

### from The Life of Samuel Johnson

Biography by James Boswell



**READING 6** Analyze the effect of sarcasm in literary nonfiction. **8** Analyze the consistency and clarity of the expression of the controlling idea and the ways in which the organizational and rhetorical patterns of text support or confound the author's meaning or purpose.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

James Boswell ...

- claimed to be distantly related to King George III.
- married his first cousin and had five children.
- was a lawyer for 17 years.

#### Meet the Author

### James Boswell 1740–1795

In 1763, James Boswell was a smart, fun-loving 22-year-old who had passed his law exams in his native Scotland and traveled to London to enjoy the many pleasures the city had to offer. He had also begun a journal where he recorded the drama of his unfolding life in minute detail. One dramatic moment occurred in a bookstore on May 16, when he met one of his heroes, the great Samuel Johnson. Although Johnson didn't at first like the brash young Scotsman, Boswell won him over in a matter of weeks. So began the famous 21-year friendship that produced one of the greatest biographies in Western literature.

**An Odd Couple** At first glance, the 53-year-old Dr. Johnson, a distinguished man of letters, and the rambunctious Boswell—a “bumbling egotist,” according to one critic—made an odd pair. But Boswell was predisposed to latch onto the older man. His own father was a prestigious judge in Edinburgh with a 20,000-acre country estate. Stern and self-righteous, the senior Boswell had ambitions for his firstborn son that were constantly thwarted by James's promiscuous lifestyle. In a compromise with his father, Boswell became a lawyer in Edinburgh

but escaped to London for periodic visits. Boswell's relationship with Johnson not only provided the intellectual and social stimulation Boswell craved but also gave him the fatherly support he lacked. For his part, Johnson was genuinely charmed by Boswell, once describing his sociable friend as a man who “never left a house without leaving a wish for his return.”

**Personal Decline** After Johnson's death in 1784, Boswell moved his wife and five children to London and spent the next seven years struggling to write *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. The book's instant success upon its publication in 1791 did not, however, halt Boswell's downward spiral into drink, dissolution, and debt. In the remaining few years of his life, he considered himself a failure. Later, in a nasty turn of events, the 19th-century essayist Thomas Macaulay wrote a withering critique of Boswell as “a man of the meanest and feeblest intellect,” casting the talented biographer into the far reaches of Johnson's shadow for more than 100 years. Boswell's reputation didn't recover until his private papers were discovered in the 1920s and 1930s and were published to wide acclaim in the 1950s. Modern readers appreciated Boswell's particular genius at capturing life's imperfect moments in all their spontaneity and splendor.

Author Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML12-680



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: BIOGRAPHY

James Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson is one of the most famous biographies in the English language. A **biography** is an account of a person's life written by another person, who may or may not be personally familiar with the subject. As a skilled biographer, Boswell synthesizes information from anecdotes, reconstructed dialogue, quotations, and interpretive passages and uses these various elements to form a full account of Dr. Johnson's life. As you read, notice how Boswell uses these various elements to depict Johnson.

## READING SKILL: ANALYZE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

The **author's perspective** is the unique combination of ideas, experiences, values, and beliefs that influence the way the writer establishes his or her **main idea** about that subject. For 21 years, Boswell chronicled his conversations and experiences with Johnson, amassing numerous anecdotes and opinions about his subject. To determine Boswell's perspective, note these clues in the text:

- Boswell's personal observations
- anecdotes and dialogue that involve the biographer
- Boswell's tone and word choice

As you read, use a chart to record statements that reflect these clues. Note what these reveal about Boswell's perspective toward Johnson.

### Statements from Biography

- "a masterly essay against gulosity"
- 
- 



### Boswell's Perspective

- admires Johnson's writing
- 

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Use these sentences to figure out the meanings of the boldfaced words, which all appear in the selection from *The Life of Samuel Johnson*.

1. She shook her head over and over in **vehement** refusal.
2. He was **abstemious**, refusing to indulge in any excess.
3. The climate is **temperate**, neither too hot nor too cold.
4. The **mason** worked on the stone exterior of the church.
5. Hawks often swoop down and **assail** small animals.
6. Tina held her ground with great **resolution**.



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

## Why tell someone's LIFE STORY?

The lives of famous people have intrigued the public for centuries. Sometimes writers are inspired to write a biography because they know readers will be interested in the private details behind the public events of a famous person's life. Other biographers, such as Boswell, may have more personal reasons, such as the impact their subject had on them or their unique perspective on the subject.

**DISCUSS** Think of someone you know who leads an interesting life, is an unusual person, or is a hero to you in some way. He or she may be someone you know or someone famous. If you were to write a biography of this person, what kind of information would you include? What might you leave out, and why? With your classmates, discuss the information you think should be included in such a biography.



# THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

James Boswell

## ON EATING (1763)

At supper this night he talked of good eating with uncommon satisfaction. “Some people (said he,) have a foolish way of not minding, or pretending not to mind, what they eat. For my part, I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else.”

He now appeared to me *Jean Bull philosophe*,<sup>1</sup> and he was, for the moment, not only serious but **vehement**. Yet I have heard him, upon other occasions, talk with great contempt of people who were anxious to gratify their palates; and the 206th number of his *Rambler* is a masterly essay against gulosity.<sup>2</sup> His practice, indeed, I must acknowledge, may be considered as casting the balance of his different  
10 opinions upon this subject; for I never knew any man who relished good eating more than he did. When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible. To those whose sensations were delicate, this could not but be disgusting; and it was doubtless not very suitable to the character of a philosopher, who should be distinguished by self-command. **A**

## Analyze Visuals ►

What personality traits come across in this portrait of Samuel Johnson?

**vehement** (vē'ə-mənt)  
*adj.* acting with or having great force; fervent

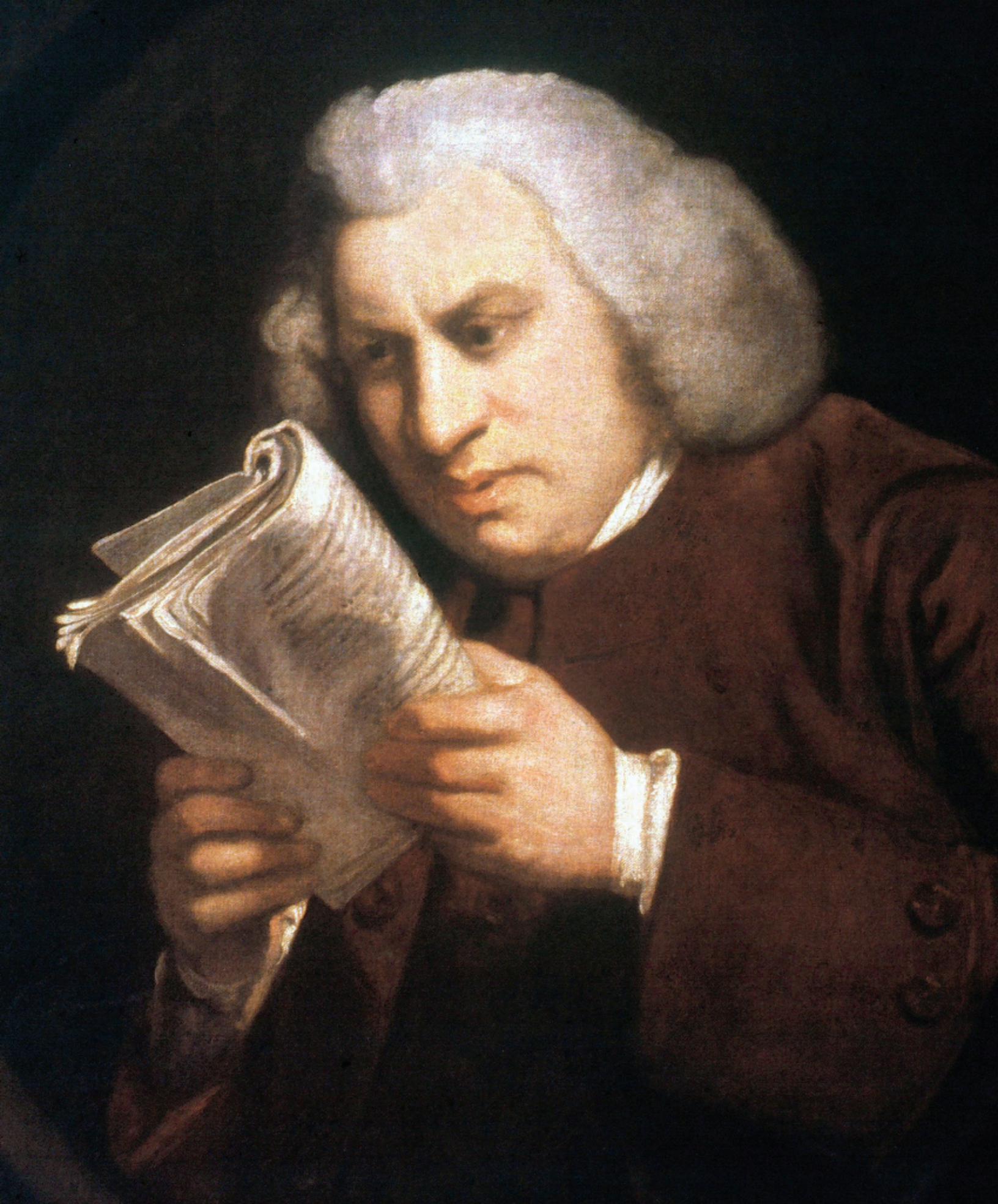
## **A** AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

In your own words, describe Boswell's opinion of Johnson's eating habits. Do you think Boswell is objective in his view?

1. *Jean Bull philosophe* (zhān bōōl fē'lō-zōf'): *French*: John Bull, philosopher. The name John Bull traditionally represents the typical Englishman, seen as honest, hearty, and gruff.

2. **206th number . . . gulosity** (gyōō-lōs'y-tē): In an issue of Johnson's *The Rambler*, a periodical published from 1750 to 1752, he wrote an essay criticizing excessive appetite, or gluttony.







But it must be owned,<sup>3</sup> that Johnson, though he could be rigidly **abstemious**,  
20 was not a **temperate** man either in eating or drinking. He could refrain, but  
he could not use moderately. He told me, that he had fasted two days without  
inconvenience, and that he had never been hungry but once. They who beheld  
with wonder how much he ate upon all occasions when his dinner was to his  
taste, could not easily conceive what he must have meant by hunger; and not only  
was he remarkable for the extraordinary quantity which he ate, but he was, or  
affected to be, a man of very nice discernment in the science of cookery. He used  
to descant<sup>4</sup> critically on the dishes which had been at table where he had dined or  
supped, and to recollect very minutely what he had liked. . . .

When invited to dine, even with an intimate friend, he was not pleased if  
30 something better than a plain dinner was not prepared for him. I have heard him  
say on such an occasion, “This was a good dinner enough, to be sure; but it was  
not a dinner to *ask* a man to.” On the other hand, he was wont to express, with  
great glee, his satisfaction when he had been entertained quite to his mind.

### ON EQUALITY OF THE SEXES (1778)

Mrs. Knowles<sup>5</sup> affected to complain that men had much more liberty allowed  
them than women.

JOHNSON. “Why, Madam, women have all the liberty they should wish to have.  
We have all the labor and the danger, and the women all the advantage. We go to  
sea, we build houses, we do everything, in short, to pay our court to the women.”

MRS. KNOWLES. “The Doctor reasons very wittily, but not convincingly. Now,  
40 take the instance of building; the **mason’s** wife, if she is ever seen in liquor, is  
ruined; the mason may get himself drunk as often as he pleases, with little loss  
of character; nay, may let his wife and children starve.”

JOHNSON. “Madam, you must consider, if the mason does get himself drunk,  
and let his wife and children starve, the parish will oblige him to find security  
for their maintenance. We have different modes of restraining evil. Stocks for  
the men, a ducking-stool for women, and a pound for beasts. If we require more  
perfection from women than from ourselves, it is doing them honor. And women  
have not the same temptations that we have: they may always live in virtuous  
company; men must mix in the world indiscriminately. If a woman has no  
50 inclination to do what is wrong being secured from it is no restraint to her. I am  
at liberty to walk into the Thames;<sup>6</sup> but if I were to try it, my friends would  
restrain me in Bedlam,<sup>7</sup> and I should be obliged to them.” **B**

MRS. KNOWLES. “Still, Doctor, I cannot help thinking it a hardship that more  
indulgence is allowed to men than to women. It gives a superiority to men, to  
which I do not see how they are entitled.”

**abstemious** (ăb-stē’mē-əs)  
*adj.* practicing abstinence;  
refraining from doing  
something

**temperate** (tēm’pər-īt)  
*adj.* moderate

**mason** (mā’sən) *n.*  
someone whose work is  
to build walls, buildings,  
and other structures  
made of stone, brick,  
or concrete

**B BIOGRAPHY**  
Reread lines 36–52.  
What do you learn  
about Johnson from  
this dialogue?

3. **owned**: admitted.

4. **descant** (dēs’kănt’): speak at length.

5. **Mrs. Knowles**: Mary Knowles, a well-educated Quaker who challenged Johnson’s opinions of women and gave her own account of their exchange in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1791.

6. **Thames** (tēmz): the large river that flows through London.

7. **Bedlam**: a London institution for the mentally ill.



*Mitre Tavern* (1800s), unknown. Colored engraving. The Granger Collection, New York.

## ◀ Analyze Visuals

The engraving shows a meeting between (from left to right) writer Oliver Goldsmith, James Boswell, and Samuel Johnson at a London tavern. What can you infer from the gestures and facial expressions of the three men?

JOHNSON. “It is plain, Madam, one or other must have the superiority. As Shakespeare says, ‘If two men ride on a horse, one must ride behind.’”

DILLY.<sup>8</sup> “I suppose, Sir, Mrs. Knowles would have them to ride in panniers,<sup>9</sup> one on each side.”

60 JOHNSON. “Then, Sir, the horse would throw them both.”

MRS. KNOWLES. “Well, I hope that in another world the sexes will be equal.”

BOSWELL. “That is being too ambitious, Madam. *We* might as well desire to be equal with the angels. *We* shall all, I hope, be happy in a future state, but we must not expect to be all happy in the same degree. It is enough if we be happy according to our several capacities. A worthy carman<sup>10</sup> will get to heaven as well as Sir Isaac Newton.<sup>11</sup> Yet, though equally good, they will not have the same degrees of happiness.”

JOHNSON. “Probably not.” Ⓢ

## ON THE FEAR OF DEATH (1769)

I mentioned to him that I had seen the execution of several convicts at Tyburn,<sup>12</sup>  
70 two days before, and that none of them seemed to be under any concern.

8. **Dilly:** Edward Dilly, a bookseller and publisher who was a friend of Johnson’s.

9. **panniers** (păn’yərz): a pair of baskets hung across the back of a pack animal.

10. **carman:** carriage driver.

11. **Sir Isaac Newton:** a famous English mathematician and scientist who died in 1727.

12. **Tyburn** (tī’būrn): a former site of public hangings in London.



TEKS 6

## Ⓢ SARCASM

**Sarcasm** is a form of **verbal irony** used to mockingly undermine someone else’s opinion. Reread lines 36–60. Johnson responds to Mrs. Knowles by claiming that women are denied equal liberty for a reason: They are morally superior, rather than inferior, to men, and this greater purity of mind must be protected from a contaminating world. He concludes that if a woman is truly virtuous, she will not complain that she lacks freedom. What are other examples of Johnson’s sarcastic wit in this section?



JOHNSON. “Most of them, Sir, have never thought at all.”

BOSWELL. “But is not the fear of death natural to man?”

JOHNSON. “So much so, Sir, that the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it.”

He then, in a low and earnest tone, talked of his meditating upon the awful hour of his own dissolution,<sup>13</sup> and in what manner he should conduct himself upon that occasion: “I know not (said he,) whether I should wish to have a friend by me, or have it all between God and myself.” . . .

When we were alone, I introduced the subject of death, and endeavored to  
80 maintain that the fear of it might be got over. I told him that David Hume<sup>14</sup> said to me, he was no more uneasy to think he should *not be* after this life, than that he *had not been* before he began to exist.

JOHNSON. “Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad: if he does not think so, he lies. He may tell you, he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain; would you believe him? When he dies, he at least gives up all he has.”

BOSWELL. “Foote,<sup>15</sup> Sir, told me, that when he was very ill he was not afraid to die.”

JOHNSON. “It is not true, Sir. Hold a pistol to Foote’s breast, or to Hume’s breast, and threaten to kill them, and you’ll see how they behave.”

90 BOSWELL. “But may we not fortify our minds for the approach of death?”

Here I am sensible<sup>16</sup> I was in the wrong, to bring before his view what he ever looked upon with horror; for although when in a celestial frame, in his “Vanity of Human Wishes,”<sup>17</sup> he has supposed death to be “kind Nature’s signal for retreat,” from this state of being to “a happier seat,” his thoughts upon this awful change were in general full of dismal apprehensions. His mind resembled the vast amphitheater, the Colosseum at Rome. In the center stood his judgment, which, like a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehensions that, like the wild beasts of the *Arena*, were all around in cells, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drove them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still

100 **assailing** him. To my question, whether we might not fortify our minds for the approach of death, he answered, in a passion, “No, Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time.” He added, (with an earnest look,) “A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine.”

I attempted to continue the conversation. He was so provoked, that he said, “Give us no more of this”; and was thrown into such a state of agitation, that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; showed an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, “Don’t let us meet tomorrow.” **D**

### Language Coach

**Cognates** Cognates are words from different languages with a common origin. The word *fortify* (line 90) has cognates in French (*fortifier*), Spanish (*fortificar*), and Italian (*fortificare*). What does *fortify* mean in line 90?

**assail** (ə-sāl') v. to attack

### **D** AUTHOR’S PERSPECTIVE

Describe the relationship between Johnson and Boswell presented here. How might Boswell’s view of Johnson have influenced his portrayal of this incident?

13. **awful . . . dissolution:** awe-inspiring hour of his own death.

14. **David Hume** (hyōōm): a Scottish philosopher and historian.


15. **Foote:** actor and playwright Samuel Foote.

16. **sensible:** aware.

17. **“Vanity of Human Wishes”:** a famous long poem by Johnson.

## ON JOHNSON'S PHYSICAL COURAGE (1775)

110 . . . No man was ever more remarkable for personal courage. He had, indeed, an awful dread of death, or rather, “of something after death”; and what rational man, who seriously thinks of quitting all that he has ever known, and going into a new and unknown state of being, can be without that dread? But his fear was from reflection; his courage natural. His fear, in that one instance, was the result of philosophical and religious consideration. He feared death, but he feared nothing else, not even what might occasion death. Many instances of his **resolution** may be mentioned. One day, at Mr. Beauclerk's<sup>18</sup> house in the country, when two large dogs were fighting, he went up to them, and beat them till they separated; and at another time, when told of the danger there was that a gun might burst if charged with many balls, he put in six or seven, and fired it off against a wall. Mr. Langton told me, that when they were swimming together near Oxford,<sup>19</sup> he cautioned Dr. Johnson against a pool, which was reckoned particularly dangerous; upon which Johnson directly swam into it. He told me himself that one night he was attacked in the street by four men, to whom he would not yield, but kept them all at bay, till the watch came up, and carried both him and them to the roundhouse.<sup>20</sup> In the playhouse at Lichfield, as Mr. Garrick<sup>21</sup> informed me, Johnson having for a moment quitted a chair which was placed for him between the side-scenes, a gentleman took possession of it, and when Johnson on his return civilly demanded his seat, rudely refused to give it up; upon which Johnson laid hold of it, and tossed him and the chair into the pit. Foote, who so successfully revived the old comedy, by exhibiting living characters, had resolved to imitate Johnson on the stage, expecting great profits from his ridicule of so celebrated a man. Johnson being informed of his intention, and being at dinner at Mr. Thomas Davies's the bookseller, from whom I had the story, he asked Mr. Davies “what was the common price of an oak stick”; and being answered sixpence, “Why then, Sir, (said he,) give me leave to send your servant to purchase me a shilling one. I'll have a double quantity; for I am told Foote means to *take me off*,<sup>22</sup> as he calls it, and I am determined the fellow shall not do it with impunity.” Davies took care to acquaint Foote of this, which effectually checked the wantonness of the mimic.

140 Mr. Macpherson's menaces<sup>23</sup> made Johnson provide himself with the same implement of defense; and had he been attacked, I have no doubt that, old as he was, he would have made his corporal prowess be felt as much as his intellectual.  **E**

**resolution** (rēz'ə-lōō'shən)  
*n.* stubborn courage to face challenges; resolve

### **E BIOGRAPHY**

Reread lines 120-123. What do you think is Boswell's purpose in presenting this description of Johnson swimming in a dangerous pool?

18. **Mr. Beauclerk's** (bō'kler'): referring to Topham Beauclerk, a wealthy young man-about-town who became friendly with the older Johnson.

19. **Mr. Langton . . . Oxford:** Bennet Langton, a friend of Beauclerk's who attended Oxford with him, became friendly with Johnson and gave Boswell details for the biography.

20. **roundhouse:** jail.

21. **playhouse at Lichfield** (līch'fēld) . . . **Garrick:** David Garrick was the most famous actor of his day and a lifelong friend of Johnson's, as well as a former student of his at Lichfield.

22. **take me off:** do an imitation of me.

23. **Mr. Macpherson's menaces:** the threats of James Macpherson, a Scottish poet whose “translations” of supposed third-century poems had been exposed as frauds by Johnson.



## Comprehension

1. **Recall** What were Johnson's eating habits?
2. **Clarify** Why did Johnson tell Boswell, "Don't let us meet tomorrow" after their discussion about the fear of death?
3. **Summarize** How did Johnson tend to behave in dangerous situations?



**READING 8** Analyze the consistency and clarity of the expression of the controlling idea and the ways in which the organizational and rhetorical patterns of text support or confound the author's meaning or purpose.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Interpret Text** In his biography, Boswell often presents dialogue to allow Johnson to voice his own opinions. Describe Johnson's opinions on the following issues:
  - the fear of death (lines 79–89)
  - an actor's imitation of him (lines 130–142)
5. **Draw Conclusions About the Biography** Compare the passages of reconstructed dialogue in Boswell's **biography** with the long passages in which he describes Johnson. Do you get a fuller sense of Johnson's personality from the dialogue or from the descriptive passages? Explain.
6. **Make Judgments** In your opinion, does revealing Johnson's faults and fears add to or detract from his image as a great man? Support your opinion with examples from the text.
7. **Evaluate Author's Perspective** Unlike many biographers, Boswell became intimately familiar with his subject over many years. Based on what you know about their long friendship, do you think Boswell is a **credible** biographer—one who is trustworthy and believable? Cite evidence in the excerpt to support your opinion.
8. **Compare Texts** Compare Boswell's portrayal of Samuel Johnson with Johnson's references to himself in the preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language* on page 672. In what ways do your impressions of Johnson from these two sources differ? Support your conclusions with evidence from the texts.

## Literary Criticism

9. **Author's Style** Wit was highly prized in the 18th century, and both Boswell and Johnson famously practiced the art. Find two or three examples of **humor** in these excerpts to analyze. What purpose does humor serve in Boswell's biography?

### Why tell someone's **LIFE STORY**?

When you read a biography of a person who deeply interests you, what information are you hoping to gain? What information would you prefer not to learn about that person? Why?

# Vocabulary in Context

## ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Identify the word that is closest in meaning to the boldfaced vocabulary word.

1. **abstemious**: (a) wandering, (b) abstaining, (c) annoying
2. **assail**: (a) travel, (b) dominate, (c) assault
3. **mason**: (a) bricklayer, (b) carpenter, (c) lawyer
4. **resolution**: (a) initiation, (b) vagueness, (c) determination
5. **temperate**: (a) mild, (b) chilly, (c) argumentative
6. **vehement**: (a) intense, (b) unpleasant, (c) odorous

### WORD LIST

abstemious  
assail  
mason  
resolution  
temperate  
vehement

## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• affect • challenge • consent • final • respond

The subject of a biography may not **consent** to everything his or her biographer writes. Write a paragraph about how it might **affect** a biography if its subject had complete control of the information a biographer could use. Include at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your paragraph.

## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: SPECIALIZED DICTIONARIES

Specialized dictionaries provide information on words related to particular subjects. In addition to language references, such as bilingual dictionaries, libraries may have dictionaries on subjects as diverse as business, food, and medicine. To illustrate the difference between a general and a specialized dictionary, consider *Mitre Tavern*, known as a *conversation piece*, on page 685.



**READING 1E** Use specialized dictionaries (printed or electronic) as needed.

### EXAMPLE: GENERAL DICTIONARY (ONLINE)

**conversation piece, n.** 1. a painting in which figures are posed in a domestic scene, popular in the 18th century. 2. an object whose unusual quality makes it a topic of conversation.

### EXAMPLE: DICTIONARY OF ART (ONLINE)

**conversation piece:** A portrait showing a group of full-length figures, often in a landscape or domestic setting, engaged in talk or other sedate social activity. Thomas [Gainsborough](#) and William [Hogarth](#) were famous practitioners. . . .

**PRACTICE** Using the examples above as needed, respond to the questions.

1. Which dictionary provides links, or cross-references, to related information?
2. Which dictionary provides more than one definition of *conversation piece*?
3. If you were reading a magazine article and were confused by the term *conversation piece*, which dictionary would be more useful? Why?

Interactive  
Vocabulary



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML12-689