

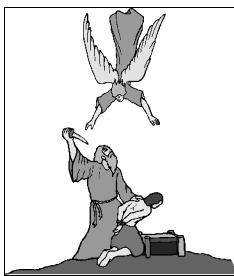
creative, motivating multi-level,
multi-skills language activities

Biographies

Short, Short Stories Based on the
“Messages” of People’s Lives

Language Learning Levels = High Beginning Through Advanced

Elaine Kirn © 1999 Authors & Editors



Abraham



Benedict Arnold



Uncle Sam



Bill Gates



Joyce Brothers



Michael Jackson

Use these engaging, effective ideas to teach or learn reading skills and strategies (getting the main idea, recognizing supporting detail, summarizing, and paraphrasing), to practice and test listening comprehension of “mini-speeches,” to provide writing practice based on models, and much, much more!

This booklet contains information about these topics and instructions for these activities.

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Who are the famous people in these cartoons? The answers follow—upside down.



ANSWERS: Arnold Schwarzenegger; Robin Williams; Walter Cronkite; Socrates; William Shakespeare

Biographies

Short, Short Stories Based on the “Messages” of People’s Lives

Language Learning Levels = High Beginning Through Advanced

Biographies are people’s life stories. Most biographies are about famous people, living or dead. But biographies can also say something about “ordinary” people’s lives, especially the “messages” they send or the “lessons” they might teach.

Biographies can be as short as a paragraph or as long as a book. They can be written in the simplest language, adapted to the proficiency level of beginning English language students or new readers—or in complex, even literary language. They can focus on one aspect or period of a person’s life—or be a detailed, chronological account of major—and minor—life events. In other words, there is a large variety of printed material that can properly be called “biography.” What such writings have in common is that they can be put to effective, efficient, and creative use in language teaching and learning. They can serve as material for reading skills instruction—getting the point or the main idea, recognizing supporting detail, listing events in time order, and the like. They also fit well into oral and written activities—summarizing, paraphrasing, writing life stories of students, and so on.

Most learners—and teachers—*enjoy* reading about people, so true biographic material is intrinsically motivating. The purpose of this teacher-resource booklet, along with the reproducible student material it contains, is to offer ideas on how to make productive use of this common form of written communication.



*Can you identify the famous people portrayed in these caricatures?
The answers are on the next page—upside down.*

Sources of Biographic Material

Public and school libraries and bookstores are sources of biographies of famous people in book form, written for historians or history professors or researchers, or for the general public, or for young people or children. Except for the shortest biographies created for young readers, most of these books are too complex or detailed to serve as resource material for simplified or adapted short readings.

Collections of short biographical readings are probably more useful. These can be found in books or in magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and others. Biographical information is also available on the Internet (the WorldWideWeb), at addresses like:

- www.biography.com
- www.pathfinder.com
- www.looksmart.com
- www.time/time 100

Very short, simplified biographies sometimes appear in the children's sections of local newspapers, in an illustrated format that may be useable without adaptation for teaching purposes. Here are examples, shown by permission.

Here are two of the many short, short biographies written and illustrated for children that appeared in the *Daily Breeze*, A *Copely Newspaper* published in Torrance, California © 1998.

STEVEN SPIELBERG

(1947 - - -)

No one ever questioned Steven Spielberg's ability as a filmmaker. "Jaws," "Raiders of the Lost Ark," and "Jurassic Park" were all box office blockbusters. But until he won an Academy Award for "Schindler's List," he was not taken seriously by some critics. With his recent hit, "Saving Private Ryan," Spielberg proved that he can handle serious subjects as well as any director. Born in Cincinnati, Spielberg was the oldest of four children in a working class family. He was fascinated by the visual images on TV and in movies and began making his own films at a young age.

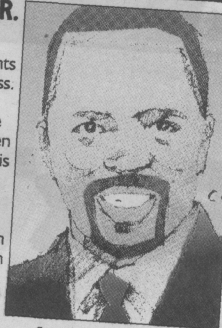


Art by Vernon Carne

JESSE JACKSON, JR.

(1965- - -)

Jesse Jackson, Jr. represents Illinois in the U.S. Congress. The son of the famous activist, Jesse Jackson, he won election in 1995 when he was only 30. Despite his youth, he convinced the voters that he had gained years of experience accompanying his father on many political trips. When Jackson was born in Greenville, S.C., his father was marching with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Alabama. Jackson attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, earned a master's degree from Chicago Theological Seminary, and graduated from the University of Illinois Law School.



Art by Vernon Carne

The other drawings of people in this booklet are from *Corel MEGA GALLERY*, Corel Corporation, © 1996, Ontario, Canada K1Z 8T7. The people portrayed by the caricatures on the previous page are supposed to be: Arsenio Hall, Charlie Chaplin, Sigmund Freud, Margaret Thatcher, Jack Nicholas, Katherine Hepburn, George Bush.

Simplifying or Adapting Biographic Reading Material

Some biographic readings, like the examples from a children's newspaper column shown on the previous page, appear in a form that is already suitable for classroom presentation. Simply collect these, cut them out, and paste them up on equal-sized index cards or card stock. Without any photocopying, soon you will have a "Biography Reading Kit" to create worksheets or design activities for—and to reuse again and again.

Other biographic materials need rewriting—to make them more "accessible" to learners of English as a second language and/or new readers. Usually, they must also be shortened—to enable learners to read and understand *many* short readings of the same kind within the time allotted for classwork or homework.

Getting the Main Idea

In simplifying or otherwise adapting biographical information, it helps to keep the most common *purposes* of reading instruction in mind. The first of these purposes is to learn—or to teach students—to get the *point* or "main idea" or "message" of a reading selection. The second goal is for learners to find, read, understand, and remember the important "supporting information"—the significant facts, events, examples, or other data that contribute to the "main-idea message."

After reading a short, short biography, students should be asked "main-idea questions" about the information, most likely:

1. Why is this person famous? (OR: Why do we still remember this person?)
2. What is most significant about this person's life (so far)? (OR: What are the three most important facts about—or events in—his or her life?)
3. What (lesson) about life can we learn from this person's story?

Keeping questions like these in mind while rewriting or reorganizing biographical information will help us focus on our goals in simplifying and paraphrasing reading material.



The famous people caricatured in these drawings are: Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Mother Theresa, Yasser Arafat, and Ronald Reagan.

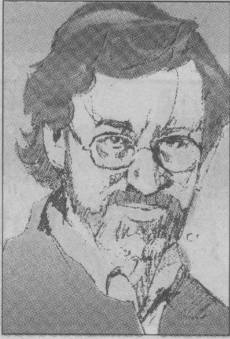
Recognizing Important Supporting Information

For students, the second most important reading skill is recognizing which information in a reading to concentrate on. Language-learners and new readers often make the mistake of reading too carefully. They tend to pay attention to insignificant details, to look up words in a dictionary (“translating” them into their native languages, if any), and/or to memorize or copy material word for word instead of understanding its meaning. For these reasons, such students need to learn to pick out what is significant for learning. Once they can grasp the general meaning of a reading selection without difficulty, they can usually recognize which information supports the main idea, which facts are about something else, and which details are irrelevant to the “message” or “lesson.”

To become aware—and/or to demonstrate a grasp—of the organization of biographic reading material, learners can list the answers to “main-idea questions” and/or fill in an outline form. Here is an example for an article from page 3.

STEVEN SPIELBERG
(1947 - - - -)

No one ever questioned Steven Spielberg's ability as a filmmaker. "Jaws," "Raiders of the Lost Ark," and "Jurassic Park" were all box office blockbusters. But until he won an Academy Award for "Schindler's List," he was not taken seriously by some critics. With his recent hit, "Saving Private Ryan," Spielberg proved that he can handle serious subjects as well as any director. Born in Cincinnati, Spielberg was the oldest of four children in a working class family. He was fascinated by the visual images on TV and in movies and began making his own films at a young age.



Art by Vernon Carne

1. For what is Steven Spielberg most famous?
A. _____
B. _____

2. What are some details from his life to remember?
A. _____
B. _____
C. _____

Here are some possible answers for the "Main-Idea Question-and-Answer Outline" above:
 1. For what is Steven Spielberg most famous? A. His blockbuster films. B. His serious films.
 2. What are some details from his life to remember? A. Fascinated by visual media images—began making films as kid. B. Famous special effects movies: *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Jurassic Park*. C. Serious films: *Schindler's List* (Academy Award), *Private Ryan*, etc.

The Subjects of Biographies for Language Learning

The best subjects of biographies are, of course, people in whom learners are likely to be interested. High school and young adult school or college students, for instance, might be interested in famous people that can serve as positive (or negative) role models—personalities at the beginning or at the height of their careers in entertainment, sports, and other areas of modern life. Older learners may want to read about businesspeople that have “made it” in the face of obstacles, politicians and political leaders currently in the news, and/or a large variety of the best-known media personalities. Serious academic students, especially liberal arts majors, will probably be interested in historical figures, such as great (and terrible) world leaders, discoverers or inventors of important technological advances, and/or other well-known names that belong to the “cultural literacy” of an educated person.

Are you using biographical information in connection with grammar and/or composition-writing lessons? In English-as-a Second-Language courses, biographies fit in best with teaching or learning of the past time frame forms and uses, such as regular and irregular simple past verb forms, the past continuous tense, and the past perfect tenses. However, very short biographies about people still living may be re-written largely in the present time frame—that is, the simple present, the present continuous, and the present perfect (continuous). Biographies adapted in this way will focus on a person’s *accomplishments* up to the present, rather than on past events in the person’s life.

There are many examples of appropriate uses of verb tenses—as well as other commonly-taught forms and patterns—in the reproducible short biographies of this booklet.



The famous people caricatured in these drawings are: Laurel & Hardy, Leonard Nemoj (Mr.

Short, Short Biographies for the Language-Skills Classroom

In the language-learning classroom, a set of short, short biographies (in the original language or adapted or simplified) can be used to advantage in a variety of ways. Each exercise or activity can focus on a different language skill, such as reading comprehension, speaking and listening comprehension, summarizing (orally or in written form), and others. The biographies can also serve as *models* for language production—in paired interviews and other cooperative learning activities, in composition writing, and the like. In step-by-step instructions, the last section of this idea booklet offers many suggestions for productive use of biographical material for language learning or teaching.

The biographical information on the following pages was researched on the Internet (www.biography.com and other web addresses). It was “written up” to appeal to and be easily-understood by second-language learners and new readers. The material is appropriate and useful for language-skills instruction.

Designed with high-beginning learners in mind, the biographical selections numbered 1 to 10 contain only short sentences, basic grammar patterns, and common vocabulary. Readings 11 to 20, which contain slightly more difficult sentence structures, words, and phrases, are appropriate for low-intermediate learners. Selections 21 to 30 are aimed at the high-intermediate level of language proficiency, at which readers should be able to “figure out” the approximate meaning of new vocabulary and understand longer, more complex sentences without interruption of their reading fluency. Hopefully, the selections provide useful models of language simplification and adaptation for a variety of levels and purposes.

The thirty readings and the sample comprehension exercises that follow, along with their ClipArt images from *Mega Gallery* by Corel Corporation, may be reproduced for classroom use:

- ◆ They may be enlarged and projected onto an overhead projector screen.
- ◆ They may be made into one or more “class sets” of reading cards, each card with a different biography on it.
- ◆ They may be duplicated and lent out or given to learners or small groups.
- ◆ They may be simplified, made more elaborate, and/or otherwise changed to fulfill the particular educational purposes of the purchaser of this booklet.