

What to Look for When You Read a Biography

A good biography presents the facts about a person's life including what the subject did and how he or she made a difference in the world. It should also tell the story in an interesting way, showing what the person was really like, how he or she acted, and how others responded. What picture does the author paint of the individual?

What is the author's point of view? What does the author think of the person he or she is writing about? Biographers interpret information in different ways. How is the person's life presented? What conclusions does the author come to about the person? What parts of the book show you the author's point of view?

What information did the author include and what is left out? If you read two or more biographies about the same person, you will find different information in each biography. Why do you think the author included certain information and left out other information?

Is it true? This can be a very difficult question to answer. Biographers make their writings accurate by learning as much as possible about their subjects. They study materials such as diaries, personal letters, oral histories and autobiographies. The most accurate biographies are based on historical evidence. But some biographers are less thorough and careful in their research and may not use the best source materials. Also, the book may be fictionalized, or partly made up. Sometimes authors use their imagination in writing about a person's thoughts, feelings and conversations. (A fictionalized biography may be a good story, but it is not necessarily true.)

How can you check what evidence a biographer used? See if the book has a bibliography, end notes or an author's note to explain what sources the author used.

Remember that just because something is in a book doesn't mean that it's true.

When was the book published? What is the copyright date? Older biographies can be excellent, but newer books may include new information based on more recent research. They may also have fewer stereotypes. Newer books often look more appealing, too; they are designed for kids and may have beautiful illustrations and interesting photographs.

Be sure to examine pictures that look "historical." Sometimes these images were actually created many years after the event by artists who did not know anything about their subjects. They were not made to show what things were actually like, they were created as art. The images may also be based on stereotypes of certain groups of people. Look to see if the captions show when and by whom the pictures were made. It is important to be aware that just because an image appears old and "historical" doesn't mean that it is authentic.

Think about why some people have many biographies written about them and others have few or none.

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