

Chapter 18

Biographical Sketch

A biography is the story of a life. It may vary in length from a paragraph to a book. Most frequently, however, when students are asked to write a biography, the expected product ranges from a well-developed paragraph to a research paper, complete with documentation of sources used. [See Chapter 34, *Research Paper*.] This segment looks at the short biographical sketch. The steps, organization, and pitfalls, however, are the same whether you write a long or short account of a life.

CHARACTERISTICS

Although a biography is the story of someone's life, unless it is book length, it cannot recount the details of a full lifetime. In addition, because the writer is describing someone else's life, he cannot write without research, either primary or secondary. [See primary research and secondary research in *the Glossary*.] As a result, a carefully prepared biography should include

- an effective introduction that includes background information that places the subject in a specific setting,
- a focus on the subject that allows the writer to limit the lifetime material to a manageable subject [see focus in *the Glossary*],
- an approach appropriate for the audience,
- details that support the specific focus, including effective anecdotes and quotations [see specific detail in *the Glossary*],
- evidence of research or knowledge of the subject,
- clear, logical organization,
- effective transitions to help readers follow the organization [see transitions in *the Glossary*],
- consistent style, assuring the omission of plagiarism [see plagiarism in *the Glossary*], and
- interesting reading, not a list of facts and figures.

PROCESS

Students who prepare biographies usually do so as part of a class assignment. If the subject is not assigned, the content area suggests the subject and emphasis. Use the following steps to plan and develop a biography, regardless of its length.

STEP 1: Prewriting—Doing the Secondary Research

Assuming you have identified the subject of the biography, complete the secondary research by consulting available sources:

- If the subject is included in a general encyclopedia entry—print, electronic, or online—begin with that. Usually encyclopedia information serves as a guide for further research.
- Check specialized encyclopedias and other reference books, particularly *Current Biographies*.
- After your preliminary search, consult the library's catalog or computer-search facilities for further references. For instance, you may find the subject's autobiography, or you may find books and articles by other biographers. [See computer catalog *in the Glossary*.]
- Check periodical indexes, either print or electronic versions [See periodical index *in the Glossary*], for articles that provide additional kinds of information, including bibliographies.
- The vertical file may include some information. [See vertical file *in the Glossary*.]
- Newspaper articles, especially those accessible through the Internet, may also include interesting highlights. Research in other areas will suggest dates and newspapers most likely to yield any material.
- If you have access to special collections, usually housed in museums or in special-collections library rooms, examine the subject's personal effects: mementos, personal letters, and diaries or journals.

Many students think they can read a single encyclopedia article and develop an adequate biography. Before you can write sensitively about another human being, however, you must understand him or her—the personality, the frustrations, the joys, the motives, the goals, the strengths, the weaknesses, the contributions, the failures. Seek out as many potential sources as you can.

The greater the variety of source material you have, the more complete, accurate, and interesting your biography will be.

STEP 2: Prewriting—Doing the Primary Research

Complete whatever primary research you can. How much you do depends on several factors: the extent of the biography, the availability of secondary research, the availability of primary-research sources, the time allotted for research, and, in the case of a class assignment, the requirements of the project.

Obviously, an extensive biography relies on every possible source available and requires months—maybe even years—of thorough research. Most of you will not be delving that deeply to develop a biography. The availability of secondary research, then, may determine how much time you can devote to primary research. Consider these two situations:

Situation One. Even though your subject may have had books and articles written about him or her, you gain a different insight into your subject through primary research. Here's what to do:

- If your subject is still living, you should try to interview him or her at length.
- Find people who know the subject, worked with or are related to him or her. Talk with these people to get a broader perspective of your subject.
- Talk with a recognized authority or scholar who has studied your subject extensively. Compare his or her comments with the results of your own research.

Situation Two. If the subject of your biography has received no journalistic coverage, all of your research will be primary:

- If he or she is still living, you must interview your subject.
- In addition, you must locate his or her friends, neighbors, and relatives.
- For the sake of perspective, you should interview your subject's enemies—or at least his or her opponents. They will most likely broaden your perspective.

STEP 3: Prewriting—Selecting a Focus

Research completed, select a focus for your biography. An especially lengthy research paper may successfully develop more than one focus, but probably not more than three.

In order to select a single focus, think about those aspects of the subject's life most directly related to the content of a course you are taking, especially if you are writing the biography as an assignment for that course. If, for instance, you are doing a biography on Benjamin Franklin for a social-science class, you will probably focus on his work as an ambassador. If you choose the same biographical subject for a science class, however, you will probably focus on his work as an inventor. For an English class, you will probably discuss his writing and his wit.

You may, on the other hand, select the single focus to show a broader understanding of your subject. For instance, while writing for a social-science class, you may acknowledge Franklin's expertise as an ambassador but dwell on his contributions to the shipping industry as a result of his work as an oceanographer who discovered the Gulf Stream.

STEP 4: Prewriting—Listing the Details

After you have selected a focus, make a list of the details which will illustrate it. The details may include the following:

- personality traits
- business experiences
- comments by critics
- self-evaluation
- educational background
- contributions to his or her field(s) of endeavor
- effects of those contributions
- any other details that introduce readers to your chosen focus on the subject's life

Write your own list now.

STEP 5: Prewriting—Organizing the Details

Arrange the details in a logical order. For biographies, the order is almost always chronological.

STEP 6: Prewriting—Developing the Setting

To help readers locate your subject in a historical time frame, jot down details about the period in which the subject lived. Note locations, dates, and historical events. For instance, was the subject struggling through college during World War I, or was he being schooled by a private tutor at home during the Golden Age of Greece? By weaving these details into the context of the biography, readers better understand your subject.

Prepare a brief list now of possible details to establish the setting for your subject's story.

STEP 7: Writing—Developing the Introduction

The introduction for a multi-paragraph biography does not rely on the time element. Rather, it follows a separate plan:

- The introduction sets the time and place and introduces the subject of the biography. Refer to the list you developed in Step 6. The reader will appreciate, however, a creative introduction, not just a list of names, dates, and places. The introduction may include, for instance, a quotation attributed to the subject, a perceptive comment from a critic, or merely the writer's reaction to the subject.
- The introduction should conclude with a thesis sentence. The thesis sentence narrows the subject of the biography and indicates the writer's focus. [*See thesis sentence in the Glossary for a quick reference, and see Writing a Multi-Paragraph Paper in Chapter 2, Writing, for a thorough explanation of effective thesis sentences.*]

In a paragraph-length sketch, the introduction may be only a sentence or two; but in a long paper, the introduction will be a full paragraph. [*See Writing a Multi-Paragraph Paper in Chapter 2, Writing, for a clear explanation and example of an introductory paragraph.*]

STEP 8: Writing—Building the Body

Take note of three items as you develop the body paragraphs of the biography:

First, using the lists developed in steps 4–6 as a result of your primary and secondary research, select details for the body paragraphs that support the topic sentence. Some hints:

- Be selective; choose only the most telling details.
- Discuss details in chronological order, or establish cause-and-effect relationships as appropriate. [*See Chapter 6, Cause and Effect.*]
- Use a variety of methods to develop the paper—examples, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, perhaps analogy and definition, as well as description [*see these methods of development discussed under their separate entries in Part II*]. Whichever method of development you choose, the development should be organized chronologically.

Second, as you develop the body paragraphs, remember that the details must be adequate to support the focus. Some hints:

- Be reasonable. Two or three details will be insufficient to explain Benjamin Franklin's contributions as an ambassador.
- At the same time, however, be careful not to stray into a discussion of sidelights. They may be interesting, but if they do not support or explain the selected focus, they do not belong in the biographical sketch. [*See unity in the Glossary and Sample Revision for Unity in Chapter 3, Revising.*]

Third, the sketch may be enhanced by anecdotes or quotations to add variety and interest. Some hints:

- Anecdotes and quotations must support or explain the focus.
- To include them just to add a bit of human interest is to lose unity in the paper.
- Give credit to your sources for the anecdotes, quotations, and other information. A formal paper requires some kind of formal documentation (parenthetical notes, endnotes, or footnotes, as well as a bibliography) for all information sources, including Internet sources. An informal paper, however, may use a text reference and omit other formal means of documentation. [See Chapter 34, *Research Paper*, for additional information on documentation.]

STEP 9: Writing—Adding the Conclusion

Conclude the biography with an emphasis on the focus established in the introduction. Obviously, a biography need not end with the subject's death. The subject may still be living! The reader will respond with greatest interest to a conclusion that dwells on the subject's significant contributions rather than on the bare facts of names, dates, and places.

STEP 10: Revising—Checking the Contents

Reread your completed paper to look for possible weaknesses. [See Chapter 3, *Revising*, for a thorough explanation of revision techniques.] In addition, ask yourself these questions to help you spot weaknesses peculiar to a biography:

- Have I researched thoroughly and carefully to avoid writing a biography that misrepresents the subject?
- Does my biography reflect the research accurately and acknowledge sources completely?
- Have I avoided personal bias so that I do not misrepresent the subject?
- Did I avoid too much name-date-place information?
- Have I included meaningful details to support the focus?
- Are names, dates, places, and details accurate?
- Does the biography read well, or does it sound like a list of facts and figures?
- Does the reader get a good glimpse of the subject?

You should have answered “yes” to each of the preceding questions. If you cannot, use the questions to which you answered “no” as a guide for revising weaknesses in the biography.

STEP 11: Proofreading—Checking for Accuracy

When you have finished revising, check for final details. Check spelling and word choice. Double-check sources for any inconsistencies in dates or details and for accuracy in documentation. Then read for grammar, mechanics, and usage errors. [See Part IV for rules and examples.]

Writing-across-the-Curriculum Models

The sample biographical sketch below and four additional sample biographies online deal with John James Audubon. As you study the sketches, however, note that the focus changes in each as the writers tailor the broad topic to specific content-area audiences. Thus, the focus parallels the curricular subject matter:

[See online at www.wiley.com/go/wnwstudentwritinghandbook.]

- Sample for Social Sciences
- Sample for Science
- Sample Workplace Writing
- Sample Technical Writing

The paper for English class (below) talks about Audubon as a writer; for social sciences, as a man of the frontier; for science, as an ornithologist; for workplace writing, as a businessman; for technical writing, as a man using his skills to earn a living.

SAMPLE FOR ENGLISH

The following biography, developed as a single paragraph, focuses on John James Audubon as a writer. Compare it with the others online to see how the emphasis changes to meet the needs of the content area.

Woodsman Audubon as a Writer

Most people worldwide recognize John James Audubon as an artist, the self-trained painter of birds who was the first to depict them life-sized and in motion. As an artist whose life spanned the years roughly between the American Constitutional Convention and the beginning of the Civil War, Audubon studied his subject more carefully than any other of his contemporary ornithologists. In addition to his painting, however, Audubon also wrote about the birds, their habits, and their habitats. His constant struggle to write effectively endears him to the hearts of modern readers who admire his other genius-like abilities but chuckle at times over his flowery

narratives. For instance, in the *Ornithological Biography*, a five-volume text to accompany his paintings, Audubon wrote with telling insight about the subject to which he devoted the last half of his life. As Michael Harwood points out, Audubon, like many other struggling writers, called on information from his “old journals and memorandum books, which were written on the spot” (Audubon, quoted in Harwood, *Audubon Demythologized*, New York: National Audubon Society, n.d., 10). From the beginning, Audubon indicated that the work would not be a scientific one; he had inadequate training for that. Little did he know, however, what an effort he would face in order to produce even an unscientific work. In fact, the final work that was published for the buying public probably bears little resemblance to the first several drafts. Because he included many stories of the wilderness, one critic notes that, while the books were a pioneering work, “they were flowery, rich with moralizing and anthropomorphizing. [In his defense, however,] that style reflected his time, in which educated men looked to nature for spiritual messages” (Harwood 10). In fact, Audubon wrote with the flair and flamboyance he learned as a child growing up in France, but he had the wisdom to hire William MacGillivray, a Scottish ornithologist, to edit his work and add anatomical descriptions. MacGillivray, like a good critic, regularly and repeatedly argued with and questioned Audubon, forcing him to write with greater accuracy; however, Audubon’s lifelong habits of exaggerating and embellishing were difficult to break. As a result of his critics, though, including MacGillivray and other academic naturalists, Audubon finally produced a text somewhat restraining his flowery style. His diaries, however, retain the embellished style; so even though he called himself “the American Woodsman” who liked simply to tramp in the woods and watch the birds, he wrote with a style far from that one might expect from a simple woodsman. Like other writers, he struggled to change to make his work acceptable to the buying public. As a result, genius artist that he was, Audubon’s struggles as a writer give him a humanizing quality worth empathy.

ANALYSIS OF THE SAMPLE FOR ENGLISH

The preceding biographical sketch focuses on Audubon’s writing. The writer selected that focus, of course, because he was preparing the sketch for an English class assignment. Note these additional details:

- As suggested in Step 3 earlier in this section, Audubon’s renown as an artist is acknowledged in the first two sentences, but the focus of this biographical sketch, his writing, is introduced in the third sentence.
- The fourth sentence suggests the writer’s attitude toward Audubon’s struggles.
- The details are in order, from most important to least. Because the details relate to only two works, the *Ornithological Biography* and Audubon’s diaries, there is little on which to base chronological organization. Instead, the writer emphasizes the larger work and concludes with a reference to the smaller work. The writer can emphasize Audubon’s struggle to refine his style by pointing to the diaries.

- The use of quotations, both from Audubon and from a critic, adds interest and further details. The full publication information in parenthetical notes credits the source, adequate for the brevity of this paper.
- Without mentioning specific dates or places, the writer lets readers know when and where Audubon lived.
- The conclusion ties together the significance of the focus chosen for this English-class assignment.