

Biography Unit Plan



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Biography is history seen through the prism of a person

– Louis Fischer

Why teach biography?

This writing project will show children how they can document the lives of people in their communities. They will discover how the lives of ordinary people they know can be sources of great historical, social and personal interest – not only to themselves as the writer but to others too. All people's lives are interesting, but we don't always realise it ourselves. Everyone in our society has a story to tell, and by asking the right questions and sharing these stories publicly, children learn that they can give a voice to those people who would never otherwise have had an audience.

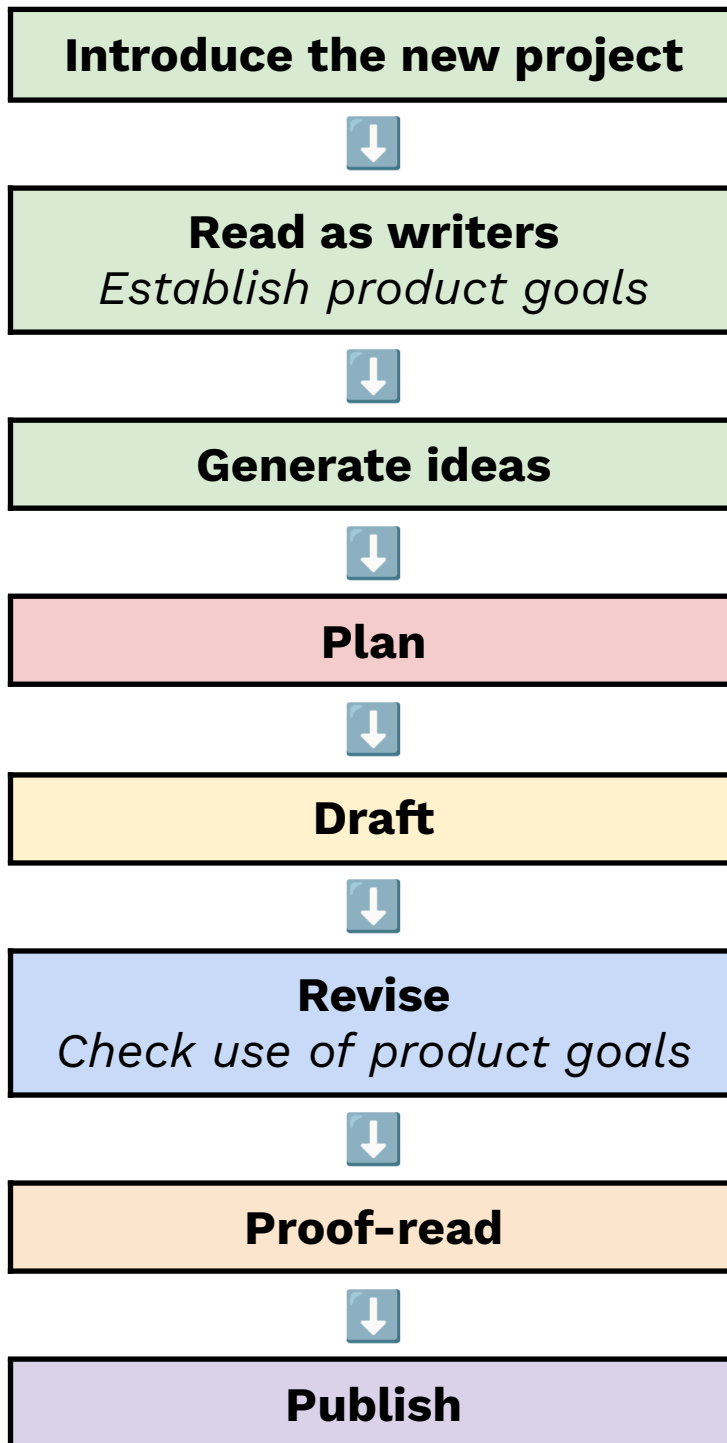
Biography writing has strong elements of memoir, although it will be about other people that the writer knows personally or has heard of through family members, friends or the community. At their very best, biographies can carry within them great opportunities for poetic description and rich anecdote. One of the great benefits of this writing project is that the writer can bring in and celebrate stories that can strengthen and enhance the sense of community and connection inside the classroom (Young et al. [2022](#)). There may well be gains, too, for the person being interviewed and written about.

A good biography topic creates the possibility for reflection, empathy or a shared understanding of a person or an experience. Children will come to understand the role biographers have in documenting and preserving people's past.

Things to bear in mind

- Encourage children to choose someone they have easy access to for interviewing. In your homework letter about interviewing, you are going to want to make it clear that the interviewee is encouraged to share background information about their early life, their main achievement or strongest memory, and what happened after this memorable event or moment occurred.
- Additionally, as this is a historical genre, you should encourage children to seek out a historical source that could enhance their biography. The source could be used to directly support the subject of the biography or instead be used to give a greater flavour of the era in general. Sources include: photographs, videos, audio, objects, letters, newspaper articles, emails, postcards or direct quotations. This is easier if you show children the biography you wrote for the project.
- On 'publishing day', you could invite the community into the classroom to view the artefacts and biographies that the children have written. You may also want to get in touch with your local museum or history centre about showcasing the writing too, and ask how they would like to be involved. It's good to set up these exhibitions in your hall if you can. You can invite the local community in and collect donations for your local museum or history centre. You'll obviously want the children to invite the people they wrote their biographies to come visit too.
- Children sometimes ask if they can write about someone they know of who is no longer alive. They can interview someone who knew them well and this usually works very well.

The journey of a class writing project



Example project plan

Day 0	A few weeks before the project send out letters to parents and have children undertake their interviews
Day 1	Introduce the new project - establish/share publishing goal - share what their texts are going to look like
Day 2	Begin reading as writers, studying mentor texts, and establishing product goals
Day 3	Continue to read as writers and set product goals
Day 4	Finalise the product goals for the project
Day 5	<i>Let's take a look at our notes</i> + Writing Register
Day 6	<i>Let's take a look at our notes</i> + Writing Register
Day 7	Mini-lesson on using a planning technique - children plan using the technique
Day 8	Continue planning if required
Day 9	<i>Drafting</i> mini-lesson - children write their openings
Day 10	<i>Drafting</i> mini-lesson - children write a small 'chunk'/paragraph
Day 11	<i>Drafting</i> mini-lesson - children write a small 'chunk'/paragraph
Day 12	<i>Drafting</i> mini-lesson - children write a small 'chunk'/paragraph
Day 13	<i>Drafting</i> mini-lesson - children write their endings
Day 14	<i>Revision</i> mini-lesson - children 'try it out'/revise the mini-lesson into their piece
Day 15	<i>Revision</i> mini-lesson - children 'try it out'/revise the mini-lesson into their piece
Day 16	<i>Revision Checklist sessions</i> - children check their writing against the class' product goals
Day 17	<i>Revision Checklist sessions</i> - children check their writing against the class' product goals
Day 18	<i>Revision Checklist sessions</i> - children check their writing against the class' product goals
Day 19	Capitalisation - 'proof-reading for capitalisation' mini-lesson
Day 20	Capitalisation - 'proof-reading for capitalisation' mini-lesson
Day 21	Use of vocab 'proof-reading for tense use' mini-lesson
Day 22	Use of vocab 'proof-reading for tense use' mini-lesson
Day 23	Use of vocab (synonyms) - 'cracking open boring words' mini-lesson
Day 24	Punctuation - proof-reading mini-lesson
Day 25	Punctuation - proof-reading mini-lesson
Day 26	Spelling (common words) - children correct any misspelt words
Day 27	Spelling (class' tricky words) - children correct any misspelt words
Day 28	Spelling (temporary spellings) - children correct any misspelt words
Day 29	Spelling (temporary spellings) - children correct any misspelt words
Day 30	Spelling (temporary spellings) - children correct any misspelt words
Day 31	Publishing - write out just a few sections - mini-lesson & pupil-conferencing focuses on handwriting instruction
Day 32	Publishing - write out just a few sections - mini-lesson & pupil-conferencing focuses on handwriting instruction
Day 33	Publishing Party!

Important! Please read!

- This is just an *example plan*. Therefore, you should use your own professional judgement to plan your own class writing projects. For example, you should either add or remove sessions based on your own class' needs and the amount of time you want to spend on the project. For more information, download our eBook *How To Teach Writing* ([LINK](#)). To create your own unit plan, you can download a blank version of the proforma used on the previous page [here](#).
- Remember, you should plan your mini-lessons based on the product goals your class comes up with when you're *reading as writers*. For more information on how to do this, download our eBook *How To Teach Writing or Reading In The Writing Classroom* ([LINK](#)).
- If you feel you need to, we can recommend devoting at least two sessions to planning. After the first session, you can see which plans you think are suitably ready for when children come to draft their pieces. For children who you feel need a bit more time and further instruction, you can meet with them as a group(s) while the rest of the class work on their personal writing projects. For more information on setting up personal writing projects, download [our eBook](#). We also provide far more information on teaching planning techniques in our eBook: *No More: My Class Doesn't Know What To Write Next* ([LINK](#)).
- Whenever children have completed the process goal set for that day's writing time, they should work on their personal writing project for the rest of the lesson. For more details, see [this article](#).
- We can recommend devoting a number of lessons to having 'revision checklist sessions'. This allows you to meet with your class in small groups and give them quality verbal feedback on their compositions. The rest of your class work on their personal writing projects.
- Make sure you break your proof-reading lessons down into small manageable chunks over a number of days. This allows children to achieve a high level of accuracy. These sessions don't take children very long. Once they've completed their proof-reading for the day, they can work on their personal writing projects. We provide far more information and lessons on proof-reading in our eBook: *No More: 'My Pupils Can't Edit!' A Whole-School Approach To Developing Proof-Readers* ([LINK](#)).
- The more time spent on a project, the better the final outcomes will be. If you rush a project, you get rushed outcomes.
- It's important to remember that this is not the only writing children should produce. Children should also have their personal writing project writing, their writing in the wider curriculum subjects, and the writing they produce in their reading lessons.

Preparation

For this project, it's important to send a letter out to parents and to do a preparation lesson with your class. You will want to discuss how to conduct an interview and you may wish to give the children a prompt sheet of questions they can use. If you wrote your own biography for the project, share with the children the questions you asked in your interview. Your letter to parents will want to explain the project and ask them to help their child source someone for their interview. Explain that the children will use their notes from the interview to help them write their biography.

Publishing goal lesson

A great publishing goal for this project is to invite the community into your school hall to view the artefacts and biographies the children have written. Share this goal with your class at the beginning of the project. We can definitely recommend getting in touch with your local museum or history centre about showcasing the children's writing too. Or else, ask them to get involved in whatever way they can.

Alternatively, the children can come up with their own publishing goal for the project. For more information on how to do this, download our book *How To Teach Writing* ([LINK](#)).

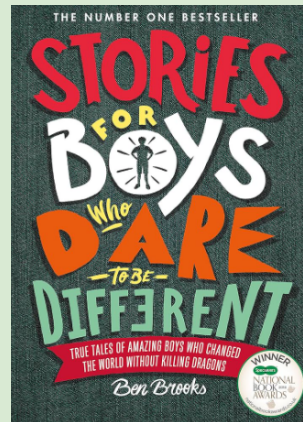
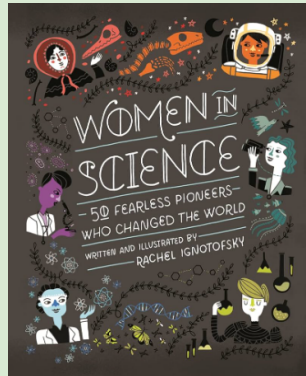
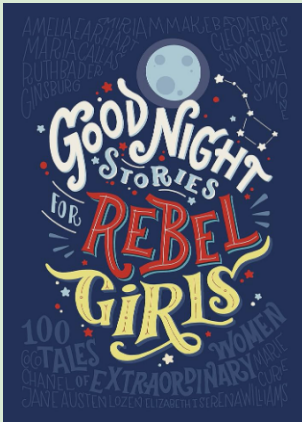
Reading as writers and establishing your product goals lessons

When undertaking *reading as writers* sessions, we can recommend having a collection of biographies for the children to read. Make sure children get to read some short biographies you and your colleagues have written and make sure you have a collection of mentor texts (texts which realistically match what you expect the children to produce). For advice on how to write your own biography, and to download our mentor texts, consider downloading the paid version of this planning [here](#).

Finally, it's important that children get to see examples of high-quality texts too. We can certainly recommend these:

- Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo
- Stories for Boys Who Dare to Be Different by Ben Brooks
- Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers Who Changed the World by Rachel Ignatofsky
- Little People, Big Dreams (series) by Frances Lincoln Children's Books

These are great because they really show children how to write short biographies.



A little top-tip. Keep some of the best biographies your children write for this project so that your class can study them next year.

While undertaking your *reading as writers* sessions, you are going to want to establish your product goals (success criteria) for the project. For more information on how to do this effectively, download our book *How To Teach Writing* ([LINK](#)).

Taking a Writing Register lesson

This is a nice session. While the children are working on their personal writing projects, go round the class and ask them who they are going to write their biography about and for a working title. Write this down on your *Writing Register*. At the end of the writing lesson, you can share this register with the children and have a chat about which pieces people are most looking forward to reading.

Teaching a planning technique lesson

It's important to teach children a planning technique. It's even more important that you show children the planning technique you used when you wrote your biography. Teach them the technique and show them your plan before inviting them to use the technique for themselves that day.

If you need more help with this, download our eBook: *No More: My Class Don't Know What To Write Next...* ([LINK](#)). It has loads of great planning techniques in it.

Teaching your drafting lessons

At this point in the project, you are going to want to teach and model one *craft move* from your product goal list before inviting the children to use the move for themselves that day. Of course, these craft moves can be grammar or sentence-level moves. To see examples of what these lessons can look like, consider downloading the paid version for this planning [here](#).

Teaching your revision lessons

Now the children have drafted their writing, you can teach them more sophisticated *craft moves*. They can try the craft move out on their 'trying things out page' and if they like what they've crafted, they can add it into their drafted text. These sessions are really interesting because the children feel free to take risks and enjoy playing around with these more advanced techniques. Remember, model one craft move before inviting the children to use the technique for themselves that day. For examples of what these lessons can look like, consider downloading the paid version for this planning [here](#).

Revision checklist sessions

These are lovely sessions. Meet with your children in small groups. Make sure everyone has a copy of the product goals you established at the beginning of the project. With the group, check whether people have used and/or considered the *craft moves* for the project. Any children that haven't, can be invited to show how they might use the craft move on their 'trying things out page'. If they like what they have crafted, they can include it in their final piece. If they don't want to - that's fine. You still have evidence in their books. This also shows that the children are being discerning - one sign of a greater-depth writer.

When undertaking these sessions, the rest of the class can be working on their personal writing projects. For more information, download our eBook: *How To Teach Writing* ([LINK](#)).

Proof-reading sessions

We can highly recommend breaking proof-reading down into small manageable chunks. Over a number of days, you can proofread for *CUPS*. This stands for *Capitalisation, Use Of Vocabulary, Punctuation and Spelling*. For more information on how to conduct these sessions, download our eBook: *No More: My Class Can't Edit!* ([LINK](#)).

These sessions don't take the children long. Once finished, they can work on their personal writing projects.

Publishing party

The project is now coming to an end. It's time for the children to write up their final published version ready for their readers. This is a great opportunity to teach handwriting in context and give children live verbal feedback and additional individualised handwriting instruction. We can recommend doing this over a couple of days.

You can download a more detailed version of this planning which includes individual lessons plans, resources and mentor texts [here](#).

Remember, all our planning is free to our members. To become a member, sign up [here](#).

