

WRITING ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES—IN THE ART ROOM

by

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The art room is an ideal environment in which to stimulate an interest in writing. Yes, the art room! Not only is the art room filled with visual stimuli upon which writing may be based, it is traditionally associated with opportunities for individual expression. Taking risks, trying something new can provide teachers and learners with renewed interest and energy. Production of works of art represents only one aspect of art learning (Eisner, 1992). Looking at art, thinking and talking about it are essential to quality art education. While acquisition of cognitive information must accompany creative and interpretive learning activities, divergent thought can be nurtured simultaneously. There is no need for art teachers to merely replicate the term paper or report format in their writing assignments. Writing in the art room may be as creative and open-ended as making sculpture or painting.

Writing Based Upon Observation

Students of all ages are able to look at virtually all kinds of art and express ideas about what they see. Many of the following writing activities are applicable, to some degree, for early elementary through senior high school:

- Select a variety of landscapes, (ie. “Europe After the Rain,” Max Ernst; “Travelers Among the Mountains and Streams,” Fan K’uan; “New Shoes for H,” Don Eddy). Ask students to write a description of one of the places. Pose questions that require thought about the temperature, the sound, time of day etc. Conclude with reading some of the descriptions aloud and connecting writing with image. Discuss the visual cues created by the artists which lead to the students’ perceptions.
- Using sets of reproductions on postcards, gather a series of images of places, real or imagined. Ask students to create a travel journal based upon their journeys to these places. Production of the journal, itself, may be incorporated as a significant part of the activity.
- Works such as Salvadore Dali’s “The Persistence of Memory” or Alland D’Arcangelo’s “Highway 1 No. 2” may lend themselves to the poetic forms of haiku or tanka.
- Venture beyond description. Many works of art capture a moment (“Radioactive Cats,” Sandy Skoglund; “Little Girl in a Blue Armchair,” Mary Cassatt; “Nighthawks,” Edward Hopper). Ask students to tell the story; what are the events leading up to this moment? What is the outcome of this moment? Share stories with the class.
- Use portraits as a basis for a written sketch of an unforgettable character. Try both realistic images (“Braids,” Andrew Wyeth) and some that are less so (“Portrait of Willem Sandberg,” Karl Appel). Look at works in which a relationship is implied. Ask students to construct the conversation between “Tourists” by Duane Hanson or “Ladies Paying Double Sixes” by Chou Fang. Develop a skit or one act play based upon these characters.
- Objects may suggest their own stories. “John’s Jacker” by Marilyn Levine, for instance, clearly has a history. Ask students to consider what it might be, who owns the jacket, where it is worn and so on. Provide each student with an opportunity to create their own record of the life of the jacket.
- Many artists have chosen to record events (Francisco Goya, “The Third of May, 1808”; Artemisia Gentileschi “Judith Decapitating Hologernes”; Umberto Boccioni, “The City Rises”). Ask students to “cover” one of these events for the local newspaper. Stress the essentials of a good news story, i.e., What? When? Where? Who? Why?
- By discussing how various visual elements contributed to the writer’s interpretations, learners will have additional opportunities for insights regarding their own works of art as well as that of others.

Writing Based Upon Research

Teachers of secondary art students may wish to encourage research activities as a part of the writing experience. Research can provide strong and dramatic content for creative writing. At the same time, students may be provided with information about various aspects of the art world.

- Ask students to become art consultants. Look at the work of several contemporary sculptors. Ask them to select a work that would be appropriate for installation in front of the school and write a convincing proposal to present to the Board for allocation of funds. Or create a proposal for a commission for a new work of art by an artist whose work you admire. Make a strong case for the expenditure based upon the quality of previous work and the historical significance of the artist.
- Students might consider what it means to curate an exhibit. Ask each student to select a body of work for an exhibition using magazine or postcard reproductions. Curators must decide on what to base their decisions, i.e., theme, period, artists, media, etc.
- Several writing activities could evolve from this experience. Students can prepare a press release for their exhibition as well as advertisements for it. Exchange “exhibitions” and ask each student to write a review. To familiarize students with the concept, previous reading and discussion of reviews is suggested.
- Artists and their lives can provide substantial grist for the creative writing mill. Here, too, research would provide the foundation for flights of imagination.
- Ask students to create an imaginary correspondence between two artists from two different cultures, two different ages (Goya and Red Grooms; Jenny Holzer and Frida Kahlo). Offer a variety of papers and writing implements so that the physical properties of the letters will support a student’s expression of ideas about the individuals.
- Bring exhibition catalogues to class for examination. Ask students to write an introduction for a catalogue of a retrospective exhibition of an artist of their choice. Then suggest creating a profile of that artist to appear in an ad for the exhibition (a la Dewar’s Profiles).

Writing Based Upon Production

- One’s own works of art may serve as a source for expressing ideas in written form. The written material may be included as part of the work or it may be completely independent.
- In the manner of Faith Ringgold (Tar Beach), ask students to recall a special childhood memory and create a collage reflecting it. Incorporate a written narrative in the work. In a case such as this, the way the written material looks and is presented becomes a consideration as well as the wording itself. Give students opportunities to think about printing as opposed to using script, pencils, pens, brushes, etc.
- At the end of the school year, suggest that students take stock of their own art production. Ask them to chronicle their *own* “art history.”
- Stories, play, or poems may very readily flow from any number of creative art activities. As educators, we all may contribute to the growth and development of communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, of students of all ages. Learning activities that involve writing can be fun, challenging and informative for students and teachers.

Sources

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