

Writing Assessment Handbook

**California Assessment
Program**

Grade Eight

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Firsthand Biography

(Originally written for middle school teachers and students.)

In firsthand biography, one of several types of personal writing tested in the CAP writing test, another person is revealed through the eyes of the writer as well as the significance of the writer's relationship with that person. Firsthand biography is closely related to autobiographical incident, which is the narration of a memorable instance in the writer's life.

Although both firsthand biography and autobiographical incident deal with some aspect of autobiography, they have a different focus. Autobiographical incident focuses on the narrator, while firsthand biography focuses on another person and the writer's relationship with that person.

Importance of Firsthand Biography

In firsthand biography students explore both another person and themselves. In this type of writing, students are challenged to develop their skills in writing descriptions and narrations. As with autobiographical incident, students writing a firsthand biography remember, select, and organize details and incidents that best illuminate their subjects.

Students writing firsthand biographies are also challenged to interpret another person's actions, motives, and beliefs. They must also examine and be able to relate the significance of the other person to their own lives.

Characteristics of Firsthand Biography

In firsthand biography, the writer conveys to a reader the personality, actions, and physical traits of a person he or she knows well. The following list of characteristics of this type of writing can be used as a guide to understanding this type of essay. The form of the essay will be governed by the writer's perception of and experience with the person who is the subject of the biography.

Many options are available to the writer of high quality firsthand biographies. Students are encouraged to experiment with varied strategies appropriate to their subjects, their readers, and themselves. The following strategies have been drawn from eighth-grade essays written for CAP.

Characterization

The writer maintains a consistent attitude toward the subject. The characterization has depth, perhaps revealing contradictions or surprises inherent in the subject's personality. Strategies available for characterizing include:

- Visual imagery (size, shape, features, dress, and so forth) (Physical details are used to enhance

other attributes and are not a catalogue of vital statistics.)

- Subject's immediate environment, workplace, living place
- Subject's routines, habits, or typical activities
- Dialogue
- Comparison or contrast to other people
- Assertions or generalizations about the subject's character

Incidents to Support the Characterization

Incidents are specific rather than generalized occurrences. Each incident presented helps illuminate the character. Strategies for presenting incidents include:

- Orientation to the incident (time, place, context)
- Dialogue
- Naming (specific names of people or objects, quantities, or numbers)
- Specific narrative action (movements, gestures, postures or expressions)
- Surprise or suspense
- Humor

Significance (controlling idea or thesis)

Writers provide readers with an understanding of the subject's importance to the writer. Writers may convey significance in a variety of ways, including the following:

- Explicitly stating the significance
- Giving a history of the relationship with the subject
- Citing incidents to support assertions about the importance
- Presenting the subject in such a way that the significance is clearly conveyed

Tone

Writers establish a tone that clearly and consistently reveals their attitude toward their subject. Tone is established by the writer's choice of words, details, and incidents.

Organization

Writers develop their essays by integrating incidents, descriptions, and significance in any way that serves their intent. Possible arrangements include:

- Chronological development
- Settings used to illuminate the subject and the relationship of writer to subject
- A sequence in which incidents are revealed
- Different aspects of the subject's personality

Rhetorical Effectiveness Scoring Guide for Firsthand Biography

Firsthand biography names a writing situation that shows how another person has been important in the writer's life. The writer shows the person through recurring activities and specific one-time incidents that illustrate the subject's character. The writer must present this special person memorably to readers who do not know the person, characterizing through details of appearance and manner, description of working or living environment, habits or typical activities, presentation of dialogue, or comparison to other people.

As a type of autobiographical writing, firsthand biography informs readers about the writer as well as about another person. Although the focus is on the subject of the biography, the writer also reveals the personal (sometimes even emotional) quality of his or her relationship with the subject.

Score Point 6-Exceptional Achievement

Characterization. The writer of a six-point essay presents a comprehensive and complex characterization of a person. The characterization has depth, revealing a range of quality through direct and/or indirect means.

A writer will integrate several of the following strategies for characterization:

- Physical description (visual imagery: size, features, dress, etc.)
- Assertions or generalizations about personality and behavior
- Background description (history of relationship, subject's environment)
- Detailing of subject's routines, habits, or typical activities
- Re-creation of dialogue
- Comparison or contrast to other people

Specific Incidents or Recurring Activities. The writer develops the characterization through relevant incidents and/or as recurring activities.

The writer of a six-point essay will utilize most of the following strategies for presenting incidents:

- Orientation to the incident (time, place, context)
- Dialogue
- Specific identification (names of people or objects)
- Specific narrative action (movements, gestures, postures, expressions)
- Expression of remembered feelings or insights at the time of the incident
- Closure to the incident that relates back to the characterization

Pattern. All the parts of a six-point essay are clearly interrelated to present a sharply focused portrait of the subject. Writers of six-point essays present incidents, generalized activities, details, claims, and reflections that are built into a coherent, consistent pattern.

Significance. The importance of the subject in the writer's life is clear, either explicitly or implicitly. If the significance is implied, the reader can infer it confidently. It may be stated in the writer's insights at the time of the incident or in reflections from the writer's present perspective. These insights may appear integrated into the narration or in the conclusion of the essay.

Score Point 5-Commendable Achievement

Characterization. Subjects in five-point essays are vividly presented but in less depth and with less complexity than those in six-point essays. Writers use several strategies for characterization but not as many and not as well integrated.

Incidents or Recurring Activities. Relevant specific incidents and/or recurring activities will be present in five-point essays. However, writers may rely on generalized activities or less fully developed specific incidents. In either case, all incidents or recurring activities in five-point essays exemplify relevant characteristics of the subject.

Pattern. A coherent pattern is still evident in five-point essays. Any extraneous details are too minor to distract from that pattern.

Significance. Readers know how the subject is important in the writer's life. The significance, however, may be less well integrated into the essay than in a six-point essay.

Score Point 4-Adequate Achievement

Characterization. Although the writer may use fewer strategies of characterization, a clear sense of personality still emerges from the paper. Lacking depth, however, that personality seems simple.

Incidents or Recurring Activities. The writer of a four-point essay tends either to develop one specific incident or to list a series of recurring activities to portray the character. When the writer narrates an incident, it is less clearly focused and less relevant to the characterization. Incidents may be too long, seemingly presented for their own sake.

Pattern. The writer of the four-point essay is not in complete control of the pattern. Some descriptive details or narrated incidents may add little to the characterizations or may inexplicably detract from other assertions about the character. The writer quickly corrects this disruption by moving on to elements that coherently fit the overall pattern of the essay.

Significance. Although the statement of significance may seem tacked on rather than naturally developing from the essay, readers can readily understand the significance of the subject to the writer.

Score Point 3-Minimal Achievement

Characterization. The writer of a three-point essay will name the subject of the biography but may present that subject more as a generalized type of person than as a specific individual. Although the reader still gets some sense of who the subject is, the focus of a three-point essay is less on a clear personality and more on the topic idea of the prompt, a generalized type of personality, or on the writer himself. Some three-point essays may even seem more autobiographical than biographical.

Incidents or Recurring Activities. The writer may depend on recurring activities, presenting the subject in a quite unfocused collection of detail. If the writer narrates an incident, the narration may ramble or digress, lacking a point or not revealing much, if anything, about the subject.

Pattern. The pattern of a three-point essay may be either not clearly apparent or too simple to contribute to a meaningful biographical sketch. When patterns are not clear, the writer of the essay may have done one of the following:

- Focused on the topic idea and presented a rambling list of generalized details
- Focused on the topic idea and presented several people who illustrate that idea
- Rambled in general about the topic idea, finally landed on one person to describe

When patterns are too simple, the writer may present one of the following:

- A detailed, rambling incident (either biographical or autobiographical in focus) with an attached character significance to meet the requirements of the prompts
- A close following of the literal directions of the prompt: a disjointed combination of introduction, physical description, long incident or series of brief trends, and importance of the person
- A catalog of scattered details that don't clarify what kind of person the subject is

Significance. The writer does not seem to be very clear about the personal significance of the subject. The significance is only briefly identified or vaguely referred to.

Score Point 2-Inadequate Achievement

Characterization. The writer of a two-point essay may make unsupported claims or generalizations about the subject or may present random details, lacking any clear point. The essay may be focused more on the writer or on several people than on one subject.

Incidents or Recurring Activities. The writer may offer an incident or mention recurring activities that add little to the identified characterization of the subject. Sometimes the reader may be able to infer some possible relevance.

Pattern. Readers will find it difficult to determine any meaningful pattern. There may be a center of focus, however. Frequently, two-point essays will contain information that does not seem to be a part of a significant pattern. The essays may seem rambling and confusing.

Significance. Reference to the significance is rare and then only in a formulaic response to the prompt. When present, statements of significance seem to have little to do with the rest of the essay.

Score Point 1-No Evidence of Achievement

Characterization. Readers get little meaningful information about the subject. Instead, the subject seems to be little more than a name with some kind of superficial relationships to the writer.

Sometimes no single subject is ever identified.

Incidents or Recurring Activities. The writer usually relies on recurring activities that are mentioned briefly. They add very little to the characterization and may seem pointless or repetitious. Incidents are rarely present.

Pattern. If any pattern is present, it is a superficial response to the prompt or a stream of thought.

Significance. If significance is established, it is flatly stated.

Score Point 0-No Response

A note refusing to write to the prompt; off topic.