

## Evaluating Biographies for Elementary and Middle Grades

**What is the author's perspective? What biases exist in the text?** The author cannot give every detail about a person's life. It is important to identify what information is included and what is left out. What words, actions and events does the author present and how are these facts interpreted? What does the text reveal about the author's point of view?

**Is the information accurate?** Good biographies for younger readers use reliable historical evidence, including both primary and secondary sources. Does the author include a bibliography, end notes or an author's note to identify the sources used in researching the book? Are the sources reliable? Does the information conflict with material found in other biographies about the same person?

**Is this a factual biography or is it partly fiction?**

Many biographies have been fictionalized – the author has used his/her imagination in writing about a person's thoughts, feelings and conversations. Ask how much of the book is conjecture or interpretation.

**Pay attention to the copyright date.** Older biographies can be excellent, but newer books may be more sensitive to issues of bias toward people of color and women. Newer books often have a layout and graphics that are more appealing.

**Examine the images and captions carefully.** To supply pictures for their books, publishers often include images that have little to do with the text. In many instances, pictures look "historical" but were actually created many years after the event by artists who had no firsthand knowledge of their subjects and at a time when historical accuracy was not considered important. The images may also contain caricatures and exaggerations. Look to see if the captions indicate 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 and correct.

**Think critically about the biographies that are accessible to young people (and adults.)** What makes a person a worthy subject of a biography? Why do some historical figures have many biographies written about them and others have so few -- or none? What life stories remain unknown to students? Why are so few biographies written about people from ethnic and cultural groups, such as Korean Americans or Chinese Americans, or Americans of Puerto Rican or Mexican descent?

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