Brainstorm Ideas for a Biography

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:

• Learn a strategy for brainstorming ideas for writing a biography by thinking about people they find interesting.
• Work in a small group to identify interesting people to write about.
• Contribute to a class list of people who could be interesting subjects for biographies.

Preparation

Materials Needed

• Chart paper and markers in several colors
• Writer’s notebooks
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

If necessary, copy the sentence frames from “Strategies to Support ELs“ onto chart paper.

1. Focus

Explain the Brainstorming Process

Say: Athletes warm up by stretching their muscles. Writers warm up by brainstorming. When we brainstorm ideas for writing a biography, we think about and jot down all the interesting people we could write about—people from the past and people from the present; people we have learned about in social studies or science class; people who are famous and even people who aren’t. Brainstorming helps us think of all the possibilities for people whose life stories we could tell. Let me show you how brainstorming helps me.

Model Brainstorming

Use the sample think-aloud to help you develop your own brainstorming models to share with students. Demonstrate how to record ideas with chart paper or by using the interactive whiteboard resources as you model brainstorming.

Sample think-aloud. Ask: Who do I think is a very interesting person? My friend says Pele is the best soccer player who has ever played the game. His life story must be very interesting. I’ll put him on my list. I’m really interested in the work of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Like me, he was born in Wisconsin. I grew up near Spring Green, where Wright lived and worked for a long time. His beautiful house there was set on fire by someone who had a grudge against him. I think his life would make a very interesting biography. Someone else I’d like to write about is Christa McAuliffe. She was the first teacher to go into space, but she didn’t quite make it there. She died with her crew when her space shuttle exploded shortly after taking off. She’s going on my list, and so is my father. Even though he’s not famous, I think he’s had a very interesting life and I’d really like to tell about it in a biography. Continue talking about other ideas and adding them to the chart.

People I Could Write About

Pele
Frank Lloyd Wright
Christa McAuliffe
My father
My grandfather
Crazy Horse
Louis Armstrong
Eva Peron

Sample Brainstorming List
2. Rehearse

Practice Brainstorming Ideas for a Biography

Encourage students to work in small groups to brainstorm ideas for writing a biography. Remind them that the subjects of biographies don’t need to be famous; they can even be members of the students’ own families. Subjects for biographies may be people still living or people who lived a long time ago. Remind students to record their ideas in their writer’s notebooks.

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

Share Ideas

Bring students back together and ask them to share ideas for subjects to write about. As students contribute ideas, record them on a class brainstorming list. Reread the list together and ask students if they can see categories of people on the list. Is there more than one athlete? Which people are no longer living, etc.? As students see categories emerge, use a different color marker to underline or circle the names that fit into a category. Then write the name of each category at the bottom of the chart in its designated color. This can provide students with a strategy to organize and think about their brainstorming.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We’ve learned a strategy for using our choices of interesting people to brainstorm ideas for writing a biography. As you brainstorm on your own, remember that you are not limited by a person’s fame or how much you know about that person already. What’s important is to choose a subject who is interesting to you and whom your biography can make interesting to others.

Encourage students to apply this strategy when they brainstorm during independent writing time. During conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share some of their ideas for biographies that they are excited about.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning

Invite beginning ELs to tell you about a person they find interesting, using whatever words they can. As they share, write down the person’s name and some key words that tell why the student thinks he or she is interesting. Help students use the words to form simple sentences.

Intermediate and Advanced

Provide sentence frames to help ELs talk to their group about their ideas for writing a biography. For example:

An interesting person is ______.
This person is interesting because ______.
One interesting thing about him/her is ______.
Another interesting thing is ______.

All Levels

If you have ELs whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates: biography/la biografía; famous/famoso(a); important/importante; interesting/interesante.