

# LEARNING the Language of Literature

## Nonfiction

is prose writing about real people, places, and events. Unlike fiction, nonfiction is mainly written to convey factual information, although writers of nonfiction shape information in accordance with their own purposes and attitudes. Nonfiction includes a diverse range of writing: newspaper articles, cookbooks, letters, movie reviews, speeches, true-life adventure stories, advertising, and more. Nonfiction can be a good source of information, but readers frequently have to examine it more carefully than fiction in order to detect biases, notice gaps in the information, and identify errors in logic. Use the following passages to learn about some of the major types of nonfiction.

### Autobiography

An **autobiography** is a writer's account of his or her own life and is, in almost every case, told from the first-person point of view. Generally, an autobiography focuses on the most significant events and people in the writer's life over a period of time and on the ways in which those events and people affected the writer. Shorter autobiographical narratives include such private writings as **journals**, **diaries**, and **letters**. An **autobiographical essay**, another type of short autobiographical work, focuses on a single person or event in the writer's life.

**YOUR TURN** From the excerpt at the right—part of an autobiographical essay—what do you learn about the writer's feelings about her heritage?

### Biography

A **biography** is an account of a person's life written by another person. The writer of a biography usually researches his or her subject in order to present accurate information. The best biographers strive for honesty and balance in their accounts of their subjects' lives, highlighting weaknesses as well as strengths, failures as well as achievements. Remember, though, that every writer has attitudes and feelings that can influence the way he or she writes about a subject.

**YOUR TURN** In this excerpt from a biographical essay, what words and phrases reveal the writer's attitude toward Nelson Mandela?

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When I found out that my parents had invited the minister's family over for Christmas Eve dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby *Chinese* Christmas? What would he think of our noisy *Chinese* relatives who lacked proper American manners?

—Amy Tan, "Fish Cheeks"

#### BIOGRAPHY

After more than two decades in prison, confident that on some crucial issues a leader must make decisions on his own, Mandela decided on a new approach. And after painstaking preliminaries, the most famous prisoner in the world was escorted, in the greatest secrecy, to the State President's office to start negotiating not only his own release but also the nation's transition from apartheid to democracy.

—Andre Brink, "Nelson Mandela"