



# Biographies

## Unit Summary

After listening to and reading several biographies, both in books and magazines, elementary students brainstorm about what makes a biography interesting and what makes a person important to answer the Essential Question, *How are we all unique?* They then interview the residents of a local nursing home to find out what makes the person unique and write articles about them. After students receive feedback from their peers and participate in student-led conferences with the teacher about their writing, they work in a group to compile the articles into a magazine. In a final celebration, the students share their publication with the senior citizens who they interviewed.

**At a Glance**  
**Grade Level:** 3-5  
**Subject(s):** Reading, Writing, Oral Language  
**Topics:** Biographies  
**Higher-Order Thinking Skills:** Metacognition, Making Connections  
**Key Learnings:** Interviewing, Narrative Writing, Biographies  
**Time Needed:** 40 minutes a day for 2 weeks

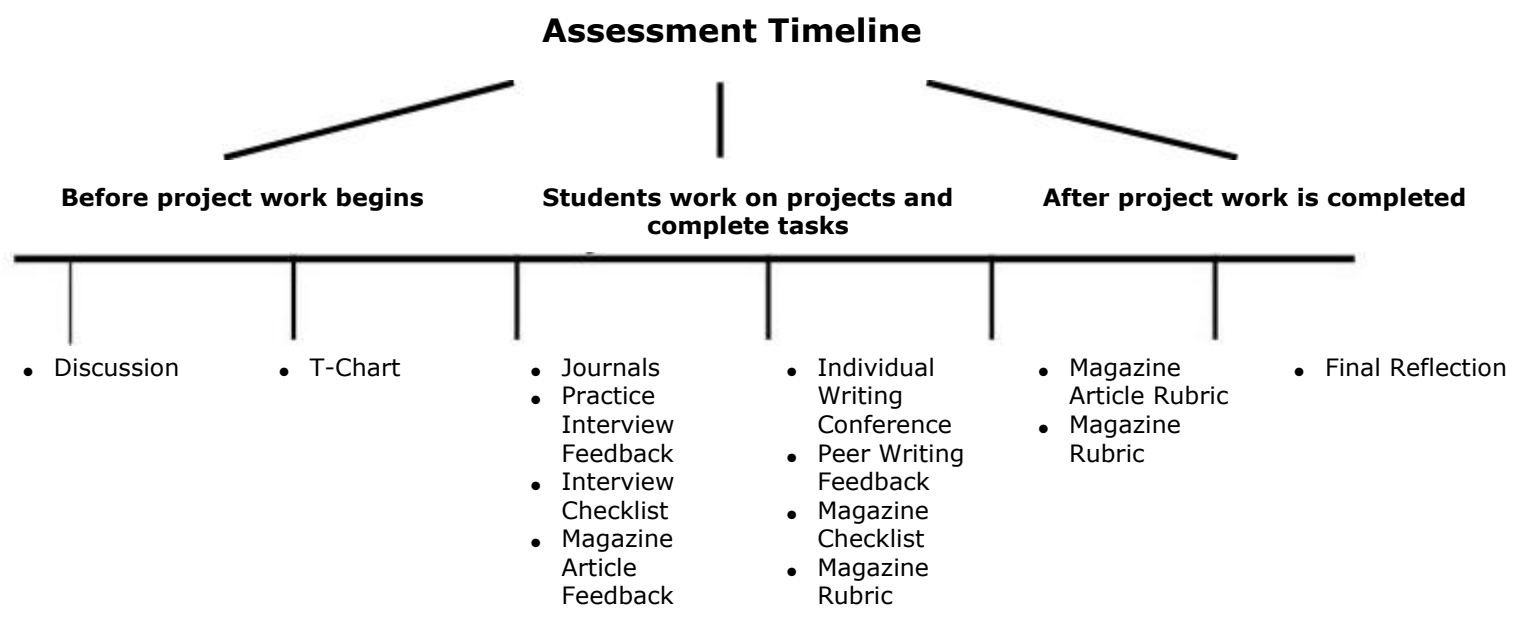
## Curriculum-Framing Questions

- **Essential Question**  
How are we all unique?
- **Unit Questions**  
What makes a biography interesting?  
How is my life like the lives of others?
- **Content Questions**  
What is a good interview question?  
How do I punctuate quotations?

**Things You Need**  
[Instructional Procedures](#)  
[Standards](#)

## Assessment Plan

This timeline shows in chronological order the different types of formal and informal assessments that occur during the unit. The table below explains how each assessment is used and who uses it for what purpose.



Assessment	Process and Purpose of Assessment
Discussion	Students read biographies and discuss what makes a person important. The teacher uses the information from this discussion to guide students as they plan and conduct their interviews.
T-Chart	The teacher uses students' contributions about what details were selected for the biographies they read to plan instruction to help students choose what to include in the biographies they write.
Journals	Students write in journals about what makes the person in the biographies they are reading interesting and important. The teacher uses this information to plan mini-lessons during the reading and writing stages of the project.
Practice Interview Feedback Form	Pairs of students role-play an interview in front of a small group of their peers who fill out this form to give them feedback about their interviewing techniques.
Interview Checklist	Before students conduct their interviews, they use this checklist to help them prepare for a successful interview.
Article Checklist	This checklist reminds students of what they need to include in their articles while they are writing.
Magazine Article Rubric	Students provide suggestions for what makes articles interesting and their thoughts are included in a rubric for the magazine articles. Students use the rubric as they write to help them produce high-quality writing and to give feedback to their peers in writing groups. The teacher uses the rubric to assess the individual articles in the magazine.
Writing Conference Preparation	Students use the Magazine Article Rubric, and think about their past writing, to prepare for their writing conference with the teacher. The teacher collects information from the student during the conference in order to provide appropriate individual instruction and to determine classroom trends and issues to inform future teaching and learning activities.
Peer Writing Feedback	Students meet periodically in small groups to share their writing and to use the Magazine Article Rubric to provide feedback about content, organization, style, and conventions.
Magazine Checklist	This checklist helps students manage their time efficiently while they are putting together their magazine.
Magazine Rubric	In groups, students use this rubric to help them create a magazine that meets high standards of quality.
Final Reflection	When the magazine is completed and shared, students write a metacognitive reflection in which they describe what they learned about writing and interviewing and set goals for their next writing project.

### Credits

A teacher contributed this idea for a classroom project. A team of educators expanded the plan into the example you see here.

# Assessing Projects: Biographies

## Instructional Procedures

### Instructional Procedures

#### Prior to the Unit

1. Contact a local nursing home or senior center and explain that as part of a unit on biographies, your students would like to interview some of their residents for class publications. Ask them to recommend residents that would be appropriate for students to interview.
2. Collect a variety of biographies from the school library, newspaper, and magazine articles to keep in your room during the project.

#### Introduction

1. Read students an appropriate biography, such as the Caldecott winner, *Lincoln: A Photobiography*. After reading it, ask students to discuss the Unit Question: *What makes a biography interesting?* Ask them to analyze what details about Lincoln's life the author did not include in the book and discuss possible reasons why the author did not include them. Make a T-chart on the board listing the details from the discussion with possible reasons and, with students input, also list the details that were included in the book with possible reasons why they were included.
2. Place students in small groups and give each group several newspaper and magazine articles about people. Ask each student to choose an article to read silently. After they have finished reading, have them write in their journals about the Unit Question: *How are we all unique?* and discuss their biographies with a small group.
3. In a large group, ask students to add to the T-Chart on the board. Ask them to think about why some details might be important in one person's biography but not important in another. Ask students to discuss the question: *Do you have to be famous to be important or interesting?*
4. Tell the students that they are going to interview some people in a local nursing home or senior center to find out what is important about them, write biographies, and then put all the articles together into a magazine.
5. As students read biographies during their silent reading time, they write in their journals about how the people in the biographies are like them and like people they know, and make creative responses to their reading, such as art projects and extended writing.

#### Magazine

1. Tell students that they are now going to begin to write biographies that will go in a magazine. Pair students with partners for the interviewing experience. Place students in small groups and ask the partners to role-play the interview while the group members fill out the **Practice Interview Feedback** form to help them improve their interviewing techniques. Before students go to the nursing home to conduct their interviews, give them the **Interview Checklist** to remind them of what they need to have and do before and during the interview.
2. Interview residents at nursing home and take pictures with a digital camera.
3. Support students throughout the writing of the biographical articles with informal questioning, student-led writing conferences, and peer writing groups. Ask students to use the **Student-Teacher Conference Preparation Guide** to prepare for their student-teacher writing conference. Provide the **Magazine Article Checklist** to help students write their articles and the **Magazine Article Rubric** to make sure the article is high quality. When students meet in writing groups, ask them to use the **Peer Writing Feedback** form to help them provide useful feedback to each other. Encourage students to also get feedback from friends and family.
4. When students have finished writing their biographies and begin to put together the magazine, ask them to use the **Group Magazine Checklist** to make sure they manage their time wisely and the **Magazine Rubric** to guide the quality of their work.
5. Have a celebration where the students share their magazines with the people they interviewed.
6. Ask students to write a **final reflection** to think about what they learned from this project and set goals for future projects.

# Assessing Projects: Biographies

## Content Standards and Objectives

### Targeted Content Standards and Benchmarks

#### Wisconsin Grade 4 Performance Standards

##### English/Language Arts

- Write expressive pieces in response to reading, viewing, and life experiences (narratives, reflections, and letters) employing descriptive detail and a personal voice
- Produce multiple drafts, including finished pieces, that demonstrate the capacity to generate, focus, and organize ideas and to revise the language, organization, and content of successive drafts in order to fulfill a specific purpose for communicating with a specific audience
- Understand the function of various forms, structures, and punctuation marks of standard American English and use them appropriately in communications

##### Information and Technology Literacy

- Participate productively in workgroups or other collaborative learning environments

### Student Objectives

Student will be able to:

- Make connections between themselves and the lives of people in biographies
- Conduct an interview and record the responses
- Write a biographical article
- Revise their own writing for effective language and appropriate details
- Respond to the writing of their peers with specific comments

### Practice Interview Feedback

Speaks clearly	Always	Most of the time
Introduces self	Yes	No
Shakes person's hand	Yes	No
Asks for permission to record the interview	Yes	No
Turns on tape recorder	Yes	No
Asks good questions	Yes	No
Turns off tape recorder	Yes	No
Thanks interviewee	Yes	No

What did the interviewer do very well in the practice interview?

What could the interviewer improve?

## Interview Checklist

- We are wearing clothes that are appropriate for interviewing adults.
- We are well-groomed.
- We have a cassette tape with our names written on it.
- We have checked our tape recorder to make sure it is working.
- We have pencil and paper.
- We have questions that will help us find out what is interesting and important about the person we are interviewing.

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2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

6 \_\_\_\_\_

- We have practiced speaking in a clear, strong voice.
- We know how to introduce ourselves.
- We will be friendly and polite.

## Magazine Article Checklist

- Our article is only about one important idea about the person.
- We describe what is important and interesting about the person.
- We have many specific details about the person.
- We choose the details we use carefully to tell what is important about the person.
- We use some of the person's own words and we put them in quotation marks.
- We use words that paint a picture of the person.
- We start our article with an introduction that makes people curious about the person.
- We give our article a title that makes people curious and want to read it.
- We proofread our article to correct any mistakes in
  - Spelling
  - Sentences
  - Punctuation
  - Capitalization
- We took a good, clear picture of the person with the digital camera.

Our friends, our family, and the students in our writing group gave us at least 2 ideas about what we could do to make our article better besides correcting mistakes.

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We thought of 2 things on our own that we could do to make our article better besides correcting mistakes.

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## Magazine Article Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Content: Theme	My article is about one main idea, and all the details tell about the theme.	My article is about one idea, and most of the details tell about the theme.	My article has a main idea, but many of the details are not related to the theme.	My article is about many different ideas.
<b>Content</b>	I select many specific details that show what is important and interesting about the person.	I use some appropriate details to show what is important and interesting about the person.	I use a few details, but the reader doesn't really learn what is important and interesting about the person.	I do not use very many details, and the reader does not learn what is important or interesting about the person.
<b>Organization: Title</b>	I have a title that gives a hint at what the article is about and makes people curious to read it.	I have a title that tells what the article is about.	My title does not give readers an idea what the article is about.	I do not have a title.
<b>Organization: Introduction</b>	I have an introduction that tells what the article is about and makes people curious about my person so they want to read more.	I have an introduction that tells what the article is about in an interesting way.	I have an introduction that tells what the article is about, but it is not very interesting.	I do not have an introduction.
<b>Organization: Paragraphing</b>	I start a new paragraph when I change the subject and when the speaker changes in conversation. My paragraphs are different lengths.	I start a new paragraph when I change the subject.	I have some paragraphs, but there may be too many long ones or short ones.	I have one long paragraph or many really short ones.
<b>Language: Vocabulary</b>	I use interesting and lively words that show rather than tell about the person.	I use interesting words to describe the person.	I use some interesting words, but most of the language in my article is ordinary.	The language in my article is ordinary.
<b>Language: Quotations</b>	When it makes sense to do so, I include some of the person's exact words in quotation marks in my article	Sometimes I include the person's exact words.	I try to include the person's exact words, but sometimes it doesn't really make sense.	I do not include any of the person's exact words.



	along with my descriptions of what the person said to make the story more interesting.			
<b>Conventions</b>	I do not have any mistakes in sentences, spelling, punctuation, or capitalization in my article.	I do not have any mistakes in sentences, spelling, punctuation, or capitalization that make it hard for the reader to understand what I have written.	I have a few mistakes in sentences, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization that make it hard for the reader to understand what I have written.	I have so many mistakes in sentences, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization that readers have a hard time understanding what I have written.

## Student-Teacher Conference Preparation Guide

Use the **Magazine Article Rubric** along with these questions to think through answers to these questions before you have your conference with the teacher.

1. What have I done so far?

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2. What do I still need to do?

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3. What am I going to do next?

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4. What am I trying with this writing that is a challenge for me?

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5. What parts of my writing do I like and why?

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6. What parts do I not like and why?

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7. What do I need help with?

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## Peer Writing Feedback

Use the Magazine Article Rubric along with these questions to help you give good feedback to your peer.

1. What did the author ask you to help with?

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2. What help can you give the author?

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3. What about the article did you like? Why?

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4. What parts were good at “showing not telling”?

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5. Were any parts confusing?

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6. What do you think is important and interesting about the person the article is about?



## Group Magazine Checklist

- 1 We have typed our stories on the computer and have helped each other proofread them for:
  - Spelling
  - Punctuation
  - Capitalization
  - Sentences
- 2 All our articles have:
  - A good title
  - Bylines saying who wrote them
- 3 We have at least one picture to go with each article that is:
  - Clear and easy to see
  - The right size
- 4 We created features for our magazine that go along with the name.
  - An interesting name for our magazine that goes along with what is inside
  - A table of contents
- 5 We created some extra features that go along with the name of our magazine and the people we interviewed, such as:
  - Advertisements
  - Letters to the editor
  - Advice column
  - How-to articles
  - Travel articles
  - Recipes and cooking advice
  - Cartoons
  - Other pictures
- 6 The final magazine:
  - Looks neat and well-organized
  - Doesn't have too much empty space
  - Doesn't look crowded

## Magazine Rubric (Group)

	4	3	2	1
<b>Appearance</b>	Our magazine is neat and attractive and organized so people can easily find what they are looking for. Our pictures have a clear focus.	Our magazine is neat and organized. Our pictures are clear.	Our magazine is a little bit confusing, and some of our pictures are not clear.	Our magazine is confusing and our pictures are clear and do not seem to have a purpose.
<b>Features</b>	We have an interesting name for our magazine that goes along with what is inside it. We also have bylines that tell who wrote the articles and an accurate table of contents page.	We have a name for our magazine and titles for our articles. We have bylines that show who wrote them and an accurate table of contents.	We have some titles, bylines, and features. We have a table of contents, but it may have some mistakes or be confusing.	We may have a title for our magazine, but many of our articles are missing titles and bylines. Our table of contents is missing or inaccurate.
<b>Extras</b>	We have some extra features in our magazine, such as letters to the editor, advertisements, advice columns, and extra articles, that go along with the name of the magazine.	We have some extra features in our magazine, and most of them go along with the name of the magazine.	We have a few extra features, but most of them don't really go along with the name of the magazine.	We do not have any extra features in our magazine.
<b>Conventions</b>	There are no errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or sentences.	There are no errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or sentences that detract from meaning.	There are some errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or sentences that detract from meaning.	There are many errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or sentences that detract from meaning.

## Biography Magazine Final Reflection

1. Write at least two things that you learned from this project.

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2. What new thing did you try when you wrote your article and how did it turn out?

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3. What did you learn about writing that you can use in your next writing project?

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4. What did you learn about working with others that you can use in your next group project?

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