

Writing a biography

Think of a famous person. Consider the questions below and use them to make notes about the famous person. Then use your answers to write a short biography of the person. When you have answered the questions you may need to reorganize the information you have collected, depending on the person you are writing about.

a Early life

- 1 Who is the famous person?
- 2 Where were they born?
- 3 When were they born?
- 4 What did their parents do?
- 5 What else do you know about their parents?
- 6 What was life like for their parents in the time/place they were living?

b Childhood

- 1 What kind of childhood did they have?
- 2 Where did they live as a child?
- 3 Where did they go to school?
- 4 What was their education like?
- 5 Did they meet anyone or do anything as a child that influenced them in later life?
- 6 Did anything important happen to them when they were a child?
- 7 Can you think of reasons why they may have chosen the area of life that made them famous?

c Adulthood

- 1 Did they have any further education?
 - 2 What was their first job?
 - 3 What other jobs did they do?
 - 4 Did they marry? If so, who did they marry?
 - 5 Did they have any children? How many?
 - 6 Where did they live?
 - 7 What was their life like as a young adult?
 - 8 Were there any important events during this period that affected the way their life developed?
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d Becoming famous

- 1 What area of life is the person famous for? e.g. politics, music, film etc.
 - 2 How did they first become interested/involved in this area?
 - 3 What was so special about this person?
 - 4 When did they first become well known?
 - 5 What were/have been the most important events during the time they were famous?
 - 6 What were/have been the most difficult times?
 - 7 What were/have been the most exciting/interesting times?
 - 8 Were there/have there been any particularly important people who affected their life during this period?
 - 9 Did/do they travel to other countries?
 - 10 Did/do they meet any very interesting people?
 - 11 Did they receive any awards for their work/achievements?
 - 12 How did becoming famous affect their family life?
 - 13 What kind of person do you think they were/are?
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e Life at the moment (if the person is still alive)

- 1 Where is the person living now?
- 2 How old are they now?
- 3 What is their life like now?
- 4 How do you think they look back on their life so far?
- 5 How has their life changed?
- 6 Have they had any important events in their life recently?
- 7 Have they got any important events coming up in the near future?
- 8 What do you think they will be doing in ten years' time?

f Later life (if the person is no longer living)

- 1 Where was the person living at the end of their life?
- 2 What was their life like at this time?
- 3 What other things did they do in their life?
- 4 How do you think they looked back on their life?
- 5 When did they die?
- 6 Where did they die?
- 7 Where are they buried?
- 8 How are they remembered today?

g Your feelings about the person

- 1 What are your feelings about the person? e.g. do you admire them, feel sorry for them, find them interesting/funny etc.
- 2 Why do you feel this way about them?
- 3 What do you feel were the most important things they did/have done?
- 4 Would you like to be/have been this person? Why/why not?

Read an example biography of Nelson Mandela

The life of Nelson Mandela

Based on the Macmillan Reader biography of Nelson Mandela

This is a biography of Nelson Mandela. He was born in 1918 in the village of Mvezo in the Transkei region of South Africa. His father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, was the chief of the village and an adviser to the king of the Thembu tribe. His mother was called Nosekeni Fanny. Life for black people in South Africa was very difficult at this time. Most of them could not vote, and only white people could stand for election. They could not travel anywhere in the country, and could only live in 'townships' where the land was not good. They had no running water, telephones or electricity.

Nelson Mandela's father Gadla was a proud and fair man. He always tried to do the right thing for his people. Because of this, he refused to obey the local white magistrate one day and lost his money and his important job in the village. After this, the family moved to Qunu, another small village. Nelson Mandela had a very happy childhood. He watched the cattle in the farm fields while his mother worked in the vegetable fields. He played and fought with the other boys, and in the evening he listened to his parents tell stories of long ago.

Nelson Mandela went to the local school and was a good student. When he was ten years old his father died, and his cousin King Jongintaba told Nelson to come and live with him. Nelson had to say goodbye to his family, but he was happy in his new home. He liked the king, and he was given lessons in leadership and freedom of speech. Perhaps this is why he later became a politician.

When Nelson was nineteen he went with the King's son Justice to Healdtown College in Fort Beaufort. He then moved to Fort Hare College. There he met many new friends, and he enjoyed discussing political ideas with them. Nelson then went to live in Johannesburg, where he found a job as a policeman in a gold mine. But he wanted to become a lawyer. So he went to law school and later set up the first black law firm in South Africa. He married a woman called Evelyn, and they had four children – two boys and two girls. During this time, Mandela learned about Gandhi and the way he was using non-violent protest to try to make changes in India. Mandela spent a lot of time talking with his friends about how they hoped all people in South Africa would one day be free and equal.

Nelson Mandela first became interested in politics when he was at Fort Hare College. Then in 1944 he joined the African National Congress (ANC). Life for black people in South Africa was getting worse all the time. Apartheid laws were getting more severe. The ANC tried to help black people. Nelson Mandela wanted a country where all people could live together in peace. He became well known because he organized a Defiance Campaign. He told black people not to obey the laws of apartheid. Thousands of people took part in the Defiance Campaign. The government did not change its laws, but the ANC grew stronger, and people around the world started to hear about it. After the Defiance Campaign Mandela was put in prison, but he went on fighting for freedom for black people. Mandela's work in politics made his family life very difficult. In 1957 Mandela and Evelyn were divorced, and in 1958 Mandela married Winnie Madikizela. They lived in the black township of Soweto and had two daughters.

In 1960, 69 people were shot dead by police during a protest in Sharpeville. Thousands of people were arrested, the ANC was banned and Nelson Mandela was arrested. In 1961 he became leader of an armed section of the ANC called the Spear. The Spear bombed power stations and government offices. Mandela could not live in his own home and had to stay with friends or in empty flats. In 1963 he was put on trial again. He did not defend himself, but made a long statement about the unfairness of life for black people. He was sentenced to life in prison and was sent away to an island where was not allowed to see his family.

During the 1970s and 1980s there were many riots and protests in South Africa. Many young black people wanted to fight apartheid. The government tried to stop these protests with force, and thousands of people were killed by the police and army. But international pressure against apartheid was growing stronger, and the country was in crisis. During this time a campaign to free Nelson Mandela started up. Around the world there were protests, and people marched in the streets shouting 'Free Mandela!'. The South African government saw that Mandela was the only man who could change things in the country. Mandela had talks with South Africa's new leader, President de Klerk. In February 1990 President de Klerk freed Mandela after 27 years in prison. He agreed to free 374 political prisoners. He said that the ANC and other banned organizations would be legal again, and he said that they would work on a plan to give all South Africans the vote. In 1991 Mandela became president of the ANC and in May 1994 he was elected President of South Africa. Apartheid finally came to an end. In 1996 a new constitution was signed, giving freedom of speech for all.

Mandela worked very hard to bring about peace in South Africa. In 1990 Mandela travelled around 14 countries, meeting lots of interesting people including President George Bush Senior and Margaret Thatcher. In December 1993, together with de Klerk, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Nelson Mandela is now 90 years old. He retired from public life in 2004 and he lives a much quieter life these days, although he still stays very busy with charitable work. He lives in Qunu, the village where he grew up, with his third wife Graca Machel (he and Winnie Mandela separated in 1992).

I admire Nelson Mandela very much because he worked so hard for his people and chose to use peaceful methods of protest. He fought to change South Africa into a country where people of different races could live together and have equal rights. His life must have been very hard because he spent almost thirty years in prison, hardly ever seeing his family. But today he is loved and admired by people all over the world.