



MISSING VOICES: BIOGRAPHY

LESSON PLAN

GRADE LEVEL Upper Middle School/High School

OVERVIEW In this unit, students are invited to explore the [Cultural Heritage Map of Pennsylvania](#), research a Pennsylvania figure, and compose a biographical essay.

ANCHOR STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9

PENNSYLVANIA CORE STANDARDS

ELA CC 1.2 L
ELA CC 1.4 A
ELA CC 1.4 D
ELA CC 1.4 V
ELA CC 1.4 W
History 8.2 A

BIG IDEAS

- Effective research requires multiple sources of information to gain, expand and verify the credibility of knowledge.
- Audience and purpose inform a writer's choice of organization and language.
- Historical literacy skills (organizing information chronologically, explaining historical issues, locating and investigating sources materials, synthesizing and evaluating evidence, and developing arguments and interpretations based on evidence) are used by an analytical thinker to create a historical construction.
- The history of the Commonwealth continues to influence Pennsylvanians today, and has impacted the United States and the rest of the world.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How do strategic readers create meaning from informational text?
- How does a reader know a source can be trusted?
- What does biography reveal about the common ties of human existence and the potential of individuals to influence change?
- How can the story of another American, past or present, influence your life?
- How does geography affect the way people live and work?

CONCEPTS

- Biography is a form of literary nonfiction used to reveal positive and/or negative influences an individual can have on society.
- Historical literacy requires a focus on time and space, and an understanding of the historical context, as well as an awareness of point of view.

VOCABULARY

Literary nonfiction	Subject	Evidence
Biography	Potential Bias	Inference
Chronological	Accuracy	Citation
Character	Purpose	Documentation
Setting	Audience	Publication Date
Plot	Voice	Context

COMPETENCIES

- Identify significant figure contributions associated with a geographic area.
- Enhance geographic literacy/geospatial education.
- Conduct a short research and writing project based on focused questions with information gathered from multiple print and digital resources.
- Develop a biographical essay with relevant, well-chosen information and concrete details appropriate to the audience.
- Integrate information into the text while maintaining the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

MATERIALS

Computers with Internet Access
[Missing Voices Graphic Organizer](#) (optional)
[Missing Voices Rubric](#)
[Missing Voices Style Guide Excerpt](#) (optional)

SUGGESTED ONLINE RESOURCES

[Pennsylvania Center for the Book Maps](#)
[Literary Heritage Map](#)
[Cultural Heritage Map](#)
[National Archives Databases and Directories](#)
[Ancestry.com](#)
[Library of Congress: Digital Collections](#)
[Digital Public Library of America](#)
[Encyclopædia Britannica Biographies](#)
[Jamboard, OneNote, Padlet, Webjets](#)
[MLA Style Center Quick Guide](#)
[Easybib or Bibme](#)

PREREQUISITE

Assume that students are familiar with proper MLA Works Cited format and plagiarism guidelines. In addition, students should be developing online reasoning and have some evaluation skills for assessing online resources. For a refresher, try John Green's Crash Course: [Navigating Digital Information](#).

SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES

Introduction & Exploring the Map

Explore the [Cultural Heritage Map of Pennsylvania](#). Who do you know? Who would you like to know more about? Who is located near you?

The Pennsylvania Center for the Book (PACFTB) online map was originally launched in 2000. Over the course of two decades, 1200+ biographies, written by Penn State students and local writers, were linked to the PACFTB maps. These biographies highlight the lives of literary and cultural figures who achieved success in their primary vocation, resided in Pennsylvania for at least four years, and that residency is connected to the outcomes of their primary vocation. Users of the maps can recognize many familiar literary and cultural figures and also be introduced to some new voices of the Pennsylvania landscape.

Select a Figure

In the process of creating any map, mapmakers convey a selection of information. They must make decisions on what to show, emphasize, or omit. Pennsylvania's diverse and robust cultural history cannot fully be encapsulated in one platform.

What voices are missing from the map? Invite students to research Pennsylvania figures and compose short biographical essays. In reviewing the map, note that some figures do not yet have a linked expanded biography. Students may select one of these figures as a subject for research or identify a missing voice. Have students select a backup option for research to reduce duplicates or in case there is insufficient information available for the student to proceed with developing a biography.

- What do you know already about this figure, think you know, what would you like to know? Generate research questions. (KWL)
- What types of information do you expect to learn from a biography? (birth, family background, things that shaped this figure, significant accomplishments, current status).
- Where might you find this information? There are many online resources to assist in your search (genealogies, historical documents, news/magazine articles, interviews, obituaries, inductions or historical markers).

Biographies are a form of literary nonfiction. In essence, biographers tell the story of a life. There are literary elements within a biography that increase interest. As a class, choose a biography from the [Pennsylvania Center for the Book website](#) that is linked to the [Cultural Heritage Map of Pennsylvania](#).

Collectively identify the literary elements: character, setting, plot, audience, voice.

Research

Research can be conducted online and in collaboration with a school librarian. In gathering evidence, biographers make connections and seek to explain the significance of particular events. There are some basic pieces of information that will be important to identify: birth and death dates, birthplace, connection to Pennsylvania, significant accomplishments and recognition. While often written in chronological fashion, biographical essays are not simply a listing of events. Published interviews of the biographical subject can also offer direct quotes or insights that may not appear in other sources. Offer multiple sources, print and digital, for students to access (see Suggested Online Resources).

Like journalists and historians, biographers often draw conclusions based upon their interpretation of primary sources. In collecting information about the Pennsylvania figure, consider how this person is connected to the state. Consider the time period in which this person lived (context). Was this figure's work informed or inspired by Pennsylvania history, communities, or achieved as a result of education or experience obtained in Pennsylvania? What makes this figure interesting? What events or qualities shaped this person? How can (or has) the story of this figure's life influence others?

In considering each source, it is important to assess its:

Publication date: is it the most recent information? Or for a historical figure, would it be beneficial to also seek information written during that time period?

Audience: was the source written for entertainment or academic/professional purposes? Potential bias: are there assumptions or opinions stated? Is the information objective?

Accuracy: can the information be supported by other sources? If the source is not current, is the information still accurate?

Review desired citation format. Citation generators can assist students with appropriate formatting.

Rephrase & Summarize

Take notes in short phrases to assist in integrating information while avoiding plagiarism. Use the [Missing Voices Graphic Organizer](#) or online collaboration tools like [Jamboard](#), OneNote, [Padlet](#), or [Webjets](#) to collect and arrange information. An added benefit of using these online collaboration tools is that students can work in groups if desired and teachers can review the resources identified by students.

One-minute paper. What has the “muddiest point” of your research been? What can’t you find? Where have you looked? Teachers can use these short reflections to direct students to additional resources or, in some cases, suggest alternative figures for research.

Draft

Synthesize information. To pull together information from a variety of sources in a meaningful way, students can benefit from working with an established structure. In its very basic format, this biographical essay can be written as a five-paragraph essay, as reflected in the Graphic Organizer.

Paragraph one: introduction including name, profession, connection to PA, overview of accomplishments

Paragraph two: background, birth, family, childhood, education

Paragraph three: adult experiences, events, mentors or qualities that shaped this figure

Paragraph four: literary/professional life, significant accomplishments, awards, important work

Paragraph five: current projects or position, legacy, why is this figure important

Construct & develop. Transitions are a key component in storytelling. In telling the story of this figure’s life, envision the reader. Transitions assist the reader in organizing and linking concepts. Beginning writers often learn to use single words like initially, secondly, and finally. However, in a biography, these words would likely create a list-like quality. Consider instead how the use of transitions can help to show connections, cause and effect, or contrasts in the figure’s life. These transitions will also prevent non sequiturs and random lists of events so the reader can connect ideas and make logical associations.

Review & Refine

Partner read aloud for content and flow. Have the author read their biography aloud to a partner reviewer. Provide questions for the partner reviewer to consider while listening that are specific to content, clarity, and repetition (some suggestions below). Ideally, the reviewer should avoid interrupting the author. Writers can often catch mistakes in flow when reading aloud. The reviewer can ask for portions to be repeated for clarity once the full biography has been read. The reviewer should share their responses to their list of questions with the author to help in revision.

- How is this figure connected to Pennsylvania? How did they contribute to Pennsylvania history (and beyond)?
- Does the biography include all key pieces of information (when available): date and place of birth/death, profession, accomplishments, family and school background, important work/contributions?
- Were there any sticking points in the biography? Any transitions that felt awkward or unnatural?
- Is there a logical progression in the biography? Is the biography list-like or do the ideas flow smoothly from one to another (storytelling)?
- Does the biography clearly address the figure's impact upon others and/or their impact on history? Do the details and examples from the figure's life provide a sense of who this figure is?
- Did the piece come to a clear, satisfying conclusion?
- Do you have remaining questions about this figure's life (ways in which the author could develop or clarify their writing)?

Review for proper documentation and grammar. Writers should review biographies for proper citations, ensuring that the format reflects accepted guidelines. Citation generators like [Easybib](#), [Bibme](#), or online resources such as the [MLA Style Center](#) Quick Guide can be beneficial. In editing the final copy, writers should pay attention to spelling, punctuation, and usage. If desired, an excerpt of the [Missing Voices Style Guide](#) can be used for reference (may not include the latest updates).

One-minute paper. How can learning about the life of another person inform your own? Or what is something unique that you have learned about your figure?

ASSESSMENT

A suggested [Missing Voices Rubric](#) has been provided.

EXTENSION/FURTHER STUDY

Invite students to:

1. Send their biography to PACFTB for inclusion in the map with a cover letter justifying inclusion.
2. Host a living museum in which they present themselves as the literary/cultural figure.
3. Share their figure with the class in a brief presentation using digital images, video clips, and informative slides.
4. Create a bio-poster that highlights key information about their Pennsylvania figure.

REFERENCES

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