



The Art of Language: Visual Literacy and Descriptive Writing



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“Images are all around us, and the ability to interpret them meaningfully is a vital skill for students to learn.”

“ ‘Literacy’ usually means the ability to read and write, but it can also refer to the ability to ‘read’ kinds of signs other than words — for example, images or gestures. The proliferation of images in our culture — in newspapers and magazines, in advertising, on television, and on the Web — makes visual literacy, the ability to ‘read’ images, a vital skill. But what does it mean to read an image, and how can teachers help students develop the skills to do so thoughtfully?”

“Visual literacy is the ability to see, to understand, and ultimately to think, create, and communicate graphically.”

From
Reading images: an introduction to visual literacy
Melissa Thibault and David Walbert

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/675>

Visual Literacy

What is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy is the art and skill of seeing and comprehending visual details, the ability to read and write visual text, and the ability to understand the meanings of and messages in visual text.



What is visual text?

Visual text contains images, either with or without accompanying words. Visual texts can be printed, electronic, fiction, or non-fiction. They range from diagrams to documentaries. Examples of visual texts include maps, charts, graphs, textbook illustrations, flow charts, street signs, Internet websites -- in short, any information source that includes pictures or illustrations.



Why is visual literacy important?

Our increasingly visual world is filled with messages that need to be understood. These may be obvious, like street signs or advertisements, or they can be subtle, like the architecture of buildings or the clothes we wear. Visual literacy helps us determine and understand the messages being sent through images.



Art, Language Arts, and Visual Literacy

Young children are natural artists. Somewhere along the line, they take on adult reservations about what they can draw; people become stick figures, trees become rectangles and circles. Part of visual literacy is paying attention to details. Making and appreciating art also require attention to details. The more children are encouraged to notice details, the more details they are likely to see, use, and understand. Writing activities that incorporate art, photographs, and illustrations can help students use more details in their writing, and vice-versa.



Prompting Descriptive Writing With Photographs

Partner Activity

One student describes a photograph to a partner, who draws a picture of the scene without looking at the photograph. They compare the photograph and drawing and discuss the results.

Materials:

scenic photographs; unlined white paper;
colored pencils or crayons

Preparation:

Gather several photographs of scenery that include a variety of details, colors, and arrangements of land and water forms, interesting structures and buildings, etc.



Procedure:

Students choose who will be the speaker and who will be the listener/artist.

Each set of partners will need one photograph.

Students sit so that they cannot see each other's papers.

The speaker describes the photograph to the other listener, using descriptive language.
The listener draws while the speaker describes.

When finished, partners compare the photograph and drawing and discuss the results. Students should note which details are more similar between the photo and the drawing, and which areas could have used more description or different language. Discussion should also include ideas and suggestions that would have improved the result.

Considerations:

This activity can be done in small groups, with one speaker and two or three artists. For some classes, a whole class activity to model the activity may be in order. Comparison and discussion should focus on the overall composition and presence of details, not the quality of the drawing.

Prompting Dialogue Writing With Photographs

**Whole Group and
Partner Activity**

Students write a collaborative paragraph with dialogue, starting at the middle of the paragraph..

Materials:

photograph of people in an interesting situation; chart paper; colored markers

Preparation:

Choose an appropriate photograph. If students will go on to do the activity in small groups, several photographs will be needed. If the photograph is small, make a transparency to use on the overhead.

Procedure:

Attach the photograph on the left side of the center of the chart paper (and show on the overhead if photo is small).

Have students describe what's happening in the picture; write it at the center of the chart paper, next to the photograph. (#1 in diagram)

Have students think about what might have happened shortly before what they see; write one idea *above* the previous sentence. . (#2 in diagram)

Ask what might have happened before *that*. Add another sentence above the previous sentence. . (#3 in diagram)

Read the sentences from top to bottom; they should describe an evolving scene or activity. Work with students to revise as necessary to make sure the growing paragraph "flows" well.

Ask students to suggest what one of the people in the photograph might be saying; come to agreement and write one idea under the original sentence. . (#4 in diagram)

Ask for suggestions about what the other person might answer. Again, come to consensus and add the dialogue to the end of the writing. . (#5 in diagram)

Add additional dialogue as desired.

Review the whole sequence of writing, from top to bottom, and make any necessary revisions or additions.

3 - what happened before

2 - what happened before



1 - what's
happening?

4 - what 1st person says

5 - what 2nd person says

Considerations:

Allow students to give many ideas and agree on one.

Include a lesson on punctuation, if necessary.

Have students use additional photos with a partner or in small groups.

Prompting Descriptive Writing With Drawings

Individual Activity

After an observation and discussion of detailed photographs or art works, students draw pictures using details and then write a descriptive paragraph using their drawings for reference.

Materials:

unlined white paper; drawing materials; writing paper; a poster of a well-known art work OR a detailed photograph of scenery or people.

Preparation:

Choose a work of art or a detailed photograph for a descriptive vocabulary-building introduction.



To introduce and model the lesson, use a well-known art work such as Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

Procedure:

Introduce the lesson with descriptive vocabulary building by having students look at a work of art that shows detailed scenes. Have students name the details they see in backgrounds, scenery, interesting details, or specific human activities in the works. As they name things, elicit and/or suggest descriptive vocabulary and chart the words for later reference.

Have students draw detailed pictures of people in action or of scenery that includes elements such as interesting land forms, structures, etc. Then have them use their drawings as prompts for writing descriptive paragraphs. The vocabulary chart should be available for reference.

Extension:

After the descriptive paragraphs are finished, have students read their paragraphs to a partner and have the partner draw according to the description, then compare the two drawings.

Considerations:

Students can exchange drawings or use their own for the descriptive writing activity. Some students may need to be encouraged to include more detail in their drawings, especially if they do little drawing in school or on their own. Students should be encouraged to observe carefully; remind them that artists look first, and try to just draw what they see.

Resources for Integrating Art With Language Arts

Books

Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers

Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe. 2007. Stenhouse Publishers

Lively Learning: Using the Arts to Teach the K-8 Curriculum.

Linda Crawford. 2004. Northeast Foundation for Children

Creating Art With Kids

Renée Goularte. 2006. Self-published: available from author and at <http://www.share2learn.com/CreatingArt-info.html>

Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain

Betty Edwards. 1979. J.P. Tarcher, Inc.

Web Resources

Visual Literacy

http://k-8visual.info/whatis_Text.html

Reading images: an introduction to visual literacy

Melissa Thibault and David Walbert

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/675>

Picture This: Visual Literacy Activities

<http://museumca.org/picturethis/visual.html>

A Periodic Table of Visualization Methods

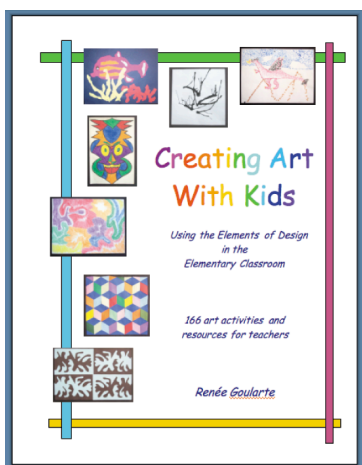
http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html

Picturing Writing and Image Making: Fostering Literacy Through Art

<http://www.picturingwriting.org/picturingwriting.html>

Image-Making Within the Writing Process

<http://www.picturingwriting.org/imagemaking.html>



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