Evaluate Your Ideas to Narrow the Focus

1. Focus

Explain Narrowing the Focus

Say: Writers narrow their focus when they choose the best idea for writing a biography from all those they’ve brainstormed. That’s not always easy, especially when we like several of our ideas. One good strategy for narrowing our writing focus is to ask questions about each idea and then use our answers to decide which one will work best. We can use a rubric that lets us rate our answers depending on how strongly we feel about them. This gives us more specific information than just a yes or a no. We can ask different types of questions depending on the genre. Let me show you how I do that before I write a biography.

Model Evaluating Ideas to Narrow Your Focus

Display an evaluation rubric for a biography like the one shown for this lesson or use the interactive whiteboard resources. Read aloud each evaluation question. Use the sample topic ideas on the chart or replace them with ideas of your own to model thinking aloud to narrow the focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas for the Subject of a Biography</th>
<th>How certain am I that I like this subject as a topic for a biography?</th>
<th>How certain am I that I can develop an interesting biography on this subject?</th>
<th>How certain am I that I can find information about this subject?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My father</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pele</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Lloyd Wright</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christina McAuliffe</td>
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</table>

Sample think-aloud. Say: I brainstormed a list of ideas for writing a biography. Now I will use this rubric to help me decide which idea is best. I will start with my father.

After first evaluation question. Say: I personally think that writing about my father is a great idea. My father has had an interesting life, escaping with his family from a country torn by war to this country when he was a teenager and learning to adapt to a new way of life. He was able to make a very successful life for himself and his family. I am very certain that I like this idea, so I’m going to rate this question a three. Write 3 on the chart in the correct box.

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:

• Learn how to use a rubric and idea evaluation questions to narrow the writing focus for a biography.
• Work with partners to evaluate their biography topic ideas using the questions.
• Discuss the strategy and how they can use it in their own writing.

Preparation

Materials Needed

• Chart paper and markers
• Biography Topic Ideas Evaluation Rubric (BLM 2)
• Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

If you will not be using the interactive whiteboard resources, copy the Biography Topic Ideas Evaluation rubric onto chart paper prior to the mini-lesson. If necessary, copy the sentence frames from “Strategies to Support ELs” onto chart paper.

Sample Biography Topic Ideas Evaluation Rubric (BLM 2)
After second evaluation question. Say: I think my father’s life is very interesting. I know I’m interested in the things that happened to him. I love it when he tells stories about growing up in his home country and having to escape when he was a teenager because of the political unrest there. Although my readers won’t be able to relate personally to his story like I can, I’m pretty certain I can make my father’s life story interesting to others. I’ll rate this question a two. Write 2 on the chart in the correct box.

After third evaluation question. Say: I have my father to interview for first-hand information about his life. I can also find information on his home country and the situation there when my father was growing up. This will provide background for why my father had to leave there. I am certain that I can find enough information to write a good biography on my father’s life. I’ll rate this question a three. (Write 3 on the chart in the correct box.) Now that I’ve rated each question for this idea, I’ll total my numbers. (Write 8 in the correct box.) A score of eight is pretty high, so this idea must be a good one for me to write about. Explain that as students evaluate ideas, they might end up with two or more ideas with the same score. If this happens, encourage them to use the following questions to help them choose between the ideas:

• Which idea would I like to research more?
• Which idea would I choose to read about?

2. Rehearse

Practice Narrowing the Focus

Invite students to work with partners and apply the evaluation questions on the rubric to one idea they have for a biography. If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

Share Ideas

Bring students back together and invite them to share ideas they evaluated and discuss how the questions helped them decide if they were good ideas.

Strategies to Support ELs

**Beginning**

Work individually with beginning ELs to answer the three questions on the evaluation chart.

**Intermediate and Advanced**

Write and model the following sentence structures that students will need as they evaluate their ideas with a partner:

- I would rate this question a ______ because ______.
- I like/do not like this idea because ______.
- I am very certain/somewhat certain that I can ______.

**All Levels**

If you have ELs whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates: interested/interesado(a), person/la persona.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We just learned a strategy for narrowing our focus to select an idea for writing a biography. We used a rubric and asked questions to help us discover which of our ideas for a biography would be the best one to choose. You can use this same chart to evaluate your ideas during independent writing time.

Make BLM 2 available to students who are ready to select their biography topics 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 the class together. Invite any students who have finished evaluating their ideas for a biography to share the subjects they have chosen to write about and explain why they chose them.