

## Interpretation

**Overview:** Students will look for the main idea, and provide details from the work to support their interpretation.

**Goals:** This lesson will

Support concepts & skills: observation, noticing details, analysis, interpretation.

Fulfill Learning Standards: ELA 1, 2, 3, 8, 11, 12, 14, 19, 21; Visual Art 2, 5.

Practice: interpreting the main idea in a work of art, and in literature.

Familiarize students with: looking for details, selecting what's important, reading for understanding.



*My Studio*  
Eleanor Norcross

**Objectives for Students:** Students will

Be able to: make interpretations about works of art and literature; analyze details, patterns, relationships, and make inferences.

Understand: that a work of literature or visual art can have one or more meanings depending upon the interpretation.

**Key Questions** (to be answered by students):

1. What is the meaning or message of this work of art?
2. How is the meaning or message communicated in Visual Art and in literature?
3. Why is it that a work of art can have a different meaning for different people?

**Materials Needed:** Interpretation Worksheet

**Museum Objects:** Many works of art would be appropriate for this lesson, but the following are especially recommended:

- Object shown is *My Studio* by Eleanor Norcross, oil on canvas, 1891, Norcross Collection (1942.1).
- *Mrs. Sarah Clayton* by Joseph Wright, oil on canvas, 1769 (?) (1953.1)
- *Blue Lake* by Charles Ephraim Burchfield, watercolor on paper, 1938 (1974.2)
- *Sunlit Moraine* by Paul Dougherty, oil on panel, c. 1913 (1980.59)
- *The Pinafore, Isles of Shoals, Moonlight* by Frederick Childe Hassam, oil on canvas, 1890 (1994.4)

**Pre-Museum Visit** – Review the concept of “interpretation.” Ask the students about times that they have had an interpretation of an event that was different from someone else’s. Discuss how it is that something can have more than one interpretation. “What are some things that have only one right answer? Are there some things that have more than one right answer? What can you think of?”

**At the Museum** – Work in pairs or small groups. Assign one work of art to each pair or group. Ask the students to use the “Interpretation Worksheet” to examine their painting, and write notes for themselves in answer to the questions. Tell them they will use their notes to write their own

interpretation of the painting. Ask them to make sure to make notes about the details in the painting that influences their interpretation.

Although they will work in pairs or groups to examine and analyze the painting, they will be responsible to write their own personal interpretation. They are using each other in the group to notice more, and to discuss their ideas, but they do not have to agree with each other.

**Post-Museum Visit** – Discussion: “What kinds of details in the paintings did you use to make your interpretations? What did the group (your partner) help with, or add to your thinking? Did other people notice things that you missed? Did other people’s interpretations influence your own?”

Give the students time to write a draft of their opinion, backing it up with details in the work. If they need to refresh their memory, the images are on the CD-ROM. They should first share their drafts with their partner or group, to check whether their thinking is clearly presented. They may want to write a second draft after this. When they have a draft that they think is clear and in which their interpretation is convincingly presented, they should present them to each other in the class.

Reflection: “How different were the interpretations of the same painting? What did you notice about the differences? Which paintings do you think were the most difficult to interpret? Why? Do you think any interpretation could be right? What would made an interpretation seem implausible to you?”

Repeat this process with a story, myth, poem, play, or chapter in a book you are reading. If you like, you can leave out the writing part of the activity, and have them present their interpretation and defense orally. Use the same reflection questions. Poetry and dramatic literature work especially well for interpretation. If you write down the things they cite as evidence you will have a nice list of the ways that an author communicates a message, which will be useful to remind them of when they are working on their own compositions.

**Supportive Material:** Interpretation Overview, Interpretation Worksheet

**Documentation and Assessment Options:** Keep track of the number and kinds of things they list as evidence in the Visual Art activity, and compare with the number and kinds they think of for the literature activity.

**Other Works of Art in the Museum** that can connect to this lesson:

Stella’s *Full Moon, Barbados*, Rauschenberg’s *Watermark*, and works by O’Keefe, Bellows, Vuillard, Frankenthaler, Kollwitz, Leavitt, and Copley.

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## INTERPRETATION OVERVIEW

Works of art are complex, rich objects. They are open to a number of different interpretations. No one interpretation can be said to be “correct,” since the real meaning of a work of art is found in the relationship between the art and the viewer. Each person brings their unique history and experience to the viewing, and this shapes their response to the work. Since there is no “right answer,” any opinion the student forms is valid, as long as they can back it up with evidence in the work. This makes works of art perfect for practicing language arts skills.

**This activity:** Forming an opinion about the meaning of something, and finding evidence for your opinion. Thinking about what “story” the work is telling you. Deciding what you think the main idea is, and listing supporting details.

### **Skills:**

- ✓ Close observation, and noticing details
- ✓ Seeing relationships, and how details work together
- ✓ Making guesses about what is important
- ✓ Interpreting mood, meaning and message or story from clues in the work
- ✓ Finding evidence for your interpretation

### **Process:**

- What do you notice in this painting?
- What does it say to you?
- What mood is communicated to you by the painting?
- What questions do you have about what you see?
- What is this painting about? What are your clues?
- Is this painting telling a story? Or is it communicating an idea?
- What would you say is the main idea in this painting? Why would you choose that?
- Are there other ideas the painting is communicating? What are they and what is your evidence?

## Interpretation Worksheet

What do you notice in this painting?

What does it say to you?

What mood is communicated to you by the painting?

What questions do you have about what you see?

What is this painting about? What are your clues?

Is this painting telling a story? What is the story? Why do you think that?

Or is it communicating an idea? What idea? Why do you think that?

What would you say is the main idea in this painting? What do you think is the most important thing the painting is communicating? Why would you choose that?

Are there other ideas the painting is communicating? What are they and what is your evidence?