



Writing through Art Grades 6-12 Pre - and Post -Visit Materials for Educators

Program Overview

This program explores the relationship between art and writing. Students will discover how works of art can inspire creative writing, and how writing can be a powerful means of engaging with images. Tours will focus on the Museum's permanent and special exhibitions.

The *Writing through Art* program will be thematically based to meet the specific curricular needs of each school group. In preparation for the tour, The Jewish Museum educator assigned to the group will contact the classroom teacher in advance to discuss which theme is most appropriate. Themes include: Painting and Poetry, Images of People and Poetry, Narrative Paintings and Creative Writing, Objects and the Stories They Tell, and Modern Art and Writing.

Program Content

The Jewish Museum's school program, *Writing through Art*, engages students in writing activities as they view original works of art in the Museum's collection. By incorporating writing exercises into the art museum experience, students not only learn to be careful observers but they learn to articulate their thoughts and reactions into writing. Students have an opportunity to hone their writing skills in a way that is meaningful and memorable. As the development of reading and writing skills is increasingly becoming the focus in today's schools, the inception of this program is timely. Kathleen Walsh-Piper, art museum educator and author of *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing*, describes the benefits of participating in writing activities in the art museum:

Writing about works of art really serves a dual purpose. Not only does the work of art provide a point of inspiration for the writer, but it also causes the viewer to slow down, analyze, and respond to the work and to become aware of the looking process...Writing about works of art is valuable not only because the rich store of images in an art museum liberally builds and stimulates the imagination, but also because it teaches about art. Receptive and thoughtful attention, the most important skill for a writer, is also crucial for learning about art.

Although creativity and imagination are difficult to define and teach, research on learning tells us that we remember what is meaningful—what touches a chord or

connects with our previous experiences. The more an idea is connected with our experiences and emotions, the stronger it is.¹

Goals

- Discover the Museum's art exhibition and learn how to analyze individual works of art.
- Understand how works of art communicate ideas through their forms and subject matter.
- Examine the variety of approaches artists use to convey meaning.
- Explore the relationship between fine arts and writing, including the artistic process, form, and presentation.
- Write creatively, inspired by works of art in the Museum's exhibitions.

Vocabulary

Background	The part of a pictorial representation that appears to be in the distance and that provides relief for the principal objects in the foreground.
Composition	The structure or organization of a work of art, literature, or music.
Cool colors	Subdued colors including blue, green, and violet.
Culture	The arts, beliefs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought expressed in a particular community or by a particular group.
Foreground	The part of a picture or scene that appears nearest to the viewer.
Identity	The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.
Narrative	A story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious.
Pattern	A repeated design of natural or accidental origin; an artistic or decorative design.
Poetry	Literary work written in verse, in particular verse writing of high quality, great beauty, emotional sincerity or intensity, or profound insight.
Portrait	A painting, photograph, or other likeness of a person, especially one showing the face.

¹ Walsh-Piper, p. xxvii-xxviii.

Sculpture	A three-dimensional work of art.
Shape	The outline or contour of a form.
Symbol	An image that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention.
Texture	The feel and appearance of a surface e.g., rough or smooth.
Theme	An idea, or point of view, embodied and expanded upon in a work of art.
Warm Colors	Vibrant colors including red, yellow, and orange.

Pre-Visit Activity

1. Describing a Work of Art

In the program *Writing through Art*, students will examine the forms and subject matter of works of art in The Jewish Museum's permanent and special exhibitions and will participate in writing activities inspired by those works. Select a painting that you find interesting and share a reproduction of it with your class. Guide your students in a writing activity based on this painting.

1. Have students look at the painting for one minute. Then, have them turn away from the painting and write about what they see.
2. Ask students to re-read what they wrote and **circle** what aspects they feel are most important.
3. Ask students to consider how much of their description considers the key questions: *who, what, where, why, and how?*
4. Have students look at the painting a second time. Ask them to list any new observations.
5. Have students share their description with a partner. Students should consider the following questions together:
 - Do you both see exactly the same things?
 - What does the work bring to mind?
 - Make a list of "I wonder" statements about the work.
6. Have students go back and review their original description. Ask them to pretend they are writing the description for someone who can not see the work. How can they improve the description? What can they add?

7. Ask students to share their final descriptions with their partners.²

Extension: Ask students to write a free verse poem, emphasizing the senses evoked in this painting: sight, hearing, taste, smell, sound, and touch. Each line of the poem may focus on a different sense.³

Post-Visit Activities

During the *Writing through Art* program, students participate in a number of writing activities based on a selection of works of art in The Jewish Museum's permanent and special exhibitions. The activities suggested below are follow-ups to some of activities students may have participated in during their Museum visit.

1. Symbol Poem

During the Museum visit, students may have viewed the piece *Warsaw*, by Michael David. *Warsaw* is a large, yellow Star of David with a textured surface. While looking at the work of art, students discussed its shape, color, size, and texture. Afterwards, students were asked to think of their own symbol and write descriptive words to describe it. As a follow-up in the classroom students can use their descriptive words to write a free verse poem.

2. Portrait Poem

Some students—particularly in the younger grades—may have created an abstract poem, using the writing prompts below, while viewing one of the portraits on view at the Museum. As a follow-up in the classroom, students can turn their abstract poems into abstract self-portraits using paint, pastels, or any other medium.

Writing Prompts:

Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks. (Sample answers are provided.)

- 1) If I were a color, what color would I be? (red)
- 2) If I were a shape, what shape would I be? (circle)
- 3) If I were a texture, what texture would I be? (soft)
- 4) What does that texture feel like? (sand)
- 5) If I were line, what type of line would I be? (straight)
- 6) If I were a sound, would I be loud, quiet, etc.? (loud)
- 7) What do I sound like? (thunder)
- 8) If I were a taste, what would I taste like? (sweet)
- 9) If I were a mood or an emotion, which mood or emotion would I be? (happy)
- 10) If I were an element in nature, what element would I be? (warm breeze on a sunny day)

² Walsh-Piper, pp.5-6.

³ Walsh-Piper, p. 6.

In order to turn your answers into a poem, put each word/phrase into sentences as follows: beginning with the words “I am....” Here is an example:

I am the color _____.
(answer to question 1)

I am a _____.
(answer to question 2)

I am _____ like _____.
(answer to question 3) (answer to question 4)

I am a _____ line.
(answer to question 5)

I am _____ like _____.
(answer to question 6) (answer to question 7)

I am _____.
(answer to question 8)

I am _____.
(answer to question 9)

I am a _____.
(answer to question 10)

3. Dramatizing a Painting

During the Museum visit, students may have written a conversation or dialogue between two figures depicted in a painting or they may have written a short monologue in the first person, from one figure’s point of view. Ask students to perform their dialogues or monologues in front of the class. Ask them to consider the tone of the painting, as well as the personalities of the characters (based on the imagery), before they begin performing.

Resources

Books

- Acton, Mary. *Learning to Look at Paintings*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.
- Ehrenworth, Mary. *Looking to Write*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003.
- Ernst Da Silva, Karen. *Picturing Learning: Artists and Writers in the Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.
- Ewald, Wendy. *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Foster, Tonya and Prevallet, Kristin. *Third Mind: Creative Writing Through Visual Art*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2002.
- Goldberg, N. *Living Color: A Writer Paints Her World*. New York: Bantam.
- Jeffus, Richard and Jeffus, Sharon. *Teaching English through Art*. Salem, MO: Visual Manna, 1994.
- Olson, Janet L. *Envisioning Writing: Toward an Integration of Drawing and Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.
- McDonald, Nan L. and Fisher, Douglas. *Teaching Literacy through the Arts*. Tools for Teaching Literacy Series. New York: Guilford Publications, 2006.
- Murray, D. *Picturing Learning: Artists and Writers in the Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Strokrocki, Mary, Ed. *Interdisciplinary Art Education: Building Bridges to Connect Disciplines and Cultures*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2005.
- Taylor, Joshua. *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*. (2nd ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Walker, Pam. *Bring in the Arts: Lessons in Dramatics, Art, and Story Writing for Elementary and Middle School Classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- Walsh-Piper, Kathleen. *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Education, 2002.

Websites

The Jewish Museum Website

www.thejewishmuseum.org

The Jewish Museum is under the auspices of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.