

Writing for Art Appreciation

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Art production, art appreciation—do they always occur together? Most art curricula aim toward these two equally important goals: to involve students in the act of self-expression through the production of art, and to provide opportunities for students to acquire an appreciation of art. However, most programs accomplish only the first goal by placing undue emphasis on art production.

The teaching of art production usually focuses entirely on composition, artistic procedure, and skill development. There is no evidence that studying art production provides students with an appreciation for art. If art classes teach only the knowledge and skills necessary for self-expression and do not prepare the student for reflection on and discussion about art, they do nothing more than teach a trade. By itself, the artist model cannot lead a student to an appreciation of art. In other words, art appreciation does not always occur with art production.

As a secondary art teacher with eight years of experience, I am concerned with increasing art appreciation as well as developing skills in art production. I have found that many students skilled in using several art media were able to make only superficial responses to the work of other artists. This indicated that I needed to place more emphasis on developing perceptual skills, aesthetic criteria, and specialized vocabulary, all of which would aid my students in making knowledgeable responses to art. This led me to find alternative strategies that would teach students to describe, analyze, interpret, and judge art.

Aesthetic education, commonly known as art appreciation, aims to sensitize viewers to aesthetic elements (line, shape, color, and such) so that the viewers may place value on art and aesthetic experience. For example, the plight of the Jews during WWII can be felt through the design elements of Ben Shahn's *Warsaw 1943*. Sharp pointed lines, stinging in feeling, make up the tortured hands in this print reminding the viewer of the many acts of barbarism. It is hard to remain unaffected by this dramatic representation of human pain and suffering. The degree

of sensitivity to these elements directly affects the quality of the viewer's response. This sensitivity is determined by the viewer's conscious perceptual awareness of the design elements. What remains on the unconscious level is lost in the experience. Because language is a tool of the conscious mind, it is the vehicle through which awareness and sensitivity can be developed. Through writing-to-learn strategies, verbal responses to art can be provoked, and sensitivity to design elements can be increased. In this chapter, I will first discuss oral and written responses to art and then share specific strategies for increasing art appreciation through writing.

Responding to Art

In general, works of art have a complex range of aesthetic qualities. Because of the perceptual complexities inherent in works of art, formal instruction in perceptual skills and writing plays a major part in the development of art appreciation.

Perceptual Skills

A technique useful in forming verbal responses to situations with perceptual complexity is **listing** concrete descriptions of visual properties. I direct my students to describe the subject matter of a work or particular design elements. For example, I used the painting *Crucifixion* by Salvador Dali and asked students to list subjects or objects within the work. Jane, a sophomore in my basic design class, made the following list of subjects:

- female figure
- male figure
- square
- platform
- cross
- loincloth
- shadow of arms on cross
- cubes
- checkered floor pattern
- cloth in lady's arms
- mountains in background
- sun setting



Figure 1. Warsaw 1943 by Ben Shahn 1963, Poster 36¾" × 28½"

This exercise helped Jane realize that it takes time to actually see the richness of subject and detail in a work of art. The act of listing made her account for what she was perceiving, provoking her to go beyond a superficial summing up of the picture. In essence, Jane has learned that to get something out of a work of art, she must take over where the artist has left off. That is, she must give the work the time and thought the artist's effort deserves.

As students become more astute at understanding aesthetic qualities, descriptive listing can become broader, encompassing many aspects of one work of art. I used the following activities to broaden students' understanding of space and linear perspective:

Taking notes to acquire the vocabulary necessary to discuss and write about how artists use space and perspective,

Viewing slides of art to identify the ways in which artists use space,

Drawing to incorporate the principles of linear perspective into their own art project.

I then used *Crucifixion* again and asked the same students to list ways in which the artist used space and perspective. Jane added the following to her list:

Cross and floor pattern are done in one point perspective.

Male figure is free floating against the cross.

Lady figure is standing on a platform with her hand on her shoulder, and she is looking up at the male figure and cross.

Much space between foreground and mountains.

Male figure's head is turned away from the viewer.

This listing exercise enabled students to postpone their interpreting and judging the art long enough to collect the perceptual data necessary to make a sensitive response. Because of the activities mentioned previously, Jane had a sense of what to look for in her analysis of Dali's use of space and perspective. This is evident in her use of such terms as "one point perspective" and "foreground." Through writing she was able to get a more complete picture of Dali's complex use of these elements. Students agreed that they saw a lot more detail in the work after doing this exercise.

Specialized Vocabulary

Critical language about art determines to a great extent the possibilities for writing. Perceptions which invite the use of previously learned

words or phrases generally surface while important observations which strain the individual's vocabulary may remain unexamined. My students' level and depth of visual perceptions are related to their existing language resources. I teach my students a vocabulary through which the description, analysis and interpretation of aesthetic qualities is possible. This vocabulary is built gradually throughout my basic art course. I begin by introducing my students to the element of line in art. Line is defined and then examined in terms of its variation (changes in width, curvature, and so on) and analyzed in terms of how artists use it (to create pattern and texture). By the end of the course, my students are familiar with the elements of line, shape, color, space, value, and texture as well as with the principles of unity, contrast, pattern, rhythm, proportion, balance, and emphasis. As they acquire the ability to understand, respond to, talk, and write about visual images, they become, in the most complete sense, visually literate. Accordingly, I try to stimulate spoken and written language about visual images.

Language is also a practical tool through which students can actively respond to art. In order to have meaning for students, art appreciation programs need to provide experiences in which the student is an active participant. The value of art is not learned by listening to someone else talk about it. My students want to talk about what they see, not be told what it is that they are looking at. We gain satisfaction from talking about what we like and dislike and in turn comparing reactions with others. This collaboration often uncovers details that were missed and furthers the enjoyment and understanding of the total experience. If the purpose of art appreciation is to increase the student's ability to share aesthetic experiences, the student must be asked to respond rather than passively view slides and films on art.

Writing-to-learn art appreciation places the student in an active role. The students' verbal abilities are exercised when those students are asked to give written responses to art. They use recently acquired vocabulary as well as personal experiences and perceptions. Mike, one of my basic design students, wrote the following when asked to respond to the shape, color, and texture of Claes Oldenburg's *7-up*.

The colors consist of green, orange, and blue. The shape is that of a 7-up beverage container slightly crunched in the middle. Its texture is rough with mountains and valleys. The 7-up can symbolizes the waste problem which the world has.

In order to make this statement, Mike isolated the elements of color, shape, and texture in the work. His description of each element was created according to his present perceptions. As my students acquire a

greater vocabulary, they perceive more qualities in each of the elements. Their first thoughts then include analysis of the elements as well as descriptions. For example, orange and blue are complementary colors. After studying color order and characteristics, which I teach toward the middle of the course, students are likely to observe complementary colors while viewing *7-up*. Also, Mike's statements reflect his knowledge of the world's waste problem and give a description of the design elements. It is this integration of the students' newly acquired knowledge with their past experiences that enhances their appreciation of art, because the most fulfilling interpretation of art reveals a commonality between the viewer's personality and the actual contents of the work itself.

Art criticism is any spoken or written discussion of art. To criticize art knowledgeably is to appreciate it in a meaningful way. Writing techniques are excellent vehicles with which students can practice art criticism in the form of description, analysis, interpretation, or judgment concerning art. Prior to analyzing and interpreting art, students must acquire skills for describing art.

Describing art is simply holding back all judgments and objectively listing concrete features in the work. Any artwork could be the focus for this exercise. If the lesson centers on the elements of art, students would list descriptions of specific shapes, textures, and colors in the work. If the intention is to give an interpretation of a representational work, students would list descriptions of objects and details in the work. I asked students to interpret the painting *My Gem* by William Harnett. In *My Gem* Harnett has juxtaposed related still life material that provides a comfortable set of practical associations. He has placed every object in sharp focus, as if each were under a magnifying glass, thereby fooling the viewer into accepting them as real instead of painted. The objects are all commonplace. For example, a feather pen, a book, and a wood table could all have been found in many homes during Harnett's lifetime. In order to lead my students to an eventual interpretation, I first asked them to make a list of all the objects they could see in *My Gem*. This painting was a good choice because it contains so many different objects. Jane listed the following items:

- wood table
- old tablecloth
- thick books
- feather pen
- black ink
- sheet of music

pipe
blue wrinkled piece of paper
burned matches
old-fashioned lamp
artistic pitcher
words
chain
flute
ashes

I then asked her to give an interpretation of the painting by writing a description of the owner of these objects. I directed students this way in their interpretations because of the title Harnett gave his work. I assumed the objects in the painting were of personal value to the artist, functioning as a kind of self-portrait. Jane's response follows:

I think he would be a rather old guy, with white hair, wearing a grey suit. I think he would be a writer of music and books. He's not real organized. He's probably a loving person. It looks as though he were a lonely kind of man.

Listing the objects in the painting helped Jane get a feeling for the personality behind the painting. She has used her imagination in associating these objects with the artist. In her interpretation the artist is characterized as not very organized, loving, and lonely. Juxtaposing the many objects in the picture elicited these ideas and feelings, making her interpretation a personal one. After this exercise I asked students if this helped them get more out of viewing the work, and they responded positively. Here are a few of their comments:

It showed me how to read a painting, not only to see the objects in the painting, but to feel the painter's expressions.

It helped me understand why he painted what he painted.

It helped me to use my imagination.

My students enjoyed making their lists and sharing them with the entire class. Usually I ask my students to share what they have written when I sense they are eager to do so and when time allows. Group interaction provides students with perceptions they might otherwise have missed. They also enjoy hearing their peers express ideas and feelings which are similar to as well as different from their own.

After students have gathered visual data through listing, an exercise in analysis can easily follow. An exercise in analysis works best when it is kept down to a few specific concepts. Adequate preparation is vital

at this stage. Students must understand the meaning behind each concept to be analyzed. For example, if the students can define the principles of contrast and identify several ways artists use contrast, they are ready to analyze how contrast is used in a variety of situations. I help my students accomplish this by giving them specific examples of six or seven isolated uses of contrast. Then the students view slides of a variety of works of art and are asked to identify which situation previously seen in the example is closest to the present situation. At this point students begin to depart from the rigid list of kinds of contrast and see new situations or ways artists use it. True analysis has begun. Students put together their own explanations of how contrast was used by relating new situations to those previously learned.

Strategies for Increasing Art Appreciation

One particular writing technique, the **dialogue**, is an excellent means of getting students not only to analyze the use of specific concepts in art but also utilize their imagination, sense of humor, and ability to see the opposing sides of a situation. To write a meaningful dialogue, students need clear guidelines and should be provided with exercises which lead up to the final written work. Students gain a clearer understanding of the concepts they are using if they are allowed to rework their first attempt into a final written work.

It is important to take time to introduce and discuss aspects that make up a good dialogue. Specifics need to be stated such as what concepts are to be analyzed, how many lines each voice should have, how much class time is to be spent writing the first draft, and perhaps how to get started. Students can be given individual reproductions, art out of magazines, or the entire class can focus on one reproduction. An exercise listing elements in the reproduction helps the students begin an analysis, for description is a major part of the dialogue.

After creating a geometric design, using the elements of line and shape and the principles of unity, contrast, and variation, I asked my students to write a dialogue incorporating these new concepts. The assignment was broken into the following units: (1) Students made a list describing the elements in a reproduction; (2) Students did a **focused write** analyzing how contrast, unity, and variation were utilized by the artist in the work; (3) Students wrote a dialogue incorporating information about the work from their list and focused write, and (4) Students reworked the first draft of the dialogue into a final product considering clarity and continuity. They were required to use two

voices, one a gallery owner's, the other a visitor's. I instructed everyone to open the dialogue with the visitor saying, "How on earth can this be worth \$100,000?" and to define the work in terms of the concepts recently covered in class. Here is a sampling of student responses to this exercise.

Example One

Visitor: How on earth can this be worth \$100,000?

Owner: You have to realize that it is very difficult for an artist to create effective variation and contrast in a picture. The value of this painting is based on the use of variation and contrast. If you look at this picture closely, you will discover that there is a lot of variation in the colors.

Visitor: Oh! Now that you mention it, I do notice the beige against the blue. The light blue sure gives variety in the blue too.

Owner: Another good point is the contrast of the shapes. Take the triangles and the rectangles for example.

Visitor: The arcs against the rectangles are a pretty interesting contrast in themselves. Also, the lines sure are a contrast to the other two shapes, triangles and rectangles.

Owner: I wonder if you noticed the lines are red and dark blue, not black as one would guess at first glance.

Visitor: Hey! I didn't even notice that. But, now that you mention it, I do notice. You're pretty observant.

Owner: Well, that is my job. Speaking of observance, did you notice the red specks in the black rectangular area?

Visitor: No, I didn't. Wow, when you look at a picture you really look! Know what, though? I sure wouldn't spend that much on one painting.

Example Two

Visitor: How on earth can this be worth \$100,000?

Owner: Now sir, please don't be so irrational, note its extraordinary qualities.

Visitor: What qualities? You mean a few multiple colored oil paints slapped on this piece of canvas?

Owner: Sir, please note the artist's use of contrast, repetition, and variation.

Visitor: What do you mean? What's contrast?

Owner: Contrast is just one of the three principles of art I just mentioned. Contrast is defined as a strong difference, for example, dark versus light or big versus small.

Visitor: Okay, I see, the darker colors of the painting are contrasting with the light ones as are the large triangles and squares to the smaller ones.

Owner: That's right, now you're catching on. Shapes can contrast as well as color and shades of value.

Visitor: And what do those other two principles mean that you mentioned? Repetition and variation.

Owner: Repetition means to repeat the same shape over and over, but the artist doesn't just stop there, he also uses variation in the shapes. Variation means a slight difference, a slight change from shape to shape. The two combined create unity. Otherwise the painting would be very dull.

Visitor: I see, so without repetition and variation working together, the design would be missing something, right?

Owner: Right, because unity brings together all principles and elements of art to create a sense of oneness to make the perfect design.

Visitor: Boy, without contrast, repetition, variation, and especially unity, art would be worthless. I can see how designs are valued at such high prices.

Owner: By Jove, I think you've got it. So would you like to purchase this particular painting?

Visitor: Are you kidding me? A painting with such caliber as this is priceless, it should be put in a museum of fine art.

Owner: Why, I never!

Visitor: Yeah, and you probably never will either, but thanks for the lecture.

Owner: @#::!!%

In both examples students used the previously learned concepts of unity, contrast, and variation to analyze the reproduction in their dialogues. But, there is an obvious difference between them in terms of the learning demonstrated. In the first example, the owner points out how the artist used variation and contrast but fails to mention how the artist unified the work. On the other hand, the owner in the second example not only points out how variation, contrast, and unity were utilized by the artist but also clearly defines each concept for the visitor and explains how they function together to make the design successful. Both dialogues indicate that the students have learned to make close observations as evidenced in their descriptions of each work. Although both examples are successful in achieving a conversational tone, the second is more interesting because of tension created between the gallery owner and visitor. Using these concepts to talk about design was a hard bridge for some to make. It helped a great deal to analyze the reproductions first in terms of how each concept was used by the artist

wears striped overalls
 splits own wood
 uses cane
 old, has white hair

At this point in the exercise, students began to appreciate and understand in a sensitive manner what Imogene Cunningham was saying about her father. Because of their earlier reflections of their own fathers, they were able to make personal connections between themselves and the work of art. Listing these qualities served as an interpretation of Cunningham's statement about her father. The key to success with this sequence is care in choosing one idea or word from the work with which to create a word cluster and develop an interpretation.

I also used the sequence of writing exercises with a reproduction of a drawing entitled *Burden* by Paul Klee. The title again was used for the word cluster. Students put everything in their word cluster from money pressures to problems in relationships. They enjoyed writing about their feelings; it was a cathartic experience for some. Here is an example of the complete sequence by a student in my basic design class:

Word Cluster

(health)
 sickness
 friends no job
 news house not going home
 brother boyfriend staying out too late
 people **burden** car
 smoking (trouble) parent's pressures
 alcohol school
 drugs law
 no money

The student is making a personal connection with the word "burden."

Written Response to Idea in Word Cluster

I have a lot of trouble with my parents and it creates a great burden on my peace of mind. Like, for instance, my car. I have had my car for about 2 years now and up until 7 months ago it was in perfect working condition. Then, I listened to my friends and burned rubber and raced it and took it four-wheeling when it's only a two-wheel drive and eventually I screwed it up. Now, the brakes need



Figure 2. *Burden* by Paul Klee 1939, Drawing 11½" × 8¼"

fixing, and it needs a new radiator, the front axle is bent and it needs a tune-up. I have \$200 to have most of it fixed but, my parents keep telling me, "We'll fix it." So far, they haven't done a single thing for it. My boyfriend keeps asking me when it's going to get fixed, and I can't even tell him. I have to have my car so that I can get a job. When I had my car, I got drunk and drove, and skipped school with it, sometimes. I can see why they wouldn't want me to have it. But, every day that I can't drive my car, there is a burden. A burden that maybe I'll never get to drive it again. And I want to have it.

In this selection the student has elaborated on a current personal burden. The feeling which surfaced was used to make a personal connection with Paul Klee's drawing. The student has related to Klee's visual statement more so than before reflecting on what it felt like to be burdened. The reasons for the feeling are insignificant. It was the reflection on the feeling of being burdened that became the student's interpretation for Klee's drawing.

List of Aspects Relating to Word "Burden"

As a class we listed five aspects of the drawing that related to the title. The purpose of this list was to help the students recognize how Klee symbolized the feeling of being burdened into visual form and to help them associate their present personal connotations with "burden" to Klee's depiction of it. Here is the list:

His head is hung down.

His arms are between his legs; no hands.

The objects above his head are on him.

His legs are crossed; he's skinny.

Arrows point downward.

In addition to using writing-to-learn techniques for the description, analysis, and interpretation of art, I have employed writing to encourage students' learning in other ways. Writing to learn works well in any art class when students write summary statements on the process they went through to arrive at a finished artwork. This provides closure for specific projects and helps students to reflect on what they have learned. I gave students questions to answer in their summary. Here are a few examples of questions I most often ask.

In what ways did you transform your original idea to fit the medium?

What problems in technique did you encounter?

What new aspects did you learn about the medium?

Did you enjoy doing the artwork?

What would you do differently if you were to do this same project again?

Here is an excerpt from a summary written by one of my ceramics students after she completed the construction of a coil pot.

I had a little problem with making my coils round. Instead of round, they tended to be a little flat. To solve that problem I slowed down my process and made small rolling motions with the tip of my fingers. Coiling then went smoothly. I thought the project was fun. I learned a lot about coiling and different things I could do with it.

Aesthetic education increases a student's sensitivity to art. The vast majority of students will go on to become art consumers, responding to rather than creating art. Aesthetic education prepares students to make knowledgeable responses to art, primarily through teaching students to understand and use the specialized language of art, enabling them to describe, analyze, interpret, and judge art. Since language is the vehicle through which awareness and sensitivity to art can be developed, writing-to-learn strategies play a vital role in the aesthetic education program.

Using writing-to-learn strategies aimed at increasing art appreciation yields many new possibilities. The strategies already discussed by no means represent all possibilities. Much more experimentation is needed with these strategies. It is important to remember that, in order to find what works, a risk must be taken. This is where the real challenge of curriculum development begins. If you are the type of teacher who delights in revamping teaching strategies until they provide you with satisfactory outcomes, you will love using writing-to-learn art appreciation strategies in a creative way.