

Testing Reading Skills with Short Biographical Readings

A set of (at least eight) short biographies similar in length and difficulty lends itself to a variety of creative, efficient, and engaging language skills lessons. On pages 30 to 35 of this booklet, three effective “generic” ways to structure learner-centered activities are presented step by step. During all of these activities, learners are helped and then expected to comprehend the general *meanings* of the biographical readings—the main message and the important supporting details of each biography.

More advanced speakers or writers of English may be able to express the important ideas of the selections in their own words. They may be capable of summarizing or paraphrasing the info so that it is even more easily understandable to listeners/readers. Less confident or less proficient students might appreciate the “cues” offered by reading comprehension worksheets, quiz questions, or other supplementary materials. “Learning aids” like these can help students in wording important information.

Depending on the size and “collective personality” of the class, students might do better in *cooperative* comprehension activities—in which they can help one another understand the questions and recall the material they have learned. Or they may prefer to demonstrate their skills or improvement by using the worksheets individually, as timed tests or as homework.

On the next five pages are sample worksheets that can be used to assess or demonstrate comprehension of any set of ten (or of all thirty) of the reproducible biographies in this booklet. There are three exercise or test item variations:

- *The ten “high-beginning” reading comprehension items correspond to Biographies 1-10. Each item contains one blank for students to fill in with the name of a famous person.*
- *At the low-intermediate level, there are two items for each of the Biographies 11-20. Learners write the same famous name twice.*
- *The high-intermediate level offers three test items for each Biography 21-30. As in the other two worksheets, all items are designed to focus students’ attention on important points only. Answer keys for all three worksheets follow.*

COMPREHENSION ITEMS FOR BIOGRAPHIES 1 TO 10:

High Beginning Level

Instructions: Here are the names of ten famous people. Write the names in the blanks of the sentences.

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| ◆ Kareem Abdul Jabbar | ◆ Jacques Cousteau |
| ◆ Yasser Arafat | ◆ Prince Charles |
| ◆ Lucille Ball | ◆ Sammy Davis, Jr. |
| ◆ The Beatles | ◆ John F. Kennedy |
| ◆ The Buddha | ◆ Pablo Picasso |

1. A French scientist, _____, explored the world's oceans, made underwater films, invented things, and wrote books about ocean conservation.
2. Probably, _____ was the most famous painter of the 20th century. He created many works of art. His cubist painting "Guernica" is one of the best-known.
3. With her Cuban band-leader husband, Desi Arnaz, _____ created the first popular TV comedy series. People still watch "I Love Lucy" in reruns.
4. The leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (the PLO) is _____. His group has always opposed the existence of the state of Israel, but now this man participates in peace talks.
5. _____ is the oldest son of Queen Elizabeth II of England. He may or may not become king some day. Before divorcing his wife, Princess Diana, he had two sons, possible heirs to the throne.
6. The famous pop music group, _____, began in Liverpool, England, in 1960. The four most famous members were John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. Their enthusiastic young fans were sad about the breakup of the group.
7. Prince Gautama Siddharta, the son of Nepalese royalty, received spiritual enlightenment. He became _____, founder of one of the major world religions.
8. _____ was a talented singer, dancer, and night club entertainer. After a near-fatal car accident, the small, frail black man became Jewish.
9. _____, one of the tallest and best basketball players of his time, played for U.C.L.A., the Milwaukee Bucks, and the Los Angeles Lakers. Born in New York City, his real name was Ferdinand Alcindor.
10. The 35th President of the United States was _____. He was the youngest president in history and the first Catholic. There was progress in many areas during his short term. He was assassinated in 1963.