



U.S. CAPITOL VISITOR CENTER

TEACHER LESSON PLAN

GRADE LEVEL: 6 – 8

CONGRESSIONAL BIOGRAPHY

Introduction

For more than 200 years, members of Congress have represented the American people. The U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate make up the legislative branch of our federal government. Today, there are 435 voting representatives, five non-voting delegates and one resident commissioner in the House of Representatives, and 100 senators in the Senate. 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 lawmaking body.

This lesson invites students to research and explore the stories of our congressional representatives. After discussing the narrative elements of a biography, students select one member of Congress about whom to write a biography. Students conduct research, develop a biographical story, engage in peer review and then share their final writing.





Estimated Time

Two class sessions

National Learning Standards

Civics:

NSS-C.5-8.3 Principles of Democracy

NSS-C.5-8.5 Roles of the Citizen

U.S. History:

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

Language Arts:

NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies

NL-ENG.K-12.8 Developing Research Skills

NL-ENG.K-12.12 Applying Language Skills

Learning Skills

Research, writing, peer review

Essential Question

- What do biographies add to our understanding of history?

Additional Questions

- What is a biography?
- Who has represented Americans in Congress throughout history?

Documents and Worksheets

- Congressional Biography “Teasers”
- Annotated Online Resources
- Writing a Biography worksheet



Suggested Activity

- **As a class, discuss and define the idea of biography.**
 - A biography is the written history of a person’s life. Biographies usually include big moments in the person’s life, as well as information about that person (where they are from, the turns and twists in their life story, key moments or decisions, and special attributes or other experiences).
- **As a class, discuss what makes a compelling biography.**
 - How will your writing help readers discover something new about the person you are writing about? Can you inspire them to read more? What connections can you make between the person’s life and current readers’ lives? Students should also carefully consider how to organize information, avoid repetition, and connect various details into a cohesive 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 a list of names. For example, you might 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.
- **Once students have decided on an individual to research, direct them to use the “Writing a Biography Worksheet” for their first draft.**
- **After completing their first draft, divide students into pairs or small groups for peer review.**
 - Ask students: Does the biography make you want to learn more? Is there anything else you want to know about this person?
- **Students incorporate peer review into their final drafts. Wrap up the activity with a discussion.**
 - Were there any surprises for students in the process? Were the students able to make connections between individuals regarding characteristics, skills or influences? Present biographies in class as published pieces—bind them into an anthology or post them in the classroom as an exhibition.



Congressional Biography “Teasers”

- Providing “teasers” can get students interested in researching specific individuals relevant to your curriculum. Sample teasers are provided in the student section to share with your class. Biographic information about senators and representatives can be found on the websites listed in the annotated online resources.
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Extended Activities

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

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

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

<https://history.house.gov/People/>

Information, organized by state, related to former and current representatives.

<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://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.”



Congressional Biography – Choosing a Member of Congress






The first step in writing a biography is to choose your subject. Below are examples of former representatives and senators to help get you started.

U.S. House of Representatives

Name	Portrait	State	Dates in Congress	Description
Henry Clay		Kentucky	1811 – 1825	Clay had a distinguished political career, serving as a senator, Speaker of the House, and Secretary of State. He was one of the youngest Speakers of the House and held the second-longest cumulative tenure in that position
Joseph Rainey		South Carolina	1870 – 1879	Rainey was the first African American to serve in the House of Representatives, the first to preside over the House, and the longest-serving Black lawmaker in Congress during Reconstruction.
Jeanette Rankin		Montana	1917 – 1919 1941 – 1943	Rankin was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives. She was the only member of Congress to vote against U.S. participation in both World War I and World War II.
Patsy Mink		Hawaii	1965 - 2003	Mink was the first Asian American woman elected to Congress. She was the major author and sponsor of Title IX of the Education Amendments, which barred discrimination against women in schools receiving federal funding.
Dalip Singh Saund		California	1957 – 1963	Saund was the first Asian American, the first Indian American, and the first Sikh American to be elected to the United States Congress.



U.S. Senate

Name	Portrait	State	Dates in Congress	Description
Charles Sumner		Massachusetts	1851 – 1874	A powerful orator, Sumner was known for his outspoken anti-slavery beliefs during the Civil War. He was attacked in the Senate Chamber in 1856 after delivering his “Crimes Against Kansas” speech.
Blanche Bruce		Mississippi	1875 – 1881	Bruce was elected to the Senate in 1874 by the Mississippi state legislature. He served from 1875 to 1881, and became the first African American to serve a full term in the Senate.
Hattie Wyatt Caraway		Arkansas	1931 – 1945	Appointed in 1931 to fill the vacancy created by her husband's death, Caraway ran for a full term and became the first woman elected to the Senate. She was the first woman to chair a Senate committee.
Dennis Chavez		New Mexico	1935 – 1962	Chavez, who represented New Mexico for 27 years in the Senate, was the first American-born Hispanic senator. He introduced many civil rights reform bills that sought to end racial discrimination in the workplace.
Margaret Chase Smith		Maine	1949 – 1973	The first woman to serve in both houses of Congress, Smith served 24 years in the Senate after more than four terms in the House of Representatives. She established a reputation as a tough legislator on the Senate Armed Services Committee and in foreign policy and military affairs.



What about the Capitol Dome?

William Thornton's design for the dome was selected in 1793, and he received credit as the first Architect of the Capitol. The second Architect of the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, altered Thornton's design by adding an octagonal drum to separate the base of the dome from the central pediment. Thornton's design would not be fully realized until Charles Bulfinch, third Architect of the Capitol, altered the exterior profile of the plans further by increasing the height of the dome. The Bulfinch Dome, consisting of an interior and exterior shell, was completed in 1826. The interior shell replicated the proportions found in the Pantheon in Rome, reinforcing the connection between ancient ideals and the United States.

By 1850, the nation's westward growth established new states and with them, more legislators. Larger chambers for the House of Representatives and the Senate were needed to provide additional space to work within the Capitol. Congress appropriated funds to expand the Capitol and named Thomas U. Walter the fourth Architect of the Capitol. Walter designed a new cast iron dome which was completed in 1866. The dome maintains the original neoclassical design despite being built in different eras. Today, the Capitol Dome is a symbol of the United States throughout the world.

Annotated Online Resources

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/capitol-building/history>

Includes a detailed history of the construction of the Capitol.

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/architecture-elements/corinthian-columns>

Here is specific information about the Corinthian columns used in the Capitol and reference to other federal buildings that employ similar architectural styles. From this site, you can navigate to information about other kinds of columns used at the Capitol as well as materials and styles referenced in its architecture and design.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0s1djKf17ZU>

A visual timeline of the growth of Capitol Hill.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/s2.html>

An online exhibition, "Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation," presented by the Library of Congress. The website features information about the 1792 competition and primary sources about the Capitol design.

<https://founders.archives.gov/>

Online database with more than 185,000 searchable and fully annotated documents from the Founding Fathers Paper projects. Excerpts of correspondence of Jefferson and Washington retrieved from this site.



Writing a Biography

The next step in writing a biography is to gather information. Once you have the information you need, you can then organize it into a story. Use this worksheet to help outline a biography.

1. Whom will you research? Why do you find this person interesting? What do you want to find out?

2. What happened in this person's childhood and youth (where are they from, what was their home or school life like)?

3. What happened in the beginning of this person's career? What was his/her profession before joining Congress (if any)? Do you think any of these experiences inspired him/her to serve in public office?

4. When did this person run for office? Has s/he said or written anything about why s/he decided to run?



Use all the notes that you gathered on this worksheet to write the biography in a separate document.

5. What did s/he do while s/he was serving in Congress? Is this person associated with any specific legislation, activities, writing, or speeches?

6. How did this person address the needs of the nation, his/her state or his/her constituents while serving in office? Can you find any quotes from speeches or writing?

7. What did this person do after s/he left Congress?

8. Any final reflections on the experiences of the person you have researched?