

## Pre-Writing Activities

**Overview:** Students will practice a range of different pre-writing activities focused on works of art.

**Goals:** This lesson will

Support concepts & skills: improve writing as a way to develop, clarify, and communicate ideas.

Fulfill Learning Standards: ELA 4, 6, 15, 19, 21, 25.

Practice: becoming reflective about their own writing, developing a distinctive writing voice

Familiarize students with: looking carefully at works of art, finding writing tactics that work.



*Untitled*  
Helen Frankenthaler

**Objectives for Students:** Students will

Be able to: write more interestingly, more descriptively, more precisely, and with more of their own voice.

Understand: how to adequately prepare for a writing assignment.

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

1. What are the things I need to think about or gather before I begin to write?
2. What makes a piece of writing clear, interesting and engaging for the reader?
3. What kinds of words can I use that will make my writing more precise, and more descriptive?

**Materials Needed:** Easel with large paper and markers; Webbing sheets.

**Museum Objects:** Any work of art may be used for this lesson, but the following are especially recommended:

- *Fire and Flood/Sacred Sites* by Harvey Sadow, ceramic, 1989 (2001.22)
- Object shown is: *Untitled* by Helen Frankenthaler, acrylic on paper, 1984, Gift of Cia Devan (2001.44)
- *Portrait of Ti, Royal Architect, from his tomb, Saqqara, 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty* by Joseph Lindon Smith (American, 1863-1950), Canvas, Legacy dimension: H. 0.949 (37 3/8 in.) W. 0.647 (25 1/2 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. William Amory, 27.554

**Pre-Museum Visit** – Ask students to think about the writing that they do for their classes.

Brainstorm: “What makes a good piece of writing, a poor piece of writing, an excellent piece of writing?” Write their ideas in the form of a preliminary rubric. They can fill this rubric in over time, as they focus on getting better at writing.

**At the Museum** – Here are three pre-writing activities focused on works of art.

1. Descriptive writing. Choose a work of art to focus on. Have an easel and markers for you to keep track of their thoughts. Write on the chart paper: “There was a painting (or sculpture, or what ever it is) in the Museum.” Ask the students “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being least interesting, and 10 most interesting, how interesting is this sentence?” Ask students to look at the work of art think of what they could do to this sentence to make it more interesting. Add each of their suggestions to the base sentence, and for each, ask them to identify what tactic they used to make the sentence more interesting (adjective, adverb, descriptive clause, details, etc.).

Choose other, very different works of art, and repeat the process, adding to the tactics list. Take this list of tactics back to the classroom and post it. As students read different texts or stories, ask them to be on the lookout for tactics that they could add to their list. When they are working their own writing, remind them to look at the tactics list to see if there might be something they could do to make their writing more interesting, more descriptive, or more precise.

2. Webbing. Divide the class into small groups, and assign a work of art to each group. Give them a sheet with an oval in the center, and ask them to write the name of their work of art in the oval. Tell them they will be asked to write a paragraph or two about this work of art when they return to the classroom, so they should get on paper as much information as they can about the work while they are in the Museum. As they look carefully at the work of art, they can fill in the web.

Back in the classroom ask them to write a short description of their work of art. They could write it in the form of a poem, an advertisement, a straightforward description, or a song.

Reflection: “What differences did you notice about how a poem, commercial, song, etc. are written? What kinds of information, sentences, and vocabulary did people choose for each different kind of writing? Why?”

3. T-Chart. Pick two works of art for students to compare. They can work individually, choosing their own two works, or they can work in pairs or small groups. Ask them NOT to write the name of the work on their paper. Choose two works of art by the same artist, or two works in the same media (oil painting, for example), or two works from the same culture. After the students have filled in their charts, bring them together and exchange papers to see if they can locate the two works described.

Reflection: “How easy was it to locate the works of art? What made it easier? What kinds of information were you able to identify for your works of art? What other kinds of information did you wish you had? How might you go about finding that information?” Make resources (books or a Museum staff person) available to them if they want to get more information.

Ask students to write a comparison between the two works of art, including their own personal opinion of each.

4. You could alter these activities in order to focus on improving students’ ability to use adjectives (any work of art); adverbs (try the paintings of Egyptian reliefs, the Greek *Fragmentary jar*, *Herakles slaying the Hydra*, E. L. Henry’s *The Wedding*); symbols and metaphors (African objects, Egyptian objects, Pre-Columbian objects); or words describing color, texture and line words (any work of art) in their writing.

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