



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

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## **American Biographies: Lives Transformed by Literacy**

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### **Introduction**

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"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. <sup>1</sup>

It is with this revelation, so eloquently stated in his own words, that Frederick Douglass takes up the challenge of making his unique journey into literacy. As I read this, I was deeply stirred by its power and an idea began to take shape. I began to think of a way I could bring to life the power that Douglass uncovered within the "mystery" of reading for the children in my own first grade classroom. For Douglass, this mystery emerged from the shadows and into the full light of day at this most decisive and pivotal moment in his life. For the first time, he saw hope for his future where there was no hope before. For the first time, he was struck with clarity and purpose, instead of a whip. Although the task before him was monumental and forbidden, it became the pre-requisite undertaking for gaining his eventual freedom and leading the way for others.

The task facing Frederick Douglass was a common enough task, even though the tools for attaining it were not readily available to him. It was a task facing children before the time of Douglass and will continue to challenge the children in future generations. It is also the challenge I face each day as a first grade teacher.

For my students to have any hope of success in this world, they need to learn not only how to read, but why it is important to them. I want to demonstrate this critical "why" by illuminating the connections between my students' lives and noted Americans we study.

## **Overview**

This unit will focus first on the "literacy biography" of Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, and Helen Keller. These figures have compelling stories of not only how they learned to read, but why reading was a critical factor in their lives. The "literacy biography" will act as a mechanism to connect my children to these figures from the past by means of a shared experience. After engaging the children's interest in these famous lives by presenting vignettes from each person's childhood and how he or she learned to read, a more traditional biographical study will follow. The unit covers the six historical figures listed above, following the sequence in which they are listed. The pacing of instruction will follow the sequence, covering one historical figure per week over a period of six weeks.

This unit is designed to be taught as a cross curricular unit to my first grade students in their urban school setting. The curriculum areas it covers are language arts and history. Typically, my students are anywhere from the age of six to eight years old. They enter their first grade school year with a wide range of literacy skills, from the complete absence of the most basic readiness skills to primer level; sometimes I may even receive a student on or above grade level. Because of these divergent skill sets, the most practical time to teach this unit will be near the end of the third quarter. It will require a degree of independent reading skill that is not in place for the majority of the students at the beginning of the year. This time period is flexible according to the needs and skill levels of different classes, but would be most useful when students have attained the degree of sophistication needed to read books on their own. I find the latter part of third quarter to be that time for most of my classes. It is usually about that time that students are beginning to feel confident and become curious about the variety of literary experiences available to them.

In the content area of history, my students have very little prior knowledge to access when it comes to any of the aforementioned historical figures we will study. They usually recognize Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin from their faces on our money, but that is about the extent of the schema they have. In reality, it's not a bad place to start. Anyone who has his or her image on a coin or bill must have been pretty important, right?

The population of my urban school is richly multi-cultural, with an approximate demographic of 65% African American, 30% Hispanic, and 5% Other Ethnicities. Over the past few years, the percentage of English Language Learners in our school has been steadily increasing. It is estimated that our incoming first grade class this year will be 49% Hispanic. With that projected increase will come the needs specific to Limited English Proficient students. As teachers in this environment, we must be prepared to meet that challenge. Although our school is culturally diverse, it is practically economically homogeneous. According to the most recent figures available from our district website, 93% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. As a result, we not only meet, but far exceed the eligibility standards of a Title I school. The great majority of our students come from families that live at or below the poverty line.

Although today's children are not victims of the crime of slavery, which outlawed the schooling that Douglass was so desperate to attain, they are met with obstacles and challenges not imposed by law, but by their environment. The hallmarks of poverty near our school are ubiquitous: pawn shops, cash advance establishments, substandard housing, pit bulls chained in fenced yards, coin laundries, barred windows and doors, amateurish graffiti, gang signs, and dilapidated mobile home parks. Just a few blocks from the school, drug dealers and prostitutes ply their trades along the four-lane highway littered with filthy motels. Many

times these motels are where the homeless families of some of our students are sent with housing vouchers. Close by is an old nightclub with a marquee in Spanish and English, where violence and shootings have become routine. "Buy Here, Pay Here Weekly" used car lots are often the only option for those fortunate enough to have a job that affords them the luxury of a car. This is the tainted urban landscape that surrounds the understaffed, underfunded, and overcrowded oasis that is our school.

Combating these environmental factors is a daily struggle. I need to make a clear case for literacy. I think of the common sense reasoning in Ruby Payne's controversial text, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, in which she points out, "Two things that help one move out of poverty are education and relationships." <sup>2</sup> In spite of the critics who accuse her of "pathologizing the poor," <sup>3</sup> she stands by her insights gained in over thirty years of working with impoverished children. She goes on to include a list of resources necessary to leave poverty. In this list, she contends that more than financial resources are necessary to leave poverty. Enumerating these, she speaks of mental resources as "being able to process information and use it in daily living. If an individual can read, write, and compute, he/she has a decided advantage..." <sup>4</sup> By studying literacy biographies, a child can begin to see the transformative nature of literacy. Payne also speaks of emotional resources as imperative, and these can come partly from role models. She states that in order to move out of poverty, "...a certain level of persistence and an ability to stay with a situation until it can be learned are necessary. The persistence ... comes, at least in part, from role models." <sup>5</sup> By exploring the struggles in the literacy biographies, students will gain strong role models for persistence. Finally, Payne speaks to the importance of relationships in learning. She quotes Dr. James Comer, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." <sup>6</sup> As a teacher, I embrace the opportunity to provide that necessary relationship.

Although this unit is intended primarily for first grade students, there are many elements that could readily be adapted to nearly any grade level. The main adjustment that would be necessary for its implementation would be the complexity and reading level of the texts selected for study. There is a plethora of high quality biographies available for children that is nearly overwhelming; with that in mind, finding additional resources may not be as challenging as one might think.

The biographical subjects could also be changed, according to the requirements of state and local standards. Of course, additional research into the "literacy biography" for any historical figures other than those selected would be necessary for that type of adaptation of this unit, but the same instructional strategies could be employed.

## Rationale

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I fell in love with biography in the second grade. My elementary school was home to a branch of the city's public library. Each week, my class would pay a visit to that library, just as my class does now. The only difference between my weekly library visits and those of the children of the school where I teach is that our school library is called a media center and is not open to the public.

In my first visit to our little public library in second grade, I was greeted by a brand new section in the library. This area was dedicated to "Biography: 100 Famous American Stories." I was immediately curious about this thing called "Biography," and asked my teacher about it. She explained that they were simply true stories of

the lives of important people. She seemed very excited by my interest, and with her encouragement I decided to try to read one and see what they were like. I checked out a biography of Amelia Earhart.

I spent that first week struggling a bit with this new type of book. Even as I was struggling, I was engrossed in "seeing" a life unfolding before my very eyes as I eagerly read word after word. This was different from the picture books and beginning chapter fiction books I had been reading. There was something about knowing the story was "true" that drew me in. I could know what it was like to be somebody else – and a famous somebody at that.

After Amelia Earhart, I could not stop reading biographies. Week after week, I delighted in standing before the Biography section, looking at the cover notes, and choosing whose life I would find myself immersed in next. Over the school year, and throughout the summer, I made my way through those one hundred biographies. My rate of consumption jumped dramatically from reading only one book per week to checking out two and sometimes even three at once. I was living and learning the lives in those biographies; more importantly, I was learning not only how to read, but to want to read, and how exciting that feels.

The very last book I read in the series, I had purposely saved for last. The final biography I read was that of President John F. Kennedy. It was written shortly after he became president, but before he was assassinated. I remember reading it with a sense of sadness, as it was just a few years after his death. All the symbols and imagery of his funeral proceedings were still in the forefront of my mind. Somehow, it seemed a fitting end to my journey through that series of biographies.

However, it was not an ending, but a beginning. After reading all of those biographies, I found myself addicted. I may have read other types of books in my elementary years, but those I remember most were the biographies. Something about being able to see the world as others may have seen it through their eyes, watching them grow, and follow their destinies made me believe that maybe someday, I could achieve something, maybe not as grand and monumental as their achievements, but that in my own way, I could be important, too. I would like to pass on that feeling of hope to my students.

I lived in a different world from the one my students live in today. Although my family was not wealthy, it was intact. The desire to read was something I craved long before I set foot in a school. I was fortunate to have a relationship with books. For as far back as I can remember, there were books in our home. My mother read to my brothers and me each day with great relish. Some of the books were read to us time and time again, but each time seemed like the first time. No one ever told me that reading was important. I intuited it, and could not wait for school to come, so I too would be privy to that secret code.

As a first grade teacher, I have many responsibilities. However, the paramount responsibility set before me each year is teaching my students to read. This instruction is often met with resistance. For many of my students, the values of education and reading are foreign concepts. Most of their parents never finished high school, for any number of reasons: incarceration, pregnancy, lack of resources and support, working for meager wages to augment their family income, frustration. Some of my immigrant parents lacked access to education in their native countries. The overall result of this, no matter what the cause, is that many may lack a connection and a reason to believe in something they consider being a futile pursuit. It is therefore incumbent upon me to not only teach the five pillars of literacy, but to also provide an answer to the question, "Why do we need to read?" It is my wish to cross the curriculum from language arts to history in order to provide that answer. We will examine the "literacy biography" of each great American as they are introduced to the children, and then follow that introduction with the story of their rise to prominence. My goal is for the children to discover how lives are transformed by journeys into literacy and discover the role it can play in

destiny.

## Objectives

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In first grade history, I am mandated by the Virginia Standards of Learning to teach about the lives of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington Carver. Unfortunately, these Americans are not always given the attention they deserve in the first grade classroom. More often than not, the surface of these lives is barely skimmed, touching mainly on their illustrious accomplishments. Rarely do we see beneath the patina of their deeds. We pay little or no attention to the humanity of these prominent individuals. I want to breathe life into these important Americans by not only recognizing them as the great figures they became, but also seeing them as the children they once were.

By doing so, I hope to avoid the "disconnect" between the children and these important American icons that I have observed in years past. Their lives are far removed, not just by centuries, but also a perceived lack of common experience. I want to give my children a means with which to reach back to the past and find a connection to engage with these Americans and join me in the search to find that common experience joining them across the generations. I want my students to be filled with curiosity and seek answers to questions we will formulate together about how these people lived as children, how they came to be literate, and how literacy changed their lives. I will also encourage critical thinking by asking the children to speculate on how these lives would have been different had they never learned to read.

My task will be to guide them in the process of seeking answers by utilizing the rich literary genre of biography. In addition to reading and researching the biographies of many figures, not just those mandated by the state, I also hope to engender a love for the genre by sharing my own story.

## Background Information

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In her book, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, Hermione Lee gives several definitions to which we can turn to attempt to construct our own understanding of biography. Lee actually gives three *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions with which to work; interestingly enough, they have evolved over time. For the sake of expediency, we will utilize the most recent version which was taken from the *New Oxford Dictionary of English of 2001* which defines biography as "an account of someone's life written by someone else."<sup>7</sup> To satisfy my own curiosity as to what the most current definition might be, I turned to the internet and found it defined as "a written account of another person's life."<sup>8</sup> Lee goes on to give us two vivid, powerful and distinct images with which to further complicate our understanding of the nature of biography: "an autopsy or an oil portrait."

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All of these definitions and depictions, simply stated as they are, do not give a clear, unambiguous meaning. Is there a standard and reliable definition of biography? To which I can answer an emphatic "maybe." As I see it, the definition of the term itself is much like its practice; for biography, and the "true" story of the person's life it is meant to give an account of, meaning is most firmly in the eye of the beholder. I imagine this "eye of the

beholder" as the reason for huge number of biographies dedicated to the same subjects. Because biographers are human, as much as they desire to have strict adherence to the facts, elements of bias – both positive and negative – can find their way into writing. Because of this, we must remain watchful for those who might unintentionally rewrite history.

For the sake of presenting a baseline from which to teach first grade, as well as most all elementary children, the most practical way for us to look at biography is by using Lee's metaphor of an "oil portrait." <sup>10</sup> As elementary teachers, the opposite view of "autopsy" reveals more than our children need to know at their tender ages. For example, it is more important for our children to see Benjamin Franklin as an inventor, a founding father, a statesman, and an ambassador than as the shameless womanizer he is alleged to have been. When speaking of Frederick Douglass' life in slavery, gruesome details of flesh being stripped from his back mercilessly by an overseer's whip, although true, is better left to high school teachers and college professors. The entirety of Douglass' existence could very well be reduced to that single image in a child's mind and become the stuff of nightmares. Using today's movie ratings as an analogy, in first grade, anything above a G rating is better left to a more appropriate time. Saying he was "beaten" is sufficient. I do not believe it an exaggeration to say that all my children have some schema regarding "being beat" — that they understand the idea and can process it. Even in the biographic sketches we provide of Helen Keller, while it is important for them to know how she became deaf, blind, and mute, it is also important to emphasize that her illness happened long ago at a time when medicine to make her better had not yet been invented. Helen Keller's biography should be viewed by the children as a heroic rise above her disability, not as a cautionary tale. The last thing we want to do is implant fear in six-year-olds so that every time they have a fever that they will be terrorized by the thought that their bout of the flu might leave them forever visually and hearing impaired.

In the early grades, "biographical intrusion" <sup>11</sup> into the personal lives of our American heroes and role models is not our goal. Our goal is set forth in the Virginia Standards of Learning. In History 1.2 it clearly states that "The student will describe the *stories* of American leaders and their *contributions* to our country, with emphasis on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington Carver." <sup>12</sup> I find the use of the word "stories" in this standard to be appropriate, although I am not sure that it occurred to the VSOL writers at the time, that much of what we teach about these figures is not always unvarnished fact. The reality is that some of the figures we introduce in the early grades have been idealized and mythologized to a point where it is hard to discern where the idealizing stops and the mythologizing begins. In those matters, I find the idealizing much less problematic than the mythologizing. As teachers, we have an obligation to teach facts, so far as we know them to be true. We are not in the business of perpetuating rumors and building "tall tales." Tall tales have a time and place. They are an important part of Americana in and of themselves and it is important that we address that aspect as we encounter such tales in the biographies. They need to be differentiated as a separate genre. In the strict sense of history or the study of biography as "life writing," they cannot be taught as fact. So, there is an ever present caveat that we must heed, and encourage children to question what they read: Did George Washington cut down his father's cherry tree and nobly admit to it? Did he really toss a silver dollar across the Potomac River? Did Benjamin Franklin fly a kite in a rainstorm? Did Abraham Lincoln really split rails or was it just a political ploy to make him seem like a "man of the people"? Was the relationship between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan "sunshine and lollipops" all the time? The concept of "what is true?" can be introduced and discussed in the early grades.

All the figures we will introduce in this unit have been written about countless times. The number of juvenile biographies of George Washington alone could fill an entire section of most children's libraries. The same is true of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln as well. Because of this oversaturation, selecting texts is a

subject that cannot be taken lightly. In her book, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography*, Hermione Lee uses the term "versionings" to describe what happens when multiple biographers write and rewrite the stories of particular subjects and how their "making up, making over...and reinterpretations" <sup>13</sup> influence retellings of life stories. It is our responsibility as teachers to teach facts, but we can also convert this problem of "versioning" into an opportunity to encourage critical thinking and examining more than one source. It is not too early, even in first grade, for students to develop healthy skepticism about feats (like the "coin toss" of Washington) that sound more like the stuff of legend than fact. It is important that we present these figures realistically; the more real these people seem, the better the children can connect them to their own lives.

## Strategies

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This is a thematic literature-based unit on historical biography. I will provide an assortment of biographies for students to read in order to engage with the content. It is critical for me to make books with a wide range of ability levels available for appropriate differentiation of instruction. I may still have emergent readers, as well as some who are transitional, and possibly, though not always, a few advanced readers in the class at the time of implementation. The importance of providing appropriate materials, and methods for using them, cannot be minimized.

I will also need to provide strategies for students to access their schema, <sup>14</sup> utilize their listening, reading, and writing skills, and retain the content they will be learning. I will utilize a wide variety of strategies to accomplish those tasks. Some of these strategies will be used with each of the historical figures; I will use others at my discretion after learning over time which strategies produce the most effective response. Below you will find the strategies I believe will be best suited to the activities to follow in the next section:

### File Folder Schema



I use this strategy for students to organize any prior knowledge or schema, they have for any subject. We create Schema file folders at the beginning of the year. Each file folder is decorated on the outside by the students and has their name and a line for the subject which we are learning. I also have a clip art cartoon depiction of a brain (pictured above) that each child glues on the cover of their folder before they are laminated. This image helps to remind them that we store knowledge in our brain and we can "pull it out" just as we pull a file out of a drawer when needed.

Inside the file folder are blank post-it notes on which the students can write words or draw pictures to assemble their prior knowledge. For example, if the subject is George Washington, on one post-it a child may draw a picture of a dollar bill and on another, he or she might write "president." As the child gains knowledge,

he or she will continue to add post-its, representing facts to the folder.

### **Exclusion Brainstorming** <sup>15</sup>

This is a strategy I use either at the beginning or ending of a lesson. On a whiteboard or chart paper, I randomly write many "facts" or key ideas about whatever it is we are studying. In addition to the facts or ideas, I will write many extraneous things that have nothing to do with the subject at hand. It is the job of the students to eliminate the items that are "red herrings" one by one, until all that is left are things true and pertinent to the topic, ranking them as high-quality according to their importance. This can be done as a whole group exercise, in small groups, or one-on-one.

### **Teaching Text Features**

Because biography is, among other things, a type of informational text; it is important to teach the features we often find in non-fiction text. I believe it has become increasingly useful to teach directly these components to better prepare primary students for the upper grades. Text features include maps, timelines, captions, charts, headings and sub-headings, informational notes, and bold-faced vocabulary. I am amazed at how ubiquitous these features are in the high quality juvenile biographies available today.

### **K-T-W-L Charting for Critical Thinking**

K-W-L Charting is a time-honored tradition in elementary pedagogy; with its columns for what we *Know*, what we *Want* to know, and what we have *Learned*. In the past year, in an effort to promote critical thinking in my first grade classroom, I have added an additional column for what we *Think* we know. I use this specifically in content areas where we find a discrepancy in information in texts. I then provide multiple references, including multimedia sources to research and see if we can prove or disprove what we think we know. I believe this will be particularly useful in examining the mythology that has sprung up around many of our historical figures.

### **Interactive Read-Aloud**

I use the Interactive Read-Aloud as a more specific way of conducting a read-aloud, making for better engagement in a whole group, or even small group, setting. It differs from the traditional storybook read-aloud in that it requires more participation from the listeners. In addition to asking questions periodically during the reading, as most of us do already, I invite my students to do one or more of the following: give a thumbs-up when they hear newly introduced vocabulary, link thumb and index finger with thumb and index finger in a chain-like manner above the head when the student recognizes a "connection" to their own life or schema, reformulate certain statements of facts into questions, and pause to fill in elements on graphic organizers during the reading. All of these actions promote "purpose" and force the students to become better listeners.

### **Interactive Write-Aloud**

I usually do Interactive Write-Aloud in small groups, but it can be easily adapted to large groups as well. This is writing that is done collaboratively with my students and me. I love when my students can write independently, but it is also important to "talk" our way through writing. This allows students to wonder aloud, try different ways to say the same thing, and most importantly, listen to me model Standard English. All through the first grade year, I believe it is important to combine oral and written exercises. The final step of the interactive write-aloud is chorally reading the piece that has been written together, thus allowing students



to hear what they have written. This is a valuable self-correction tool.

## **Grand Conversations <sup>16</sup>**

I use a slightly adapted version of this strategy in my classroom. Most Grand Conversations are almost completely student-centered with minimal guidance from the teacher. I do think that is the optimal way to facilitate a grand conversation. However, that works best in upper grades. First graders need a little more support.

Customarily, a grand conversation has two parts. The first part centers on student-led discussion of the text. They learn to observe the conventions of conversation and speak in turn. The talk concentrates on the "big ideas" they have read about or seen in a video presentation. The second part consists of the teacher pointing out any of the pertinent facts or ideas that were not discussed. I have monitored grand conversations in upper grades where I have not had to intervene at all as the students covered everything, plus adding some interesting ideas that never occurred to me.

In adapting this strategy for first grade, I divide the class into small groups first. I prepare strips of paper with one of the ideas or facts on them. The leader of each group chooses a strip of paper, and begins a discussion in the small group. During this time, I circulate in the room, listening in on the conversations. I remind them of the proper way to converse while modeling complete sentences. After the groups have discussed the idea or fact among themselves for ten minutes or so, we all meet on the carpet in a circle for the Grand Conversation. I usually choose the first speaker by pulling a craft stick from a jar that has a stick for each person in the class. As the conversation progresses, I monitor it closely taking notes to make sure everything is covered. If at the end, not all items have been discussed, I will intervene with some leading questions.

Please know that this strategy cannot be learned in one day by first graders. This is particularly true if you have a lot of English Language Learners in your class, but that makes it all the more valuable to persevere. It takes a great deal of practice and work in small groups in order to get to the point where the Grand Conversation can occur, but it is well worth the effort.

## **Technology Integration**

In researching this unit, I have discovered many websites related to the study of biography. I provide a list of the best websites I have found in the annotated bibliography following the Activity section of the unit. Of particular interest, are interactive timelines for the historical figures we will be learning about. These will serve the dual purpose of bringing the concept of a timeline into focus as well as highlighting events. On these timelines, all the students need do is to move the cursor over a certain year, and whatever events occurred in that person's life during that time appear. I could see my students becoming very engaged in doing this.

Another great means of technology connection I found comes from the website <http://www.biguniverse.com>. Not only is there a nice variety of online biographies there for the children to read, but there is also a tab under which books can be electronically created and published. This would be an excellent strategy to use for "early finishers" at any time during the day.

You may also find <http://unitedstreaming.com> produced by the Discovery Channel a useful resource. The Biography website, <http://www.biography.com> has a Classroom tab under which many "mini-biography" film clips can be found and shown to your class without cost. I have found these helpful in reaching out to children because of the amount of television they watch.

## Interviewing

This could be considered more of a skill than a strategy, but interviewing will certainly be a necessary part of at least one of the activities I am planning for the unit. This will be an interesting concept to teach to first graders. I believe that showing clips of interviews of popular celebrities, such as Miley Cyrus, will serve as an example to the class. I will model the procedure by inviting the principal or another adult at the school to be interviewed in front of the class. Following these examples, we will further explore how to ask questions and what makes a good question.

## Unit Activities

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As I previously stated, six weeks is the expected duration of this unit. In developing the activities, I have established a pattern that will be repeated each week with each of the historical figures. As you will see, this pattern will be readily adaptable to any other biography chosen for study at any level. Because this unit is specifically written for first grade, if you intend to use it for other grade levels, it allows the freedom to extend certain activities and truncate others.

Before we can begin the study of the historical figures, it is necessary to spend at least one day introducing the genre of biography by name, and explaining exactly what it is, why they are written, where they are located, and why we are going to study them. In order to accomplish this, I will arrange a "field trip" to our school library. I will enlist the partnership of the librarian by explaining exactly what I would like to do and soliciting any input she might offer. It is extremely important to gain the support of the librarian in this venture by showing her the proper respect and recognition of her authority over all that happens in her area of responsibility. I will discuss my ideas with her well in advance. It is important that this excursion fits into her schedule. I would also like to add some festive decoration to the Biography section, and that is certainly something that cannot be done without the advice and consent of the librarian. I will also need to use technology resources during the field trip which will need to be set up prior to arriving with the children. In addition, I envision a table set up with thirty to forty picture book biographies on display. I will encourage my librarian to be a "guest speaker" to offer whatever she might like to add to the children's knowledge of this new topic.

This field trip should include the introduction of many of the informational text features often found in juvenile biographies. In order to do this, I will prepare a brief power point presentation with a slide for each one of the following features: maps, timelines, captions, charts, headings and sub-headings, informational notes, tables, indexes, and bold-faced vocabulary. I will also have previously marked, with post-it notes, examples of each of these features in a variety of biographies. These books can be passed around for the children to see concrete examples of each. I will have previously made a chart with each of these features that will be in our classroom during the unit for easy reference.

Following the introductory presentation, I will allow the children ample time to explore the biographies set up on the table. I will ensure that the biographies cover a wide variety of people over a long timespan. One biography of each person we intend to study will be included in this display, but I will not disclose the actual figures we will study. The children should be reminded of the proper way to handle books and be encouraged to do so while examining the books.

Nearing the end of the field trip, I will invite the children to join me in a circle on the carpet. We will discuss questions related to biography such as: What is a biography? Why are biographies important? What is their purpose? Are biographies fiction or non-fiction books? Who are biographers and why would anyone want to do "life writing"? Can biographies be written about ordinary people or does the subject have to be famous? This will also be an important time to ask the students for any questions they may have. I will also ask some leading questions directly related to our objectives for the study such as: Do you think you might have some things you do in your life that are similar to the lives of the people in these biographies? Do you think everyone can make contributions to our country and the world? Is there anything you can think that we do in school now that is the same as people have done in the past? What kinds of things are different?

To conclude the field trip, I will briefly announce that in the coming weeks we will be reading and writing about some of the biographies that we have looked at during our visit. I will also add that I will have a "classroom library" of biographies, courtesy of our librarian, available for them to read during station time in our reading block and at "waiting times" (waiting for all to arrive in the morning, waiting in the restroom line, waiting for the buses to come in the afternoon) during the day. Then, upon our return to the classroom, the students will design bookmarks with the word "Biography" on one side and the words "life writing" on the other side. Laminate the bookmarks, if possible, for students to use in the coming weeks.

Please refer to the strategies section for details on how to implement the strategies I will list for each day. Also note that although I name specific biographies for some activities, they are to be regarded merely as suggestions. I would encourage anyone who uses this unit to personalize it by choosing the books he or she deems most appropriate for his or her class. I do believe the Paul A. Adler picture biographies will be most useful to me as read-alouds, as well as the National Geographic biography series. There are many high quality biographies available to choose from, and hopefully, you will not need to venture beyond your school library to find them.

Before moving on to the weekly schedule, there is one more thing I want to remind myself to address each and every day of the week – the explicit teaching of informational text features. I would like to encourage the students to watch for the features we introduced on our chart and to bring them to everyone's attention in a polite manner when they see one in a book we are reading. I will review the chart daily, and remind everyone to be on the lookout for these features. Now, below you will find the order of activities I will use in teaching this unit each week:

## **Monday**

Introduce the historical figure of the week. I will utilize the File Folder Schema method to activate any prior knowledge the class may have about the person whose biography we will be studying. We will update our schema each day with newly acquired information. I will follow the schema discussion with a short video clip from one of the sites mentioned in the technology integration strategy. United Streaming and Biography provide brief mini-bio clips suitable to first grade attention spans. Seeing video is familiar and engaging and often a good introduction to the Interactive Read-Aloud. I will end each Monday with an Interactive Read-Aloud using either an Adler or National Geographic picture biography, depending on the class and the historical figure. After a brief discussion, students will use post-its to add to their Schema File Folder.

## **Tuesday**

As a method of review, we will utilize the Exclusion Brainstorming strategy. As the weeks go by, I will be able to mix up facts about all the persons we have studied thus far. Doing this will not only reinforce information

about the biography we are currently studying, but will act to solidify facts about those figures we have already covered.

After the Exclusion Brainstorming, it will be time to consult our Schema File Folders again to make sure we have included all the facts we know and begin to think about any erroneous information we may have picked up. This would be a good time to use the K-T-W-L Chart, making sure to place anything we are not sure of in the "What we THINK we know" column. We will revisit the chart on Wednesday.

In each Tuesday class, we will complete an exercise called "Just Like Me." In this exercise, I will invite the children to work with their reading partner to spend a few minutes engaged in a "knee-to-knee, face-to-face" pair chat. During this pair chat, they will make a list of things they have in common with the historical figure of the week on a dry erase slate. After circulating and monitoring the conversations for "on-task" talk for about 7 - 10 minutes, we will gather back as a large group to make an inclusive list of all the things they discussed as being "Just Like Me." This will serve as a natural lead-in to the "literacy biography" of each figure. Depending on the person of the week, I may have a book that details the way this figure learned to read and what schooling meant to them - or I may flex my storytelling muscles and cover the key elements of how this person came to read and what learning meant to them and their future. To wrap up the Tuesday activities, we will complete an Interactive Write-Aloud literacy biography of the figure we are studying and post it on the bulletin board.

(Note: You will find resources for the literacy biography of each person following the Unit Activities section.)

### **Wednesday**

The middle of the week is the perfect time for giving the class the freedom to explore as many resources as possible about the person of the week. Pertinent websites will be pulled up and ready for exploration at the Computer Station. The Listening Station will be supplied with the current person's biography on tape and books to follow along in. The Writing Station will be stocked with writing paper, markers, and resource books to compose a few paragraphs about our subject. The Biography Basket will have varied level biographies available for reading and reflection. The Art Station will have materials prepared for creating a memorable scene from the week's biography. Finally, the Talk Table will be available for practicing oral language and the conventions of conversation.

Wednesday's class period will conclude with a Grand Conversation about all the key points we have learned from the biographies this week. Included in the Grand Conversation will be points of disagreement that we may find in the resources, i.e. Ben Franklin's kite experiments, George Washington's coin toss, etc. These will be clarified using the K-T-W-L Chart.

### **Thursday**

Interviewing and writing will be the focus of the day. We will have a weekly guest from the school to be interviewed. Before the guest's arrival, I will guide the children in generating a list of ten questions agreed upon as important. I will conduct the guest interview each week, modeling the proper way to ask questions and listen politely. They will also see the importance of following up unclear responses with clarifying inquiries.

After our guest leaves, the children will choose one of two ways to write about the interview they have just witnessed. They may choose to write a Five Fingers Bio Sketch. The Five Fingers Bio Sketch is a writing

technique in which students will use the outline of a hand to write a sentence gleaned from the interview on each finger. The Five Fingers (and when appropriate Five Senses) technique is something my students will already be familiar with from language arts and can see how it can be applied to other forms of writing. Students may opt instead to create an Open Mind Portrait of the guest. In this writing technique, a student will draw a "neck up" portrait of the person, leaving space between the subject's hair and face – thus creating an "open mind." Then they will write the things remembered from the interview in that space. This will create a visual and written biography.

## **Friday**

Friday is designated as assessment and Biography Freedom day! After answering a five question quiz about the person of the week, the children are free to read and explore biographies that interest them from our classroom biography collection. The children can use "whisper phones" to read silently. Students can partner read or he or she may participate in an extension activity such as writing a biography at [www.biguniverse.com](http://www.biguniverse.com) at the Computer Station.

## **Final Thoughts in Concluding the Unit**

Like most teachers, I begin the school year with an "All About Me" activity. I generally do this either the first day of school or sometime during the first week of school as a tool to get to know my students. I developed a formulaic approach many years ago that seeks answers to questions such as: What is your favorite food? How many brothers and sisters do you have? Who do you live with? What kind of games do you like to play? What is your favorite sport? What is your favorite season? Who do you like to spend time with? and so on. At the very end of the six weeks, I would like to conclude the unit with a writing exercise called "All About You." In this activity, students will receive a blank "All About Me" worksheet with the title changed to "All About You." Each student will choose someone he or she would like to write about. He or she will use his or her interviewing skills to procure the answers to the questions in "All About You." Using the information from the interview, the students will write a short biography and present it to the subject of his or her "All About You" biography.

## **Literacy Biography Key Points**

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Below you will find the key points of the literacy biographies I was able to find about the historical figures I will be teaching. If you choose to teach about another figure, it will take some research to find out how that individual learned to read and what it meant to him or her.

### **Frederick Douglass**

A very complete resource for learning about Frederick Douglass and his journey into literacy can be found in the book, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Slave Who Learned to Read* by Linda Walvoord Girard. This particular book makes an excellent read-aloud that covers all the most pertinent points of Douglass' literacy biography in an appropriate way for young children. If you cannot find this particular, I would encourage you to look for alternate sources. If you cannot find anything addressing his literacy biography, I would direct you to Douglass' autobiography available free on line at this link: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23/23-h/23-h.htm>. The most pertinent details are found in chapter six of this ebook. Please use this only as a resource to learn

about his literacy biography, then relate it to the children in your own words.

### **George Washington**

George learned reading and writing from a minister in a small church school near his home. There were no schools past the early grades nearby. He had expected to go to school in England as his brothers did, but after his father died suddenly when George was eleven, the family could not afford to send him far away. Most of what he learned was from copying out of books and learning words by sight. He had a hard time with spelling and worked hard at it all of his life. He studied very hard to learn the things he needed to do well. He ordered books from England to help him become a better farmer, and by reading and rereading these books, he not only became a better farmer, but a better reader.

### **Abraham Lincoln**

There are so many excellent versions of Abraham Lincoln's journey into literacy, it will be hard for me to choose just one, but I believe I will use the National Geographic version called *Young Abe Lincoln: The Frontier Days, 1807-1837* by Cheryl Harness. It is not only visually stunning but gives a detailed narrative covering all the major points of his literacy biography. The National Geographic biographies by Harness are books I would not usually read in full as a read-aloud, but this one is truly a must-read. If you are unable to locate this book, there are many others that would cover the same material. I would encourage anyone teaching about Abraham Lincoln to exhaust all resources to find the book listed above. I believe it will captivate the children and will not be soon, if ever, forgotten.

### **George Washington Carver**

George Washington Carver should be introduced on Monday by use of the Adler picture biography. The book *George Washington Carver* by Tonya Bolden is another book I would suggest as an absolute "must-read." One could certainly excerpt his literacy biography from this book, but it would be a shame to deprive the children of a full read-aloud of this book. Carver has been written about extensively, but this biography, written in association with the Field Museum in Chicago, is a treasure. All of the other books about George Washington Carver listed in the bibliography would serve as adequate substitutes, but I have not found any other that covers Carver's literacy biography as fully as this book.

### **Benjamin Franklin**

The best interpretation I found of Ben Franklin's Literacy biography was in the book, *Benjamin Franklin: American Statesman, Scientist, and Writer* by Bruce and Becky Durost Fish in pages 7 through 13. If you cannot find this book, key points to Benjamin Franklin's literacy biography include that he knew how to read by age three or four, having been taught by his mother and older siblings. He appeared to be very smart and was sent to a Latin School in order to study for the ministry. He was pulled out of Latin School when it became apparent that he was not going to be a minister. He did attend "regular school" for only two years, from age eight until ten. He was an excellent reader, but struggled in math. When he left school, he went to work in his father's candle shop but did not like the work. Because of his love of books, he went to work as an apprentice to his brother who was a printer.

Benjamin Franklin has a wealth of juvenile biographies written about him. I am going to use as many as possible in my classroom. Because there are so many biography, some with contradictory information, these books are a good catalyst for discussing why some biographers include details that others do not, as well as

when a biography crosses the line to become more of a tall tale than an informational text. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are also much "biographied" subjects and their many biographies also lend themselves to discussions requiring critical thinking.

## **Helen Keller**

Helen's "literacy biography" and "biography" are forever linked. Had Helen Keller not had a "literacy biography," the rest of her life would likely never have warranted a "biography." It was through her "literacy biography" that Helen's life became notable. If she had never learned to read, first by her hand and then by Braille, she would have been forever isolated and forgotten by the world.

The children will experience the Adler biography of Helen Keller as a read-aloud Monday of her week. I will use the time normally reserved to explore the ways Helen became connected with the world by showing examples of Braille, giving the students the Braille alphabet and having them write their names and notes to friends using this "code." It will provide an opportunity for students to experience what it is like to be as Helen Keller was by using blindfolds and sound silencing headphones (such as those used by marksmen). The students could work in pairs with one as Helen Keller and the other as Anne Sullivan to experience the frustration of communication under the circumstances experienced by both Helen and Anne.

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One of David A. Adler's series of picture book bios. Perfect first read-aloud.

Adler, David A., and John Wallner. *A Picture Book of Helen Keller (Picture Book Biography)*. New York: Holiday House, 1990.

One of the David A. Adler series of picture book biographies. Perfect for a first read-aloud or possible independent read.

Adler, David A. *A Picture Book of Benjamin Franklin*. Milwaukee: Trumpet Club, 1990.

Picture book full of information. Definitely readable by a transitional reader. It would also make a valuable read aloud. Solely a picture story book.

Adler, David A. *A Picture Book of George Washington Carver (Picture Book Biography)*. New York: Holiday House, 2000.

Full of facts and information with a personal touch. Has flexibility as either a read aloud or a readable text for the transitional reader.

Adler, David A. B. *Franklin, Printer*. New York: Holiday House, 2001.

Detailed story of Ben Franklin, definitely aimed at intermediate and middle school readers, but an excellent resource for teachers.

Adler, David A. *Picture Book of Abraham Lincoln (Picture Book Biography)*. Pueblo: Live Oak Media, 2004.

One of the David A. Adler series of picture book biographies. Perfect for a first read-aloud or independent read for some first graders.

Adler, David A. *Honest Abe Lincoln: Easy-to-read Stories About Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Holiday House, 2009.

Easy reader filled with anecdotes of Abe Lincoln's life. Good book for critical examination as some seems to lean toward "mythology."

Alter, Judy. *Abraham Lincoln (Presidents)*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, 2002.

One of the [www.myreportlinks.com](http://www.myreportlinks.com) bios. A great teacher resource or intermediate grade independent read.

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Mainly a teacher resource, but has an excellent chronology and informational text features. Not student-friendly until middle school.

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Great read-aloud. Published in association with the Field Museum in Chicago. Many photos of rare artifacts.

Bowdish, Lynea. *George Washington Carver*. New York: Children's Press (CT), 2004.

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Chronology with informational text features. Independent reading for 1st graders.

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Cook, Martha F. *Abe Lincoln's Hat*. NYC: Random House Children's Books, 1994.

Anecdotal and fictionalized light biography reading for primary. Would be an excellent book to examine critically for facts.

Dash, Joan. *The World At Her Fingertips: The Story Of Helen Keller*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2001.

Could be useful as either a teacher resource or a chapter book read-aloud. Not an independent read for first grade.

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One of the [www.myreportlinks.com](http://www.myreportlinks.com) bios. A great teacher resource or intermediate grade independent read.

Fish, Becky Durost, and Bruce Fish. *Benjamin Franklin: American Statesman, Scientist, & Writer: Colonial Leaders*. New York: Diane Pub Co, 1999.

Great chapter book with some features of informational text at the end such as glossary, chronology, timeline, suggested readings, and an index.

Fontes, Justine, and Ron Fontes. *George Washington: Soldier, Hero, President [DK READERS]*. New York: Dk Publishing (Dorling Kindersley), 2001.



Good for grade level readers. Informational resource for teachers and students.

Freedman, Russell. *Lincoln: A Photo Biography*. New York: Clarion Books, 1987.

Teacher resource for background information. Photo documentation. Newberry Award winner, but not student-friendly below middle school at the earliest.

Fritz, Jean. *What's The Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* New York: Putnam Juvenile, 1996.

Focuses on Franklin's inventions and innovations. Not a student friendly read for first grade, but much useful information.

George, Sullivan. *IN THEIR OWN WORDS - Abraham Lincoln*. NYC: Scholastic, 2000.

Another great teacher resource to enrich background information.

Giblin, James Cross. *George Washington: A Picture Book Biography (George Washington)*. 1992. Reprint, New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 1998.

Interesting story of Washington done in narrative only with painted illustrations. This would be a good first read-aloud.

Giblin, James Cross. *The Amazing Life of Benjamin Franklin*. 2000. Reprint, New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2006.

Excellent resource for teachers, too advanced for first grade readers, but should be made available for reference.

Girard, Linda Walvoord. *Young Frederick Douglass: The Slave Who Learned to Read*. Library Binding ed. Morton Grove: Albert Whitman & Company, 1994.

Incredible read-aloud that goes right to the core of what this unit is about.

Glass, Maya. *Benjamin Franklin: Early American Genius*. NYC: Rosen Publishing, 2004.

Harness, Cheryl. *Abe Lincoln Goes to Washington, 1837-1865*. Washington, D.C.: Natl Geographic Soc Childrens Books, 1996.

One of the beautifully written and illustrated National Geographic Society volumes. Packed full of text features and great information. As a Read-Aloud could be excerpted over a few days, too much to absorb in one sitting.

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Kramer, Barbara. *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Inventor (African-American Biographies)*. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, 2002.

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Krensky, Stephen. *Benjamin Franklin*. New York: DK CHILDREN, 2007.

Contains illustrations, but is an advanced read. More for teachers than students.

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Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)*. 1 ed. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009.

Mayer, Cassie. *Benjamin Franklin*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 2008.

Illustrations and clear, large font. Engaging text. Highly readable for beginners.

Mckissack, Fredrick, and Pat Mckissack. *Frederick Douglass the Black Lion*. Toronto: Childrens Press, 1987.

The McKissack's first biography of Frederick Douglass. Excellent teacher resource or upper grade independent read.

Mckissack, Fredrick, and Patricia Mckissack. *Frederick Douglass: Leader Against Slavery*. Library Binding ed. Berkeley Heights: Enslow Publishers, 1991.

Many historical documents and photos. Succinct chronology, excellent teaching tool or independent read.

Nettleton, Pamela Hill. *Benjamin Franklin: Writer, Inventor, Statesman (Biographies)*. Minneapolis: Picture Window Books, 2003.

Contains vibrant, full page illustrations with a large font, short paragraphs, and information with kid-friendly vocabulary. Includes a link to a related website.

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Quackenbush, R. *Benjamin Franklin and His Friends*. Kansas: Pippin Press, 1991.

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Suitable for emergent readers, begins with 13 year-old George and portrays him in a very human way.

Schuman, Michael . *Frederick Douglass: "Truth is of No Color"*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2009.

Advanced level. Could be excerpted for background info and read aloud in part.

Thomas, Peggy. *Farmer George Plants a Nation*. Honesdale: Boyds Mills Pr, 2008.

Excellent book for the more advanced primary reader. Beautifully illustrated.

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Venezia, Mike. *George Washington: First President 1789-1797 (Getting To Know the U.S. Presidents)*. New York: Children's Press (CT), 1980.

Super book of loosely connected facts, but uses cartoon illustrations as well as classic portraiture. An engaging books for students of any age.

Venezia, Mike. *Benjamin Franklin: Electrified the World With New Ideas (Getting to Know the World's Greatest Inventors & Scientists)*.Canada: Children's Press, 2010.

Geared more toward the transitional reader. Uses cartoons, prints, and photographic images. Contains informational text features.

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## Appendix A - Virginia Standards of Learning

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In complying with the Virginia Standards of Learning in implementing this unit, I have aligned my own goals for this unit with those of the state. They are as follows:

- Students will understand that biography is one of the types of media available to them for reading, writing, listening, and appreciating. (This aligns with VA Language Arts SOL 1.1a)
- Students will understand that books and ideas can be discussed in small groups. (This aligns with VA SOL Language Arts 1.3 a-d)
- Students will be able to understand and retell the stories of individuals in pairs and groups. (This aligns with VA Language Arts SOL 1.9 c-h)
- Students will write creatively to reinforce learning. (This aligns with VA Language Arts SOL 1.12 a - g)
- Students will understand that while biographies are available mainly in book form, they are also accessible by various means of technology such as the internet, video, and audiotape. (This aligns with VA Language Arts SOL 1.12h)
- Students will learn that events from the past can be important in their present day lives. (This aligns with VA History SOL 1.1)
- Students will learn about the lives of famous people and the importance of literacy and life events in shaping who they became. (This aligns with VA History SOL 1.2, 1.10c)

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