

# Introduction to Ohio Authors

## Overview

Ohio writers are an interesting group. You might be surprised by the number of Ohio authors who have had a major influence on the direction of American literature – as well as authors who have been tremendously popular with the American public. In this lesson, students will get to know several Ohio writers and their works through individual research projects and class discussion. Each student will also choose one Ohio author to investigate in more detail and select an additional work of fiction to read and review. The lesson includes many opportunities for nonfiction reading, research, and writing, as well as fiction reading, informative writing, and persuasive writing.

## Getting Started

### Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Name at least five Ohio authors and explain why they are/were important
- Explain the impact that one piece of Ohio literature had on American literature or society
- Name one Ohio author whose works they like or admire, and explain why

### Grade Level Indicators

In meeting the above lesson objectives, students will:

- A** Use the text to demonstrate reading comprehension strategies, including the ability to recall and summarize important ideas and supporting details, and the ability to draw conclusions
- B** Use criteria to choose independent reading materials (e.g., personal interest, knowledge of authors and genres, or recommendations from others)
- G** Generate writing ideas through discussion with others and from printed materials, and keep a list of writing ideas
- H** Use available technology to compose text
- I** Publish writing for display or for sharing with others
- J** Write informational essays or reports (including research) that present a literal understanding of the topic; pose relevant and tightly drawn questions that engage the reader; provide a clear and accurate perspective on the subject; create an organizing structure appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context; support the main ideas with facts, details, examples, and explanations from sources

- L** Locate information using text features and parts of books
- M** Compare and contrast important details about a topic using different sources of information, including books, magazines, newspapers, and online resources
- N** Persuade readers with writing that demonstrates the ability to assess the adequacy and accuracy of details, identify and understand an author’s purpose for writing, and identify intended audience

**Time Required: 8 class periods or more**

This lesson is divided into two sections, which could be completed within several weeks or over a longer period of time. In addition to the class time indicated here, students will need time outside of class for independent reading, research, and writing.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Pacing</b>
<b>Getting to Know Ohio Authors</b>	
Watch Travelogue; Read Essay . . . . .	90 minutes
Graphic Organizer . . . . .	45 minutes
Interview Questions; “Writers on Writing” . . . . .	45 minutes
Selecting an Author; Letter to the Teacher . . . . .	45 minutes
Author Research; Informative Essay . . . . .	Variable
<b>Reading Ohio Authors</b>	
Book Selection; Begin to Read . . . . .	45 minutes
Reading the Book . . . . .	Variable
Book Review . . . . .	45-90 minutes

**Reading and Writing Strategies**

Throughout the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* lessons, students and teachers should keep a reading/writing dialogue journal. Encourage students to write about what they are reading and to make lists of things that they might want to write about. They can use their journals to share their thoughts and questions with you and with other students, and you and the other students can write back to them in their journals.

**Materials Needed**

- Student copies of the “Getting to Know Ohio Authors” essay (found at the end of this lesson)
- Copies of the Getting To Know Ohio Authors graphic organizer (six per student)
- (optional) Copy of the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/videocassette, television monitor, DVD player or VCR

## Additional Resources

- (optional) Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- (optional) Internet access
- (optional) Poster-making materials, including poster board, markers, etc.

## Getting to Know Ohio Authors

In this activity, students will read about and begin to investigate Ohio authors. You can pique students' interest in Ohio authors by showing the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* travelogue show, which is included on the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/videocassette. This travelogue is approximately 60 minutes long, so you will need to view it over two class periods.

After students have watched the travelogue show, give them the following instructions:

- Read the "Getting to Know Ohio Authors" essay.
- Choose one author in each genre to investigate further (six authors in total).
- Do your own research to find out why these authors were important. For each author, complete the Graphic Organizer, found on page 12. At least one source should be a book.

When all students have completed their research, organize students into discussion groups, with all of the students who researched the same author in the same group. Have the students in each group complete the following activities:

- Have students refer to their Graphic Organizers and compile a list of what they want to know and what questions they want to ask the author.
- Ask students to imagine that they have the opportunity to interview their chosen author. Have each group create a list of their top ten interview questions.
- Assign one student to be the "reporter" who records the names of the students in the group and the list of questions. If desired, you can reconfigure groups for a different genre. Finally, as a class, compare the lists compiled by each group. Identify any common types of information that the students want to know or common questions that they would like to ask an author.
- Some of the students' questions may concern the writing process: "How did you get the idea for your book?", "How long did it take to write that?", "How did you find out about that subject before you wrote about it?", etc. Tell students that, as they do further research on a specific author, they should look for answers to these questions.

## Write Now!

Have each student select a single author to investigate in detail. This can be one of the authors they have already researched or someone else. (For a local connection, students can find a list of authors from your local area on



### TECHNOLOGY LINK

Biographical information and bibliographies for many Ohio authors, as well as a literary map of Ohio that links authors with Ohio cities and towns, are available on the Ohio Reading Road Trip website. <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org>



### TEACHING TIP

Place an Ohio road map on your bulletin board or wall. Have students find the places where their authors lived on the map and mark those locations with pushpins or small round stickers.



### TECHNOLOGY LINK

For interviews with three individual Ohio authors on the writing process, have students watch "Writers on Writing" on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videotape. Remind students to listen for answers to some of the common questions that the class would like to ask.

the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* website’s literary map.) In their journals, have each student write a letter to you, explaining why they chose that author and how they plan to learn more about him or her. The letter should answer the following questions:

- What interests you?
- What do you want to know about this person or their work? Why?
- What books or other sources of information will you use for your research? (You could read the author information on the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* website, as well as other biographies, bibliographies, book reviews, etc. At least one source of information should be a book.)

Review these letters and make suggestions where necessary. You may need to help students make a realistic research plan. (For example, they will need more than one source of information, but they should not try to read every available biography.)

Once you have returned all students’ journals with your feedback, have each student complete their research and write an informative essay about their selected author. At least one source should be a book. These essays should include:

- The author’s vital statistics (from Graphic Organizer)
- Biographical information, including how this author became a writer
- Most important or influential work, why the author wrote it, what he or she was trying to accomplish or say, and what the reaction was at the time the work was published
- The student’s research should answer the question, “How did this work affect the author, the American public, and/or other writers?”

## Reading Ohio Authors

Have each student choose a book to read by an Ohio author. To ensure that students choose age-appropriate books, you can use the following list (recommended for middle school students by the Ohioana Library Association) or your own knowledge of Ohio books and authors. For example, you are probably familiar with popular young adult authors such as Margaret Peterson Haddix, Sharon Creech, and Sharon Draper.

If possible, take students to the library to check out their book, and have them start reading it right away. Students should make notes in their reading journals as they read.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe  
*The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells  
*A Modern Instance* by William Dean Howells  
*The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* by Ambrose Bierce  
*Sport of the Gods* by Paul Laurence Dunbar  
*Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson  
*My Life and Hard Times* by James Thurber  
*Many Moons* by James Thurber



In Spring 2004, Ohio authors answer student questions on the Ohio Reading Road Trip website. Go to <http://www.ohio-readingroadtrip.org> and click on the “Write to a Writer” feature to find out more and read the questions and answers.



For Parents’ Night or Open House, you might ask students to present their research. Have each student create a poster or display to persuade their parents or other people in your community to read this work. The display should include their essay, the students’ own artwork or pictures found in their research, and other media as desired. You might ask students to prepare oral presentations about their authors to share with visitors who stop to look at their displays during the event.



You can assess these essays using the Ohio Graduation Test 6-point rubric, found on page 183.

*The Last Flower* by James Thurber  
*Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes  
*Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes  
*The Branch Will Not Break* by James Wright  
*Early Autumn* by Louis Bromfield  
*Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove  
*Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey  
*The Secret of the Old Clock* or other Nancy Drew mysteries  
by “Carolyn Keene”  
*Witch World* by Andre Norton  
*Troublemakers: Stories* by Harlan Ellison

### **Write Now!**

Have each student write a book review for their selected book, using the following structure:

- Begin with the title of the review and the reviewer’s name. For example, a student named Jim Smith would write, “*Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove, reviewed by Jim Smith.”
- The first sentence presents something interesting about the book that will capture the reader’s attention.
- The rest of the first paragraph (the introduction) gives a general description of the book.
- The next paragraphs (the body) present your comments about the story, character development, plot, setting, theme, etc. What was the author trying to do, and how well did he or she do that?
- The final paragraph (the conclusion) includes your opinion of the book and your recommendation. Who do you think would enjoy this book?

If desired, students can prepare their book reviews for publication or display. You might also encourage them to submit their book reviews to the school newspaper.



# Getting to Know Ohio Authors

by Kate Templeton Fox, Ph.D.  
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## Why Study Ohio Authors?

Ohio authors have always played an important role in American literature. For example, in the early 1800s, both Ohio writers and American authors in general became interested in writing about the unique experiences of American life instead of imitating European writers. Ohio was part of the first westward expansion from the original 13 colonies, and it had only just become a state in 1803. Ohioans began writing about their experiences living in what was still very much a frontier territory. Because many American authors wanted to write about life in the more sophisticated New England colonies, Ohio writers had to convince people that the frontier was an appropriate subject for literature.

But, whether the subject was the colonial experience or life on the frontier, American and Ohio literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were more alike than different. Both the American colonies and the Ohio frontier attracted settlers who were very independent—people who might not have fit in anywhere else. Not surprisingly, both American and Ohio literature placed a high premium on original thought and imagination, as well as individual identity and experience. As a result, Ohio has given American literature some of its best writers and most important works.

One Ohio native who made a significant contribution to American literature was William Dean Howells (1837–1920). Howells wrote poems, novels, plays, and essays. He served as the editor for magazines including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*, and he was the first famous American literary critic. In all of these roles, Howells did much to shift the focus of American literature to a more realistic portrayal of the United States beyond New England. Howells's own novels, including *A Modern Instance* (1882) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), are prime examples of early realistic fiction. His writing paved the way for such works as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Howells also championed other American writers, including Henry James, Mark Twain, Frank Norris, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

## Literary Fiction

One Ohio author in particular influenced both American literature and American history. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that opened the eyes of the nation to the suffering of African-American slaves. After *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852, many people who read the book began to support the Abolitionist movement, a group who wanted the U.S. Government to pass a law that would end slavery. The Abolitionists were mostly in the northern United States, and they were opposed by many people in the South, where the economy depended on slave labor. The South also wanted to keep states' rights to make their own laws about things like slavery and taxes instead of handing power over to the federal government. The political fight over these issues led to the American Civil War. It is reported that, when Stowe visited the White House in 1862, President Lincoln remarked, "So this is the little lady who made this big war."

Stowe wrote about slaves from the perspective of a typical white person of her time. Today, we recognize that the African-American characters in *Uncle Tom's*

*Cabin* are based on stereotypes, rather than real people. Even so, the book was successful in highlighting the plight of African-Americans. This issue was explored more deeply in the writings of later Ohio authors such as Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), Charles Chestnutt (1858–1932), Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Rita Dove (1952– ), and Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison (1936– ). These Ohio writers—along with Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Ralph Ellison, and others—have been instrumental in the development of African-American literature in the United States.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was also important in another way. Although women writers such as poets Anne Bradstreet (the first published American writer) and Emily Dickinson had achieved critical success, Stowe was the first woman to make her living as a writer. She opened the door for such American women writers as Louisa May Alcott, Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O’Connor, and Eudora Welty, as well as native Ohioans Rita Dove and Toni Morrison.

### Short Story

William Sydney Porter (1862–1910) wrote under the pen name “O. Henry.” He began his writing career while he was serving a five-year term in the Ohio Penitentiary for embezzlement. Many considered him the greatest short story writer of the late nineteenth century. Many people are familiar with his story, “Gift of the Magi,” which is often told during the Christmas holiday. Other stories such as “The Last Leaf” and “The Ransom of Red Chief” are read in many high school and college classes. Although at times his stories might be called shallow or sentimental, O. Henry was a master of the surprise ending.

Another master of the short story was Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941). Anderson was not impressed by O. Henry’s surprise endings. He criticized O. Henry for making up contrived plot twists instead of developing believable characters. Anderson himself influenced the short story genre by developing a more natural, expressive form of writing that didn’t follow the traditional short story structure. An excellent example of this is Anderson’s collection of short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, which is considered a classic work of literature. Anderson also helped other writers get published, including Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner.

Many contemporary writers are still contributing to the art of the short story. One Ohioan, James Purdy (1923– ), has a unique writing style that is either loved or hated by critics. When he first started writing, Purdy (like many aspiring writers) struggled to find a publisher. Like Faulkner and Hemingway, he received encouragement from other, more established writers. Purdy sent out a manuscript of his short stories to famous writers, and English poet Dame Edith Sitwell responded with great enthusiasm, calling several of his short stories “superb: nothing short of masterpieces.”

### Poetry

Poetry has a long history in Ohio. In fact, the earliest book of original verses in the West, *American Bards: A Modern Poem*, was published in 1819 in Cincinnati. Ohio poets and their works have contributed greatly to the American poetry scene. Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first important black poet in America. Although he wrote plays, stories, and novels, Dunbar was most famous for his poetry. Dunbar wrote in both formal English and the dialect of enslaved African-Americans. His writing was widely read by white and black Americans alike, and by the time Dunbar died at the young age of 33, he had produced a substantial body of work.

Other famous Ohio poets include Hart Crane (1899–1932), who wrote a very famous long poem, “The Bridge,” that literally bridges the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Langston Hughes was an integral force in the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920s. James Wright (1927–1980), along with other poets of his time, gave up formal verse in favor of free verse, and his work is still an influence on contemporary poets.

Ohioan Rita Dove was the U.S. Poet Laureate from 1993–1995 and a consultant on poetry to the Library of Congress. Her poetry collection, *Thomas and Beulah*, won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for its meditations on the legacy of slavery. Another contemporary poet whose work explores the African-American experience is Nikki Giovanni.

## Humor

Humor took root in Ohio during the early days of statehood and has flowered with each generation. Meigs County native Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914) is best known for short stories such as “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” but he also produced a book of satire, *The Devil’s Dictionary*. Satire is a form of humor writing that makes fun of human behavior. For example, one of the “definitions” in *The Devil’s Dictionary* is: “Admiration, n.: Our polite recognition of another’s resemblance to ourselves.” Other well-known writers of satire included Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, and Dorothy Parker.

Another famous and popular humor writer is Columbus native James Thurber (1894–1961). He would revise his writing over and over again, until he found the exact words that he wanted to use. Thurber stands equal to Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Garrison Keillor in his masterful storytelling skills and sophisticated wit. His books include *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, about a man who day-dreams, and *My Life and Hard Times*, which contains stories from Thurber’s life through the age of 24. Other Ohio humor writers include newspaper columnist Erma Bombeck (1927–1996) and novelist and essayist Ian Frazier (1951– ), who won the 1997 Thurber Prize for American Humor for his book *Coyote v. Acme*.

## Children’s Literature

As early as 1868, Ohio authors were producing books for children. In that year, Chillicothe native Martha Finley (1828–1909) began publishing the *Elsie Dinsmore* series of books about an orphaned girl whose Christian beliefs sustain her. Finley wrote twenty-eight *Elsie Dinsmore* books, which sold millions of copies in America and abroad. Two other Ohio authors, Hildegard Frey (1891–1957) and Mildred Wirt Benson (1905–2002) also wrote books for children. Frey wrote the *Camp Fire Girls* series in the early 1900s. Benson, writing as Carolyn Keene, created the ever-popular *Nancy Drew* mystery series for young readers in 1929. Benson wrote under many other names, creating books for the *Dana Girls*, *Hardy Boys*, and other children’s book series. Today, many of Ohio children’s authors create their own series books. The most famous of these are the *Goosebumps* and *Fear Street* books by R.L. Stine, Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* series, and the *Henry and Mudge* books by Cynthia Rylant.

Ohioans Lois Lenski (1893–1974) and Robert McCloskey (1914–2003) both wrote and illustrated some of the most original young children’s books of their time. Lenski’s *Strawberry Girl* won the Newbery Medal in 1946. She also



illustrated the most popular version of *The Little Engine That Could*, which was originally published in 1945. McCloskey was a two-time Caldecott Medal winner for *Make Way for Ducklings* in 1942 and for *Time of Wonder* in 1958. The originality of their art continues to set a standard for contemporary Ohio children's authors/illustrators, including David Catrow, Denise Fleming, Christopher Canyon, Anna Grossnickle Hines, and Will Hillenbrand.

Two Ohio authors, Virginia Hamilton (1936–2002) and Mildred D. Taylor (1943– ), did not think that many children's books painted an accurate picture of the African-American experience. They began to write books that celebrated their racial heritage and provided a more complete portrayal of black family life. Both authors have won national writing awards, and their work has influenced contemporary authors such as Angela Johnson and Jacqueline Woodson.

### Popular Fiction

Popular fiction is usually thought of as more fun and entertaining, as opposed to serious literary fiction. Popular fiction writers from Ohio have made a big impact on the publishing scene over the years. The Western (cowboy) novel was literally invented by Zane Grey (1872–1939), with such books as *The Last of the Plainsmen* (1908) and *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912). Science-fiction/fantasy writing was heavily influenced by authors Andre Norton (1912), Harlan Ellison (1934), and Roger Zelazny (1937–1995), who began writing in that genre in the 1950s–1960s.

Earl Derr Biggers (1884–1933) and Chester Himes (1909–1984) made important contributions to the detective/mystery genre. In the 1930s, when most law enforcement officials were Caucasian, Derr Biggers wrote the Charlie Chan novel series about an Asian detective. Beginning in 1959, Himes wrote the *Harlem Domestic* series of crime thriller books featuring the first black detectives, “Grave Digger” Jones and “Coffin” Ed Johnson. Today, many mystery book series still feature a detective who belongs to a specific group or must solve the mystery while working in a setting that is unfamiliar to many readers. For example, Tony Hillerman writes about two Native American detectives who solve crimes for the Navajo Tribal Police, and Nevada Barr's novels focus on a ranger who solves mysteries in U.S. National Parks. Other examples of this approach include P. L. Gaus's Ohio *Amish Mystery* series and Karen Harper's *Elizabeth I* mysteries.

### Conclusion

Looking back over the history of Ohio literature, William Coyle (editor of *Ohio Authors and Their Books, 1796–1950*) identifies two especially interesting points about Ohio authors and their work. First, there does not seem to be a distinct Ohio style of writing. Coyle says, “The writing of Ohioans shows a surprisingly complete representation of popular taste in the nation as a whole.” In other words, if it's being written in Ohio, it's probably being read everywhere.

Second, Ohio writers tend to leave the state. As Coyle puts it, “There have always been more authors *from* Ohio than *in* Ohio.” Writers seem to get an excellent literary start here and then go on to greater things, but it seems that the Buckeye State is never far from an Ohio writer's mind. As James Thurber noted, “I have lived in the East for nearly thirty years now, but many of my books prove that I am never very far away from Ohio in my thoughts, and that the clocks that strike in my dreams are often the clocks of Columbus.”

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Getting to Know Ohio Authors

Author Name \_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Birth and Death \_\_\_\_\_

Places Where This Author Lived \_\_\_\_\_

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Books This Author Wrote \_\_\_\_\_

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Why This Author Was Important \_\_\_\_\_

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What Do I Want to Know About This Author? \_\_\_\_\_

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What Questions Do I Want to Ask This Author? \_\_\_\_\_

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