



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

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## **Micro Biographical Essays: Students Helping Students Learn about American History**

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by Jeff Joyce

### **Introduction**

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Several years ago when I was a much younger teacher, but not any less handsome, during the course of a totally normal class period something interesting happened that I will never forget. A student raised a point of opinion during our discussion of Richard Nixon and referenced the textbook in relation to her comments. The comment itself I cannot remember, though I think it had something to do with him being a crook. My response was unsettling to her. I disagreed with the book. "How can you say that the book is wrong Mr. Joyce?" she asked. "It's not that the book is wrong," I said, "but rather that, it is not fully telling of the entire set of circumstances and I have a different point of view." She was amazed and after pausing for just a moment said, "so how are we supposed to know the truth, read lots of books on the subject and make up our own minds?" as if this were unthinkable. And of course I affirmed that this was in fact the tragic path she would have to follow if she wanted to be comfortable with her knowledge!

I relay this story not to denigrate this student nor even to point out the naiveté of my students in general but to indicate particular points of interest implicit to the formulation of this unit. First, the "truth" is very difficult to ascertain. There are lots of biographies of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, and though I have not read them all, I am sure they have some clear differences as to the "truth" of his life and service. So I guess I'm claiming that one might endeavor to do all the reading of all the biographies of Lincoln and still not have anything like a consensus on the truth of his life. We have lots of perspective and opinion to mull over but in the end those can be terribly confusing to our students who are looking for answers. Most are so programmed to think there is one factual version of history and they can easily end up in the situation like my student was with the textbook version of the Presidency of Richard Nixon; moreover, all students can begin to think that there are always, without much dispute, tangible facts even when reason can point in lots of other directions. Certainly there are things we can all agree upon, but there are also many areas for dispute. And I think this can be a severe detriment to student interest. Added to this is the enormous problem of scale. The amount of reading it might take to develop a scholarly opinion or perspective in history is probably incalculable. The mass of history might be broken down into smaller histories or even biographies but these are often massive undertakings. And it is unrealistic to think that there are many students of high school age ready to take on this challenge.

Given this dilemma how are we to lure students into being interested in history when it can be so perplexing and intimidating? I think we can pare down the debate, and the infinite number of questions, agendas, and priorities in biographical and historical works and create some kind of entryway for new scholars, or at the very least, make history a more approachable subject. It is part of the aim of this unit to do so.

And I think biography offers us an opportunity to attack this problem head on. Biographies are essentially like micro-histories. They focus on singular lives (sometimes the connection of several lives) and by function allow readers to peer into history through a life or set of lives. I want to take this one step further. I would like my students to look at American history by using the biographer's craft on a more micro level. Students will write micro-biographical essays on subjects of their choosing. These will be written on a scale more suitable to the research abilities of young people who are for the first time attempting serious scholarship. In doing this, students will scale down the mass of history into more consumable parts and see for themselves that the study of history is well within their grasp.

## Background

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I am a Social Studies teacher and regularly find on my teaching schedule classes like Advanced Placement United States History, Advanced Placement American Government and Politics, and United States History. This unit will be for my AP US History class though I am positive that it could be used with honors students and perhaps reconfigured in a way that will make it possible to do with standard level students.

In North Carolina, students who take US History, no matter the achievement level, are required to take an end of year exam formulated by the state. This is in addition to the AP exam that students of that class will take in early May. There is approximately one month between the two exams and that puts me in a bit of a strange position. My AP students by virtue of the need to be prepared for the College Board exam have completed the entire survey course in US History. And though it is true that we must do well on the state test, it has never been much of a challenge to AP caliber students. Here is where this unit fits (I say this only because if it were not for this scheduling phenomenon, I do not think I would have time to pull this off). Teachers should be forewarned that unless you are free of curricular restrictions, this project is not likely the best choice. I think it will take a great deal of class time and probably have to take place over the course of several weeks. I also think that it will require having available library time and space so that students can do adequate research.

My high school will be brand new next year and will be about 1500 students strong, including only grades 9-11. The students at this school will not necessarily represent a diverse population. It is in a wealthy suburban area and is already being considered, with no evidence yet, as one of the best schools in the district. Early registration numbers show that I will have at least 4 sections of AP US History and that each section will be comprised of 30 or more students. This presents a potential logistical problem but one I will address in the strategies section of this unit. Suffice it to say that I think for the project described in this unit I will have the proper level of student to be successful.

## Rationale

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My proposal is to have students write what I am going to call micro-biographical essays (MBE). The goals I hope to accomplish through this exercise are three-fold. If American History is made less complicated by exploring history through the writing of MBEs (cutting down the mass of material into consumable quantities) it is my feeling that they will be less intimidated by the discipline and more willing to study history as they move forward in their educational careers. Second, I want students to learn the biographer's craft. If they have a better understanding of what biographers and historians do, then we might draw out a sort of empathy that makes learning history less abstract and the sorting of historical ideas less intimidating. Third, and maybe a little less important to this unit, I am going to create the William A. Hough High School Historical Society. There are actually a number of things I hope that this group will do over the course of the school year but primary among them, and germane to this unit, will be to build a website where they will post their MBEs so that their research can be shared with others. In particular, I hope it will become a valuable resource for students who might be taking the AP class in US History for years to come.

Hermione Lee refers to biography as "life writing." But makes it abundantly clear in her *Very Short Introduction to Biography* that it is not so easy to determine exactly what that means or in what sort of narrative form it should be translated. Indeed, it is clear that there are some serious and difficult questions to be answered when considering writing a biography. Lee suggests that among the more troubling questions in biographical writing are whether the author should cover the entire life of the subject (what to include or omit, i.e., the chronology to examine), what kinds of sources are to be used and whether (and how) authors can judge their authenticity, how the author decides upon a through-line (the narrative focus), and the point of view the biographer is going to take which can also depend upon the relationship of the author to the person in question. <sup>1</sup>

These are obviously going to be hard questions for my students as well. But it seems that going through the process to handle each of these questions is what will make the exercise edifying and thus worth the struggle. Students will be making some tough intellectual choices. Biography writing requires them to use analytical and rhetorical skills. They are practicing the craft of the biographer; it will widen historical knowledge and demand that they develop perspective. Those choices give them ownership and ultimately authorship. The strategies that follow later in this unit will sort out all the details as to how I think all of this will occur. But first I want to explore the reasoning behind the construction of this unit.

## Problems

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About five years ago, right about the same time I began coming to Yale for National Initiative seminars, I discovered the one element that would make me a better history teacher: information. Now before you give a big whopping 'DUH' response let me explain. For lots of years I was under the impression that the textbook almost uniformly drove the material my students needed to know as it was aligned to the goals of the AP College Board curriculum. Once I was master of that information what I needed were the pedagogical strategies to put me over the top. In my mind, it was methods that cured the madness.

That same year, the great historian David McCullough came to Charlotte to speak about his forthcoming book and said a wonderfully provocative thing that changed my mind for good. He said, and I am paraphrasing here, if you teach history you need to "tell the stories." In other words, captivate students with the astonishing tales of great episodes and characters in our past. He went on to tell the audience the kinds of stories that were he felt were so alluring. I was so impressed that I went out and bought his biography of John Adams and the journey began.

Slowly I began to see that it indeed was the stories that drew interest from my kids. This is not to say, of course, that the AP requirements were not top priority or that the state standards were being ignored; nevertheless, I found that the more I knew, the more stories I could tell that interested my kids. Suddenly, Mr. Joyce became a cool teacher, wow! Then I realized that my students' test scores began to improve as well. But then I realized something even more important. It takes a lot of time and effort if you really want to know your history.

Most recently I have been on a campaign to read Robert Caro's three (soon to be four) part biography of Lyndon Johnson. I have read parts one and two, but it took nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a year to do it. These books are tomes, and there are thousands more just like them. In fact, it seems that every important work that is published these days is a minimum 700 pages of narrative and another 200 in notes. Shelby Foote's three-part history of the *Civil War* is enormous, Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* is so thick it would kill a small animal, and Gordon Wood's *The Empire of Liberty* requires hand trucks to be moved. My sarcasm notwithstanding, it is true that all of these are important to current scholarship in American History but also inaccessible to the average student. Reading this kind of work requires a mammoth amount of dedication, not to mention time. I don't mind it because I love history but there are other more important considerations here.

It is a given that my primary task is to teach students the material associated with my subject. But I take it as an additional part of my job to interest students in the learning of our past. Right or wrong, I think learning our nation's history is and should always be considered an important element to one's personal, social and intellectual growth. It is also my belief that students are not willing to take on the challenge of learning American history because it seems like more than they can do.

So on the one hand the learning of history can be troublesome to students who have come to believe that history is filled with rote lists of absolute facts. When they encounter so many perspectives they can be turned away by what they might see as relativism. And on the other, biographies and histories are often huge compilations of material that most students will see as beyond their capability to digest. Therefore, I pose this unit as a potential solution to these problems.

## Strategies/ Solutions

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What follows are the kinds of considerations students must make to complete this project successfully. Lots of these things are all wrapped up together, but there are distinctions, and I will do my best to make those clear. These subsets in the overall strategy are put together as a way to help my students get prepared to do the work of building an MBE.

## Subject

It will first be necessary to choose a life. There are some qualifications that I will insist be a factor in that choice. There must be a direct connection between the person and the curricular requirements for the AP US History exam. This does not mean that the person has to be terribly famous. For example, Massasoit, Sachem chief of the Wampanoag tribe in the early 1600s, is never going to appear in any multiple-choice question on the exam and to many he might seem a rather obscure character. However, his diplomatic dealings with the pilgrims in Plymouth colony give us vital insight into early colonial-native relationships. He was clever in the sense that he realized there were elements of European culture that could use to help to aggrandize his power. He used the colonists to build trading partnerships that gave him enormous material wealth in the form of wampum and gold. Simultaneously, he hired agents within his tribe to learn the English language. This assisted him once he traveled to Europe. He made great sums of money by hiring out his underlings for display in shops and restaurants. He was also able to acquire guns that could be used to fight off his native rivals, making him one of the most powerful sachems in New England. But he never wanted to give up landholdings that he believed were sacred to his people. After he died, his son, Metacomet, tried to halt the progress of colonial movement west, an act of preservation as he saw it. The resulting King Phillip's War was the most deadly of Native American wars in that area of colonial America, and was the final attempt by natives to curb European dominance there.<sup>2</sup> So if a student were to write an MBE concentrating on Massasoit, it would be necessary to use that essay as a way to help students understand the consequences of colonization to Native Americans, a substantial obligation for students looking to meet the AP standards.

## Time/ Purpose

The second and third parts of this will be choosing chronology, the space in time that students will focus on for their research, and then deciding upon a purpose for writing. Although I think the process for determining both chronology and purpose can happen in a couple of different ways, I want to give two examples as a way to demonstrate the conjunction between them.

First, let's make it clear that a full-fledged, whole life biography is not appropriate for this exercise even on the modest scale of a student essay. So if the subject chosen for biography is Andrew Jackson, there are several points of focus within his life that a student might draw out for their MBE. This is to say that there are some very pivotal moments that a student might choose to write about.

He was of course the President of the United States and one of particular note. Any President that has an era of time associated with him, the period of Jacksonian Democracy, is going to be full of possibilities in this project. But as a way of clarifying let me give you an example of the kind of choice students might make. Jackson was also involved in the American Revolution. Though he was not a soldier and not regularly associated with this event, he was part of a subversive resistance movement in South Carolina that gathered and stockpiled weapons in the case of a British invasion in the South. He was scarred by the sword a British officer in an incident where he was captured but refused to divulge any information. The British did eventually invade out of an erroneous belief that loyalists in the region would join them in quelling the independence movement. That never came to pass as Southerners united in all sorts and forms to oust the British presence.<sup>3</sup> So an MBE might focus on Jackson's youthful escapades as a way of telling the story of the American Revolution in the South. It is also the case that this same MBE might dwell a bit on colonial life in the south or immigration patterns to the south as they pertain to Jackson, his family, and others of the region. All of these elements are significant to our class and worthy of consideration. In other words, the purpose of the MBE is to use Jackson's life as a young man to provide the lens by which students can peer into late eighteenth century

America. To be clear, it would not be feasible for one of my students to tell the life of Andrew Jackson, because it would become so cursory in its approach as to give readers very little in the way of useful information (especially with relation to the AP test). But with a keen eye to the standards of the curriculum and a realization that lives put into proper context teach us both about those lives and the lives of others, we can accomplish our stated objectives. However, I think there is another way to arrive at the same place with regard to time and purpose.

Imagine that students aren't necessarily interested in a person but in a time period. Maybe they want to dig deeper into the time of the New Deal and the Great Depression. So they have decided that the purpose of their MBE is to take a unique look at a period that then requires the student to decide subsequently on a person whose life will help fulfill that purpose. Let's explore that example.

Lyndon Johnson became a famous character in this country once he had ascended to the Senate and was later elected Vice President under John Kennedy. His Presidency has been the greatest focus for historical scrutiny since it was the time of so many important American transformations. It was the time of the counterculture that was related to, among other things, the very unpopular Vietnam War. It was the culminating moment of the civil rights movement with the signing of the civil rights and voting rights acts. Lyndon Johnson as president committed our country to an unprecedented growth in the federal bureaucracy with his war on poverty. And it was a time of serious social upheaval that included protests, race riots, and assassinations of some of our nations most important figures. But in his youth Lyndon Johnson also played a vital role in carrying out programs associated with the New Deal. He was not yet a politician, but after serving as secretary to a Texas member of the House was asked to run the National Youth Administration (NYA). This program provided contracts to local businessmen to do work for the federal government that included an incentive to hire those out of work. Johnson was a regular champion of New Deal programs and campaigned himself for the House using buttons with the words "Me and Roosevelt for Lyndon Johnson." <sup>4</sup> Thus a student might find an enriching story of the New Deal and the Depression by focusing on Lyndon Johnson's life in the 1930s.

I suppose that the examples I have given might seem rather obscure in the sense that they take the standard learning of history somewhat off the beaten path. We don't normally associate Jackson with the Revolutionary War or Johnson with the New Deal. The point of the MBE is not necessarily to retell the stories we have already heard, nor is it to find the kinds of things I have described here. Rather the MBE is to tell some story of a life that gives us insight in to the bio-subjects themselves and simultaneously brings greater depth to our study of the time through which that life was lived. The aim is to develop the through-line; which is to say, the focal point for research can come from lots of angles. What I have offered here are two plausible angles students might use to arrive at a subject.

### **Argument/ Knowledge**

Once a time and purpose have been negotiated, it will then be the student's job to decide upon a thesis or argument for the piece they will author. Additionally, I will ask that they carefully delineate how the MBE will add to what we have already learned in the class over the course of the year; I need to know how their biographies will add to our existing knowledge. One caveat here: I don't mean to suggest that time and purpose are automatically to precede the establishment of an argument and/or the sought after knowledge to that argument. It is possible that any of these may occur to students before the other since they are intrinsically related to one another and so the MBE may have many points of origin.

Hermione Lee writes that for authors of biography and history "the form of the narrative may have to be a steady and unsurprising, solid scaffolding of the blocks of facts".<sup>5</sup> I would be remiss not to mention that Lee's considerations of biography in this text are far more complex and wide-ranging than what I mention here; nevertheless, the quotation gives us a very familiar point from which the perception of history writing/teaching commonly begins. Indeed, I wouldn't expect any push back from public school teachers if I claimed that the telling of history in our textbooks, and sadly sometimes in our classes, resembles something akin to a mere timeline of banal events rather than a thoughtful set of provocations that deal with causality and perspective and that challenge students to think more deeply about the meaning in history. Lee has it right that a scaffolding of historical facts is undeniably at the core of the biography. But that is merely a tool by which we begin to engage history and not the sum of the story. Virginia Woolf writes that the writing of biography implies "two incompatible things...(the) sterile and fertile."<sup>6</sup> In this case, the timeline is the sterile and speculation the fertile. I want my students to include both. Here is an example.

Let's return for a moment to Andrew Jackson. But in this case let's use the period of his life when he served as a General in the American military. Specifically, let's say that a student chooses to write about Jackson beginning from the War of 1812 to his first bid for the Presidency in 1824. It is a perfectly suitable subject for our purposes as outlined earlier and gets the student past phase one of the MBE. However, I am going to insist that students at this juncture choose an argumentative line through which the essay will develop. Students shouldn't merely say that something happened but are required to make a historical judgment about those events, as any historian would. For example, students would write more about details of the Battle of New Orleans and Jackson's role in defeating the British than they would about the War of 1812 as a historical phenomenon. The War would be the context of the bio, but discussion of Jackson, as a prime mover in the War would consume the essay. I will ask that students go beyond what we may have covered in our class discussions during the year and expand, by way of the thesis, on what is said on the subject in the text. For instance, after having done research, a student might conclude that Jackson was something of a rampaging murderer. He did fire relentlessly on British forces in New Orleans even as victory seemed well in hand. He also nearly exterminated the Creek and Seminole tribes in Florida, burning their villages to the ground, and often taking no prisoners.

According to the rules I have described, a student would have at this point established time, purpose, and argument for the MBE. The final stage is to add new knowledge. This is not to say that the student will not have learned anything in the process thus far; however my goal for this project is that he or she builds on previous understandings held by the group at large. For example, Jackson's exploits described here fall into a broader category of American foreign policy better known by the 1820s as "Manifest Destiny." This is a major concept in College Board standards though specific information about Jackson either as it relates to the War of 1812 or the Florida Indian battles is not required in the AP US History curriculum. But because it falls into the scheme of our understanding of history and builds on a major concept, it has value for the readers (and ostensibly to other students of US History). This student has now completed four of the major stages of MBE writing. But there is one more major piece to this puzzle.

## **Sources**

No student will be successful in his or her writing without having found and used several credible resources. This too can be problematic but not overwhelming. The problems are threefold. First, one of the central roadblocks articulated earlier in this unit: history books and other biographies are often massive works and can be hard to navigate for young people. Second, the ability to surf the Internet has in some cases diminished the thoroughness with which students approach their work. I will call it the "cut and paste"

generation. Third, students may not know exactly how to tell if a source is worth their attention. Here are my suggestions for each problem.

Students are going to have created a narrow framework within which they will work. This can be tricky because they will need only a few chapters of any work to help them along. So I will need to insist and assist on being focused. They will need to avoid the vastness of the works I described earlier by being calculating in what parts they choose to read (selecting only the parts that specifically relate to their topic). I think I can help them by sharing some of the same examples I shared earlier in this unit (Massasoit, Jackson, LBJ). Additionally, my classes will be working in teams, and the labor will be divided (an explanation about this will be in the classroom activities section to follow). I suppose one way to deal with "cut and paste" is to have a meaningful conversation about plagiarism. I know warning does not always prevent this kind of action but maybe a demonstration of what warrants copyright infringement will do the trick. Last, a simple rule for using the Internet is to look only to sources that are from URL's that end in org or edu. I am not positive that this will totally solve the problem but in my experience these kinds of sources give researchers the best kind of information to use. Our textbook can also be a nice resource. There are lots of great books listed as sources in the back of the text and could easily serve as the starting point for students.

## Classroom Activities

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### Choosing a Topic

I will have about 135-150 AP students next year and am not silly enough to think I can handle facilitating that number of MBEs. Therefore, each class will be split into writing groups of 4 to 5. The group will need to choose a topic. There is some need for caution here as well. Teachers know well that totally open-ended kinds of projects can be destructive to an academic exercise. Students often need guidance but I don't want to choose topics for students to explore, which might prevent them from being excited about the subject. I will explain the project and then gather them into their writing groups. I will circulate around the room for 30 minutes or so listening to their conversations and answering any questions that might arise. Somewhere between their dialogue and my intervention topics will form. Thus, students will arrive at subject, time, and purpose though some of this may remain fuzzy (argument might be tenuously agreed upon) until they begin their research.

### Research

Each group will need to have an editor and chief. I will assign my best writers in each group to this task. The initial stage of research will begin as the editor assigns to her/his group areas to investigate. Again, if we think Andrew Jackson, students might divide into those who look into his early military service, those who dwell a bit on the War of 1812, those who find policies associated with the concept of Manifest Destiny, and those who look into the Creek and Seminole Wars. Each student will need to then write small-individualized essays appropriate to the argument previously agreed upon by the group but within the narrow scope of the subtopic they have been assigned by the editor. These will serve as the basis for the MBE. Groups will then need to decide upon ways to connect what they have each discovered. It might be the case that they find conflicting information that must be reconciled. The editor of the group can facilitate these kinds of conversations until there is some consensus in the group.



## Compilation

The final stage is to put the MBE together. There will likely need to be re-writing of the various parts of the MBE as ongoing discussions may result in the kinds of conflicts I described just above. It is going to be the job of the chief editor to make the final product ready for our website (should be somewhere in the realm of 15-120 single-typed pages). The MBE will need a title. It will need to have appropriately titled subheadings to assist the reader. And it must contain a works cited page. The number of sources this work will need, as for now, will need to be somewhere between 8 and 10. My hope is that there will be no need for minimum requirements, as the momentum of the task at hand will carry the group well into the realm of sufficient research. There will also need to be some expected features for each narrative of the MBE as a way to keep them somewhat standardized (see appendix A).

## Website

At this point in my life I can honestly say that I have never helped create a website. But I think one of the nice things about this project is that it will also contribute to both my and my students' technology literacy. I am positive that lots of my students will have more adept skills at this and may have perhaps already done something similar. My hope is that the act of making this happen will give the class and the MBE lasting meaning.

## Teacher's Role

I think any teacher who might want to do this project must be prepared to do lots of work with students. Teachers will need to help shape meaningful historical arguments. Teachers will need to make sure that the argument students choose to make is not overly radical, conspiratorial or otherwise outside the structure of current scholarship as to be useless to others. And although there are editors in charge of each group I can imagine that teachers will have to edit every paper carefully as well. Teachers will need to check for plagiarism and help students choose the proper sources. In the end, teachers will have to help students put all their work together in a nicely concise and readable form.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Lee,Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 1-18.
- <sup>2</sup> Philbrick,Nathaniel. *Mayflower A Voyage to War*. (London: Harper Collins, 2006) 78-259.
- <sup>3</sup> Brands,H.W.. *Andrew Jackson His Life and Times*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2005) 67-82.
- <sup>4</sup> Caro,Robert A.. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson The Path to Power*. 1, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) 341-369.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, 123.
- <sup>6</sup> Lee,Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. (New York: Knopf, 1997) 10.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Brands, H.W. *Andrew Jackson His Life and Times*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

This comprehensive biography starts with Andrew Jackson's very early childhood until his death. At about 800 pages it is a serious read from a well-regarded historian. It is nice for teachers in that Brands takes time to dig into some of the things our kids are to know about Jackson like the removal of the Cherokee and the notorious bank war. It would not be necessary to read the entire book to get some fruitful stories for one's class.

Caro, Robert A. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson The Path to Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. This is the first volume in what will soon be a four-part biography of Johnson. Caro has been considered the Johnson historian for some time but one note of caution: Caro really seems to despise Johnson and every story he tells carries the taint of this disposition. It is very long and terribly involved. He provides us with amazing stories to tell but you have to seriously commit yourself if you want to get through this book.

David Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen and Thomas Bailey. *The American Pageant*. 13th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. This is an Advanced Placement textbook known to be one of the first developed specifically for the advanced placement high school curriculum. It has long been thought of as the text most closely aligned with the expectations of the College Board test.

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. If teachers are thinking about teaching this unit I would say that this is a must read. It is likely that I will ask all of my students to buy this prior to beginning the construction of our MBEs. It is short, smart, and incredibly readable. It gives teachers and students a lot to think about as they begin to think about studying and writing in biography and history.

Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Mayflower A Voyage to War*. London: Harper Collins, 2006. This is a great book for students and teachers. It is a quick and easy read that trails the pilgrims from their difficulties in Holland to the new world and through King Phillip's War. It is the kind of book teachers could assign to students without any worry. Also, this book is a nice source for teachers looking for those attention-grabbing stories to use in the classroom.

## Appendix A- Student handout

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### Guidelines for the narrative- each MBE should contain the following:

#### 1. Title/ Thesis

Titles should give the name of the bio-subject followed by a subtitle that will give readers an idea about the specific focus of the MBE. Ex. Andrew Jackson: His service as General as it impacted both the War of 1812 and Native Americans in the South 1810-1820. Added to this, students must develop an argumentative statement very early in the narrative that takes some stance with regard to the subject matter. Ex. Andrew Jackson was often brutal in his military tactics and can be seen as a symbol of America's ruthless will toward domination of North America.

#### 2. Life background

Each narrative should include a concise biographical exploration in to the bio-subjects life prior to

the period to be considered in the MBE. So, students working on Jackson should tell a little about where he was born, his life as a young boy and maybe just a little about his career before joining the military. Because of the nature of the MBE, none of this requires more than cursory attention unless the group thinks that perhaps some particular event sheds light on his behaviors later.

### 3. Description of time period/ place

The narrative should give the reader proper context: background. With regard to Jackson for example, it would be imperative for readers to understand that his service took place within the political period known as the Virginia Dynasty (Jefferson, Madison, Monroe) and that it was during the first true era of American Nationalism. The reader must be given an idea about the developments of the War of 1812 and the Creek Indian Wars that were to follow. It might also be advantageous to talk a little about American expansionism and the Market Revolution of the same time. All of this might not be necessary, but depending on the direction of the essay could be of use to the reader. This sort of decision will need to be made collaboratively within your groups. Chief Editors will have the final say.

### 4. Argument development

Of primary importance is gathering and using evidence that helps the students make the argument detailed in the thesis. This is where your team needs to concentrate your efforts. This does not mean that the argument is scientifically provable; it means that you have found credible sources that gives you the kind of information that help you at least make the argument. Students should analyze their work by asking themselves; does the information we use sustain the argument outlined in the thesis? Are we following the path we set out for ourselves? If so, then the essay will have purpose and your team will be practitioners of biography and history. If not, then you will need to reassess and, perhaps, change the argument to meet the evidence you have found.

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