

Writing a biography

Think of a famous person. Answer the questions below and use your answers to write a short biography of the person.

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?

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?

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?

d Hometown/Country

- 1 What was life in their hometown or country like at this time?
- 2 How did they feel about life in their hometown or country?

e 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 When did they first become well known?
- 4 What were the most important events during the time they were famous?
- 5 What were the most difficult times?
- 6 What were the most exciting times?
- 7 Did they travel to other countries?
- 8 Did they meet any very interesting people?
- 9 Did they receive any awards for their work/achievements?

f 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 Have they had any important events in their life recently?
- 5 Have they got any important events coming up in the near future?

g 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 When did they die?
- 5 Where did they die?
- 6 Where are they buried?
- 7 How are they remembered today?

h 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?

Read an example biography of Nelson Mandela

The life of Nelson Mandela

Based on the Macmillan Reader biography of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela was born in 1918 in the village of Mvezo in South Africa. His father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, was an important man. He worked for the king and was the chief of the village. Nelson's mother was called Nosekeni Fanny.

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 argued with somebody 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 went to the local school and was a good student. But 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.

When Nelson was nineteen he went to Healdtown College in Fort Beaufort. He moved to Fort Hare College and then went to live in Johannesburg, where he worked as a policeman. But Nelson 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.

At this time in South Africa life was very difficult for black people. There was a system called 'apartheid'. Many black people could not vote, and they could not travel around their country. They could only go from their home to work. They had to live in 'townships' with other black people. The land here was not good. They had no running water, no telephones and no electricity. Mandela spent a lot of time talking with his friends about life in South Africa. 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, and 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. Mandela became well known because he organized a Defiance Campaign with the ANC. 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 apartheid laws, but the ANC grew stronger. People around the world started to hear about it. After the Defiance Campaign, Mandela was put in prison for a while. But he went on fighting for freedom for black people.

In 1957 Mandela and his wife Evelyn were divorced, and in 1958 Mandela married Winnie Madikizela. They lived in the black township of Soweto and had two daughters. But in 1960 the ANC was banned, and in 1963 Mandela was put in prison for life. He was sent away to an island where he could not 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. The police and army killed thousands of people. But people in other countries were also speaking out against apartheid. The United States and European countries passed sanctions against South Africa ('sanctions' are laws that punish a country). During this time a campaign to free Nelson Mandela also started up. Around the world there were protests. 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. De Klerk promised to free 374 political prisoners. He said that the ANC and other banned organizations would be legal again. And he said that the government would work on a plan to let all South Africans 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 for peace in South Africa. In 1990 he 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. He lives a much quieter life these days, although he still does a lot of 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.