Masks Protect Everyone

Hao Zhu

BEFORE YOU READ: Do you wear a mask? If so, when did you start wearing one? How did it feel?

"Uncomfortable to be watched suspiciously..."

I remember how embarrassed I was in the early days of the pandemic when I got on a train, and I was the only one with a mask on my face. Most of the passengers ignored me, but there were one or two people watching me cautiously. Maybe they thought I was infected and should not be there. But that is not at all what was happening.

I am from China, and I had read news about Covid-19 since it began exploding in China. Chinese health professionals suggested people wear masks to reduce the spread of the virus in public areas. Even though there was not yet a confirmed case in New York City, I did not believe that the city could be immune because it is a transportation hub. Maybe there were people already infected around me even though they did not realize it themselves.

"It is not my fault that I want to protect myself," I thought. "But it is really uncomfortable to be watched suspiciously. They might not know about the danger of the virus. Should I explain it to them?" I asked myself. "Maybe not. They do not know me, and they would not believe me."

"How violent and ignorant people are!"

At dinner, my wife told me that she heard that someone wearing a mask was pushed down onto the tracks in a subway station. She was worrying about me. My daughter was so frightened that she stopped wearing a mask on the train.

I felt upset and thought, "How violent and ignorant people are!" I decided I had to do something. I convinced my daughter not to go to school until the situation was better.

I told my wife, "We should tell neighbors and co-workers the importance of wearing masks, and we can share our back-up masks with them." My wife agreed.

"Sounds good," she said. "We would be safer if our neighbors are all safe."

"A mask offers a layer of protection."

The next morning, I went to work with a mask on for the first time. I had been too ashamed to do it before. Some co-workers watched me mockingly.

"Are you getting the coronavirus?" Jason laughed at me.

"Not at all," I responded. "I am trying to protect myself from getting infected."

An unofficial poster designed to look like a New York City subway poster. Read all the text of the poster. What do you think this poster is a response to? Photo by Jess Hawsor from wikimedia.com.

"I see," Jason replied. "But professors said we only need to wash our hands frequently and keep social distance." Jason smiled and pretended to move far away from me.

"Keeping social distance is a good idea," I explained. "But I have a question for the professors: How do we keep distance from people on a crowded subway? People are so close, they can breathe on you and sprinkle the virus on your face. A mask offers a layer of protection."

My friend Jackie commented, "In the United States, only patients and doctors wear masks."

"Got you," I said. "Do you know there is at least a 14-day latent period for coronavirus?"

"Really?" he replied.

"Yes, trust me. You might not know whether the person speaking with you has been infected or not. So I suggest you wear a mask, too, and I have some masks to share."

"Thank you!" they said. They took the masks, but I never saw them wear them.

One month later, Governor Cuomo signed an executive order mandating everyone to wear a mask in public. Now, more and more people are beginning to see the importance of wearing masks.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What is xenophobia? If you don't know, look it up and learn the definition. Did Hao Zhu and his family experience xenophobia or racism or both? Explain. Use evidence from the text.

2. Have you witnessed or experienced xenophobia or racism connected to wearing a mask? Describe what you witnessed or experienced. Write about it. If appropriate, use dialogue to tell your story.

3. Make your own poster (like the one on the previous page) about how people should be responding to the coronavirus. Imagine it will be put up in a public place like the subway. Handwrite or draw it, or use software on your computer to design your poster. Make rough drafts and get feedback before making a final version.

Hao Zhu is from China. He is an ESOL student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City. He is a programmer, and he likes writing.

Learn How to Write Dialogue!

First, think about why it matters. Dialogue (sometimes spelled dialog) is a tool that can help you tell a story. Look back over Hao Zhu's story and notice the dialogue. What effect does it have on you as a reader?

Second, learn the rules for writing dialogue.

a) Study the paragraph breaks in Hao Zhu's story. Can you figure out a rule for when to use paragraph breaks when writing dialogue?

b) Study the punctuation and capitalization. For example, does the period go inside or outside the close quotation mark? Write down as many rules as you can figure out. Then go look up the rules to see if you got them right and to learn more.

Third, underline the words that Hao Zhu uses to describe talking. For example, *said, replied, commented*. Make a list of more verbs you could use to describe dialogue.

Fourth, write your own dialogue. Use appropriate slang to make the dialogue more realistic. Share your dialogue with others, get feedback, and re-write.