



Tips for Bringing Life Stories to Life

A biographer needs two skills: to be a sleuth and a storyteller. Storytelling is one of the most powerful narrative techniques you can use as you embark on writing a biography. Here are some tips you can use to help make your assignment a winner.

Tease with tension

Don't start at the beginning. A great biography does not open with "Thomas Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743." Rather, your first line should be like bait on the end of a fishing line. You want to hook your reader. "When Thomas Jefferson penned the epitaph for his tomb, he chose not to mention he served as President for eight years. He didn't think that it was as great an achievement as the other accomplishments of his life." Doesn't that make you want to read further?

Dramatic tension, showing rather than telling, is a great way to bring interest to the story you are telling. It's always more effective to permit readers to make their own judgments about your subject. For instance, your narration will be strong and more convincing if you show your subject engaged in an act of meanness and cruelty rather than announce that he is mean and cruel.

Resist the temptation to foretell the future. Just as a novelist work to keep the tension of the present alive, so should you. It stifles the drama if you remind your readers that "this would be last cup of coffee so-and-so enjoyed before he died of a heart attack."

Even if you are writing about a person whose fate everyone knows, such as John F. Kennedy, reminding your readers regularly that he has only 11 days to live diminishes the moment. The President certainly didn't base his actions on that knowledge. On the other hand, you might use the subject's future the way a novelist might and use a little foreshadowing. Your readers will enjoy it and take pride when they connect the clues you leave. Your English teacher will also be impressed.

Stay in the moment

Just as you should not be a soothsayer, you should never remove the reader from the time period in which they're immersed if you want to tell your story most powerfully. When dealing with money, for instance, don't compare its worth to 21st century value. Instead use facts from your research to convey the same point. For instance, find out how much a meal cost or how much money it took to rent a house. That way, you can say that the \$100 your subject earned was enough to feed and house him for a year.

Use dramatic dialogue

Think of the good sections in a novel you read. Often they were scenes of conversation between characters. You can do the same with the biography you are writing. Examine the documents and letters you have. It is likely that in one of them a conversation was reported. When you use the dialogue, don't keep explaining where you found this conversation. It will break the magic of the moment. Compare these two versions of the same event.

Version 1	Version 2
<p>In an article he would publish several years later, Smith described his visit with Jefferson. When Smith entered the room, Jefferson said, "I see you are still up to your old tricks." Smith asked him, "what do you mean?"</p> <p>"Why you are trying to get them to vote against my idea," Jefferson said. Smith wrote that Jefferson smiled when saying this causing him to think that maybe he was only teasing.</p>	<p>"I see you are still up to your old tricks," Jefferson said when Smith entered the room. "What do you mean?" asked Smith</p> <p>"Why you are trying to get them to vote against my idea," Jefferson said with a smile, leaving Smith to think that maybe the President was only teasing.</p>

Both are accurate, but the second one is leaner and more dramatic, lets the action speak for itself, and doesn't interrupt the re-creation of the scene with needless sourcing information. (You must, however, **be sure to provide the source of your information** in either footnotes or endnotes, depending on your teacher's preference.)

Don't show off your research

Be careful in how you display your research. You are rightfully proud of the facts you dug up. Just as the fossil record is at the center of a paleontologist's work, so are your facts. But they should be used to tell your story; they shouldn't become your story. The bulk of an iceberg lies beneath the surface of the water; the power of your story should also come from its unseen portions.

In the end

Develop the natural drama of your subject's life, allow readers to make their own discoveries, and use your research wisely without displaying it as a trophy of your hard work. That's how to embrace the power of storytelling and add vitality to your writing which will keep your reader turning the pages.

Adapted from "Bringing Life Stories to Life" by James McGrath Morris, *Writer's Digest*, July 2005.
Reproduction of this handout is permitted for instructional use.