

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

TO ENCOURAGE OBSERVATION, DISCUSSION, AND ANALYSIS DURING CLASS

A museum can be an intimidating environment, raising larger questions about who is allowed to speak about art and how. Class activities empower students to explore and critically engage with visual culture, following their own interests and forming conclusions about a work in their own words. The following list contains examples of low-stakes, in-class activities that promote close observation, encourage descriptive, visual language and sharpen communication skills, especially the translation of visual material into verbal outcomes.

Language classes may find these activities especially useful to emphasize new vocabulary and grammar, and to practice fluid speaking that involves description and expressing opinions and ideas.

TWO-PERSON DRAWING

Students are broken into pairs, with one designated as the observer and the other as the listener. The observers select a work of art (digital image distributed by the instructor) that they must keep hidden from their partner before the activity starts. In a Zoom breakout room or via other social media, the observer describes the work to the listener without showing it to the listener while the listener tries to draw it based on the description alone. The listener cannot ask questions, and the observer is not permitted to see the drawing during this process. When time is up, the student pairs discuss the drawing together, noting how assumptions and language choices led to effective communication or misunderstanding, then share with the class.

DRAWING = THINKING = WRITING

Students are asked to draw an artwork in detail before writing about it or discussing it, encouraging keen observation skills in a fresh way. Once the drawings are complete, students write a paragraph about their works, presenting the artwork in general and remarking on the most striking formal features and how their observation changed during the drawing process. This exercise can be done with digital images, or students can visit the Museum individually outside of class to draw from an actual artwork.

IMAGE TO ARTWORK

Students are assigned/allowed to choose a digital image of an artwork that is currently on view at the Johnson and asked to write informally on what the work is about based on what they see, their personal or emotional reaction to it, etc. Students then go to see the actual artwork at the Museum and are asked to think about the difference between seeing something online and in person (i.e. scale, materiality, color, the gallery space).

THINK LIKE A CURATOR

Students choose an artwork to observe and analyze, first considering how the work evokes a personal response in the viewer, and then building out to think about how the work relates to the overall layout of the gallery, other works displayed nearby, visual and artistic commonalities, etc. Finally, after noting the work's title, culture, and date on the object label, students think about how this piece relates to its time period and cultural priorities.

Updated for 2020–21 hybrid and online teaching

ONE WORK, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Students are given a work of art to observe closely; each writes a short personal response in front of the work. The class shares and discusses the responses, noting different approaches and common themes that arise.

A follow-up activity: students are given a work of art to observe that relates to course themes. Over a number of weeks or a semester, students return to observe and analyze the work anew, writing a short response informed by class discussion or utilizing different methodologies (i.e. descriptive, contextual/historical, creative writing narrative, feminist, Marxist, semiotic, etc.).

ONE TOPIC, MULTIPLE WORKS

Students are given a topic or theme relating to class discussion/readings and search for a work of art that they feel best instantiates, expresses, or comments on that topic. The class regroups to review the selected works, reflecting on similarities and differences in interpretation, as well as possible ways to understand a given topic critically.

WHAT AM I THINKING?

Many artists are excellent at capturing emotional nuance and ambiguity. Students are all shown a work of art featuring a person and are each asked to write down ten sentences of what that person might be thinking. In breakout rooms of about three students or in similar groups via chat, students compare their sentences, select the best ten sentences from the group and arrange them into a ten-line poem.

TWENTY TITLES: ONE POEM (by poet Douglas Kearney, Getty Museum)

Artists have very different ideas of what a title should be, and many do not require their titles to describe something exactly. Students create a list poem made of twenty new titles for a given work of art. The titles should be related to the object in some way, though this does not need to be concrete. For comparison, students can title their poems with the actual title of the work of art and the year it was made.

TEN QUESTIONS

Students each select one artwork in a gallery or online that they find especially interesting and observe it closely, writing a list of ten questions that they have about this piece. 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 piece?

To schedule a session for your course, hybrid or online, 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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