

# Ordinary People Do Extraordinary Things! Connecting Biography to Larger Social Themes

**Enduring Understandings:** History is not just about famous people; it is also the story of our neighbors, our grandparents, and other people just like us.

Like our ancestors, we can make a difference in our community.

While people make their own choices, they operate within a larger historical and cultural context that shapes their choices.

**Grade Level:** 8th-12th

**Activity Description:** Students will read and analyze two essays from the Women’s History Matters website. They will discuss how the lives of ordinary people intersected with events and trends to make history by shaping their communities. They will then conduct an interview with someone in their own community to learn about how that person has chosen to shape the world around him or her.

**Objectives:** At the conclusion of the lesson, students will have

- Read two articles about Montana women’s history (both about Montana tribal members)
- Considered the connection between the lives of ordinary people and larger historical events
- Conducted an interview with a person in their community and written a narrative connecting that person’s life to the life of the community

**Note:** This is a two-part lesson: Part 1 focuses on reading and analyzing biographical profiles created as part of MHS’s Women’s History Matters project (<http://montanawomenshistory.org>). Part 2 focuses on students creating their own biographical profiles. Teachers with limited time can stop after completing Part 1.

**Time:** Part 1: 1–2 class periods; Part 2: 1–2 weeks

**Materials:** Computers with Internet access

## *Part 1: Reading and Analyzing Biographical Profiles*

### **Content Standards**

**ELA.RI.9-10.2** Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

**ELA.RH.9-10.10** By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

**ELA.SL.9-10.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**EU 2** There is great diversity among individual American Indians ...

**MSSC.4.2.12** Interpret how selected cultures, historical events, periods, and patterns of change influence each other.

### **Pre-Lesson Preparation**

Copy Worksheet 1 (below), one per student

Copy “Julia Ereaux Schultz, Health Advocate and Cultural Champion,” <http://montanawomenshistory.org/julia-ereaux-schultz-health-advocate-and-cultural-champion/>.

Arrange for Internet access for students.

## Procedure

As a class, read the article “Julia Ereaux Schultz.” Engage students in a discussion about the article, using the following four questions, most easily remembered through the acronym DICE: What disturbed you? What interested you? What confused you? What enlightened you?

Bring up the fact that individuals have **agency** (the ability to make their own choices), but those choices are always made in the context of larger historical, cultural, geographic, political, and economic forces.

As a class, list the larger historical, cultural, geographic, political, and economic contexts that shaped Julia Schultz’s life stories. Answers should include some of the following:

- Familial/tribal poverty
- Rural/agricultural upbringing
- Federal Indian policies of boarding schools and allotment
- Disease (tuberculosis)
- Progressive era:
  - State funding for a public health program that included traveling nurses (see “Expanding their Sphere: Montana Women in Education Administration and Public Health,” <http://montanawomenshistory.org/expanding-their-sphere-montana-women-in-education-administration-and-public-health/>)
  - Women’s club movement (see “Montana Women’s Clubs at the Turn of the Century.” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 26–35. Available for download from <http://montanawomenshistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Tubbs-Stephenie-Ambrose-Montana-Womens-Clubs-at-the-Turn-of-the-Century.pdf>).
- The Great Depression and New Deal
- Passage of the federal Indians Arts and Crafts Act

Then list the choices Schultz made in the face of these circumstances. For example, she

- Seemed to choose to be a good student (evidence: she later taught and was a newspaper reporter, so she learned skills)

- Ran for tribal council
- Became active in the women’s club movement
- Researched problems related to tuberculosis and used the information to lobby for improvement
- Collected army uniforms to make clothes
- Taught food preservation and gardening to her neighbors
- Organized elders to preserve traditional arts
- Became a newspaper reporter

Talk about how Schultz could have made other choices in her circumstances—for example, she could have run away from boarding school, chosen not to become a community activist or a newspaper reporter, etc. Sometimes people feel as if they have no choices. Was this ever true for Schultz? Is this ever true?

Reinforce: History is shaped by the combination of individual actions and large social forces.

Have students visit the Women’s History Matters website, choose another article featuring an American Indian woman to read, and complete Worksheet 1.

Hold a class discussion where students share what they learned.

- What circumstances shaped the women’s lives they read about?
- What choices (either good ones or bad ones) did these women make in the face of these circumstances?
- Which of the challenges these women faced were specifically because they were women? Indians? Rural? Which also affected men, non-Indians, city folks?
- Many women were faced with similar circumstances—for example, boarding school, the Great Depression. Compare the different choices made by women facing similar circumstances (for example, Oshanee Kenmille ran away from boarding school while Adeline Abraham Mathias embraced it).
- What makes these women worth studying? How were they ordinary? How were they exceptional?

## ***Part 2: Celebrating the Extraordinary, Ordinary People in Our Midst***

### **Content Standards**

**ELA.W.9-10.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**ELA.W.9-10.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**ELA.W.9-10.5** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

**ELA.W.9-10.7** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question ...

**ELA.W.9-10.10** Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

**ELA.SL.9-10.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners ... building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**MSSC.4.2.12** Interpret how selected cultures, historical events, periods, and patterns of change influence each other.

### **Pre-lesson Preparation**

Make copies of Worksheet 2 and Worksheet 3

Review *Molders and Shapers: Montana Women as Community Builders, an Oral History Sampler and Guide* and *Oral History in the Classroom*, both posted on the Montana Women's History Matters Oral History page (<http://montanawomenshistory.org/oral-history/>), to gain an overview of best practices for conducting interviews. (Since your students will not be conducting formal oral histories, you'll adapt these practices to suit your classroom.)

### **Procedure**

Discuss the fact that (as students saw in the profiles they read in Part 1) ordinary people can choose to make a difference in whatever circumstance they find themselves.

Tell students that they will be writing a profile modeled on the accounts published on the Women's History Matters website.

Note that the profiles they read focused on Indian women. The women profiled operated within a particular context (tribal culture, reservation politics, reservation poverty, federal Indian policies, gendered expectations, etc.) However, ALL people operate within a social context and ALL people make choices within that context that affect their own lives, their families, and their communities.

Ask students to brainstorm people they know who have made contributions to their communities or families. What larger historical circumstances might have shaped their lives? How did they shape their communities in the face of those circumstances?

Then ask students to interview and write an account of someone from the community modeled on the Women's History Matters profiles they just read.

Hand out Worksheet 2 (assignment instructions)

Prepare your students for this assignment by working with them on interview techniques, helping them to write appropriate open-ended questions, and guiding them to consider the larger context into which the life story they are collecting fits.

**Note:** To make this easier for your students, you may want to tie this to a particular period in history or a topic you are already studying (for example, a topic of significance to your local community—a mill or mine shutdown, the 1950s oil boom, etc.). After students have conducted the interviews, have them write their profiles. Make sure that students write multiple drafts, using whatever revision process you find most helpful. If you have students conduct peer reviews, Worksheet 3—Peer Review may be a useful guide.

Have students send copies of their finished pieces to the person they interviewed, along with a thank you note.

Hold a class discussion, during which students share information about the person they interviewed.

- What contributions did the people profiled make?
- What circumstances shaped their lives and choices?
- How were the contributions/activities/lives of the men interviewed different from the women interviewed?
- Why do you think those differences exist (gender, expectations and opportunities, happenstance, personal preference)?

- How do the lives of the people that the students profiled compare to the lives of the Montana Indian women that they read on Women's History Matters? In other words, how was the **historical context** in which their interviewees operated **similar** to and **different from** the Indian women profiled? How were their choices similar? How were they different?

### **Additional Options:**

Collect the pieces your students wrote and donate them to your local library.

Invite the interviewees and their families to a tea or other "honoring" ceremony at which you have students share their biographies—either in booklet form, on posters, PowerPoint, and/or aloud.

# Worksheet 1

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Go to <http://montanawomenshistory.org>. From the right-hand dropdown menu titled “Categories,” choose “Native American.” This will take you to pages featuring blogs written about Montana Indian women.

**Find the name of one woman from each of the tribes listed below. Write her name next to her tribal affiliation.**

**Blackfeet:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Salish:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Kootenai:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Assiniboine:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gros Ventre:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Crow:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Northern Cheyenne:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chippewa Cree:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Choose an article about a specific Montana Indian woman to read in its entirety. On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions.**

1. What is the article title?
2. What time period does the article focus on?
3. Where did the subject grow up?
4. Name one of her accomplishments.
5. Individuals have **agency** (the ability to make their own choices) but those choices are always made in the context of larger historical, cultural, geographic, political, and technological forces (for example, federal Indian policy, religious beliefs, transportation options.) How does this essay place its subject into a historical, cultural, political, or social context? List some of the “big picture” issues that shaped this woman’s life and choices.
6. What individual choices did the subject make in response to one of the issues you listed above?
7. The Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians state: “There is great diversity among individual American Indians as identity is developed, defined and redefined by entities, organizations and people. **A continuum of Indian identity, unique to each individual, ranges from assimilated to traditional.** There is no generic American Indian.” Discuss this woman’s cultural identity in the context of this statement.

# Worksheet 2

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Now that you've read two profiles from Women's History Matters, choose a person in your own community to profile. You can find good ideas for interview questions in *Molders and Shapers: Montana Women as Community Builders, an Oral History Sampler and Guide*, pages 13–16. The booklet has been posted as a PDF online at <http://montanawomenshistory.org/oral-history/>.

Before conducting the interview, you may want to ask your subject to fill out a short questionnaire (see pages 33–34 of *Molders and Shapers*). Use that questionnaire to do some research. Think about the events through which your interviewee lived and the organizations she or he participated in. Try to imagine some of the larger historical events/themes with which your interviewee's life would have intersected.

Note that you are NOT being asked to write a biography of your subject. Instead, you are writing about a larger topic or theme using one person's story as an example. Sample topics/themes might include community building, survival, activism, or work (paid and unpaid). Your essay needs to use your subject's life to illuminate this larger topic. Here are some guidelines.

1. Every profile needs a title—one that captures the story or theme.
2. Every essay needs to tie to a theme and illuminate a larger historical context, not just tell a story.
3. Every account needs sources. Your interview is one source. You must use at least one additional source that helps to place your interview in context. Sources should be listed, bibliography style, at the bottom of the essay under the header "Sources."
4. Each paragraph must have a topic sentence that relates to the larger theme(s). This will help make sure that each paragraph has a clear point (instead of being simply biographic).
5. Your essay must have a conclusion explaining what it all means.
6. You will be sharing this piece publicly, so make sure to follow writing conventions (spelling, punctuation, etc.). Have someone else proofread your paper to help you catch errors.
7. When you are done, make sure to send a copy to the interviewee along with a note thanking the interviewee for sharing her or his time and stories.

# Worksheet 3 — Peer Review Form

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Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Author's name \_\_\_\_\_

Biographical subject \_\_\_\_\_

What historical contexts or larger historical themes are explored in this essay? \_\_\_\_\_

How does the subject's life connect to or exemplify these themes? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the piece's title? Does it capture the theme? \_\_\_\_\_

For each paragraph, underline the topic sentence. (if you can't find one, note that in the margin.)

Does this topic sentence relate to the theme? Does the information in this paragraph support the topic sentence?

Body Paragraph 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Body Paragraph 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Body Paragraph 3 \_\_\_\_\_

(Continue on a separate sheet of paper if there are more than three body paragraphs.)

Are conventions followed (spelling, punctuation, grammar)? Note any corrections that need to be made on the essay.

Are there at least two sources listed (the interview and at least one additional source)? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the essay's conclusion? \_\_\_\_\_