

Biography: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

The motives, manias, and magic of famous people come to life in biographies. These life histories trace paths to success and delve into the depths of character. Explore how twentieth-century biographers uncover the lives of their subjects by examining the methods, goals, and impact of this literary form.

Use these video segments and activities in your classroom to show students that the learning from this form of literature can last a lifetime.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the video clip “Achievements of Leonardo da Vinci” from *World History: The Modern Era*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

Vocabulary

Before showing the video, ask students what they know about biographies. Point out that the word *biography* comes from two Greek roots: *bio*, meaning “life,” and *graphy*, meaning “a method of writing.” Challenge students to come up with a definition of biography that all can agree on, such as “an account of the life history of a person written by another person.” Mention that while biographies have existed for many centuries, in the twentieth century biographies became more psychological, in-depth, and interpretive.

Student Glossary

Help students to distinguish biography from these related forms: autobiography, journal, letter, diary, memoir, interview, and obituary. Make a two-column chart to contrast the forms that are recollections *by* a subject with those that are recollections *about* a subject, and have students make flashcards for each term.

Discussion

Ask how well the Leonardo da Vinci video fits the definition of a biography. Point out that biographies usually create a single impression of the subject, and stimulate discussion with these questions: What impression of Leonardo da Vinci does this video create? How does it portray Leonardo da Vinci as a “Renaissance man”?

2. Show the segment “Young Ben Franklin Pursues His Dream of Becoming a Writer and Printer” from *The Real Ben Franklin*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

Discussion

Ask this question: What elements does this film biography include? Students should identify narration, reenactments, writings by Franklin, interviews, and still images. Discuss why the biographer might have selected these particular elements—and what impression they create. Discuss how the biography would change with a different selection of elements.

Graphic Organizer

Note that the video biography portrays Franklin as a “free spirit.” Discuss how well this interpretation is supported with facts and details. Ask students to create a web diagram showing supporting details spanning out from a central cell called “Franklin’s free spirit.”

Interview

Point out the interview segment with the Franklin museum director in the video. Discuss the role of the interview in biographies, both written and filmed. Brainstorm for good interview questions to use to probe a subject’s character and motives.

3. Show the video clip “Eisenhower” from *American Presidency: 1929-1963*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)

Discussion

- Before showing the video clip, ask students the purpose of a biography: Is the purpose of a biography to teach? to satisfy curiosity? to honor a person?
- After showing the video clip, discuss the purpose of the Sandburg biography: Does it teach? satisfy curiosity? honor him? How does this biography portray Sandburg? What parts of Sandburg’s life does the video emphasize? (Mention that Sandburg himself was a biographer of Abraham Lincoln.)
- What biographical methods does the biographer use in this video clip? (Make sure that students notice the inclusion of filmed news clips, a twentieth-century method not used in the Franklin or da Vinci biographies.)
- Focus on how biographies interpret: How does this biography interpret facts? What are facts and what are opinions in the biography? What facts support the biography’s interpretations?

Graphic Organizer

Have students create a timeline of Sandburg’s life, highlighting key events. Based on what they learned from the video, ask them to circle the events that they think are most significant in Sandburg’s life. Then challenge them to discuss these questions: What events or people do you think had the most influence in shaping Sandburg? What events in Sandburg’s life had the most influence in shaping the world?

4. Show the segment “Hatshepsut: The Queen Who Became King” from *Great Egyptians*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)



Discussion

Before showing the video clip, ask students what they know about Hatshepsut. Afterward, ask what they learned about Hatshepsut and what made her outstanding, innovative, and influential in world history.

Research

Introduce students to biographical resources in the library, such as biographical dictionaries and the biography section, which is usually 921 with biographies organized by the subject's last name. Have students make a list of people they would like to know about, and assist students in selecting a biography to read.

Oral Presentation

After students read biographies, assign an oral biography review, encouraging students to consider creative formats such as an interview, talk show, panel discussion, or news program. Suggest that students answer questions such as these: What did the biography teach about the person? How did the biographer make the book interesting? How did the biographer research the biography? What was the most emotional part of the biography? What was the most unforgettable part?

Writing

Invite students to write short biographies about a person they know. As preparation, guide them as they work in pairs to write good interview questions to ask. Then after students interview their subjects, have them to write a short biography, presenting not only the person's life but also the subject's personality.

Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards:

National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Culture
- Time, Continuity and Change
- People, Places, and Environment
- Individual Development and Identity

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

- Language Arts
 - Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
 - Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts



- Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

- History
 - Historical Understanding: Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns