Use Third Person Voice in a Biography

1. Focus

Explain Using Third Person Voice in a Biography

Say: When I write a biography, I am retelling another person’s life based on my research about that person and the period of history in which he or she lived. To narrate a biography, I use a third person voice. A third person voice allows me to place my subject in historical context, which allows readers to draw conclusions about my subject based on events, places, times, and people who were or who are important to my subject. With a third person voice, I am outside of my subject’s life, looking in as an authority on the subject. I can examine my subject’s character and experiences from a distance. Today I’m going to discuss an example of using third person voice in a biography, and you will learn how you can use this voice in your own biography writing.

Model Using Third Person Voice in a Biography

Display the modeling text on chart paper or use the interactive whiteboard resources. Ask students to listen for how the writer uses third person voice as you read the text aloud.

It’s difficult to confirm the facts of Cleopatra’s life. So much about her is unknown or has been slanted by later writers. After her death, the Romans intentionally destroyed many of the documents of her reign. The lines blur between fact and myth.

Modeling Text

Say: I see that the narrator uses the third person voice to establish herself as a trustworthy authority on her subject. The narrator does this first by telling me the limits of her own knowledge about Cleopatra—she says, “It’s difficult to confirm the facts.” These words suggest that this narrator will try to give me as honest and truthful an account of Cleopatra’s life as possible. The third person voice also allows the writer to tell us about the historical context for the biography. This would not have been possible if the text had been written in the first person, imagining Cleopatra’s own voice. There would not have been a way for Cleopatra to know about the later writers who slanted her story after her death. Using a first person voice would have also changed this text to a work of fiction because the author could not have truly spoken from Cleopatra’s perspective. By using a third person voice in a biography, a writer can include language that establishes authority and provides historical context for the subject’s life.
2. Rehearse

Practice Using Third Person Voice in a Biography

Display the practice text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources. Explain that the sentences tell part of Cleopatra’s story in a first person voice—an imagined account from her point of view.

We have raised a huge army to fight Octavian. If only we can defeat him! The soldiers are gathered now in western Greece. I sense that a battle is near.

Practice Text

Ask students to work with partners to rewrite the sentences using a third person voice. Invite them to tell the story as a biography writer would, adding details that they can remember about Cleopatra and her times. If necessary, remind them that Cleopatra and Mark Antony lost the battle with Octavian in 30 B.C.E. and this led to their downfall. Remind students that the third person voice allows writers to share facts, establish themselves as trustworthy authorities, and examine the subject from a distance. Encourage students to use language and knowledge that Cleopatra could not have used, but that a biography writer using the third person could. Students should write down their sentences and be prepared to read and explain them to the class.

Share Practice Sentences

Bring students together and invite pairs to read aloud their sentences and explain how they used the third person voice. Record some student sentences and post these as models for students to use as they write their biographies.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We just learned that using third person voice in a biography gives a writer ways to include historical details, explanations, and language that the subject may not have used him- or herself. As you write your biographies, remember to use a third person voice to communicate different types of information about your subjects and the times and places in which they lived.

Ask students to identify a section of their biographies that they can improve by strengthening their third person voice. 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 two or three students to read aloud a section of their biographies in which they strengthened the third person voice by adding new details and information.

Strategies to Support ELs

**Beginning**

Ask students to work with partners to generate simple sentences in the third person. Encourage one partner to perform a simple action, such as walking across the room. Model generating an oral sentence about the action. Say: He walked to the door. Encourage students to take turns performing simple actions while their partner describes each action to you orally. Provide the following sentence frames to help them:

*He ______._

*She ______._