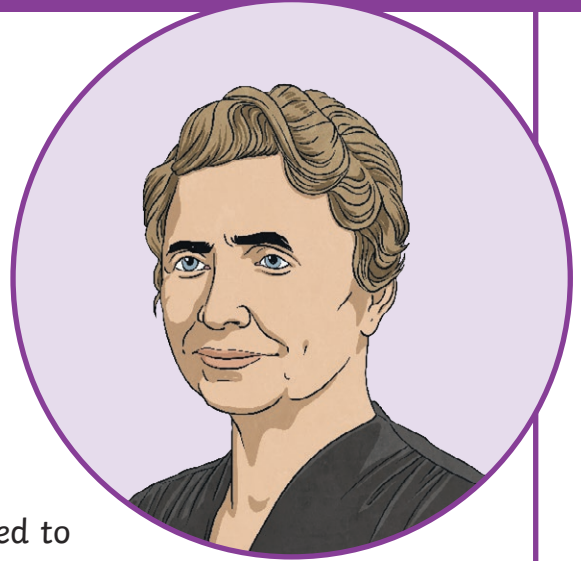
**Name:** Helen Adams Keller.

**Born:** Tuscumbia, Alabama, 27th June 1880.

**Significant events:** Helen first spoke at 6 months old. At 19 months old, she had a very bad fever which left her deaf and blind. Her eyes were replaced with glass eyes for medical reasons.

### Did you know?

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright but unruly<sup>1</sup> child who had lots of temper tantrums and disrupted family life. An inventor called Alexander Graham Bell had used a system called 'Visible Speech' (originally invented by his father) for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn this method. Helen went to the Perkins School for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She helped Helen to connect words with objects and sensations. After Anne got Helen to run her hands under a water pump, Helen described it in her autobiography like this:



*"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness<sup>2</sup> as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"*

Helen also learned to read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots on paper).



## Later Life

Helen spent her life helping others triumph over adversity and was hugely courageous herself. She died on 1st June, 1968, just a few weeks before her 88th birthday.

<b>Languages learned in braille:</b>	English, French, German, Greek and Latin
<b>As a student at Radcliffe College:</b>	First deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.
<b>As a celebrity:</b>	Helen became famous because of her accomplishments <sup>3</sup> and Mark Twain, the author of Huckleberry Finn, became friends. An oil executive <sup>4</sup> , Henry H. Rogers, paid for her to go to Radcliffe College.
<b>As an author:</b>	Helen wrote 12 books, including her autobiography, 'The Story of My Life'.
<b>As a traveller:</b>	Helen visited over 40 countries. She was an advocate for women and people with disabilities.
<b>Lifetime achievements:</b>	Helen was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965.



## Glossary of Vocabulary

**unruly<sup>1</sup>** - difficult to control

**consciousness<sup>2</sup>** – an awareness of your surroundings

**accomplishment<sup>3</sup>** - a remarkable or successful achievement

**executive<sup>4</sup>** - a senior manager in a company

# Questions

Record your answers in complete sentences.

1. In what decade was Helen Keller born?

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2. What do you think the word 'fever' means? Record your definition here.

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3. How is sign language different from spoken language?

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4. Why are the words, 'I stood still...set it free!' written with inverted commas?

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5. Using the whole text, can you find and record six past tense verbs?

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6. From information in the Later Life table, Helen is described as an advocate of people with disabilities. What do you think the word 'advocate' means?

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7. Do you think Helen was right to spend her life helping others, or, should she have concentrated on her own studies and writing? Give reasons for your answer.

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8. Create two 'Visible Speech' signs that you can try on your partner's palm to help them to understand two things that they cannot hear or see. Record them here.



# Answers

1. In what decade was Helen Keller born?

**Helen Keller was born in the 1880s.**

2. What do you think the word 'fever' means? Record your definition here.

**The word 'fever' means a high temperature.**

3. How is sign language different from spoken language?

**Sign language is different from spoken language because you can see or feel it, whereas spoken language is heard.**

4. Why are the words, 'I stood still...set it free!' written with inverted commas?

**The words 'I stood still...set it free!' are written with inverted commas because they are quotations (from Helen's autobiography).**

5. Using the whole text, can you find and record six past tense verbs?

**Examples could include: spoke, replaced, talked, used, recommended, taught, helped.**

6. From information in the Later Life table, Helen is described as an advocate of people with disabilities. What do you think the word 'advocate' means?

**An advocate is someone who speaks on someone else's behalf. Or, an advocate is a representative of someone, or a group of people.**

7. Do you think Helen was right to spend her life helping others or should she have concentrated on her own studies and writing? Give reasons for your answer.

**Various answers.**

**I think Helen should have continued with her own studies because she could then have got a good job and been able to earn a living.**

**Or: I think Helen was right to spend her life helping others because she became an example of what could be achieved through hard work and a system that could help people communicate, like braille.**

8. Create two 'Visible Speech' signs that you can try on your partner's palm to help them to understand two things that they cannot hear or see. Record them here.

**Various representations of words.**

# Helen Keller:

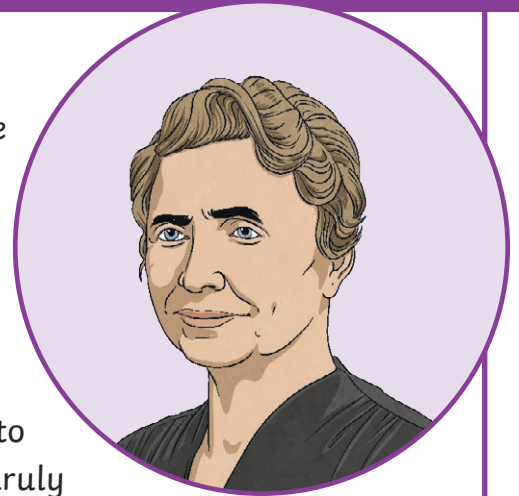
## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

Helen Adams Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on the 27th June, 1880. Her father owned a cotton plantation but he was also a Confederate Army Officer during the Civil War. Helen could speak at 6 months old but at 19 months old she had a very bad fever which left her deaf and blind. Her eyes were replaced with glass eyes for medical reasons.

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright but unruly child who had lots of temper tantrums and disrupted family life.

Helen's mother read her a story by Charles Dickens, describing how a deaf-blind child, Laura Bridgman, was taught to communicate. Inspired by the story, the family contacted the inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. He had used a system called 'Visible Speech' (originally invented by his father) for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn. In 1888, Helen went to the Perkins Institute for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who firstly taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She helped Helen to connect words with objects and sensations. After she got Helen to run her hands under a water pump, Helen described it like this:



*"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness<sup>2</sup> as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"*

Very quickly, Helen learned new words and she could also read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots on paper). In time, she used a braille typewriter to record her thoughts.



## Adult Life

Helen was a quick and determined student. She learned to communicate in English, French, German, Greek and Latin. Aged 24, as a student at Radcliffe College, she was the first deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.



Her achievements brought her to the attention of many, including the author Mark Twain (who wrote *Huckleberry Finn*). The oil executive, Henry H. Rogers paid for her expenses at Radcliffe College.



Helen wrote 12 books, including her autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1903). She travelled to over 40 countries and was a strong advocate for women and those with disabilities. When she visited Akita, in Japan, she remarked that she would like an Akita dog – a popular breed there – and was presented with one from the Japanese Government.

Helen was recognised by the US Government

for her

achievements and was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965. In 1980, the US Postal Service issued a stamp depicting her and in 2003, Alabama State honoured her by minting a coin featuring her image. It is the only state coin to feature braille.

Helen spent her life helping others triumph over adversity and was hugely courageous herself. She died on 1st June, 1968.



# Questions

Record your answers in complete sentences.

Look under the heading 'Early Life' for the answers.

1. In what century was Helen Keller born?

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2. What is another word for 'plantation'?

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3. What is the difference between Visible Speech and braille? Use the text to help you.

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4. In paragraph 3, the letters in the word w-a-t-e-r are separated by hyphens.

Why did the author write it like this?

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5. Using the text, can you find and record three past tense verbs in the table?  
Can you change them into the present tense and record them in the table too?

Past Tense	Present Tense

6. Some of the text is split into paragraphs. When a writer needs to divide their work, can you explain when a new paragraph is needed?

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7. How old was Helen Keller when she wrote her autobiography?  
Why do you think she wrote it at that age?

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8. Do you think Helen was right to spend her life helping others or should she have concentrated on her own studies and writing? Give reasons for your answer.

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**Extension Task**

Think of a system that would help a deaf or blind child come to school independently and describe it briefly here. (The system could involve people, animals and/or technology).

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# Answers

1. In what century was Helen Keller born?

**Helen was born in the 19th century.**

2. What is another word for 'plantation'?

**Another word for plantation is farm or homestead.**

3. What is the difference between Visible Speech and braille? Use the text to help you.

**The difference between Visible Speech and braille is that Visible Speech uses the palm of the hand to spell words and symbols out for the blind person and braille uses raised dot on paper for the blind person to read with their fingertips.**

4. In paragraph 3, the letters in the word w-a-t-e-r are separated by hyphens. Why did the author write it like this?

**The author wrote the word w-a-t-e-r like this because she wanted to give the reader the impression that she was sounding out every letter as she put her hand under the pump and felt the running water.**

5. Using the text, can you find and record three past tense verbs in the table? Can you change them into the present tense and record them in the table too?

**Examples could include: spoke, replaced, talked, used, recommended, taught, helped.**

Past Tense	Present Tense
read	read
revealed	reveal
wrote	write

6. Some of the text is split into paragraphs.

When does a writer need to start a new paragraph?

**A new paragraph is needed when there is a change in place, time, topic or person.**

7. How old was Helen Keller when she wrote her autobiography. Why do you think she wrote it at that age?

**Helen Keller was 21 when she wrote her autobiography. This seems young, but at the time she had already overcome many obstacles by studying at college and learning how to communicate, despite being deaf-blind. She may not have thought that she would achieve even more in her lifetime, so the time was right for her to publish her autobiography.**

8. Do you think Helen was right to spend her life helping others or should she have concentrated on her own studies and writing? Give reasons for your answer.

**Various answers.**

**I think Helen should have continued with her own studies because she could then have got a good job and been able to earn a living.**

**Or: I think Helen was right to spend her life helping others because she became an example of what could be achieved through hard work and a system that could help people communicate, like braille.**

### **Extension Task**

**Various answers.**