

Writing for All Levels: Teaching with the Visual Arts

Liz Donakey, BYU Museum of Art

Overview: No matter the grade level, students can use the visual arts to develop their reading and writing skills. This outline provides several cross-curricular activities and lesson plans, and can be adapted to best fit your classroom needs. These exercises do not require a background in Art History, just a few materials and that your students creatively engage with the paintings!

Materials:

- Paper
- Pencils
- Images of artworks
- Crayons or colored pencils, optional

Grade: Any

Duration: 5-60 minutes

Purpose: There are multiple benefits to using visual arts to teach reading and writing. A few are explained below:

- Speaking of writing in response to art, Sharon Vatsky said, “Whether or not [students] decide to voice [their] ideas to the [class] in the ensuing conversation, [they] have formed and recorded an independent idea. This skill of taking in stimuli, processing [their] thoughts about it, and finding ways to clearly express [their] personal response is vital to all communication.” Similarly, a study conducted by the Guggenheim’s artist in residency program found that “regularly asking students to write and talk about art helps students become better learners, thinkers, and communicators” (*Museum Gallery Activities: A Handbook*, Sharon Vatsky, 29, 31).
- Furthermore, these writing exercise provide opportunities for teachers to measure students’ performance in each of the Language standards. These opportunities are natural and engaging for teachers and students alike.

Core Standards: Each of the following exercises meets the Visual Arts standards for Strand: RESPOND (V.R.) and Strand: CONNECT (V.CO.). They can be used to practice each of the Language standards as well. They meet a variety of Reading and Writing standards; for those, see individual exercises.

Writing Exercises: There are many ways to incorporate Reading and Writing standards into the Visual Arts. The activity or lesson you choose may depend on how much time you have.

Here are some shorter exercises:

Daily Writing:

- Use art for daily writing exercises and writing warm-ups. Display an image of an artwork on the screen, and invite your students to write about it for five or ten minutes. You may ask them to write what they see, or general thoughts on the piece. You may decide to ask more specific questions—here are [82 questions](#) you can ask them to write about.
- Core standards:
 - Writing Standard 10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- Artwork suggestions:
 - <https://moa.byu.edu/moa-artwork-of-the-week>

Journal Prompts:

- Similar to daily writing warm-ups, journaling with art as an aide is a simple way to start or end the school day/week.
- Invite students to complete the following the prompt:
 - One word that describes how I'm feeling right now is _____.
 - Today, the artwork that best demonstrates this word is _____.
 - This artwork demonstrates my word because _____.
- This practice promotes mental and emotional health by encouraging students to identify and express how they feel. By finding a visual representation of their emotions, students may also be able to identify the cause of their feelings, and practice demonstrating empathy.
- Core standards:
 - Writing Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
 - Health Education: Strand 2: Mental and Emotional health
- Artwork suggestions:
 - <https://moa.byu.edu/maynard-dixon-highlights>
 - <https://moa.byu.edu/virtual-exhibition-a-studio-of-her-own-women-artists-in-the-collection>
 - <https://moa.byu.edu/treasures-from-the-collection>
 - <https://moa.byu.edu/virtual-exhibition-john-henri-moser-painting-utah-modern>

Collaborative Poetry:

- Writing, of course, does not need to be a solitary practice. This simple exercise includes working together in groups. Organize students in groups of 4-6 (each group can have the same artwork, or you can assign a different artwork to each group). Students should write one word about the piece. After they write their word, pass it to the person on their right. Now, students will write one sentence about the artwork, using the word they have been given. Finally, groups will arrange the 4-6 sentences to create an original poem about the artwork.

- Though students need write only one sentence each, this exercise brings an awareness of the nuances of language, like the different connotations and evening denotations for the same word. It also demonstrates the variety of perspectives people can have towards the same thing. While the original word can come from any part of speech, you may ask for a specific part of speech as a method of practice.
- In addition to the collaborative poetry exercise outlined here, you can invite your students to write a poem based on an artwork using essentially any form of poetry (ekphrastic, pantoum, cinquain, haiku, free verse, etc.).
- This exercise also works in reverse, or like a game of Telestrations. For example, students and groups can share their poem with another student or group who has used a different painting to write their poem. Groups must then draw a picture of what they think the original painting looks like, based on the poem it inspired.
- Core standards:
 - Reading Standard 1
 - Reading Standard 2
 - Writing Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
- Artwork suggestions:
 - *Family on Horse Drawn Cart*, Joseph Paul Vorst: <https://moa.byu.edu/recent-acquisitions> (Scroll to 15 of 25)
 - *Abstract in Pink*, Mari Lyons: <https://moa.byu.edu/recent-acquisitions> (Scroll to 2 of 25)
 - *Triflora*, Jeanne Leighton-Lundberg Clarke: <https://moa.byu.edu/00000181-ac35-d0f9-a7bd-bfb7c64b0001/i-spy-zentangles>
 - *Arizona*, Nat Leeb: <https://moa.byu.edu/00000184-154f-d2de-abb7-557f34ea0001/arizona-teaching-poster>
 - *Lady in Waiting*, David Driskell: <https://moa.byu.edu/artwork-of-the-week/artwork-of-the-week-february-6-2023>
 - Anything by Maynard Dixon: <https://moa.byu.edu/maynard-dixon-searching-for-a-home>

Character Developments OR Journal Entries:

- Character developments and journal entries can fulfill very comparable purposes, and each are similarly adaptable. Display an image for your students with one or more figures in it—if there are multiple figures in the painting, students will choose only one of them to write about. A character development allows students to share what they learn about the character they selected, while a journal entry allows them to imaginatively become that character. Consequently, journal entries encourage empathizing with someone with a different life experience.
- Consider the following questions (all responses must be based on what can be found in the painting):
 - How old do you think the individual is?

- What is their social status? How can you tell?
- What types of things do you think are important to them?
- Based on their body language and facial expression, how does the individual feel right now? Why might they feel that way?
- What do they like to do for fun?
- How would their friends describe them?
- What other information can students infer about the individual?
- For a simpler version of the activity, students need only answer questions. For a more involved modification, character developments or journal entries should be written as narratives.
- Core standards:
 - Reading Literature Standard 1
 - Reading Literature Standard 3
 - Reading Literature Standard 6 (for *Immigrants to New York City [Jewish Refugees]* and other paintings with multiple figures): Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.
 - Writing Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
 - Writing Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
 - Writing Standard 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- Artwork suggestions:
 - *Premier Chagrin (First Grief)*, Daniel Ridgway Knight: <https://moa.byu.edu/00000184-161a-d2ff-a7b6-1f9fa0f70001/first-grief-teaching-poster>
 - *In the Beginning*, Ernie Barnes: <https://moa.byu.edu/from-the-vault-guide>
 - *Immigrants to New York City (Jewish Refugees)*, Minerva Teichert: <https://moa.byu.edu/00000181-ac36-d9e0-a789-be367df70000/a-letter-home-one-point-perspective>

Other writing prompts may take longer, but allow students to engage in a variety of ways. Schedule in more time for the following lesson plan:

Verbal Descriptions:

- Verbal descriptions of artworks provide a way for people who are blind or visually impaired to still engage with the pieces. However, the descriptions often benefit more than the individual with limited sight. Provide half of your class with one image, and the other half with a second image, and ask them to write a description of it for someone who is blind or visually impaired. Students should only see their assigned image. After writing the description, ask students to

share it with a partner who has not yet seen the artwork. After hearing the description, invite the listener to compare the actual image with what they imagined the artwork to look like.

- Tips for writing verbal descriptions:
 - Start with the big picture
 - Establish perspective
 - Clarify size and scale of objects within the image
 - Give information in relation to other details (use prepositions)
- For examples of verbal descriptions, see PowerPoint; for their corresponding image, see MOA website: <https://moa.byu.edu/desde-la-boveda>
- In writing verbal descriptions, students will begin to notice more details in the artwork than they previously picked up on. They may also become more curious about what is unclear. This exercise will strengthen students' writing as it requires students to be descriptive and concrete in their language.
- Optional extensions:
 - Invite students to draw a picture based on the description given by their partner. How did the actual image compare to what they thought it would look like?
 - Instead of describing one image per person, each student describes two alike images. The describer must carefully determine how to describe the two images in a way that the viewer imagines them as distinct paintings.
- Optional modification:
 - Invite students to write a verbal description for an image from the Museum of Art's *From the Vault* exhibition (see link above). Afterwards, compare their visual descriptions to [those provided by the Museum](#). What did the MOA point out that the student did not include? What did the student include that the MOA missed? Were certain points better clarified in one description than another?
- Core standards:
 - Reading Literature Standard 1
 - Writing Standard 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
 - Writing Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
 - Writing Standard 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- Artwork suggestions:
 - *Against the Sky*, Robert Reid; *Boy with Peonies*, Robert Reid; *In the Sun*, Julian Alden Weir
 - *Grain Fields*, Edwin Evans; *Off the Maine Coast*, Samuel Colman; *Mountain Landscape*, John Frederick Kensett; *Lake Scene*, Sanford Robinson Gifford
 - *Postcard images available upon request. Email liz_donakey@byu.edu.*