The author shows how using art helped a blind student in an AP class and students in Creative and Practical Writing classes improve writing proficiency and critical thinking.

Art as Text: Seeing beyond the Obvious

The arts convey . . . what it is to be human . . . [and] give coherence, depth, and resonance to other academic subjects.

—William J. Bennett, “Why the Arts Are Essential”

Imagination, the “Mind’s Eye,” and Experiences

Meaningful learning occurs when students become immersed in a multitude of complex and interactive activities that provide opportunities for them to connect with the visual arts. In a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) focused world, artists and writers still have the ability to communicate aspects of the human condition and to persuade and influence opinions in viewers and readers. In English classrooms, especially, incorporating art as text can enhance instruction by creating common experiences for students and showing them how to use their imaginations to see between and beyond the lines. Works of art, including paintings and photography, encourage reflection, analysis, and evaluative thinking skills that build success for students in both academic and workplace environments.

Just for a minute, let’s imagine our world without colors—grass without green, sky without blue, sun without yellow. Imagine a world where we can hear only one major or minor chord, a world where everything tastes like salt, feels like corduroy, or smells like cinnamon. Our senses guide us down new paths, help us choose food, warn us of danger, and help us understand human emotions. Often, the ability to provide descriptive, sensory details can determine whether we think an event is interesting or dull. For instance, friends who attend a concert might enthral us with a vivid account of the audience, the musicians, the songs, the atmosphere; others just have a good time. The power of observation, through experience or imagination, can create images and words that hold our attention and add to our enjoyment of life. If student writers can put themselves in someone else’s place physically and psychologically through a piece of art, they also become aware of other people’s emotions, attitudes, and experiences that can improve their ability to communicate.

In college, I majored in both art and English, and art and art history became an integral part of my writing classes because “Works of art provoke rich, multilayered meaning-making in ways unlike other disciplines” (Tishman and Palmer 12). Art provides common knowledge and experiences regardless of language, culture, and family backgrounds of students. During the 13 years I served as ELA department chair, our school’s demographics changed dramatically. Today, 77 percent of students participate in free/reduced-price lunch programs; many are immigrants and English Language Learners. Through art, they discover common experiences. They can visit mountains, forests, and oceans. They can walk through castles, farms, and foreign lands. They can see dancers, clowns, and acrobats. Historical events and heroes come to life for them in paintings and sculptures. Like most teenagers, however, they receive information...
about the “real” world through visual images and media “sound bytes.” Television, the Internet, and social media spread pictures and words, with the speed of light, that shape their views and opinions. As students learn to write—and THINK—English teachers, using art as text, can also help them learn to analyze and evaluate the meaning, purpose, and effects of images and graphics on audiences’ emotions and ideas.

Students in my AP English Language and Composition class reflected the diversity of our population, including students with differences in abilities. A few years ago, Jimmy sat at a table with the rest of his study group, his white cane resting on the floor. When I introduced the new writing assignment—a “One Picture=1,000 Words” composition based on a scene in a painting—he raised his hand and asked, “OK. But, what will I write?” Other students chimed in: “Yeah, how can Jimmy do that?” “What will Jimmy get to do?” The whole class waited for my answer, probably hoping that if Jimmy didn’t have to write the composition, then they wouldn’t have to either. I said, “Jimmy, I’m not sure, but we’ll figure something out. Maybe you can smell or touch or hear or taste the painting.” And that’s what he did. Jimmy talked with his classmates, used his other senses, and, in “his mind’s eye,” visualized the scene in Van Gogh’s famous painting, Starry Night. Then, on his Braille computer, he wrote an original short story based on that masterpiece.

Theme and “Big Ideas”
The assignment Jimmy questioned followed a unit where students had read—and written—personal narrative essays. They understood narrative structure and had learned “show, don’t tell” strategies—adding details, dialogue, and action verbs—that put “flesh on the bare bones” of storytelling (Dozier 18). However, they needed help in determining the theme, or the “big idea,” of the stories they were reading. Kylene Beers, in her book When Kids Can’t Read, advises teachers, “We must help students read a text with an aesthetic stance” (270). To help them discover theme and main idea, I shared two pieces of art, 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras, painted by Elizabeth Thompson during the Victorian period,

Elizabeth Thompson, The 28th Regiment at Quatre Bras, 1875, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
and Soldiers on the March, painted by Jacques Villon during the Cubist period. I asked students to “peek inside the artist’s heads” and respond to “questions to encourage reflection” (273) similar to the ones I asked about the prose and poetry we studied: “What part of the painting would you consider the most important? Why? If you could talk with the artists, what questions would you ask? What do you think the artists might say, or feel, about war—the subject of both paintings? How are the two pieces alike? Different? How do the titles help you determine the theme? What message did you take away from studying this painting?”

A few of their statements of theme included the following:

• “The sky was covered in a sheet of dreariness, yet they all stood, shoulder to shoulder, maintaining hope during this moment, as real as the ways of war” (Brandon).

• “The artist tries to show the mass chaos and confusion of war: mangled bodies and marbled thought. The concentration of blue hues indicates the sadness and somberness of war; sporadically mixed in are hints of red and brown, a victory married to blood, death and evil” (Daphne).

• “The paintings show that war is eccentric and chaotic and yet a time when men will stick together until the last moment to fight for something they all believe” (Emilie).

As Jimmy’s study group compared the war scenes depicted in the paintings, he asked questions, listened, and wrote notes in Braille. The whole class joined the discussion that guided him through the transparencies on the overhead projector. With their help, Jimmy traced, with his fingers, the geometric shapes used by Villon, the lines and mathematically structured cubes and triangles that stylize the forms of the soldiers as they move forward into battle. He counted the rows and number of soldiers in uniform standing shoulder to shoulder in the Quatre Bras battle scene. At one point, Jimmy learned, through his research, that the English and French fought the battle at Quatre Bras two days before Waterloo. He proudly contributed historical background to the discussion, and his classmates added this new information to their Writer’s Notebooks. As students talked, read, and wrote about the two pieces of art, Jimmy’s senses of hearing and touch helped his whole team explore the chaos and confusion of war even though Jimmy could not see the battle scenes in the two paintings. Guiding questions that began as an “entry ticket” to a piece of art became robust reflection and critical engagement with text that could inspire essays, poetry, and short stories.

Thoughtful Viewing and Critical Thinking

Around our classroom, I hung illustrations from calendars that featured the art of Edward Hopper, Norman Rockwell, and several Impressionistic artists—artwork with three distinctively different styles, subjects, and moods. The assignment would meet the AP Language and Composition objective, according to the College Board Course Description, of analyzing “graphics and visual images both in relation to written texts and as alternative forms of texts themselves” (79). Students would submit their short stories to our school’s award-winning student art/literature anthology, Aquila Stilus, Latin for the “eagle’s pen” (Helm et al.). The “One Picture=1,000 Words” assignment sheet provided the following directions:

As students talked, read, and wrote about the two pieces of art, Jimmy’s senses of hearing and touch helped his whole team explore the chaos and confusion of war even though Jimmy could not see the battle scenes in the two paintings.

For this assignment, you should use your imagination and powers of observation to create a short story that connects to a painting displayed in the classroom. As you write, incorporate details and images depicted in the painting and use them to help create a plot, conflict and characters. Create dialogue that shows what the characters in the painting might think and/or say to each other. If the painting you choose does not include people, invent them!

As you write, try to show what is happening during the few minutes shown by the artist—a turning point or a moment of decision, for instance. Avoid sharing the characters’ entire life stories.

Your purpose is to entertain and affect your readers—to make them smile or cry, feel suspense or compassion. However, your readers should also recognize the piece of art that inspired your story.
Before students began drafting their stories, they studied *Nighthawks*, the famous painting by Edward Hopper, an artist who painted realistic city life and urban scenes. The painting shows four people in an all-night diner, a study of loneliness and isolation. The viewer, placed on the street outside, shares their mood. Then, students discussed the prose poem, “Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks, 1942*,” written by Joyce Carol Oates (190). They identified key elements of language and composition on copies I provided for them; Jimmy worked with his Braille copy. They underlined the concrete details Oates uses in lines 1–6 to set the scene, such as “three men, fully clothed, long sleeves, even hats.” They put parentheses around the vivid sensory imagery such as “sweaty, rancid, like dirty socks” (14–15). Then, they considered the man who sits “silent beside her” (19), the counterman, and the significance of the title, *Nighthawks*. Students discovered the nature of the relationship when Oates writes, “he starts in about his wife, his kids” (38). The woman imagines the man feels guilty about his wife and children. She becomes more and more angry at her situation—and at the man sitting next to her at the counter in the diner.

Students understood the stark reality of the situation Oates has created. Yes, the language is harsh, strong, and sometimes offensive, but “that shows the way Oates feels about the people in the painting,” they said. They considered what would happen if Oates had chosen another point of view: “Who is the third man at the diner late at night?” “Why doesn’t Oates mention him?” “What does the counterman think about these three customers he’s serving?” Their analysis and discussion of the piece of art and the story it tells encouraged more and more questions: “What happens next? What happened before they met at the diner? What is Oates’s theme, or ‘big idea’? Why so many long sentences in line 19–25 and 30–45? Why did Oates use dashes? Why does she end with a question?” Ideas about other versions of the relationship between the four people also became a topic of their conversations. They moved from just “looking” at a scene in a painting to interpreting and evaluating character, setting, motivations, point of view, conflicts, themes, composition, and language. They felt ready to create their own stories. So did Jimmy.

**Innovation and Problem Solving**

As prewriting for their stories, students sketched and re-created, as best they could, the objects, people, lines, and spaces in the paintings they selected. Boxes of crayons (standard supplies in our classroom) helped them fill in colors. I believed that imitating and copying the piece of art each of them had chosen as a “mentor text” might help them see the subject matter from the perspective of the artist. However, I still needed to “figure something out” for Jimmy. I described Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* to him—its broad, swirling strokes and thick applications of pigment and the use of colors—blue, yellow, orange, green, brown, and black. A large cypress tree reaches toward the brightest star, probably the planet Venus, and links the sky with the earth. A church steeple identifies the most visible building in the town, dark except for a few lights in windows. Together, we read that, after Van Gogh committed himself to an asylum at St. Remy, France, he painted a “sky above a quiet town pulsating with celestial rhythms and blazing with exploding stars” from his imagination rather than nature (Stokstad 1034). Jimmy also discovered that Van Gogh contributed to Expressionism, a style of modern art in which the artist’s emotions override fidelity to the actual appearance of the subject (1034). “A perfect match—somewhere in one
of those buildings on that black night in that dark town is a character who wants to see the stars. Let’s do it,” Jimmy said to his teammates and me.

I made a trip to the local hobby store where I bought a pre-stretched canvas, heavily textured fabric paint, and several jars of finger paints. Once, I had attended a seminar on natural healing and purchased a variety of aromatic oils, each with a different smell—lemon, orange, peppermint, coffee, lavender, chocolate. I put several drops of each oil into the paints. Jimmy would use his fingers and his study group could guide him to fill in the objects and swirls I outlined with the fabric paint. As his friends guided him in choosing colors through smells (lemon and orange stars, lavender blue skies, coffee cypress tree, dashes of dark chocolate, and touches of peppermint grass) Jimmy began to create his version of Starry Night. I’m not sure who felt the excitement of this experiment in using the senses more—Jimmy, his classmates, or me—but we all discovered the value of “the mind’s eye,” a little teamwork, and some problem solving! As he painted, he “saw” a man in a dark house who, at night, walks past the church, through the empty streets and up a hill where he leans against the tree hoping to see the stars. Jimmy put himself in someone else’s place, physically, emotionally, and psychologically—a gift that talented writers and artists share.

Besides AP English, I also taught Practical Writing, a class required for students who had not passed the state writing tests. In that class, I asked students to write about Agnes Tait’s Skating in Central Park (1934), a winter scene set against the New York skyline. I challenged them to write descriptive paragraphs without using the words snow, ice, or cold. This strategy helped them notice details, including the bright colors of hats, coats, and gloves that stood out against the black, white, and gray background. Then, they added skating terms like “pairs and singles,” “crossovers and spins,” “lifts and jumps.” When they entered the scene in their imaginations, they created conversations between the skaters and the onlookers on the bridge: “Hey, your nose is getting red. Do you want a scarf?” “I think my toes are frostbitten,” and “The wind makes my eyes water.” One reluctant student writer imagined he was watching from a window in one of the skyscrapers and wrote, “Damn, I’m glad I’m inside this warm office. It won’t be fun walking to the subway tonight.” They learned that sensory details, quotations, strong nouns, and vivid verbs added to a personal narrative, expository essay, or persuasive argument could make experiences, information, and opinions more interesting, meaningful, and convincing. They felt confident, and when they took the state-mandated “re-test” that spring, they all scored at high levels. The same strategies (questioning, focusing on sensory details, looking beyond the obvious in a piece of art) helped all students—regardless of abilities, backgrounds, language, or experiences.

Students in my AP and Practical Writing classes also learned much about the creative process by reading about the artists. For example, Vincent Van Gogh, a gifted writer with a passion for both writing and art, wrote hundreds of letters to his friends and to his brother, Theo. Through his letters, students learned that he found inspiration in Japanese prints and the works of other Dutch artists, including Rembrandt. He viewed art as craft and often discussed painting techniques, styles, and purpose with contemporaries such as Monet, Gauguin, and Signac. He believed in the middle-class value of working hard, and he spent hours planning his paintings because “drawing is the root of everything, and the time spent on that is actually profit” (Van Gogh). He worked constantly to improve his skills and continually experimented with colors, spaces, and lines. Despite despair, seizures, and other problems, he remained confident in the healing power of art—a valuable lesson for all of us.

James Blaise, or “Jimmy” to his friends, the student who “saw beyond the obvious,” graduated from the University of Texas in 2014; he and his dog, Emmett, currently attend Oklahoma City University School of Law. We have stayed in touch through the years, and when I contacted him to ask permission to share his name, experience in my class, and the photographs, he replied:

It would be an honor for you to use the story of my painting in the article, and you most certainly have my permission to use the photographs.

My sister, I believe, has my painting. Unfortunately, I do not know where the original copy of that story is. I’ve moved several times since graduating from high school, and so most of my belongings are tucked away in a storage unit.
I vividly remember filling the outline of that canvas since it was the first time that I had been able to feel the outline of such a masterpiece. It allowed me to visualize in my own way what the painting represents, and it enabled me to use the images to write the story.

Thank you for everything that you taught me. You were one of the few teachers who forced me to improve my writing skills, and you made sure that my success was predicated on my ability to write not on my disability. Please let me know if I can help in any other way, and I sincerely hope that the article is successful in delivering your message.

The Message

We cannot truly say we believe “all children can learn” until we provide opportunities for “all children to learn.” As English teachers, we have an obligation to help students grow intellectually by introducing them to the “Artful Thinking Palette” (Tishman and Palmer 16) and historical, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects of the humanities. When Jimmy “made art” in an AP class, he helped his classmates understand the importance of imagination—to see beyond the obvious and read between the lines. In my Practical Writing class, art helped give “voice” to students who often had trouble finding theirs when writing, and artwork provided color, rhythm, beauty, and experiences in their worlds that often seemed dark and bleak.

Art, as an extension of literature, can motivate critical thinking, encourage problem solving, and improve writing proficiency. By appealing to our senses, art has the ability to present ideas, tell stories, and establish moods. Art does not just deliver pleasure; it encourages the freedom to think, to create, to question society and relationships. Art and the other humanities—poetry, music, history, and drama—can open students’ eyes, hearts, minds, and lives so they experience real-world success and possibilities beyond the number of correct answers on standardized tests. Most importantly, art makes us feel—gets under our skins, punctures our routines, rips away scar tissue, and instructs us on our obligations of being human.

Works Cited


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

In this lesson plan, after looking at an image that tells a story, students brainstorm about the possible events and characters the image illustrates. Students then write from the point of view of one of the characters in the image, sharing the character’s thoughts and feelings, describing the events that led up to the picture, or imagining the events that followed. http://bit.ly/1RNAsWf