UNIT 6: FINDING BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION & LITERARY CRITICISM

When you have completed this unit on using print and electronic print resources, you should be able to:

1. Use biographical sources, specifically about authors.
2. Find book reviews.
3. Find critical evaluations of an author's work.

UNIT 6: TO DO

1. Read Unit 6 material online or in the binder at the Library Reference Desk. Check the Library Skills web site to see if any changes have been made to the text or exercise.
2. Pick up Exercise 6 at the Reference Desk or download it and complete it.
3. Go back to the Reference Desk and turn in your exercise to have it checked by a librarian. You may pick it up the next school day to make any corrections.
4. REMEMBER! All exercise questions must be answered correctly to receive credit for the unit.

ADDITIONAL READING:

When you use the electronic print resources described in this chapter, additional information will be presented in the online Help screens and the search tips. Be sure to use the tips and help in all online resources.

DO NOT HESITATE TO ASK QUESTIONS IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEMS.
Literature Resource Center

Remember to use the search tips and help screens in all the online databases.

Help Using Literature Resource Center

<http://galenet.galegroup.com/>
FINDING BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
AND LITERARY CRITICISM

You have already used many sources that give biographical information about people. These sources include encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, periodical databases, and many others. Finding information about a person can be tricky because there are so many sources that can be used. You will frequently want to find out about an author to establish some basic facts about that person and to see whether those facts influence his or her writings. You may be curious about a historical figure or someone you heard speak on a television show. Perhaps you want to write a paper on the person. Hopefully you will have the correct spelling of the name, and maybe you know the dates of his or her birth or death and where that person lived. A biographical dictionary can help you establish these facts.

Some sources deal with living people, others with those people who have died. Others will only include people of a certain country. Some sources will include people working in a certain profession. The books discussed in this section are just a few of the many owned by this library.

Remember, not all books will include everyone, nor will they include the same kinds of information. If you cannot find someone in the sources highlighted in this unit, be sure to ask a reference librarian for help in choosing sources likely to contain the information you need.

If you want a whole book about a person, search the online catalog by the person's last name as a “subject.” Remember to search for the person as a subject unless you also want to find all the books that the person may have written, as well as any biographies about him or her. If you do not find anything, this just means that there is no whole book about the person in the library. If the person is an opera star, and you find nothing, you might try using a “word or
phrase” Boolean search that deals with the subject that person is associated with, such as opera and biography to see whether the person is featured in a book covering several opera personalities.

Whereas a biography is a book written about a person by someone other than the person who is the subject of the book, an autobiography is a book a person writes about his or her own life. If you cannot find an entire book about someone, or you wish to read brief information on your subject, your next step should be to check the biographical reference books.

Biographies in the LPC Library are not shelved together as they are in public libraries. Biographies and autobiographies are shelved according to the profession of the person who is the focus of the book. For instance, if the biography is about a physicist, it will be shelved in the subject area for physics (QC). Books about American authors will be shelved in the subject area on American literature (PR).

**Biographical Sources IN PRINT**

**American National Biography** (CT213.A68 1999) is a fundamental source of historical American biography containing biographical information on nearly 20,000 men and women whose lives have shaped the nation. The people included in the 24-volume set died before 1995. Published in 1999, the American National Biography features the work of more than 6,000 scholarly contributors. Chronologically it extends from the time of the earliest European explorations to people who died as recently as December 1995.

**Current Biography Yearbook** (CT100 .C8) covers people who are living and are currently in the news. The single-volume yearbook is the annual cumulation of the monthly magazine Current Biography. The cumulated yearbooks, 1955 to the present, are available at the LPC Library in the Reference area. The monthly magazine is indexed in periodical databases such as EBSCOhost but is not available in full text. However, if you use EBSCOhost Academic Search
Premier to search for a person, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, you may limit your search to the publication Current Biography to find any articles listed for the periodical Current Biography. Use the date of the periodical, August 2004, as shown in the citation from EBSCOhost, to find LPC Library’s bound volume for 2004 for the information. Once you have that bound volume, you can find Schwarzenegger alphabetically.

You may also use the 1940-1995 index shelved with the volumes to find information. Each volume is also indexed for the year it covers and for the previous years of the decade at the back. You must use the yearbooks’ indexes to find a person in the annual volumes. Each article may have two to three pages. The articles present detailed information on the professional and personal life of each person and a photo of that person. You will find biographies of well-known people in the news.

**Biographical Information By Group**

Following are examples of biographical works that cover noteworthy people by gender and/or ethnic group. Use the online catalog to find the call numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arab American Biography</th>
<th>Notable American Women</th>
<th>Notable Native Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian American Biography</td>
<td>Notable Black American Men</td>
<td>Prominent Women of the 20th Century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinas! Women of Achievement</td>
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</table>

**LITERATURE RESOURCE CENTER (LRC)**

The LRC is a huge literary database that includes resources to research authors and their works. The Library owns some of the same resources in print. Go the Quick Clicks on the Las Positas College Library Homepage to access the LRC.

LRC provides biographical information, plot summaries, and literary criticism. Literary works of nearly 100,000 novelists, poets, essayists, journalists and other writers are featured, with in-depth coverage of 2,000 of the most-studied authors.
You may search by:

- Author Name
- Title
- Genre
- Literary Movement
- Literary Theme

You may also combine these criteria to create a custom search.

Let’s say you are interested in the 19th century American writer Oscar Wilde. In the default search box (author search), type **Oscar Wilde**. You will retrieve information separated into five clickable categories: Biographies (items found in *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, to be discussed later in the unit); Literary Criticism, Articles, and Work Overviews (articles come from many sources); Bibliographies (works by and about Wilde); Additional Resources (websites about Wilde); and Literary-Historical Timeline (places Wilde in context of important world and literary happenings). If you click on the first article in Biographies, you will get the article from *Contemporary Authors*. Many documents have internal Table of Contents sections that will make it easy for you to jump directly to your area of interest. At this point, you can e-mail the article to your personal e-mail account or print it out. At the bottom of the article you will find the source information to use in your works cited list, in this case:

- **Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2004. And the article would be cited as follows:
"Oscar (Fingal O'Flahertie Willis) Wilde." *Contemporary Authors Online. Literature Resource Center.* LPC Library, Livermore. 30 Mar. 2005


The banner in this screen offers more search options:

Home will start a new search, Title and Keyword Search gives you a clear form to fill out for research. Authors by Type and Advanced Search is especially useful for focused literary research; both options offer fill-in blanks and drop-down lists to help you refine a search (see illustration). Note: If you fill in too many criteria, the search may yield no results. If this happens, remove some of the criteria, one item at a time, to see whether you have focused the search too narrowly.

Clicking *Encyclopedia of Literature* allows you to search for literary terms while reading the documents online. The *Gale Literary Index*, to be discussed later in the unit, offers additional customizable search screens for you to explore. The illustrations that follow highlight the Authors by Type and Advanced Search options.
The articles from the Biography and Literary Criticism sections of the LRC are electronic versions of full-text literary resources originally published in print. The LPC library owns some of these series. Use the online catalog to find the call numbers.

- **Contemporary Authors, Contemporary Literary Criticism Select, and Dictionary of Literary Biography**
- **Scribner Writers Series**: full-text, signed articles on writers and literary genres
- **Twayne Authors Series**: U.S., English, and World Authors. Literary criticism of works by approximately 200 authors; critical introductions to the lives and works of writers, to the history and influence of literary movements, and to the development of literary genres.
- **Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature**

The LRC also contains the online version of the new “For Students” series of literary reference books, which includes the following titles you can find in the Reference area of the LPC Library:

- **Drama for Students** (Ref PN1701.D73)
- **Epics for Students** (Ref PN56.E67)
- **Novels for Students** (Ref PN3385.N68)
- **Short Stories for Students** (Ref PN3373.S56)
- **Shakespeare for Students** (Ref PR2987.S47)
- **Poetry for Students** (Ref PN1101.P64) Includes the complete text for each poem reviewed.

This reference series provides invaluable information on the literary genres college students study: drama, novels, short stories, and poetry. Each analytical section features an introduction to the work and the work's author, a plot summary, descriptions of important characters, analysis of important themes, an explanation of important literary techniques and style, important information on the literary and historical background, a critical overview essay
and excerpted critical essays, and a discussion of relevant media adaptations. Note: This series features only well-known writers and the print copies are easier to use than the online version.

The LRC is one of the most important resources you will have available for literary research at LPC Library. Familiarity with this electronic print resource will help you in all classes dealing with literature.

More Ways to Find Biographical Information About Authors

Key Print Resources

If you are required to get information on an author for an English class, first search the LPC Library Catalog for an author's name as a "subject" to find books on specific authors. The abundance of resources—both in print and in electronic format--sometimes makes it difficult to decide where to go first to find information about an author. However, next search the LRC, LitFinder, Academic Search Premier, and NewsBank for information as described in the first pages of this unit. If you still need information, you may also consult key print resources in the LPC Reference Collection. Many of those resources are also in the LRC database. The following major reference sets dedicated to biographical information on writers:

- **Contemporary Authors (CA)** features biographical information on current authors from many countries. “Writers” includes authors of books, fiction, nonfiction, songs, and poetry. A cumulated index for all previous volumes are included at the end of every other volume and every volume is self-indexed. There is also a paperbound cumulative index to the whole set. You must use the cumulated index to find authors. CA is also indexed in the Gale Literary Index in the LRC. Each article lists the author’s published works. Following is a sample citation of an article about the popular singer/songwriter Hank Williams:

- **Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB)** is a series of books that feature brief biographical information about major writers, as well as criticism of the writers' works. The DLB is self-indexed and indexed in Contemporary Authors and the paperbound cumulated indexes. It is also indexed in the Gale Literary Index in the LRC. Following is a sample citation of an article about the Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko:


- **Other useful reference titles:**

  There are many other useful reference titles that the library owns. Use the “English & Literature Resources Guide” on the library’s web page, “For Students,” to find more reference works. Many more titles and their complete citations and call numbers are cited in this list. It will help you to become familiar with the resources.

**LitFinder**

The Library has recently added a new electronic print resource to the collection. It is called LitFinder. LitFinder provides the opportunity for the study of many literary works. It is especially useful for students who must fine poems, essays, speeches, stories, or plays on a subject for comparative projects or oral interpretation. It is international in scope, covers all
time periods, and contains a wealth of primary literature content, including more than 126,500 full-text poems, 850,000 poem citations and excerpts, 5,000 full-text short stories, 2,800 full-text essays, 1,800 full-text speeches, and 1,000 full-text plays. LitFinder also includes biographies, work summaries, photographs, and a glossary. It provides over 10,000 subject headings, and basic and advanced search modes allow searching by keyword, author, subject, work title, work date, nationality, gender, and timeline.

You can find everything from the sonnets of Shakespeare to the poetry of Maya Angelou, the love poetry of the 13th century to contemporary poems by African American women, the inaugural speeches of George Washington through George W. Bush, short stories by Edgar Allan Poe to stories by up-and-coming writers, or essays on such subjects as the arts, science, and religion. It also features 850 Spanish-language poems with English translations, and coverage of more than 600 nationalities and ethnicities and approximately 27,000 women writers. It focuses on contemporary works, including more than 3,500 full-text poems published for the first time in the current year.

**Tip:** It includes “explanations” for some of the stories and poems, but it does not include explanations for all of them. The symbol T next to the title of a poem, story, play, or essay means that the full text is included.
It is an excellent complement to Literature Resource Center. Click on the PDF, “How To Use LitFinder” on Quick Clicks for a description of searching the database. You should also use the “Help” screen once in the database for tips on successful searching.


**Book Reviews and Literary Criticism**

After you find out about an author, you generally need to find out more about what the author has written. Book reviews and works of literary criticisms are the sources to use to find out what other people have thought and written about an author's works.

A **book review** usually describes the subject matter of a book, discusses the style and technical qualities, and may examine its usefulness when compared with similar works. The review may be very general and include the critic’s opinions and impressions. It may also contain some information about the author's background.

Book reviews may be found in the following LPC electronic print resources: LRC, Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost), NewsBank, and others. When using these resources to find book reviews, you will need to know the title and author. Note that the resources will not contain reviews published before the databases began indexing and will usually include full text, when available.

- **LRC** (see previous section on the Literature Resource Center)
• **Academic Search Premier** is an excellent source of book reviews for books published in the last ten years. Reviews can be found by author, title, or keyword. The database will contain many of the reviews in full text. However, if the review is not full text, the citations will list where the reviews can be found. At that point, search the Library online catalog for the periodical to see whether the LPC Library has that title in print.

• **NewsBank** (*San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, other California newspapers, national newspapers*) includes the book reviews published during each year the database covers. (The *L.A. Times* and *S.F. Chronicle* reviews are especially good.) Search for book reviews by author and title, or by keyword (“books,” “review”). NewsBank is an excellent source of book reviews for titles published since the mid-1980s.

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**Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism is analytical and very detailed work. A scholar who has spent much time reading, comparing, and evaluating an author's works usually writes the criticism. Valuable sources of literary criticism are the following:

• **Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)** is a continuing series that provides an extensive collection of critical essays on contemporary writers. Many of the essays are excerpts from other sources. Each volume indexes itself and the previous volumes. The CLC has cumulative indexes of authors and critics at the end of each volume. Writers included are living or have died since January 1, 1960. Excerpts of criticisms of author's works are indexed. Full citations are given for the source of the excerpt. Always use the last cumulated index or the paperback title index to find criticism of your book if you do not use the online *Gale Literary Index*. Many of these articles may also be found in the electronic print resource, the *LRC*. The criticisms are by different authors excerpted from
other sources. The following sample citation includes the most pertinent information for a reviewer, Jim Ruppert, of the book *Ceremony* by Silko:


- **Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)** is organized in much the same manner as *CLC* but covers published criticism of authors who died between 1900 and 1960. *TCLC* is indexed in the *Gale Literary Index*. The cumulative indexes in volumes one through eleven refer only to information in *TCLC*; thereafter, the indexes refer to other volumes in the series such as *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors*, and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

| Tip | Always use the last cumulated index or the paperback index to anyone of the above series to find reference to your subject if you do not use the online Literary Index. |

Remember, if you want to use one of the above Gale references, you must first check the Library online catalog to see whether the LPC Library owns it, then use the call number to locate the reference work on the shelf. The *Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB)* is the most difficult series to find from a citation in the indexes. The index will tell you that an article is in *DLB* 9, for instance. You then will have to find what the call number is for volume 9 of the *DLB*, which is very difficult to do in our online catalog. Therefore, the LPC librarians have created an online list of the volume the library owns. Look for this list in the “English & Literature Resources Guide,” under the heading LPC Internet Databases. Ask for help if you cannot locate a *DLB* volume or the listing of their locations by call number.

| Tip | It is very easy to find all of these articles in the LRC. |
Use the LPC Web Site

You may also use the Reference Section in LPC Library’s “English & Literature Resources Guide” on the library’s webpage, “For Students,” to find links to handy online reference works such as dictionaries of terms and concepts and glossaries of literary terms.

Remember that the Library owns many of the printed volumes of the references contained in the Literature Resource Center, but the LRC provides many more resources than the Library owns in print and is easier to search.