

Biography and Autobiography

We are all curious about other people—about what they do, why they do it, and how they feel. The purpose of biographies and autobiographies is to satisfy our curiosity, to inform us about the effect people have on the world, and even to entertain us.

COMMON CORE

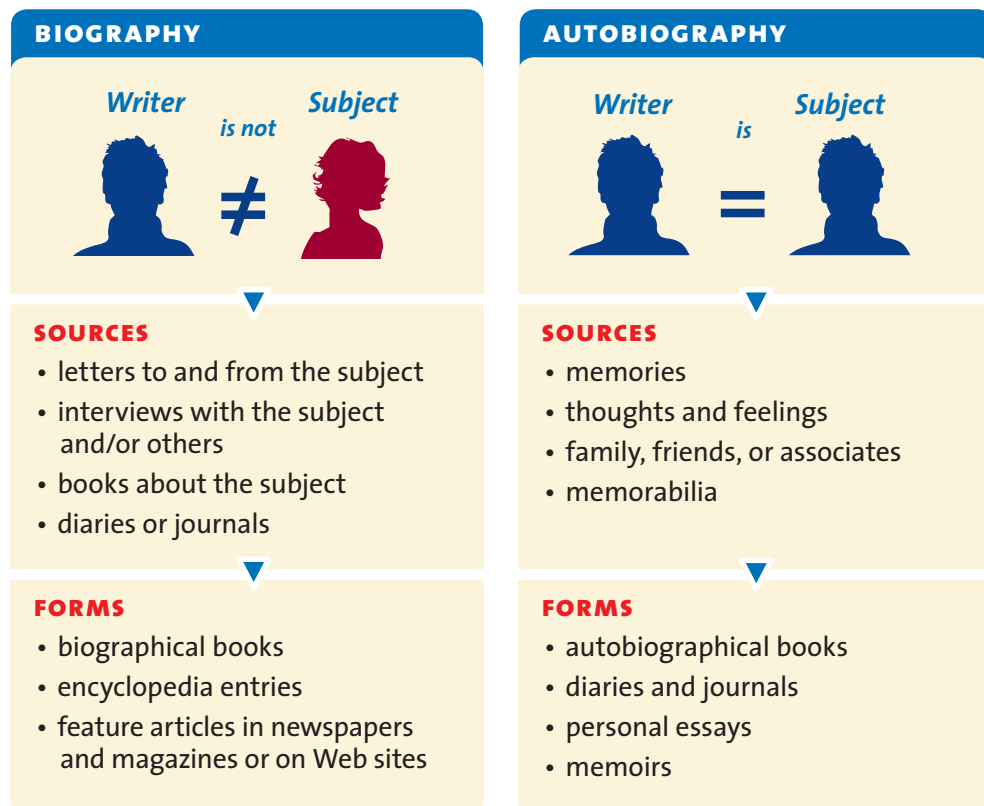
Included in this workshop:
RL 9 Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history. **RI 1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly. **RI 3** Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text.

Part 1: Understanding the Basics

A **biography** is a story of a person’s life told by someone else and written from the third-person point of view. The writer, or **biographer**, usually gets information about the subject by doing detailed research using a number of sources. Sometimes, the biographer might even interview the subject directly.

An **autobiography** is also the story of a person’s life, but it is told by that person and is written from the first-person point of view. Although most of the information is from the subject’s mind and memories, he or she may still consult others for help in remembering details about his or her life.

Usually, when people talk about biographies or autobiographies, they are referring to whole books about people’s lives. However, biographical and autobiographical writing also includes other forms, such as a **diary** or **journal**. These are daily records of a writer’s thoughts, experiences, or feelings. Additional forms are shown in the chart.





MODEL 1: BIOGRAPHY

This excerpt is from a biography about Wilbur and Orville Wright, two brothers who invented and flew the first machine-powered airplane.

from

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS



Biography by **Russell Freedman**

Orville was more impulsive, “bubbling over with ideas,” according to his niece. Among family and friends, he had a reputation as a tease and a practical joker. Among strangers, however, he seemed uncomfortably shy. He would clam up and fade silently into the background.

- 5 Orville’s greatest pleasure was to take something apart, see how it worked, and put it back together. Wilbur was more of a visionary, fascinated by the big picture rather than its individual parts. He was the one who first dreamed of building an airplane. . . .

Close Read

1. What clues tell you that this is a biography rather than an autobiography?
2. How were Wilbur and Orville different? Cite details to support your answer. Also note who provided the author with some of these details.



MODEL 2: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Now read this excerpt from the autobiography of a Japanese-American author. What do you learn about her thoughts and feelings?

from

THE INVISIBLE THREAD

Autobiography by **Yoshiko Uchida**

I was born in California, recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag each morning at school, and loved my country as much as any other American—maybe even more.

- 5 Still, there was a large part of me that was Japanese simply because Mama and Papa had passed on to me so much of their own Japanese spirit and soul. Their own values of loyalty, honor, self-discipline, love, and respect for one’s parents, teachers, and superiors were all very much a part of me.

- 10 There was also my name, which teachers couldn’t seem to pronounce properly even when I shortened my first name to Yoshi. And there was my Japanese face, which closed more and more doors to me as I grew older.

How wonderful it would be, I used to think, if I had blond hair and blue eyes like Marian and Solveig.

Close Read

1. What clues in the boxed sentences signal that this is an autobiography?
2. Name two things you learn about Uchida from her description of her own thoughts and feelings.

Part 2: Reading Biographies and Autobiographies

From which book would you learn more—a biography or an autobiography? You might think that an autobiography is the better source. After all, who knows more about a person’s experiences than that person? But each form has strengths and limitations. Here is how you can distinguish one form from the other.

BIOGRAPHY

When you read a biography, you . . .

- get information from a variety of sources
- discover how other people view the subject
- might get a more objective picture of the subject’s life



Eleanor Roosevelt
by William Jay Jacobs
pages 786–797

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When you read an autobiography, you . . .

- get the subject’s interpretation of events, written from a subjective point of view
- learn the subject’s private thoughts and feelings
- hear the subject’s voice and get a sense of his or her personality



The Noble Experiment
by Jackie Robinson as
told to Alfred Duckett
pages 834–843

Part 3: Reading Fictional Adaptations

Remarkable people, particularly historical figures, inspire all kinds of stories. Some are true but some are a blend of fact and fiction. **Fictional adaptations** are stories and plays about real people and events and may be based on biographies, autobiographies, and diaries. Writers of fictional adaptations combine factual details with imaginary ones, usually to create a compelling story. You can distinguish between fictional adaptations and autobiographical forms by understanding a few basic differences.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND DIARIES

- written by the actual person
- writer’s primary purpose is to inform
- writer presents fairly accurate details but with own point of view

FICTIONAL ADAPTATIONS

- written by a writer or playwright
- writer’s purpose is to inform and entertain
- writer may include imaginary characters and events to boost dramatic effects

MODEL 1: READING A BIOGRAPHY

The actor Christopher Reeve was famous for his 1978 movie role as Superman. This article was published in 1982.

from

CHRISTOPHER REEVE

Feature article in *Current Biography*

Another outstanding quality is that he [Reeve] brings the same energy and enthusiasm to his recreations that he does to acting: he owns both a \$350,000 private plane and a glider; he is an accomplished sailor who, upon completing *Superman*, gathered a six-man crew and sailed a boat from Connecticut to Bermuda; and he has played classical piano since adolescence, usually practicing ninety minutes every day, and also composes music. His hobbies, moreover, include skiing, ice-skating, and playing tennis. But nothing takes precedence over his work, as Aljean Harmetz told readers of the *New York Times* (August 20, 1979), “He thrives on acting. . . .” According to her, Reeve admitted: “. . . [I am] still at the stage where I’m taking care of myself, my career, first.”

Close Read

1. Look at the boxed details. How would you describe the author’s attitude toward Reeve?
2. What source does the author use for quotes by and about Reeve?
3. Based on this article, how would you describe Reeve?

MODEL 2: READING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In 1995, a fall from a horse left Reeve paralyzed from the neck down, and he died in 2004. In this essay, Reeve reminds people not to let fear take over their lives. Reeve conquered his own fears when he participated in research for spinal cord injuries.

from

LIVING WITHOUT FEAR

Personal essay by **Christopher Reeve**

Of course, the greater difficulty lies in being fearless in surrendering and in giving. I don’t want to sound too noble, but I really have been able to say, All right, I’ve had some setbacks, but look at the other people who have benefited.

I recommend you do the same thing because being fearless is not always going to get you exactly where you expect to go. It might take you in a completely different direction. It might not give you what you want, but it can satisfy you to know you did something for the world, for the planet, or even just for your family or your neighbors. And that’s enough.

Close Read

1. Describe Reeve’s personality at this point in his life. In your opinion, has his attitude toward life changed or stayed the same?
2. What picture do you get of Reeve’s life as a whole? Explain how this picture would be different if you had only read one of these excerpts.

Part 4: Analyze the Text

In 1955, a 42-year-old African-American woman in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a public bus. Her action sparked a citywide bus boycott and helped break down the barriers of racial segregation in the South. Her name was Rosa Parks.

The first excerpt is from a biography of Parks; the second is from her autobiography. What do you learn about Parks from each excerpt?

from

ROSA PARKS

Biography by **Mary Hull**

The driver [J. F. Blake] repeated his order: “Look, woman, I told you I wanted the seat. Are you going to stand up?”

In a firm, steady voice, Parks questioned him. “Why should I have to get up and stand? Why should we have to be pushed around?”

5 The driver slammed on the brakes and pulled the bus over to the curb. He walked back to her seat and stood over her. He asked her if she was going to move, and Parks said, “No.” He told her he would call the police if she did not move. “Go ahead. You may do that,” Parks answered. Blake left the bus angrily and went for the police. Several
10 passengers—all of them black—followed, reluctant to become involved in an incident that invited trouble with whites. While everyone else aboard the bus waited to see what would happen next, Parks looked out the window at Montgomery.

Parks had a right to be scared, for she recognized the driver. Twelve
15 years earlier, she had refused to enter a bus through the rear door and had been evicted from the bus by this same driver. Although Parks had seen him before while waiting at bus stops, she never boarded a bus if she knew he was driving. In all these years she had never forgotten his face. That evening, Parks had not looked at the driver when she boarded,
20 but when he stood over her, there was no mistaking who he was.

Parks’s mother and grandparents had always taught her not to regard herself as inferior to whites because she was black, but she admitted that until that fateful December day on the bus “every part of my life pointed to the white superiority and negro inferiority.” She was uncertain about
25 what exactly had provoked her not to move on the bus driver’s order, but her feet certainly hurt, her shoulders ached, and suddenly everything became too much. “I had had enough,” Parks later said. She was tired of giving in. “I wanted to be treated like a human being.”

Close Read

1. How can you tell that this excerpt is from a biography? Cite details to support your answer.
2. Consider how the author describes Parks’s words and actions in lines 3–13. How does the author seem to feel about Parks?
3. What do you learn about Parks’s upbringing from this biography?
4. One of the sources for this biography was Rosa Parks’s own autobiography. As a result, the author was able to include details about Parks’s thoughts and feelings. One example is boxed. Find one more.

Now read this excerpt from the beginning of Parks’s autobiography. Pay attention to how Parks describes the incident on the bus. Also notice what she reveals about her thoughts and feelings at that time in her life.

from

Rosa Parks: My Story

Autobiography by **Rosa Parks**
(with Jim Haskins)



One evening in early December 1955 I was sitting in the front seat of the colored section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. The white people were sitting in the white section. More white people got on, and they filled up all the seats in the white section. When that happened, we black people were supposed to give up our seats to the whites. But I didn’t move. The white driver said, “Let me have those front seats.” I didn’t get up. I was tired of giving in to white people.

“I’m going to have you arrested,” the driver said.

“You may do that,” I answered.

Two white policemen came. I asked one of them, “Why do you all push us around?”

He answered, “I don’t know, but the law is the law and you’re under arrest.”

For half of my life there were laws and customs in the South that kept African Americans segregated from Caucasians and allowed white people to treat black people without any respect. I never thought this was fair, and from the time I was a child, I tried to protest against disrespectful treatment. But it was very hard to do anything about segregation and racism when white people had the power of the law behind them.

Somehow we had to change the laws. And we had to get enough white people on our side to be able to succeed. I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on that Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South. I only knew that I was tired of being pushed around. I was a regular person, just as good as anybody else.

Close Read

- Reread the boxed sentences. Would you say that this autobiography was written in the 1950s, or later? Explain.
- How can you tell that the author of the biography used Parks’s autobiography as a source? Cite similar details in both excerpts to support your answer.
- By revealing her thoughts and beliefs in lines 13–25, Parks gives readers a real sense of her personality. How would you describe her? In your opinion, do you get this same sense from reading the biography about her? Support your answer.