



Using Biography in the History Classroom

Biography is an engaging form of writing that can inspire both the young reader and writer in your classroom.

This handout contains:

- Discussion of the nature of biography
- Suggestions for its use in the classroom.

“There is properly no history, only biography.”
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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As adults, the difference between history and biography is easily discernable. But this is not true for students. Many of them are Gertrude Steins when it comes to a book: *a text is a text*.

So in introducing students to biographies, either to supplement course materials or to engage them in writing their own, one should begin by drawing the differences between biography and history.

- **Biography is the story of an individual.**
- **History is the story of a group.**
- **Biographies focus on the individual as opposed to the whole.**

Each approach—history or biography—has its advantages and disadvantages in teaching about the past:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Readers tend to relate more to the life story of an individual.• Biographies usually provide an engaging narrative thread that makes them very readable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biographies elevate the importance of the individual.• They are subject-centered. <i>If one reads a biography of FDR, one might rightly think that he ended the Depression all by himself.</i>• Biographies can also be devoid of important context.

That said, by having your students read and practice the art and craft of biography can enhance the teaching of American history.

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Reading

The easiest and simplest way to make use of biographies is to either assign excerpts or read aloud from them.

In the last thirty or forty years, biography has increasingly become a literary art. Biographers work hard to producing a compelling narrative, create dramatic tension, and provide a readable and exciting account of their subjects. By introducing samples of this work into the classroom you can:

- **Increase level of interest in the events being studied**
- **Provides meaning to what seem like dry and unconnected facts.**
- **Humanizes the story**
- **May increase motivation to learn**

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Here, for example, are three to four sentences from two different accounts of President Lincoln confronting the decision he had to make regarding Fort Sumter.

Version One

Lincoln received conflicting advice about what to do. Winfield Scott, his commanding general, saw "no alternative to surrender," convinced that it would take eight months to prepare naval and ground forces to relieve Fort Sumter. Secretary of State William H. Seward also favored abandoning the fort to avoid provoking a civil war, but also considered the possibility of inciting a foreign war (probably with France or Spain) as a way to reunite the country.

Version Two

That night, Lincoln was unable to sleep. The time for musing and assessment was at an end. He must make the decision between a surrender that might compromise the honor of the North and tear it apart, or a reinforcement that might carry the country into civil war.

The Power of Reading Aloud

No one is too old to be read aloud to. We have lost something valuable in believing that reading aloud is something reserved for children. Reading aloud is a valuable and important practice. In fact, reading aloud to high school students is very important. For many of them reading is a struggle and as a result they do not hear—when they read to themselves—the beauty of a well-written passage. Don't under-estimate the power you have when you—as an adult with good reading skills—read a passage aloud to them.

The first version was drawn from a high school history textbook, the second version come from Doris Kearns Lincoln biography *A Team of Rivals*.

In short, consider stocking your classroom with excerpts from the best biographies and either read them or assign them for reading to your students. You may be pleasantly surprised by the results.

That is one way you can use biographies. A far more complicated but rewarding use of biographies in teaching is to have your students write them.

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Writing

Having students write biographical works can do a number of things:

Create a strong personal relationship with a figure in the past

We all know the power of assigning a student to spend time with a single individual from the past. Having a student write an account of the life of a Chinese railroad worker, a delegate to the Constitutional convention, a nineteenth century baron, a soldier, a politician, a poet, a singer, a painter, an American of any sort will engrave forever that life story into the student's mind.

Enhance critical thinking, researching, and writing skills

The skills they will apply to the task are important ones. They must sift and evaluate evidence, work with primary and secondary sources, and organize facts. In the end they must produce a story. That's why, at its core, writing biography challenges a student in different ways than other kind of school writing.

A student interpreting a life from the past may come to realize one of the most important lessons of history: Things did not *have to* work out the way they did.

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Suggested Steps

So let's presume you are convinced that you want your students to try their hand at writing a biography of a figure from American history. How do you prevent this seemingly good idea from turning into a disaster?

Research

Here are two preliminary steps to follow:

1. **Work with the school librarian to provide them with a limited amount of research material comprising both primary and secondary sources.** It will assist your students in the daunting research phase. It will help you with quality control, as the students will be using dependable sources. It will also help reduce plagiarism and make it easier to spot.
2. **Provide the students with a series of questions to help guide them in their research.** Students at this age often have a hard time distinguishing what is important and what is not. The temptation for them, when doing research, is to hit the photocopying machine. So good specific question will help make sure their notecards, or whatever system of note-taking you have them use, will come in with consistent and useful information. This will make it more likely they will have the research they need to write the biography and it will make it easier for you to supervise and to grade. Some of the questions can be in the nature of a scavenger hunt that can add fun to the project. For instance, ask them to share an unusual discovery they made reading one of the primary sources.

Writing

Before they embark on writing, you must provide instructional time on how to write a biography one how, unlike a five-paragraph thesis-led essay, a biography is a thematic narrative tale built on a foundation of facts.

To assist you, distribute and review "Tips for Bringing Life Stories to Life" to your students.

Follow-Up Activities

Student-produced biographies can create opportunities for enhancing the instruction of the entire class. Here are some ideas:

- **Students can take on the role of their subject and the class can play games such as "What's My Line" or "To Tell the Truth."** In this way, the students learn about each other's work.
- **The students can put on skits in which several students take on the roles of their subjects and interact.** Douglass and Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Nixon and Kennedy, Hawthorne and Emerson, the possibilities are limitless.
- **The students, again taking on the role of their subjects, can be interviewed.** Imagine, George Washington holding a press conference in your classroom.

If you are more ambitious, student-produced biographies can be adapted to a useful inquiry lesson plan.

Let's say you are teaching the Constitution Convention. Each of your students has produced a short, readable biography of one of the delegates. What you now have a classroom of students who each know a lot about one delegate but very little about the larger group. This is a wonderful opportunity for students to use their research to learn about the functioning the larger group.