Developed for a high school quinmester unit on comparative biography, this guide provides the teacher with strategies to aid students in examining biography from "Plutarch's Lives" and Cellini's "Autobiography" to Nabokov's "Speak, Memory." Special emphasis is placed on comparison of biographies of the same person and the distribution between autobiography and biography. Performance objectives are listed along with a rationale for the course and its content. A section entitled "Teaching Strategies" includes suggestions for exercises and directions for completing them. The guide concludes with a list of student and teacher resources, including state-adopted textbooks, supplementary reading materials, and films. (RB)
AUTHORIZED COURSE OF INSTRUCTION FOR THE QUIMNESTER PROGRAM

LANGUAGE ARTS
Comparative Biography
5113.94
5114.166
5115.181
5116.188
COMPARATIVE BIOGRAPHY

5113.94
5114.166
5115.181
5116.188

English

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Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida
1972
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COURSE TITLE: COMPARATIVE BIOGRAPHY

COURSE DESCRIPTION: An examination of biography from Plutarch's Lives and Cellini's Autobiography to Nabokov's Speak, Memory. Special emphasis is placed on comparison of biographies of the same personality and the distinction between autobiography and biography.

I. PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

A. Having investigated various approaches to biography, the students will compare them in terms of scope, accuracy, readability, and interest span.

B. Having investigated various types of autobiographies, the students will compare them in terms of scope, accuracy, readability, and interest span.

C. Having read several biographies or autobiographies, the students will discern differences in point of view and biases.

D. Having read historical drama and novels, the student will recognize the debt fiction owes to biography.

E. Having noted the popularity of current "hero" biography and autobiography, the students will evaluate the public's demand for this particular genre.

II. COURSE CONTENT

A. Rationale

Biography and autobiography offer insight into man as an individual and as a maker of history. This body of literature helps to show how, throughout history, writers have described their subjects in many ways: idealistically, objectively, critically, compassionately. As readers have the opportunity to examine a variety of styles and approaches to the same subject, they may observe that just as events change man so, too, has man chosen to alter the record of events.
B. Range of subject matter

1. Approaches to biography
2. Types of autobiographies
3. Comparison of various portrayals of subjects
4. Influence of biography on other literary genres
5. Current popularity of biography and autobiography

III. TEACHING STRATEGIES

A. Objective A. Having investigated various approaches to biography, the students will compare them in terms of scope, accuracy, readability, and interest span.

1. Have students research simple biographies through the use of The Dictionary of American Biography, The Dictionary of National Biography, Who's Who, Current Biography. Request that the students make note of the type of information given in these sources; e.g., dates, occupations, accomplishments.

2. Have the class view one or more filmstrip biographies. Help them discover that the type of information they can gain from such portrayals is similar to that found in simple biographies.

3. With the aid of the librarian, have a group of students scan different volumes of several scholarly biographies such as Douglas Southall Freeman's study of Robert E. Lee or Carl Sandburg's Abraham Lincoln. Ask students to classify the range of information given. (Chapter titles are helpful.)

4. Assign students who have scanned the Freeman and Sandburg biographies to read the excerpts in Adventures in American Literature, The United States in Literature. Students might also wish to read letters and speeches written by Lee and Lincoln in American Literature.
5. Have the group of students who are investigating scholarly biographies view a film such as *Lee, the Virginian* (1-31172). Ask them to contrast the scope of coverage in the film with that in Freeman's biography. Is "one picture worth a thousand words"?


7. Have the students apply the techniques suggested in Activity #6 to a visual biography such as *The Hurdler* (1-13878).

8. Have students investigate various approach styles taken by biographers over the span of the centuries.

   a. Ask individual students to read stories from the Bible. Have them record the information learned in terms of personality, family background, historical setting. Illustrated maps, family trees, or series of original drawings are some ways they might choose to present their findings. Selections in state-adopted textbooks include:


   (4) Joseph and His Brothers, *ibid.*, pp. 289-299.


b. After introducing Plutarch's Lives, have selected students read paired Greek and Roman and indicate which traits they shared, what their contribution to history was.

c. Have students investigate what facets of life were emphasized in early Anglo-Saxon accounts. Excerpts in state-adopted textbooks include:

   Bede, "The Poet Caedmon" in Adventures in English Literature, "The Conversion of King Edwin" in English Tradition: Nonfiction or Heroes and Pilgrims.

d. Have students read the Prologue to Canterbury Tales to observe emerging realism.

e. Provide opportunity for students to view the film Michelangelo and His Works (1-12499) to enhance their appreciation of the Renaissance view of life.

f. Have groups of students sample excerpts from journals and accounts such as the selections by Pepys, Johnson, and Boswell which may be found in state-adopted textbooks.

g. Have students read selections by Lytton Strachey to note how the modern biographer views real life as more exciting than fiction.

9. Have students compile the identifying features of approaches to biography at each stage of history in order to define biography as it is today.

10. Have students read a modern biography. Set aside time for class presentations, group or individual. One type of presentation might be the living biography in which the reporter assumes the first person role and tells his own story.

11. In order to encourage divergent thinking, present a variety of "biographies," and have students label them biography or nonbiography and defend their reasoning.

a. Life with Father

b. Cheaper by the Dozen

c. Auntie Mame
d. **In Cold Blood** (nonfiction novel)

e. **The Biography of the Motion Picture Camera** (a rental film)

f. **Time-Life Series** (historical periods)

g. **Little Women**

h. **The Flowering of New England**

i. "O Captain! My Captain!"

j. "Mary White" (essay by E. B. White)

12. Discuss with the class the value of each approach to biography. Elicit from the students what purpose each approach could serve.

13. Have students read aloud some pertinent brief passage from the biographies they have read, and have other students guess the main thrust of the biography and when it might have been written.

14. Have each student write a paper comparing one type of biography he has investigated with one of the other types discussed in class. Have him compare in terms of scope, accuracy, readability, and interest span.

15. Take a consensus of the students' views on types or approaches to biography preferred and their reasons for favoring these.

B. Objective B. Having investigated various types of autobiographies, the students will compare them in terms of scope, accuracy, readability, and interest span.

1. After discussing the difference in authorship between a biography and an autobiography, have students suggest some of the problems facing an individual planning to write his own life story. (Modesty-conceit, desire to conceal unflattering information -- urge to "tell all," need for objectivity in portraying others in relation to self, etc.)
2. Read to the class portions of Virginia Woolf's *Flush*. In writing this biography, Mrs. Woolf saw the subject, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, through the eyes of her dog, Flush. Could one write an autobiography from some such stance? Any suggestions?

3. To confirm the possibilities of the approaches explored in Activity #2, show the film *The Perils of Priscilla* (1-14007).

4. Have students informally outline what they would include in an autobiography. Where would they begin? What would they emphasize? Who would be the "main characters"? How important would events be? Would there be a moment of decision? How much of a life story can a young person tell?

5. Have students view Gordon Parks' *Choice of Weapons*, (1-31829) an autobiographical film. Ask them in discussion to evaluate the film in terms of the problems they generated in Activity #1B.

6. Divide class into pairs. Have available discarded magazines or newspapers, unlined paper, scissors, and glue. Ask each individual to make a collage that tells at least three things about himself. After about ten minutes, ask partners to exchange collages and study each other's. Each partner should then try to interpret the other's collage. Finally, each participant will introduce his companion to the class explaining what the collage revealed.

7. Have a group of students read selections from autobiographies which are more revelations of the person's inner thoughts and self than a "life story." Possible choices might be Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Myself*, Joan Baez's *Daybreak*, or Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Bring Me a Unicorn*. Have students discuss whether it is significant that most such autobiographies are written by women.

8. Have a group of students read selections from autobiographies which emphasize the times rather than an individual's story. Possible choices might be selections from Samuel Pepys' *Diary*, Boswell's *London Journal*, or Cellini's *Autobiography*. Have students work with librarian to determine whether most such autobiographies are written by men. Excerpts may be found in *Major British Writers*, *English Literature*, *England in Literature*, *Western Literature: Themes and Writers*. 

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9. After the two preceding groups have presented their findings to the class, ask the members of the class to refer back to the informal outlines for their autobiographies. Did their outlines tend to reflect their sex?

10. Have a group of students read selections from memoirs of celebrated individuals; e.g., Vladimir Nabokov's Speak Memory, H. L. Mencken's The Happy Years, or Boris Pasternak's I Remember. Have them share with the class by reading aloud particularly nostalgic or vivid passages.

11. Have the class view a film such as River Boy (1-13827) which provokes a similar nostalgic feeling to that in Activity #8.

12. After students have listened to the readings and viewed the film, ask them to write a brief paper in which they attempt to evoke similar feelings in the minds of their readers. These may be shared with the class if students wish to do so.

13. Ask one or two students to read and report on the autobiography of Lorraine Hansberry, To Be Young, Gifted, and Black. This unusual book is a compilation of published and unpublished works by Miss Hansberry. Students should be encouraged to plan a multi-model presentation of the book.

14. Have a group of students read autobiographies of persons who had to struggle to overcome handicaps: Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings; Helen Keller, The Story of My Life; Margaret Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself or other similar selections. After reading, ask the students as a group to formulate a reply to the question: "Did these people have anything in common other than their having had to struggle to overcome handicaps?"

15. Have a group of students read autobiographies written by members of non-white minorities (Blacks, Indians, Mexican Americans), and report on the writer's memories of childhood experiences and his attitudes toward society and the times. Selections in state-adopted textbooks include "Hunger" by Richard Wright in Projections in Literature, "My Boyhood in New Orleans" by Louis Armstrong in Designs in Nonfiction, "Valedictorian" and "The Streets of Memphis" both by Richard Wright in Coping, and "I Always Wanted to Be Somebody" by Althea Gibson in Who Am I? and "My Struggle for an Education" by Booker T. Washington in Outlooks.
16. Have students read letters, journals, and essays to observe autobiographical details. Letters by Lord Chesterfield and Francis G. Parkman, essays by Montaigne, or the journals of Benjamin Franklin might be selected.

17. Test Tennyson's line "I am a part of all that I have known," by reading several selections by one writer. A writer whose works lend themselves to this approach is Dylan Thomas. Such poems as "Fern Hill," "Do not go gentle into that good night," and "A Child's Christmas in Wales" are available on recordings as well as in textbooks.

18. Provide time for all groups to report on the types of autobiographies they have read. Encourage a variety of reports.

19. After the reports have been presented, help students to identify the different approaches used in autobiographies: e.g., scholarly, historical, emotional, informative.

20. Have the students debate the merits of the type of autobiography they have read.

21. Take a survey of the class to determine which type of autobiography each individual would be interested in reading in the future and why.

C. Objective C. Having read several biographies or autobiographies, the students will discern differences in point of view and biases.

1. Ask students to review biographies they have read earlier in the course. Have them describe the biographer's attitude toward his subject. Require them to support their opinions by reference to at least three specific passages in the book.

2. Using the evidence gathered in Activity #1, have the class list on the board the different attitudes they identified.

3. Assign pairs of students to read biographies of the same individual. Have them report to the class how the biographer in each instance revealed his biases.
4. Assign interested students to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Have them compare the diary with the dramatization which can be found in *Counterpoints in Literature* and *Encounters: Themes in Literature*.

5. Ask another group of students to read William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* in *Insights: Themes in Literature* and compare it with selections by Helen Keller such as "How I learned to See," (Insights), "Three Days to See," (Adventures in Appreciation), and "The Great Day," (Outlooks).

6. Have students read biographies or autobiographies of people who are members of groups or professions which interest them: sports personalities, theatrical celebrities, musicians, politicians, military leaders, etc. After they have read, have them prepare a brief dramatic situation in which they role play the subject of the biography.

Selections from state-adopted textbooks include:

a. "Lou Gehrig: An American Hero" by Paul Gallico in *Insights* and *Exploring Literature*

b. "Walter Reed and the Conquest of Yellow Fever" by Paul de Kruif in *Exploring Literature*

c. "The Family Trade" by Cornelia Otis Skinner in *Adventures in American Literature*

d. "Opening Night on Broadway" by Moss Hart in *Designs in Nonfiction*

e. "I Resolve to Become a Jungle Doctor" by Albert Schweitzer in *Western Literature: Themes and Writers*

7. Have pairs of students read biographies of members of minority groups to prove or refute charges of group stereotyping. Students should search for works written by members and nonmembers of the group chosen.

8. Discuss with students whether it is possible to know someone else's feelings in terms of race. Point out the biographies of people who have tried to put themselves in the position, e.g., *Black Like Me*. 
9. Have students trace the history of the civil rights movement by searching for evidence of this theme in the biographical or autobiographical writings of Blacks prior to World War II. Students might consider the works of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, as well as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

10. "Iron bars do not a prison make." Have students find examples of autobiographies which reflect the mind's freedom even when the body is confined. The following suggestions might prove useful:
   a. Behan, Borstal Boy
   b. Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress
   c. Cleaver, Soul on Ice
   d. Dostoevsky, House of the Dead
   e. Gaddis, Birdman of Alcatraz
   f. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
   g. Solzhenitsyn, A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich
   h. Thoreau, Civil Disobedience

11. Have a group of students read and compare two biographies of military men. Ask them to report on the emphasis of biography, whether toward the historical battles or toward the personage as a man, e.g., Patton and His Pistols vs. Warrior - The Story of Patton.

12. Have a group of students research two biographies of the same man which are known to have conflicting points of view, one flattering, the other more critical. Ask students to point out what was stressed, what avoided in each biography. Could a fair view of the person be seen from either point of view? Current political figures are possible choices.
13. Pose the question: Does a time lapse enhance or detract from the objectivity of a biography? For example, rate Parson Weems as a biographer of Washington; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as biographers of Jesus. Compare these early accounts with more recent ones.

14. Have another group of students compare the full length biographies of the men profiled in John F. Kennedy's Profiles in Courage with his shorter entries. Ask the students to look for the events highlighted in Kennedy's book in the longer biographies and compare the treatment given these events.

15. Have a group of students read and compare autobiographies with biographies written by a relative or close friend of the subject. Ask students to pinpoint identical incidents in both books and describe how these incidents are handled, e.g., Randolph Churchill's unfinished biography of his father vs. Winston Churchill's A Roving Commission.

16. Making use of the biographies and autobiographies which have been read, have students organize into groups representing a certain period in history. Have them analyze the main features of biographies and autobiographies during that period and summarize the main points they agree upon.

17. Have students use the information decided upon in Activity #16 to trace changes in the tone, point of view, and biases down through history.

18. Have students organize a panel discussion during which they explore the results of glorifying and debunking key historical figures.

19. Ask the class to comment on the influence the church and other societal institutions have had on biography: the subjects chosen, the attitudes and points of view adopted, and the changing biases.

20. Have each student write about how he thinks a particular biography he read would be written at another specified period in history. What would be omitted, what would be added; how would the point of view change; how would accuracy be altered?
D. Objective D. Having read historical drama and novels, the students will recognize the debt fiction owes to biography.

1. Have students brainstorm as to why some authors would rather classify their work as fiction than as biography or autobiography. Elicit from the students that fiction gives a freedom not always achieved in biography or autobiography.

2. With the help of the librarian, have a group of students investigate examples of autobiographies disguised as fiction. These should be examples which most literary authorities agree are mainly autobiographical. Have students record what they consider to be autobiographical information and use a source such as The Dictionary of National Biography to check their responses. Good choices might be Dickens' David Copperfield or Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel.

3. Have groups of students investigate autobiographies disguised as fiction with biographies of the same subject. Ask them to note what freedoms the autobiographer has taken under the guise of fiction. Is this literary license taken to cover up or enlarge upon incidents? Possible selections might be Save Me the Waltz by Zelda Fitzgerald and the recent biography Zelda; or For Whom the Bell Tolls and one of the recent biographies of Hemingway.

4. Have a group of students read in Plutarch's Lives the biographies of subjects who appear in plays of Shakespeare. Ask them to determine how much of Plutarch's interpretation is reflected in the Shakespearean work.

5. Have a group of students investigate Biblical characters who are used in other literary areas, e.g., Archibald MacLeish's JB. Ask the students to demonstrate how the Bible is a source of reference for writers like MacLeish and Shakespeare.

6. Have a group of students trace the biographical information found in most historical novels, e.g., Esther Forbes' Johnny Tremain.
7. Have a group of students read and compare two biographies of the same person, one strictly factual, the other fictionalized. Have the students write the pros and cons of each type and decide which they preferred and why, e.g., Georgio Vasari's portrait of Michelangelo in *Lives of the Artists* vs. Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*.

8. Present a group of students with selections of biographical fiction. Explain that authors such as Andre Maurois, Emil Ludwig, Irving Stone, Taylor Caldwell, and Arthur Miller have dramatized and fictionalized the lives of men and women. Have them consider questions like these:
   a. Do such authors capitalize on idiosyncracies of their subjects?
   b. Are events in the subjects' lives or their achievements highlighted?

9. Show the film *Lincoln's Last Day* (1-31882) as an introduction to the biographies of writers like Jim Bishop who attempt to compress a biography into one fateful day. Have students investigate the effectiveness of several such biographies.

10. Have students differentiate between fact and fiction by investigating at least three portrayals of a person's life. The following suggestions might serve as examples:
    a. Emily Dickinson -- her poems, a biography, and the film *The Magic Prison* (EBC rental)
    b. Walt Whitman -- his poetry, a biography, and the film *Walt Whitman* (EBC rental)

11. Have students compare a written and visual biography. Examples:
    a. *Nicholas and Alexandra*
    b. *Mary, Queen of Scots*
    c. *Sound of Music*

12. Have students read *Inherit the Wind* and compare the portrayal of characters and events with historic accounts.
13. After reading works of fiction such as The Godfather, All the King's Men, After the Fall, The Prince and the Pauper, and Song of Bernadette, have students investigate whether the protagonists have real life counterparts.

14. Have students identify the historic events which are fictionalized in Mother Goose, Gulliver's Travels or The Crucible.

15. Have students play literary sleuths (1) by determining which account was by the true eye witness to the event chronicled, e.g., Tacitus' "The Great Fire," or Defoe's The Plague Year; or (2) discovering how Defoe capitalized on the published adventures of Alexander Selkirk in producing Robinson Crusoe.

E. Objective E. Having noted the popularity of current "hero" biography and autobiography, the students will evaluate the public's demand for this particular genre.

1. Have a group of students read autobiographies of celebrities, some ghostwritten, some written by the personalities themselves. Discuss whether those which are ghostwritten are truly autobiographies.

2. Have a group of students investigate those sports autobiographies which serve to give a forum for gripes. Ask on what emotional level these autobiographies are written. Do they "tell it like it is"? An example: Jim Bouton's Ball Four.

3. Have a group of students read classic biographies of well-known actors; e.g., Gene Fowler's Goodnight, Sweet Prince. Ask the students to evaluate the biographies in terms of literary merit. Have the authors been selective in creating their stories?

4. Have students discuss why there is a large readership for biographies/autobiographies of celebrities.

5. Have students offer theories which explain modern man's preoccupation with the rich and the famous.
6. Pose the question: Why is there a public outcry when a soap opera series or even a favorite character is "cut"? Elicit from the student recognition of people's need for vicarious experiences.

7. Analyze the popularity of movie magazines, gossip columns, and special editions about musicians and other entertainers.
   a. What vicarious experiences do they provide?
   b. Is interest kindly or cruel?
   c. Can readers detect any effort to reduce or increase sensationalism?
   d. Do such publications reflect the reader's right to know or an invasion of privacy?
   e. Have students discuss commonalities between movie magazines, etc. and biographies which, though well-written, still have made the appeal to readers' avid curiosity about details of private lives.

8. After reading biographies written by family members, or close friends, have students evaluate their special poignancy.
   a. Gunther, Death Be Not Proud
   b. Killilea, Karen
   c. Rogers, Angel Unaware
   d. Morris, Brian Piccolo (Brian's Song)

9. Having read selected works by or about Tom Dooley and Albert Schweitzer, have students predict their place in history.

10. Have students investigate the charisma of the Kennedy clan by reading books by and about family members. Have them identify the many angles from which the works are written. What triggers a public reaction such as the one demonstrated?
11. Have students compare portrayals of F. Scott Fitzgerald in such works as *Far Side of Paradise*, *Moveable Feast*, and *Beloved Infidel*. Ask them to apply criteria of closeness of relationship, objectivity, etc.

12. Have a discussion in which students propose reasons for writing accounts of human lives. Consideration could be given to purposes such as debunking, glamorizing, mythologizing, bragging, protecting.
IV. STUDENT AND TEACHER RESOURCES

A. State-adopted textbooks

The English Tradition: Nonfiction
Designs in Nonfiction
The United States in Literature
Encounters: Themes in Literature
Insights: Themes in Literature
American Literature: Themes and Writers
Western Literature: Themes and Writers
Major Writers of America
Insight: The Experience of Literature
Adventures in American Literature
Discovering Literature
Adventures in English Literature
Heroes and Pilgrims
Counterpoints in Literature
England in Literature
Outlooks through Literature
Coping
Who Am I?

B. Other reading materials


Hemingway, Ernest. For Whom the Bell Tolls. New York: Scribner, 1940.


C. Films

Adams, John Quincy

Alcott, Louisa

Aristotle

Boyhood of Abraham Lincoln

Churchill, Winston, Part 1

Churchill, Winston, Part 2

Eisenhower, Dwight David

Franklin, Benjamin

Hitler, Adolph, Part 1

Hitler, Adolph, Part 2

Hemingway, Part 1

Hemingway, Part 2

Hurdler, The

I Have a Dream: The Life of Martin Luther King

Keller, Helen

Kennedy, John

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