

**Making Connections:
Is There a Correlation between the Written Word and the Lives of African
American Children's Authors?**

Lysa Craig

“In the South, the breeze blows softer...neighbors are friendlier, nosier, and more talkative. (By contrast with the Yankee, the southerner never uses one word when ten or twenty will do)...This is a different place. Our way of thinking is different, as are our ways of seeing, laughing, singing, eating, meeting, and parting. Our walk is different, as the old song goes our talk and our names. Nothing about us is quite the same as in the country to the North and West. What we carry in our memories is different too, and that may explain everything else.”ⁱ

~Charles Kuralt in “Southerners: Portraits of People”

Introduction

“What we carry in our memories is different too, and that may explain everything else” is the cornerstone of this unit on African American literature. Two years ago I attended my 35th high school graduation reunion. For months I had looked forward to reconnecting with dear friends, laughing as we rehashed high school pranks, and reminiscing about the great times we all shared, when the hardest part of our lives was rewriting an English essay or solving a math equation. The reunion was fun, and my expectations were met, but while leisurely driving back to the place I call home today, a realization occurred to me; high school years are for memory making. I am certain those formative years molded me into the woman I have become today, but that town, that school, those friends are not who I am, nor who I want to be now. I don't belong there anymore. Those years are in the past, extraordinary life experiences I encountered along the way and will carry with me always in the deep hidden compartments of my psyche. But are those memories more than fleeting life experiences? I think yes. As I drove that day, my musings brought to mind another place that has always fashioned my life, the South. I am a born and bred southerner, and everything I have done or will do in life is wrapped around the fact that I am a southerner. My southern upbringing has patterned the way my home is decorated, the way my children were raised, my so-called manners and charm, and even the way I acknowledge my elders. As I continued my trip, my mind drifted to the fascinating southern characters I have privileged to know or “meet” in books and movies, and as I wondered silently, it occurred to me that memories shape us all, no matter whom we are or where we were from. But, in the South it is different, almost surreal. That southern heritage that at times moves me to tears, and at other times makes me cringe, is primarily born from one big event: The Civil War. As I drove past industrial parks, railroad

crossings, abandoned farms on old dirt roads, Confederate flags hanging on ramshackle porches, and cookie cutter homes in new developments, I thought about the different people each one of these places had touched, the stories each one of these places could tell if only they could talk, and I felt the need to investigate and speak for them. This unit is their story. "Making Connections: Is There a Correlation between the Written Word and the Lives of African American Children's Authors?" is a three week interdisciplinary unit focused on the African American people of the south. It is intended to teach middle school students how a key individual, event or idea is introduced, illustrated and elaborated in a text through examples and anecdotes while exploring the back stories of the various African American writers who have given birth to these stories.

I am drawn to this topic for several reasons. I have a great love for historical fiction, especially as it relates to the South; secondly, I feel it is imperative to teach background in order to make meaning of text. My teaching experiences have enabled me to conclude that my students are far more likely to comprehend and analyze subject matter deeply when that able to make a connection with the lives of the people directly involved in the storytelling. Lastly, I believe it is imperative to equip my students with the necessary background knowledge and history of past events in order to understand what drives people to react and behave as they do today. This unit is a step in that direction.

Background Information

I teach sixth grade Language Arts in a predominantly white, upper middle class 6th-8th grade middle school. The school is part of a large urban school district in the Piedmont region of North Carolina; however my school is located in the outskirts of the county in a wealthier, suburban area. Nevertheless, there is a twenty-five percent ethnicity in the school comprised of Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians. My schedule is composed of four sixty-seven minute blocks that include an Exceptional Children's (EC) inclusion class comprised of thirty one students with needs ranging from Attention Deficit Disorder to autism, one Standard class with students' End-of-Grade test scores ranging from the one percentile to the eighty seventh percentile. Many of these students lack motivation. I teach two Honors classes with students that primarily scored above the ninety-five percentile on the North Carolina End-of-Grade tests. My EC class is co-taught with an EC certified teacher. My other three blocks have thirty three, thirty one and twenty seven students respectively.

This unit is intended for the middle school adolescent. Ideally it would work best with students who are good readers and exhibit above average intelligence, but I feel it can easily be modified to work with students with disabilities as well by altering the book suggestions and/or modifying the differentiated activities. Having taught for almost thirty years, as I was a fourth and fifth grade elementary teacher prior to my move to middle school, I feel these plans could accommodate that level of student, too. I plan to teach this unit to my Honors' students.

In order to teach the entire unit, one must be prepared to devote one week to the study of African American authors. However, if time is of the essence, each of my highlighted lessons or strategies is designed so that they could be taught in isolation, but if one chooses that direction, the overall theme of the unit will not be fully realized. In other words, completing the authors' webquest is not a prerequisite for reading and analyzing the novels or participating in the photo journaling activities. Nevertheless, my vision is to allow my students time to research the lives of African American writers, to truly analyze the hardships and successes they experienced, to verbally and graphically demonstrate their knowledge of what molded these people into the authors they became, as well as the behaviors that motivated their writings. My intentions for the students are multi-dimensional: to get to know and appreciate the life of an African American author through a teacher-made webquest, to identify a work by that author, to read and analyze that work, to interview an African American member of the community, and to create a photo journal of that person's life focusing on what molded their subjects into the people they are today.

Rationale

Each year in an effort to get to know my students I administer surveys, learning inventories, and questionnaires. I like to include a section on various objectives I plan to teach throughout the year. One question on my survey asks students to relate their favorite author and why they enjoy their stories. Even though the majority of my students enter middle school with passing End-of-Grade scores, most cannot articulate a favorite author. Moreover those who do admit to a favorite author can rarely explain why they are particularly fond of their stories. In recent years, their responses have included Stephanie Meyer, of *Twilight* fame, Rick Riordan of *The 39 Clues* series and JK Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series. Without further pretests I cannot be certain if their responses are an attempt to quickly fill in my survey or a true lack of knowledge, but it is apparent to me after talking with my students that they have very little knowledge of authors. Even rarer is the student who conveys an interest in an African American author. Furthermore, my students enter 6th grade from a range of feeder schools. Many of these schools are "Honors Schools of Excellence" with top notch faculty, however their faculties are limited in what they teach by time restraints and the scope, sequence and objectives required by our state. Therefore, my 6th graders enter my class each year with little or no knowledge of great literature and the authors who wrote it. For most, their experience has been limited to the short biographies blurbs at the beginning of a short story in the state anthology or the back jacket of a novel. My responsibility as a middle school teacher is not to teach my students to read, but to enhance their understanding of literature and those who compose it.

As a sixth grade Language Arts teacher, I am on the frontline of adolescence angst every day. My students face remarkable changes as they transition from elementary to

middle school. They are confronted with a new environment that includes a new school, new teachers, new peers, the novelty of changing classes and the onset of significant changes taking place in their bodies. The onset of puberty brings other revelations to my students as well – the realization that they are “different”. Although the teen years are ones of exciting, extraordinary occurrences, they are also a time of great anxiety among a large majority of my students. Middle school students are typically quite shallow and self-centered, but how they view themselves becomes less of a priority, as others’ views take precedence. What they believe to be truth is often just another’s perspective, and this is another cornerstone of this unit. I want my students to delve into the true character of the author they choose to study, and to wade through the perspectives of others in order to uncover the back-story in this person’s life that inspired them to write the stories they chose to tell. By utilizing children’s literature written by African Americans, I am able to incorporate the historical background of talented writers with their human interest stories making this unit engaging and believable.

Lastly, the new National Common Core Standards allows for this unit. Forty five of the fifty states have adopted Common Core Standards, and my state is one. The standards define what students should understand and be able to do by the end of 6th grade, as they correspond to the College and Career Readiness Anchor standards. This unit fits into several groupings for the standards including reading, writing, language, speaking and listening. This unit falls under the categories of craft and structure and integration of knowledge and ideas. Particularly this unit will allow for the understanding of how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in the text and how it is conveyed in the text, as well as allowing students to integrate information presented in different media or formats to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue. Utilizing the webquest, students will not only be reading informational text and conducting research projects to answer questions related to the author studies, but they will be required to create writings in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to the task, purpose and audience.

Teacher Background

My school’s current textbooks don’t allow for this unit. The Language Arts curriculum centers on an anthology of short stories, and although many of the stories are interesting, each short story tends to focus on one central objective. Excellent teachers know that one cannot thoroughly encompass an objective using one short story on one given day, as stories mean little in isolation from their context.

But why teach with literature? According to Penny Strube in *Getting the Most from Literature Books* literature allows students to engage in conversations with each other. Often these conversations are full of meaning and insight. Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds state in *Grand Conversations* that literature is built on four beliefs: Story is a way to explore and enrich life, interpretation comes from readers actively engaged in the reading

process of making meaning by what they bring to and take from the text, children have the innate ability of being meaning makers, and dialogue provides the best means of understanding and explaining literature.^{ii iii}

Because each child brings their own meaning to the text through their individual experiences and prior knowledge, reading quality literature and then discussing that literature is a wonderful way to actively engage students in their own learning. Students are able to bring their own interpretations to the table, listen to their peers, and make informed decisions about the characters. And that is one of the goals of this unit, improving reading comprehension by requiring my students to analyze characters in literature and evaluate how the history of the authors may have played a part in shaping their character's motivations.

I was fortunate to attend a semester long seminar entitled, Reading African American Lives conducted by an outstanding professor of English at our local university. I was able to garner a wealth of information on the African American authors I intend for my students to encounter. Four prominent twentieth century children's authors will comprise this unit of study: Christopher Paul Curtis, Mildred Taylor, Virginia Hamilton and Walter Dean Myers.

Christopher Paul Curtis, award winning author of the books *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* and *Bud, Not Buddy* grew up in Flint, Michigan. Working for nine dollars an hour at the Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint, Curtis would escape the monotony of the day by reading and writing. His wife persuaded him to take a year off to write, and he was able to hone his craft and eventually win \$4000 in a short story writing contest. A positive review from a judge led to a publishing contract, and the rest is history. He credits a black literature course at the University of Michigan at Flint for introducing him to great literature from such authors as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, his literary heroes. Many of Curtis' novels are set in Flint, Michigan, and often his protagonists mimic the path he's taken in life, as he journeys from one adventure to the next. Curtis has stated that the character, Kenny, in the novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* is most closely related to him growing up. However, the strong character, Bud, he entails in *Bud, not Buddy* earned him the prestigious Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Book Award, a rare achievement of writing. For this unit, students will be read *The Watson's Go to Birmingham, 1963*.^{iv}

Mildred Taylor, born in Jackson, Mississippi, but reared in Toledo, Ohio is a prolific writer of children's literature centered on the realistic portrayal of the African American experience. She was raised listening to her father relay stories of southern memories and traditions. Crediting her father, a master storyteller, with influencing her interest in writing, Taylor has never lived in the south, but is adept at mimicking the speech and culture of the south from her visits and father's stories. An honor student with a graduate degree in journalism, Taylor wrote her first novella, *Song of the Trees*, in 1973. This

story introduced the Logan family, the strong African American family that would become the centerpiece for her subsequent novels, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* and *The Land*. Taylor is able to reach readers through her brave and lovable characters, as she writes about the lives of people whose stories are not often found in history books. Students may choose to read *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*, a 1977 Newbery Medal winner for this unit.^v

Virginia Hamilton, the first African American to win the Newbery Medal and the first American to win the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, was born in Yellow Spring, Ohio in 1936. She was raised in a family of storytellers and wrote her first novel at the age of nine. As a child, Hamilton enjoyed exploring the rural area of her home place in Ohio, land purchased by her ancestors, escaped slaves from Virginia. Many of her story's settings center on this area. A unique house she encountered in the area as a child serves as the abolitionist house in her novel, *The House of Dies Drear*. Although Hamilton did not experience blatant racism as a child, she was aware of the inequities between blacks and whites. Her writings are influenced by her love of great storytelling, and through her writings she is able to rouse the imagination in children. Hamilton has published African American children's literature in more genres than any other author, and for this unit, students may choose to read *The House of Dies Drear*.^{vi}

Walter Dean Myers, award winning author, is best known for his young adult novels about Harlem residents. Growing up in Harlem, he loved to read, but he rarely read about positive African Americans. Determined to change that, he writes about a diverse population of African American characters who live, love, laugh and dream as much as any other ethnic group, but he doesn't gloss over their failings. His characters are often plagued by drugs; economic troubles, violence and loneliness, and their challenges find their way into his plots. Like Curtis, Myers entered and won a writing contest as his venture into writing children's books began. Myers has published over sixty books, most of which have won awards, including the Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Award. He was honored by the American Library Association and School Library Journal with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1994. Students may choose to read his most recent novel, *Autobiography of my Dead Brother*.^{vii}

Objectives

The purpose for my students, beyond the obvious mastery of the National Common Core Standards, is to inspire my students to learn more about the people who write the novels they love to read, and to make connections between the written word and the unspoken human interest stories of those authors. This unit will allow them to reflect upon the rich, varied history of the African American storyteller they choose to investigate and the lives of the characters that author brings to life in his novels. The overriding question of this

unit becomes, “Is there a connection between the lives of African American authors and the characters they create?” This unit intends to expose students to a variety of texts (fiction and nonfiction) and an array of African American writers that will not only pique their interest, but provide meaning to their readings. I intend to integrate their studies with author webquests, desktop biographies, book talks, readings, interviews, and photo journaling. In essence, this unit will train students to question, research, collect data, formulate opinions and disseminate information while developing the Language Arts skills necessary to advance into an accomplished reader, writer, listener and speaker.

Strategies, Activities and Lessons

I am continually reading and researching additional ideas, so I may modify some of these activities in future years, but for those who are interested in some of my other activities and lessons, I will be glad to provide a more specific list. I have selected activities that can be easily differentiated for varying levels of students as well as activities that adapt to the different learning styles of students. In order to teach this unit, one should be prepared to devote three weeks of instruction. I feel the webquest and Distinguished Desktops can be completed in one week, but an additional two weeks would be necessary to complete the reading of the novels, subsequent discussions, expository writing and photo journaling assignments. Participation in the novel study is a crucial aspect to mastery of the objectives. Moreover, participation in the novel study would afford teachers the opportunity to evaluate their students’ knowledge of the connections between authors and their works by applying them in context.^{viii}

I plan to begin the unit with students participating in a survey on perception. The five-ten question survey would allow me a starting point for their understanding of this term and its implications. Displaying pictures of African American advertising icons, I plan to pose several questions to the students. Questions they will consider are: Who is this person? Where before have you seen this image? For what is he/she most famous? Is he/she a real person? What do you know about their background? Have their images changed through the years and if so, why? Would your perception of this product being presented change if a different image was used for advertisement purposes? A mini lesson on false perceptions would follow, as I incorporate the hidden stories of famous icons such as Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, mulattoes, etc. Under the pretense that every picture tells a story, I will present my students with an array of photographs depicting African American life in the late 19th and early 20th century in order to inspire critical thinking and writing as well as to provide my students with historical background knowledge surrounding the early years of the featured authors in this unit. According to the website, teachers.net, if one chooses to Google, “photography and writing,” over 23,000,000 entries will appear. I hope to spurn my students into discussions based on the photographs of life post Civil War up to the Harlem Renaissance. This would lead to my next activity, the webquest.

Webquests were developed in 1995 by Dr. Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University as a way to incorporate technology into the classroom setting. A webquest is a guided learning project that includes opportunities for research and application and synthesis of new knowledge in which most of the information comes from work on the internet. Usually a webquest has five parts: the introduction, the task, the process, the evaluation and the conclusion.^{ix}

The **introduction** gives an overview of the activity, and is written entirely in second person. Often the webquest is written as an overview or using a problem scenario. The introduction is what educators commonly call the “anticipatory set”, as it is used to capture the students’ attention.

The **task** includes the goals and objectives of the lesson. This section gives students the information on the outcome or product they are expected to create in order to demonstrate knowledge whether it be an essay, power point, oral report or presentation to the class.

The **process** includes strategies and resources for achieving the goal of the lesson. It should explicitly explain how to accomplish the goal. The process also includes information on how the class will be divided into roles in order to complete the work. This section includes the links to websites students will be required to use while gathering their data.

The **evaluation** contains a rubric explaining how the results will be measured.

The **conclusion** wraps up any loose ends. Often links are provided for students to conduct additional research if they so desire. The conclusion influences students to reflect on the activity. Often I provide my students with an evaluation of the process in order to modify the webquest for future students.

The webquest for this unit would involve an internet search for information on the four authors featured, and can be located at the Quest Garden website. After learning about the personal lives of the authors, students would then create a “Distinguished Desktop” for the author that piqued their attention and captured their heart, and then read a novel written by the author.

At the conclusion of the webquest, students would be required to complete a “Distinguished Desktop” on their chosen author in order to demonstrate knowledge of the author’s life. A Distinguished Desktop is an out-of-the-box way to display biographical information about a particular subject, in this instance, one of the featured authors. The steps to the desktop project are as follows:

- After completion of the webquest, choose one of the featured authors.
- Use the Distinguished Desktop Biography Organizer and collect important facts about the person. (Appendix A)
- Using a large foam poster board, students will design the desktop of the distinguished author they have chosen. They should decorate the desktop with the following items:
 - a. A sign that reads, “From the Desk of....
 - b. A letter from the author written in first person point of view. The letter should include information about the author and should explain who the letter’s recipient is and why he/she is important to the author. Additionally, the letter must be written on stationery designed by the student to reflect the author’s interests. For example, if a student chose to complete a desktop for Christopher Paul Curtis, they may design stationery depicting images of Flint, Michigan.
 - c. Three items that represent the author’s life must be glued to the desktop. For example, Christopher Paul Curtis’ desk may hold a photograph of his family, the Newbery Award and a manuscript of a novel in progress.
 - d. Three short post-it notes the author may have written to himself/herself attached to the desktop. (Appendix B)

If time is of the essence, Bio Poems are a great way to assess students’ knowledge of an author as well as to get them to create individualized poetry without sacrificing time. Bio Poems are written based on a precise format, but they still allow for the student’s individual creativity. On each line of the poem, students provide only the information requested for that line. Lines may be written with a single word or phrase. The objective is for students to demonstrate understanding of character.^x

- Line 1 – First Name
- Line 2 – Title given to the character
- Line 3 – Four words that describe the character
- Line 4 – Lover of (three items, objects, or ideas)
- Line 5 - Who believes (one idea or concept)
- Line 6 – Who wants (three things)
- Line 7 – Who uses (three things)
- Line 8 – Who gives (three things)
- Line 9 – Who says (a direct quote)
- Line 10 – Last name or synonymous descriptor

The following is an example bio-poem using Langston Hughes as the subject.

Langston
Writer extraordinaire

Poet, novelist, essayist, playwright
Lover of books, humanity, jazz,
Who believes in artistic freedom
Who wants his father's love, acceptance as a black American, a life free of bias
Who uses women, his words, alcohol
Who gives voice to a people, support to a cause, and hope to a race
Who says "I, too, am America"
Hughes

Following the author study, students would choose to read one of the predetermined novels written by their preferred author. During the novel study portion of this unit, and in order to make learning meaningful and comply with the National Common Core Standards, introductory lessons will be taught on author's purpose, author's tone, point of view writing, and characters' voice. By introducing these Language Arts objectives through short mini lessons using the state textbook and supplementary worksheets, students will have a knowledge base for later use when these objectives are revisited in the novel. The objectives will spiral throughout the two week novel study and will be reassessed continually. Moreover, the strands of Language Arts will be interwoven throughout the lessons as students work to improve their reading, written language skills, listening, and speaking throughout the novel study. Socratic seminars, cooperative literature circles, and an expository writing project will be expected of each student, as a means to assess their comprehension of the books they are reading.

A Socratic seminar can be centered on any book or article, or in this case, author. All one has to do, as the educator, is figure out what larger theme or question you want the students to discuss. In this lesson the question would of course be, "What motivates the authors to write the stories they choose?" Students would be expected to read the novel that corresponds to the author and create their own questions, but they need guidelines. First of all, in my experience, students have never heard of a Socratic seminar, and even those who have heard of one are not sure what to do. You must teach them. The Socratic seminar is a structured, student-centered discussion format. The protocol maximizes student participation, requires students to read, think and listen critically, and facilitates the clear and convincing development and articulation of ideas. The seminar places the burdens, responsibilities, and rewards of intellectual inquiry squarely on the shoulders of the students.^{xi}

I try to give students at least some class time to prepare. It isn't always necessary, but it calms some of their concerns if they can run questions by me before the seminar. It also gives those who are having a hard time with the task a chance to see what other students are doing to prepare. You may need to do some modeling with middle school students.

The best thing about Socratic seminars is that they enable the teacher to assess a student's understanding of the book, while at the same time ensuring that the student does all the work him/herself. It is hard to fake this assignment without having read the book. Students have to mark passages so they can defend their statements. Their audience is their toughest one — their peers — and their peers will call them on it if they realize they haven't read the material.

Tips for conducting a successful Socratic seminar:^{xii}

- If you're like me, it will be hard for you as the teacher to remain quiet while the students talk, but it's essential.
- Allow students to use hands if they can't restrain themselves.
- Supply post-its if students can't mark in their books.
- Make sure students are aware of expectations — that each of them must contribute both as a speaker and a listener.
- Put chairs in a circle.

Because students will be reading and learning from four distinct novels, the Socratic seminar for this unit, will not include the whole class, but will be comprised of four unique groups. The guiding questions will be:

- What was it about the author that made you want to read this book?
- Did the novel live up to your expectations?
- What did you know about the subject of this novel prior to reading, and did you learn anything new while reading?
- What did you learn about the time period in which the book is set that you did not previously know?
- Did reading this book change your perspective on life for African Americans prior to the Civil Rights Movement?
- What did you find to be the most interesting parts of the plot?
- Has reading the book inspired you to do further research on the subject and time period of the novel?
- What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book as a whole?
- Would you recommend it to a friend? Why or why not?^{xiii}

Literature Circles are task driven by individualized assignments that benefit the class when small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature. The discussion is guided by students' responses to what they have read. They discuss the plot, characters, author's craft or personal experiences related to the story, and are a great way to engage students in critical thinking and reflection as they read. Literature Circles

guide students to a deeper understanding of the chosen book through structured discussions and written and artistic responses.^{xiv}

The circles are focused on individualized roles the students carry out. I utilize the following roles in my classroom:

- Team Leader – develops questions for the group to discuss
- Summarizer – composes a brief summary of the passage read for the discussion
- Illustrator – draws a picture related to the reading with a brief written explanation that connects the drawing to the action of the plot
- Passage Director – chooses a section from that day's reading that the group rereads and discusses because it is interesting, informative or well-written
- Word Wizard – selects unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary from the passage and teaches their meanings to the group
- Travel Tracer – tracks the movement of the protagonist
- Connector – finds and makes connections between the reading assignment and another book, event in their personal lives or the outside world

The process for a Literature Circle is simple. The teacher selects members for the circle. I like to differentiate my circles to include students with varying learning styles and levels of competency. The roles are assigned for each member of the group as well as the readings they must complete prior to the meeting date. A meeting date is set. I usually have the students meet every other day using the day in between for reading and preparation. I help students prepare their roles, and then I facilitate when needed on the days the groups meet.

Once students have completed the novel readings, I plan to have them compose an expository writing essay. The purpose of the expository essay is to explain in a logical manner, without the student's opinion, how the setting, characters, conflict or plot progression of the novel they read does or does not connect to the biographical information gleaned in the authors' webquest.

The essay should be composed of five paragraphs. The introductory paragraph contains the main idea statement. Case in point, the protagonist, Kenny, in the novel, *The Watson's Go to Birmingham, 1963* parallels the life of its author, Christopher Paul Curtis. The next three paragraphs provide details and elaboration as evidence to support the main idea. The concluding paragraph restates the main idea and binds the essay together.

The culminating activity for this unit is the photo journal project. The photo journal project is designed to engage the students in telling the story of an African American in the community using any type of technology; cameras, cell phones and online pictures, in order to gather photographs that tell their subject's story. Using available resources in your school community, locate adults willing to be share photographs and personal

information with the students. I have had much success with local assisted living facilities and churches. The PTA organization, fellow teachers and students' parents are good resources as well. With the students, brainstorm a list of questions they will ask their subjects. The following is a hypothetical list from which you may want to choose.

- When and where were you born?
- Were you named for anyone special? Who?
- Who are/were your parents, and what did they do for a living?
- Do you have siblings? Tell me about them.
- Did you play sports as a child? Any hobbies?
- Do you remember any special teachers? What made them special?
- Who were your best friends in school? Do you remember a particularly special time with these friends?
- What were the fads when you were in school? What was your favorite?
- Are you currently married? At what age did you get married?
- What was your first job? What has been your favorite?
- Did you ever spend time in the service/
- How many different places have you lived? Which was your favorite and why?
- What has been the best time of your life? The worst?
- Was there any great event in history that you especially remember? Why do you suppose you remember it so vividly?
- Do you have any regrets or anything you wish you could do over?
- Do you have any advice for a young person growing up?

Once the interviewing process is complete, students are required to take a minimum of ten pictures that represent the lives of the person chosen for their project. They may take photographs of the person interviewed, people important to the subject, or places and objects relevant to the subject. Once the pictures are developed, students plan the layout and design of their photographs, and glue them student made booklets. They are encouraged to embellish the booklet with stickers, stamps and other craft materials that highlight the subject of their board.

After placing the pictures, students narrate each one using the responses gathered during the interview phase of the project. Just like with any other narrative writing assignment, students would proceed through the writing process with the booklet, including proofreading and final editing before assembling and publishing the booklet.

Students would extend invitations to their subjects to attend a grand finale tea where they could share their creations.

I have attached a rubric for your consideration. (Appendix C)

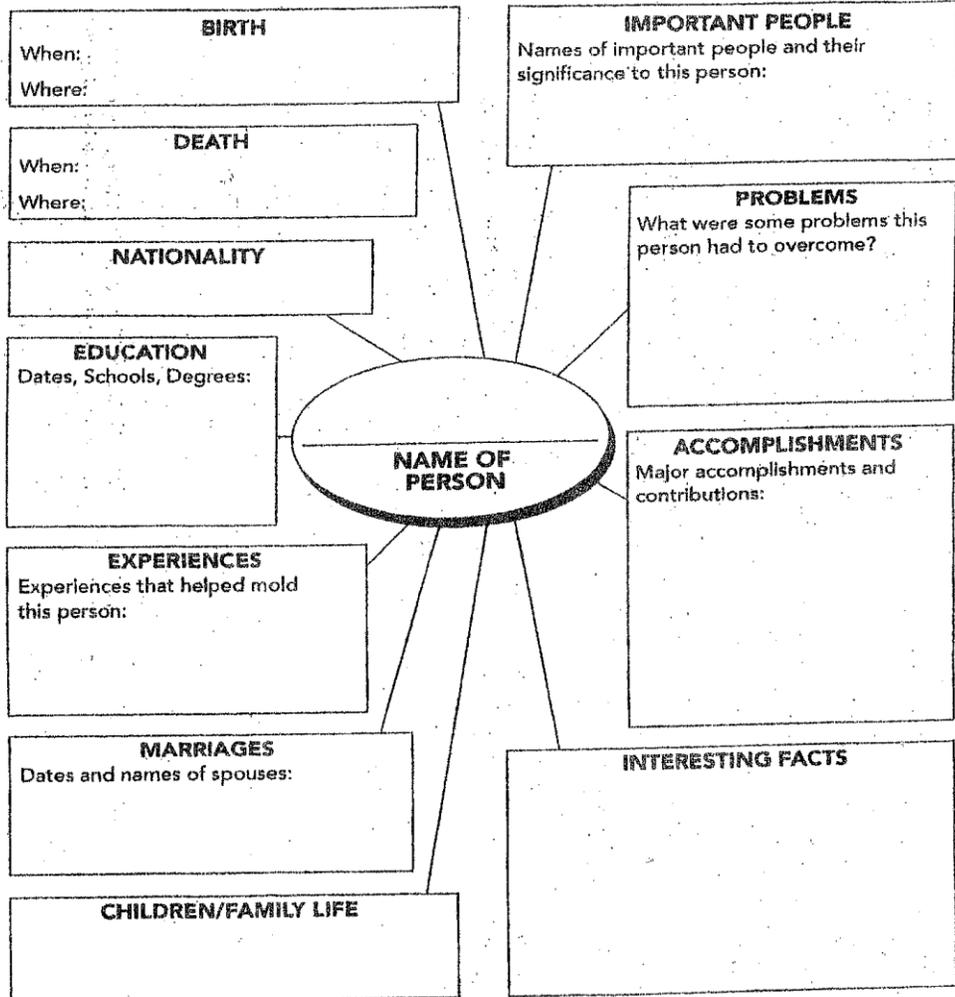
Appendixes

Appendix A

Distinguished Desktops Biography Graphic Organizer

Name _____

Use this graphic organizer to help you research your biography subject.



Appendix B

Rubric for Distinguished Desktops

Name _____

Biography _____

- I. Graphic Organizer (44 pts)
 - A. Birth (4 pts)
 - B. Death (4 pts)
 - C. Nationality (4 pts)
 - D. Education (4 pts)
 - E. Experiences (4 pts)
 - F. Marriages (4 pts)
 - G. Children/Family Life (4 pts)
 - H. Important People (4 pts)
 - I. Problems (4 pts)
 - J. Accomplishments (4 pts)
 - K. Interesting Facts (4 pts)
- II. From the Desk of (5 points)
- III. Letter (21 pts)
 - A. Recipient
 - B. Facts included (7 pts for each relevant fact)
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- IV. 3 Items (15 pts)
 - A. (5 pts)
 - B. (5 pts)
 - C. (5 pts)
- V. 3 Short Notes (15 pts)
 - A. (5 pts)
 - B. (5 pts)
 - C. (5 pts)

Appendix C

PROJECT RUBRIC

PROJECT POINT	3: outstanding. Student completed the assignment and provides support for all part. Work overall was at a high quality level	2: acceptable Student completed parts of the assignment, and made correction to address deficiencies in the original work	1: Student had errors and omissions that were not corrected. Work overall was not satisfactory.	Errors, omissions, incomplete work notes	Correction date and teacher sign off
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					

Annotated Bibliography for Students

Taylor, Mildred D. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. New York: Penguin Books USA, 1976. This is a good book to use for a novel study. This book centers on a year in the life of a land-owning black family as they battle racism in the south and learn to prevail. Great book to read in order to demonstrate the bigotry African Americans encountered from many characters in the New South era, including the KKK, town demagogue, redneck “white trash” and the segregation and inequality of services provided to whites and blacks in this time period.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons go to Birmingham – 1963*. New York: Random House Children’s Books, 1995. This book is the light hearted narrative of Kenny Watson and his zany family. It tells the story of a 1960’s era black family in Flint, Michigan. However it demonstrates how quickly life could change for the black family in America when they travel to visit relatives in Birmingham, Alabama during one of the darkest moments in American history. The Birmingham church bombings play a prominent role in the conclusion of the book.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The House of Dies Drear*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968. A traditional mystery story, this novel concerns an African American family who moves into a home once a part of the Underground Railroad and owned by the abolitionist, Dies Drear. Set in Ohio in the late 1960's, the book focuses on friendship and family intertwined with African American history.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Autobiography of my Dead Brother*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006. The story of two, close life-long friends and their struggle to remain so, as one turns to a life of drugs and violence. Illustrated by Dean's son, Christopher, the protagonist of the story uses his drawings as a coping mechanism, as his life seemingly falls apart.

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

Boynton, Alice, and Wiley Blevins. *Teaching Students to Read Nonfiction*. New York: Scholastic, 2003. Great book to supplement lessons on nonfiction, especially as it relates to end-of-course testing.

Clemmons, Joan, and Lois Laase. *Language Arts Mini-Lessons*. New York: Scholastic, 1995. This is a great book full of short lessons on note taking, lead sentences, and combining literature with grammar instruction.

Hildum, Kristin. *Write to Publish*. Cypress: Creative Teaching Press, 1996. Good examples to use when teaching the writing process

Sunflower, Cherlyn. *75 Creative Ways to Publish Students' Writing*. New York: Scholastic, 1993. This book is a must read if you are in need of some creative ways for your students to demonstrate learning.

Strube, Penny. *Getting the Most from Literature Groups*. New York: Scholastic, 1996. This book gives step by step instructions for using literature circles in the classroom.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1990. The poems in this collection were chosen by Hughes shortly before his death. They represent work from his entire career. Many of the poems are autobiographical, but the collection also gives insight to the feelings of artists who moved to the North during the Great Migration.

Cox, Karen L. *Dreaming of Dixie*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011. This book reveals how the New South emerged in advertising, movies, publishing houses, and television. She debunks the myths of the mammy, Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, as well as a host of other falsehoods mistakenly credited to the South.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. This is an interpretative history of Blacks in American Films. It begins with the classic, *The Birth of a Nation* and concludes with the turbulent 1960's. Although written as a textbook, it is an easy read and full of interesting illustrations.

Andrews, William, and Frances Smith Foster. *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. An excellent resource for biographies of African American authors, their poems and stories, songs, plays and essays. An easy to read, alphabetized reference manual for teachers as well as the general public.

ⁱ Kuralt, Charles, and Irwin Glusker. *Southerners: Portrait of a People*. Birmingham, Alabama: Oxmoor House, 1986.

ⁱⁱ Stube, Penny. *Getting the Most from Literature Groups*. New York: Scholastic, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, Ralph, and Maryann Eeds. *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action*. Updated ed. New York: Scholastic, 2007.

^{iv} Gale. *Children's Literature Review*. Detroit: Literature Resource Center, Cengage Learning, 2012.

^v Andrews, William, and Frances Smith Foster. *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Lysa Craig, email Lysa.Craig@cms.k12.nc.us

^{ix} <http://webquest.org/index.php> "What is a WebQuest" Bernie Dodge

^x Peterson, Ralph, and Maryann Eeds. *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action*. Updated ed. New York: Scholastic, 2007

^{xi} www.cccoe.net "Socratic Seminar" Thomas Duffy

^{xii} www.huffenglish.com "Socratic Seminar" May, 2007.

^{xiii} www.readinggroupguides.com

^{xiv} Schlick, Noe, K.L. & Johnson, N.L. *Getting Started with Literature Circles*. Massachusetts: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1999.