

American Art at the Core of Learning

Guidelines—Writing for Students about Art

I. Understand the goal for your text:

1. **Write with your lesson/unit theme or topic and enduring understandings in mind.** What do you want students to understand as a result of exploring the artwork?
2. **Decide if your text is primarily about the artwork or the artist.**

II. Help students examine and find meaning in the art:

1. Get the reader to **look closely at the artwork**. Anchor the reader by starting your writing with specific information that the reader can see in the image. Point out or ask questions about important details.
2. Help the reader **unpack the meaning and significance** of the artwork by addressing:
 - Historical and cultural context as reflected in the artwork.
 - Layers of content within the artwork that the students might not immediately see, such as iconography and symbolism.
 - Visual strategies the artist used to communicate the subject and content.
3. Help the reader **discover more** by addressing any additional aspects of the artwork that may be relevant, such as:
 - The artist (e.g., his/her commentaries on work and philosophy and biography as related to the artwork. If the artist is unknown is that significant?)
 - Technique (how was the art produced?)
 - Function (practical, symbolic, changes over time)
 - Economics (patronage, consumption)
 - Relationship to other works of art with similar themes or images

III. Gauge the readability level of students before you start writing:

Grade Appropriateness:

To check the grade-appropriateness of texts, consult the [Fry Graph Readability Formula](#) or go to the website [lexile.com](#). Another way to check level is to compare the text with some materials used at that grade range.

If writing for primary students, the [Dale-Chall word list](#) provides lists of words likely known by students at this grade level.

IV. Best practices in writing about art:

1. Focus on what can be seen in the artwork and base your writing on its strengths.

- What's the most interesting thing about the object you're writing about? Start with that. It is often helpful to show the work of art to one or more students in the target age group to ascertain what they find interesting and intriguing about the work.
- Go from the specific to the general.
- Put descriptions close to what they describe and the doer close to what's being done
- Define any art or other technical terms and attach the definition to something the reader can see.
- Don't belabor the obvious

Include information about:

- *The work of art itself (accurate information relating to the content and subject, composition, etc.)*
- *Artist's biography (as it applies to the art)*
- *Historical context*

2. Ask questions:

- Include a dramatic question, follow up with guiding questions, remembering that surprise gets our attention but interest keeps our attention.
- Ask why and provide answers:
Example: Not much duo piano music is performed anymore, and the group wants to prevent it from dying out. Why? Duo piano music provides the rich sound of the orchestra but the intimacy

of chamber music.

3. **Draw the reader in:**

- Use an active voice.
- Use the word YOU whenever you can. Appeal to your reader's identity.
- Ask your reader to imagine (create empathy)

4. **Show, don't tell.**

- Showing involves using descriptive language.

Example: *Instead of writing, "She was sad that Martha was dead," consider "She stood over the casket afraid to move. Martha was still, as if frozen. Shivering from standing in the cold and cavernous room, she wondered if Martha might be cold, too. Why had her mother not dressed her in a sweater, she wondered?"*

5. **Don't use jargon.**

6. **Decide whether to focus on internal or external conflict when appropriate (this especially applies when you discuss the author or the subject of a portrait)**

- Internal conflict = what the character wants
- External conflict = what the character needs

V. **Things to consider when revising and editing:**

1. **Fact-check** your writing.
2. **Simplicity:** Strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Use active verbs, and eliminate unnecessary adjectives!
3. **Clutter:** When revising, put brackets around every component in a piece of work that isn't doing useful work.
4. **Style:** Removing clutter does not mean compromising style. You have to strip your writing down before you can build it back up.
5. **Words:** Simple vocabulary words are good choices because they're easy for readers to understand.
6. **Avoid the "curse of expertise"!** Think about what you've written from the perspective of someone who is encountering the art or the subject for the first time.

VI. Sources:

Wetterlund, Kris. *If You Can't See It Don't Say It: A New Approach to Interpretive Writing*. Minneapolis:

Museum-Ed, 2013. <http://www.museum-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/If-You-Cant-See-It.pdf>

Zinsser, William Knowlton. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.