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Biography Examples & Planner

Three model biographies with every feature labelled, plus the planner, writing frame and self-check students need to write their own.

Ages 9–14 · 10 pages

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REFERENCE

What makes a biography?

A biography is a true account of a person's life, written by someone else, in the third person. It tells the life in order and shows why it matters.

Structure

1. Orientation
Who the person is and why their life is worth reading about

2. Early life
Birth, family, childhood and education

3. Key events
The main events in time order, with dates

4. Turning points
Moments that changed their direction, and challenges overcome

5. Legacy
What they do now, or the difference they made

Usually told in time order. A confident writer may open with a big moment and then flash back.

Language features

Feature	What to use	Example
Third person	he, she, they, the person's name. Never “I”.	She lived in a cold attic room.
Past tense	For events. The ending may move to present tense for a living person or a legacy.	In 1898, they discovered… / Today, he still starts work at four.
Time connectives	In 1895, At first, After two years, Later, Today	After two years, the owner let him make the morning rolls.
Precise details	Names, places, dates and numbers	…born in Warsaw on November 7, 1867.
Quotes	The person's own words, from an interview or a reliable source	“I burned more loaves than I sold,” he remembers.
Evaluative language	Word choices that show the writer's view without saying “I think”	brilliant · heartbroken · recognition came late

Biography, autobiography or memoir?

	Biography	Autobiography	Memoir
Who writes it	Someone else	The person themselves	The person themselves
Person	Third (he, she, they)	First (I, we)	First (I, we)
How much of the life	The whole life, or the life so far	The whole life so far	One period or theme

EXAMPLE 1 · AGES 9–10 · A FAMILY OR COMMUNITY MEMBER

A biography built from an interview

Read the biography, then match each numbered label to the notes.

1 Thomas Abara: The Baker of Hill Street

2 Thomas Abara has baked bread for the people of Hill Street for more than forty years. Many people know his shop, but few know the story behind it.

3 Thomas was born in 1958 in a small fishing town by the sea. He was the youngest of five children. When he was eight, he began helping his mother bake flatbread before school. 4 “I burned more loaves than I sold,” he remembers, laughing.

5 In 1979, Thomas moved to the city to find work. At first, he swept floors in a large bakery. He watched the bakers closely, and after two years the owner let him make the morning rolls.

In 1983, Thomas opened his own shop on Hill Street. The first winter was hard, and some days he sold only ten loaves. 6 However, he never gave up. He gave free bread to the school next door, and soon the parents became his customers.

7 Today, Thomas still starts work at four o'clock every morning. He has taught twelve young bakers his trade. 8 For the people of Hill Street, his shop is more than a bakery. It is the heart of the street.

1. **Title** names the person and what they are known for.
2. **Orientation** tells the reader why this life is worth reading about.
3. **Early life:** birth year, place and family.
4. **Quote** from an interview, with a speech verb (“remembers”).
5. **Time connectives** keep events in order: In 1979, At first, after two years.
6. **Challenge overcome.** “However” signals the change.
7. **Present tense** at the end, because Thomas is still alive.
8. **Closing judgement:** what his life means to other people.

Model biography of a fictional community member.

Your turn: who could you interview? Write down three questions you would ask about their childhood, a challenge they faced, and what they are proud of.

EXAMPLE 2 · AGES 11–12 · A HISTORICAL FIGURE

A biography in time order

Notice how the dates carry the reader through the life, and how the ending names a theme.

Marie Curie: The Scientist Who Changed the World Twice

1 Marie Curie was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, and is still the only person to win Nobel Prizes in two different sciences. Her discoveries changed physics, chemistry and medicine.

2 She was born Maria Skłodowska in Warsaw, Poland, on November 7, 1867. Her father was a teacher, and Maria was a brilliant student who loved science. 3 At that time, however, women in Warsaw could not study at university.

4 In 1891, she moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. She lived in a cold attic room and had very little money, but she earned degrees in both physics and mathematics. In 1895, she married Pierre Curie, a French scientist. Together they studied the mysterious rays given off by uranium, and in 1898 they discovered two new elements. 5 Marie named the first polonium, after her home country, and the second radium.

In 1903, Marie and Pierre shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with Henri Becquerel. 6 Just three years later, tragedy struck: Pierre was killed in a street accident. Marie was heartbroken, but she took over his teaching post and became the first woman to teach at the Sorbonne. In 1911, she won a second Nobel Prize, this time in Chemistry. During the First World War, she set up mobile X-ray units so that doctors could treat wounded soldiers near the front lines.

Years of working with radioactive materials damaged her health, and Marie Curie died on July 4, 1934. 7 Today, the element curium is named in honor of her and Pierre. 8 Her life shows that curiosity and determination can break down barriers that once seemed fixed.

1. **Orientation** opens with why she matters, not with her birth.
2. **Precise details:** full birth name, city, country and date.
3. **Context:** the barrier she faced at the time.
4. **Dates** anchor each new stage of her life.
5. **Achievement explained** with a detail the reader will remember.
6. **Turning point** told with evaluative language: “tragedy struck”, “heartbroken”.
7. **Legacy:** what remains today. The tense shifts to present.
8. **Theme statement:** what her life shows, in the third person.

Your turn: underline every date. Then circle three words the writer chose to show how they see Marie Curie.

EXAMPLE 3 · AGES 13–14 · A THEME-LED BIOGRAPHY

A biography built around a theme

This one breaks strict time order on purpose. Track how the theme returns at the end.

Katherine Johnson: The Woman Who Checked the Numbers

1 In February 1962, astronaut John Glenn was preparing to become the first American to orbit Earth. His flight path had been worked out by an electronic computer, but Glenn wanted a person to check the numbers by hand. He asked for Katherine Johnson. If she said the figures were right, he was ready to go.

2 Johnson's path to that moment began in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, where she was born on August 26, 1918. She was so quick with numbers that by the age of 13 she was attending the high school on the campus of West Virginia State College. At 18 she enrolled at the college itself, and in 1937 she graduated with highest honors in mathematics and French.

3 Talent alone did not open doors. 4 In the segregated America of the 1930s and 1940s, few careers were open to a Black woman with a gift for mathematics, and Johnson worked as a teacher. In 1953, she joined the West Area Computing unit at the Langley laboratory of NACA, the agency that later became NASA. 5 The “computers” there were women who did complex calculations by hand. Johnson's accuracy and her questions soon earned her a place working alongside the engineers.

6 In 1961, she calculated the flight path for Alan Shepard, the first American in space. After Glenn's orbit, her work helped plan the Apollo missions to the Moon.

7 Recognition came late. In 2015, at the age of 97, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. She died on February 24, 2020, aged 101. 8 Johnson's life shows that talent can be held back for a time, but not forever, and that some of the most important work is done by people whose names are left out of the story.

1. **Opens with a defining moment** instead of the birth date.
2. **Flashback, signposted:** “Johnson's path to that moment began…”
3. **Theme introduced:** talent against barriers.
4. **Historical context** explains the obstacles she faced.
5. **Explains a term** today's reader might misread.
6. **Achievements in time order,** each with a date.
7. **Short evaluative sentence** for emphasis.
8. **Thematic conclusion** that links back to label 3.

Your turn: write the one-word theme of this biography, then a sentence about what Johnson's life says about it.

PLANNER · PART 1

Choose your subject

Shortlist three people. Score each one out of 5 for each test, then add up the scores.

Possible subject	Interest Will I stay interested?	Merit Will readers care?	Information Can I find enough?	Total /15
1.				
2.				
3.				

My subject: _____ **Why:** _____

Research questions

Topic	Question	What I found (and where)
Early life	Where and when were they born? Who was their family?	
Education	What did they learn, and who taught or inspired them?	
Key events	What are the most important things they did?	
Challenges	What obstacles did they face? How did they respond?	
Turning point	Which moment changed their life most?	
Quotes	What did they say, or what did others say about them?	
Legacy	What difference did they make?	

My sources

Check each fact in two sources. Include books, websites, videos and interviews.

PLANNER · PART 2

Timeline and theme

Put the key events in order. Star (★) the two or three turning points.

Year	What happened	Why it mattered	★

Find the theme

Look for what repeats: obstacles overcome, a lifelong passion, helping others, standing up for something.

Thematic concept (one word)

e.g. determination

Events that show it

Pick from your timeline

Thematic statement: what does this life say about that idea?

e.g. “Her life shows that curiosity and determination can break down barriers that once seemed fixed.”

WRITING FRAME

Draft it paragraph by paragraph

Use a sentence starter, or write your own. Stay in the third person and the past tense.

1. Orientation: who they are and why they matter

___ was the first... · Many people know ___, but few know... · In [year], ___ ...

2. Early life

___ was born in [place] on [date]. · As a child, ___ ... · Even at a young age, ...

3. Key events in order

In [year], ... · At first, ... · After [time], ... · Later, ...

4. Turning point or challenge

However, ... · Everything changed when... · Despite ..., ___ ...

5. Legacy and theme

Today, ... · ___ is remembered for... · ___'s life shows that...

Time connectives	Evaluative words
In [year] · At first · Soon · After two years · Meanwhile · Later · Eventually · By [year] · Today	brilliant · determined · against the odds · heartbroken · tireless · groundbreaking · overlooked · remarkable

SELF-CHECK AND PEER FEEDBACK

Check your biography

Tick the first box yourself. Then swap with a partner, who ticks the second.

Structure

Me · Partner

- [ ] [ ] My opening says who the person is and why they matter
- [ ] [ ] I include their early life: birth, family, education
- [ ] [ ] Key events are in time order, with dates
- [ ] [ ] I explain at least one turning point or challenge
- [ ] [ ] My ending gives their legacy or what their life shows
- [ ] [ ] I list my sources at the end

Language

Me · Partner

- [ ] [ ] Third person all the way through (no “I”)
- [ ] [ ] Past tense for events
- [ ] [ ] Time connectives link the events
- [ ] [ ] Precise names, places, dates and numbers
- [ ] [ ] At least one quote, with who said it
- [ ] [ ] Word choices show how I see the person

Fact check

A fact I used	Source 1	Source 2

Peer feedback: two stars and a wish

★ Something that works well

★ Something that works well

Wish: one change that would make it better

Reviewed by: _____

FOR TEACHERS

A one-lesson plan (60 minutes)

Introduces biography features and gets every student choosing a subject. Use the example that suits your class: 1 for ages 9–10, 2 for 11–12, 3 for 13–14.

Time	What happens	Pages
5 min	**Hook.** Read the first paragraph of Example 3 aloud. Ask: who is this, and why does she matter? What kind of text is it?	5
15 min	**Model.** Read your chosen example together. Cover the notes column; students predict what each numbered label points out, then reveal and compare.	3, 4 or 5
10 min	**Build the checklist.** From the example, the class lists the structure and language features. Check it against the reference page.	2
20 min	**Choose a subject.** Students shortlist and score three people, then write three research questions for the winner.	6
10 min	**Exit ticket.** Each student writes an opening sentence for their subject that says why the person matters.	8 (box 1)

Next lessons

Research and fact-checking (page 6) → timeline and theme (page 7) → drafting (page 8) → self-check and peer feedback (page 9).

Differentiation

Support: start with a family member students can interview, as in Example 1, and use every sentence starter.
Extend: open with a defining moment and flash back, as in Example 3, and write a thematic statement.

Want the full unit?

The **Biography & Autobiography Writing Unit** takes this further, with two weeks of teaching for grades 4–7:

- Lesson plans for both biographies and autobiographies
- Graphic organizers, tasks and practice content
- Assessment tools
- Google Slides, PowerPoint and print-ready PDF versions (82 pages)

See the full unit

Facts in Examples 2 and 3 checked against the Nobel Prize and NASA biographies. Thomas Abara is a fictional person.