

CALIFORNIA WRITING PROJECT

Teacher-to-Teacher Curriculum Resources

California Writing



Family Autobiography Projects: An Adaptation of Family and Community History Projects

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California Writing is a statewide program of the California Writing Project.

This yearlong project begins with students learning to write autobiographical sketches about their identity as newborns and toddlers. The project then moves to students' learning to write biographies of family members. It focuses on strengthening students' identities—by affirming them and their lives—and the connections that bind and link family.

Genres: autobiographical sketches and biographies

Recommended Grades: K-4

Overview

This lesson is modeled after one created by California Writing Project teacher consultant, Jin Dorst—Family and Community History Projects.

Students come from all kinds of families and cultural backgrounds, have a wide variety of life experiences, and speak a number of different languages.

All students need validation and confirmation of who they are and where they come from, but this is especially important for students of color and for those whose first language may or may not be English or standard English. These students usually go to schools where their teachers are most likely white and the curriculum often does not reflect their experiences or backgrounds. The students and their lives, because they are such rich resources for learning, became the impetus for this yearlong project. It is a layered curriculum project that starts at a simple level and grows in complexity as the year goes on.

This journey of affirmation begins with the students in the class. We learn about ourselves and each other through weekly sharing of special childhood possessions, family artifacts, and family stories. The sharing leads to a variety of writing opportunities—poetry, memoir, autobiographical sketches, and personal narratives. We also read and study memoirs and biographies in our literature circles, analyzing the characteristics of the genres and drawing on what we read as models for writing.

Over the course of the school year, our learning and preparation for the family and community history projects covers seven important stages:

- Learning about myself and my friends: writing autobiographical sketches and memoir writing
- Learning about our families: exploring family experiences through writing and reading
- Learning about our grandparents: preparing for biography writing
- Learning about our parents: writing biographies

The year concludes with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the lives we all have and the places we have come from. This is accomplished through the power of purposeful writing that transforms, empowers, and inspires all of us.

Objectives

Students will:

- gain understanding and appreciation for all classmates through learning about others, their families, and their heritage
- feel safe and valued for who they are and where they come from
- learn to write their stories in two genres—autobiographical sketches and biographies
- realize that they all have stories to tell and that their stories, though different, often have common threads and themes
- build community and establish positive relationships with all students and their parents or guardians
- connect their home and school lives
- publish their writing in a variety of ways and share them with others.
- understand the power of the written word and the impact it can have on their lives.

Applications to the California English-Language Arts Academic Content Standards

□ Second/Third Grade

Writing Strategies

- 1.0 Students write clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows they consider the audience and purpose. Students progress through the stages of the writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing successive versions).

Organization and Focus

- 1.1 Group related ideas and maintain a consistent focus.

Penmanship

- 1.2 Create readable documents with legible handwriting.

Research

- 1.3 Understand the purposes of various reference materials (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, atlas).

Evaluation and Revision

- 1.4 Revise original drafts to improve sequence and provide more descriptive detail.

□ Second Grade

Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

- 2.0 Students write compositions that describe and explain familiar objects, events, and experiences. Student writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and the drafting, research, and organizational strategies outlined in Writing Standard 1.0.

Using the writing strategies of grade two outlined in Writing Standard 1.0, students:

- 2.1 Write brief narratives based on their experiences:
 - a. Move through a logical sequence of events.
 - b. Describe the setting, characters, objects, and events in detail.
- 2.2 Write a friendly letter complete with the date, salutation, body, closing, and signature

□ Third Grade

Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

- 2.0 Students write compositions that describe and explain familiar objects, events, and experiences. Student writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and the drafting, research, and organizational strategies outlined in Writing Standard 1.0.

Using the writing strategies of grade three outlined in Writing Standard 1.0, students:

- 2.1 Write narratives:
 - a. Provide a context within which an action takes place.
 - b. Include well-chosen details to develop the plot.
 - c. Provide insight into why the selected incident is memorable.
- 2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.
- 2.3 Write personal and formal letters, thank-you notes, and invitations:
 - a. Show awareness of the knowledge and interests of the audience and establish a purpose and context.
 - b. Include the date, proper salutation, body, closing, and signature.

Teaching Sequence

Since I am tied into the *Open Court* curriculum in my district, I have been able to use California Writing to make some adaptations to the writing component for my first grade class.

In *Open Court* Unit 1, Let's Read, we begin an autobiography that begins teaching students the writing process and continues through Unit 2, Animals. The students are learning to use capital letters for names, months and days of the week, cities and states. So their homework assignment is to get their parents talking to kids about when and where they were born, how they got their name, and something funny that happened to them when they were younger. Parents are also encouraged to send in a baby picture. The final copy will include either an illustration or students can draw a picture.

Autobiography Worksheet

Name _____ # _____

Date _____

Autobiography Information – so I can write a story about myself:

Date of birth (month, day, year)

Place of birth (city and state)

How did I get my name?

What was something funny that happened when I was a baby? (I don't remember, so please tell me about it.)*

*Parent can write a few words or student can draw a picture and write a word to remind me what it was about.

Student Sample

Bright and Beautiful

My Chinese name is Xiu Jie Guo. It means bright and pure. My Japanese name is Akemi. It means bright and beautiful. My mom and dad chose Akemi because its meaning is close to my Chinese name's meaning. I was born in China on June 10, 1998. My mom and Dad adopted me when I was eight months old.

We lived in San Francisco after I was adopted. We moved to Sacramento when I was two years old. My Mom's parents, my Bachan and Jiichan, lived in Sacramento too.

I was adopted with eleven other girls. We have a reunion every year. This summer we will go to Disneyland and Legoland.

My little sister was adopted from China when Ayumi was 14 months old. I went with my Mom and Dad to pick her up. I felt proud to be a big sister and to have a little sister. Ayumi's name is close to my name's meaning. Her name means graceful and beautiful and mine is bright and beautiful.

Sometimes I feel a little sad because my birth mother couldn't keep me. Growing up in California is good and fun because it's like being on a journey. I learn new things and go to new places. I'm lucky because my Mom and Dad chose me.

By Akemi Alden, 1st grade

Teaching Sequence continued

In Unit 6, Journeys, we begin to discuss immigration. Students can choose an older adult to interview (usually a parent or grandparent) to discuss how they arrived in California. They may select from several interview questions, and the students then go through the writing process to write and illustrate several paragraphs, each on a different sheet of paper.

During Unit 8, Games, students can also interview to learn about some games the older adult played as a child. The child then teaches the rest of the class how to play the games, many of which children today do not know.

Each student's interviewee is invited to the school to take a photo together with the student on a photo day. Black and white photos are mounted and are surrounded by the writing and illustrations onto a storyboard and displayed. During the writing process, first grade with their fourth grade buddies, revise and edit together.

Interview Worksheet

Name _____ # _____

Date _____

As we begin our unit on Journeys, we look forward to having students find out a little about how they arrived here in California. We ask that you provide support by helping with an interview, and helping make decisions of whom your child will interview.

During the interview, you will have to use your own judgment of how much information your child can transform from your information to your child's own writing. You may assist the writing during the interview taking notes, but the children will do their own writing in class and should use their own words.

When and where were you born?

What was it like growing up?

What did you like to do?

How did you get your name?

What brought you here to California?

Do you have a special memory of something funny that happened to you?

Do you have a special memory of something sad or frightening that happened to you?

Do you have any special family traditions?

Do you have any special hobbies, talents, or accomplishments that you can share with me?

Do you know any other languages?

Is all of your family in the United States?

Student Sample

Goong-Goong's Life

My grandpa's name is Narisco Garcia Wong. I call him Goong-Goong. He was born in Matamoros, Mexico on October 16, 1940. When he was growing up, he was able to spend some of his childhood in China and part of it in Mexico. It made him feel happy because he knows more about his Mexican and Chinese cultures.

When he first came to California, he and his family had a grocery store, but they didn't speak any English. They didn't even know the difference between the Mexican and the U.S.A. currency. When the customers came in, they trusted them enough that they would pay them the correct amount for their groceries. Lucky for them they had loyal and honest customers!

When he was in China, he was in the middle of a war and had to hide in the hills with his family and friends. They were all pretty scared. I think this was pretty interesting because I didn't know he was in a war.

One of our family traditions is Chinese New Year. Our family closes the year and begins the new year with the whole family. We usually have dinner at our house.

Some of Goong-Goong's family is still in Mexico City, Hong Kong, China, and other parts of the world. He speaks Chinese, Spanish, and English fluently. Some day, I would like to go to these places.

By Tristan Fong, 1st grade

My Hero

My hero is Kenneth Fujii. You are probably wondering who this is. He is my grandpa. He is a retired dentist, and if someone were to ask me to describe him, I would say he is brave, thoughtful, encouraging, and understanding.

When my grandpa and I (and sometimes my sister Karisa) have free time, he always entertains us with his stories. Most of the time his stories have a lesson, or sometimes he tells us about his life.

When my grandpa was younger he was sent to live in a camp. Camp was what they had when America and Japan were at war. America was scared of the thought that some Japanese Americans would spy on them, so they took most of the Japanese Americans out of their homes and put them into camps. (It was not the kind of fun camp.)

Several years later my grandpa went to the Korean War. He said he felt like he owed it to America.

After the war was over, he returned home, barely injured.

My grandpa was a very brave person, and I am proud of him.

By Allison Yamamoto, 4th Grade

Luigi Mario Di Ninni

One day, in January, in 1957 a wonderful thing happened in Buenos Aires, Argentina. A boy was born, and his parents named him Luigi Mario Di Ninni after his grandmother, Maria Luisa. When Luigi was about four years old, he moved from Argentina to New York in the United States. After some time, he moved to Connecticut.

In Connecticut, Luigi went on picnics with his family and friends. He played baseball, softball, football, soccer, and basketball. He enjoyed going to the beach. His best friend was his cousin, Eddie DiRenzo. Luigi and his friends had snowball fights in the winter and tomato fights in the summer. At East Hartford High School, Luigi won several medals for running track. Luigi remembers that his parents worked hard, sometimes with two jobs to get situated, being immigrants. His mom, dad, and his track coach taught him to do what was right and what he could do with hard work and discipline.

As an adult, Luigi moved a long distance from Connecticut to San Diego, California. Later, he moved north to Sacramento. For about twenty years, Luigi worked in prisons, and now he works as a Deputy Commissioner in parole hearings. He usually works in jails where people are held after getting arrested.

In August of 1995, Luigi was introduced to Carliana Di Ninni, his third child. Carliana knows he is helpful and works hard like his parents and his track coach taught him. What really touched Carliana is that out of all Luigi's experiences from Buenos Aires to Sacramento, he said his greatest accomplishment was having Alexandra, Angielee, and Carliana Di Ninni with Linda Jean Di Ninni.

by Carliana Di Ninni, 4th Grade

For more information about how to order classroom copies of the 2005 CWP California Writing Anthology, link to <http://californiawritingproject.org/teachers/anthologies.html>.

Teaching Sequence continued

The public event displays the interview projects of both the first and fourth grade classes together. If possible, video-taping includes the buddy writing activities, which is played during the exhibit of writing.

To get a glimpse into the public event, link to http://californiawritingproject.org/Parents/didion_event.html

Aileen Nishio also contributed, **Directions for Making a Book in a Box**, to the CWP website pages. This project is another way teachers can publish students writing. You can find this at http://californiawritingproject.org/Parents/gift_box.html.

About the Teacher Consultant

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