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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## Character Traits in Biography

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### Overview

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My ultimate goal for teaching is to help the students I teach to discover who they are, who they want to become, and how to be contributing citizens who make a difference. I want good character to be emphasized through the literature that we read so my students continue to develop from learning about the contributions of others. I want my students to be critical thinkers and intelligible readers by knowing that there is sometimes more to a story than just what the author may include, and therefore ask questions about what is missing...and even seek out answers. Students should also be able to transfer and integrate what they learn and do in reading to their writing by exploring and applying the same ideas and concepts. I am creating this curriculum unit for my second grade students in response to what I am learning at the Yale National Initiative in the Seminar *The Art of Biography* with Seminar Leader John Gaddis.

The goal of this unit for my second grade students is for them to engage in the genre of biography while reading and writing and becoming experts about a historical person, including themselves. My students will read biographies and autobiographies in order to identify the characteristics of the genre as well as to learn about real people who made distinguishing contributions to various fields, including arts, sports, politics, literature, music, and exploration. They will read on their level and engage with various text types including picture books, graphic novels, websites, encyclopedias, and identified apps. My second grade students will also write their own autobiographies. In doing so, students will be taught how to decide what to include and what to leave out. They will have discussions with their peers about their choices and why they made them in order to learn how to make decisions and defend them. Students will continue to craft their own autobiography throughout the school year, adding events or chapters that shape their time in second grade.

I am designing this curriculum unit for second grade students, but it could easily be applied to other elementary grades, especially 2-5. I am a second grade teacher in a self-contained classroom in a large urban public school district, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools. Teachers on my grade level work together and create thematic units with integrated connections across the subjects of math, science, social studies, and language arts. We develop and use a relevant and rigorous curriculum for students. As we implement the national Common Core standards for Language Arts and Math and state-created Essential Standards for Science and Social Studies, prior knowledge of students along with observations and assessments inform instruction in the classroom. Student assessments include district mandated tests in the subjects of reading, math, science, and

social studies, self-reflection, portfolios, grade level pre- and post-unit assessments, formative and summative assessments, and classroom observations. In the classroom and at the school, students have access to numerous technologies including computers with internet and instructional software, calculators, overhead and data projectors, TV, VCR/DVD player, CD player, and cassette players. Some students have access to technology at home, while others have limited resources at home. My PreK-5 school has an average student population of 900 students, but a lot of students come and leave throughout the year. There is an approximate one to twenty-five teacher to student ratio on my grade level. The student population of my school includes 66.2% African American, 14.6% Caucasian, 10.6% Hispanic, 3.9% Asian, and 4.7% other. Approximately 63.6% of our students meet the state's poverty level.

## Content Objectives

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In the story *Horton Hears a Who!* author Dr. Seuss wrote, "A person's a person, no matter how small." This story features a large elephant trying to protect small creatures. One of the primary messages of the story is that everyone is important. Thinking about the subject of biography, the central idea I can teach my students is that everyone's story is important. By reading biographies about people throughout history, they will begin to learn important things, events, and people from the world they live in. By writing autobiographies and sharing them they will learn mutual appreciation and respect for their peers. Students will be encouraged to dig deeper and ask questions to better understand the thoughts and motives of a historical person, while reserving judgment of them. They will also do the same exercise of discussing personal things about their peers while encouraging their peers to share aspects about themselves. This helps create great readers and writers who think critically and make connections to things they read and observe.

Learning to respect others while asking questions to explore things deeper aligns language arts standards with social studies standards. I will use the knowledge I gain in seminar from reading biographies written for adults, but I will apply it when reading second-grade "friendly" biographies as read-aloud books to help my students learn about historical figures in the context of reading, writing, science, social studies, and math. I will use biographies to introduce topics in the various units that I have to teach.

In social studies, second grade students are expected to "understand how various sources provide information about the past." When we study history, I will share *The Picture Book of George Washington*, *The Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and *The Picture Book of Christopher Columbus* with my students (along with picture biography books). When we study the "relationship between sound and vibrating objects" in science, I will read *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven* where students can learn about how Beethoven was able to feel the music even though he was beginning to go deaf. When we learn about money in math integrated with financial literacy in social studies where students are expected to "understand basic economic concepts" I will read *The Value of Saving: The Story of Benjamin Franklin*. My goal for students is to have a wide knowledge of people who have helped to shape our country, our music, our literature, our discoveries, our problems, our solutions, our arts, our sports, etc. By reading biographies and connecting people to various topics second grade students learn about, they will begin to understand and be able to make deeper connections to the big ideas and vocabulary they need to know in second grade. Students will be able to observe changes over time and how varying perspectives can understand and interpret the same thing.

In addition to reading, my students engage in writing for various purposes throughout the school year.

Currently we teach non-fiction writing in the spring and the students create an "All About Me" book using various text features that they learn about in reading. I'm going to develop my curriculum unit to introduce "All About Me" books at the start of a school year. I learn so much about my students through reading their "All About Me" books. I want to find a way to introduce them to autobiography where they can use the craft and principles employed in this genre and apply it to their own writing. Then (if there's time in the calendar) students will create a biography of a peer in the classroom. They will compare their biography to the autobiography that was written in order to learn the big idea that not everything that is written tells the whole story. This exercise will particularly highlight how individual authors tell or write stories in different ways.

## Background Knowledge

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In order to better understand the genre of biography and autobiography, the authors Hermione Lee and Nigel Hamilton have written short books on the craft. I recommend these books as overviews, explanations, and references for the genre of biography. I teach second grade scholars and although I have been required to read numerous biographies and autobiographies in my own career as a student (although *The Diary of Anne Frank* is the only one I can recall right now), I do not regularly take the time to think about the idea of what makes a biography a biography. Nor do I frequently think about the shape and format that biography takes when teaching it to my students.(1)

In *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, Hermione Lee suggests "Ten rules for biography." This would have been very helpful up until the tenth rule, which simply states "There are no rules for biography." Nevertheless, for a teacher who does not explore language arts at a scholarly or more specific level, the book was very helpful to read various understandings of the term biography as well as useful information to think about when reading and writing biography. Biography can be described as many things - "Life, Life-history, Life-writing, memoir, and profile." I write this because some fellows in the *Art of Biography* seminar prefer to use a different terminology to describe what they are going to have their students do, and you might want to as well.(2)

Plutarch, in "The Life of Alexander the Great" says, "For I am writing biography, not history. When a portrait painter sets out to create a likeness, he relies above all upon the face and the expression of the eyes, and pays less attention to the other parts of the body. In the same way, it is my intention to dwell upon those actions which illuminate the workings of the soul, and by this means to create a portrait of each man's life. I leave the story of his greatest struggles and achievements to be told by others...."(3) This sentiment is also explored by Hermione Lee, and my second grade students will practice this idea by interpreting a portrait and writing a biography to match it (see Teaching Strategies - Art Integration).

There are several definitions of biography in various sources, but my favorite one that would resonate and be comprehensible for second graders is "biography is a story of a person told by someone else" from Hermione Lee. Because there is no clear answer as to what biography is, in my teaching I am going to have students create their own meaningful definition and rules of biography. (Reference Classroom Discussions under the Teaching Strategies heading). Since my students are very literal, this will help them know what is expected and how their writing should be shaped. In my classroom I hang anchor charts which are visual reminders for things we are learning. We will create an anchor chart with the ideas that come out of our discussion.

"Do we read biography because we want to learn about people who are different than ourselves, or do we read biography because we want to learn about people who are very like ourselves?" There is a short video where Hermione Lee introduces her book *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* and asks this question. I will share this three minute video with my students to implore them to think about that question and have a connection to the answer through each biography that they read.(4)

There are many styles in which the genre of biography is presented. Students can illustrate their autobiography using a comic-strip, as modeled (for adults) by author Chester Brown in *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*. Comic-Strips are very appealing to elementary students, so this is a great option to teach them. Other strategies used in this book that are very applicable to the elementary level are to include maps to show where events occurred, and to choose a particular point or event in someone's life to write about, without telling the whole story. Elementary students can explore choosing one time period in history to write about by beginning to practice writing and including details in their writing by retelling only one specific day in their life or even one moment or time period in their life. (5)

When reading and writing a biography or autobiography, students need to be taught to consider how much truth is in a biography and how much of the story is embellished or fictionalized. Students can explore this idea in conversation and share with their peers what they think is important to hold closely to the truth, on the one hand, and, on the other, what they may want to change or write differently because it would better captivate their reader or because it's closer to what they think or wish. Students can also use this topic as a springboard for reading as well. When reading non-fiction, it is important for students to ask questions to get more information and to realize that an author may embellish or add details beyond what is strictly true. Or the author may leave out important information and students should ask questions like what is missing and why? These ideas are especially highlighted in *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf.(6)

Second grade writers are encouraged to focus on small moments and elaborate on them with great detail. In *Orlando* the author goes into great detail about the Queen's hand. "It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or scepter; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand; a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor;..." Virginia Woolf takes almost a whole page to describe the Queen's hand. Page 22 in the novel can be used as a mentor text for what describing a small moment would entail. Accompanying the text of the book, teachers can also show an image of Queen Elizabeth I, whose hand is being described in the passage. (Use Google image and type in "portraits of Queen Elizabeth I." There are multiple images of her that include the hands being described in Woolf's novel).(7)

In the biography *The Years of Lyndon Johnson - Means of Ascent* by Robert A. Caro, the author uses a strategy of zooming in and zooming out. He zooms into the life of Johnson and what he is doing on the campaign trail and then he zooms out to write information about the state of Texas and what Johnson's competitor is doing. Caro also does a really good job of developing character, something that students can be taught to do. Johnson's opponent is portrayed as an upstanding citizen who is highly respected in the state of Texas and maintains a moral character throughout the biography. Johnson's character is very aggressive and is seen as a risk-taker. When students are writing their autobiographies, it is important for them to think about their character and how they will maintain their character traits throughout all their writing.(8)

Setting also plays into *The Years of Lyndon Johnson - Means of Ascent*. Although I've never been to Texas, nor was I alive in the 1940s, I can imagine what that time and place was like from the description in the book. "Hill Country roads were as rudimentary as ever. Without rail connections to the rest of the state, trucks or wagons

were the only means for the area's ranchers and farmers to get their produce to market, and because of the condition of the roads their produce was often spoiled by the time it got there." From this example, I can teach my second graders to spend time in their writing detailing information about the world and what is happening while they are writing, as well as the place where they are living and writing.(9)

While the biographies of Louis Riel and Lyndon Johnson focus on specific moments in time, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* spans Augustine's life from infancy. It also captures some of the "warts" (a word biographers use to capture flaws in a person's character, or things that make a person more real) in Augustine's character. Students need to consider, as Augustine did, who the intended audience is and the "warts" their audience will relate to. I especially like the part where Augustine describes not liking school because he cannot play games. "What miseries and mockeries did I now experience, when obedience to my teachers was proposed to me, as proper in a boy, in order that in this world I might prosper...Next I was put to school to get learning, in which I knew not what use there was." This sentiment echoes true with many of our students' attitudes toward school and learning. Augustine's character also changes in the story. "I heard that young men studied there more peacefully, and were kept quiet under a restraint of more regular discipline." This text will allow me to show students that someone from 407 AD did not want to concern himself with school when he was their age, but about 20 years later he developed an appreciation for education. A timeline from then until now can be mapped out to show similar trends in thinking and attitudes from back then until present day. It shows a change in character, which students could discuss in the context of their own personal changes.(10)

## Teaching Strategies

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While engaging in the *Art of Biography* seminar, I learned various strategies to use with the students in my classroom. Here I will describe how I will employ the different strategies I read about, observed through the seminar experience, listened to other teachers share, as well as what I think are best practices for students in second grade.

### Keeping a Writer's Notebook

My school and school district is adopting the Reader's and Writer's Workshop approach constructed by Lucy Calkins. Meanwhile, the university we partner with houses teams of teachers involved in the National Writing Project. With these influences I have learned the value of having students keep a writing notebook. In order to get students to see themselves as writers, it's important to give them a special place for writing. By introducing students to a Writer's Notebook they are hooked into writing and this space marks the beginning of their little lives as writers for the year. One of the things I like to do is wrap notebooks and give them to students as gifts. Once students receive their Writer's Notebook, they are given time to decorate the cover to make it special for them. This allows students to create artistic ownership over their book and makes them care for it even more.

Keeping a writer's notebook lends itself greatly to the idea of autobiography. In her book *Living Between the Lines* Lucy Calkins writes that "notebooks have embodied the idea that we put bits of our lives and our thinking into print not only to produce compositions but also because we do not want to walk around unwritten." The purpose of keeping a writing notebook is for students to keep track of their lives. "Notebooks can become a habit of life, one that helps us recognize that our lives are filled with material for writing."

Another great thing about keeping a writer's notebook is that students have something to reference when they are writing. They can flip back through and use information from their own writing to start creating drafts of stories that highlight their living and who they are as a person. It is very important for teachers to model keeping a writer's notebook her/himself, in order for students to see it as a habit and best practice. The teacher must have experience and motivation to use it first. "If we keep notebooks ourselves and move from those notebooks into larger writing projects, then we can anticipate and respond to the predictable problems that will emerge. But more than this, if we keep notebooks, we will expect and welcome diversity." (11)

## **Art Integration**

Integrating art into the content of reading and writing provides an opportunity for students to engage with visual representations and make meaning of them. It is sometimes easier for students to interpret art than it is for them to do with text. It can provide students with the opportunity to practice the skills they learn on an easier task, and then apply it to something more difficult – their autobiography. As the classroom teacher I will provide my students with portraits. Some schools have these resources available through an art department. They can also be printed in color from various websites and apps. Several resources you can explore to find art for use in your classroom include:

- Artspan: <http://www.artspan.com/> (art is organized by categories, types, locations, and you can search just for "portraits")
- Deviantart: <http://www.deviantart.com/> (contemporary art including portraits of people students may recognize)
- Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/index.html> (you can search by location, theme, time period, etc)
- National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/kids.html>
- Art Gallery: +3000 Artists (this is a FREE iPad App)
- Google Images: <https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en&tab=wi> (you can type any category or topic into the search bar and access many responses)

\*A caveat of advice is for the teacher to prepare the images for the students to view. You may not want to conduct this search in front of your students as some of the results will not be age/grade appropriate.\*

I will group students into partners or small groups and they will look at the same portrait and respond to it. Students will initially respond to the art through journal writing so that they reflect using their own personal ideas and reactions before listening to someone else's. This gives all students the opportunity to have a voice in responding to the subject. Then students will engage in a discussion with the other students who are sharing their portrait. This allows students to practice conversation skills of listening and thinking to understand different perspectives and develop an appreciation for how someone else may interpret something. When looking at the portraits, students will brainstorm and write about:

- What they see – describe the details of the portrait or the subject of the portrait
- What questions they have – what do they wonder about the portrait or the subject
- What connections they can make – does it relate to or make them think of anything they already know either from their own life, or from a book or from the world

Once students have responded to these questions in their notebook and discussed their responses with a peer or small group, then I will have them research the portrait for more information. Students can look up information about the portrait, the artist, the time period, etc. in order to learn more about the work. Our school has limited technology in the classroom and second grade students are only beginning to understand and fluently use technology as a tool for researching information they want to learn more about. So they will work with a partner in order to be more supported and successful at accomplishing this task.

After students have practiced looking at portraits, examining them in detail, and drawing their own conclusions, they can practice with other genres of art that involve characters within a setting. Students will begin to write a story related to the piece of artwork describing the scene that they see and how they interpret it. They will write about what is happening in the picture and create conflict and resolution for it. They will determine what is important to include in their story and what does not need to be described.

### **Creating Timelines**

A springboard for students to use to start thinking about their own story is to create a personal timeline. Second grade students in North Carolina are expected to use timelines to sequence events, and a good indicator of their being able to accomplish this is by making a timeline to detail important events in their life. Second grade students have lived for about seven to eight years and will have certain memories and experiences. They may not necessarily know exact dates when things occurred, but they usually have a good idea of how old they are or in what season things happened. One way to help students get started is for the teacher to create a timeline modeling significant events in his/her life. In modeling a timeline for my students, I would start my timeline to include my birth date, the birth of my siblings, the month and year I started Kindergarten, High School, College, Teaching, and Graduate School. I would go back and add in the years I took memorable trips or when special things happened to me like graduations and my wedding. I would also make sure that there would be room on my paper to add on so students know that my timeline is open for more events to occur in my life.

After I have modeled how to create a timeline for my students, students will create theirs. I will encourage students to work independently for 10-15 minutes so they can focus on thinking about their own life, but then allow them the opportunity to talk and share so that they can piggy-back off the ideas and memories of their peers. One thing that as a class we will need to be sensitive to is that everyone's life and experiences are different and that it's important to value and respect each other's differences as well as similarities. This attitude will have to be fostered during beginning of the year activities, but depending on the students, it may need to be revisited before students share something personal like a timeline from their life.

### **Graphic Organizers**

All students will be writing an autobiography and a biography in narrative form, but students benefit by having access to an organizer to help them gather their thoughts and ideas in order to sequence events, recall and highlight details, pick out important ideas, and dig deeper to gain more information. Especially when writing a biography, students can research important information, but use a graphic organizer to have it all available in one place for when they start the writing process. A great interactive website that allows students to do this is available on [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org). ReadWriteThink, sponsored by the International Reading Association has an interactive "Bio Cube" creator. It asks students for specific information and provides fields for them to input the information and creates a template for a 6 sided cube that can be printed on paper and cut, folded and pasted together in the shape of the cube so students can role it like a dice and share the information from each box. Because so many students are kinesthetic or active learners, this is a great way for them to be

moving (by rolling the cube) and learning new information (by reading each box). Whether students are using it for biographical or autobiographical purposes, the same information is requested and it includes boxes or fields for: the person's name, time period, and place, personal background where a student can narrate or list important events, personality traits, significance, obstacles, and an important quote from the person.(12)

Another biography graphic organizer is one that I have created and use in my classroom. (See Appendix II and please feel free to modify to suit the needs of your classroom). I make a copy available to each student as a way for them to organize information as well as know what information to learn about when students are reading various sources. There is also space on it for "fun facts" where students can decide what is important or how they connect to their subject. If students are using the graphic organizer for an autobiography, what doesn't fit into the other categories that they want people to know about themselves can be included in the "fun facts" section.

Second grade students are very literal and while hopefully creativity will come out in the narratives that they write, they usually need to be directed into what should be included or how to start thinking about what they are doing. By providing them with a graphic organizer, students cannot use the excuse of "I don't know what to write."

### **Technology Integration**

Second grade students at my school love using technology. Although our classroom has limited resources (by my standards), I try to use our three computers as much as possible. Throughout the unit students will be using the internet to conduct searches of biographical information about a chosen person. Websites I have found that include biographical information in very elementary-friendly language includes:

- Biographies for Kids – Famous Leaders for Young Readers <http://www.gardenofpraise.com/leaders.htm>
- Multimedia Biographies <http://www.harcourtschool.com/activity/biographies/index.html>
- America's Story <http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/index.php>
- Biographies for Kids – Life Stories <http://www.ducksters.com/biography/>
- Bio.Classroom <http://www.biography.com/tv/classroom>

All of the above websites are linked to my classroom website and students have found them helpful when searching for information. The text and vocabulary are friendly and words are easily readable to a second grade student. In addition to searching for information about a person online, students can use the computers to create a presentation (either using PowerPoint or Prezi.com) to publish and share what they are learning about a person they are studying. Students can also use the computers to create a Bio Cube (described in the Graphic Organizer section).

### **Classroom Discussion**

Second grade students are responsible for demonstrating success in speaking and listening standards. These standards expect students to participate in collaborative conversations, recount or describe key ideas and details, ask and answer questions about what a speaker is saying, tell a story or recount an experience, and produce complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation.(13) In order to provide students the possibility of learning from their peers, this curriculum unit naturally allows the opportunity for various classroom discussions. One of the things I like to do before starting a classroom discussion is to give students time to individually prepare to talk. I generate a prompt or idea and give students time to brainstorm their own response to it through journal writing or sketching. This is a great strategy to use because it sends the



message to students that everyone is capable of having an idea and everyone's idea is important. It also allows students the time to organize their thinking so that they don't ramble on and on about something and kill the momentum of a conversation. Once students have been given an opportunity to individually respond to a discussion topic, they will then in small groups share their thinking with their peers. Some of the discussion topics or questions that naturally flow from the study of biography that can be discussed by second grade students are:

- What is biography?
- Why do we study biography?
- Who are your favorite types of people to learn about? What specific questions do you have about other people? What do you like to learn about other people?
- If someone was writing a biography about you, what would be important for that author to include?
- If you were to write a biography about someone you loved, who would you write about? Why would you write about that person? What important information would you make sure to include in that biography?
- What are some common characteristics you read in most biographies? (Students will have already have needed some experience with reading a variety of biographies either independently or as a read aloud prior to being able to discuss this topic).

### **Writing a Memoir**

Lucy Calkins describes memoir as "the genre of our decade," arguing that it is about more than just a single moment, but also "about the plot lines or patterns that bind those moments together. The purpose of a memoir is to explore the significance of events." Through the writing of memoir students are "encouraged to tell not only what they did during those moments, but also what they thought and felt, and in this way, to make the moments add up, to make them reveal life as a whole." Beginning writers, like second graders, typically pick important moments from their life to write about – a birthday, a day at Carowinds (our local amusement park), going to a football or basketball game, playing in a soccer game, etc. In encouraging students to write memoir, Lucy Calkins claims it "has everything to do with rendering the ordinariness of our lives so that it becomes significant. Rather than recalling facts, we need to re-create worlds. Rather than writing with statistics, we need to write with scenes. Rather than reporting on our time line, we need to explore the truths that underlie it."

An exercise you can do in the classroom to get students to start writing a memoir is to have them start thinking about memories. This can be done through quiet reflection as well as sharing and discussing ideas, and of course capturing them and writing them down so they aren't forgotten. Students can brainstorm a list of memories they have and then think about the ones that are more vivid that they can use to craft their memoir. Once students begin recalling their memories, they're faced with turning them into memoirs. "The challenge of memoir is to discover memories that no one talks about, to document stories that haven't been told, and to draw conclusions that haven't been drawn."(14)

Lucy Calkins summarizes themes that are discovered in reading memoirs of others. "Memoirists often write about the places of their lives. Memoirists often write about their imaginations, about what they fantasize and fear, about their private, subjective experience of events. Memoirists often place themselves within their family tree, telling something about their familial roots." (15) Authors Tomie dePaola and Patricia Polacco write memoirs that can be read aloud to second grade students as mentor texts for how to write a memoir.

## Mentor Texts and Read Aloud

There are several sets of biographies by a common author or publisher that I am going to read to my students or have them read independently or with a partner, throughout this unit. It is a good idea to share biographies with students so they can learn about different people, but also so they can make comparisons between books about the same person or between styles of the same genre. There are three very appropriate sets of books that I have available to me in my classroom and school library, as well as at the public library. (They can also be purchased on amazon.com).

These sets include *The Picture Book of (insert name of famous person)*. These were written and illustrated by David A. Adler and are very engaging to young readers. They have painting-like pictures and a list of important dates related to the person. A little bit longer, but also appropriate for elementary readers is the *Who Was ? (insert the name of a famous person before the question mark)*. These books have various authors, but are written in the same style. They are published by Grosset & Dunlap and an example would be *Who Was Albert Einstein?* by Jess Brallier. They have large text size and sketched illustrations throughout the book and are organized in chapters which second grade students get excited about because it's a big deal for them to transition from picture books to chapter books. Another series is ValueTales. An example is *The Value of Respect: The Story of Abraham Lincoln* by Ann Donegan Johnson. ValueTales have different authors for the different stories, but are written in the same style where they tell the life of a famous person and have cartoon images. Each person also has an imaginary friend who acts like their conscience in a way, so there is a fictional element to the stories. There is more advanced vocabulary in these books and therefore I usually use them as a read aloud in order to discuss harder words or unfamiliar ideas.

## Classroom Activities

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Each of the individual activities described below (identifying character traits, researching a famous person, and writing an autobiography) should take no less than two weeks to complete. They can occur simultaneously in reading, writing, and social studies because the ideas support all curriculum standards and expectations.

### Identifying character traits

While engaging in the Reader's Workshop Process, students will be making the connection between the challenges characters face in a story to the challenges they face as readers. Second grade students will study characters in stories in order to better understand the story, and eventually to make connections among characters and learn about greater themes in life. Second grade students are expected to "demonstrate understanding of characters, setting, or plot and to describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges." Students start with identity and identify traits or characteristics of the main characters in the story. (16)

1. After reading a biography to students I will model for them how to complete a + graphic organizer where they note the characters, setting, problem and solution (see Appendix III). We will have already used this graphic organizer throughout our fiction unit so students will be familiar with it, but I will show students how to apply it towards biography. In the character box,

students not only need to write the name of the person, but also character traits or attributes they learn about him/her. In the setting box they need to describe the years and places he/she lived and anything significant they know about that time period and place. In the problem and solution boxes students may write about problems or struggles the person encountered and then accomplishments and how the person overcame any struggles. At the bottom there is a section for notes for students to write additional information, connections, and questions. This is where I want students to think about how the person's challenges may compare to theirs and what character traits the biographical person exhibited that helped him/her overcome the challenge.

Procedurally, I will probably do two short read aloud books over two days modeling this process so students can become familiar with completing the graphic organizer before they have to do the work independently or with a partner.

2. Students will then self-select biographies to read and create a graphic organizer on. I want them to choose their own so they have an invested interest in the person they are reading about. I will make sure to have numerous biographies available in my classroom for them to choose from. I will probably work with a group of struggling readers to help them through this process.

Students will repeat this process over the course of a couple of weeks, setting individual or a class goal of how many biographies they should read to gain an understanding of the genre, of various people, and of history.

### **Researching a famous person in history**

After students have read a variety of biographies, they need to choose one historical person and become an expert on that person. Students will access various sources of biographical information in order to accomplish this goal, and they can use the Biography Graphic Organizer (see Appendix II) to keep track of the information they are learning.

1. They can read a biography book along with an internet article about the person and identify different styles the authors of the two sources used to convey the information about the person. The second graders can also make judgments about why one author chose to include certain information.
2. My classroom website will have direct links to biography websites (see Technology Integration under the Teaching Strategies section) that are on a second grade reading level. Students will have computer time to look up more information about their person beyond what may be contained in one or two books we have available in our classroom collection.
3. Another goal of the plan for the Reading Workshop is for second grade students to engage in nonfiction reading clubs and for students to become experts around a particular topic exploring a variety of texts on that topic with a peer. Students will design the time to meet and goal for what learning they want to share during that meeting. The main task of the club includes "reading and talking about books, ponder questions, develop ideas, develop theories, and celebrate discoveries."
4. This directly aligns to the common core standards for second grade students, which include "follow agreed-upon rules of discussion, build on others' talk in conversations by linking their comments and remarks to others, and ask for clarification and further explanation as needed about the topics and texts under discussion." After students have built their confidence of sharing information with their reading club they will create a published piece which records everything they have learned and present it to the class.
5. Second grade students are expected to "participate in shared research and writing projects like reading a number of books on a single topic to produce a report." I will give students the flexibility of deciding

how they want their published report to look like, whether it's a written narrative, PowerPoint presentation, poster board, cereal box, song, collage, etc. The students will have several days and access to a variety of materials to complete this work and time will be set aside in the schedule for individual presentations about the information they learn.

## Writing an autobiography

One of the strategies I described is creating a timeline. This is a springboard for students to compose their own autobiography or memoir. Second grade students are expected to "write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.

1. I will start this lesson by introducing beginnings and having students think about how they want to start their work – do they want to write it sequentially, do they want to hook their reader with a short story describing a memory.
2. Students will list character traits they want their reader to know they have and then think about a story or stories they can tell to describe how they show ownership over each trait.
3. Students will write about a flaw in their character to show that they are human.
4. We'll talk about endings. Students will first engage in a class discussion about endings and how they should end their autobiography. If they're struggling for an idea, they can be encouraged to re-read the endings of biographies or other selected books. They can also think about ending with a wish or a hope for their future. I'm hoping students will generate a list of really good ways to end their autobiography.

Throughout all of these brainstorming and mini-lesson sessions, students will be writing down their ideas for their narratives. Then they will take them through the writing process, revising their work independently, with a peer and with me, making sure to have consistency and a common voice throughout. Finally, students will publish their work, either writing a clean copy or typing their narrative using a word processing application.

Through hearing biographies read as well as engaging in reading biographies students will begin to understand and ask questions about events and things that happen in history. They will build an understanding about the world and what type of person they want to become in the world and how they want to contribute to make it a better place. The autobiography they write will not only reflect who they are as a writer, but who they are as a person, and their history will be recorded because each of my students is important.

## Resources

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Apple. "Art Gallery: +3000 Artists." iTunes Preview.

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/art-gallery-+3000-artists/id648853882?mt=8> (accessed July 14, 2013). This is a free digital app offered for apple products. It features art from numerous collections.

"Biographies." Harcourt School Publishers. <http://www.harcourtschool.com/activity/biographies/index.html> (accessed July 13, 2013). This website offers biographical information on a variety of people. The text is appropriate for elementary students to read and understand.

"Biographies for Kids, Famous Leaders for Young Readers." Garden of Praise.

<http://www.gardenofpraise.com/leaders.htm> (accessed July 13, 2013). This website offers biographical information on a variety of leaders. The text is appropriate for elementary students to read and understand.

"Biographies for Kids: Inventors, Athletes, World Leaders, Women." Ducksters: Fun Kid site with safe search, sports, games, jokes, and homework help. <http://www.ducksters.com/biography/> (accessed July 13, 2013). This children's website offers biographical information on a variety of people.

Brown, Chester. *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003. This comic-strip biography details the adult life of Louis Riel, a Canadian leader and politician.

Calkins, Lucy . *A Curricular Plan for the Reading Workshop*. Portsmouth: Firsthand Heinemann, 2011. This teacher reference book details how to introduce and teach the Reading Workshop in 2nd Grade.

Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986. This textbook for teachers organizes how to teach writing and run a writer's workshop.

Calkins, Lucy, and Shelley Harwayne. *Living Between the Lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991. This book reads like a narrative textbook for teachers offering advice, encouragement and instruction on how to create a classroom of writers.

Calkins, Lucy. *A Curricular Plan for the Writing Workshop*. Portsmouth: First Hand Heinemann, 2011. This teacher reference book details how to introduce and teach the Writing Workshop in 2nd Grade.

Caro, Robert A. *Means of Ascent*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. This is the second book in a series detailing the life of Lyndon Johnson.

"Contemporary Art: Original Photography, Painting, Sculpture and Prints." Artspan. <http://www.artspan.com/> (accessed July 15, 2013). This website offers contemporary art gathered from various sources.

International Reading Association. "Cube Creator." Homepage - ReadWriteThink.

[http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/cube\\_creator/](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/cube_creator/) (accessed July 12, 2013). This interactive websites provides an organizer for students to enter information about a biography they read or their own autobiography and it generates it into a cube maker.

Dr. Seuss. *Horton Hears a Who!*. New York: Random House, 1954. This Dr. Seuss book features a large elephant who tries to protect small creatures.

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<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy> (accessed July 13, 2013). This website lists and annotates the English Language Arts Common Core standards.

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Hamilton, Nigel. *How To Do Biography: A Primer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. This book offers examples from various biographies as well as ideas for how to write a biography.

"Hermione Lee Biography: A Very Short Introduction." Meet the Author Bringing Books to Life!. <http://www.meettheauthor.co.uk/bookbites/1842.html> (accessed July 13, 2013). This website has a three minute video clip of Hermione Lee talking about her book *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*.

Teacher College. "Home - The Reading & Writing Project." The Reading & Writing Project. <http://readingandwritingproject.com/> (accessed July 14, 2013). This website offers teachers lots of information and resources for using the reading workshop model and the writing workshop model as described by Lucy Calkins.

Johnson, Ann Donegan, and Steve Pileggi. *The Value of Giving: The Story of Beethoven*. La Jolla, Calif.: Value Communications, 1979. This character book about Beethoven's life focuses on the theme of giving and how he gives back to others.

Johnson, Spencer, and Steve Pileggi. *The Value of Saving: The Story of Benjamin Franklin*. La Jolla, Calif.: Value Communications, 1978. This value book describes the life of Benjamin Franklin through a character book with a focus on his attitude toward saving.

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. This short reference book defines and gives examples of various types, styles, and subjects of biography.

"Library of Congress Home." Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/index.html> (accessed July 15, 2013). This website offers a digital representation of art.

"Meet Amazing Americans." America's Story from America's Library. <http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/index.php> (accessed July 13, 2013). This website offers biographical information on a variety of Americans. The text is appropriate for elementary students to read and understand.

"NGAkids Art Zone." National Gallery of Art. <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/kids.html> (accessed July 15, 2013). This site digitally offers art available at The National Gallery of Art.

State Board of Education. "North Carolina Essential Standards Social Studies." Public Schools of North Carolina. [www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/standards/new-standards/social-studies/k-2.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/standards/new-standards/social-studies/k-2.pdf) (accessed July 13, 2013). This website lists and annotates the Essential Standards for Social Studies that my state follows.

"PLUTARCH on BIOGRAPHY." California State University, Northridge. <http://www.csun.edu/~hcfll004/plutbiog.html> (accessed July 13, 2013). This professor's webpage zooms in on how Plutarch regarded biography.

Pusey, Edward Bouverie. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons; 1907. This translated edition of St. Augustine's autobiography describes his life starting at infancy.

"The Partnership for 21st Century Skills." The Partnership for 21st Century Skills. <http://www.p21.org/>

(accessed July 15, 2013). This website highlights 21st century skills and outcomes expected of College and Career ready students.

Ulrich, Laurel. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Knopf, 1990. This book is a biography written based on the diary of a midwife.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928. This fictional biography describes the life of a character Orlando as he transitions from a man to a woman.

"deviantART: Where ART Meets Application!." deviantART. <http://www.deviantart.com/> (accessed July 15, 2013). This website offers a digital representation of art on various subjects from different artists.

## **Appendix I - Implementing District Standards**

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As a result of this curriculum unit, my second grade students will deepen their understanding and receive continuous practice in the subjects of reading, writing, and social studies. Here are the Common Core and Essential Standards this unit provide students access to.

### **Social Studies Essential Standards**

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Students will read biographies to understand the past and create timelines to organize events that happened in history as well as in their own life.

2.H.1 Understand how various sources provide information about the past.

2.C.1 Understand how various cultures influence communities

### **Language Arts Common Core Standards**

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Students will read for the purpose of understanding about people in history and historical time periods and situations. They will write their own autobiography after taking their ideas through the writing process as well as create a report about an historical person who they study from gathering information from various sources. Students will discuss the information they are learning about historical people throughout the unit in order to enhance their conversation skills.

RI2.1 Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why and how to demonstrate key details in a text.

RI2.3 Describe the connection between a series of historical events.

- RI.2.6 Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe.
- RI.2.9 Compare and contrast the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic.
- RF.2.4 Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
- W.2.2 Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events.
- W.2.6 With guidance and support use a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing.
- SL.2.2 Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.
- SL.2.6 Produce complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification.
- L.2.3 Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading or listening.



## **Appendix II - Biography Graphic Organizer**

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ #: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Name of Historical Person:</b>
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 <b>Date and Place of Birth:</b>	<b>Date and Place of Death:</b> 
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<b>Childhood &amp; Growing Up</b>	
<b>Family</b> 	<b>School(s)</b> 

<b>Fun Facts:</b> *  *  *  *  *
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### Important Events and Contributions

<b>Event/Contribution 1</b>	<b>Event/Contribution 2</b>	<b>Event/Contribution 3</b>



**Why is this person important and significant?**

<b>Resources</b>	
<b>Resource 1: Book</b> Title:  Author:	<b>Resource 2: Website</b> Website Name:  URL:

# Appendix III - Reading Literature Graphic Organizer

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ #: \_\_\_\_\_

Title:	
Character:	Setting:
Problem:	Solution:
Notes:	

## Notes

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1. H. Lee, Biography: A Very Short Introduction
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3. "PLUTARCH on BIOGRAPHY," California State University, <http://www.csun.edu/~hcf1004/plutbiog.html> (accessed July 13, 2013).
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5. C. Brown, Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography.
6. V. Woolf, Orlando: A Biography.
7. V. Woolf, Orlando: A Biography, 22
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9. R.A. Caro, Means of Ascent, 151
10. E. B. Pusey, The Confessions of St. Augustine, 13 & 103
11. L. Calkins and S. Harwayne, Living Between the Lines, 38, 43, 52.
12. "Cube Creator," International Reading Association Homepage, [http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/cube\\_creator/](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/cube_creator/) (accessed July 13, 2013).
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