

# Biographies as Tools for Mentoring Young Writers

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**B**iographies of writers reveal valuable insights into their traits and writing processes. This information can guide students interested in improving their writing or embarking on becoming a writer. Utilizing reading analysis skills, students can identify the childhood experiences and activities of eminent writers that contributed to the development of their skills and eventual success, modeling a framework for success.

For example, students may discover how Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' keen skills of observation, developed through walks with her father at the family farm, led to her ability to capture perfectly the sensibilities, culture, dialect, and habits of the descendants of the Irish and American pioneers of Florida that she celebrated in her books. In addition, through this same process of analyzing biographies, students learn ways these authors engaged in and managed the creative process of writing.

This article provides an outline for an instructional unit designed to introduce young writers to the craft of writing, the personalities of authors, and to their styles, quirks, and habits. The unit was designed with both the Common Core Reading and NAGC Learning and Development Standards in mind. More specific information on the unit, including a list of biographies and examples of excerpts used, can be obtained by emailing me at [ecfair@outlook.com](mailto:ecfair@outlook.com) or by visiting <http://nurturingkidscreativetraits.weebly.com/biographies-and-the-writing-process.html>. I describe the unit as I implemented it with fifth grade gifted and advanced language arts students, but it can be adapted for use with various populations and grade levels.

## One Step at a Time

**Step One:** In a whole group, introduce students to the valuable information found in the biographies of writers. Start by sharing excerpts from biographies, demonstrating important childhood traits, activities, and experiences related to later success in writing, i.e., avid reading, keen observation, drawing, experiencing nature, curiosity, vivid imagination, and submitting writing to contests/publishers. Many gifted students will recognize these traits in themselves.

Examples of excerpts used with the students include: Avi "devoured adventure stories and mysteries, novels, and fairy tales" (Somers, 2004, pg.14). J.R.R. Tolkien "devoured books like a starving person devours bread" (Coren, 2001, pg. 16). Lois Lowry called herself "a solitary child who lived in a world of books and [her] own imagination" (Daniel, 2003, pg. 17). Dr. Seuss "loved to draw. He almost always had a pencil in his hand. The zoo was one of his favorite places to practice drawing" (Waxman, 2010, pg.8). Jean Craighead George "stared at the moss spores as though studying a painting in a museum, try-

ing to memorize every detail so she could draw them later" (Cary, 1996, p. 14) and J.K. Rowling "would frolic for hours by the river and make up fantasy games to carry out in the fields" (Shapiro, 2000, p. 30). More examples can be found at the link provided.

A whole group activity began by sitting on the floor with my students around a pile of biographies. I read excerpts (which I had pre-identified) from a few biographies and had the students identify the experiences and activities of the writers' childhoods that developed the traits associated with their writing. Some of these were obvious, such as avid reading. With others, I walked the students through passages such as "experiencing nature." I pointed out key words and phrases that identified the activity "experiencing nature" and then asked the students questions to help them determine how this experience might have helped the individual with writing. Some of these were fairly direct. For example, once students identified that an author was observant in childhood, students could make the connection that observant individuals can write with more detail. While we were on the floor, I showed students the biographies available and let them know that eventually they would pick an author and read a biography to learn about what helped the individual to become a successful writer.

Following that, students returned to their seats, and I utilized the board to share even more excerpts. At this

point, because I was teaching in Florida, I focused on regional author, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. To help the students in the analysis process, I put a table on the board for recording pertinent information. I read a page of her book to the students, having them stop me when they thought I was reading a passage that contained a noteworthy example of an activity or experience. As students identified a variety of them, we typed new information on a collective chart on the board. After reading a few pages, I gave students a photocopied sheet of the same chart (with blank spaces for the information), and while working in groups, students read from sets of biographies of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and recorded more information about her childhood experiences and activities. Then, we met back as a whole group, and students shared what they discovered. We re-analyzed the text together; discussed what these could mean for her as a future writer; and then added the information to the group chart.

**Step Two:** After this lesson, I worked with students individually to select the biography they wanted to read. Students made their selections from a set of biographies I had pre-selected. The following should be considered when choosing biographies that you will offer to your students: authors should be known to children, author choices should represent a variety of writing genres, and biographies should feature considerable aspects of childhood. Chosen biographies should also provide a good deal of information on both childhood activities and the authors' creative processes for writing. Students and I worked together to find a good fit with respect to interests and reading/complexity levels. Once students selected their biographies, they began reading individually and taking notes. For these, students replicated the chart from the board. I conferenced regularly with the students as they read and took notes from their books. Students were directed to read only through the section of the book covering the author's childhood.

**Step Three:** Once all students had finished the section on childhood (this took a couple of days) we came back

together as a whole group and shared what was discovered. As students shared the activities and traits developed, we added each new trait to a chart on the board, listing below each one the authors that had developed that trait through childhood activities. We then had a discussion about each trait, how much time the students themselves currently spent developing these traits, and how the students might further develop these traits in themselves.

**Step Four:** Next we moved on to the writing process. Using the same method in Steps One and Two, I modeled the process of analyzing text to determine the authors' experiences of engaging in the creative process of writing. Together, we used passages of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings books to discover that she took notes on what she observed, conducted interviews, wrote outside, and made many, many drafts (which she balled up but never threw away). Then, students read the rest of their biographies, taking notes on the writing process of their authors. As students worked on their reading and notes, I conferenced regularly with them to provide guidance on analyzing and interpreting the text. Once all students had completed their biographies, we came back together again to draw conclusions about the writing process and how each of the authors wrote.

**Step Five:** As a culminating activity, I had students write a review of the book they read, from the viewpoint of how well the book provided information about what contributed to the author becoming a successful writer. Students were provided with guidelines of what to consider when writing a review—amount and quality of information about the author, amount and quality of information about the author's childhood and writing process, and how much they enjoyed reading the book. When finished, students posted their reviews to the class website.

### **A Reflection**

The unit has proven to be quite successful. It is easily adaptable to students' abilities and interests as well as different classroom configurations. I found it to be very effective in motivating students to write and achieve

key language arts standards, notably citing specific textual evidence; making logical inferences from text; and interpreting words and phrases used in text. Students commented that they learned to look at biographies in a new way after participating in the unit. Others became much more metacognitive about their personal experiences with the writing process. Also, in seeing that many authors had submitted and published pieces at a young age, students were motivated to publish their own. In fact, two students were accepted for publication in a national magazine.

In addition to learning about the traits and writing processes of authors, students found validation as creative individuals, each in their own way. Many students remarked on how they could identify with the authors, not only in their traits and writing processes, but also in the problems and successes they experienced. Many students began to be more aware of how they spent their time and endeavored to opt for activities that assist in develop traits that are beneficial to their writing. After reading a biography through this framework, students are able to identify similar information in later biographies they read.

Although this framework of analyzing and interpreting biographies was utilized in the area of writing, the same process could be applied to other fields of creative endeavor. For example, students might learn the traits of scientists and how they engage in the scientific process. Give it a try. It can only be enhance your instruction, class, and learning environment. **THP**

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