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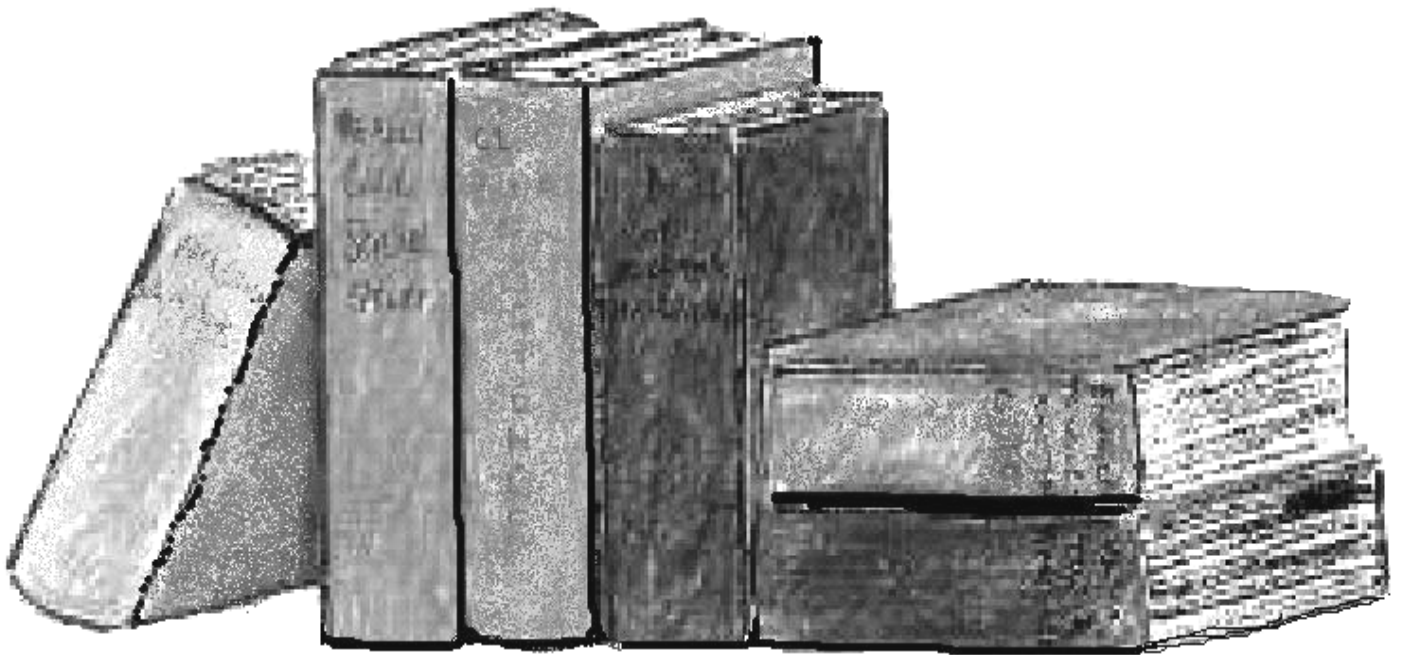
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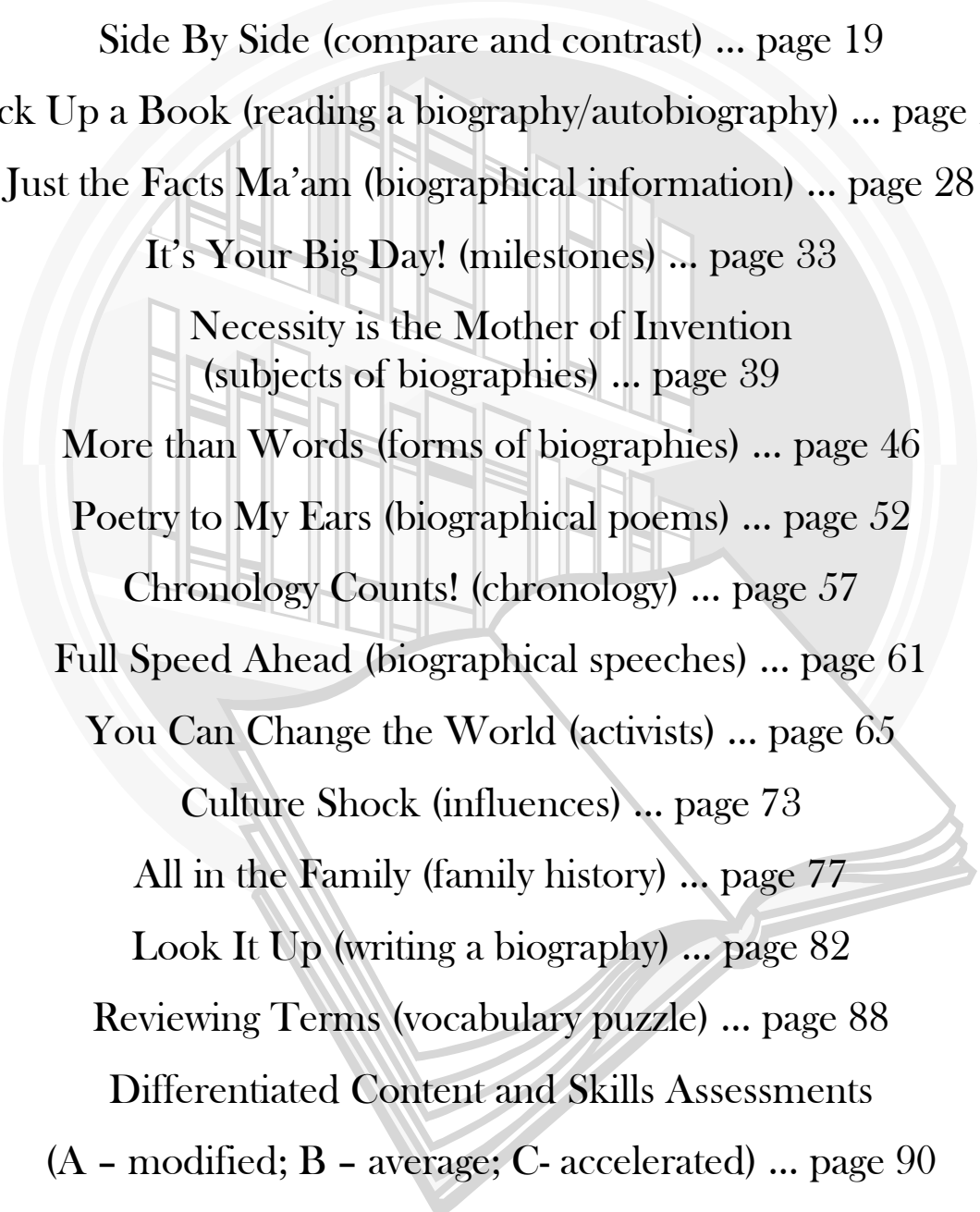
i Think: Reading & Writing Biographies



By Christy Baldwin

“Inspired” by Kendra Corr and Sharon Coletti

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Life is an Open Book

Springboard:


Students should read “Will Smith” and answer the questions.

Objective: The student will be able to define and explain the characteristics of an interesting biography.

Materials: Will Smith (Springboard handout)
Spicing It Up! (handout)
C'mon Re-write It, Man (handout)

Terms to know: **biography** - the story of a person's life written by someone else
enhancement - an improvement
trivia - unimportant but interesting information
anecdote - a short account of an incident

Procedure:

- While discussing the Springboard, review the definition of a biography and have the student(s) explain how the Will Smith passage fits the definition. (*It's about a person and it's not written in the first person.*) Go on to explain that though biographies come in many forms, this lesson focuses on what makes a GOOD biography.
-  Distribute “Spicing It Up!” and review the directions. Explain that although some basic details are always necessary (such as dates, places, awards, family relationships, etc.), these are ways the student(s) could add to the piece to make it much more interesting. Have student(s) complete the handout, adding their own ideas for improvement. (*Answers will vary but could include photographs, hobbies, quotes by and about him, etc.*) The student(s) should work individually, in pairs, or small groups using the Internet to find examples of each enhancement in order to write a new version of Will Smith's biography.
- After their research is complete, distribute “C'mon Re-write It, Man” and have the student(s) write another short biography about Will Smith that includes their enhancements. Remind the student(s) that they should also improve on the original title. (**NOTE:** They could also print their rewrite out and find and add photographs to make the biography more interesting.)
- Have the student(s) share their improved biographies and discuss what makes them “good.” (*Answers will vary, reflecting the idea that dry details are not enough; quotes, personal details, anecdotes, photographs, and other enhancements make biographies more interesting to read.*)

Will Smith

Born on October 25, 1968, William Christopher Smith, Jr. came from a fairly normal middle class family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During childhood he was introduced to a wide variety of cultures and learned how to adapt to any situation.

Smith began rapping at the age of twelve, and by 2003 had released a number of albums and singles with his partner, Jeffrey Townes. Their most famous single, *Parents Just Don't Understand*, became a hit in 1988 and the following year he won a Grammy for Best Rap Performance. He then won a second Grammy in 1991.

In the late 80's Smith began a successful television career as the star of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a situation comedy based loosely on his life. The show aired for six years and was nominated for and won many awards. Perhaps because of his success on television, many producers offered Smith parts in their movies. His first was *Where the Day Takes You* and later films included *Made in America*, *Bad Boy*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Independence Day*, *Men in Black*, *Enemy of the State*, *Wild Wild West*, *Legend of Bagge Vance*, and *Ali*. He starred in sequels for *Men in Black* and *Bad Boys* and continued his movie career with *I-Robot*, *Shark Tale*, *Hitch*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *I am Legend*, and more. Over the course of his movie career he has been nominated at least twice for Academy Awards.

Will Smith has been married to Jada Pinkett Smith since 1997. The couple has two children, Jaden Christopher and Willow Camille. He also has a son, Willard Smith III, from an earlier marriage.

In addition to acting and singing, Will owns a film production company called Overbrook Entertainment and Treybell Development Company, which works on various building projects in the Philadelphia area.

This form of writing would **BEST** be described as

- A. fiction.
- B. a legend.
- C. a biography.
- D. a comedy.

How would you describe the information about Will Smith given in this passage?

- A. basic information about his life
- B. quotes by Smith and others
- C. reviews of Will Smith's work
- D. details about his family life

Which sentence states the **MAIN IDEA** of the passage?

- A. Will Smith's early life helped him to adapt to any situation.
- B. Smith's acting career began with a hit comedy series on TV.
- C. His marriage to Jada Pinkett Smith boosted Smith's career.
- D. Will Smith has been successful in music and show business.

What do you think the author could have added to make the reading more lively and interesting? _____

Will Smith - Answers & Explanations

Born on October 25, 1968, William Christopher Smith, Jr. came from a fairly normal middle class family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During childhood he was introduced to a wide variety of cultures and learned how to adapt to any situation.

Smith began rapping at the age of twelve, and by 2003 had released a number of albums and singles with his partner, Jeffrey Townes. Their most famous single, *Parents Just Don't Understand*, became a hit in 1988 and the following year he won a Grammy for Best Rap Performance. He then won a second Grammy in 1991.

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This form of writing would **BEST** be described as

- A. fiction.
- B. a legend.
- C. a biography. *
- D. a comedy.

(It tells about a person's life as all biographies.)

How would you describe the information about Will Smith given in this passage?

- A. basic information about his life *
- B. quotes by Smith and others
- C. reviews of Will Smith's work
- D. details about his family life

(The reading is a kind of "no frills" description of Will Smith's life, career, and family.)

Which sentence states the **MAIN IDEA** of the passage?

- A. Will Smith's early life helped him to adapt to any situation.
- B. Smith's acting career began with a hit comedy series on TV.
- C. His marriage to Jada Pinkett Smith boosted Smith's career.
- D. Will Smith has been successful in music and show business. *

(Choice D, though not specifically stated, is the most general description of the information provided. A-C are details, though C is also unstated.)

What could the author of the passage have included to make it more interesting?
Answers may vary and include quotations, reviews, perhaps funny anecdotes about Smith's family life, pictures, a catchy title, etc. The purpose of this question is to get students thinking about how biographies can be MORE INTERESTING.)



DIRECTIONS: Read the list of enhancements that can improve a biography. Then, add a few ideas of your own. Finally, find examples of each enhancement for the Will Smith biography and explain how each could improve the piece.

Quotes (either from the subject himself or by other people about the subject):

Interview questions and answers (either by the subject or others about him):

Trivia (illustrating interesting or unusual qualities about the subject):

Personal anecdotes (about the subject's life or work):

Your Idea(s) (Be creative!):

[illegible]

It's All About Me!



Springboard:

Students should read “Joan Lowery Nixon: My Story” and answer the questions.

Objective: The student will be able to define and explain characteristics of autobiographies.

Materials:

Joan Lowery Nixon: My Story (Springboard handout)
All About Me (handout)
How to Create a Storyboard (handout)
“_____” (handout)

Terms to know:

autobiography - an account of somebody's own life
fiction - a piece of writing involving people and events that aren't real

Procedure:

- After reviewing the Springboard, review the term “autobiography” and explain that in this lesson the student(s) will create their own autobiographies, but in a little different format.
- Distribute “All About Me” and have the student(s) complete the brainstorm handout.
- Then hand out “How to Create a Storyboard” and “_____” and review the directions for creating storyboards. Each of the student(s) should then follow the directions to plan and create a storyboard about his/her life.
- Have them share their ideas and evaluate their creations using the rubric provided.

Joan Lowery Nixon: My Story



"I have been writing since before I could read. My mother told me that at the age of two, I would come to her and say, "Write this down. I have a poem." While I was growing up, I wanted to write the kinds of books I loved to read: stories that made me laugh or cry, and mysteries -- especially mysteries. When I was grown and became a published author of books for young people, my dream came true. Writing fiction is my idea of the most wonderful job in the world, and I love it.

I was first published when I was ten. A poem I wrote appeared in a children's magazine. I sold my first article to a magazine when I was seventeen. I majored in journalism at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles, but there were few jobs at the time for journalists, so I took a temporary job teaching kindergarten and first grade in the Los Angeles City Schools. I enjoyed teaching so much I went to night school and took the courses I'd need for my credentials.

My husband and I have four children, and when they were young I had only one day a week in which someone could watch the preschoolers and I could write. I discovered that you never find time to write. You make time.

In 1964 my first book was published, and in 1994 my 100th book was published. I've won lots of awards for my books. Among them are four Edgars from the Mystery Writers of America, two Spurs from Western Writers of America, and eighteen awards from various states that invite kids to vote for their favorite books. But the greatest rewards I've received are the letters I get from young people in high school or middle school who write things like this: "I hated to read. But my teacher gave me one of your mysteries, and I loved it. I'm going to read everything you've ever written." My favorite letter was from a ninth-grade girl who wrote, "Thank you for the gift of reading." You can't beat an award like that."

Source: teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mystery/bio.htm

This reading is UNLIKE a biography in that it

- A. tells about a person, Joan Lowery Nixon.
- B. is written by the person it is about.
- C. describes the life and works of a writer.
- D. was a published piece of writing.

Which sentence COMPARES this piece of writing and a biography?

- A. This piece is about a writer; biographies can be about anyone.
- B. It provides information about the life and work of a person.
- C. The people who wrote the two pieces would be different.
- D. It explains how someone's early life influenced her work.

In contrast to a biography, this piece is

- A. more detailed.
- B. less interesting.
- C. a form of literature.
- D. more personal.

Joan Lowery Nixon: My Story - Answers & Explanations



"I have been writing since before I could read. My mother told me that at the age of two, I would come to her and say, "Write this down. I have a poem." While I was growing up, I wanted to write the kinds of books I loved to read: stories that made me laugh or cry, and mysteries -- especially mysteries. When I was grown and became a published author of books for young people, my dream came true. Writing fiction is my idea of the most wonderful job in the world, and I love it.

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- C. describes the life and works of a writer.
- D. was a published piece of writing.

*(The passage is an
AUTOBIOGRAPHY.*

*It tells about a person's
life but is written by the
person it is about.)*

Which sentence COMPARES this piece of writing and a biography?

- A. This piece is about a writer; biographies can be about anyone.
- B. It provides information about the life and work of a person. *
- C. The people who wrote the two pieces would be different.
- D. It explains how someone's early life influenced her work.

(To "compare" is to identify similarities, and Choice B is true of BOTH forms.)

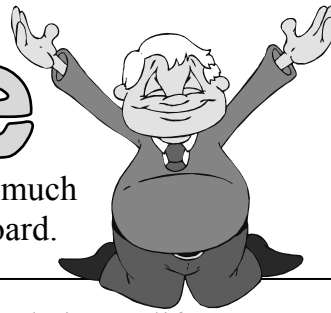
In contrast to a biography, this piece is

- A. more detailed.
- B. less interesting.
- C. a form of literature.
- D. more personal. *

*(Since autobiographies are written **BY** the subject, he/she can give details such as thoughts, feelings, preferences, etc. that others could not know.)*

all ABOUT me

DIRECTIONS: Complete the graphic using as much detail as possible to brainstorm ideas for your storyboard.



Birth date, birthplace:

Important people in my life:

Favorite foods:

Best trip or vacation:

Hobbies and talents:

Favorite book, movie, etc.:

Most cherished memory:

Most valued possession:

Achievements/awards:

Future goals: