Look at the Subjects of Biographies

1. Focus

Introduce Biography Writing

Display as many biographies as possible for students to view. Use the sample think-aloud below as a model of how to talk to students about what factors make someone a worthy subject for a biography.

Sample think-aloud. Say: I brought in a selection of books for us to look at today. They all have something in common. They are all about the lives of real people. Some of the people are still alive and others lived hundreds of years ago. They represent people in many different categories. For example, here is a biography of a president. This one is about an athlete. I also found a biography about a famous scientist. But not all of these biographies are about people who achieved amazing things or were heroes. For example, look at this one about Jesse James. He was a bank robber. And this one is about Adolf Hitler. He was hardly a sympathetic or admirable person. But all of these people had qualities that made writers want to write about them. What do you think some of those qualities might be? Allow responses.

Say: Biography writers choose subjects who they feel other people should know about for some reason. A subject may be someone from modern times or someone from the distant past. It may be a man or woman who made a huge contribution to the world. Some biography subjects have made important discoveries that changed history. Others have demonstrated remarkable acts of leadership or courage. And sometimes they show us the darker side of human nature. They help us get inside the mind of someone who affected the world in a negative way. And keep in mind that biographies don’t have to be about famous people. Sometimes a biographer researches the life of someone people have never heard of. They read primary sources, such as journals, newspapers, and magazines, and learn firsthand about someone’s life. For the next several weeks, we are going to read, write, and share biographies with each other. In the process, we’ll learn about all kinds of subjects.

Introduce the Purpose of and Audience for Biography Writing

Say: Most of us are curious about other people’s lives. Sometimes we read biographies to learn about how real people lived at different times in the past. Sometimes we read them because the subjects are role models who inspire us in our own lives. And we also read biographies to be entertained. Think how many people read celebrity biographies over summer vacation. They read these biographies to experience the glamorous life of a well-known performer. And of course we read biographies in school to help us learn about the subjects.

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, teachers will:

• Launch the biography writing unit of study.
• Establish themselves as biography writing mentors by sharing examples of biographies.
• Model how writers think about their subjects.

Students will:

• Talk about what makes someone a good subject for a biography.
• Discuss how the time during which a subject lived affects that person’s biography.

Preparation

Materials Needed

• Examples of biographies from within the classroom or the school library.
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

Have a selection of biographies ready for the model portion of this lesson. Make sure to include biographies of men and women from diverse backgrounds and time periods. If you have English learners, you may wish to support the oral language activities by preparing the sample sentence frames from “Strategies to Support ELs” on chart paper prior to the mini-lesson.
we are studying. Biography writers help us explore the lives of interesting or remarkable people. They try to give us a balanced, complete picture of the whole life of a person, from birth to death. They do this by studying many sources of information about the subject, including primary sources like the subject’s diaries or journals, birth certificate, school records, speeches, or newspaper articles about the subject.

### 2. Rehearse

#### Practice Talking About Biographies

Invite students to work with partners. Each student should identify at least two people they think would make worthy biography subjects. Students should tell their partners why each person would make a good biography subject and how they might go about learning more about each person. Remind students to consider what time period the person is from and what types of information sources about that person are likely to be available.

If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

#### Share Biography Ideas with the Class

Invite volunteers to share their ideas for biography subjects with the class and to explain why they chose that person and what sources they might use to research that subject. Use one or more of the following questions to guide discussion:

- How easy or difficult was it to generate ideas for subjects?
- Thinking about all of these ideas our class generated, what generalizations can we make about biography subjects?
- What sources of information did you hear about today that you have never thought about using before?

### 3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Today we learned that many kinds of people can make worthy subjects of a biography. We learned that biographers use many kinds of information sources. In the next several weeks, we will learn a lot about the lives of many people past and present. Keep in mind the qualities that you think will make someone an interesting biography subject.

Invite students to write one or more paragraphs identifying someone they feel would make a worthy biography subject and describing the qualities that make that subject worthy in their eyes.

## Strategies to Support ELs

### Beginning

Meet with beginning ELs one on one while other students work with partners. Display additional biographies as you say the word biography. Use the sentence frame This biography is about ______ to name the subject of each biography. Encourage students to use the sentence frame if they can.

### Intermediate

Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner practice. Write these simple sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to talk about their biography ideas:

- I would like to write about ______.
- He/She is important because ______.

### Advanced

Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice.

### All Levels

If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share this English/Spanish cognate to help them understand the lesson focus:

- biography/la biografía.