

Unit Seven – Biography Book Clubs

April- Mid May (Level 3 Reading Benchmark: O/P)

Welcome to the Unit

This month marks a return to information reading for your third graders--but information reading in a different structure: biography. Narrative nonfiction, as biography tends to be, is powerful, heady reading for your third graders. Biographies are texts that teach about the past as well as the present, about one person and about how people can be in general. Students read stories about real people who have done remarkable things-- many of whom have changed the world-- and they can start to wonder about how to use their own lives to better the world. Students read about people who faced adversity and how they handled that adversity, and they can begin to consider how they themselves deal with adversity. Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed*, says that kids need grit; in biographies, students see models of people with grit. They can see how others handle setbacks and still push themselves to stay determined. And, biographies can teach about more than the one subject of the text. We read to learn not only about the one person the book is about but also the group of people that person represents and the groups of people on whom that person made an impact. That is, we read biography not only to learn about specific famous figures, but also to learn about the world in which we live and the world in which we want to live.

Earlier in the year, students wrote to make a difference in their own lives and in the content areas they have considered (and continue to consider) issues of equity and access, power and injustices around the world. This unit is designed to deepen the level of students' thinking about what changes are possible and prepares them well for the social issues work they will engage in during the following unit. In addition, this is a unit which helps them to draw on all of their literary and informational reading skills and apply them to these transformational books.

This unit draws directly on directly on Part II of *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study in Teaching Reading* and like all units, its aim is to support students in becoming stronger readers. That is, the goal of this unit is not to get kids to remember and memorize every detail of a remarkable person's life. Rather, at its heart, this unit is about teaching students to use story grammar to determine importance, to synthesize, and to analyze critically across long stretches of text, ultimately growing theories within and across texts-- in this case, narrative nonfiction texts.

Overview

Essential Question: How can I draw on all that I know about reading narratives and about character development to read biographies (and other forms of narrative nonfiction) well?

- **Bend I: Biography Readers Use All We Know about Reading Stories**

How can I draw on all that I know about reading narratives and about character development to read biographies (and other forms of narrative nonfiction) well? (approx. a week)

- **Bend II: Biography Readers Not Only Follow a Life Story, We Also Grow Ideas**

How can I develop theories about the subject of a biography that are not unlike the theories I develop about characters in fictional books? Can I think about what the person's motivations and struggles are, and about what resources the person draws upon in order to overcome difficulties? Can I also think about what this character's achievements matter to the world? (approx. two weeks or less)

- **Bend III: Readers Know That Biography Is But One Form of Narrative Nonfiction**

There are different types of narrative nonfiction texts—some are biographies, but many are not. For example, in some narrative nonfiction, the main character is a plant, an animal, a group of people. How can I apply what I know about reading narrative nonfiction to a broader array of texts? (approx. a week and a half)

Alignment to Standards

As this is a unit on narrative nonfiction, it addresses both reading literature and reading informational texts standards, in addition to Standards in other areas. We want to highlight three major standards addressed in this unit. Throughout the unit, students will be discussing the subjects of their texts as if they are characters in a story, paying attention to their traits, motivations, and feelings and explaining how their actions contribute to the events that occur (RL 3.3). Students will also be reading about events that have already occurred and thus these texts are historical (and in some cases scientific). As students discuss what caused events to happen and what consequences occurred, they will be doing the work of discussing the relationships between events, using the language of cause and effect, time, and sequence (RI 3.3). In addition, the unit will support students in growing ideas and beginning to make inferences, backing these up with specific text evidence and

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this is work that is expected of fourth graders (RI 4.1). Thus, this unit will help to move students toward and beyond grade-level expectations.

Getting Ready

Here are the bare bone essentials of the preparation the teaching of the unit requires. What you will most need to do before the unit starts:

- gather biographies at different levels
- choose your read alouds
- form book clubs

Gather biographies at different levels

You can't very well teach the biography unit without gathering some biographies at different levels for students, of course. At the end of this calendar, we've included an appendix with a list of suggested series and titles along with their levels. If you choose to teach this unit as a club unit, as we recommend, we suggest gathering multiple copies of at least a few of the texts. Students can work in clubs studying different figures, but they can work more interpretively if they can all look closely at the same text, discussing the content and craft together. They can also hold each other more accountable to the text if they have the same text. If resources are limited, you might begin the unit by making sure that all members are reading the same text to support them as they start this work. As the unit moves on you can let the members of a club read different texts (or suggest that half the club read one text while the other half reads another text) as they become more skilled at this work.

Try to choose biographies about a variety of people. If you decide to order some new books, you might look through the biographies you already have and decide if there are categories of achievement within which you need more examples. Here are some possible categories:

- Figures in American history
- Athletes
- Figures in Science and Technology (scientists, inventors, doctors, etc.)
- Artists (authors, artists, poets, singers)
- Explorers (astronauts, polar explorers, deep sea divers, etc.)
- Activists

In addition, you will also want to make sure you have represented people of a wide variety of backgrounds--check for biographies of people of different races, genders, ethnicities,

abilities and disabilities and nationalities. You may choose to purposefully purchase new texts that highlight achievements of groups of people who run the risk of being underrepresented. Keep the heroes of your most reluctant readers in mind—is there a sports star or a singer that those students love? You may decide a biography on a figure from the Worldwide Wrestling Entertainment industry (Check out the DK Readers series on the WWE!) would captivate one particular child. Sometimes these famous heroes have their own websites and these sites include their background history.

For some teachers, resources will be very limited and it will be difficult to keep students reading biographies all month. If this is the case, we suggest helping students maintain a steady volume of reading by providing expository texts as the unit progresses. (Remember, though, that your initial lessons will be about helping students to read narrative nonfiction differently than expository nonfiction and you'll want all students to have narrative texts on which to practice this work.) But after these initial lessons, students might alternate between reading narrative and expository texts if biographies are extremely limited.

For the very last part in this unit, you'll want to make a collection of narrative nonfiction texts other than biographies. This could include books that tell the stories of inanimate objects (such as a piece of coal that becomes a diamond or a cocoa bean that becomes chocolate), texts that tell true stories of events in history, and articles about more recent events. (There is a list on our website of narrative nonfiction).

Choose read alouds

While you gather resources for children to read, you will also want to look for texts to read aloud to your class. Just as children will be independently reading multiple biographies to truly get a sense of the genre, you will want to read several biographies aloud. You should aim to read three to five texts to your children across the month. You might choose to begin with simpler biographies, perhaps picture books or short texts, to quickly immerse children in the genre. A picture book that we suggest is *Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles, a gorgeous picture book about a child who made a difference. This text is also listed in Appendix C of the Common Core as an exemplar within the 2-3 grade band and is Lexile level 730L. A novel that we suggest is *Who Was Jackie Robinson?* (Lexile 670L) by Gail Herman, one in the series *Who Was...?* In addition to this being a story of a famous person in history, we have also chosen it because clips of the recent movie *42* might be paired with this book.

Assessment

Because Biography requires both narrative and expository reading skills, you'll find it helpful to have the *Literature Reading Learning Progression* and the *Informational Reading Learning Progression* on hand.

You'll want to gather some data on your students that shows how well they can read informational and literary nonfiction. As you are likely just coming from work around test prep, this data might offer you information to help guide your planning or you might plan to give a brief, informal assessment to gather data on your readers. You'll want to read aloud a biography that fall within the higher end of the two-three text complexity band (the band ranges from 450L to 790L). We therefore recommend choosing a book around Level O or P. *The Childhood of Famous Americans* series and the *Who Was...?* series both offer a multitude of books in this range. You can also consult our Biography Book List on the TCRWP website for more suggestions.

As you read the biography, or part of the biography aloud, plan for places where you'll prompt children to stop and jot. You'll likely want to create prompts that assess skills such as inferring about characters and setting or interpreting the text. For instance, you might stop and ask, "What kind of character is this?" or, "What might this story be teaching you? What lesson are you learning? As you write, be sure to include evidence from the text to support your ideas." You could also ask students questions about what science or history or... they are learning from the text, as well. At the end of the unit, you'll likely repeat this same assessment (or a similar one) to measure student growth. If you ask questions about the literary elements of the biography, you can use the *Literature Reading Learning Progression* to assess these and if you ask questions about the informational elements of the biography, you can use the *Informational Reading Learning Progression* to assess these.

Bend I: Biography Readers Use All We Know about Reading Stories

The goal for this bend is for students to use their knowledge about reading fictional texts and studying characters to help them navigate biography in particular and narrative nonfiction in general. The goal is for them to use their reading skills to make meaning about real people and the impact they have had on the world.

It is wise to start the unit by teaching readers to recognize the genre they will be reading for the month. Taking a cue from Session VIII starting on page 2 in Volume II in *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, you might begin by teaching children to recognize how narrative and expository texts differ--one provides information in boxes-and-bullets while the other flows like a story, telling a series of events in the order they happened.

As your students move into reading their biographies, you will want to watch to see if they are applying all that they know about reading fiction. If needed, point out to them that biographies are like most fiction stories: they center around a main character whose life story contains challenges and struggles, then the character generally combats or overcomes these, and in the process he or she grows and learns a valuable life lesson/accomplishes something.

"If we were to divide up the nonfiction books in our classroom, we'd end up with one pile of true stories (narrative nonfiction) and one pile of expository texts (little courses on a topic). Today I want to teach you that readers read these kinds of nonfiction texts in very different ways. When readers know what kind of nonfiction book you have, that helps you decide how to read it. When you know you have narrative nonfiction in your hands, you know you can read it like narrative fiction. A story is a story!"

Apart from re-teaching the classic story arc in this way, you'll want to tell your readers of biography to pay attention to their subject's traits and sources of motivation, learning about the people of their biography just as they have learned about characters in fiction books. You may want to revisit some of the questions students used to guide their thinking in previous units, such as:

- What makes you think the character feels this way?
- How does the character's words and actions help you understand what he/she is like?
- How do the character's actions change?

Just as they did in fiction, children can study the daily actions of the subjects of their biographies and ask, "What does this tell me about her as a person?" Then too, readers often study the relationships that these people have, asking, "Who is in this person's life? How does that impact this person?" We push ourselves to continually think about the people in our books, asking, "What am I now learning about her as a person?" You can refer to the chart 'Narrative Nonfiction Readers Notice and Think About' on page 13 in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction*, as a resource to support this teaching.

"Today I want to teach you that, as biography readers, it is important to draw on all you know about studying characters. Just as you did in fiction, you can study the daily actions of the subjects of your biographies and ask, "What does this tell me about him or her as a person?" As you read, you revise and add onto these theories to make them more complex."

When you check reading logs, you might find that some students are slowing down their reading rate. If this is the case, you will want to remind students to heed their reading speed and volume the way they did in previous units. Encourage them to read long and

strong, allowing the story of a person's life to create an uninterrupted mental movie in their minds. You might help them to use some of the strategies they used to read with high volume in the series and mystery units, setting goals for how much to read each day (and night). Remind them to log the total number of pages read each day, pushing them to read not two or three but many biographies this month and to log each title.

If the logs still reflect that students are reading too little or too slowly, you will want to research why this is the case. One reason might be that students are encountering many unfamiliar names of people and places, events. So you might remind students that when we read with speed and momentum, we don't let unfamiliar words throw us off course. Instead, we carry the meaning of the larger sentence to guess a synonym that might work as a placeholder for this word, and we read on. Session XII in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction* may be used to guide this teaching. Also refer to the chart on page 73 entitled, 'Ways to Figure out What an Unknown Word Means'.

"Today I want to teach you that the most powerful readers don't *already know* what every single word in a book means. The most powerful readers work hard to *figure out* what a tricky word means! One of the ways you can do that is to get a mental picture of what's going on in that part of the story and to think about what makes sense."

Some teachers further support students' work with vocabulary by creating word banks with a repertoire of words associated with biographies: *achievement, obstacle, success, failure, influence, mentor, etc.*

Once your children are immersed in a biography, you may notice that they might be skipping over details. Some students read biographies as stories and forget that they are in fact, nonfiction. If this is true for your students, you can call their attention to the fact that, like expository nonfiction, biographies are written to teach. That is, these texts will provide lots of information on a topic, and readers learn this information as they read. Teach children to pay attention to details such as historical and political references or the descriptions of places and events, reminding them that these details are true and can be verified against informational texts on the same era. For example, a reader who encounters a reference to the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the "I Have a Dream" speech while reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s biography can be taught that these events will pop up in many nonfiction texts connected to the civil rights movement.

Of course, this also means that readers need to carry forward all of our prior knowledge on that topic and use it to make meaning out of the text currently in our hands. For example, while reading the biography of a famous Native American such as Sacagawea, a reader can think, "I've read other books on Native American tribes and history," and can draw on that prior experience with texts about similar topics to anticipate this text's contents and references. Or if children are reading the story of a famous dog, like Balto, they'll access their prior knowledge about dogs and especially any knowledge they may have about sled

dogs or Alaska. You will want to show students that book clubs provide a chance for students to activate this prior knowledge and apply it to their new findings. Book club discussions provide opportunities for students to express their knowledge of the topic at hand as well as their ideas, to agree and disagree with their group members, and to revise their thinking.

After this, you'll want to draw readers' attention to the setting—the historic time and place in which their character lived—since they are likely to be reading about characters who lived in different times or places from their own. You might say, "These people may live differently than the way we are used to, so we need to read looking carefully at details, gathering information about their daily lives." You might prompt students to ask themselves, "What am I learning about this person's life? What was their day-to-day existence?" Then too, you might suggest students compare this daily life to their own, thinking, "What in this book is similar to or different from contemporary society, or my life in particular?"

Often as children study the actions of those they are reading about, they will respond to their actions as children of today. That is, if the subject of their biography lived during a different time period, then her actions are shaped by that time period, but children will think about their responses to events as though these people lived in contemporary society. These are moments for clubs to catch each other, saying "That wouldn't have happened then because..." or "You're thinking about yourself! Step into her shoes and..." Book clubs will offer students the opportunity to push their conversations, thinking about a text for longer periods of time and exploring ideas with more depth. And by doing this work, readers are distinguishing their own point of view from that of the narrator and the characters, work the Common Core expects of them (RL 3.6). Book clubs might explore questions such as,

- Whose point of view is this?
- What are the different points of views represented in this text?
- What would be your point of view on this issue? Would it be more like _____'s (one character from story) or _____'s (another character from story)?

Once readers are well into their first biography (or perhaps into their second one), you can deepen your earlier teaching about the story arcs we find in biographies. Teach readers to pay special attention to factors and events that trigger a character's decisions. Remind them to ask the question, "How does whatever is happening now in this story connect with what came before?" Or, "How does this event follow from a previous event or factor in this character's life?" According to the Common Core, students need to analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. Studying the trajectory of biographies will give students the opportunity to do this work. Explain that

many biographies are tales of achievement: “The way these stories go is predictable,” you might say. “A person shows great promise at a young age or is affected by something in childhood and then, despite obstacles, the person grows up to do something remarkable!” You can encourage students to approach such texts expecting to follow that person’s path toward achievement. They will investigate how the subjects of their biographies interact with others and with their environments, and how they come to face challenges or obstacles, which they usually overcome.

Your students will already know from reading fiction that it is helpful to pay attention to the important events and decisions in a character’s life; they can be taught to recognize that a character’s response to those events often reveals his or her traits. For example, in *Who Was Jackie Robinson?* on page 51, there is an exchange of words between Branch and Jackie, and Branch says, “ I’m looking for a baseball player with guts enough *not* to fight back.” You might ask students to pause, thinking about what this reveals about Branch’s character and his values. You may also decide to teach students to turn to these critical moments during club conversations and to reread important sections, studying the language and thinking, “What does this section make me think?”

Children can also learn to push each other’s thinking by exploring the other side of an argument. For example, students might analyze the groups or ideals challenging these people and view the issue from their perspective. They might say, “On the other hand...” Students will benefit from clubs, because they will have the opportunity to strengthen and shift their ideas through conversation, which aligns with the Speaking section of the Common Core State Standards (SL 3.1)

Bend II: Biography Readers Not Only Follow a Life Story, We Also Learn to Grasp and Grow Ideas

As your students will now be able to adjust their reading based on the structures of narrative nonfiction they will also be poised to do the big interpretation work of developing theories and ideas about main characters, about the story, and about life. They have done this sort of work in fiction and now you can help them do that same kind of work with figures in history.

It will be relatively easy for your readers to follow a person’s life story as a series of events, and even to read a little deeper and uncover cause-and-effect patterns—but to understand this genre fully, readers need to be able to pick out the big message that a person’s life offers to the world. After all, you’ll want to tell students, “There is a reason that this person’s life made it to the press. This isn’t a story about a guy who watched TV all day, eating chips and swatting flies and going to the mall. If somebody decides to write a

biography, it is usually because the subject of the story did something big enough for the world to sit up and take notice.”

You might pick a few titles to use as examples as you teach readers to note the message a character’s life offers us. “The people featured in these biographies are movers and shakers. Elvis was no ordinary singer—he popularized a new kind of music that even after his death still affects the way people sing and dance and play music. Amelia Earhart was no ordinary woman and no ordinary pilot. She was the first aviatrix to fly solo across the Atlantic. Harriet Tubman was extraordinary not just because she overcame a terrible situation by escaping slavery, but because she then was able to help hundreds of others do the same. Ruby Bridges was no ordinary student. As a child, she fought racial injustice within the New Orleans school system. You’ll want to urge children to think about the big achievement of the characters in their books, asking, “Why has this person’s life story made it to the press?” Next, you might ask readers to think about the particular bold choices the character made to accomplish this big thing. In other words, teach children that it isn’t enough to say that Earhart, Presley, Tubman, or Bridges were all brave and determined—they certainly were these things, each in their own right—but to cite specific instances in these people’s lives that demonstrated true courage or persistence or personal risk-taking.

This work also creates an opportunity to broaden and add nuance to students’ vocabularies by introducing the subtle yet significant differences between words like determined and persistent or courageous and fearless. Teach readers to pick the precise word that best describes a specific choice a character made in life. For example, students could say Rosa Parks wasn’t just determined, she was a risk-taker in refusing to give up her bus seat, and Gandhi wasn’t just determined, he was principled because he stuck by certain moral ideals. Each time a reader attaches a trait to a character, urge her to also cite the specific occurrence that makes her think this about the character, and then to explore which words most precisely describe the character in that moment. You can take a cue from session XIII starting on page 82 in Volume II of *Following Characters Into Meaning*.

“Today I want to teach you a technique that you can use to help you grow not just any ol’ ideas about characters, but *precise, well-founded* ideas. And specifically, I want to teach you that it can help to try to reach for the exactly, precisely true word (or words) to convey something about a character.”

As a next step to deepen their ability to glean bigger ideas from biographies, you might teach your readers that just as it is important to recognize that we learn lessons from the narrative nonfiction we read, we have to understand that narrative nonfiction paints the picture of one person’s life to comment on the world at large. Often the subjects of our texts represent a larger group of people in society. In telling the story of one, the author is really crafting the story of many, commenting on history, society, and life in general. You will want to teach readers that as we read our nonfiction we need to think, “Does this person represent a group of people?” (Or more than one group?) If so, we push ourselves to think,

“What are we learning about this particular group? What is the life lesson that I am learning from this text?” For example, when reading *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles, teachers might have students pause and have discuss how Ruby Bridges is, in some ways, representative of several groups including African Americans, children, girls, etc. Students could then use these groups to understand that the fight for equal rights was not just limited to adults. In fact, children, just like themselves were (and still are) plagued with injustice. Often, readers take these life lessons and then use them as the impetus to live life differently. They think about how they wish the world were and how they will contribute to making that vision of the world come true, now that they have read the story of others who made a difference.

“Today I want to teach you that if you find yourself flooded with facts as you read and want to discern what is and is not important, it can help to see that beneath the details, many true stories are either tales of achievement or of disaster, and each of those kinds of story follows a predictable path. That path can help readers determine what matters most in the story- which details to pay most attention to and which to pay less.”

Across this unit, children will benefit from using sticky notes in a wealth of ways to support their learning and their talk. You might also introduce timelines as a way to track events and the subject’s reactions to those events or to track decisions and the effects of those decisions. Using Post-its in these ways supports readers in synthesizing information and growing ideas into theories. Here you can remind students that all the work which paid off in helping them to make interpretations in fiction will also pay off when reading biographies. You may refer to session XIV starting on page 100 in Volume II of *Following Characters/ Into Meaning* to guide this teaching.

“Today I want to teach you that when you get about halfway through your books (or when your books are bursting with ideas), it is wise to take some time to organize your thoughts. One way you do this is by sorting out your Post- it notes into piles of ideas that seem to go together, and then writing a bit to explore the connection and theories you are growing.”

Bend III: Readers Know That Biography Is But One Form of Narrative

In the first two bends, your students eased into reading narrative nonfiction through its most accessible form: biography. Since biographies read like stories featuring a main character, they are fairly straightforward to follow—readers brought all their fiction-reading muscles into play. Toward the end of the unit, your students will realize that biographies aren’t the only form of narrative nonfiction—that any true story qualifies as being narrative nonfiction. A chronological account of any event (such as a war or a revolution—or a baseball game) is also narrative nonfiction. They will know that narrative nonfiction can take many forms, from newspaper articles that cover a “story” to their social studies textbook chronicling the timeline of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. They will learn to use the framework of narrative nonfiction to read these types of texts as well.

You'll want to start this part, therefore, by re-teaching children to recognize narrative nonfiction when they see it. You might clarify that "narratives" involve time, a first/then/after that/next/finally sequence of events. Teach children to ask, "Does this narrative qualify as nonfiction? Or has the author added characters or details from his or her own imagination?" (If the author has added fictional characters or embellished actual events with fictional details, then the text is historical fiction and not narrative nonfiction.) Not all texts are easy to brand as narrative nonfiction texts—many are hybrid in structure, with swaths of narrative text interspersed with expository. You might decide your readers are advanced enough to analyze the architecture of hybrid texts. If so, you might teach that readers are prepared to encounter texts that contain both narrative and expository segments, and that we need to switch our reading muscles accordingly. For example, a passage describing the voyage of Columbus across the Atlantic will tend to have a narrative structure (it will tell a story of all that happened), but it might also contain an expository paragraph or two (for example, three bullets evidencing the claim that no one wanted to finance Columbus's voyage). You might use the two associated graphic organizers—a time line versus boxes-and-bullets—to illustrate the structural difference between these two kinds of texts.

Readers may be confused if they begin reading a narrative nonfiction about an animal or plant (or a section of narrative nonfiction within a hybrid text). How is a plant a character? So, next, you might call readers' attention to the fact that while many narrative nonfiction texts are not biographies, they still feature a central character. Readers will need to look closely to identify that a text that tells the story of a plant (as in the mentor text used in *Navigating Nonfiction Volume II--Cactus Hotel*) or an inanimate object (e.g., a volcano or a continent) is not expository. You can help them to see key details which will allow them to see that this text is narrative--that it relates a timeline of events that happen to this plant or volcano or continent. This is a new concept for young readers to take in, since many are used to the hero or heroine of a story being human or at least human-like. Often a "character" in narrative nonfiction might even comprise a group of people that function as one, such as the "colonists," the "members of the Underground Railroad," the "Sioux," or the "voyagers." You might demonstrate this by reading aloud a couple of such texts. Ask children to pick out who or what the text is mostly about and to think of this as the "main character." Session IX starting on page 22 in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study* chalks out one possible direction for this instruction using *Cactus Hotel*, a narrative nonfiction picture book that will feel deceptively like expository to many young readers.

"Today I want to teach you that you can use ways of reading narrative even if you don't have a traditional main character in your text. In fact, you can often get to some big ideas by stretching the definition of main character to apply to the main presence in the text. You can regard a meercat colony or a Venus flytrap or a whole group of people, like the pilgrims, say as the main character of your nonfiction narrative."

To help your students become even more adept at reading narrative nonfiction, it will be helpful to provide them with a template through which to look at narrative nonfiction. “Most true stories are either tales of achievement,” you’ll tell them, “or they’re tales of disaster.” You could teach readers that achievement and disaster stories each follow a predictable pattern and each provide their own lessons. Achievement stories, which include most biographies, typically document a path where a character (or a society) faces a challenge, takes risks, and makes critical choices to overcome this challenge. Disaster stories, such as the story of Pompeii or the *Titanic*, are often written so that history isn’t forgotten and that mistakes aren’t repeated. You’ll want to encourage children to study these two templates and make their own theories of what characterizes an achievement or disaster story—refer to Session XI starting on page 54 in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction* for guidance on how to do this.

As readers are growing stronger at determining what details matter and are holding onto information, concepts, and main ideas, you can help them begin to do more interpretation with all narrative nonfiction. You might help them to see that we do not just learn messages about a person, but about life. Remind them, “Stories are told for a reason. When we uncover this reason, our understanding of the story takes on a whole new level.” Since narrative has a natural flow, you will want to teach readers to hold onto big trajectories in such texts rather than simply fact-mining “to get notes.”

Encourage them to ponder instead, “Why was this story worth telling? What lesson does it impart? What does it serve as an example of?” Refer to session X starting on page 36 in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction* to guide your teaching.

“What I want to teach you today is that people write stories to convey ideas. The *idea* is what allows the storyteller to shape information, experience, into something that fits together so the story is not just a hodgepodge of junky details strung along a line of time. While that is a writer’s goal, it is also a reader’s goal. Readers have to find the unifying idea behind the texts we read, to make coherence and find meaning out of all that would otherwise be strings of events and facts.”

Yet another way of determining a narrative text’s big unifying theme is to study a big choice a character makes during a crucial time. Historical texts, especially, usually focus on the choices that a leader or a collective society makes, for example to raise a voice for the oppressed, to fight for a right, to take a risk by following a dream, or to challenge the government. Thinking about this crucial choice, its transformative effects, and the bravery required to make it helps readers take away the big message that a narrative text offers. Since the genre is nonfiction after all, knowing that these choices were real makes their effect and their message all the more powerful. Readers will read the stories of societies that chose passive resistance over violent war, of peoples that fought for liberties, of leaders that chose one path over another, and know that these are actual historic choices that paved the way for whatever liberty, bravery, and courage has come to mean in the world today.

If readers are having trouble growing theories, you might support interpretation by helping them to take an idea about the person in their book and make it broader. “Sometimes in life, people...” is a prompt that can help readers to create a broader, interpretation of the text. You might also remind students of the questions they asked themselves in earlier units to make interpretations:

- What central messages can I learn from how the character responds to trouble?
- What messages can I learn from the choices the character makes (doesn’t make)?
- What messages can I learn from when the character seems to feel two different emotions at the same time?
- What messages can I learn from the images that seem to occur across the book?
- What messages can I learn from the title the author picked for this text?
- What messages can I learn from the character’s mistakes and successes?

For example, if you are reading *Who Was Jackie Robinson?* as your class read aloud, students might practice this work by rereading their notes about how Jackie’s brother died when he was a teenager, how he trained for the Olympics only to watch as it was cancelled because of the war, and the many ways he was tormented by fellow soldiers and baseball players throughout his life. Then, students might be able to take this information and develop a theory such as, sometimes in life when people endure tough moments, they end up creating pockets of hope to inspire others. They might also take this theory to other books and texts they have read during this unit and consider where else this theme might show up. What messages live across many biographies?

A few common themes you might help students learn to recognize:

- Sometimes in life you have to reach inside yourself to find the strength to keep going.
- Sometimes in life when others believe in you, that helps you to believe in yourself.
- It takes courage to create change
- In life, there are groups of people who have power and they want to keep that power
- Sometimes in life you have to fail before you can succeed
- We can learn from our mistakes
- United we stand, divided we fall
- Survival isn’t always easy and it isn’t always pretty
- Sometimes small actions can have big consequences

For the celebratory end to the month’s work, readers might choose one biography or other narrative nonfiction text that resonates most for them and write about how the big message from this text has implications for their own life. Teach that reading narrative

nonfiction often affects our own personal decisions so that we go through a critical choice, thinking “What would Rosa Parks do?” or “Would Magic Johnson have given up now?” You may want to create a chart of prompts to guide students toward thinking about life lessons. The chart might include prompts such as:

- I learned from (person) that sometimes people . . . but instead, people should . . .
- I learned from (person) that in life, it is important to . . .
- (Person) changes from x . . . to . . . y . . .
- Even if you . . . , you should . . .
- Don’t forget that even if you . . . , you should . . .
- (Person) teaches us not only about . . . , but also about
- When I first read about (person), I thought . . . but now I realize . . .

Readers might develop these prompts into small literary essays and, if your community of readers is a close one, read these aloud to each other. The big lesson of this unit of study might just be that narrative nonfiction affects the way we live our lives, knowing that these people before us faced life with all its toughness and unjustness but came through shining. Their stories are worthy of being told, retold, and carried forward.