

THE WHOLE PICTURE

Activity

Ekphrasis is a Greek word for a description of art. (You could look this up in the dictionary. It's a good word for showing off!) This writing exercise uses visual images as a springboard for writing, and involves several stages.

Preparation

Tracking down suitable images is a part of the exercise. Here are some possible routes:

- Bring in your own photograph, illustration, painting, etc.
- Go to the school library and browse through illustrations in books
- The teacher provides a series of postcards from which to choose
- Visit a museum, or follow up this exercise with such an outing

Tips

- Choose an image which rings bells for you, or provokes in you a strong emotional response, perhaps explaining why you chose as you did

Part 1 – Notes on the Real World

Describe in detail the most important thing you notice first, and then the least important thing, and then anything else you notice, like what's happening

Tips

- Description of elements in picture might include shape, size, colour, people, etc.
- To say something is "red" is not precise. What kind of red? Similes might be encouraged here. As red as a strawberry/a fire engine/a blushing face?
- Close and careful observation is an important skill for the writer to cultivate. To note and describe something that many others will miss, is part of what makes writing original, or unique. Such accuracy helps the reader to identify with what the writer is saying.

Part 2 – Notes on an Imaginary World

Step inside the picture, as if it's a doorway.

- What do you hear/smell/see?
- What's happening around the corner, just outside of the picture?
- If the picture unfroze, moved forward in time, what would happen next? What happened before?
- Write the first line of the poem...that doesn't yet exist! Write the last line and a line from the middle of the poem...that doesn't yet exist. Because it doesn't yet exist, there's no pressure, no reason not to be inventive, wild. Grab the reader's attention.

Tips

- Instead of settling on the first thing which comes to mind, think of alternative first, last and middle lines
- Invent your own ideas or prompts, like those given above

Part 3 – The Poem...at last!

First, choose your narrator – the point of view. For example, the poem could be in the voice of: the artist/photographer; the model; someone in the picture; someone not in the picture but present; an inanimate object, etc.

Tips

- Don't feel obliged to use all – or any – of your notes. You can alter or expand them, depending on the narrator and poem's development
- Often, we mistakenly think we've said something, because we see it so clearly in our head. The trick is to find words which clearly and effectively convey your image or idea. No one can read your mind!
- Choose your words precisely. Again, don't just settle for the first word at hand. Access your vast underground store of language.
- Your poem should be self-sufficient and not depend on the reader seeing the image, although seeing it may broaden the understanding or pleasure. Words are for the writer as paint is for the artist - the tools of the trade.

Follow-Ups

- Read aloud your own and each other's poems. What sounds "right" or "wrong", and why?
- Invent new variations on the above. For example, what if the picture were of an imaginary kingdom, with you its ruler? The poem might consist of this kingdom's rules e.g. Men can only wear hats while asleep, the stars go out when war is imminent, shoes are worn on alternate days, etc. Make up whatever you like. It's your poem and you're the boss
- Swap pictures. Write another poem, perhaps in response to the first poem

Further Reading

Laura Marsh – Photograph On Palatine Hill

Dan Hitchens – Stumbling on More Photographs

(in Radio Seventeen)

W.H. Auden – Musee des Beaux Arts

William Carlos Williams – The Dance

Vicki Feaver – Oi Yoi Yoi

Fleur Adcock – On Leaving the Tate

Moniza Alvi – I'd Like to be a Dot in a Miro Painting

Sharon Olds – I Go Back to May 1937

Eva Salzman