

College Guild
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Biography

~ Biography ~

Unit 3 of 4

A fascinating genre (type) of literature is the biography, a document produced by a person who researches and writes about another person's life. Subjects can range from sports figures and soldiers to queens and presidents.

A biography is not a court record or a legal document. The biographer is a human being writing about another human being, and his own temperament, his own point of view, and his own frame of reference are unconsciously imposed upon the person he is writing about. -- Marchette Chute, American biographer

A biography tries to show people as they really are or were. A good one brings the person to life. It widens a sense of enjoyment over and beyond the person. For example, it gives the reader knowledge of a particular society, forms of custom and historical events, to name a few. It offers the reader new "friends," ideas, lifestyles, and understanding of relationships. There are many types of biography.

SIMPLE -- offers a glance at the subject.

Examples: obituary, book jacket about the author, Who's Who in America, encyclopedia entry.

POPULAR -- the life of any current celebrity in the limelight.

FICTIONALIZED -- tells the basic story of a subject in novel form.

Examples: The Perfect Storm, a true account and analysis of men against the sea; Loving Frank, the story of the love life of the great architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

AUDIO-VISUAL -- television programs such as "Biography" or "American Masters" that show pictures and reenact milestones in a subject's life.

Example: the movie "Lust for Life," dramatizing the artistic and personal struggles of the artist Vincent Van Gogh.

DEFINITIVE/SCHOLARLY -- usually a fully detailed picture from childhood to death, including the person's ancestry, education, jobs, relationships, health.

Example: Carl Sandburg, by Harry Golden, a portrait of one of America's great poets -- who is also known for his monumental biography of Abraham Lincoln. Sandburg assembled his materials from people, books, and places. He read Lincoln's speeches and writings (over one million words in all), and biographies by men who had known Lincoln. He also visited every library that had Lincoln material, every photographer's studio, and every home where Lincoln had lived. The result of all this research was originally contained in six volumes entitled, The Prairie Years. Later, Sandburg compressed the volumes into 430,000 words and in 1954 published, Lincoln: The Prairie Years. The Foreword to this work consists of twenty-one pages of acknowledgements and sources.

After we read a full biography, we get a real look at the subject, his character, background, influences, good and bad experiences; his fears, joys, and accomplishments and loves. We may "know" the person better than we know our own

loved ones. Who, for instance, asks or even talks about their parents' lives in detail? What do we really know about them? We are often too busy living and sorting out our own lives to take the time to interview them or research their past.

Note: In the following, the use of "his" will also stand for "her" because it is understood to be neutral.

Choose one of the persons listed below and be imaginative. Use the knowledge that you already have about the person's life. You may not know all the facts to be able to answer the questions, so create the answers. You can substitute another well-known person (past or present) for a subject.

- * World Heavyweight Champion -- Mohammed Ali
- * English Princess -- Princess Di
- * Actor -- Matt Damon
- * Singer -- Mariah Carey
- * Computer Wiz -- Bill Gates
- * Talk Show Host -- Oprah Winfrey
- * Movie Director -- Steven Spielberg
- * Comedian -- Carlos Mencia
- * Baseball Player -- Jackie Robinson
- * Admirable Person -- Abraham Lincoln

1. Describe a person who had a significantly bad or good influence on your subject's life.
2. Was there a teenage experience that affected his life?
3. In order to enter his work life, what conflicts or obstacles stood in his way?
4. Describe other ambitions or desires that the person had besides his work. (*Example: an accountant may really yearn to be a rancher.*)
5. Describe the person's lifestyle as a youth.
6. What were/are his spiritual beliefs?
7. Describe his society, the events that were occurring during any segment of his life. (*Example: The Vietnam War, moon landing by Armstrong, assassination of Martin Luther King.*)
8. List a number of friends, employers, or relatives who supported the person throughout any phase of his life.
9. What were/are his political attitudes?
10. Describe in detail his physical appearance.
11. List some interesting, unique facts or experiences that aren't ordinarily known about the person's "other side."
12. Was he a healthy person most of his life? Explain.
13. What were some encouraging moments in his life?
14. Besides coping with his own problems, did he have to face and deal with other people's problems?

- 15. Explain his romantic life throughout his lifetime.
- 16. What were/are his cultural interests (art, music, dance...)?
- 17. Choose one word to describe your subject and tell why you chose it.
- 18. Why did you choose to write about this person?
- 19. Create two questions you would ask if you were the biographer.
- 20. Make a list of people, past or present, that you would like to read about and explain why.

James Boswell wrote a biography, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, about the English critic, essayist, and a man of letters. In order to do a definitive biography, Boswell lived with Johnson, traveled with him, and visited him. He observed what he ate, what he spoke about, how he treated friends, and so on. After the biography was published it was said that "everyone needs a Boswell."

21. Would you approve of or dislike a person who observed you so closely? Explain.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes