Oodgeroo Noonuccal is famous for her poetry, her paintings and for a variety of honours that were accorded to her throughout her long life of service and devotion to her people and her land.

Oodgeroo means ‘paperbark’. She belonged to the Noonuccal group who lived on the island of Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island). Oodgeroo was born on 3 November 1920. She was the second youngest child of the family and had three brothers and three sisters. She was brought up at One Mile on Minjerribah.

Because the Queensland government had taken control of Minjerribah early this century, the Noonuccal people suffered the effect of government policies that reduced them to servants and labourers without paid wages. Oodgeroo’s father as a labourer was paid in government rations. He lead a strike against this in 1935 and won wages for his people.

Oodgeroo loved the sea and the seashore, and as a young girl spent much of her time around the shores and out on the mudflats of the bay. Her favourite activities as a child were crabbing, fishing and oyster hunting.

From her father Oodgeroo learned about her people and their way of life and beliefs. Outside her family she encountered the apartheid that was commonly practised throughout Australia in one form or another. Her first years at Dunwich State School were also not entirely happy. She had a miserable time because she was left-handed. There was a belief at this time that left-handedness was wrong and needed to be corrected through severe punishment. Punishments included hitting over the knuckles with an ebony ruler and standing in the corner wearing a dunce’s cap.

By the age of thirteen Oodgeroo had reluctantly left school and had begun work as a domestic servant for a wealthy white family. She was disappointed that because she was black she could not do further study or find other work. However, with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the opportunity opened up for her to volunteer for army work. She was trained in telecommunications and for the first time in her life earned a reasonable wage—sixty cents a day.

Her marriage to Bruce Walker took place in 1942. They had two children, Dennis and Vivian. Ten years of marriage, however, ended in divorce and she raised her two sons alone. Because she had had army service she qualified for a repatriation scholarship and successfully completed a commercial course in book keeping, typing and shorthand.

Oodgeroo’s attendance in 1961 of the first meeting of the Aboriginal Advancement League at the University of Queensland changed the
direction of her life, and she joined the campaign to change the Australian Constitution so that black Australians could be given citizenship rights. In 1965 she lobbied the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, but he was not sympathetic to her cause. She lobbied his successor, Harold Holt, in 1966. He eventually agreed to a referendum on the issue. This referendum was held on 27 May 1967 and was a resounding affirmation of the rights of Aboriginal people.

It was her work in the Aboriginal rights movement that stimulated Oodgeroo’s need to write. Her first book of poems, *We Are Going*, published in 1964, was also the first book ever published by an Aborigine. This was followed by *The Dawn is at Hand* in 1966, *My People* in 1970, and *Stradbroke Dreamtime* in 1972. Her writing is filled with her love of the earth, stories of her childhood and the Noonuccal people, and her mourning for the loss of the Aboriginal past.

Oodgeroo’s art is also filled with these ideas. Her paintings and drawings tell of the destruction of the earth, the beaches and the whales. They depict the creatures of the earth, particularly those of the seashore, and her own totem, the carpet snake. The first exhibition of her paintings was held at the Brisbane Community Arts Centre in 1981.

Oodgeroo’s determination to halt the destruction of the earth stimulated her to approach the Queensland Government to sell or lease land to her. Eventually they granted her five acres of her family’s land at Moongalba. She established there a homeland and educational centre, where native plants, animals, birds and insects can flourish and where people from all over the world can come to experience the earth as she knew it.

Oodgeroo changed her name from Kath Walker to her Aboriginal name to acknowledge her Aboriginality in 1988—the year celebrated by white Australians as the Bicentennial. From 1960 to 1970 she was State Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. She received the Mary Gilmore Medal and the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award, and received doctorates from Macquarie University and Griffith University. In July 1989 Oodgeroo attended a conference in Canberra for the International Year of Literacy where she spoke of the need to tell the history of Aboriginal peoples and the need to face the destruction of the earth.

‘We are the custodians of the earth and its lifeforms which we must respect and protect. We own nothing. Our Earth Mother teaches us that the earth owns us . . . The Earth Mother tells us that we are too busy fighting machines to take time for each other. Man should have time and space to find his spiritual roots.

‘All of the cultures of the world must be recognised. We in the Southern Hemisphere have a unique contribution to make to the world. Once we can bring people together through culture then we can bring them together in all other ways to bring about the unity of mankind and the world.’

Teaching notes for Oodgeroo Noonuccal

OTHER RESOURCES
Access to collections of poetry by Oodgeroo Noonuccal and research information about her life.
Access to information about Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island).
Access to information about Prime Minister Menzies and Prime Minister Holt.
Examples of written texts with subheadings.
Draft paper.

INTRODUCING THE UNIT
Explain that a biography is a form of information report while a description is an information report about a particular person, place or thing. Point out that it does not provide information about a whole class of things, but rather about one particular person. It does however commonly use some aspects of the form and features of an information report. Encourage them to talk about other biographies that they have read or encountered in the media.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT
Encourage students to discuss why we are interested in the details of other people’s lives. Ask them to consider whether this applies only to famous people who have made major achievements. Provide the opportunity for students to consider how differing versions of a particular person’s biography can construct a different view of the person. Challenge them to consider why one writer might present one view of a person while another writer might present a totally different view. Discuss the differences between the way a writer approaches a biography and the way a person would write his or her own autobiography.

THE MAIN EVENTS
Point out that a biography is usually organised chronologically, although within the chronology it is possible to group the events of the person’s life in other ways. Help students to identify the time frame of Oodgeroo’s life as described in this biography and to mark on the timeline the major events and influences on her life at each of these points.

LOOKING AT PARAGRAPHS
Help students to identify the main idea around which each paragraph is organised. Remind students to look at the topic sentence in each paragraph. You may wish to bring examples of texts that use subheadings so that students can use these as models for the subheadings that they will write. Encourage students to discuss their subheadings with each other as they explore economical ways of highlighting the main idea of each paragraph.

LOBBYING THE PM
Explain to students what lobbying is and how it works. You may wish to tell students that there are people who are professional lobbyists, employed to communicate issues and swing opinion. Talk about how people might be persuaded to a particular viewpoint. You may wish to explain the role of the Australian Constitution and the Referendum, and why the Referendum was necessary. You may also need to provide students with information about the Prime Ministers Robert Menzies and Harold Holt.

CUSTODIANS OF THE EARTH
Help students to find information about Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island). They may wish to explore not only books about the area, but research information through travel brochures and other texts that make use of visual elements. Encourage students to consider how they can best present their information using a largely visual design. The poster should provide as much information as possible about Minjerribah, using primarily visual images. Encourage students to consider the style of visual image that is most appropriate for the content of the poster. If students have access to computer programs and scanners they may wish to design their poster as a computer aided design. Display the posters in the classroom.

POETRY PRAISE
Encourage students to read as many poems by Oodgeroo as possible and to explore some of her artwork. Have them consider what kind of poem would be a fitting tribute to this woman. Encourage them to revise and rework their drafts and publish the final version in their books.

FOLLOW-UP/EXTENSION
• Have students prepare a ‘This is Your Life’ program on the life and times of Oodgeroo Noonuccal.
• Students could interview a partner about their life and then write their biography.
Let’s talk about it

This text is a biography. Talk about it with a partner. Write your ideas on the lines.

What kind of people do we write biographies about?

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_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Why is it possible for a number of people to write different biographies of the same person?

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_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

What is the difference between a biography and an autobiography?

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

Name two biographies and two autobiographies you have read or would like to read. You may need to go to the library to find the titles and authors.

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________

NA 4.1 NSW 3.1 Communicates and interacts confidently for a range of purposes and a variety of audiences to express well developed, well organised ideas dealing with more challenging topics.

NA 4.2 NSW 3.3 Considers aspects of context, purpose and audience when speaking and listening and discusses ways in which spoken language differs from written.

NA 4.6 NSW 3.7Analyses and explains techniques to position the reader and to interpret experiences differently in texts.

NA 4.9 NSW 3.9 Writes well structured literary and factual texts using challenging topics, ideas and issues for a variety of purposes and audiences.
Oodgeroo Noonuccal

The main events

Talk with a partner about the aspects of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s life which are documented in this biography. Create a timeline to show the main events of her life.
**Looking at paragraphs**

An information report is organised so that the facts about the topic are sequenced in a logical way. Reread this biography and identify how the paragraphs are organised. Imagine that you are an editor who has been given the task of writing subheadings for each paragraph. On the lines below, write the subheadings that you would include.

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**Lobbying the PM**

Work in a small group and role-play the meetings that Oodgeroo had with Prime Minister Menzies and with Prime Minister Holt. Then talk with your group about why she was not successful in convincing Menzies but she was successful with Holt. Write your group’s ideas in the space below.

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**NA 4.2 NSW 3.3** Considers aspects of context, purpose and audience when speaking and listening and discusses ways in which spoken language differs from written.

**NA 4.6 NSW 3.7** Analyses and explains techniques to position the reader and to interpret experiences differently in texts.

**NA 4.9 NSW 3.9** Writes well structured literary and factual texts using challenging topics, ideas and issues for a variety of purposes and audiences.

**NA 4.11 NSW 3.14** Discusses and evaluates how texts have been constructed to achieve their purpose and shape readers’ and viewers’ understandings using grammatical features and structures.
Oodgeroo Noonuccal

**Custodians of the earth**

Like all Aboriginal people, Oodgeroo felt that the land was very important. Do some research to help you visualise the area in which Oodgeroo was born. Create a visual image as a poster to present your information. Include a map, illustrations and written information. Use this space to write notes or draft your ideas. Then create your poster and display it in the classroom.
Poetry praise

Visit the library and find some of Oodgeroo’s poems. Share them with others in the class. Then write a poem in tribute to the life of Oodgeroo. Do your draft work on paper and publish the final poem in the space below. Illustrate it appropriately.

NA 4.5 NSW 3.5 Reads an extensive range of texts with fairly complex structures and features, justifying own interpretation of ideas, information and events in the response to themes and issues.

NA 4.11 NSW 3.14 Discusses and evaluates how texts have been constructed to achieve their purpose and shape readers’ and viewers’ understandings using grammatical features and structures.

NA 4.12a NSW 3.10 Uses a range of strategies to plan, edit and proofread own writing.

NA 4.12b NSW 3.11 Uses a range of strategies to spell unfamiliar words.