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8<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Students in my eighth grade language arts classes will be starting work on autobiographical writing activities now. All work will be done on their own as homework activities, not in-class work. The **due date** for the final copy will be **March 10, 2010**, and will be worth **500 points**.

Parents and students alike are almost always delighted with the completed work. Students will have a wonderful keepsake, and families can even make several copies to give as gifts to grandparents or other special relatives. My hope is that students will be able to get lots of information from relatives over Thanksgiving and our four week Winter Break, when they are typically with family that they normally don't get to see very often.

The Writing Your Life assignments are not meant in any way to pry into the personal or private lives of a student or a student's family. Students are encouraged to write about only what they and their families feel is appropriate. The open-ended activities are designed for all students, including students living with their biological parents, with grandparents or other relatives, with adoptive families, with foster families, or others. There are writing options for many situations.

Also, it is very important to realize that the questions are meant to be used as possible writing prompts, not requirements. Each activity includes a list of questions, and students certainly do not need to answer every question. In fact, if you, for any reason, do not want your child to complete the assignment, he or she may instead complete an alternative assignment. (For example, the student might interview another adult to find out about his/her childhood, or research and write about the childhood of a historical figure.) Please contact me as soon as possible if this is the case.

This project has proved to be a positive one for students, and it has indeed been so for families as well. One of the reasons for its success is that it builds on what students are most familiar with – themselves. Students work on their writing skills as they write about something they know very well. Even if they sometimes become frustrated or tired of writing, the results at the end of the project are well worth their efforts.

I hope that writing an autobiography will be a positive and memorable experience for your child.

Sincerely,

# Finishing Your Autobiography

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## Adding the extras

If you are writing an autobiography of your life, try to make your final book as interesting as possible, with photographs, drawings, and mementos from your life. To find material, go through old pictures, scrapbooks, letters, photo albums, programs, or boxes of “junk.” Make your own drawings to illustrate some pages, incorporate computer graphics, or make a collage or two. Use your imagination to make the book as inviting as possible.

It’s a good idea to include as many “documents” as you can in your autobiography. For example, you might include:

- a photocopy of your birth certificate
- a picture you drew for your mother when you were four years old
- a copy of a first-grade report card
- a report you did in fourth grade
- a copy of your confirmation certificate
- newspaper articles that mention you
- poems, stories, or artwork you have created

When you look back at your autobiography in later years, you will be delighted to have a record of your childhood and adolescent years – even if some of the things may seem silly or insignificant to you today.

You might want to include a section in your book for family history. This section could include information about ancestors and family members – photographs, copies of marriage certificates, birth certificates, old newspapers, or whatever other information you might have.

## Writing the beginning

There are several pages you need to complete for the beginning of your autobiography. At a glance, these are:

- Title page
- Acknowledgments
- Dedication
- Table of Contents

**Title page.** On the title page of your book, put the following:

- the title of your book
- your name
- the date your book was completed

**Dedication.** To whom would you like to dedicate your book? The dedication page should include a short statement, often something as simple as “For my future children” or “In appreciation of my mom and dad.”

**Acknowledgments.** If you like, write a statement acknowledging anyone who gave you particular help in preparing your book – perhaps a family member or friend who helped you gather information, locate pictures or type your manuscript, or the teacher who prodded you into completing your book.

**Table of contents.** For the table of contents, list the chapter titles and the pages on which they begin.

## Editing

Editing is the first step in turning your written material into a book. It involves making any major changes you wish to make, perhaps deleting material, adding material, moving paragraphs around and/or reorganizing.

It also involves dividing your story into chapters. Chapter divisions make a book easier to read, and they make it easier for readers to go back and find specific references. Chapter titles also make each part of your book more inviting.

## Proofreading

Proofreading is the final step before you make your final copy. You need to go over your book and make any corrections necessary in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, etc. After you have gone over it yourself, have at least one other person go over it again, just to be sure your work is the best that it can be.

## Getting your book made

At last you are ready to put your material into book form. Getting a book made can be broken into five main steps:

- Reproducing photographs
- Putting it into print
- Choosing a cover
- Binding the book

## Reproducing photographs

First, you will need to decide how to reproduce the photographs you want to include in your book. Whatever method you use, remember this: Be sure to include captions for all photographs. Each caption should identify all the people in the picture, as well as the place and approximate date the picture was taken. Also, note each person's relationship to you – maternal great-grandmother, second cousin, brother, etc. What is obvious to you now may *not* be obvious to you in years to come or in future generations. Think about your great-grandchildren who may discover your book sometime in the next century. They will be delighted to have the details about people they otherwise wouldn't be able to identify.

**Photocopying.** The easiest and most inexpensive method of photo reproduction is photocopying. Many photos reproduce reasonably well on a conventional copier. It pays to experiment with different settings on the copier and with different machines. Color copiers often do an especially good job of reproducing photographs, though at a higher price.

**Reprints.** Another option is to have reprints made of your photographs, so that you can attach actual photographs inside each finished book. (Of course, this can be expensive if you are making many copies of your book.) If you don't have the negatives or disc of some of the photographs, find a store that will make prints from the photographs themselves.

**Scanning.** If you are using a computer in putting together your autobiography, you may want to use a scanner to incorporate photographs into your text. Many businesses that provide graphic services offer scanning services for a small charge, if you don't have access to a scanner at home or school.

## Putting it into print

Getting the book into “print” is the next step. That means typing the book, probably using a computer word processing program. You may want to type it yourself or have someone type it for you.

Here are a few basics to keep in mind:

- Make sure the printer you are using has a fairly new print cartridge. A very old print or toner cartridge will produce faded-looking print.
- Be sure to leave an adequate inside margin (1¼”-1½”), to allow for binding.
- Number the pages.

If you can’t find a way to have your book typed, you can write it by hand, neatly, in standard blue or black ink. It might be a good idea to invest in an erasable ink pen, just to make things easier.

When planning your book, it is a good idea to include photographs, drawings, documents, etc., throughout the text – rather than saving them all until the end. Your finished book will then look more inviting, and it will be more interesting to read.

## Choosing a cover

For the cover of your book you have many options. You might choose something simple, perhaps plain, colored card stock available at a photocopying center. You might want to create an original design, photocopying the design onto the card stock. Or you might want to create a special, personalized cover, using your talents for quilting, embroidery, watercolor, or calligraphy. Your choices are limited only by your imagination.

Whatever your choice, try to make the cover something that will last and something that looks inviting.

## Binding the book

After the pages and/or covers are finished, you will need to bind your book. The easiest binding, for most purposes, is plastic spiral binding, available at printing or photocopy centers for a few dollars (or less) per book. Simply take in the books, with the cover, and ask the attendant about plastic spiral binding. The book can often be bound while you wait.

Other options for binding include making hand-bound books, using three-ring notebooks, stapling, or using a plastic cover designed for term papers.

# Before You Were Born

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*"Just as you inherit your mother's brown eyes, you inherit part of yourself."*

Alice Walker

Who you are today depends a lot upon people who have lived before you. Perhaps you inherited your curly red hair from your grandmother or you learned to play chess from your stepfather, who learned it from his father. Perhaps you lived in this country because of your great-grandparents' interest in starting a new life in the United States.

Your family may be made up of parents, brothers and sisters, stepparents, foster parents, guardians, some combination of all the above, or some entirely different combination. You may be born into a family, adopted into a family, or become part of a family in some different way. Some people even consider themselves to have more than one family. No matter what form they take, families have a big effect on our lives.

Tell about the people who came before you in your family. Who were they? Where did they come from? How did they live?

You will need to do some research before you can start writing. Talk to your parents. Telephone your grandmother. Write to an uncle. Visit your mother's cousin. Visit a cemetery. Ask to look at family scrapbooks or mementos. Take time to find out as much as possible about your family's past – the past that helped lead to you.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. How did your family wind up in this country? Were your ancestors Native Americans? Did your ancestors emigrate from another country? If so, why did they come to America? How? When? Where did they settle? Did they come to the United States by choice?
2. Tell as much as you can about your grandparents and/or your great-grandparents. Which ones are still living? What are they like?
3. Do you know about any "characters" in your family's past? Every family has its clowns, saints, black sheep, and eccentrics who are deeply loved or loathed. Do you know any stories about "characters" in your family?
4. Are there any special family history stories that are told again and again in your family? For example, you might have heard how your great, great grandfather's name was changed when he arrived in America, because the officials at Ellis Island couldn't read Hebrew.
5. Are there any characteristics or personality traits that run through your family? Perhaps they describe Uncle John as "stubborn as a mule, just like all the Millers." Perhaps, generation after generation, there are relatives who tend to be artistic. Explain what family traits run in your family.
6. Does your family have any items from previous generations? Perhaps you have an old desk, quilt, or watch that has been passed down from generation to generation. What stories do you know about these items?

# You Make an Entrance

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*"A baby is a tight little bundle of wailing and flannel."*

Frederick Locker-Lampson

When you were born, a unique individual was born. Find out about the first few months in the life of this individual (you!) – from birth until about age two.

Of course you won't remember much, if anything. You will need to talk to relatives, friends and neighbors who knew you then. You will need to consult photo albums and scrapbooks, and perhaps your baby book, if you have one.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. When and where were you born? Do you know anything about your birth? (Was it early in the morning? Did you take a long time to arrive? Was your father present at the delivery?) How did your parents announce your birth?
2. If you were adopted, tell about your first meeting with your parents. Did they pick you up at the hospital or perhaps meet the plane bringing you to this country? How much time did your parents have to prepare for your arrival? What else do you know about your adoption?
3. What kind of baby were you? What can other family members tell about your first year or two?
4. Tell about your name. Do you know anything about your surname and/or its history? Why were you given your first name? Does it have any special meaning? Do you have any nicknames? Do you like or dislike your name or your nicknames? What other names were your parents considering for you? What would your name have been if you had been born of the opposite sex?
5. Where do you fit among your brothers and sisters (third daughter, second son, etc.)? If you have older brothers and sisters, how did they feel about your arrival?
6. Did you have a special stuffed animal, toy, or blanket when you were little? If so, describe it.
7. When did you first talk? What was your first word? Who heard it?
8. What were your favorite poems, songs, games, or bedtime stories?
9. Some people are unable to find out about and/or write about their early years. If you are one of these individuals, imagine what your early years *might* have been like, or how you *wish* they had been. Then use the questions above to help you create a fictional background for yourself. (Be sure to indicate that you are writing fiction.)

# Your Early Years

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*"Most of what I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be, I learned in kindergarten."*

Robert Fulghum

What was life like for you as a child? To help you start remembering, look at school pictures, family snapshots, an old diary (if you kept one) and/or old scrapbooks. Write about your early years, after age 5.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. What do you remember with real pleasure from your childhood? Tell about a good time growing up.
2. What was upsetting during your childhood years? For example, did you experience a fire, a flood, a car accident, a death in the family? Did you have to change schools, move away from a close friend, or go through the divorce of your parents? Tell about a bad time growing up.
3. Tell about a mischievous thing you did when you were younger.
4. What did you want to be when you grew up?
5. Were you ever really sick? Did you have any broken bones or operations? Tell about what happened and how you felt.
6. Did you have a favorite hiding place or secret place? How about an imaginary friend? Describe your "secrets" and how you felt about them.
7. What scared you when you were younger? Did you believe in ghosts or boogiemen, or monsters under the bed? Explain.
8. What were your favorites – favorite comics, clothes, television shows, books, movies, toys, etc.? Describe them.
9. Is there anything you could swear happened – but your parents swear *didn't* happen?
10. What sorts of thing did you believe when you were younger that you don't believe now? For example, did you believe that little people lived inside your television, or that wind was caused by trees flapping their branches?

# On Your Birthday

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*"People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."*

James Baldwin

What was the world like the day you were born? What was happening that year? Visit the library and/or your local newspaper office to find a newspaper from the day you were born. Find popular magazines from the year you were born, as well as an almanac and/or any other useful materials.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. On the day you were born, what happened in your community, in the United States, and in the world?
2. What were the major news events the year you were born?
3. What were the hit songs the year you were born? What were the Oscar-winning movies? Which actors were popular? Which books were best sellers? Who were the sports heroes?
4. What other interesting information can you find about the year you were born? For instance, who was president of the United States?

# You and the Outside World

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*"All adventures, especially into new territory, are scary."*  
Sally Ride

How were you involved in the outside world when you were younger, the world away from your family? Write about school and activities you were involved in during your earlier school years.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. Describe the schools you attended. What was each like? How did you feel about school? What were your favorite subjects? What school programs do you remember? What teachers do you remember most, and why?
2. Did you ride the bus, walk to school or get a ride from your parents? What memories do you have about getting to school?
3. What do you remember about lunch at school? Did you pack your lunch or eat school lunch? If you packed your lunch, what kind of lunchbox did you have?
4. What were your favorite school activities? Did you ever enjoy being in a play, a spelling bee, a concert, a poster contest, student council, etc.? Explain.
5. How did you spend your free time after school and on weekends? What did you do for fun? What games did you play? Did you have any hobbies? What were they?
6. Where did you live when you were little – on a farm, in a town, in a city? Describe your neighborhood and some of your neighborhood activities. How did you get around? (You might even want to draw a map of your neighborhood and the important places in it.)
7. Were you active in any clubs – 4-H, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, Bluebirds, Boys and Girls Club? Why did you join? What did you do? What did you learn?
8. Were you involved in organized sports, either through school or other organizations? What did you like about sports? What did you dislike about them? Did you have a favorite coach? Why was he or she your favorite? What was your favorite sport?
9. Did you take lessons of any kind – music lessons, dance lessons, karate lessons, acting lessons, etc.? How did you feel about the lessons? What did you like? What did you dislike?

# Your Family

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*"Big sisters are the crab grass in the lawn of life."*

Charles M. Schultz, *Peanuts*

Family life is one of the strong glues of our society, yet every family is different from every other family. Describe your family. (If you live part of the time with one parent and part of the time with another, you may choose to write about either or both family situations.)

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. Who do you live with? Who are the people in your family? How do you think your family is like most families? How do you think it is different?
2. Who is your mother? What does she look like? Describe her personality and your relationship with her. What does she do for a living? What are her hobbies? What do you remember most about her from when you were very small? What have you learned from her so far?
3. Who is your father? What does he look like? Describe his personality and your relationship with him. What does he do for a living? What are his hobbies? What do you remember most about him from when you were very small? What have you learned from him so far?
4. Who are your brothers and sisters? Tell their names and ages, and describe each of them. What are they like? What do you like to do with each of them? To whom do you feel closest, and why?
5. Does anyone outside your immediate family live with you? How does that work out?
6. Who is your favorite relative outside the immediate family, and why?
7. If you have stepparents, describe them. How have you adjusted to having them in your life?
8. Do you have stepbrothers or stepsisters? Half sisters or half brothers? How have you adjusted to having them in your life?

# Being Your Age

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*"Know thyself."*  
Socrates

What is it like to be the person you are now, at the age you are now? Write about who you are today.

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. What do you look like? Describe yourself.
2. How are you like other people your age? How are you different?
3. What is the most unusual thing about you?
4. What or who influences you the most at this point in your life? Why?
5. What disturbs you?
6. What makes you happy?
7. What do you value?

# Everyday Life at Your Age

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*"Take time every day to do something silly."*  
Philipa Walker

Young people today live lives very different from young people of yesterday or young people of tomorrow. Describe everyday life in your world today. As you write, you will be recording history, so write with honesty.

Imagine someone fifty years from now finding what you have written. How interesting it will be for them to read about your world. And imagine what fun it will be for you – a gray-haired man or woman – to read about your own life in “the good old days.”

## Getting started

Choose from the questions below to help you write:

1. Describe what is “in” with you and your friends. What music do you like? What dances, television shows, movies, videos, etc., do you enjoy?
2. What is definitely not “in” with you and your friends?
3. Describe the fashions that you and your friends wear. Describe the hairstyles.
4. Describe a typical school day for you. What happens? What do you enjoy? What do you dislike? Is school important to you? Why or why not?
5. What are the conflicts, hassles and stresses in your life? Describe them. What do you do about them – or what are you going to do?
6. What do you do when you are not in school? Describe a typical weekday evening, a typical Saturday and a typical Sunday.
7. What activities are you involved in, other than school? Do you belong to clubs or organizations? Do you have a part-time job? Do you enjoy any hobbies? Are you active in church groups? Do you participate in sports?
8. Describe young people of the opposite sex, in your view. What are they like? What do you like about them? What do you dislike?
9. Do you go on dates? If so, where do you usually go? Do you remember any date especially well? Why?

# WHO! Was... Am... Might Be...

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*"Some people don't find out what they want to be until they're 35. I knew when I was 4."*

Mariah Carey

Think about an average day, perhaps a day like today, in fall, winter, spring, or summer. Write a paragraph or two about the day – but make it an average day when you were about five years old. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing?

Next, write a paragraph or two about an average day when you were about ten years old.

Then write about an average day today.

Finally, look into the future and envision the person you think you might become. Write about what an average day for you might be like at each of the following ages:

- 20 years old
- 35 years old
- 60 years old
- 80 years old