

Communication 4312 – The Biographical Sketch

One of the most common stories you will be asked to write is the biographical sketch. However, sketches come in many forms. To start with, you must determine what kind of sketch you are being asked to write.

This section discusses kinds of biographical sketches and introduces the longer sketch, also known as the profile.

A common sketch is when a person is named to a new position. If the person is coming from somewhere else and if you aren't going to be able to interview them, this is basically a background story.

On the other hand, if you had been able to interview the person, that changes everything. Now you emphasize what the person says about the new job including quotes. Then you use where they went to school and all that.

Another kind of sketch involves a person who is already here and doing a particular job. In this sketch, the background recedes and you have to emphasize whatever the person is involved in now.

In any biographical sketch, the lead is very important. You must set the context. Be careful of going off in a direction that doesn't fit the purpose of the story.

For example: Jeannette Harrison, who teaches chemistry at the University of Houston, became interested in the subject when she got a chemistry set for Christmas. She was 7.

Now, explain what she does, what she teaches. And follow that with areas of research or whatever she does that relates to her job. Don't put too much in the paragraphs. If necessary, include more than a single paragraph on this.

Now, develop Harrison's education and/or how this interest in chemistry evolved over time. This may be when to say where she went to college. But, perhaps she was involved in some kind of science competition while still in high school.

After college, she decided to go to graduate school. Where, why? What kind of degrees did she get? Did she study under anyone famous, or did she do something unusual? And then what? Where did she teach? When did she come to the University of Houston. How long has she been here?

You can do this story without quotes. But, if you talk with the person you must get at least two quotes. Three would be better. Put one high, about the third paragraph. Make the other related to her teaching. If you have a third one, have that related to the University of Houston. In this regard, I would never use just one quote. That shows how lazy you were in doing the research.

We already know that we need lots of preparation. Preparation, preparation, preparation. We also know that we need to ask: What's the story about? And, you need to know the answer that question before you write the story.

As a general rule, you want to use background that ties the person to whatever it is she or he is doing or the reason you are writing the story. After that, use only the background

information that is pertinent to the particular situation you are in – what's the story about and what's the context?

Have the pieces of background build on each other. Don't jump around. See if you can find a direct correlation in the material you are presenting. If not, leave it out and go on to some other material you have.

Depending on the circumstances, you are going to have lots of anecdotal information that is very interesting. Be careful of falling into the trap of thinking that's important enough to be included in your piece.

For instance, suppose Jeannette Harrison rides a motorcycle. While interesting, that may not fit the sketch we are writing. On the other hand, suppose she rides the motorcycle to school. That may be worth using -- not necessarily in the lead.

The problem with the motorcycle lead would be showing its relation to teaching chemistry. The motorcycle idea helps to emphasize the most important aspect of writing the biographical sketch. You are writing about what the person does, not what she or he is involved in that's unrelated to what she or he does. You have to be careful of getting sidetracked with information that isn't related.

For example, no matter how many cats the person has, it may not be relevant to the story we are doing now.

However, if you were doing a longer story – a profile – everything changes. Now incidental information may find a place – the motorcycle for sure and maybe even the cats. In the profile you have time to roam, to work in what otherwise might be incidental. However, you want the story to be more than a series of incidentals.

In a profile, look for significant events, important happenings and/or turning points in a person's life. Find out everything you can about the person and then arrange the information to make it readable and interesting.

Your job as the writer is to determine what order to put things in. Don't just throw in information in any old way. Have the information build on itself. Say away from chronology. Talk about the present and see how the past is related.

Oh, about that chemistry set Jeannette Harrison got for Christmas: she still has it in a frame in her office.

■ David McHam