

## MUSEUM-BASED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The following guide contains examples of different types of writing assignments that can be based on or inspired by works of art at the Johnson Museum. You can adapt the assignment to best fit the learning objectives of your course.

### CLOSE OBSERVATION

In these assignments students are first asked to closely observe a Museum artwork. This observation can be followed by a variety of writing assignments involving questioning, describing, and/or reflection. These assignments can help to develop close observation skills, in a similar way as close reading.

#### *Possible prompts*

- Pick one artwork in an exhibition that you find especially interesting and observe it closely. Write a list of 10 questions you have about this work. Pick one of these questions and write one page explaining how a scholar might conduct research to answer this question. What other sources might scholars use to better understand this work?
- Pick one artwork in a gallery that you find especially interesting. First write a detailed description of this work and then reflect on your own responses and emotional reactions. Does it stimulate a particular mood, emotion, or memory? What specifically about the work helps to communicate or evoke these particular emotions or responses?
- Pick one artwork in a gallery that you find especially interesting. Spend at least 20 minutes closely observing it and taking notes. Write a detailed description of the artwork.
  - Try to write your description without including any of your own interpretations or any interpretations given in the Museum label.

### INTERPRETATION

Interpretation assignments can build on the observation assignments, and then go a step further in asking for more specific kinds of interpretation. These are especially appropriate for building expository writing skills.

#### *Possible prompts*

- In the chosen exhibition find 2-4 artworks that you feel express one of the themes of this course (love, conflict, power, beauty, etc.) and write an essay comparing and contrasting how these works express this theme.
- In the chosen exhibition find 2-4 artworks that communicate different perspectives or voices on the chosen theme. Write an essay comparing these different perspectives and how they are communicated through the artwork.
- In the chosen exhibition evaluate how the photographs can be studied as a primary source for the chosen historical period. Discuss the advantages and limitations of using photographs in comparison to the other primary sources that we have studied in this course.

### RESEARCH

Research assignments further challenge students in considering how to use visual culture as a primary source and how they might combine different sources of information to build up a larger understanding of a particular subject.

#### *Possible prompts*

- For your research paper, pick at least two artworks from the chosen exhibition and two newspaper articles from a particular decade. Your paper should consider the limitations and advantages of these different sources of information and what information they provide.

- Pick one artwork in the chosen exhibition that you find especially interesting. Research the background of this artist and discuss how this work fits into the wider body of their artistic work and the historical time period in which they lived.

## EXHIBITION REVIEW OR DESIGN

Students can be asked to review/critique an exhibition or propose their own exhibition.

### *Possible prompts*

- Write a review of the chosen exhibition, and in your review consider the following:
  - What is the message/perspective of the exhibition? What story(s) are being communicated? Are there perspectives or points of view that are missing?
  - How does the arrangement, lighting, displays, text labels, and movement of people through the exhibition contribute to its overall message?
- For the chosen exhibition, why do you think the curator chose these pieces and arranged them in this way? What would be some alternative options? If you were to change one aspect of the exhibition what would you change and why?
- If you were to design an exhibition at the Johnson Museum based on one of the themes of this course, describe the exhibition you would plan. What objects/sounds/activities would you include?

## CREATIVE WRITING

Artworks in the Museum can also serve as inspiration for creative writing. Learning about creative writing techniques such as the elements of good storytelling or using imagery can also be valuable for expository and persuasive writing.

### *Possible prompts*

- Storytelling: Write a story based on a work of art in the Johnson Museum. Make sure that you include the key elements of good storytelling that we discussed in class (character, conflict, complications).
- Write a poem based on an artwork in the chosen exhibition—more ideas are given in HFJ Ekphrasis Worksheets.pdf
- Find an artwork in the Johnson Museum that you find especially mysterious. Pretend that you are in the image and describe what is happening.
- Find an artwork in the Johnson Museum that contains at least two figures. Write dialogue or a script—what are the figures saying?
- Write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the figures in an artwork in the chosen exhibition.
- Imagine that the work you're observing is a still image from a film. What happens next?

Some of these ideas in this guide were adapted from "From the classroom to the museum: Understanding faculty-designed assignments in an academic museum" by Alison Barnes and D. Ryan Lynch in *Museum Management and Curatorship* 2012, vol. 27:5, 487–503.

To schedule a session for your course, email **Leah Sweet**,  
Lynch Curatorial Coordinator for Academic Programs, at **lgs82@cornell.edu**  
and allow **three weeks' notice** to arrange a visit.



**JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART**

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