



# CONGRESSIONAL BIOGRAPHY

## Introduction

The Constitution lays out minimum requirements for becoming a senator or a representative and guidelines for what kinds of responsibilities Congress holds as the nation's single lawmaking body. For more than 200 years, members of Congress have represented the American people. Today, there are 435 voting representatives, 5 delegates and one resident commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives, and 100 senators in the U.S. Senate. The House of Representatives and the Senate make up the legislative branch of our federal government.

This lesson invites students to research and explore the stories of our congressional representatives. After discussing the narrative elements of a biography, students research one member of Congress about whom to write a biography. Students conduct research, develop a biographical story, engage in peer review and then publish their final writing. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.



## Estimated Time

Four to eight class sessions

## National Standards

United States History National Standards

(Specific Era addressed depends on selection of individual to research)

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Writing 2, 5, 8

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Writing 2, 5, 8

## Learning Skills

Research, writing, peer review

## Essential Question

What is a biography? Who are the people who represent Americans in Congress? How do you compose a biography about one of those representatives?

## Documents and Worksheets

- Writing a biography worksheet
- Annotated webography

## Suggested Activities

- Discuss and define the idea of biography. A biography is the true story of one person's life (whereas an autobiography is a history or story of a person's life written by themselves.) When writing a biography, you write in the third person and share what are determined to be the main points you'll make about that person (the details, the turns and twists in his/her life story, key moments or decisions, what makes it a personal and unique story).
- Individually, students choose a member of Congress about whom to write a biography. To help them narrow down their choices and make a selection, provide some guidelines, parameters or even a list of names. You might for example suggest that students choose a senator or representative from your state (current or past), an individual who served in Congress during a particular historic time period (i.e. after the Civil War) or someone who may have held a position of leadership or been instrumental in some key legislation.



Providing brief “teaser” summaries of the experiences of various senators or representatives (see examples in Teacher Tip) may also help students determine who to focus on.

- Once students have decided on an individual to research for a biography, they determine the main questions they have about this person, how they might find this information and what they will highlight about that person’s story. Using the Writing a Biography worksheet, students gather information from online and library resources (see annotated webography for some suggested sources).
- After students have researched enough information, they write a biography. Ask students: How will your writing help readers discover something new about the person you are writing about? Can you inspire them to read more? Students should also carefully consider how to organize information so that it is not repetitive and so that it ties together into a story.
- When students have written a first draft of their congressional biographies, they engage in peer review and exchange drafts with partner. Ask students: Is there anything missing from the story? Does the biography make you want to learn more?
- Students incorporate peer review into their final drafts. Wrap up the activity with a discussion. Were there any surprises for students in the process? Did any students research the same person? Are there similarities in biographies? Were the students able to make connections between individuals regarding characteristics, skills or influences? Present biographies in class as a published piece — bind them into an anthology, post them in the classroom as an exhibition, or post them on line as a website.

### Extended Activity

- Students use the biographical information they gathered to create a digital or hardcopy poster that showcases life stories, including images/maps/copies of primary source material like newspaper clippings. Students may also consider telling the biographical story in a graphic novel format.
- Students write reflectively about their experience researching this individual. Would they ever want to run for Congress? Why or why not?



## Teacher Tip

Providing “teasers” can get students interested in researching specific individuals relevant to your curriculum. Here are some sample teasers. Biographic information about senators and representatives can be found on the websites listed in the annotated webography.

Serving first as a Representative in the House and then as a Senator, **Dennis Chavez** was the first Hispanic to serve in both houses of Congress. He represented his home state of New Mexico and was a member of the Democratic Party. ([More information](#))

**Patsy T. Mink** of Hawaii was elected to Congress in 1964. She was the first Asian American woman elected to Congress and advocated strongly for women’s issues and right. One project she was specifically involved in was Title IX of the Education Amendments which barred discrimination against women in schools receiving federal funding (for example, academics as well as in athletics). ([Image](#))

**Blanche Bruce** of Mississippi was the first African American elected to the Senate to serve a full term. Born as a slave in Virginia, he fled north to freedom during the Civil War. Following Emancipation, he worked in education and politics in Missouri and Mississippi. ([More information](#) and an [Image](#))

**Jeannette Rankin** of Montana was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives. She served from 1917–1919 and 1941–1943 and was the only member of Congress to vote against U.S. participation in both World War I and World War II. ([More information](#))

Helping to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1965, **Everett Dirksen**, a Senator from Illinois said racial integration was “an idea whose time has come.” ([More information](#))

**Mike Mansfield** of Montana is quoted as saying “every Member ought to be equal in fact, no less than in theory.” During his time in Congress, he was the longest-serving Senate Majority Leader in history (1961–1977). After he retired from Congress, Mansfield served as an Ambassador to Japan. ([More information](#))

**Margaret Chase Smith** of Maine was the first woman elected to both the House and the Senate. While serving in the Senate, she was one of the first to challenge Joseph McCarthy’s methods of investigating communism in government. ([More information](#))

Congresswoman **Barbara Jordan** was the first African American woman in the Texas State Senate before she became a representative at the federal level. She emerged as a national figure in part due to her statements on the Judicial Committee during the Watergate Crisis. ([More information](#))



## **Suggested Modifications**

Consider developing a rubric as a tool for both assessment and clarification of assignment expectations. For example, at the beginning of the lesson, share your rubric and discuss what meeting/exceeding expectations looks like for this activity. An assessment rubric for this activity could contain categories like understanding of biography as a genre, research process, and inclusion of historical detail and also the ways students meet expectations (meeting/exceeding, approaching, below).





4. When did this person decide to run for office? Has s/he said or written anything about why s/he decided to run?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Did anything interesting happen while s/he was serving in Congress? Is this person connected to any specific legislation, activities, writing, speeches?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Are there any examples of how this person addressed the needs of the nation, his/her state or his/her constituents? Can you find any quotes from speeches or writing?



7. What did this person do after s/he left Congress? Do you feel his/her life and work made an impact on community, his/her state, the nation, or Congress?

8. Any last reflections on the experience of the person you have researched?





## Annotated Webography

There are lots of resources available to help students learn more about members of Congress.

<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress (1774–present day) provides a brief paragraph of information on each individual who has served in the U.S. Congress.

<http://history.house.gov/Exhibition-and-Publications/WIC/Women-in-Congress/>

This website contains biographical profiles of former women members of Congress as well as current members. There are also historical essays and images of each woman member.

<http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Black-Americans-in-Congress/>

This website features biographical profiles of former African-American members of Congress and links to information about current black members as well as historical essays and images.

<http://oralhistory.clerk.house.gov/additional-resources.html>

Here you will find a growing resource of oral histories with recent House members (and their staff, family and scholars).

[http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Facts\\_Figures.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Facts_Figures.htm)

A list of fun facts and milestones related to Senate history and senators including “firsts” and “records.”

<http://www.senate.gov/states/>

Information, organized by state, related to current and former senators of note.

<http://www.house.gov/>

Website of the House of Representatives with an area for searching for members by state, committee, name.

<http://thomas.loc.gov/links/>

Library of Congress website with links to historical and biographical information about members of Congress on internal and external sites. One can also search activity on the floors of the Senate and the House, including roll call votes, bills and the Congressional Record (the official record of proceedings and debates in Congress).