

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 without telling their partner about it and guide them to a spot where the observer can see the work but the listener cannot. The observer describes the work to the listener while the latter tries to draw it based on the description. The listener cannot ask questions, and the observer is not permitted to see the drawing. When time is up, the student pairs discuss the drawing together, noting how assumptions and language choices led to effective communication or misunderstanding.

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.

ART SWAP

Each student selects a work of art and writes a short description of it after close visual examination. This text can be a descriptive paragraph or poem, etc., but must NOT include the title and artist's name. When the class regroups, students swap texts in pairs and try to locate their partner's work of art based on the written description. The class regroups after students locate their artworks to discuss which words or sentences helped to identify their partner's artwork or made the search harder, as well as common types of words such as descriptive, concrete, poetic, art historical, etc.

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.

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.

POST-IT POEMS

Students spend a few minutes observing an artwork of their selection (alone or in pairs), then write down individual ideas, words, and phrases generated from this work on post-it notes or scrap pieces of paper. The students/pairs arrange the post-its or pieces of paper into a poem on the floor in front of their selected artwork.

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 piece in a gallery or exhibit 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?

JOHNSON

MUSEUM OF ART

Please allow three weeks' notice to arrange a class session. Scheduling information and additional resources are available at museum.cornell.edu/learn/faculty-and-instructors on our website.