

# Writing Workshop

## Narrative Essay

## Biographical Essay

### ► Introduction

In a biographical essay, you write about the life and personality of a person who actually lived. A biographical essay should have the following characteristics:

- a real-life subject
- a thesis statement that states a specific idea about that person's life and achievements
- an account of one or more major events in the subject's life
- a description of the subject's key character traits

**Assignment** On the following pages, you will learn how to write a biographical essay. You will get step-by-step instructions. Each step will include an example from a sample essay discussing the life of George Washington.

Read the instructions and the examples. Then, follow each step to plan and write a 500–700 word essay.

**Discuss one of the historical people from Unit 3. Review his or her most important contribution to the nation, giving reasons for your choice.**

### ► Prewriting

**Choose your subject.** Choose a person whose life seems especially appealing to you. Once you have decided on a subject, make notes about what you already know about his or her life and personality.

For a review of the steps in the writing process, see the **Historian's Toolkit, Write Like a Historian.**

#### Sample notes about George Washington

- "father of his country"
- "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen"
- Washington's father was a wealthy Virginia planter.
- Washington fought in the French and Indian War.
- led disorganized, poorly funded Continental army in the Revolution against better-trained, better-funded professional British soldiers
- struggled with Continental Congress for money
- encountered many tough situations as President and knew each decision would have impact on the future
- the nation faced financial problems: debt crisis, Hamilton's plan
- faced other crises: Whiskey Rebellion, conflict in Northwest Territory, European wars

**Gather information.** Once you have reviewed what you know, think about what areas of this person's life you would like to focus on. Then, write down some questions to help you direct your research.

**Draw conclusions.** Based on your research, make some decisions about your subject's personality. What did he or she value most? Is there a connection between your subject's character traits and his or her role in history?

**Write a thesis statement.** You have learned more about your subject and reflected on his or her life and personality. You are ready to write a thesis statement.

## ► Drafting

**Decide how to organize your writing.** The simplest way to organize a biographical essay is to cover the main events of the subject's life chronologically.

Another type of organization focuses on a few important events in the person's life, building up to the one that you think is most important.

**Write an introduction.** The first paragraph of your essay introduces your subject. The introduction leads up to the thesis statement, which expresses the idea you will develop in your essay.

**Support your thesis with examples and details.** Use the information you have gathered to support and develop your idea about your subject.

**Use an informative, lively tone.** As you write your draft, enliven your writing with vivid language and colorful details that appeal to the senses.

**Write a strong conclusion.** In your final paragraph, restate your view of the person about whom you are writing. Tell the reader what this individual has contributed to the country.

### Sample questions about George Washington:

- What was Washington's family background like? What about his education?
- What qualities made him a good general? Were they the same things that made him a good President?
- How did his soldiers feel about him? How did other leaders feel about him?
- How effective was he as a President?
- What was Washington like as a person?
- What were his personality strengths and weaknesses? What did he do best? What did he not do as well?

### Sample thesis statement:

George Washington was not a very imaginative man, but he had a practical, steady mind—a quality that was necessary to give stability to our new nation.

## ► Model Essay

Read the following model of a biographical essay about George Washington. Notice how it includes the characteristics you have learned about.

### George Washington: A Quiet American Hero

When George Washington was a boy, he liked to make up his own sayings. “Lean not on anyone” was one of them.

As he grew older, a strong sense of self-reliance and responsibility—to his family, his soldiers, and his country—shaped Washington’s character. It gave him a quiet strength that helped him direct the course of our nation.

Washington grew up on his family’s Virginia plantation. As a young man, he decided to learn a trade as a land surveyor. George Washington was only sixteen years old when he set out on his first surveying expedition. Sleeping outdoors and hunting for his food made the teenager more mature. This maturity and sense of responsibility were the perfect qualities for a military leader.

Seven years later, Washington was already a colonel commanding Virginia’s colonial troops. At six feet two inches tall, he was a forceful leader who inspired his men to defend the colony’s 350-mile western frontier.

In 1775, Washington’s leadership was called upon one more time. The Second Continental Congress named him commander in chief of the army. From 1775 to 1783 his strength helped his soldiers overcome many problems. Washington’s troops didn’t have enough supplies, and many soldiers deserted. The men suffered horribly during the bitterly cold winter at Valley Forge.

After Washington’s death, Thomas Jefferson said about the leader, “His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known.” Without this quiet American hero, with his strong sense of responsibility, our nation’s early history would have been very different.

The opening paragraph is an introduction to the subject. It can include an anecdote.

The thesis statement introduces the idea that will be developed in the essay.

Is this essay organized chronologically; by focusing on a few events; or by contrasting the public’s opinion with the real man?

Each paragraph includes examples and details to develop ideas about the subject.

The conclusion restates the thesis statement in a new way.

## ► Revising

After completing your draft, read it again carefully to find ways to make your writing better. Here are some of the things you should look for.

### Revise to strengthen your thesis

- Do the introduction and thesis statements create a clear, unified impression of the person about whom you are writing?
- Do the body paragraphs develop this impression?

### Revise to meet written English-language conventions

- Are all sentences complete, with a subject and a verb?
- Are all the words spelled correctly?
- Are all proper nouns capitalized, including names of people and places?
- Did you use proper punctuation?

## ► Rubric for Self-Assessment

Evaluate your biographical essay using the following rating scale:

|                 | Score 4   | Score 3   | Score 2  | Score 1   |
|-----------------|---|---|--|---|
| Organization    | Supports the thesis with a series of logically ordered paragraphs creating a clear impression of a real-life person, organized chronologically, by order or importance, or by character trait             | Uses a reasonably clear organization, but occasionally includes less relevant information (for example, anecdotes or facts that wander from the thesis) | Chooses an organization not suited to the topic (for example, presents personality traits without tying them to an overall impression or to the subject's actions) | Shows lack of organizational strategy   |
| Presentation    | Discusses the life and personality of the subject in a way that develops a clear impression of the person with facts, details, and anecdotes from the subject's life; links all information to the thesis | Discusses the life and personality adequately with several facts, details, or examples; links most supporting information to the thesis                 | Does not discuss the life and personality adequately in any detail; does not link supporting information to the thesis   | Does not provide any facts, details, or examples about the subject's life and personality           |
| Use of Language | Varies sentence structure and vocabulary successfully; includes no or very few mechanical errors  | Uses some variety in sentence structure and vocabulary; includes few mechanical errors  | Uses the same types of sentences without varying them; repeats words; includes many mechanical errors  | Writes incomplete sentences; uses language poorly; sounds confused; includes many mechanical errors |