

A Picture Speaks a Thousand Words

Exploring Art, Expanding Literacy

Writing about art doesn't have to be dry and stuffy.
Art is all about creativity – so writing about art should
be creative too.



*My saliva tastes sour, like coins or a bloodstain.
I hear my heart, quick as footsteps in an old town.
I can see blood, bright as my mum's lips.
I can feel something sticky and salty on my shirt.
I can smell dinner burning like a church candle.*

Card 1: At the Gallery

Find your inspiration

Split up and explore the gallery. Discuss different pictures, sculptures or installations as you meet other members of the group.

As a Group:

- Discuss your favourite artworks, and explain why some grabbed your attention more than others. Give everyone a turn to talk about their favourite.
- Decide on one artwork that you'd like to explore together.



HINT

It's not important for you to understand the artwork. You don't need to know anything about the artist, or what the artist's intentions were in creating the work.

This is all about your own reactions and responses, whatever they turn out to be...

Card 2: At the Gallery

Who's there?

As a Group:

Identify all the characters in the artwork. If you've chosen a work with no characters, think creatively!

For example, if you've chosen:

A still life:

think about the people who might have placed the objects, or made one of the objects, or stolen one of the objects...

An abstract work:

who might have made it? Who might they have made it for?
Does it remind you of someone? (Use your imagination to think of the artwork as a person itself.)

A landscape:

who might live in or travel through this place?
Who might the artist have been, and why were they there?

List the characters, then ask each other questions about them:

Make sure someone notes down the best answers and ideas.

- What is their name?
- How old are they?
- What is their relationship to any other characters in the artwork?
- What were they doing five minutes before the moment captured in the artwork?
- What will they be doing five minutes after the moment captured in the artwork?
- Who do they live with, and where?
- What do they do to make a living?
- How much money do they have?
- What kind of a social life do they have?



HINT

It doesn't matter if some of the biographical details you invent are a bit weird.
Go with it...

Card 3: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Choose your Champion!

As a Group:

- Choose just one of the characters. From now on, you're going to be telling his or her story. This is your Champion!
- Find a volunteer who feels confident to do some role-playing.
- Get your volunteer to sit in a chair – **the HOT-SEAT** – facing the rest of the group. He or she is now acting as the Champion. Ask him or her questions about their life, about the moment captured in the artwork, and about things which might have taken place since then.

The volunteer must answer the questions as imaginatively as possible, building on the ideas the group came up with in the 'Who's There?' activity (Card 2)

Make sure someone notes down the best answers and ideas.

- If you like, change the person in the Hot-Seat now and then. Each new person needs to stick to the 'facts' provided by previous volunteers.
- Introduce other characters in Hot-Seats. Add a second chair and ask for a new volunteer to sit in it. Give them a part – say, the Champion's mother – then fire questions at either your first volunteer, your second, or both.
- You can always add more Hot-Seats to fill out the story. They could be other characters from the artwork, or anyone else you think might supply an interesting bit of story: an eye-witness, a policeman, a social worker... **Use your imagination!**

HINT

It's fine for boys to play female characters and the other way around – it might throw up surprising plot-twists...

Card 4: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Write Senses

Individually:

- Imagine being the Champion, and picture very clearly the scene around you at the moment captured in the artwork.
- Write five lines – call it a poem, if you like – in the voice of the Champion.

Each line should use a different one of the five senses and one SURPRISING simile or metaphor.

Think of things nearby and far away, things obvious and almost-unnoticeable, things happening simultaneously, things imaginary...

For example: imagine a sculpture of a boy, maybe twelve years old. He's barefoot, wearing blue jeans, and he's lifting the hem of his white t-shirt to reveal a thin, horizontal wound across his chest. His face looks surprised.

You might write something like this:

I can see blood, bright as my mum's lipstick, on my stomach.

I can feel something sticky as cooling jam under my shirt.

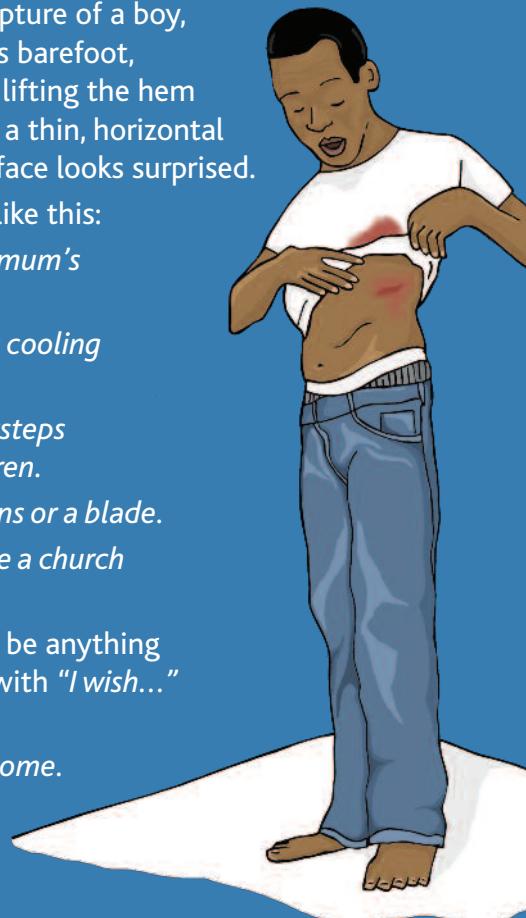
I hear my heart, quick as footsteps in an alley, over a far-away siren.

My saliva tastes sour, like coins or a blade.

I can smell dinner burning like a church candle going out.

- Write a sixth line, which can be anything you like, BUT it must begin with "I wish..." for example:

I wish my mum had been at home.



HINT

A simile compares something to something else using words such as "like" or "as" – *the full moon is like a silver bowling-ball.*

A metaphor compares something to something else by saying it is the other thing – *the full moon is a silver bowling ball on a black velvet cloth.*

HINT

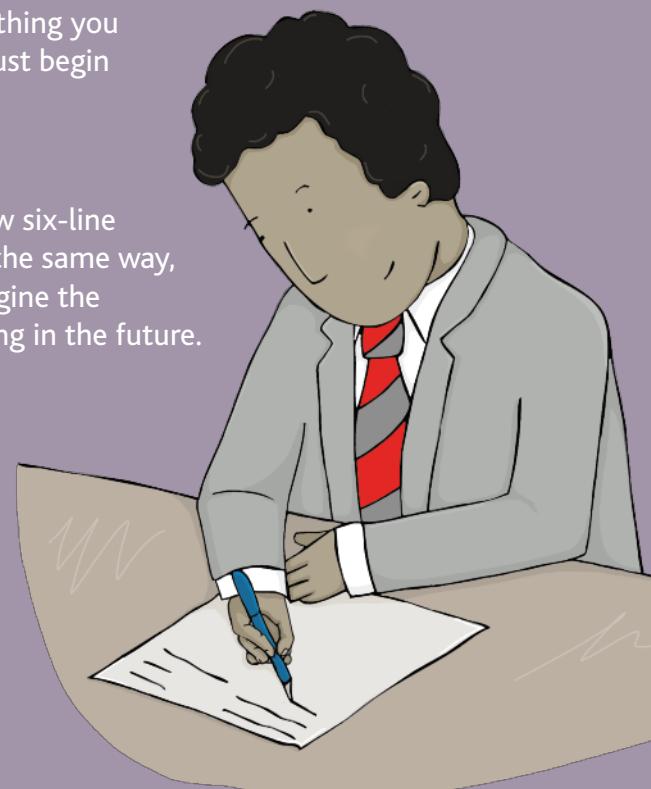
Don't make it rhyme. Chasing a rhyme can easily wreck your most interesting ideas...

Card 5: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Time Travelling

Individually:

- Imagine being the Champion, but this time a minute before the moment captured in the artwork.
What will change to bring you to the moment the artwork depicts?
Who else might arrive or leave?
How does what you see, hear, touch, taste or smell differ?
Picture very clearly the scene around you.
 - Just as you did before, write five lines – call it another poem, if you like – in the voice of the Champion, each one featuring a surprising simile or metaphor, and each one using a different one of the five senses.
 - Again, end with a sixth line which can be anything you like, but which must begin with, “I wish...”
- Try hint 1*
- Write a whole new six-line poem, in exactly the same way, but this time imagine the Champion speaking in the future.
- Try hint 2*



Still no rhyming!

HINT 1

It's up to you how far back in time you travel. It could be a minute or two before the moment captured in the artwork. It could be an hour, a day, a year, a decade. Just don't forget you're still writing in the voice of the Champion.

You might want to try Hot-Seating each other again. Questions from other people can really fire up your imagination.

HINT 2

Again, It's up to you how far you want the Champion to time-travel. Go with whatever your imagination tells you is the most interesting decision.

Card 6: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Other Voices

As a Group:

- Remember the other characters you identified in the 'Who's There' activity (Card 2)
Discuss each of them: what were they doing before the moment captured in the artwork? What are they doing at the captured moment? What will they be doing a few seconds, a few minutes, a few days, many years afterwards?
- Hot-Seat some of the most interesting characters you've created. Ask them to imagine their experience using all five senses. Ask them how they feel.

Individually:

- Pick one of the characters. Write something – however long or short – in the voice of that person.

For example:

you might pick the Champion's mother, and write her diary entry at the end of the day on which the moment captured in the artwork took place...

or a police detective, writing an official report back at the police station...

or a journalist, writing a lurid article for a tabloid paper...

or one of the Champion's friends, on the other side of the world, writing a letter to the Champion, weeks later...

or a member of a jury in a courtroom where the Champion is the victim, the accused or a witness...

or a passerby at the moment captured in the artwork, who's phoning a friend to tell them what happened...

HINT

Use your imaginations! You could be anyone!

HINT

Take any of these characters time-travelling. What would they have written five minutes before the moment captured in the artwork? What would they write twenty years later?

HINT

As a group, you're trying to create as many different types of writing as possible. If you've got loads of time, you could all write something by the mother, then by the detective, then by the journalist and so on. If time's tight, some of you could be the mother, others the detective, others the journalist...

HINT

Don't forget to use surprising similes and/or metaphors to spice up your writing.

Card 7: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Piecing It All Together

By now, the group will have created quite a lot of writing. You're going to turn this new writing into one piece which you could perform or publish. Or both.

As a Group:

- Decide how to tell your story.

You could:

tell it in strict chronological order, with all the events of the story in the right order...

tell it in reverse order...

leap about in time...

Try hint 1

- Pick some of the most interesting bits of writing from everything that's been written.

Try hint 2

- Create a new document using bits of everyone's writing, in whatever order you think works, so that you're telling the story of the moment captured in the artwork in the most captivating way possible.

Try hint 3

- Set the document out like a play script.



HINT 1

Think how films have used these different ways of handling their timelines.
What difference does it make?

Think about which of these three ways will create the most mysteries, surprises and plot-twists for your audience and readers to enjoy...

HINT 2

You don't have to use a whole poem – if someone's written one brilliant line, you can use that without the rest of the poem.
If you could only choose one line you have written – which would it be?

HINT 3

Don't be afraid to jump between the voices of different characters – some might need to say a lot, and some might need to say just a few words.
The more variety there is, the more interesting your final piece of writing is likely to be.

Don't feel you have to tell the whole story or include all the characters.

Card 8: At the Gallery or in the Classroom

Publishing and Performing

As a Group:

- Make sure you're all happy that what you've created tells the story well.
Is it interesting?
Is it a page-turner?
Is it too long?
Does it repeat ideas?

Try hint 1

- You could publish it as a booklet, on paper or online, and / or...
- You could perform it live – in the gallery, at school, anywhere...

Divide up the lines between the people performing. You don't have to have the lines performed by the person who wrote them – share them out.

Think about where you all stand in the performance space. Do you stay still? Do you move about? If you're in the gallery will you just stand near the artwork itself or reveal it to the audience gradually? Are there moments in the script when everyone moves at once – perhaps to mark the end of a scene? When you're performing,
BE LOUD ENOUGH FOR YOUR AUDIENCE TO HEAR, AND NOT-TOO-QUICK, AND CLEAR.

Try hint 2

HINT 1

The writing should be imaginative and surprising. Make sure you're not using clichés (phrases or sentences that have no real impact on the reader because they've been used by other people so often.)

HINT 2

If you're performing, you don't have to learn all the words. You can all read from script, but try and be familiar enough with your lines so that you can **LOOK AT THE AUDIENCE** while you're performing. It'll help them hear you and connect with the emotion in your words.

ENJOY!!!

You've made a work of art!!!

Nominate someone to read out the name of the character who's about to speak, or to add some stage directions to help the audience understand what's going on!

This resource pack will help you and your class to focus on one work of art and inspire your students to write creatively through a series of games and activities.

They could write a poem, a story, a play, a radio drama – it's up to them. And they may even want to perform it...

This resource has been produced as part of the Max Reinhardt Literacy Awards (MRLA) in 2016/17. MRLA is a programme conceived by the Max Reinhardt Charitable Trust in memory of the publisher, Max Reinhardt. It has been developed with the support of Engage, the National Association for Gallery Education, and the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) to enable galleries, art museums and visual arts venues to support a dedicated programme of creative writing and literacy work with schools. The Awards are funded by the Max Reinhardt Charitable Trust, with additional support from the Ernest Cook Trust.

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