

Twenty+ suggestions for using biographies in the classroom!

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1. Geography – a Natural Corollary to Biography

- Bidley Mason walked from Mississippi to Salt Lake City, and then to Southern California. Using WITH OPEN HANDS, trace her route on a map.
- Sojourner Truth walked or rode to more than 20 different states. Locate the states, trace her route. How did people travel in the 19th century?
- How long would it take, for example, to walk from Los Angeles to San Francisco? From your house to Disneyland? How many miles can a person walk in one hour? How many miles is it across New York State? (Math enters too) How many miles per hour, per day. How fast can a horse and buggy go? How far in one day?
- What and where were the 13 separate states?
- Where exactly *was* the Underground Railroad? (It went all the way to Canada.)
- Trace Matthew Henson's various attempts to reach the North Pole. Why didn't some of the routes work? How did he finally get there? Why didn't Henson and Peary have a map?
- Study the map of Europe by tracing Marian Anderson's many journeys, from England to France to the Soviet Union and beyond.

2. Economics

- How did the typical farmer in 1776 aid the war effort?
- Chart the various prices for which Sojourner Truth was sold:
\$50 at age 9 \$150 at age 11
\$300 at age 13 \$20 -- when? and why did it drop so far?
- Compare her price to that of a horse or cow.
- Compare her price to that of a slave in the Deep South.
- Slave owners had a reward of \$40,000 for Harriet Tubman, dead or alive, 150 years ago! What would that compare to today? \$400,000? What was she *doing*?
- What were tobacco notes in comparison to actual money? (Banneker)
- Why and where should a grain mill be built? (Banneker)
- Why was the buffalo like an entire warehouse to the Indians?
- What happened to the Indians' "grocery store"?
- How could Thomas Jefferson be \$100,000 in debt when he died? What did he spend his money on?

3. Citizenship and Values and Education

- What is your freedom worth? Your mother's freedom?
- Why was Sojourner Truth's owner surprised to see her upset just because he sold her five-year-old son? What values had he been taught?
- Why was Benjamin Banneker called "the black Benjamin Franklin"?
- Use Banneker book as a background for the study of astronomy; how almanacs were written and why they were necessary; and how a new city is laid out, in this case Washington D.C.
- All biographies: does the hero show willingness to accept responsibility for an error?
- What did Noah Webster do for his country *besides* writing the dictionary?
- What was a classroom like 250 years ago?
- What kind of school did the Plains Indians go to? (before the white man came)
- What kind of school did the Inuits go to?
- Were the settlers justified in building houses and farms where the Indians had lived?
- How would it feel to have everything you believe in pulled out from under you, and everything you disagree with put in its place?
- Were the Indians right to fight and kill settlers?
- What was the result of expecting the Indians to become like white farmers?
- What do we learn of Marian Anderson's values when she faces discrimination?
- Where do these brave biographical subjects get the courage and determination to stick with a problem until they have solved it? Can we do the same? *Do* we?

Other Suggested Exercises

4. Have students dress up as their favorite subjects, and tell stories from "their" lives. Videotape the biographical presentations. Have the whole class put on a play using scenes from their favorite biographies.
5. Make models of a slave cabin; a plantation; an Indian village; an igloo.; Washington D.C. in the time of Banneker; Noah Webster's school room.
6. Make floor maps or dioramas showing Harriet Tubman's routes via the Underground Railroad; or Matthew Henson's many attempts to get to the North Pole; or Sojourner Truth's travels through 20 states.
7. Have the students write letters and journals in the voice of the characters, telling the problems or joys of a typical day, week, month.

8. What was it like to go to the doctor 250 years ago? 150 years ago? 80 years ago? Did children go in for checkups? Did children go to the dentist? Did the Indians have doctors (before Susan LaFlesche)? What kind of doctors? Why did George Washington have problems with his false teeth? How would you get a smallpox vaccination in 1776?
9. Have students write letters to their biographical characters, asking questions about things they really want to know, and including:
 - Who influenced you in your life?
 - What are the most important things that happened to you in your life?
 - What are the most important things that happened in the world during your life?
 - How do you think your life has affected others? the world?
10. Have each student answer one of the above letters as the character. Have the student/character design stationery that reflects her personality and include her address (in character).
11. Describe an average day in the life of the biographical character.
12. Make up an appropriate saying for the character's tombstone. Design a tombstone with dates, symbols, quotes.
13. Tell what effect the character had on our world. Have each student tell how and why his/her life is different because of the character's life. (A woman can vote, for ex., because of people like Elizabeth Stanton).
14. Make a Venn diagram with two intersecting circles. Intersection contains similarities between student and character; outer sections, the differences.
15. Write a name poem using first letters of whole name, or just writing adjectives that fit the character (Ex: ANNE: A - active, N - nice, N - natural, E - educated) (character was Anne Sullivan)
16. Draw a "favorite activity" portrait. Think about the favorite activity of your character. Where is he/she? Is character alone or with others? How is he/she dressed? Now draw the picture you see in your mind.
17. Time lines - have your students make a time line for their character. One way to do this is to make a card for each important event in the person's life with date, name, place, fact. Then tape the cards, in order, of course, to a long paper and illustrate each event.
18. Make life-sized character drawings by outlining child's body on paper, make a front and back, then cut out and paste with poster board in the middle. The student then finishes the model with period clothing and hairstyle, and mounts it on a cardboard stand.
19. Have students write stories in which they appear in the biographical character's life (not as the character). How will your student talk and think? What will his/her daily life be like?

20. Have a student give brief “teaser” autobiographical information. Classmates tell who the character is. “When I was six years old, I was dragged from my mother’s arms and sold to a stranger. I could never read a book, or write a single word, but I saved over 300 people from slavery. The slave owners searched....”
21. Use vocabulary from the story, or definitions (very good for non fiction), names of characters, etc., to create a 2-column matching activity OR use same in a crossword puzzle or word search (with or without a word list, depending upon grade level).

Arctic Explorer: Matthew Henson
Demanding Justice: Mary Ann Shadd Cary
Go Free or Die: Harriet Tubman
Native American Doctor: Susan LaFlesche Picotte
Remember the Ladies: Abigail Adams
Thomas Jefferson: Father of Liberty
Walking the Road to Freedom: Sojourner Truth
What Are You Figuring Now?: Benjamin Banneker
What Do You Mean?: Noah Webster
What I Had Was Singing: Marian Anderson
With Open Hands: Biddy Mason