

Writing an Extraordinary Biography

(according to Barbara Kerley*)

You can write a biography, too. Why not start with a member of your family, like Susy did. Just follow her lead...

First, she gathered information on her subject—in this case, Papa.

Susy observed Papa carefully to learn:
his physical appearance
his personality
his routines and habits
his likes and dislikes

Tip: You can study your subject through personal observation or by reading the accounts of others. Be sure to take good notes so that you won't forget anything important.

She gathered additional information by:
conducting interviews
reading books, articles, and letters

Tip: Whenever possible, use primary sources—things written by people who actually know or knew your subject. Think of primary sources as eyewitness accounts.

Next, she started writing.

Susy worked hard to make sure her biography was accurate, being, as Papa put it, “loyal to her position as historian.” So she was careful to get the facts straight:

people
places
dates
events
quotations

Tip: Always double check your facts. (This is when you'll be really glad you took good notes!)

Susy wanted her readers to get to know the “real” Mark Twain. She brought her portrait to life by including:

specific details
lots of examples
interesting quotations

Tip: Writers follow the rule, “Show, don’t tell.” To make your biography lively, instead of telling your readers that your subject is funny, give them an example of one of your subject’s jokes.

Susy created a well-rounded portrait of Papa by showing:
his fine and not-so-fine habits
his accomplishments and set-backs
things he found easy and things he found difficult

Tip: Everyone has flaws and everyone struggles from time to time, even famous people who have done great things. Providing a balanced account will help your readers see your subject as a real person.

Finally, Susy asked for writing advice when she needed it. Susy consulted with a fellow author (in this case, Papa!)

Tip: Even if you don’t happen to live with a world-famous author, you can get writing help from a teacher, parent, or librarian. There are lots of people eager to see write your own, extraordinary biography.

*with a lot of help from Susy

Adapted from THE EXTRAORDINARY MARK TWAIN (ACCORDING TO SUSY) by Barbara Kerley. (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010)