

Biography Clearinghouse Principles

The Biography Clearinghouse of The Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) believes that biography is a dynamic genre and an important ingredient in elementary and middle-level curriculum across the content areas.

Diversifying the curriculum is a national imperative. Contemporary biographies explore the lives of diverse peoples throughout history and around the globe. Because of the increasing diversity of subjects, biographies are a powerful tool for diversifying the curriculum K-8. Biographies reveal the diversity of people who have helped to shape government, the arts, science, sports, industry, and entertainment. Biographies can infuse the language arts, science, social studies, math, and integrated arts curriculum with models of agency and perseverance.

Principles

The Biography Clearinghouse operates with the following principles in mind. Biographies can be read for both personal pleasure and academic learning. Biographies can shape readers' understanding of the world, and their connection with the past and present. Biographies can evoke students' wonder and prompt them to ask questions about the world. Through the telling of life stories, biographies can help students build empathy.

Literacy

- Biography is a powerful genre for fostering students' reading and writing identities.
- Biography serves as a model for narrative thinking.
- Biographies can be used to support students' growth in reading comprehension.
- Biographies allow us to consider the role of the biographer and the evidence the biographer uses. In biography, authors build cases using evidence.
- Biographies serve as models for how authors and illustrators do research, through the information revealed in author and illustrator notes in both picture book and chapter-length biographies. The Biography Clearinghouse advocates that publishers regularly include such back matter.
- Biography models language, stylistic choices, and literary elements in the same ways that other literary genres do.
- Biography models the importance of revision.
- Biographies are powerful tools for exploring visual literacy.
- Biographies can be a tool for critical literacy. Biographers make decisions about what to include, what to emphasize, and what to exclude, offering complex perspectives of people and examinations of power and privilege.

Content Information and Disciplinary Literacy

- When reading biography, students learn more than just the bare facts of an individual's life. They may learn about disciplinary ways of thinking, everyday life in the past, and information about the disciplines in which the subjects' work.

- Biographies can help shape students' understanding of specific historical events.
- When reading biography, the process of knowledge construction can be revealed. Biographies about scientists and historians piecing together evidence reveal how evidence leads to theories and how theories lead to facts.

Socio-Emotional Learning

- When students are exposed to biographies with regularity, the subjects of those biographies can serve as models for agency in students' own lives. Biographies can serve as models for activism and a growth mindset. Biographies show readers that the world is fluid, not fixed. People create change. New ideas take root. Injustices get righted. Problems get solved. Discoveries are made.
- Biographies can show the complexity of the world, and give young people the chance to explore the flaws in figures - those working for good, those not - and learn from those experiences as well. These flaws are contextualized for readers within the times in which the subjects lived.
- When students are exposed to biographies with regularity, the subjects of those biographies can serve as mentors for pursuing passions and interests. Biographies model people's passions (author's, illustrator's, subject's). Students need to see authentic interests modeled by the people around them.