This story was written by Isaac Asimov in 1951. It addresses the question of distance learning using a computer. At that time, the idea of this type of learning was science fiction, and having a home computer was unimaginable. Most people did not even own a television set at the time!

2 Read the story, *The Fun They Had*. As you read, notice the boldfaced vocabulary. Try to guess its meaning from the context.

THE FUN THEY HAD

By Isaac Asimov
(from *Earth Is Room Enough*)

1 Margie even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2157, she wrote, "Today Tommy found a real book!"

2 It was a very old book. Margie's grandfather once said that when he was a little boy, his grandfather told him that there was a time when all stories were printed on paper.

3 They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly,[1] and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way that they were supposed to—on a screen, you know. And then, when they had turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had had when they read it the first time.

4 "Gee," said Tommy, "what a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it, and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away."

5 "Same with mine," said Margie. She was eleven and hadn't seen as many books as Tommy had. He was thirteen.

6 She said, "Where did you find it?"

7 "In my house." He pointed without looking, because he was busy reading. "In the attic."

8 "What's it about?"

9 "School."

10 Margie was scornful.[2] "School? What's there to write about school? I hate school."

11 Margie had always hated school, but now she hated it more than ever. The mechanical teacher[3] had been giving her test after test in geography, and she had been doing worse and worse until her mother had shaken her head sorrowfully and sent for the County Inspector.

12 He was a round little man with a red face and a whole box of tools with dials and wires. He smiled at Margie and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart. Margie hoped he wouldn't know how to put it together again, but he knew how all right, and after an hour or so, there it was again, large and square and ugly, with a big screen on which all the lessons were shown and the questions were asked. That wasn't so bad. The part Margie hated most was the slot[4] where she had to put homework and test papers. She always had to write them out in a punch code[5] they made her learn when she was six years old, and the mechanical teacher calculated the mark[6] in no time.

13 The Inspector had smiled after he was finished and patted Margie's head. He said to her mother, "It's not the little girl's fault, Mrs. Jones. I think the geography **sector**[7] was geared a little too quick. Those things happen sometimes. I've slowed it up to a ten-year level. Actually, the **overall** pattern of her progress is quite satisfactory." And he patted Margie's head again.

14 Margie was **disappointed**. She had been hoping they would take the teacher away altogether. They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out[8] completely.

15 So she said to Tommy, "Why would anyone write about school?"

16 Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. "Because it's not our kind of school, stupid. This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago." He added loftily, pronouncing the word very carefully, "Centuries ago."

17 Margie was hurt. "Well, I don't know what kind of school they had all that time ago." She read the book over his shoulder for a while, then said, "Anyway, they had a teacher."

18 "Sure they had a teacher, but it wasn't a regular teacher. It was a man."

19 "A man? How could a man be a teacher?"

20 "Well, he just told the boys and girls things and gave them homework and asked them questions."

21 "A man isn't smart enough."

22 "Sure he is. My father knows as much as my teacher."

23 "He can't. A man can't know as much as a teacher."

24 "He knows almost as much, I betcha."[9]

25 Margie wasn't prepared to **dispute** that. She said, "I wouldn't want a strange man in my house to teach me."

26 Tommy screamed with laughter. "You don't know much, Margie. The teachers didn't live in the house. They had a special building and all the kids went there."

27 "And all the kids learned the same thing?"

28 "Sure, if they were the same age."

29 "But my mother says a teacher has to be **adjusted** to fit the mind of each boy and girl it teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently."

30 "Just the same, they didn't do it that way then. If you don't like it, you don't have to read the book."

31 "I didn't say I didn't like it," Margie said quickly. She wanted to read about those funny schools.

32 They weren't even half-finished when Margie's mother called, "Margie! School!"

33 Margie looked up. "Not yet, Mama."

34 "Now!" said Mrs. Jones. "And it's probably time for Tommy, too."

35 Margie said to Tommy, "Can I read the book some more with you after school?"

36 "Maybe," he said nonchalantly.[10] He walked away whistling, the dusty old book tucked beneath his arm.

37 Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bedroom, and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. It was always on at the same time every day except Saturday and Sunday, because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

38 The screen was lit up, and it said: "Today's arithmetic lesson is on the addition of proper fractions. Please insert yesterday's homework in the proper slot."

39 Margie did so with a sigh. She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighborhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day. They learned the same things, so they could help one another on the homework and talk about it.

40 And the teachers were people . . .

41 The mechanical teacher was flashing on the screen: "When we add the fractions $^1/_2$ and $^1/_4$—"

42 Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking of the fun they had.

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1 **crinkly:** having many folds or wrinkles; dried out
2 **scornful:** critical of someone or something that you think is not good
3 **mechanical teacher:** a computer (in this story)
4 **slot:** an opening for a paper
5 **punch code:** a pattern of holes put on a card that was used in past times for putting information in a computer
6 **mark:** a number score or letter grade
7 **sector:** an area
8 **blanked out:** been erased
9 ***I betcha:*** "I'll bet you"; "I'm sure"
10 **nonchalantly:** calmly, in an informal way

COMPREHENSION

Discuss the questions in a small group. Then share your ideas with the class.

1. What does Tommy discover in his attic, and why is it such an important discovery?

2. What does Margie think about the discovery?

3. How does Margie feel about the "old days"?

4. How do you think the writer feels about the future of books?

LIVEWORKSHEETS