



English

Biographies



For Upper Primary

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Preview

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A Biography

- A biography is an account of somebody's life, written by another person. It is informative. Read the biography below about Edith Cowan written by Leonie Westenberg. When you have finished reading the text, complete the activity pages that follow.

A Tireless Woman by Leonie Westenberg

She wiped her hands nervously on her dress. Having removed her gloves, she realised just how sweaty were her palms. This was a big day. A big day for her. A big day for women. A big day for the Child Protection Society. She was the first woman elected into Parliament in Australia . . .

Have you ever looked at a \$50 note? Have you ever seen the picture of the woman on the back? That's Edith Cowan - the first woman elected into Australian Parliament. The year? 1921.

Edith Cowan was 59 years of age when she was elected into the Western Australian Parliament. When elected she said, "I stand here today, being in the unique position of the first woman in Australian Parliament. I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind Honourable members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable, is because men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home."

Cowan faced some obstacles as a female member of Parliament. One of these obstacles came in the form of a newspaper article, written by a male journalist, who criticised Cowan for neglecting her home and family. However, Edith Cowan's husband, James Cowan, whom she had married at the age of 18, was a strong supporter of his wife's career. As Master of the Supreme Court himself, he saw the need to encourage women to enter all professions in the land and worked to have his wife elected.

Once an MP, Edith Cowan fought for the right for women to enter all professions. In doing this, she was opposed by Charles Latham, another Member of Parliament. Unlike



Edith Cowan, who had been involved in volunteer work in societies for the protection of women and children and had seen first-hand some of the difficulties faced by women with no money, and had witnessed children forced into the workforce at an early age, Charles Latham had experienced a more privileged life. He was considered a conservative who wanted to make sure that the social aspects of life, including the role of women at home rather than in the workforce, were not radically changed. Cowan's different upbringing, in an often troubled home rather than a wealthier established home, gave her different insights into the legal status of women. She argued with Charles Latham, claiming that if women could do housework then they were fit and able to take on other work. In reply, Latham said, "You would not suggest a man do that sort of thing (housework)?" To which Cowan replied, "Why not? They are as capable as we."

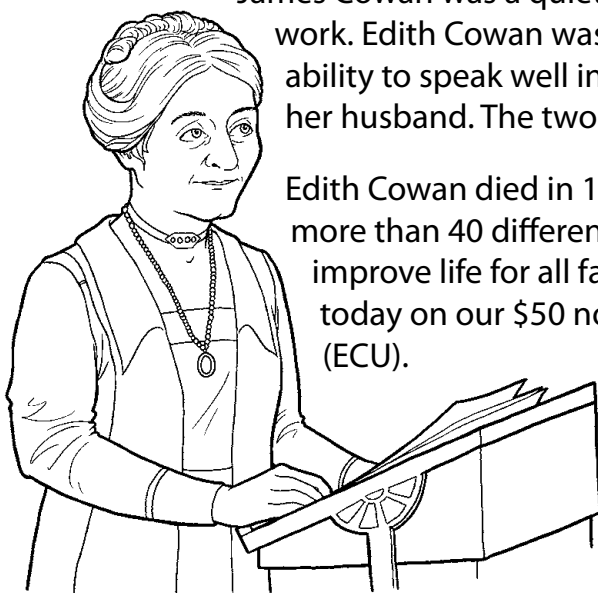
While Cowan was an MP, the then Railway Minister, William Hill, put in place a tax of one shilling (equivalent to \$5.00 in today's currency) for every pram on a tram or other means of public transport. As a mother of five, Cowan knew the difficulty of travelling, even for a day out in the city, with several children. She also knew that a tax on prams would be something poorer mothers could not afford. Soon after entering Parliament, Cowan opposed the 'pram tax' and had it successfully removed.

Through her husband's work in the court, Cowan witnessed how women and children suffered when their husbands/fathers were in gaol. She set up charities and volunteered in organisations to help these women and this became the driving force of her work in Parliament - to improve the financial and professional lives of women and of families. She also argued for a maternity and child endowment - money given to help expectant mothers and families with young children.

The Children's Protection Society that Cowan set up has now become our Children's Court. Having seen families suffer and children turn to crime to help their families, Cowan made sure that children were not tried as adults but treated differently and with more compassion and care in court.

Cowan's husband James worked alongside his wife in helping the poor and needy.

James Cowan was a quietly spoken man but was not afraid of hard work. Edith Cowan was known for her sense of humour and her ability to speak well in public. She was a more social person than her husband. The two worked well together.



Edith Cowan died in 1932, at the age of 71. She was a member of more than 40 different volunteer organisations, working strongly to improve life for all families. As you now know, she is remembered today on our \$50 note and has had a university named after her (ECU).

That woman who nervously wiped her hands when being sworn into Parliament as our first female representative is our example still today of how care and compassion can work in government.

● Summarising

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

One way to understand a text is to summarise. How do we summarise? We write down the most important ideas from the text. We ignore what we think is less important information. We organise the information in a way that has meaning for us. Summarising helps us to take the text and to simplify it - to help clarify the big picture of the text.



- When you summarise, remember to quote (use exact words) from the text.

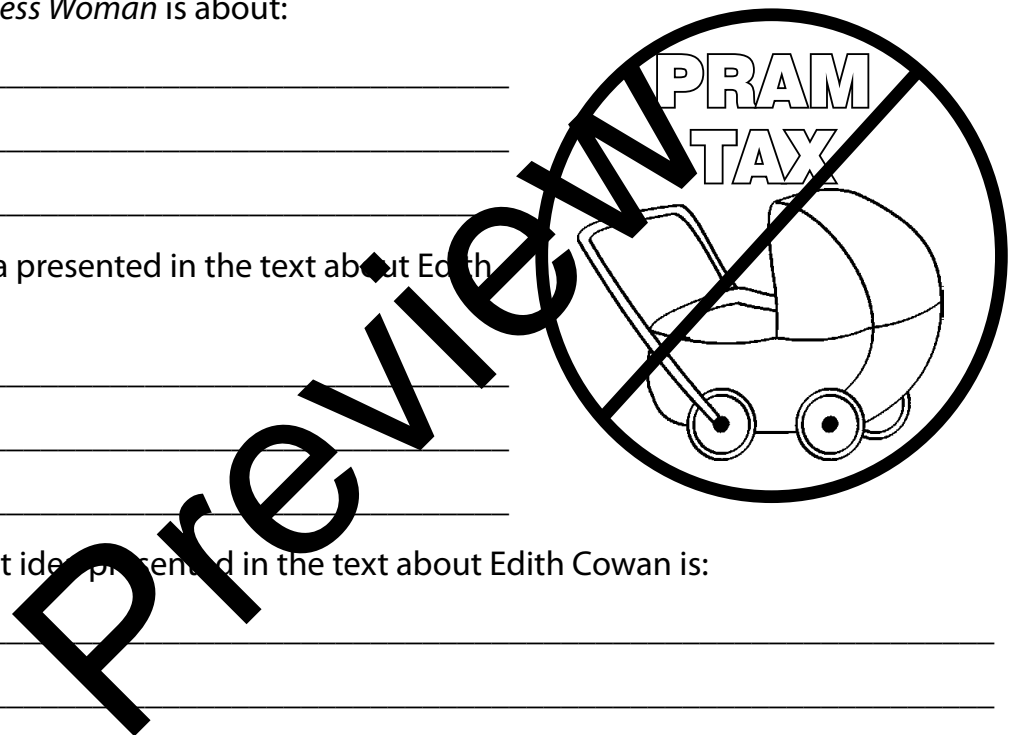
1. In a nutshell, *A Tireless Woman* is about:

2. One important idea presented in the text about Edith Cowan is:

3. A second important idea presented in the text about Edith Cowan is:

4. I believe that this text is important because:

5. If I had to write one sentence about the text to tell a friend, it would be:



EXTRA ACTIVITY

Write a list of the main "idea words" (important words) from the biography on the back of this sheet. Can you find ten to twenty words?

● *Language And Effects 1*

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Looking at the type of language used by a writer is important in helping us to understand biographies like *A Tireless Woman*. Think about the language used in the text – is there: descriptive language (nouns, adjectives), technical language (language which relates to a particular topic - politics for instance), or figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification)? Do we know why this language has been used?



Type of Language used (quote from the text)	Effect (how it positions us to see Edith Cowan)
e.g. "unique woman" (adjective)	e.g. positions the reader to see Cowan as one of a kind, extraordinary.

Preview

● Language And Effects 2

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Language is important in helping us to think about our learning. What language is used in the text *A Tireless Woman*? Can you see any repetition, synonyms, antonyms and/or specific language? Do you know the meaning of this language (why it has been used)? Writing down key words used in texts helps understanding.

KEY WORDS



- Re-read *A Tireless Woman* and try to identify specific types of language used. If there are any words used that you don't know the meaning of, check their meanings using a dictionary.

1. Specific language is language which replaces general terms. Instead of "cut" for example, "slice" or "dice" can be used. Can you find any specific language in the text?

2. Repetition of certain words can help to reinforce a main idea. Choose two words that are repeated a lot. What ideas do they reinforce?

1st word: _____

2nd word: _____

3. Synonyms are words similar in meaning. What synonyms are used in the text?

4. Antonyms are words dissimilar in meaning. What antonyms are used in the text?



5. In pairs look at the antonyms that you've both written down. Discuss how the antonyms help to develop two opposite characters.

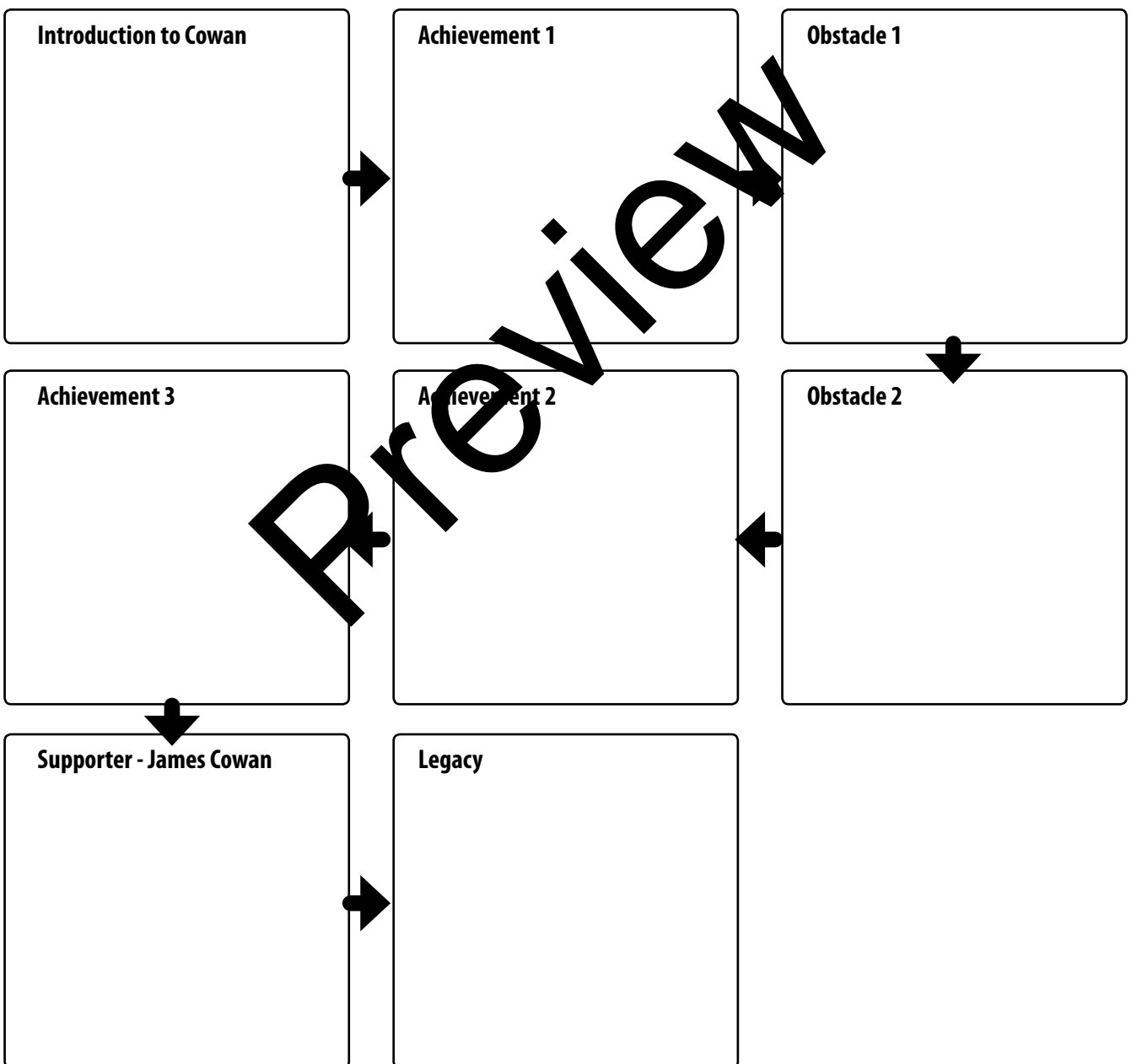
● Structure Of A Biography

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Using graphic organisers can help us to comprehend a text. We can use charts and graphs and diagrams to help us to create a visual text and organise information. Think about a graph in a Maths book for example. Sometimes, creating a visual text while we read can help us to organise a text and understand it better. Story maps are one example of graphic organisers. They can help to better show the structure of a text.



- Complete the story map for the text *A Tireless Woman*. Draw or write dot points in each box below. This story map will help you to understand the structure of biographies in general as well as the specific structure of *A Tireless Woman*.



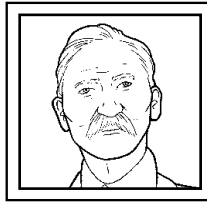
- Now look back at your story map. Can you better understand the structure of a biography? Pair up and explain this structure to a friend. Try to identify this structure in another biography.

● Making Comparisons 1

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Graphic organisers can help readers make meaning of texts by showing differences and relationships in texts. Sometimes a graphic organiser can help a reader compare and contrast ideas or the people in a text. They can help readers answer questions like, "How are the people the same?" and "How are the people different?"

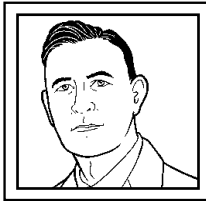
- Look at the people pictured below from the text *A Tireless Woman*. Complete the graphic organisers to compare and contrast.



Edith Cowan & James Cowan

One way in which they are similar:

One way in which they are different:



Edith Cowan & Charles Latham

One way in which they are similar:

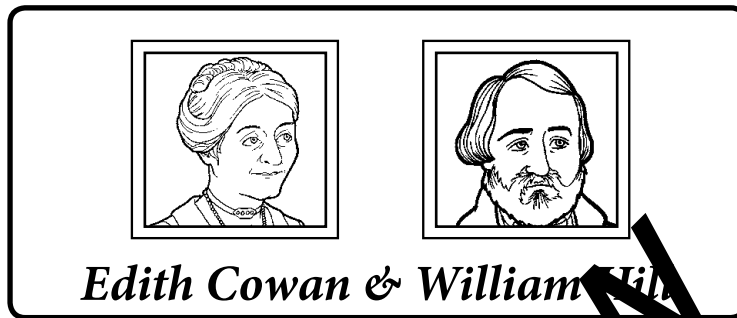
One way in which they are different:

● Making Comparisons 2

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Graphic organisers can help readers make meaning of texts by showing differences and relationships in texts. Sometimes a graphic organiser can help a reader compare and contrast ideas or the people in a text. They can help readers answer questions like, "How are the people the same?" and "How are the people different?"

- Look at the people pictured below from the text *A Tireless Woman*. Complete the graphic organiser to compare and contrast.



One way in which they are similar:

One way in which they are different:

- Use your graphic organisers on this page and on the previous page, to answer the questions below.

1. In many text types, there are heroes and villains. Who do you think you are positioned to see as heroic in the text?

Why? Think about what makes a hero. _____

2. Who do you think we are positioned to see as the antagonists in the text?

Why? Think about what makes a character unlikable. _____



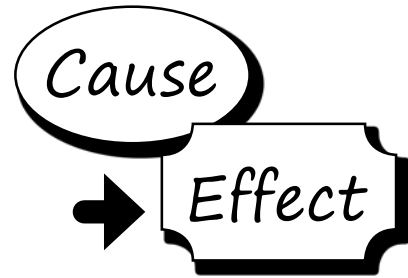
EXTRA ACTIVITY

Imagine that the life of Edith Cowan is going to be the subject of a film. Create a promotional movie poster which celebrates the achievements of Edith Cowan. Depict her as heroic in your poster.

● *Analysing Events In A Biography*

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Graphic organisers can help us to see the cause and effect of events that take place in a text. They can help the reader to answer questions like, "What caused this event to happen?" and "What is the effect of this event happening?" Answering these questions helps us to see the consequences of events and actions in the text.



- Complete the graphic organisers below to help you to show and understand cause and effect.

Event 1: _____

Cause

Why did this event happen?

Effect

What was the result of this event happening?

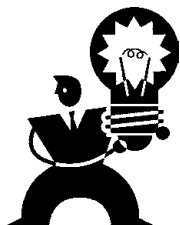
Event 2: _____

Cause

Why did this event happen?

Effect

What was the result of this event happening?



EXTRA ACTIVITY

In groups of three, brainstorm some other female figures in Australian history who have achieved great things. Choose one of these figures and write down what obstacles she faced. Share your information with the class.

Answers

Sample answers. Answers may vary.

Page 5

1. *A Tireless Woman* is about: Edith Cowan, the first woman in Australian Parliament, who made important contributions to the welfare of women and children in society.
2. One important idea presented in the text about Edith Cowan is: her work in the Child Protection Society, to prevent children from being sent to gaol.
3. A second important idea presented in the text about Edith Cowan is: the important contribution that Edith Cowan made in fighting prejudice towards women when she became the first woman in Parliament in Western Australia.
4. I believe that this text is important because: it provides important information concerning the history of Australia, including the rights of women and children and Edith Cowan's role in Parliament.
5. If I had to write one sentence about the text to tell a friend, it would be: This text is a biography that describes the life and achievements of Edith Cowan - the first woman to enter Parliament in Australia.

Page 6

Students will select different types of language. They should understand that overall, language is used in the text to persuade readers to see Cowan in a positive light - as compassionate, tireless, intelligent, courageous, a great orator and a creator of change. It is also used to develop other characters in the text.

Page 7

1. Specific language is language which replaces general terms. Instead of "cut" for example, "slice" or "dice" can be used. Can you find any specific language in the text?: "witnessed" instead of saw; "needy, troubled" instead of poor, etc.
2. Repetition of certain words can help to reinforce a main idea. What words are repeated a lot? What ideas do they reinforce? "first" (that Cowan made in history), woman (her gender made her unique as a member in parliament), women (she did much to support women throughout her parliamentary career), etc.
3. Synonyms are words similar in meaning. What synonyms are used in the text? criticised-opposed; support-encourage; experienced-involved; troubles-difficulties, etc.
4. Antonyms are words dissimilar in meaning. What antonyms are used in the text? troubled-privileged; compassion and care - lack of support; quietly spoken - spoke well in public; quiet-social.
5. Students might note that antonyms help to develop the opposing qualities of Edith and James; Edith and Charles Latham; Edith and William Hill.

Page 8

Introduction to Cowan: A summary of her achievement - first woman to enter Parliament in Western Australia in 1921 - introduces her as an important historical figure - know she is on the \$50 note.

Achievement 1: First woman elected into Parliament in Australia.

Obstacle 1: Newspaper article written by a male journalist who criticises her for neglecting home and family.

Obstacle 2: Charles Latham - fellow politician wanted to make sure Cowan made no changes to women's roles in society.

Achievement 2: Removing the Pram Tax.

Achievement 3: Setting up the Child Protection Society.

Supporter - James Cowan: married to Edith Cowan, a judge in the court and a strong supporter of Edith Cowan's work. They worked well together.

Legacy: Our Children's Court today, on the \$50 note, ECU university.

Page 9

Edith Cowan & James Cowan

One way in which they are similar: Both supporters of women, children and families.

One way in which they are different: Edith Cowan was very social and enjoyed public speaking while James was quieter and less social.

Edith Cowan & Charles Latham

One way in which they are similar: Both members of the West Australian Parliament.

One way in which they are different: Edith Cowan came from a troubled family that suffered financial difficulties while Charles Latham's background was more privileged.

Page 10

Edith Cowan & William Hill

One way in which they are similar: Both members of Parliament who were concerned about public transport.

One way in which they are different: Edith Cowan disagreed with the Railway Minister concerning the Pram Tax.

1. Who do you think you are positioned to see as heroic in the text? Edith Cowan.
Why? The biography is about Edith Cowan so the author presents her and her achievements in a positive way, she rises above all the obstacles that come in her way - she is triumphant.
2. Who do you think we are positioned to see as the antagonists in the text? Charles Latham and William Hill.
3. Why? Latham: The text contrasts his more privileged/wealthy background with the less financially rich background of Edith Cowan to represent his lack of sympathy for and understanding of women's lives and the role of women in government. Hill: The text shows that he is more concerned with raising money than with the welfare of children and mothers.

Page 11

Event 1: Removal of the Pram Tax.

Cause: Why did this event happen? Edith Cowan had been a mother herself and knew of the difficulties mothers experienced when travelling with children - she fought for the removal of the Pram Tax.

Effect: What was the result of this event happening? Mothers and children were able to travel without an added tax and the significance of the role of mothers was recognised in Parliament.

Event 2: The introduction of the Child Protection Society.

Cause: Why did this event happen? Cowan witnessed how women and children suffered when a husband/father was in gaol.

Effect: What was the result of this event happening? The Children's Protection Society that Cowan set up has now become our Children's Court. Having seen families suffer and children turn to crime to help their families, Cowan made sure that children were not tried as adults but treated differently and with compassion and care in court.