

# **Have you Ever Told That Story Before? Student Biographers Asking Important Life Questions, Preserving Memories and Writing History**

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## **Overview**

This is a four week interdisciplinary unit created for fifth graders in a self-contained classroom. It can, however, be modified for use in the upper grades as well. Our school is home to speakers of 32 languages other than English. As is often the case in our particular setting, reading levels and literacy skills can range from students who are more than two years below grade level to students who are two or more years above grade level. Because this unit is designed to be taught in the literacy and social studies blocks, consideration has been given to creating activities and providing materials that will allow all students access to the content as well as to the skills required to become stronger and more perceptive readers and writers. The work students will do throughout the unit is aligned to the Common Core and district standards for reading informational text, writing, and speaking and listening.

The primary focus of the unit is the biography that each student will write about his/her oldest family member or close family friend. Students will read and analyze a biography and several corollary pieces on the same subject for main ideas, text structure and features, as well as author's perspective. Students will then turn their attention to collecting information about their own biographical subject – researching using a variety of sources, examining artifacts, and conducting interviews. They will write and publish the biography. Students will create a short class presentation which will utilize multi-media components. Additionally, students will create a time line of the historical events their subject's life encompassed. They may choose to further explore and write about a particular event and include it as an afterward in the biography. Finally, students will be

asked to write a reflection piece, identifying and examining common threads they see running through their own lives and those of their subject.

## **Rationale**

Viewed through my twelve year old eyes, my grandmother who lived with us was, simply, or grandmother – Baba. She was a stout little old lady who wore her long iron gray hair in two braids that encircled her head like a crown. She was never out of her bibbed apron which invariably covered a long, shapeless, faded print dress, except to don her best black gabardine, already shiny with wear, for church. She spoke almost no English, despite my earnest efforts to teach her through the adventures of Dick, Jane, and their dog, Spot. She and my mother, her only child, spoke constantly and companionably to one another in rapid, guttural Ukrainian. She was a vivid presence in our lives and exerted an inordinate, yet subtle degree of control over our small family. And I didn't really know her at all.

We children knew almost nothing about her early life, what she was, or did before becoming our grandmother. We knew, more accurately had heard, stories swirling about that she had come from Ukraine sometime before December, 1917 and that our grandfather had died, peacefully of course, smoking his pipe by the hearth. She never told us of her life before coming to America and we never asked. As I grew older and started to learn some history, I began to realize that she had come during the Russian Revolution. How old had she been? How had she managed this? Where did she get the money? Why did she come? Was she sent to save her or to avoid a scandal? What about her family? I had so many, many questions. Why hadn't I thought to ask when I could? There was so much to learn about her, about a tumultuous period in the history of the world that she had witnessed, or possibly even been a part of. And then it was too late.

This unit gives students the chance to find out about their own family's history and that of one of its members by writing the story of one of its oldest members. Though students will be actively involved in a great variety of literacy tasks, I think the most powerful will be the personal interview with their grandparent/subject. Quite possibly I've focused in on this because I didn't have that opportunity to do so myself and regret the loss of those memories. But I think it goes beyond the personal sense of loss and disappointment. I wasn't quite sure how to characterize this until I heard an interview on National Public Radio with Dave Isay, the creator of StoryCorps. I was struck by his notion that, listening is an act of love. He went on to explain: "Sitting down and being present with someone and asking them important questions is something that doesn't happen often during the course of day to day life. And it is one of the most profound and powerful ways we have to tell someone else how much we love them. Just asking them who they are and what they've learned in life, and how they want to be remembered ...it's one of the most remarkable and kind of nourishing experiences that I know of "(Isay 2014).

He's got it exactly right. We all have a story to tell, we all want to tell that story, and more importantly, we want someone to listen to it, to really hear it. The work students will do for this unit goes beyond mere exercises in literacy. They will forge a bond that is meaningful for child and grandparent, a connection and affirmation that this life is important and meaningful, that it has had an impact on what went before and what will be.

Through this unit I would like to give students the opportunity to discover/uncover a part of their own family's history through the story of one of its oldest members. After completing a class genre study on biography, where they will read and analyze a biography and other selections for form, structure and content, and authors' perspective, students will write a biography of their grandparent or great-grand parent. (If this is not possible or practical, then perhaps students could choose another older relative or a close family friend.) They will begin by writing down what they really want to know about that person and conducting an interview with him/her. They will also interview others who knew their subject – spouse, contemporaries, siblings, friends, neighbors, as well as their children and other relatives and add their own reminiscences. Their research will take them to family photographs and archival photographs of places that were important to the person but no longer exist or have been repurposed, to letters, diaries, maps, immigration documents, and artifacts found in the attic or an abandoned old trunk. Using the information gleaned from their research, they will write the biography.

In addition to the written piece, students will create a time line of the major world events that this person's life encompassed as a way of creating a context. Students may even choose to delve more deeply into a period their subject described as pivotal, researching and writing about that period. Both will be included in the biography as an afterword. Two copies of the biography will be published and bound, one presented to the subject and the other for the author.

Once the biography is completed, students will reflect on their work, looking for and identifying a thread or a theme they see in this life. Do they see the seeds of this in their own lives just yet? How do they see themselves in this person? In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? This reflection piece should be included as a note (possibly handwritten on special paper) and inserted into each copy of the biography.

At the conclusion of the project students will celebrate the lives of these important historical figures by creating a multi-media presentation of their subject which will be shared with the class as well as with invited family members.

## Background

Instructional time is precious and, given our district's intense focus on the high stakes areas of literacy and mathematics, there is little room at the curricular table for history/social studies. It is a required subject, but given the time constraints, it gets short shrift. History, as presented in most of the textbooks provided, is taught as if there were one true and objective account of the past, pulled together from irrefutable and unimpeachable sources. This single narrative viewpoint fails to include, or at least marginalizes, the experiences of countless groups and ignores individual voices. Though recent editions of school texts have made attempts to be more inclusive, most still pivot on what Roland Barthes called, "referential illusion", the notion that the way things are told is simply the way things were. They rarely cite sources; they eliminate meta-discourse, and speak in the omniscient 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the corporate author (qtd.in Wineburg 84).

Studying history by engaging in historical thinking, on the other hand, is a quite different way to approach the discipline. Studying history by thinking like a historian offers teachers and students rich opportunities not only for grappling with the past, but provides the best types of meaningful literacy experiences as well. Hayden White proposes that historical narratives are more akin to literature than the sciences, not because historical narratives are fictional, but because historians use literary devices to help make past events comprehensible to us. Historical narrative is narrative prose shaped by literary conventions and the historian's imagination/point of view. "In point of fact, history – the real world as it evolves in time – is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is familiar, form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same (98). Although the focus of this unit is the writing of a biography, the work that students do and the habits of mind, the ways of thinking are equally applicable to literacy or to the study of any historical period.

There are many explanations/descriptions of historical thinking. Just what might it entail? Well, if you were asked to describe a very famous painting in the Louvre based on what you were able to discern through a one inch hole, you might be able to say that there were landscape elements, a garment possibly, and likely a figure of some sort. You would not be able to describe or understand the *Mona Lisa* in all its glorious complexity without having been able to examine it from many vantage points – paint, texture, perspective, background, and context. Looking at a historical event or period and understanding it fully (or a fully as is possible) requires this multifaceted approach as well. Overall, it requires an attitude of active inquiry and involvement with relevant content. Two elements of historical thinking that complement the work that students do in literacy are determining the author's perspective and purpose and evaluating and using evidence to support inferences and conjectures.

History doesn't record everything that happened in the past. Historians make decisions about what gets recorded; they construct accounts based on their particular viewpoints, whether they subscribe to the view of history as the deeds of great men, the rise of cultural issues and ideas or the interplay of nations (Zuckerman). A student/reader of history must always question who is controlling the narrative? Whose stories are included? Whose are excluded? Which events will be revealed? Which omitted? This questioning stance, this type of historical thinking does not come easily. We tend to be more naturally drawn to the familiar, rather than to the strange or different. As Wineburg notes, it goes against the grain of how we think. That is why it is so much easier to learn dates, names, and stories than it is to change the fundamental structures that we use to grasp the meaning of the past (86). This intentional questioning of the accepted story must therefore be taught explicitly to students and they must have repeated experiences with and opportunities to practice these skills.

Another important aspect of historical thinking is how do we come to know what we think we know? As we read literature and informational texts with our students, we constantly stress the importance of text evidence to support literacy interpretations and explanations. "You can't just make this stuff up. Where do you find it in the text?" we admonish. Historical thinking also demands that we consider the evidence before us. How reliable is this evidence? How can we explain historical accounts that offer different, even contradictory interpretations of events in the past? A. von Heyking cautions that children should not be left with the impression that there is one true story of the past. Nor should they think that historians make things up. Children need to understand that historians draw inferences based on evidence; some inferences are better than others; some evidence is more credible. Historians determine the credibility of the evidence, weigh different kinds of evidence and use the evidence to weave the narrative (2004).

This ability to reconcile multiple versions of an event or an account is difficult for children, though not insurmountable. H. Cooper (qtd. in von Heyking) points out that young children can readily accept differing perspectives in literature, comparing and contrasting, as they do, different versions of the same fairy tale. Students should be provided with conflicting versions of historical events to read and consider. "Purposefully provoking students with examples of historical accounts that encourage alternative readings creates a cognitive dissonance that leads to growth and deeper understanding" (von Heyking). As with questioning, students must be explicitly taught to examine the nature of these sources for their reliability, draw inferences, understand the interrelatedness of causes and consequences, and to explain and develop theories about these contradictions. Young children can begin to understand why there may be more than one version of a story about the past. But in order to do so, they need opportunities to create their own interpretations, based on what they know and what they've learned, and to see how and why they may differ.

What better way is there for students to begin to immerse themselves in authentic historical inquiry than with their own family – dealing with content they know well and care about? Through the process of writing a biography, they can explore the extent to which the story of that person’s life gives us a glimpse into the times. Alternatively, they can consider the extent to which it is just about the person’s life. Does it provide us with a hook on which to hang a study of the period or is it a rollicking good story, wherein we can catch the individual at his/her decisive moments, moments that reveal their deepest essence and character, reveal what they’re really about (Zuckerman). Here is the opportunity for students to do history. Through this process of active engagement with a topic relevant to them, students can gain first-hand experience in collecting the various stories, listening to all the voices. Here, they can gain first-hand experience in evaluating evidence, some of which will undoubtedly be thin and fragmentary, and grappling with the contradictory inferences as they use their research to create a historical narrative of their own.

It’s not easy to teach students to think like historians, but it is possible to create in them an awareness, a mind-set that it is necessary to always question – Who is telling the story? Whose voices are not heard? And that it is essential to have the evidence to support the conjectures. What is the evidence? Can it be believed? In and through this process students can appreciate the value of historical thinking and come to a fuller understanding of the nature of history.

## **Strategies**

Looking at history as a historian and thinking and writing about history as a historian are the overarching strategies of this unit. Historians don’t accept one version of the facts. They see themselves as detectives, searching through many sources for evidence and evaluating that evidence as they attempt to solve or at least shed some light on the mysteries of the past. They know there are multiple layers to be examined and that there is a relationship among them. They formulate questions and theorize about what the evidence shows about the past and what it can mean for the present. For example, as historians delve into Ellis Island, they are confronted with differing interpretations of its significance. Is it meant to represent a symbol of hope and opportunity, or is it a relic of our nativism and xenophobia?

The strategies used in historical thinking align closely with those used to build literacy skills. The Common Core standards for reading informational texts require students to read for main ideas and to explain how they are supported by using details from the text as evidence. Proficient readers are also expected to be able to analyze multiple accounts of the same topic or event, noting important similarities and differences. As writers, students are to conduct research projects that require them to investigate several sources and use the information/evidence acquired to construct knowledge of their topic. With

this research in hand, they are to produce a clear and coherent piece of writing that develops the topic and reflects their voice and viewpoint.

Students will do a close reading of the texts they encounter. This puts the emphasis on readers figuring out what the text says by rereading it several times, each time with a different purpose. The first is to understand what the text is saying explicitly. The second read focuses on how the text works – its structure, word choice, evidence presented. The final reading is for the heart of the text. Students begin to understand the connections to other texts and what it has to say to the reader.

This same strategy can be used for examining photographs and other artifacts. Proceeding slowly as they would in doing a close reading of a written text, students will examine the photos/artifacts noticing the details, making connections, and posing questions as they try to determine the backstory. These conjectures can then be clarified during the interview or through further research.

Another effective reading strategy that is especially helpful for getting at the meaning of informational text and which also encourages participation of all students as they work in small groups is “*Say Something*.” Students pick a significant line or phrase from their reading and write it down on the front of a 3x5 card. On the back, they write an explanation of why this has significance for them or why this is a question. In turn, students put the card out there, everyone discusses it and the person whose line it is gets to have the last word and explain the connection he made. (Adapted from Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988 cited in Beers 105).

Writing and researching make up a large portion of the work students will be doing throughout this unit. One of the rationales for reading nonfiction is that it helps students in their own writing by providing good models of the genre. This should be made explicit at the outset of the unit so that as students read, they are actively noticing author’s craft in terms of organization/structure, features included, word choice, and reliability of supporting evidence. Throughout, students will be routinely writing for a range of tasks: reflection, biographical sketch, interview, and an extended piece of informational writing using graphic organizers and expository text structure. Many of the skills for their writing will be taught within the writing workshop and mini lessons can be designed throughout the unit to meet students’ observed needs.

A great deal of the research will be conducted through the interviews. Students will need guidance in the preparation of good questions and technique. Students will watch and listen to good interviews, discussing what was effective in getting information and what questions just stopped the flow of the conversation. Time will also be provided for them to work with classmates or possibly students from another class in order to practice and hone their own interview skills.

Another writing strategy is the use of a designated journal throughout. There is a lot to think about and write about. And students need what poet Paul Janeczko refers to as “a place my words are looking for” – some place for their thinking and reflecting, and their questions and their writing. This would be a personal journal, but would also provide an opportunity for students to respond to assigned prompts and quickly write on various topics and issues. This would also provide the teacher with a quick check on progress and involvement. Very often the writing and thinking students do is lost to them as papers that are graded and returned are stuffed into notebooks, desks, and book-bags, never again to see the light of day. A journal provides a record, an artifact of the thinking and learning one did. Students are often surprised when they look back at it and see the quantity and quality of their work and the progression in their thinking. It is a good reminder, evidence if you will, of their potential and accomplishments.

Finally, in addition to the biography, students will want to share their research and writing with a larger audience. Knowing this will be shared with peers and with others’ family members will hopefully lift the quality of the writing and the presentations. Students will choose a multi-media format for these presentations in consultation with the classroom teacher and the computer teacher. This can be in the form of an iMovie, a power-point, a comic, a video of part of the interview, a projected view of photos and artifacts accompanied by snippets of the interview and music chosen by the subject or including the interviewer’s choices as well.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Part I – Historical Thinking**

#### **Introduction**

##### Activity 1

Begin the unit by asking students these questions:

- What is history?
- How do we know for sure what happened?

Ask them to respond in their project notebook.

Once students have thought about and written down their answers, debrief the class and record their responses on the smartboard or on chart paper. (Save for review at the end of the unit.)



As students respond, throw out the following questions for their consideration and discussion:

- Can we ever know for sure what happened?
- Is there a one true version of the event?
- Where does the information come from?
- Who wrote it down?
- What was that person's point of view?
- Who is the person telling the story?

The purpose of the questioning is to plant the seeds of doubt in students' minds about the immutability of historical narrative; to encourage confusion as a corollary to reading history.

To reinforce the ideas explored in the introduction, follow up with the following activities

### Activity 2

Play the YouTube version of Lin-Manuel Miranda's 2009 performance at the White House Evening of Poetry, Music & the Spoken Word.

Play it through once for the gist and the pure joy of listening.

Play it through a second time and have students write down what they've learned about Alexander Hamilton

Ask for answers and record them on the board. There will likely be many. Ask students why there are so many answers. Get to the idea that people are/can be many things

### Activity3

#### *Lunchroom Fight*

(Adapted from Stanford History Ed. Group - Reading Like a Historian)

Give students the following scenario:

Imagine that you are the principal of the school and you just found out that there has been a fight in the lunchroom during last lunch. You've asked students and teachers who witnessed the fight to tell what they saw and who started the fight. You have received many conflicting accounts about who started the fight, who was involved, and when and why it started. It's important to remember that no one is just plain lying.

In pairs, have students consider the situation and respond to the following questions in writing:

1. Why would there be different stories if no one is lying?

2. What are the different types of people who might have seen this fight? (For example: friends of the people involved in the fight; teachers; others who didn't know the students involved)
3. What might make one person's story more believable than another person's?

As a class debrief. Discuss:

- Why might people see or remember things differently?
- Who was standing where? Who could see the whole event?
- Is the story the person told believable?
- Do stories change over time?
- Is there physical evidence that might make a difference in what you believe? (Bruises, broken objects, etc.)

Ask students what they think this activity can teach us about what we read in history books.

Ideas that should evolve are:

- We rely on evidence, but you have to check the reliability of that evidence
- Just one piece of evidence is not enough- we need more to get the fullest picture
- The evidence, even eye-witness accounts, differ based on the person's perspective and that has to be considered

#### Activity 4

##### *Personal Narrative/Interview*

Explain to students that one way we can learn about a particular period in history is by reading about the life of a person who lived during that time. However, not everybody remembers the event in the same way.

Ask students to write a personal narrative about a memorable event in their lives. This piece of writing should follow the basic narrative format and include a beginning, middle, and end as well as a final reflection on why it was memorable.

Once students have completed this assignment, ask them to talk to a person who also knows about or participated in this event. This could be a parent, sibling, another relative, or a friend.

Ask that person what he or she remembers about the event. Take notes and try to get as much detail as possible. Then write up their story and compare the two accounts. How were they alike? How were they similar?

Student volunteers can share their findings with the class or this can be done in small groups.

Once students have had a chance to listen to others' accounts, ask for their reaction to this exercise.

Were they surprised that the accounts differed? Why might the stories have differed?

Conclude by reminding students about the nature of history and what we can know and how we know. The take-away for students should be that people remember things differently. As a result, there is no one true and complete version of an event. The best we can do is to take the different pieces, the evidence, examine them critically, and try to create as complete a picture as possible.

Activity 5 (extended activity)

### *Reading biographies- A Genre Study*

This is a prelude to the second part of the project – the researching and writing of a biography.

In this section, students will be reading multiple versions of one person's biography.

For Philadelphia students, the figure of Ben Franklin looms large – literally and figuratively. Almost every student has been to the Franklin Institute where the marble sculpture of a seated, thoughtful, Ben dwarfs all who enter the rotunda. Just about every student knows a fact or two or three about the great man. Add to that the fact that he is endlessly fascinating, and he seems an excellent choice for students to investigate.

Suggested Reading:

*What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?*, by Jean Fritz

*Benjamin Franklin, an Illustrated History*, by Richard Lacayo

*Autobiography of Ben Franklin* (text and on cd)

*Becoming Ben Franklin*, by Russell Freedman

Social studies textbook account of Benjamin Franklin

Begin this section by creating a semantic map about Franklin with the class.

While the class may know about Ben, it might be useful to provide some background information of the times in order for students to have the necessary context to analyze the biographical information at a deeper level.

Use *What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* as a shared reading text.

With this text, explore the features of biography: determining how it is organized (text structure) and the text features (illustrations, maps, definitions, etc.) author's perspective- what does he/she think of Franklin

Explain that we will be reading the book from a critical standpoint – understanding that there are many ways of thinking about and understanding a topic and that the author has explained it in only one way. We as readers have the right to challenge the text and question the author's message.

Model this idea of reading with an alternative perspective in mind by reading aloud and talking through the thinking that goes into analyzing a text from this standpoint. Students should consider questions such as: Who wrote the text? What was the author's purpose? Whose view point is expressed? What does the author want us to believe? Who else could tell this story?

Students can practice this questioning strategy as they read the text book, recording their thoughts in their project notebooks.

Students will also do close readings of selected portions from Franklin's autobiography, reading and listening to the cd (which adds another dimension). Compare it to what they've already read. Use the "Say something strategy" as explained in the strategies section.

Juxtaposing pictures in a similar way and doing close readings of them is also very revealing about the message or theme an author is trying to convey. Images are not neutral. They're chosen with intent – to influence the reader/viewer and support or convey the author's point of view.

Have students compare the pictures in Fritz's book to those in Lacayo's book. What do you notice? How are they different? How are they alike? What particular point does each make about Franklin?

As a final piece to this section of the unit, students will work with a partner to write and illustrate a short biographical sketch of Franklin.

## **Part 2**

### **Writing the Biography**

#### **Introduction**

Introduce this part of the unit by explaining to students that they will be doing the work of historians. They will research a subject, write and put together a book, create a presentation about their topic for the class, create a time line, or delve more deeply into a particular area they encountered in their research, and write a final reflection.

The subject of their work will be a grand-parent or great-grandparent. (In some family situations this may not be possible, so students could research the oldest family member or older family friend.)

## Research

### Activity 1

#### *Documents*

Begin by brainstorming with the class how they could find out information about this person. Where could they go to find information? Some sources could include:  
photo albums, diplomas, yearbooks, birth certificates, letters, passport,  
immigration archives, and interviews with the subject, his/her friends or relatives,  
photos of places from their past (school, stores, churches)

Make a copy of these sources for each student and post it in the classroom. Students can then add to it as they encounter additional pathways in their research and so share with classmates.

Have students do “close readings” of these artifacts. Identify each, examining it carefully. Guess what it means to the person? What does it say about the person? What questions do you have about it? Record notes on this evidence in project notebook

## The Interview

### Activity 2

#### *Preparation- Creating Questions*

The interview students will do with their subject is the most vital source of information for their work and possibly the most difficult to complete. It is an unfamiliar format and students have much to learn about the process.

After students have identified the person about whom they will be writing, have them first think about what they’d like to learn. Turn this genuine curiosity into a set of questions they will plan to ask. Open this up to the class and have students share what they feel are some of their best, most interesting questions. List these and encourage students to add to their list any that they feel might be useful.

Share with students the StoryCorps.org. Here they will find ideas for questions that ask, as StoryCorps creator Dave, Isay characterizes them, “the big life questions.”  
<http://www.storycorps.org/great-questions/>

As you look through these with students, ask them what they notice about the questions. If they don’t bring it up, point out that the questions are all open ended. This type of

question encourages the person being interviewed to open up and talk freely and possibly take the interview into unexpected areas. The best stories come from these questions. Two really insightful questions suggested by Harvey (173) which should be included are:

- Who else should I talk to?
- Is there anything else I haven't asked you that I should have?

### Activity 3

#### *Face to Face/Practice and Learning to Listen/listening to Learn*

It's not enough for students to come to the interview clutching their set of prepared questions. What invariably happens is that they will just go through the questions, marching from one to the next, waiting out the response until they can ask the next questions and so on until they've exhausted them and the interview, in their eyes, is done. Interviewing technique must be taught and practiced.

If possible, conduct an interview in front of the class with another teacher or adult. Stop periodically and step out of the interview to point out particular techniques such as listening posture, truly listening, and, most importantly - *the follow up question*, the one that follows from the answer to the previous question and quite often leads to surprising insights and delightful stories. Provide students with transcripts of interviews and ask them to identify the sections where a follow-up question was used and the information that it elicited.

Students can greatly benefit from listening to accomplished interviewers such as Terry Gross on National Public Radio and the interviews on StoryCorps. On this site there are also animated versions of interviews which are captivating and may be a source of inspiration for students as they design their class presentations.

One consideration at this point: How will students record the information from the interview?

It's difficult to juggle listening, taking good notes, and being attentive in the moment. Students should have a means of recording the interview so that they can devote their full attention to their subject and can have a record to which they can go back when they are writing the biography. In addition, they will have a record of that person's voice for use in their presentation, and perhaps most important of all, for themselves.

Students should, however, have something to write on so that they can jot down words or phrases that resonate with them as they are interviewing. This could be a notebook or a printed sheet with their questions and lines next to it for notes. (A format not unlike those we teachers receive at professional development sessions to accompany the speaker's power point presentation.)

Allow students time to practice interviewing each other and to analyze their own technique. What was it like? What do they need more practice doing? What will they do next time?

Create a class list of interviewing tips which students can add to or modify. Post it and provide a copy for each student to keep nearby as they prepare for their interview.

The list should include:

- Be prepared. Have some background knowledge of your subject and your open ended questions ready.
- Be fully present. Take your listening posture. Listen carefully and participate/respond to what you're hearing so that you can ask the important and revealing follow up questions.
- Think of this opportunity as a conversation, not a question and answer session.
- Try to get a full sense of who your subject is as a person.
- When you are done, be sure to thank the person. You have learned a lot and should express your gratitude.
- Note: Several other suggestions gleaned from an interview with Dave Isay about StoryCorps interviews:
  - Limit the time to between 40- 60 minutes. This helps to give form and structure and often leads to a very intense session. It also helps to move the interview along
  - Also, the presence of a third person, a facilitator of sorts, seems to put the participants more at ease.
  - Conduct the interview in a quiet softly lit place – somewhere you are not likely to be interrupted
  - Finally, take a picture of the interviewee and the student to be included in the biography.

## Activity 5

### *Writing the Interview*

After students have had a chance to interview a classmate, have them write up the interview.

It can be in the question/answer format of a magazine interview or in the narrative form. (Provide models of both formats and opportunities to read and analyze each.) The narrative form, though more challenging than the q & a format will give students practice in writing the biography.

As students conduct their interviews with their subject and other interested parties, provide any help, guidance, or reassurance they need. Most students will likely benefit from this type of debriefing, so make it a class session.

## **Writing**

### Activity 6

#### *Preliminaries- Organizing and Synthesizing*

Before beginning writing, it will be necessary for students to review their material and organize it. Have students create a memory line of life events; look for recurring phrases in the answers that might hint at a thematic thread that runs through this person's life. Students should work from a transcript of their interview or at least good, thorough notes taken from the recorded interview (s).

In addition to this memory line, have students research the major world events that occurred during this person's lifetime and use this to create a time line. This is as interesting exercise in and of itself, and may yield surprising insights into the subject's life. This will become part of the final project.

Decide on the best format for the biography. At this point, it might be helpful for students to look through a number of additional biographies to determine the structure authors have used to present their material in order to find a model that suits their subject. Will the writing begin at the beginning and proceed chronologically? Will text then include headings and subheadings? Possibly the story could begin at the present and work backwards, centering more on a theme in that person's life, highlighting events that led him/her to this point. Consider beginning with a dramatic event and exploring how that event influenced all subsequent aspects of the subject's life.

Once a format has been decided upon, have students create a graphic organizer specific to their format and complete it as fully as is possible.

### Activity 7

#### *Writing/revising/publishing*

Here is where all those painstakingly crafted and well taught mini-lesson on expository/informational writing presented during writing workshop time should kick in. (One hopes.) This is a big task and students will, of course, still need time and guidance. Mini lessons during this writing period are class specific and discretionary – based on what we see that our students need in order to further and enhance their writing and bring the project to fruition.

Once the writing has been completed, edited and revised, it's time to consider what else will accompany the biography. What kinds of images will be included? Photographs, illustrations, copies from diaries, letters, maps and any other documents should all be a part of the project and students should consider and plan how most effectively to intersperse these artifacts throughout the text.



The finished project should be bound in some way and a copy made for and presented to the person about whom it was written and a copy made for the writer.

#### Activity 8

##### *Presentation*

Students will decide how best to present their projects to the class in a multi-media format: I-movies with their subject's favorite music or music heard over the course of their lifetime underscoring it, a combination of the subject's music and the student's favorites, a power point, story boards, comics, photo montage with audio clips of the interview interspersed are just a few suggestions, but leave this to students they may surprise you with their proposals.

Make this presentation a celebration of great lives. Invite the people interviewed and have everyone share in the celebration of these historical figures.

#### Activity 9

##### *Final Reflection*

As a final element, ask students to reflect on the process of researching, and writing about this person. What themes did you see in this person's life? What did they learn about the person? Have they become closer? Do they see any personality traits/ qualities of that person in themselves? Which ones? How are they different? Students will revise their reflections and hand write (maybe) a copy on special paper to be included in the biography given to their special person.

## **Annotated Bibliography/Works Cited**

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Epstein, Terrie. "Preparing History Teachers to Develop Young People's Historical Thinking." *Perspectives On History* (2012): n. page. Web. An article about common misconceptions students bring to historical inquiry and some effective strategies teachers can use to correct them.

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Von Heyking, Amy. "Historical Thinking in the Elementary Years: A review of Current Research." *Canadian Social Studies* 39.1 (2004): Web. An examination of how students' learning of history can be made more meaningful and dynamic along with suggestions for accomplishing this task in our classrooms.

White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 81-100. Web. Author applies theories of fiction to historical writing making the case that historians make sense of the disparate facts by using novelists method of constructive imagination.

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Zuckerman, Mike. "Biography as History, Or, Perhaps, History as Biography." Teachers Institute Seminar. Univ.of Penn, Phila. Mar. 2016. Lecture. From a seminar based on Prof. Zuckerman's collection of essays; *Almost Chosen People* where he takes an oblique look at America's history and invites readers to join him in rethinking our assumptions about our past.

#### Student Resources

Aliki. *The Many Lives of Benjamin Franklin*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977. Print. The author's informative, easy to read text along with her charming illustrations make this an excellent resource for all readers.

Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc.,1996. Print. The great man himself, in his own words.

Freedman, Russell. *Becoming Ben Franklin: How a Candle-Maker's Son Helped Light the Flame of Liberty*. New York: Holiday House, 2013. Print. The consummate story teller, the author recounts how a rebellious apprentice became, through hard work and sheer brilliance, an "American Icon." Excellent, engaging book filled with compelling illustrations and reproductions.

Fritz, Jean. *What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* New York: Putman and Grosset Group, 1976. Print. This is a wise and witty biography that reads like a story book, but is chock full of information. Along with its delightful illustrations by Margot Tomes, it is a great read for all students.

Lacayo, Richard. *Benjamin Franklin: An Illustrated History of His Life and Times*. New York: Time, 2010. Print. A beautifully designed book filled with excellent reproductions of all things Franklin.

## Internet Resources

StoryCorps.org

<https://sheg.stanford.edu> Reading like a historian lessons and resources

teachinghistory.org

## Content Standards

### 1.2 Reading informational text

#### Key Ideas and Details

1.2.5.A: Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details

1.2.5.B: Cite textual evidence by quoting accurately from the text to explain what the text says explicitly and make inferences

1.2.5.C: Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more events or ideas

#### Craft and Structure

1.2.5.D: Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view

1.2.5.E: Use text structure, in and among texts to interpret information

#### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas Analysis Across Texts

1.2.5.H: Determine how an author supports particular points in a text through reasons and evidence

1.2.5.I: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic to demonstrate understanding of that topic

### 1.4 Writing

1.4.5.A: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

1.4.5.C: Develop the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the text: include illustrations and multimedia when useful to aid comprehension

1.4.5.V: Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic

1.4.5.X: Write routinely over various time frames and for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes, and audiences

## **1.5 Speaking and Listening**

1.5.5.B: Listen critically and summarize the main points presented visually and orally

## **Integration of Knowledge, multimedia and Ideas**

1.5.5.E: Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentation when appropriate to enhance the development of ideas or themes