

Comprehension

Genre

A **Biography** tells the story of a person's life written by another person.



Evaluate

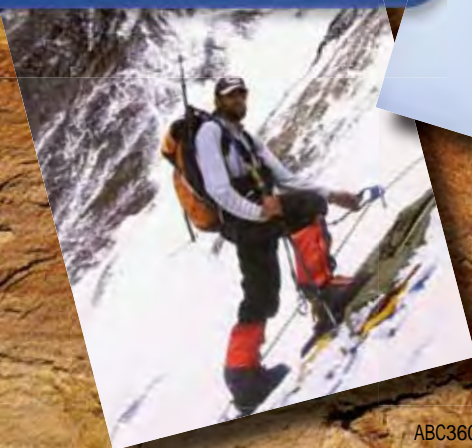
Author's Purpose

As you read, use your Author's Purpose Chart.

Clues	Author's Purpose

Read to Find Out

Why do you think the author wrote about Erik Weihenmayer?





Seeing Things His Own Way

by Marty Kaminsky

Erik Weihenmayer thrust his ice ax into the deep snow, hoping to grip a hold long enough to catch his breath. The howling winds, gusting up to 100 miles per hour, roared like a fleet of jet planes. To communicate with his climbing partners, Erik had to scream to be heard. It was only 3,000 more feet to the **summit**, but Erik's team was hopelessly trapped for five days in a blizzard on the high slopes of Mt. McKinley.

At 20,320 feet, Alaska's Mt. McKinley is the highest peak in North America. Freezing temperatures, sudden avalanches, and devastating storms make it one of the most difficult mountains in the world to climb. Nearly one hundred climbers have lost their lives there after falling into deep crevasses or being blown off the face by gale-force winds. For even the most experienced mountaineers and rugged explorers, climbing McKinley is the challenge of a lifetime.

Imagine climbing such a treacherous peak without being able to see a single step. That is the task that Erik Weihenmayer faced in June 1995. Erik is completely blind, having lost his vision at age thirteen due to a condition he was born with called retinoschisis. But blindness has never stopped him from living an exciting life and pursuing adventures most of us only dream about.


"I am not a daredevil," Erik explains. "I have a healthy fear and respect of the mountains, but I believe with proper training and skill a blind person can tackle some **awesome** challenges."

From a young age, life itself proved to be a challenge for Erik. When he was a three-month-old baby, Erik's eyes began to quiver and shake. His parents were alarmed and brought him to teams of **specialists** over a year and a half. The doctors diagnosed his problem as retinoschisis, a rare condition that causes pressure to build in the retina until it disintegrates, eventually leading to blindness. To view something directly in front of him Erik would have to look up, down, or sideways. He relied on his **peripheral** (side) vision to navigate his neighborhood and to do daily chores and tasks.



Erik at a base camp on Mt. McKinley





But Erik hated to be treated differently, so he learned to compensate for his poor vision. When he played basketball with friends, they helped him cover the court by playing zone defenses. They also learned to feed him the ball with a bounce pass. “Erik would hear a bounce pass,” his father, Ed Weihenmayer, explains. “But lots of passes hit him in the face anyway. After most games Erik had a bloody nose and looked as if he was playing football, not basketball.”

With the help of family and friends, Erik was encouraged to find creative ways to participate in everyday activities. When his brothers raced their mountain bikes over a ramp, Erik joined in, but sometimes he rode off the edge, picking up scraped knees for his efforts. Though he rarely complained or showed his frustration, Erik’s family was aware of his struggles. His father solved the bike problem by painting the ramp bright orange. After two more months of bike stunts on the ramp, however, Erik’s eyesight had **deteriorated** to the point that the ramp became an orange blur. He rode off his driveway one day and broke his arm.

Despite his failing vision Erik continued his attempts to blend in and be like everyone else. Frequently he walked into trees or doors, and he had constant bruises and black-and-blue shins. “I guess it was a lack of **maturity** on my part,” Erik admits. “It was a sense of denial. I refused to learn to read Braille or to use a cane, even though I needed one for my own safety.”

By the time he was thirteen, Erik’s eyesight was completely gone. At first he tried to function without the use of canes or visual aids, but that proved dangerous. While visiting his grandparents, he stepped off a dock and fell eight feet into a boat. Though unharmed by the incident, it shook him up. Out of sheer desperation, Erik came to accept his blindness.

“I realized that if I got good at using the systems for the blind I would blend in better and be more like everyone else,” he says. “If I didn’t use my cane I would be stumbling about, and that would make me stand out more.”



Erik and his dog, Wizard



Machu Picchu

At fifteen Erik joined his high school's wrestling team. Because the sport depends on physical contact, strength, and instinct, Erik found he could compete on even terms with his opponents. He did not win a match as a freshman, but by his senior year he was chosen team captain and sported a 30-3-3 record. He was selected to represent Connecticut in the National Freestyle Wrestling Championships and went on to wrestle at Boston College.

Just as Erik was beginning to accept his blindness and learning to function in a sightless world, tragedy struck hard. While he was away at summer wrestling camp, Erik's mother was killed in an automobile accident. The loss was devastating, but Erik's father exerted extra efforts to spend more time with his children. As a way to bring the family closer, Ed Weihenmayer brought his children together for adventurous treks around the world. Among many other journeys, they visited the Batura Glacier in Pakistan and the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu in Peru.

"Facing his mother's death and blindness so close together was difficult," Ed recalls. "But Erik never used them as an excuse for not measuring up and going for it." Rock-climbing trips to New Hampshire and other travels with his family whet Erik's appetite for adventure. He soon became a skillful rock climber, scuba diver, and sky diver.



After getting his master's degree from Lesley College in Massachusetts, Erik was hired to teach at an elementary school in Phoenix, Arizona. Managing a class of lively fifth graders was a challenge equal to any Erik had undertaken, but he loved his work and handled it well. "My dad worked on Wall Street for thirty years," he says. "He struggled to find meaning in his work. I don't have that struggle as a teacher." The students in his classes quickly realize that Erik needs their help to make learning work for them. With his **guidance** they devise systems to communicate and get things done. Students pitch in taking turns writing on the board, hanging posters, and passing out papers. Although the class could take advantage of their sightless teacher, they rarely do. In fact, they fall over each other to be the first to fill his dog's water bowl.



Erik with students

As he settled into his teaching job, Erik and a buddy filled their weekends with climbing trips to the rock faces and mountains of Arizona. On the higher slopes Erik and his partners devised a climbing language that the lead climber would call out. If a teammate shouted, "Iceberg ahead," for example, Erik understood that a pointy rock sticking out of the ground was in his path. A cry of "ankle breaker" meant that little loose rocks lay ahead. By learning to follow in the footsteps of his partners and to rely on his other senses, Erik took on the tallest peaks in Africa and North and South America with his climbing friends.



Author's Purpose

What details does the author include to inform the reader about Erik's life as a teacher and a rock climber?

Erik rock climbing at the Phoenix, Arizona, Bouldering Competition

“Feeling the rock under my hand, feeling the wind and sensing I am hundreds of feet above tree line is an incredible experience,” Erik says. “It’s exciting to work on a team for a common goal.” So great is his love of the mountains that Erik and his wife, Ellen, were wed at a rock altar 13,000 feet up the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

But pulling yourself up a sheer rock wall, balancing on an icy ridge, and handling sub-zero temperatures can prove frustrating for any mountaineer, particularly one who is blind. While climbing Mt. Rainier in 1985 Erik discovered he could not set up his tent in the freezing weather with his bulky gloves covering his hands. In **typical** fashion he refused to admit failure. “I was so embarrassed that I resolved never to let that happen again,” he says. “When I returned to Phoenix I practiced setting up a tent in the one-hundred-degree heat with gloves on over and over. It is no longer a problem for me.”

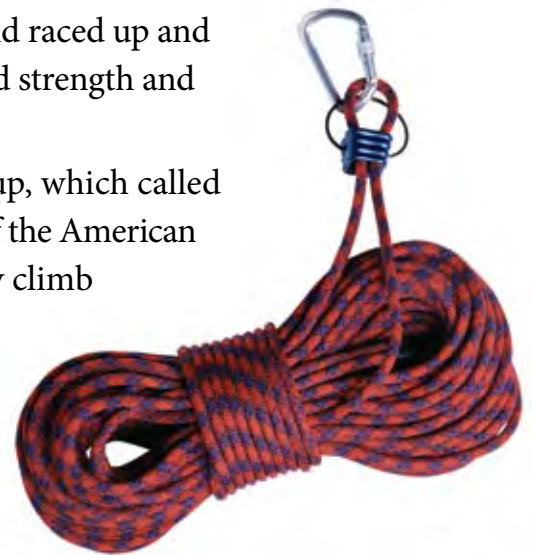
Careful planning and practice have always helped Erik work around the problems caused by his lack of vision. To prepare for the risky climb up Mt. McKinley, Erik’s team practiced on Mt. Rainier in Washington and Long’s Peak in Colorado. Back in Phoenix, Erik and a teammate strapped on fifty-pound packs and raced up and down the stairs of a forty-story skyscraper to build strength and endurance.

Before the McKinley trip Erik’s climbing group, which called itself Team High Sights, secured the sponsorship of the American Foundation for the Blind. “I was hopeful that my climb would make a statement,” Erik says.



Author’s Purpose

Why does the author include the anecdotes about setting up the tent and running up the skyscraper’s stairs?



Erik(right) in an igloo on Mt. McKinley at 17,000 feet.





Huddling in their ice-coated tents at 17,000 feet, Team High Sights was forced to wait out a five-day storm on Mt. McKinley. Their food supply was dwindling and all that could be seen of the summit was a plume of snow blowing hundreds of feet into the air. Unless the storm let up, all hope of reaching the summit would have to be abandoned. On the sixth day they heard on their weather radio the news they'd been waiting for: There would be a twelve-hour period of clear weather in which to reach the summit and return before the next storm system closed off the mountain.



Strapping on their ice shoes and insulated gear, the climbers tied themselves together with sturdy rope. Pushing through thigh-deep snow was exhausting work, but Team High Sights carefully moved up the mountain. For Erik, the climb to the summit seemed endless. At the top of a knife-edge ridge his ski pole slipped and all he could feel was air. “I was concentrating very hard with each step,” he explains. “Finally I took a step and my friend Stacey said, ‘Congratulations, you’re on the top of North America.’”

With tears in their eyes, the climbers embraced and snapped photographs of each other. Erik held aloft a pair of banners—one designed by a girl at his school, and one for the American Foundation for the Blind. After fifteen minutes at the peak, the team headed down, safely making their way back to a lower camp.

The climb to the top of Mt. McKinley was a proud accomplishment for Erik, and one that he hopes provides inspiration for others. “Before McKinley I never thought I was extremely tough,” Erik says. “I always felt I had the potential to do much more. I hope my climb proves that we can all push beyond what we think we can do.”

Having climbed McKinley, the highest mountain in North America, Erik is well on the way to meeting one of his climbing goals. In the next few years he plans to summit the highest peak on each continent, including Mt. Everest in Asia. He has learned to step around every obstacle in his path, and though it will be a difficult task, Erik knows there is no reason a blind man cannot sit atop the tallest mountain in the world.

Erik reached his goal of climbing Mt. Everest in 2001.

On Top of the World with Marty Kaminsky



Marty Kaminsky is an elementary school teacher who loves to write. He started by writing for magazines, such as *Highlights* and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. When he heard stories about athletes who are physically challenged, he was hooked. He had to write about them, he said, for his children, and for the children he has taught through the years. He says, “They are the reason I write anything at all.”



Find out more about
Marty Kaminsky at

www.macmillanmh.com

Author's Purpose

This selection is a biography. Its main purpose is to give information about a person's life. Why might this piece also be persuasive?



Comprehension Check

Summarize

Summarize “Seeing Things His Own Way.”
Tell about the different situations that Erik Weihenmayer faced from childhood to adulthood.

Clues	Author's Purpose

Think and Compare



1. Why do you think the author included a section about Erik’s childhood and his family? Use your Author’s Purpose Chart to support your answer. **Evaluate:**
Author’s Purpose
2. Of all of Erik Weihenmayer’s accomplishments, which do you find to be the most inspiring? Why? Support your answer. **Analyze**
3. Think about a time when you overcame a difficulty. What obstacles did you encounter? How did your experience contribute to your **maturity**? **Evaluate**
4. What, above all, is the message of “Seeing Things His Own Way?” Use references from the text to support your answer. **Synthesize**
5. Read “Bethany Hamilton’s Comeback” on pages 366-367. If Bethany Hamilton were to meet Erik Weihenmayer, what do you think they might discuss with each other?
Reading/Writing Across Texts

