



# Rethinking Reports

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID J. WALBERT



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*"What? Not another animal report?!?"*

Every teacher's toolbox carries a few assignments that are so timeworn, so standard, that merely naming them says all you need to say about them: the President Report, the Animal Report, the Famous Person Report. Each of these reports has the same basic goals: for students to perform thoughtful, thorough reading and research, to learn information skills while they learn the content of another curriculum area, and to improve their writing skills by communicating what they learn. But giving students the same tired assignment year after year — and likely as not sending them running for an encyclopedia — doesn't accomplish these goals.

This series of articles provides alternative research-based assignments that ask students to think about old topics in new ways, work collaboratively, and develop products that support a variety of learning styles. Resources, references, and rubrics are provided.



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The original web-based version, with enhanced functionality and related  
resources, can be found at  
<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/rethinking-reports>.

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# Rethinking Reports



# Introduction: Rethinking reports

A little creativity can make research a rewarding learning experience for students and teachers alike.

BY DAVID J. WALBERT AND MELISSA THIBAUT

Every teacher's toolbox carries a few assignments that are so timeworn, so standard, that merely naming them says all you need to say about them. There are the biographies — the President Report, the Inventor Report, the Famous African American Report, and so on. There are the generic research assignments for science and social studies — the Country Report, the Biome Report, the Animal Report. And then there are book reports.

Each of these reports has the same basic goals: for students to perform thoughtful, thorough reading and research, to learn information skills while they learn the content of another curriculum area, and to improve their writing skills by communicating what they learn.

Trouble is, reports like these usually don't work. It bores teachers to assign them and to grade them — it's ok, admit it, we've all been there — and, what's worse, it bores students to write them. You can tell by the tired prose, the sloppy grammar, the dumb mistakes you know they could have fixed, if only they cared.

And why — and let's be honest here — why should students care? They're writing a paper on a topic that doesn't seem to relate to their lives, a topic they haven't yet learned to relate to. They're writing in a format — the five-paragraph essay, the book report, the research paper — whose real-world analogues are written and read by only a few practitioners of particular professions. Their only audience is you, the teacher — who already knows this stuff anyway. What they've learned is only good (as far as they can tell) for getting a better grade, and the skills they're learning by writing it up will only prepare them to write for other teachers.

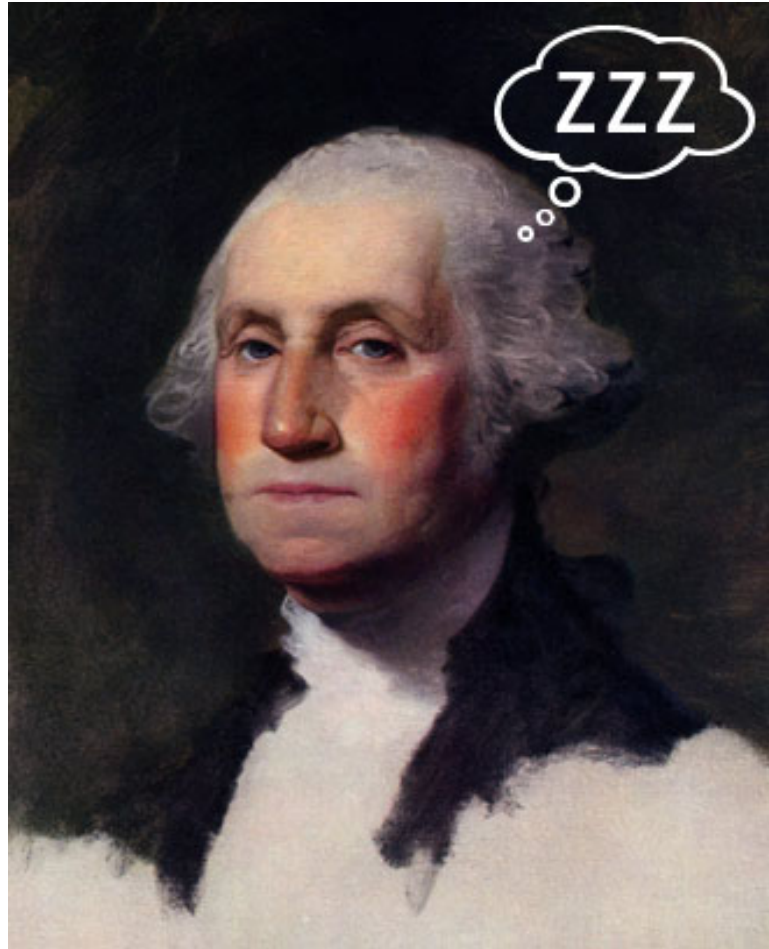
There's another problem, too: plagiarism. If everybody gives the same assignment, it's easy to copy it. In the old days (you remember, the mid-1990s) that meant turning in an older brother's or sister's paper. Now it means finding a paper on the internet — possibly even paying for it. There are online services dedicated to selling "research" papers on standard topics to various levels of students.

There are also online services that will help you track down the students who use those other services, but do we only want to punish the cheaters? Wouldn't it be better to remove the temptation, to demand that students actually think for themselves, by designing original and creative alternatives to these tired old assignments?

This series of articles is designed to help you create those alternative assignments. We'll take on standard research assignments for various curriculum areas and grade levels, providing suggestions for alternatives that ask students to think carefully about their topic, to use their imagination, and to consider their sources thoughtfully. They'll also ask students to write what they learn in a format that has a real-world analogue they can understand, one that has a real audience — or even a pretend one.

# 1

## The President Report



Even George Washington would be tired of hearing his biography recited — let alone Chester Arthur's! These alternative assignments will get your students exploring U.S. history and the role of the President thoughtfully and creatively.



# Alternatives to the President Report

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID J. WALBERT

The "President Report" is a common assignment in social studies classes from second grade, where biography is first introduced, through high school U.S. History. You know what we mean: students are asked to pick a U.S. president and write a biographical report on him. The goal is to help students understand their president in historical context, the influences on him and the legacy of his life and work. And, we hope, students will develop their research and writing skills at the same time.

But all too often, the President Report encourages students not to do thoughtful, thorough research but only to paraphrase basic sources — or, at worst, to plagiarize. So how can we promote real thinking and learning while discouraging quick fixes and plagiarism? Try some alternative assignments!

## Why research a president?

Biographical research is easy to do. The encyclopedia provides the important facts, including significant dates, family members, and major events or accomplishments. Many encyclopedias even provide a timeline or a "facts in brief" section that may all by itself answer most of the factual requirements of an assignment. If the going gets tough, students may need to venture to the Biography section of the library, where they'll find a book about their assigned historical figure, most likely a series edition with a two-to-four-page summary in the back. It sounds to us like a factual treasure hunt, not research.

So why assign biographical research at all? The life of an individual person — in this case, a president — can be a useful window into the past, a "hook" that gives students something they can relate to, something on which to hang the rest of what they learn about an historical place and time.

Biographical study of a president addresses a wide range of curriculum goals, helping students understand concepts from the development of an individual's identity in cultural context to checks and balances of power. No curriculum objective demands recall of facts about a particular U.S. president, but studying cultural influences on leaders or the context of a president's term in office will strengthen a student's understanding of social studies. The National Council for the Social Studies suggests a number of concepts that researching a president can address:

**Time, Continuity and Change**

How am I connected to those in the past?

**Individual Development and Identity**

What influences how people learn, perceive and grow?

**Individuals, Groups and Institutions**

What is the role of institutions in this society?

**Power, Authority and Governance**

How is power gained, used and justified?

## Alternative assignments

So what will be different about the research students will do with these new assignments?

First, they won't be able to simply gather facts; they'll have to work in the context of the time period. While the work might include some of the same facts as a traditional report, the assignment will require a contextual use of the facts that demonstrates understanding.

Second, students will need to use a variety of sources. The encyclopedia's Fast Facts will not provide the necessary information, and students will need to look beyond the timelines in a biography. To save you time in directing your students to quality resources, we have provided a Presidential Information Pathfinder (page 15), a selection of print and online resources that are non-commercial, offer unique elements, and are from highly respected sources.

# Now what? A President considers a career change

In this alternative to the dreaded "President Report," students write a resumé for an ex-president.

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID J. WALBERT

The president has reached the end of his term and has decided to try something brand new. Research a past United States president and based upon the character of the individual, his life, work, and accomplishments in office, and the events and economy of the time period, choose a career for your president. This career must be something the president never did for a living, and it should be a reasonable career for the time period. (In other words, Thomas Jefferson isn't looking for a biotech position!) It is understood that the president has completed his term, so those who died in office or resigned are nonetheless given a chance to try a post-presidential career.

Create a resumé and cover letter to help your president make the career change for which you believe he is suited. The resume should follow a standard format, including a header, career objectives, educational history, job experience, and other interests. Include a cover letter addressed to the company looking for a new employee. The company may be fictitious, but the role the applicant will play in the job should include skills actually necessary to do the job. For example, if you say Abraham Lincoln is applying for a job as a printer and typesetter, focus on his strengths relative to this job (spelling, editing, grammar, design) in your cover letter.

## Assessment

Requirements for this assignment may vary, but students will be graded upon their understanding of the individuals and their personal strengths, their incorporation of the historical context and related economy, and their realistic portrayal of the skills necessary for the career path chosen. This is more than a Social Studies assignment; it is also an experience for students who need to learn how to write a resume, an exercise in persuasive writing, and an opportunity to be creative.



# Guest of honor: A presidential banquet

A research assignment in which students plan a banquet in honor of a president.

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID J. WALBERT

The president you have been assigned has just been elected to office for his first term. You will research this president, the time period, and the other people of influence at the time, and plan a banquet to be given in the president's honor. You will create for this banquet a program that is to be handed out to all guests. In this program you will include the following:

## **Time, date, location and sponsor of the banquet**

Who would have been likely to want to throw a big formal party and impress the new president? Be sure to include somewhere in the program a few references to the host's interest in this president and their administration.

## **Keynote address:**

Who might have been asked to speak to this group, and what would be the topic of the speech? Give the name, a short introduction to this individual, and the title of the speech.

## **Menu and courses:**

What would be served at the time? What might this president like to eat?

## **Presidential information:**

Include a section honoring the president, bringing attention to his platform, strengths and hopes for the coming years.

## Assessment

Areas you will need to assess include:

- accuracy and use of factual information

- understanding of the time period as demonstrated in choice of keynote speaker and recipe
- proper citation of sources used
- writing style and mechanics

Depending upon the student’s needs and their prior experience with desktop publishing, you may or may not choose to evaluate the layout, design and use of graphics.

A rubric would be useful in assessing the student’s final banquet program. Rubistar<sup>1</sup>, an online rubric generator that allows you to make customizable rubrics to print and/or save online, is a great tool for making this rubric. You can also use the rubric below as a starting point. It is also available in PDF format<sup>2</sup> for easy printing.

### RUBRIC

Category	Performance			
	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
<b>Writing — Vocabulary</b>	The author correctly used several new words and defines words unfamiliar to the reader.	The author correctly used a few new words and defines words unfamiliar to the reader.	The author tried to use some new vocabulary, but may use 1–2 words incorrectly.	The author does not incorporate new vocabulary.
<b>Writing — Mechanics</b>	Spelling, capitalization and punctuation are correct throughout the brochure.	Spelling, capitalization and punctuation are correct throughout the brochure.	There are 1–2 spelling, capitalization and/or punctuation errors in the brochure.	There are several spelling, capitalization or punctuation errors in the brochure.
<b>Content — Accuracy</b>	All facts in the brochure are accurate.	99-90% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.	89-80% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.	Fewer than 80% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.
<b>Attractiveness &amp; Organization</b>	The brochure has exceptionally attractive formatting and well-organized information.	The brochure has attractive formatting and well-organized information.	The brochure has well-organized information.	The brochure’s formatting and organization of material are confusing to the reader.

<b>Sources</b>	Careful and accurate records are kept to document the source of 95–100% of the facts and graphics in the brochure.	Careful and accurate records are kept to document the source of 94–85% of the facts and graphics in the brochure.	Careful and accurate records are kept to document the source of 84–75% of the facts and graphics in the brochure.	Sources are not documented accurately or are not kept on many facts and graphics.
<b>Knowledge Gained</b>	Student can accurately answer all questions related to subjects in the brochure and to technical processes used to create the brochure.	Student can accurately answer most questions related to subjects in the brochure and to technical processes used to create the brochure.	Student can accurately answer most questions related to subjects in the brochure and to technical processes used to create the brochure.	Student appears to have little knowledge about the subjects or technical processes used in the brochure.
<b>Graphics/Pictures</b>	Graphics go well with the text and there is a good mix of text and graphics.	Graphics go well with the text, but there are so many that they distract from the text.	Graphics go well with the text, but there are too few and the brochure seems "text-heavy".	Graphics do not go with the accompanying text or appear to be randomly chosen.

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## Notes

1. See <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/media/articles/reports0502-2/guestrubric.pdf>.



# Vote for me! A re-election editorial

BY MELISSA THIBAUT AND DAVID J. WALBERT

The president you have been assigned is running for re-election. You are the editor of a major national newspaper (you decide which one, or invent one) and it is time for your newspaper to endorse a candidate — either the incumbent or his opponent. Should your readers vote this president another term in office? Why or why not?

For the purposes of this assignment, let's pretend that your president is running for re-election at the point at which he left office. So, for example, Abraham Lincoln would be running for re-election in April 1865, and we'll pretend he wasn't assassinated; Harry Truman would be running again in 1952, even though he was constitutionally ineligible to do so. Use your imagination. If your president was actually voted out of office, of course, you should write from the perspective of the election he lost.

Additionally, don't worry about the president's vice president or running mate, since in many cases that person would be hypothetical. Argue on the merits of the president alone.

To make your argument, you'll need to draw on the president's accomplishments while in office, his character, and the context of the time. What had he done — or not done — to deserve another term? What, if anything, had he done to make him unworthy of re-election? Was this a man people felt they could trust when he left office? Was the economy good or bad, and would (or should) the incumbent be blamed?

Be sure to remember your audience — the voters of the time. Think about what kind of arguments they would respond to. And, obviously, keep in mind that they don't know what will happen the following year or decade; you'll have to pretend that you don't, either — although you're allowed to “predict” the future based on events that had already occurred.

## Assessment

You will need to assess the following in evaluating a student's editorial:

- How thoroughly does the student understand the events and context of the President's administration?
- How much of the available evidence did the student use in making his or her argument? (A student arguing that Nixon should not be re-elected should probably mention Watergate, for example!)

- How well did the student make his or her argument? How persuasive was the argument? Did the student recognize and attempt to refute opposing arguments?
- How effectively did the student put him or herself in the proper historical time? How well did he or she write for an audience of that time?

Some Presidents will be harder to argue for/against than others. A student who gets Franklin Roosevelt or Richard Nixon will have a lot to work with; Millard Fillmore and Chester Arthur don't provide as much. (Hint: Arthur is best known for cleaning out the White House attic.) A student writing about a do-nothing president will deserve some slack in the grading process; you may want to steer such a student away from the president himself toward the economy, events, and culture of the time. Conversely, a student with a better-known president could be expected to dig a little deeper and produce a somewhat stronger argument. You may want to consider this in assigning topics, giving your most able students the lesser-known presidents as a way of challenging them.

## Persuasive writing

More explicitly than most research reports, this assignment asks students to make a coherent, persuasive argument. You may want to use the Web-based resources in the sidebar to discuss with students how to craft a persuasive argument, or refer students to them on their own.

- A study guide<sup>1</sup> from the University of St. Thomas
- Writing a logical argument<sup>2</sup>, from the On-Line Writing Lab, Utah Valley State College
- “How to Write a Persuasive Essay<sup>3</sup>,” a study guide for fifth-grade students
- An in-depth discussion of persuasive argument<sup>4</sup> from the University of British Columbia Writing Centre

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### Notes

1. See <http://www.studygs.net/wrtstr4.htm>.
2. See [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_argpers.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_argpers.html).
3. See [http://www.geocities.com/fifth\\_grade\\_tpes/persuasive.html](http://www.geocities.com/fifth_grade_tpes/persuasive.html).
4. See <http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/argument.htm>.

# Presidents pathfinder

BY MELISSA THIBAUT

## Presidents and the Presidency

The American Presidency (see <http://gi.grolier.com/presidents/preshome.html>)

Grolier's family of encyclopedias provides three levels of biographical material on presidents for elementary, upper elementary and secondary audiences. Presidential Gallery offers some audio and video clips; Presidential Links provide other websites to explore.

POTUS: Presidents of the United States (see <http://www.ipl.org/div/potus/>)

This Internet Public Library site provides background information, election results, cabinet members, notable events, and some points of interest on each of the presidents.

Mr. President: Profiles of Our Nation's Leaders (see

[http://smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson\\_plans/idealabs/mr\\_president.html](http://smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson_plans/idealabs/mr_president.html))

Glimpses of the presidents and a few fast facts illustrated with paintings from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. A Smithsonian website.

A Presidential Exploration (see <http://library.thinkquest.org/11492/index2.html>)

Visit the "Oval Office" for fast facts, the administration, a chronology, domestic policy, foreign policy and events relevant to each president.

Presidents' Hall (see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/>)

Biographies illustrated with painted portraits, linked to similar biographies of first ladies. From the official White House website.

## Influential Americans: biographical websites

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress (see

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>)

Locate information about the political players during your president's term in office.

Biography of America (see <http://www.learner.org/biographyofamerica/index.html>)

Who were the key players in American history? This chronology links events and people important to the development of the United States from explorers and native people to the present.

## Historical food and menus

Culinary History Timeline (see <http://www.foodtimeline.org/food1.html>)

Social history, manners and menus.

The Food Timeline (see <http://www.foodtimeline.org/>)

Food from the Vikings to today.

New York Public Library Menu collection (see <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/grd/resguides/menus/>)

Trying to plan a menu for your president? Check out some menus of the period for ideas!

## Economic and employment history

Jump Back in Time (see <http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb>)

Stories about America's past from the Library of Congress.

## 2 The Animal Report



Feel like you're seeing the same tired animal report again and again? These research-based alternatives ask students to look at folktalkes, animal adaptations, and biodiversity.



# Alternatives to the animal report

BY MELISSA THIBAULT

Year after year, students are assigned an animal report, a factual report on a species of their choice. My son chose the Harpy Eagle for his third-grade animal report — and proceeded to re-submit that report with only slight modifications for years thereafter! (One of these days, someone who taught my son will be in a conference presentation — or reading this article — and I can hear them now. “Oh, that explains everything!”)

Should I have intervened and insisted that my son do yet another research paper outlining the habitat, diet, and life cycle of a different, randomly chosen animal? Perhaps, but I didn't. I chose to focus on the curriculum my son had to learn rather than the random assignment. Would re-doing the same factual research process accomplish the goals of the science curriculum? No. The science objectives in the upper grades were more complex and involved ecological systems; a report on a single animal wasn't going to teach them.

Some of the concepts intertwined with the study of animals are life cycles, adaptations, interdependence, habitats, and food webs. Of these topics, only life cycles and adaptations are specific to one animal. Broader topics related to an entire ecosystem cannot be addressed in a report focused upon one animal. So the animal report should be assigned to help students understand the life cycles of various animals and/or how an animal's successful adaptation to an environment is necessary for survival.

The articles in this series will get you thinking creatively about student research and teaching these topics.



# Animal folktales: Legends, superheroes, and pourquoi tales

By writing a narrative about an animal rather than a traditional report, students can learn about literature, develop writing skills, and still fulfill science and research objectives.

BY MELISSA THIBAULT

By researching animals, students learn about the adaptations and characteristics specific to their animals as well as the role their animals play in their natural environments. Creating a narrative allows students to present the information they learn through their research while learning valuable writing skills, studying traditional forms of literature — and even having fun!

## Why?

Physical or behavioral adaptations as well as interactions (or the lack thereof!) can be the centerpiece of a story that explains why. Pourquoi tales, such as Kipling’s famous Just So Stories<sup>1</sup>, explain how something came to be. Like a myth, the Pourquoi tale provides a supernatural explanation of the creation or alteration of a natural phenomenon or animal. For more information, see “Teaching with Pourquoi Tales<sup>2</sup>” from Instructor<sup>3</sup>.

## Talk with the animals

Personification of animals appeals to students of all ages. From crafty Anansi the Spider’s trickster tales to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *Watership Down*, animal protagonists exhibit complex character traits and human behaviors.

Students can share what they learn about their animals by storytelling, drawing comics, or writing a complete story. Based upon their research, what human character trait might best be represented by this animal? Write a story in which this animal is protagonist or antagonist, taking care to keep the environment accurate and the actions in character with the animal’s real-life environment.

Might this animal be portrayed as a superhero, accomplishing Herculean tasks and making its world a better place? Even if the role the animal plays is predator, this animal character can be portrayed as the hero, helping to maintain the balance of its ecosystem. Who would be the villain in this tale? The “bad guy” could be Man, upsetting the balance and contributing to habitat loss — or perhaps an invasive species determined to wheedle its way into the ecosystem and threaten the balance of nature.

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## On the Web

### Invasive Species Educational Resources

<http://www.invasivespecies.org/resources/index.html>

This website provides excellent resources for students, including links to a variety of media formats, databases and demographic information. This collection of essential reference materials, appropriate for secondary students, covers a variety of topics, including how invasive species enter an ecosystem, how invasive species can be detected and monitored, why we need to be concerned about invasive species, and how communities, researchers, and governments are responding to invasive species.

### Invasive Species

<http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/>

from the National Agricultural Library provides links to more programs and resources related to federal and state efforts concerning invasive species.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.boop.org/jan/justso/>.
2. See <http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/pourquoitales.htm>.
3. See <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/instructor.htm>.

# Believe it or not! Reporting on amazing animals

A visual and oral presentation of an "animal report" can engage students' interest and develop their artistic and visual literacy skills.

BY MELISSA THIBAUT

Strange, unusual, interesting — animals have amazing capabilities. Did you know that beavers' front teeth grow throughout their lives? Or that loons, unlike most other birds, have solid bones? What do their strange characteristics tell us about these animals and how they have adapted to their habitats?

Animal adaptations, structural and behavioral characteristics that have made animals successful in their environment, are studied from grade 4 through high school. As students research, they will need to identify the adaptations animals have made and compare these adaptations to those of other animals, particularly animals of the same species living in different ecosystems. In addition, the students need to understand the role their animals play in the ecosystem and the interdependence of all organisms in a habitat. In most assignments, students are asked to list these adaptations or perhaps to compare and contrast the adaptations of a few animals. The resulting report is simply a compilation of facts, not a particularly engaging or thoughtful exercise.

Researching an animal will easily provide answers to the usual questions about diet, habitat and physical characteristics, but what makes each animal unique? What structural or behavioral characteristics are peculiar and amazing?

Students and adults alike are intrigued by the strange and unusual, as shown by the popularity of Ripley's Believe It or Not! and "Snapple Facts." Focusing on the unique characteristics and behaviors of animals and analyzing these in light of the animal's successful adaptation to their environment will result in an innovative animal report that captures students' interest.

Students can collect information for their animal using standard reference materials: books, Internet resources, and encyclopedias. (Be sure to start by searching LEARN NC's media center from our grade-level areas for students!) In addition to the usual questions about the animal in its environment, students should be on the lookout for the most outstanding, even bizarre, characteristics or behaviors.

Using the information gathered, students will create a visual representation of the animal emphasizing its unique qualities and the significance of these qualities to the animal's success in its ecosystem. This visual will persuade the audience that the animal is

uniquely adapted to life in their ecosystem. The final product is a brief oral presentation in the format of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, profiling the bizarre in a dramatic fashion.

## Ideas for effective visuals

### **CARICATURE**

Students may use elements of caricature to emphasize physical adaptations. Though caricature is used primarily to exaggerate different facial features, the same concepts can be applied to unique physical features of an animal. More information about this art form can be found at Learn to Draw.com's caricature site<sup>1</sup>.

### **FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURE**

As in the caricature, unique physical features may be accentuated in 3D using found objects. Whether you choose bits of packaging or acorns and pinecones, the sculpture will be a bit abstract but must emphasize the relevant adaptations. There are some examples for younger students in the animated story "Lizzy Visits the Sculpture Garden<sup>2</sup>" from the National Gallery of Art.

### **FLIP BOOKS AND MULTIMEDIA ANIMATION**

If the animal's unique characteristic is a behavior, you may need to see this animal in action. A series of drawings that are designed to be animated will do the trick! A hand-drawn flipbook, a series of cartoon drawings, a computer graphic animation or a multimedia presentation can be used to show the animal in action.

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## On the Web

### **Animal Adaptations**

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/dirtrep/animal/index.htm>

Join Dirtmeister's team of investigators researching animal adaptations. This site provides a simple yet effective procedure for focusing on the importance of adaptation to species survival. Short and sweet, grade 4-8. From Scholastic.

### **Animal Adaptations**

[http://www.uen.org/utahlink/activities/view\\_activity.cgi?activity\\_id=4750](http://www.uen.org/utahlink/activities/view_activity.cgi?activity_id=4750)

Questions to answer about specific species and their adaptations designed as a treasure hunt. Grades 4-8. From UtahLINK.

## Notes

1. See <http://www.learn-to-draw.com/caricature/>.
2. See <http://www.nga.gov/kids/lizzy/>.

# 3

## The Famous Person Report



Picking the most famous faces out of the crowd may not be the best way to study history. Alternative research assignments challenge students to think critically about historical actors — including which actors are worthy of reports.



# Alternatives to the famous person report

Rethinking reports: breathing new life into tired assignments

BY DAVID J. WALBERT AND MELISSA THIBAUT

What's a "Famous Person Report"? Well, the most common incarnation of the Famous Person Report is the Famous African American Report, assigned in February. Next is probably the Famous Woman Report, assigned in March; others are the Inventor Report, the Famous Person from a Particular Foreign Country Report, and the President Report, which we've already covered.

These reports tend to be a mishmash of character education and appreciation for the history and culture of a particular group of people. The Famous African American Report, in particular, is often assigned in the hope of prodding students to appreciate the "contributions" of African Americans to American history and culture. We have argued elsewhere (see "Beyond Black History Month"<sup>1</sup>) that a biographical report once a year is not sufficient to understand and appreciate the part played by millions of Americans in four centuries of our history, and that history of African Americans (and of all other groups of Americans) should be integrated into the curriculum, whether or not it is highlighted once a year as well. If "appreciation" of African Americans is the goal, students might be better served by a different type of research project.

Worse, too many biographical reports wind up as timelines of individual lives, with little thought about the subject's character, the circumstances that produced it, or the real impact he or she had. Part of this might be the emphasis on famous people: if someone is truly and deservedly famous, it's easy to turn a report into hero-worship, and if a student gets stuck with someone she's never heard of, her temptation will be to focus on why the subject should be famous.

Fame, though, shouldn't be the point. So when you assign a biographical report, start by considering what you really want your students to get out of it.

## Why biography?

We believe there are two good reasons to assign a biographical report. The first is to have students learn about **character**. What in the subject's life made him or her a great or a good person? What does it mean to be a great or a good person? How did he or she come to be

famous; what did fame mean then, and was the subject's fame justified? What adversities did the subject overcome to accomplish what he or she did? And, most importantly, what can we learn from this person's experience that helps us to live better lives today?

The second reason to assign a biographical report is to have students learn more about the **culture and/or historical circumstances** that produced the individual in question. This second reason takes a very different perspective from the first — the exact opposite, in fact. The first type of biographical report is all about the individual and how he or she rose above his or her background; the second is all, or nearly all, about the background.

A really good and interesting assignment (and a really good and interested student) could combine the two perspectives, but it's important for you, as the teacher assigning the report, to know what you want your students to learn — character or history and culture — before you write your assignment.

## Alternatives to the famous person report

If you want students to understand an individual's relationship to history and culture, you need to put that individual in context. If character education is your goal, be sure that the connection between the subject of the biography and the student's own life is clear in the assignment. Don't assume that students will make the connection on their own — or let them choose a person currently enjoying his or her "fifteen minutes of fame" whom the student may already admire but whose character is not, in an objective sense, particularly admirable.

Our alternative assignments are designed to examine both character and context. "The Not-So-Famous Person Report (page 29)" offers two ways of learning about history by studying the lives of people who aren't famous at all, through oral history and through documentary research in primary sources on the Web. For younger students, a "Living History Day (page 43)" is a way to dramatize a famous person's role in history.

Finally, you might decide simply to have students read and review a biography or autobiography of a famous person. There are excellent biographies out there, but not all are written for K–12 students. (Sadly, not all are really written to be read.) "Reading Biographies and Autobiographies (page 39)" gives you suggestions for selecting books and for guiding students through their reading.

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### Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/articles/history0404-1>.

# The not-so-famous person report

Instead of teaching the history of the famous, use research in primary sources to teach students that the past and present were made by people like them.

BY DAVID J. WALBERT

You don't have to be a famous person just to make a mark. — *Gwen Stefani*

Yes, I'm quoting a popular singer to lead off an article about why kids don't need to be writing reports about popular singers. Take a moment, if you will, to enjoy that irony with me, and then let's recognize that she has a point: *history is made by everybody*, not just a handful of formally certified Important People.

Which is more important, for example, in understanding World War II and its impact on American history and culture: the experience of Dwight Eisenhower or that of a random G.I. on the beach at Normandy? It depends on what you're interested in: as an individual, Eisenhower had the greater impact, but the G.I.'s experience was more nearly representative of the experience of war for millions of Americans — who, as a group, had a greater impact on American history and culture than the general and future President. You can't watch *Saving Private Ryan* and not recognize that there's a lot to be learned about both history and character from the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people.

While it can be inspiring to read about great men and women, many people are turned off by the history of the famous, especially when those famous people don't seem to be anything like them. It can be just as inspiring to students to see the greatness that is possible in the lives of people they've never heard of — and, by extension, to realize that they, too, can do great things, even though they're not famous, either.

There are many possibilities for research assignments on not-so-famous people. In this article, I'll provide broad outlines for two that can be widely adapted. The first is a community study with oral history; the second uses documentary sources available on the Web. To help you find and use primary sources on not-so-famous persons, I've included links to collections on the Web and "historian's notes" on using them, as well as a list of questions to guide students' research.

## A community study with oral history

Oral history projects, on a small or large scale, can bring history to life in the K-12 classroom in ways that no other assignment can. In this approach to the biographical report, students interview people in their community who lived through the times they are studying. Focusing on their own community gives added relevance to history, and helps them put the lives of individuals in context.

For example, suppose you are studying the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of having students write another report on Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks, ask them to investigate the impact of the Movement on their own community. A possible focus would be the integration of a local high school: have students interview individuals who were students and teachers, both white and black, during integration. After doing their interviews, students can share what they've learned and perhaps do collaborative projects to help them put the experiences of individual interviewees in the context of the community and of the broader events of the time.

Both your approach and the students' product will vary depending on grade level. In elementary grades, you can ask members of the community to come to your classroom, discuss their experiences, and answer student questions; at higher grades, students can go out on their own to do recorded interviews.

For a product, fourth-grade students might write a narrative about what it would have been like to live at a particular time in the past, which could prompt them to think about character issues (not to mention giving them practice for the state writing assessment). Students from fifth grade through high school could turn their interviews into a script for a short play, which they could perform for classmates or for other classes. To save time, trouble, and money, consider a radio play (see resources listed below).

If you're teaching eighth grade or high school and are technologically savvy, consider a documentary video or a website. To see what's possible, see the list of student projects on the Web<sup>2</sup> in Kathryn Walbert's article "Oral History Links and Resources."

### RESOURCES FOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

If you're considering doing an oral history project with your students, start by reading "Oral History in the Classroom<sup>3</sup>," a series of articles by Kathryn Walbert on LEARN NC. In this series, you'll learn more about what oral history is, why it is a valuable and vital tool for professional research and student learning alike, and how you can do creative, exciting oral history projects that fit all levels of the K-12 curriculum. Part 3, "Incorporating Oral History into the K-12 Classroom<sup>4</sup>," gives specific strategies for primary, elementary, middle, and secondary grades. Additional resources are linked from the last article in the series.

The Organization of American Historians (OAH) Magazine of History's Spring 1997 issue<sup>5</sup> was devoted to oral history in the K-12 classroom. All articles are available on the Web in PDF format. See in particular "Fish Bowls and Bloopers: Oral History in the Classroom<sup>6</sup>" by Paula J. Paul, which provides excellent strategies for helping students practice various aspects of the interview process. Other articles offer strategies for using oral history to study particular time periods and events in U.S. history.

If you're considering an in-classroom oral history project for elementary students, read this article on Interviewing Artists in the Classroom<sup>7</sup>.

## RESOURCES ON CLASSROOM RADIO PLAYS

If you'd like to turn an oral history project into a radio play, here are some resources to help you.

Using Radio Drama: Turning Passive Students into Active Learners (see <http://www.balancepublishing.com/article1.htm>)

An introduction to why a radio drama makes a great learning tool.

A Radio Drama Project (see <http://www.balancepublishing.com/Radiodramaproject.htm>)

Brief lesson plan with an example of a script.

Independent Radio Drama Productions (see <http://www.irdp.co.uk/>)

All about radio drama: how to write it, its history, and its value and impact.

The Mercury Theatre on the Air (see <http://www.mercurytheatre.info/>)

Information on the acclaimed radio series of the 1930s, with audio files.

Stories1st.org (see <http://www.stories1st.org/>)

Examples of present-day radio documentary.

## The atom and the hurricane: a not-so-famous person in context

In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo titles one of his chapters “The Atom Fraternizes with the Hurricane<sup>1</sup>.” The title evokes perfectly the chaos of the events Hugo describes — a failed student revolution in the streets of Paris — and the seemingly random ways in which individual human beings and grand historical events can influence each other.

That tension between the individual and his or her historical context, the atom and the hurricane, is at the heart of a good biography, even (or maybe especially) when the subject was not-so-famous. The strategies for research and discussion I'll outline here, combined with the guiding questions for student research (see below), will help students examine the lives behind primary sources and the relationships between individuals and the times in which they live.

Although this unit could be adapted to various eras of U.S. history, depending on what primary sources are available (see #1, below), it might work particularly well as a unit on the Great Depression. The WPA Life Histories (see below) would be a good collection of source materials for such a unit.

This unit combines individual research and writing with group projects and small and large group discussion. Assessment is based on both written and oral presentation and on both individual and group work. The unit should be undertaken *after* you complete general reading and discussion of the major events and issues of the time period.

## SELECTING PRIMARY SOURCES

Later in this article, I've provided information about three good Web-based collections of primary sources on the history of the American South. All of these sources are about more or less "ordinary" people, and all are available on the Web, so they will be available to your students. There are plenty of other primary sources on the Web, but I've focused on southern resources out of a belief that students will more effectively learn history if they relate it to their own community and personal experience.

Select the collection that best suits the topic you're teaching and your students' grade level. My notes on the collections should provide some guidance, but you'll also want to browse some of the materials yourself.

## STUDENT RESEARCH

Divide the students into groups of two or three. Assign each group a single interview, life history, or manuscript.

Give students the guiding questions (see below) for research or a similar set of questions you've designed or adapted. The questions should remind them of the sort of information they're looking for in the sources and prompt them to think about the subject's character and background as well as potential sources of bias and misunderstanding.

Each student will read the source material on his or her own and respond in writing to the guiding questions. (This can be done during class time in a computer lab; students can read the sources on their own time on the Web; or if the sources are fairly short, you can print them out for students to read at home.)

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Once the students have completed their research, have them convene in their small groups and discuss what they learned. Each student will (one hopes!) have answered the questions differently, and they should discuss why they answered as they did.

Remind the students that this is a *dialogue*: the goal of the small-group discussion is for the students to learn from one another, not for someone to "win." If they can come to a consensus, that's fine; if not, that's fine too. Students can "agree to disagree" and explain both sides of the argument in their report (see below).

## ORAL REPORT

Each group should then prepare an oral report about the person they studied. The "Big Question" for this report will be whether the "atom" (the individual subject) or the "hurricane" (the historical events of the time) was more important in the subject's life, and why. If students can't agree on this within their group, guide them toward a more complex argument that takes both sides into account. Disagreement, if managed well, will actually produce a *better* report!

If the necessary materials are available, the report can include a PowerPoint presentation with images. You can also ask for a written version of the report, although I've

suggested a separate written assignment below. Regardless of the format, all students should participate in the presentation.

Students should be assessed on the following:

- understanding of the major events and issues of the time period (20%)
- information gathered from the primary source material (20%)
- connections made between the individual's life and broader events and issues (20%)
- representation of each student's viewpoint (20%)
- quality and coherence of presentation (20%)

During the presentations, remind students to pay close attention and take notes if necessary, because they will be asked to use what they learn from their classmates later on!

### **LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION**

You'll probably need to set aside 1-2 days for the oral reports, depending on how long you choose to make them and whether you're on a block schedule. The day after the students make their presentations, discuss as a class the "big picture" issues raised in the oral reports. Here are some questions to ask:

- Which was more important in this time period, the influences of individuals or "big" influences like the economy, government, and society?
- Why do you think this was true at that time? Do you think it is true generally in history? Why or why not?
- How fair is it to generalize about a time period from the experiences of a few people? Are there issues that we may have missed in looking at these sources?

### **WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT**

Have each student write a short (two to three page) essay answering the first question above: Which was more important in this time period, the influences of individuals or "big" influences like the economy, government, and society, and why? Students should refer to their own research, and also to what they learned from other students' oral reports.

Students should be assessed on the following:

- Coherent thesis statement and argument (20%)
- Understanding of the events and issues of the time period (20%)
- Substantiates argument with evidence from his/her own primary source research (20%)
- Substantiates argument with evidence from material from fellow students' reports (20%)
- Clear and coherent writing (20%)

## On the Web: primary sources on not-so-famous persons

### **FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH<sup>8</sup>**

Provided by Documenting the American South<sup>9</sup> at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, this collection “documents the American South from the viewpoint of Southerners. It focuses on the diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, travel accounts, and ex-slave narratives of relatively inaccessible populations: women, African Americans, enlisted men, laborers, and Native Americans.” The sources cover the years from first white settlement to 1920.

#### **Historian’s notes**

This collection is a wonderful source for student research, provided that you provide some guidance. Remember that the perspective of a single person on a big event can be misleading. You’ll need to discuss with students the role of perspective in autobiography (link to my guide). Also be aware that some of these writings contain words, phrases, or ideas that you or your students may find offensive — they were, after all, written a hundred or more years ago. If you’re uncomfortable discussing those issues openly in class, you may want to pick one or a few memoirs or autobiographies to assign so that you can read them yourself first.

### **BORN IN SLAVERY: SLAVE NARRATIVES FROM THE FEDERAL WRITERS’ PROJECT, 1936-1938<sup>10</sup>**

This collection from the American Memory Project<sup>11</sup> of the Library of Congress “contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves. These narratives were collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and assembled and microfilmed in 1941 as the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*.” The collection is organized by state and can be searched by keyword.

#### **Historian’s notes**

Although these interviews provide a fascinating first-person look at life in the antebellum South, because of the time and manner in which they were conducted, they often show some bias and can be misleading. In some cases, the interviewer was a relative of the interviewee’s former owner — and as you can imagine, the interviewee was not always especially candid! Ask your students to consider whether the interviewer was white or black and what his or her prejudices were (do they show in the questions? the transcript?). On the other side of the interview, consider to what extent the interviewee’s answers may have been shaped to fit the interviewer’s expectations.

## WPA LIFE HISTORIES<sup>12</sup>

Another collection of the American Memory Project<sup>13</sup>. “These life histories were written by the staff of the Folklore Project of the Federal Writers’ Project for the U.S. Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) from 1936-1940. The Library of Congress collection includes 2,900 documents representing the work of over 300 writers from 24 states. Typically 2,000-15,000 words in length, the documents consist of drafts and revisions, varying in form from narrative to dialogue to report to case history. The histories describe the informant’s family education, income, occupation, political views, religion and mores, medical needs, diet and miscellaneous observations. Pseudonyms are often substituted for individuals and places named in the narrative texts.”

The collection is organized by state, so it could be used in teaching 8th-grade North Carolina history as well as high school U.S. history courses.

### Historian’s notes

These interviews are quite valuable, but watch for bias. Most of the writers employed by the WPA to develop these “life histories” seem to have been interested primarily in folklore, social conditions, and “local color.” As a result, and because of the context of the Great Depression, many of the interviewees come off as (if the interviewer was inclined to see suffering as noble) helpless victims of circumstance or (if not) ignorant but amusing rubes. You’ll see this especially in interviews with rural southerners. Guiding questions and class discussion will help students see potential sources of bias and misunderstanding and give them an opportunity to see what they learn in context.

## MORE PRIMARY SOURCES ON THE WEB

See our series of articles on Teaching with Primary Sources<sup>14</sup> for additional suggestions on where to find primary sources on the Web and how to use them.

## Guiding questions for primary source research on not-so-famous persons

These guiding questions for student research in primary sources are designed to help them examine both the subject’s character and his or her historical context. Students should refer to these questions (or questions like them) when they read an interview with, diary of, or memoir by a not-so-famous person.

You can use them in different ways depending on the nature of your research project. If you’re discussing the primary sources in class, ask the students these questions directly and discuss the answers as a group. If the students are reading the sources on their own, have them respond in writing, to provide the basis of the next day’s class discussion or of a written or oral report.

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Where did this person live?

- What was his/her occupation?
- How does this person live? Was this typical of the time and place in which he/she lived? How or how not?
- What was his/her religion? How important was religion in this person's life?
- What is this person's family background? Was this typical of the time and place in which he/she lived? How or how not?
- What social and economic factors shaped this person's life?
- To what extent were those social and economic factors unique to this person's experience, and to what extent were they shared by others?
- What were his/her political beliefs? (If they are not stated explicitly, can you infer what they might have been?) Why, based on his/her background and life experience, might he/she have held those beliefs?
- Given his or her background, social/economic conditions, etc., how do you think this person might have "turned out" differently (or acted differently in the major event you're researching)?
- What impact did this person have on the events of his or her time?

#### **IF THE PRIMARY SOURCE IS AN INTERVIEW**

- Are there questions you would have asked the subject that the interviewer didn't ask?
- Why do you think the interviewer asked the questions he/she did? What was the interviewer primarily interested in?
- Do you think the interviewer was biased in any way? What makes you think so?
- Do you think the interviewee was honest in his or her answers? What makes you think so?

#### **IF THE PRIMARY SOURCE WAS A MEMOIR OR AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

- What was the author's reason for writing this memoir?
- Are there topics he/she left out that you wanted to know more about?
- Are there topics or issues on which you think the author might not have been entirely honest? Why or why not?

#### **IF THE PRIMARY SOURCE WAS A DIARY**

- Was this intended as a private diary, or did the author expect it to be read? If you think it was intended to be read, what makes you think so?
- Are there topics or issues the author left out that you wanted to know more about? Why do you think he/she didn't address them?

#### **MODIFICATIONS**

You may need to supplement, edit, or alter these questions to suit the specific needs of your students. They are written for a high school audience, but could be simplified a bit for eighth-grade students. And, obviously, the topic and time period your students are researching will determine the questions they ask of their sources. Some of these questions

may not apply to particular research projects, and you'll need to supplement them with questions specific to your project.

In addition, certain sources may not provide answers to all of these questions; if you're using life history interviews, for example, the interviewer may not have asked the questions to which you want the answers. In that case, you could tell your students to skip the question, or you could have them speculate on an answer, with an explanation of why they answered as they did.

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## Notes

1. See <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Hug4Mis.html>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/oh-links0406-1>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/oralhistory2002/>.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/oralhistory2002/3>.
5. See <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/oralhistory/index.html>.
6. See <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/oralhistory/paul.pdf>.
7. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/cmc-interview-1>.
8. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/index.html>.
9. See <http://docsouth.unc.edu>.
10. See <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.
11. See <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>.
12. See <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>.
13. See <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>.
14. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/primarysources>.



# Reading biographies and autobiographies

How good is that biography your students are reading? Here's how to make sure they get the most out of their reading and research.

BY MELISSA THIBAULT

An important goal of biographical reports is to have students read and appreciate biographical literature, but assigning a report may not meet that goal. Biographies are not equally readable, and most trade series biographies are designed for student research, not to be enjoyed cover-to-cover. If we want students to learn enough about the life and character of a famous person to identify influences and connect causes and effects, providing a good biographical read is essential.

Look for unique perspectives in the biographies you select. Does the biography offer more of the same old information? Worse, does it perpetuate myth? For example, most biographies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt gloss over his paralysis, a condition so unique among world leaders and so essential to who he was and how he acted that it cannot be ignored. A biography that addresses this taboo subject head-on offers a more compelling read. As Will Manley writes in his review of Hugh Gallagher's *FDR's Splendid Deception* (Dodd, Mead, 1985), "Roosevelt's disease shaped his character and prepared him for the extraordinary challenges he would be faced with as president, and despite the strength of his character, it was absolutely necessary to live a life of deception by hiding the fact that he was unable to stand and walk." Looking at FDR's life through this lens provides an opportunity to analyze his actions and words with a new perspective.

Students are also drawn to memoirs; it seems the more adverse the circumstances of the subject's life, the better. Experienced media specialists will tell you that students are drawn to the lives of people who have managed to overcome poverty, disability, or otherwise difficult childhoods to become successful adults. These survival stories can be powerful to students as they approach an age where responsibility increases and their actions have lasting repercussions. Memoirs also have a personal element, an intimacy lacking in most biography. Just the fact that these stories are told at all is remarkable; after all, the authors share both decisions that they were proud of and those that they may have made differently if they had been given a chance to go back! As Jane Kurtz says, "Talking about such painful subjects is hard, but it's easy compared to the task of writing the pain in a way that will encourage others to inhabit, if just for a few minutes, someone else's world." Candid portrayal of the experiences and actions of people faced with situations that

required hard choices will ring true with older students. They may even consider writing, perhaps in a private journal, as they experience the power of sharing a life story.

## Book recommendations for biography and autobiography

Periodicals listed are available in the Professional Collection of NC Wise Owl<sup>1</sup>'s online periodicals services. See your media specialist for more information about NC Wise Owl and for more biography review resources.

### FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

"Biography (see <http://www.bookhive.org/books/category.asp?category=bi>)." BookHive website, accessed 1/20/03.

Stuart Hannabuss and Rita Marcella, *Biography and Children: A Study of Biography for Children and Childhood in Biography*. London: Library Association, 1993.

Catherine Barr, ed., *From Biography to History; Best Books for Children's Entertainment and Education*. New York: R. R. Bowker, 1998.

Carol Hurst, "Biographies and Memoirs (see <http://www.carolhurst.com/booklists/biographies.html>)." *Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site* website, accessed 1/30/03.

National Council for the Social Studies, "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People (see <http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/>)." Available in PDF format (Adobe Acrobat required).

### FOR OLDER STUDENTS

Sally Estes, "Biography and Autobiography for Teens." *Booklist*, 93:8 (Dec 15, 1996), p. 716(2).

EvaluTech Review Database (see <http://www.evalutech.sreb.org/search/index.asp>). Website, accessed 1/20/03. Narrow search by format (print) and subject (biography) and Level (6-12).

Jennifer Hubert, "Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Unusual Biographies for Teens (see <http://members.tln.lib.mi.us/~amutch/jen/minds.htm>)." *Reading Rants* website, accessed 1/30/03.

## References

Jane Kurtz, "Memoirs and the Teenage Reader." *Booklist*, 96:2 (Sept 15, 1999), p. 250.

Will Manley, "The Deception Continues (the art of a good biography)" *Booklist*, 93:22 (August 1997), p. 1852(1).

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## Notes

1. See <http://www.ncwiseowl.org/>.



# Bring history to life with a Living History Day!

A Living History Day turns students into teachers and challenges them to think historically.

BY MELISSA THIBAUT

The National Standards for History require students to build skills, not just cover time periods. The ability to assess the importance of an individual in history, to construct a historical narrative, and to formulate historical questions are independent of time period or geographic region. These skills must be cultivated from the student's first exposure to history. Biographical study is one logical approach to building these skills, providing a manageable topic to focus on — an individual — and encouraging students to consider the context of place and circumstance in which the individual lived. The key is to move from reporting the facts, an activity that can be done without demonstrating any understanding, to historical inquiry, an activity that engages the student and brings the subject to life.

A Living History Day event might be just what you need. Depending upon your circumstances, it can take many different forms. Will the individuals studied be ancient or current? Local people or from anywhere in the country or world? Learning objectives of your class grade level will determine the scope of individuals included. Will this be a class project or involve other grades? What about the greater community?

Depending upon the magnitude of school involvement this could be a culminating event for a unit of study or an annual school observance. The one common thread is the creative context of student projects; the biographical subject is not a flat collection of facts but a living human being interacting with the people and events relevant to their lives.

One idea for the creation and planning of a Living History Day is to share your event with a younger class. Groups or individual students study a chosen individual and then create an activity, experience, or skit that teaches about something relevant to the individual studied and is appropriate for the period of history in which he or she lived. By presenting to younger students, your students will not only bring to life the person they studied and the time period in which he or she lived, they'll also learn from the process of teaching.

For an interactive experience, your students could demonstrate a craft or trade or present learning games incorporating relevant information. Students may also present skits, images, and exhibits and then answer questions from their audience.

If more than one class is involved in presenting, you may need to book a bigger space such as the media center. The exhibits may be organized by era, in a trade show format, or

students may be given a schedule for their performances. The older students can determine their success by surveying the younger students to see what they learned. The creation of the survey or test would be excellent review for the older students.

## Bringing history to life serves a dual purpose

To research and prepare a Living History Day, students must synthesize the information they learned to create an exhibit representative of their subject; this can't happen unless they are actively engaged in the event.

In order to select pivotal events or recreate significant circumstances in an individual's life, students must not just locate facts about the person but critically evaluate the people, places, and events to develop a powerful exhibit. Deciding on a format, selecting key material for younger students to understand, and putting it all in context requires active learning and encourages creative interpretation. As they work write a script or design a hands-on activity, students will really need to understand the subject and the world in which he or she lived. In addition, a Living History Day introduces younger students to subjects relevant to their grade's curriculum goals but beyond their reading ability. For example, the Grade 2 social studies curriculum requires students to "identify historical figures and events associated with various cultural traditions and holidays celebrated around the world" (goal 3, objective 5), but biographies you may find in the media center may be too difficult for many students to read independently. Focusing a History Day on individuals or time periods relevant to the students in earlier grades creates an authentic audience for the event and reinforces for all participants the themes of character and civic responsibility that span the grades.

## What about a field trip?

Historical reenactments and working historical farms and museums are another way to bring history to life. As with a Living History Day, placing people in the context of historical circumstances and living conditions is a powerful teacher. Of course, students are just observing history when they attend these demonstrations; it is possible to view the events without engaging historical understanding. Still, as a part of a deliberate path toward encouraging student inquiry, a field trip might be a valuable activity. Find out what is available using LEARN North Carolina's Discover NC<sup>1</sup> resources. Locate cultural museums, state historical sites, and history events nearby and contact the curators for a list of upcoming events. Be sure to visit the related websites and consider the linked lesson plans as pre- and post-visit enhancements

## Ideas and examples on the Web

This Living History Museum<sup>2</sup> activity from Carol Hurst presents guidelines for creating an Old Salem-like environment in your classroom or school. This resource links to the rich

historical literature integration ideas and book suggestions for which Carol Hurst's Children's Literature site is famous.

Move over Halloween: here comes Historical Figure Day<sup>3</sup>! This article from Education World outlining an educational alternative to the usual array of ghosts and ballerinas of Halloween. While the research and activity suggestions are traditional, the idea of giving students the opportunity to be in character may fit well as a part of the event. A great activity choice for the drama club kids!

National History Day is an annual contest to encourage "discovery and interpretation" of historical topics. Designed for grades 6-12, students produce dramatic performances, exhibits, documentaries and research papers based on research related to an annual theme. These projects are then evaluated at local, state, and national competitions. Step by step directions for creating a project<sup>4</sup> are available on the National History Day website.

The Virtual Schoolhouse project-based learning site includes a Living History Day event<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the activities above, this high school event is schoolwide and also includes the greater community. Originally designed to honor fallen veterans, the traditional Veteran's Day assembly has grown to a more intentional community outreach that involves students in the stories of World War II participants.

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## Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/discover/>.
2. See <http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/history/livinghistory.html>.
3. See [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr284.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr284.shtml).
4. See <http://nationalhistoryday.org/Contest.htm>.
5. See [http://virtualschoolhouse.visionlink.org/lh\\_o.htm](http://virtualschoolhouse.visionlink.org/lh_o.htm).



# Contributors

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Melissa joined LEARN NC as Education Resource Coordinator in August 2000 and, shortly thereafter, assumed the role of Director of Media Services. In her current position as Associate Director, Melissa oversees all areas of the LEARN NC program, including publications, professional development, online learning, and instructional technology.

Before joining LEARN, Melissa was a Media Coordinator at W. G. Enloe Gifted and Talented International Baccalaureate High School in Raleigh, N.C. Her experience as a librarian has included university, public, literacy and school programs. Her master's degree in Library and Information Science is from the University of South Florida, Tampa, and her undergraduate degree in Economics is from Colby College, Waterville, Maine.

When not working at LEARN NC, you may find Melissa on the sidelines of her daughter's soccer games or creating scrapbooks of her extensive extended family's photos and memorabilia.

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## Figure 1 (page 3)

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## Figure 2 (page 17)

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## Figure 3 (page 25)

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#### **ABOUT LEARN NC**

LEARN NC is a K–12 outreach program of the University of North Carolina School of Education. Through our website we serve more than 20,000 teachers and students each day with lesson plans, best practices, online courses, classroom content, and multimedia learning experiences, all tied to state and national standards. Visit us today at [www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org).