Think About the Subjects of Biographies

1. Focus

Introduce Biography Writing

Display a variety of biographies for students to view. Include biographies of people from different walks of life and time periods. 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: These books are biographies. They tell about the lives of real people. Some of these people are still alive and others lived long ago. There are biographies about scientists, athletes, and politicians. But not all of these biographies are about people who achieved amazing things or were heroes. For example, this biography is about Adolf Hitler. He was not an admirable person, and he caused the deaths of millions of innocent people. But all of the people in these biographies, including Adolf Hitler, had qualities that made authors want to write about them. What do you think some of those qualities might be? (Allow responses.)

Say: Biography writers choose subjects whom they feel other people should know about for some reason. These subjects have had an effect on humankind in some way, whether it was positive or negative. These subjects may have made important discoveries that changed history or may 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. Biographies don’t have to be about famous people. Sometimes a biographer researches the life of someone people have never heard of. Biographers 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 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. 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 we are studying. We learn about people who made important contributions to science and history. 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, such as the subject’s diaries or journals, birth certificate, school records, newspaper articles, and speeches made by the subject.

2. Rehearse

Practice Talking About Biographies

Invite students to work with partners. Both students should identify at least two people they think would make worthy biography subjects. Students should tell their partner what time period each person is from and why the person would make a good biography subject.

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?
• In what ways have these subjects had an impact on us?
• Thinking about all of the ideas our class generated, what generalizations can we make about biography subjects?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Today we learned that many kinds of people can make worthy subjects of a biography. 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 a fascinating 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.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite two or three students to read aloud their paragraphs. Discuss the qualities students’ focused on.

Strategies to Support ELs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>Meet with beginning ELs one on one while other students work with partners on the “Practice Talking About Biographies” activity. Display additional biographies as you say the word biography. Use the following sentence frame to name the subject of each biography: This biography is about ______. Encourage students to use the sentence frame if they can.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner practice. Write 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 ______.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>All Levels</td>
<td>If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share this English/Spanish cognate to help them understand the lesson focus: biography/la biografía.</td>
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