

Teaching Students about Historical Figures

It is important to consider what research says about learning prior to using the following pages:

- 1. Learning is social.**
- 2. It begins with prior experience.**
- 3. It requires risk taking.**
- 4. It involves constructing meaning.**
- 5. Learning mandates active involvement.**
- 6. It allows for choice.**

Another important research-based consideration is that students learn more from verbal interaction than they do from paper and pencil activities. In addition, the brain seeks patterns, so having students use a familiar format many times assists their learning. Keeping the above in mind, one suggestion for using the biographical information about famous Virginians follows.

1. Begin by introducing a famous historical figure who is fairly well known—George Washington. Ask students what they know about Washington. List student contributions that are true, dispelling any myths such as the one about Washington chopping down the cherry tree.
(prior knowledge/experience)
2. Have students work in pairs. Ask them to list all the places where they have seen Washington's image. Have partners report out to the class.
(social interaction; active involvement)
3. Prepare students for reading by providing them with a purpose. Read aloud the following true-false statements and require partners to respond to each. Tally the number of guesses for true and for false. Post on the board. Do not tell students the answers; they will find them when they read. The questions will pique students' curiosity as well as provide the brain with a purpose for reading the piece.
(risk taking; social interaction; active involvement)
 - A. When George Washington was a young man, England was one of the most powerful countries in the world.

- B. George Washington worked as a surveyor and probably surveyed land in Montgomery County, Virginia.
 - C. George Washington carved his initials on Natural Bridge.
 - D. George Washington served two terms as President of the United States, then stepped down, refusing to run for a third term.
 - E. George Washington is the only six-star general in the history of the United States.
4. Introduce any vocabulary words from the short biography that you believe students may not know. Have students work with a partner to guess each word's meaning. As a class discuss the meanings of the words and post in a prominent place.
(constructing meaning; risk taking; social interaction)
 5. Distribute the short biography of Washington that follows and allow students time to read it silently. **(constructing meaning)**
 6. Go over the true-false questions again, this time allowing partners to change their minds about their earlier guesses.
(constructing meaning; social interaction; active involvement)
 7. Provide students time to discuss the questions with their partners and then discuss the questions as a whole class.
(social interaction; active involvement; constructing meaning)
 8. Prior to assigning the questions, discuss the Jefferson quote about Washington found in the first question until you are sure that students fully understand what it means.
 9. Remind students to write in complete sentences. Require neat work and correct spelling as is grade-level appropriate.

This process can be repeated for other historical figures and can be adapted for other topics as well.