

## How to Read a Biographical Essay

This introductory lesson has been designed to teach students how to read a biographical essay and glean essential information from it; the lesson focuses on basic skills as a means of helping them master the content of the article.

### Step 1

Assign students the name of an individual for them to research using *ANB Online*. They should begin by typing the person's name in the box entitled "Search Now!" that appears on the home page. When they finish typing the name, they should click on the green box to the right labeled "Search." This will bring up the Search Results List. They should click on the name of the individual they have been asked to research. (Note: It is possible that several names will appear on the Search Results List. If that is the case, students should locate the correct name and click on it.) To print the article, they should click on the printer icon at the top of the screen.

### Step 2

Once the students have printed the article, ask them to read the entire essay. Have them note the main subject of each paragraph (two or three words are sufficient) and write these notations in one of the margins. When they have completed this initial reading, ask the following questions:

- What information did they find in the first paragraph?
- In what order does information appear in the article?
- What information did they find in the last paragraph?
- Why is it helpful to know how a biographical essay is organized?

### Step 3

Encourage students to underline or highlight words, terms, or names that are unfamiliar. Ask them to decide which of the following will enable them to define or identify these items:

- Dictionary
- Explanation in the essay itself, i.e. context
- Links provided online
- Encyclopedia

In some cases, an unfamiliar name will be underlined, indicating that the student can find out about that person by going back to the article online and clicking on the name. This will link the student to an essay about that individual.

As the students work their way through the list of unfamiliar terms, have them define or briefly identify those that seem most important. They can do this in the other margin of the printed copy of the article.

### Step 4

Once they have completed these preliminary steps, they should go back over the essay to gather information. From the first paragraph they should be able to collect basic facts: when the individual lived, information about his family, and one or two important events that shaped his life.

- Why is it important to know when a person lived?
- What do we learn about an individual when we can place him in an historical context?
- Why is it helpful to know where a person was born and where he lived?
- What do we learn about an individual when we can place him in a geographical setting?
- What other significant facts do we learn from the introductory paragraph?

### Step 5

The decision to include this person in a major reference work speaks to this individual's importance. From reading the biographical essay, students should be able to answer the following questions:

- What were the major contributions or achievements of this individual?
- What opportunities enabled this person to achieve success?
- What obstacles/challenges did this person encounter?
- Did these challenges interfere with or contribute to his success?
- What influence did others play in this individual's life?
- Who were the key players?
- How did personal traits shape this individual's experience? Which were most important?
- Were the contributions of this individual of short- or long-term significance?

### Step 6

Based on their reading of the article, students should write a paragraph (6-8 sentences) in which they summarize this individual's importance. One question they might consider is whether the individual was more important during his own lifetime or has become important as his achievements and/or contributions have been recognized by later generations.