



## BIO: Charles Dickens Study Guide



### **Introduction**

His vibrant characters such as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Nicholas Nickleby have delighted readers for generations. Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England in 1812 and by the 1830s his writings were anticipated by readers throughout the country. *Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius* reveals how his own life experiences and talents animated his work, leading him to become one of the essential authors of the Victorian era. This program traces Dickens' life story from his early years on the assembly line to his rise as an author through his death in 1870.

This one-hour biography brings viewers new insights into the development of Dickens' unique literary style and the artistic context in which he penned some of the most important literary works of the 19th century. This BIO shows how Dickens' work became a strong commentary on the difficult conditions of the Industrial Revolution through his captivating characters and rich descriptions of industrial England. An excellent visual resource together with Dickens' novels and stories, this BIO will introduce students to the complex world of Victorian England and will encourage students to consider the relationship between literary works and social context.

### **Objectives and Curriculum Links**

*Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius* would be useful for classes on Literature, English History, Culture, and Writing. It is appropriate for high school students. Teachers should watch this program before showing it to students to determine whether the content is appropriate for their age group.

## Vocabulary

Using a dictionary ([www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com)) or an encyclopedia, students may want to define or explain the significance of the following terms from this program:

- gentility
- gentry
- Industrial Revolution
- prosperity
- psyche
- reform
- remonstrate
- serial
- social class
- stenography
- volatile

## Discussion Questions

1. The writings of Charles Dickens have been popular for over a century. What is it about his work that makes it so enduring and memorable?
2. Charles Dickens' work coincided with the height of the Industrial Revolution. How do you think this historic era influence Dickens' life and writings?
3. How did Dickens' childhood experiences affect his outlook? How do you think his upbringing affected his decisions later in life?
4. How did Dickens first become a writer?
5. Charles Dickens created some of the most memorable characters in the history of the written word. How did Dickens get the ideas for these characters? Are they purely fictional?
6. What are some examples of Dickens' use of real people and experiences into his fiction?
7. The first works of Dickens were published as serials. How did this method of publication contribute to Dickens' popularity and success as a writer?
8. Charles Dickens' success was everything he had dreamed of as a boy and more, yet he was an intensely unhappy man. What made Dickens so unhappy? How do you think his melancholy influenced his work?
9. How did Dickens' meeting later in life with his long lost love affect him psychologically?
10. What is the legacy of Charles Dickens? How have his writings influenced world society?

## Extended Activities

1. Charles Dickens had a gift for description; he created some of the most memorable characters in the world. Choose your favorite Dickens character, and using Dickens' description of this character, create an artistic rendering of what this character might look like on poster-board or using a computer program such as PowerPoint.
2. Dickens' stories are geared toward adult readers, yet his characters have almost universal appeal. Working along or in a group, create a "chapter book" for younger readers based on one of his classics. You may want to illustrate these

- books with images or with your own drawings, and share them with younger students at your school or in your family.
3. The economic backdrop for Dickens' stories was the Industrial Revolution, a process which transformed England and the rest of the world. Break up into groups of four or five. Research the Industrial Revolution in England using the Internet or at the library. Identify key terms, dates, and events from this era. On a poster, create a timeline for the Industrial Revolution. Include in your search the publication dates for some of Dickens' works. Find images or sketches from Dickens' novels to decorate your poster; you may also want to include a quote from one of his stories. Choose one person to share your timeline with the rest of your class or group.
  4. Despite the prosperity of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, there was also great poverty. Social reform movements aimed to alleviate the affects of poverty were developed throughout the world. Research the concept of social reform and identify some of the key social reformers in 19th century England. Write a short essay of one to two pages defining social reform and summarizing the contributions of your chosen reformer.

### **Websites**

**Additional background and video from Bio.com:**

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Charles-Dickens-192833>

**Updated news about Dickens:**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/charlesdickens>

**Comprehensive background and links on Dickens:**

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/dickensov.html>

**Additional background:**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/dickens\\_charles.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/dickens_charles.shtml)

### **Books**

Ackroyd, Peter. Dickens: Public Life & Private Passions (Hylas Publishing, 2003) (For older readers)

Davis, Paul B. Charles Dickens A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Life and Work (Checkmark Books, 1999)

Jordan, John O. The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Pool, Daniel. What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist-The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England (Touchstone Books, 1994)