

# Biography

## ~ Intro to Biography ~

### Unit 1 of 4

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 Welcome to College Guild's Biography Course! This is a four unit course that covers both writing about other people and writing about yourself.

Some things to know about this course:

1. Answer all the questions that are in bold print. When we receive a completed unit back, you'll be sent the next one, along with your original work and feedback from your reader. You don't need to return the questions—it saves us both postage.
2. Take the time to read the questions thoroughly and find the most creative way to word your answers. There is no specific deadline to complete any unit, but we would get concerned if we hadn't heard back from you in 2-3 months. You can ask for an extension if your own circumstances make that necessary. Remember how often the mail service loses things and if you don't hear back from us after a month, write to make sure your unit was received and the next unit sent out.
3. Let us know if you need a dictionary, free to CG students who complete the first unit.

### Types of Biography

A fascinating genre of literature is the biography, a document produced by a person who researches and writes about another person's life. Subjects can range from sports figures and soldiers to queens and presidents.

A biography tries to show people as they really are or were. A good one brings the person to life. It widens a sense of understanding of and beyond the subject. For example, it can give the reader knowledge of particular societies, customs, historical events, and more. It offers the reader new "friends," ideas, lifestyles, and understanding of relationships. After we read a full biography, we may feel like we know the subject better than we know our own loved ones.

There are many types of biography. A few are described below.

**SIMPLE** – a short piece of writing that offers an abbreviated story of the subject.

*Examples: obituary, book jacket about an author, Who's Who in America, encyclopedia entry.*

**POPULAR** – a book that describes the life of a modern celebrity.

*Examples: Justin Bieber: The Unauthorized Biography by Chas Newkey-Burden, Michael Jackson: The Magic, The Madness, The Whole Story by J. Randy Taraborrelli*

**FICTIONALIZED** – a piece that tells the basic story of a subject in novel form. These biographies may include made up dialogue and details but are based on fact.

*Examples: Loving Frank by Nancy Horan (the story of the love life of the great architect, Frank Lloyd Wright). I, Elizabeth by Rosalind Miles (the story about Queen Elizabeth I told from her point of view)*

**AUDIO-VISUAL** -- television specials, films, musicals or plays that tell stories from a subject's life.

Examples: *Lust for Life* (a movie dramatizing the artistic and personal struggles of the artist Vincent Van Gogh), *Hidden Figures* (a movie about three black women who worked for NASA during The Space Race)

**DEFINITIVE** -- a fully detailed picture from childhood to death, usually including information about a subject's ancestry, education, jobs, relationships and health.

Examples: *The Life of Langston Hughes* by Arnold Rampersad (the full story of a black American poet), *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow (a story of an American Founding Father that inspired a Broadway musical)



1. Which of the types of biography listed above would be the most interesting to you and why?
2. Choose two of the types of biography listed above and compare them. What are the pros and cons of each type?
3. If you could study and write a biography on any person, living or dead, who would you choose and why?
4. What would you title the biography that you described in the previous question? What type of biography would it be?

### Notable Biographers

**Carl Sandburg** is known for his monumental biography of President Abraham Lincoln. Sandburg assembled his materials from people, other books, and places. He read Lincoln's speeches and writings (over one million words in all), and biographies by men who had known Lincoln. He also visited every library that had Lincoln material, every photographer's studio, and every home where Lincoln had lived. The result of all this research was originally contained in six volumes entitled, *The Prairie Years*. Later, Sandburg compressed the volumes into 430,000 words and in 1954 published, *Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. The Foreword to this work consists of twenty-one pages of acknowledgements and sources.

5. What do you think it would feel like to know so much about a person who you'd never met and would never meet?

**James Boswell** wrote a biography called *The Life of Samuel Johnson* about the English critic, essayist and man of letters. To write the best biography possible, Boswell lived with Johnson, traveled with him, and visited him. He observed what he ate, what he spoke about, how he treated friends, and so on. After the biography was published it was said that "everyone needs a Boswell."

6. Write an imagined dialogue between Boswell and Johnson.
7. Would you approve of or dislike a person observing you so closely? Explain.

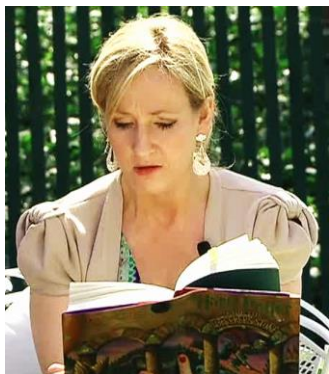
**Marchette Chute** was a 20<sup>th</sup> century American biographer. She wrote about English literary figures including the playwright William Shakespeare. She said of her craft, "A biography is not a court record or a legal document. The biographer is a human being writing about another human being, and his own temperament, his own point of view, and his own frame of reference are unconsciously imposed upon the person he is writing about."

8. Put this quote by Chute into your own words. Explain whether or not you agree with her.

### Biography Examples

J.K. Rowling is the author of the famous Harry Potter fantasy book series. Below is a simple biography that appears on the jacket for the final book in the series, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

*J.K. (Joanne Kathleen) Rowling has written fiction since she was a child, and always wanted to be an author. Her parents loved reading, and their house in Chepstow was full of books. In fact, J.K. Rowling wrote her first ‘book’ at the age of six—a story about a rabbit called Rabbit!*



*The idea for Harry Potter occurred to J.K. Rowling on the train from Manchester to London, where she says Harry Potter ‘just strolled into my head fully formed’, and by the time she had arrived at King’s Cross, many of the characters had taken shape. During the next five years she outlined the plots for each book and began writing the first in the series, Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, which was first published by Bloomsbury in 1997. The other Harry Potter titles: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix and Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, followed. J.K. Rowling has also written two other companion books, Quidditch Through the Ages and Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, in aid of Comic Relief.*

**9. Tell us about a time when a good idea (big or small) just strolled into your head. Did you act on it? What was the outcome?**

**10. What questions do you have about J.K. Rowling after reading this biography?**

Hamilton is the musical biography of Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States. In 2016, the show broke a record by getting nominated for more Tony Awards (the highest awards for plays and musicals) than any show in history. Lin-Manuel Miranda is the writer, composer and star of Hamilton, and he says that the show is “a story about America then, told by America now”. With rap, hip-hop and R&B-inspired music and a racially diverse cast, the show gives audiences the message that history belongs to everyone. Below is an excerpt from the show’s opening rap:

*How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore  
And a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the  
Caribbean by providence impoverished,  
In squalor, grow up to be a hero and a scholar?  
The ten-dollar founding father without a father  
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder  
By being a lot smarter  
By being a self-starter  
By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter  
And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted away  
Across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up  
Inside, he was longing for something to be a part of  
The brother was ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter  
Then a hurricane came, and devastation reigned  
Our man saw his future drip, dripping down the drain  
Put a pencil to his temple, connected it to his brain  
And he wrote his first refrain, a testament to his pain  
Well, the word got around, they said, this kid is insane, man  
Took up a collection just to send him to the mainland  
Get your education, don’t forget from whence you came*



And the world is gonna know your name

- 11. If you could create a musical about any historical figure, who would you choose and why?
- 12. Write a section of a song or rap that could appear in the musical you just described.

Wikipedia is an internet encyclopedia that contains biographies of all kinds of famous people. Below is the opening to the Wikipedia piece on Yo Yo Ma:

*Yo-Yo Ma (born October 7, 1955) is a French-born American cellist. Born in Paris, he spent his schooling years in New York City and was a child prodigy, performing from the age of four and a half. He graduated from the Juilliard School and Harvard University and has enjoyed a prolific career as both a soloist performing with orchestras around the world and a recording artist. He has recorded more than 90 albums and received 18 Grammy Awards.*



*In addition to recordings of the standard classical repertoire, he has recorded a wide variety of folk music such as American bluegrass music, traditional Chinese melodies, the tangos of Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla, and Brazilian music. He has also collaborated with Grammy Award-winning jazz singer Bobby McFerrin, as well as five-time Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter and guitarist James Taylor. Ma's primary performance instrument is a Montagnana cello crafted in 1733 valued at US\$2.5 million.*

*He has been a United Nations Messenger of Peace since 2006.*

*He was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2001, Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011, and the Polar Music Prize in 2012.*

- 13. If you were interviewing Yo-Yo Ma to write a biography, what are 3 questions you would ask him? Try to think of questions he may have never answered for the public.
- 14. What are 3 reasons why someone would want to read a biography?
- 15. Choose one person you know a lot about—it could be a friend, family member or celebrity. Write a biography for that person, about two pages in length.

*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*

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Sources:  
<https://www.wikipedia.org>  
<https://www.theatlantic.com>