

S A M P L E

Lesson 1

SCOPE AND NATURE OF BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Aim

Determine when, why, where and how biographies are written.

INTRODUCTION

A biography is, quite literally, something written about life: it comes from the Greek "bio", life, and "graph", write. This definition covers a lot of ground. Examples of biographical writing include:

- An historical account of someone's life, such as the explorer Douglas Mawson
- An account of someone's philosophy in the context of their life, sometimes generally, sometimes for motivational reasons, such as works by the motivational speaker Og Mandino
- A collection of interviews about a person's life
- A feature article discussing only one or two aspects of the subject's life, through empirical research or anecdotal research (interviews with the subject, people who know the subject etc.)
- A biopic, or film representation of a person's life – the screenplays or teleplays for such work are a form of biographical writing
- A play about a subject's life, or period in their life.

Biographical writing can be large-scale, and cover a person's whole life, or it can be small scale, and cover only a short period, from a week to a few years. In 1977, David Frost interviewed former US President Richard Nixon over a series of interviews. These interviews then became the subject of a play written by Peter Morgan – *Frost/Nixon*, which was later developed into a film. Sometimes the subject's life is the entire focus. Other times, it is his or her work, or their life in the context of a particular philosophy or achievement.

The difference between a biography and autobiography

'Auto' means 'self' in Greek, so an autobiography is a biography written by the subject. The subject of a biography may have a limited amount of control over the details in the work; in an autobiography, the author/subject decides on what's included and what's not.

Famous autobiographies include –

- *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne Frank
- *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou
- *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell
- *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain
- *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang
- *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen

Famous biographies include –

- *Steve Jobs: The Exclusive Biography*, Walter Isaacson
- *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, John Bew
- *Starman: David Bowie - The Definitive Biography*, Paul Trynka

While most biographies are about people, the term is sometimes applied to objects or animals. These works are usually popular histories which discuss the known origin or first use of the subject, then connect it to the human

era or arc. Authors do this by considering importance and change across a population from a perspective such as economics, science, or even faith.

Examples of these include:

- *Cod, A Biography of the Fish That Changed The World*, Paul Kalanithi
- *Salt: A World History*, Mark Kurlansky

Unauthorised biographies

Unauthorised biographies are written when the person they are written about has not consented to the biography. Sometimes these can be harmless, but at other times they can cause distress to the person being written about.

The major difference between authorised and unauthorised biographies is access. The research in an authorised biography usually includes interviews with the subject and people close to the subject. An unauthorised biography must use publicly available information. Unauthorised biographies sometimes include interviews with people close to the subject.

There are legal concerns in writing an unauthorised biography. Information must be verifiable. If using interviews, the author must be aware that laws vary according to the use of source confidentiality. The subject of the biography may also seek legal recourse, especially if material affects their income or potential income.

Using ghost writers in biographies

A ghost writer is a specialist type of writer employed to create work in another person's voice, often under another person's name. Ghost writers can be employed directly as individuals through their website or other contact details, or through an agency. Each ghost writer has different standard rates and contracts – some contract as work-for-hire writers, while others take a royalty percentage.

Before working with a ghost writer, it is imperative you work out the details of the project, such as rights, scope, payment, and revisions. Rights are especially important – these include who owns the copyright on the text, who needs to agree to sale of the text, whether rights revert to a given individual after a set period of time, and more. If you are considering working with a ghost writer, research copyright laws in your country.

While some ghost writers leave their name off the final work, others are included, usually as a 'with' or 'as told to' credit somewhere in the title.

Choosing your subject

A biography is nothing without a life to write about. Think about your subject. Is it you? Is it a friend, an industry professional? Before you start writing, it's important to think about the interest level of your subject. Will readers be interested in this person?

Ask yourself questions, such as:

- Who am I writing about?
- What makes my subject special?
- Why will anyone want to read about him/her?
- Is there an overall theme to my subject's life? Overcoming adversity, finding one's self, finding professional success?
- Am I going to write about his/her whole life, or just a section of it?
- Is there enough to cover a whole biography? Is it a short biography?
- Do I have access to the sources I need? Will I be able to find everything I need in books and online, or do I need to do interviews?
- Is there a market for the biography e.g. Have other people already written about them? Do you want to write from another perspective?
- Would it be an autobiography?

- Will the subject be all right with me writing about them? Do I need permissions?

Remember: biographies are often about famous people, but they don't have to be. They do have to be interesting. Be sure there's a reason your subject is interesting.

WHAT DO BIOGRAPHIES COVER?

A biography is neither a diary nor a journal. It's more than a collection of 'she did this' and 'he did that'. Although biographies are writing about life, it's more useful to think of them as a collection of writings about life events. What are the key events in your subject's life? How do these tie around a central theme or purpose?

Let's say we're writing a biography about the Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson. Here are some of the events we'd need to cover:

- Birth – 1882, Shipley, England
- Moved to Australia aged 2
- Started travelling as a geologist after graduation
- First expedition – with Ernest Shackleton, at age 25
- First person to go to South Magnetic Pole. First person to reach the summit of Mount Erebus
- Death (or end of our written biography)

These are only a handful of events in Mawson's life. Already, though, we have a sense of key events in Mawson's life. Living in Australia made it easier for him to be involved in Antarctic expeditions. Attaining a degree as a geologist helped him start travelling. That helped him get on the Shackleton expedition. These are important events. The details we fill in around these help us fill out the narrative of Mawson's life.

Using important events also keeps the biography on track. Note how the first point is Mawson's birth. While we might discuss a little about his parents, their immediate background – where they were born, their parents etc. – is largely irrelevant.

Although there is no one size fits all template for how to write a biography – no two lives are the same – most biographies cover at least some of the following:

- Birth
- Early childhood – parents at home, guardian, orphanage etc.
- Childhood/formative years – including siblings and education
- Adolescence – including siblings and education, changes in temperament
- After school – workforce or continuing education
- Influences on later life from early periods (especially in biographies of creatives)
- Important romantic relationships, any children
- Marriage, children. Divorces, affairs
- Family relationships in adulthood
- Career prospects, failures, successes e.g. Steve Jobs and the iPad
- Notable works, including charitable works, speeches, academic works, novels etc
- Notable institutions or organisations worked for
- Awards or closely missed awards (e.g. Rosalind Franklin and the Nobel Prize)
- Influences on others in the field
- Any substance abuse
- Reasons or drive behind developing the Big Idea, e.g. Victor Chang and the first heart successful heart transplant

- Specific trips or expeditions of important, e.g. Ernest Hemingway and the running of the bulls in Pamplona
- Legacy

How many of these they cover, depends on the type of biography. A short biography might cover only or two of these, especially if a lot of the details for the subject's life are already known or easily accessed. A comprehensive biography would cover most, if not all. Depending on the subject, specialist details or events might also be included.

Timelines

An important planning tool on deciding on your subject and genre is the timeline. Sketch out a line of important events from birth to death and look at it closely. Is there a period where the subject's life is especially crowded with important events? Or is everything more evenly spaced out?

Looking at a timeline will help you determine the most important periods to cover in your biography. This is especially important if you're working on a short biography or within certain genres.

If you are not writing about the person's whole life, you can still do a time line of the specific period you are writing about. For example, if you are writing about a year in a person's life, you might still do a time line. A scientist may have spent a year living in the arctic circle.

The time line may be something like –

- Finding out she could go to the Arctic
- Planning the trip
- Saying goodbye
- The journey
- Getting to know other people there
- A month in – falling ill
- And so on.....

FICTION VERSUS NON-FICTION

Biographies are always non-fiction. They're factually based and always contain true events. There is, however, a genre known as biographical fiction, or 'based on a true story' fiction. Historical fiction is sometimes included in this genre.

Fiction

In biographical or historical fiction, the writer can take many more liberties, including writing the protagonist's thoughts. This is because the book is not true – it is only based on a true story. In her *Thomas Cromwell* trilogy, Hilary Mantel details Cromwell's life from childhood to death, including thoughts, memories, and much fine detail. Although her details of the period are largely correct, and she uses primary evidence about Cromwell and Cromwell's life, the story uses details Mantel cannot wholly verify. Indeed, Mantel's books give Cromwell thoughts and opinions, emotions and history no one can verify.

This is because Mantel's books are fiction. While they are based on the life of a real person and draw on historical evidence, they are biographical fiction, rather than biographies. The biographical fiction writer uses biographies. They do not write them.

This is an important distinction. As you work on a biography, do not presume to know the subject's thoughts, or write thoughts or dialogue you cannot show evidence for. If you are writing an autobiography, you can include such thoughts, because you are a primary source for information on your life.

Non-fiction

Biographies do not state the protagonist's thoughts. Biographical writers must engage in research. Sometimes, this means they can include excerpts of letters or other communications to demonstrate a subject's thought process. Sometimes they use this evidence to infer thought, but this is always clearly stated. For instance, writing about Thomas Cromwell, the author could use Cromwell's notes and actions to state his position on something. This position, however, would be evidenced. This does not mean that the biography must be dry and never contain opinion, but rather that it must be factually correct and separate inference and fact from opinion.

For Example:

Cromwell left many detailed records, many of which are carefully preserved. While studying some of his letters, I was surprised by the eloquence of his style: the ruffian child of a largely illiterate and violent father, Cromwell came to be a prominent man of letters. His ambition – well-documented throughout his letters and notes – coupled with an aptitude for learning helped him rise to one of the most powerful positions in 16th century England. Some historians argue that his ambition was his downfall, that Cromwell wanted more power than his king, Henry VIII. Others have suggested that it was his love for Henry that prompted him to help orchestrate the divorce between Catherine and Henry and put Anne Boleyn on the throne, and that it was this continued love that pushed him to help Henry rid himself of Boleyn and crown Jane Seymour queen.

Note how we have a sense of Cromwell from the details about his father and his eloquence – both facts can be verified. They have also been carefully chosen: Cromwell's father was a blacksmith, fuller and cloth maker who owned a hostelry and a brewery. The author has then tied our facts to potential reasons for Cromwell's manipulations, while making it clear that these reasons are opinions, and not verifiable. The first reason, ambition ties directly to the details we can verify. If the passage continued, it would discuss reasons Cromwell might have loved Henry, and any evidence for this, such as Henry VIII's bestowal of several valuable titles and positions.

Uses for Biographies

Biographies are used in many different areas of writing.

Books may seem the most obvious area where a biography is written. There are a lot of authorised and unauthorised biographies available as books. But not everyone wants to write a whole book about a particular person. There are other areas, such as –

- Screenplays – biographies can be used to developed screenplays for films, such as the Frost/Nixon biography we talked about earlier.
- Business reports
- Obituaries
- Newspaper articles
- Magazine articles
- Website articles
- Social media listings
- Blogs
- Conference programmes
- Professional profiles
- Government submissions
- Resumes/CVs

Biographies can be short or a full-length book.

Biography vs. Memoir

While these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinct difference between biographies and memoirs. Biographies are dependent on research and can be written by the subject (autobiography) or about another subject (biography). They may be considered historical documents.

Memoirs are written by the subject and are not considered historical documents. There is usually little research involved, unless it is required for deepening an aspect of the telling or providing some context. This is because memoirs are about an individual perspective, as opposed to documenting or chronicling a life history.

Although memoirs require less research, it is often a good idea to read around the general area you intend to write about and gather other perspectives. It can also help you situate your personal story, or think about in a new way, which may prove helpful to you.

Memoirs do not have to be comprehensive or linear. They can be written about a single period, life event, interest, or aspect.

Sequels

Comprehensive biographies rarely have sequels unless new information comes to light. This is especially true when the subject is deceased. If the subject is living, a sequel may be released after enough time has passed. This is commonly seen in celebrity biographies.

Shorter biographies may have followups, which cover later life or earlier life.

Memoirs may have sequels, because they cover a smaller portion of the subject's life. The writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks published many books, each dealing with a different section of his work or life.

SET TASKS

Set Task 1

Find a biography of someone you're interested in a newspaper, online or in the library. It can be a short article, a non-fiction picture book, a short biography, or a comprehensive biography. Make a list of topics covered, and write about why they're important to the work. Work with a list of three topics.

Set Task 2

Pick a period in your life, such as the years from ages 8-12, or 15-19. Think about key events during this period, and write them down as a timeline. Think about how each event affected the next. Write down your sequence of events, then 5 points about each one. If you're not sure how to start, use these prompts:

- Who was there?
- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- Why did it happen? Why did it matter to you, as a person?