

## Stepping inside a Photograph

What can a portrait photograph reveal about its subject? What thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences are suggested by the subject's gaze, facial expression, posture, or clothing? Unlike a painted portrait, a photograph happens in an instant. Photographs have the power to capture us in authentic moments that evoke joy, empathy, surprise, or fear. At their best, they inspire the viewer to stop and think about the moment of human life represented in the picture. In this lesson, students are invited to "step inside" a photographic portrait. They will use visual evidence to imagine the perspectives of both the subject and the photographer and to tell their stories.

### Grade Level

Adaptable for all grades

### Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3](#)

### National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning

### Suggested Art Images

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Any of the suggested images are appropriate for this lesson.

- [7674, Chalmita, State of Mexico](#), 1984, by Graciela Iturbide
- [Cynthia, Philadelphia](#), 2004 (image); 2011 (print), by Zoe Strauss
- [Primer día del verano \(First Day of Summer\), Veracruz](#), 1982, by Graciela Iturbide
- [South Philly \(Mattress Flip Front\)](#), 2001 (negative); 2003 (print), by Zoe Strauss
- [Untitled \(Harlem Ambulance\)](#), c. 1936–41, by Lucy Ashjian
- [Untitled \(Philadelphia\)](#), 1954 (negative); c. 1954 (print), by Dave Heath
- [Walking from CVS, West Philly](#), 2010, by Hannah Price

### Supplementary Images

- [Alfred Stieglitz, Hands, Variant IV](#), 1935, by Dorothy Norman
- [Cable Car, San Francisco](#), 1956 (negative); c. 1960 (print), by Dorothea Lange
- [Hand of Gerald Warburg, Cellist](#), c. 1930, by Imogen Cunningham



*Cable Car, San Francisco*, 1956 (negative); c. 1960 (print)  
Dorothea Lange (American)  
Gelatin silver print  
Image: 15 1/2 x 15 5/16 inches (39.4 x 38.9 cm)  
Sheet: 19 15/16 x 15 7/8 inches (50.6 x 40.3 cm)  
Purchased with funds contributed by the Friends of the Alfred Stieglitz Center, 2010  
2010-225-1  
© The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland. Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

### Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Use visual evidence to infer the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a person in a photograph
2. Collaborate with a partner to imagine a dialogue between the photographer and the subject
3. Write a personal narrative from the perspective of a person in a photograph

### Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Character Development Worksheets and Dialogue Templates (provided at the end of this lesson)
- Tools for writing

### Lesson Process

1. Choose a photograph to display from the list of suggested images.
2. Give students a few minutes to look at the picture, and then ask them to share their initial observations. Guide them by asking what they notice about the setting and the person or people in the picture. Where and when do you think this photograph was taken? What details help you understand the setting? What do you think you know about the person, or people, in the photograph? What details are you using to make these inferences?
3. Tell students that they are going to use visual evidence to “step inside” a photograph and take the perspective of the person, or one of the people, in it. Refer to the [Artful Thinking Palette](#) for a description of this thinking routine.
4. Guide students through the process by asking which details allow them to imagine the subject’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences. What might this person feel or perceive? What might this person believe or know about? What might this person care about? What makes you say that?
5. Next, ask students to imagine themselves as the photographer who took this picture. What do you imagine the photographer perceived or felt about the subject? What made the photographer want to take the picture? Do you think the photographer cared about the subject? Ask students to provide visual evidence for their responses.
6. For the next activity, you may project one image for the whole class or allow students a choice of images. Hand out the Character Development Worksheet, and have students sit with a partner. Students will use the worksheet to organize their observations and inferences about a new photograph. One student in each pair will take the perspective of the subject in the photograph and one will take the perspective of the photographer. As students begin their work, remind them that each inference about an individual’s feelings, perceptions, beliefs, and experiences should be supported by an observation.
7. When students have completed their worksheets, give partners a few minutes to share.
8. Hand out a copy of the Dialogue Template to each pair. Tell students that they will work together to write a dialogue between the photographer and the subject based on their observations and inferences. The worksheet will scaffold this process for students by prompting them to consider what the photographer might have noticed about the subject, questions the photographer might ask the

subject, and how the subject might respond. Students will develop the voices in their dialogue using their observations and inferences.

9. When partners have completed their dialogues, provide an opportunity to perform them for the class. Project the image on which the dialogue is based, and ask students to point out details in the photographs that helped them to develop the questions, responses, and voices of the photographer and the subject. Ask them to reflect on any differences in perspective as well. Did your observations or inferences differ from those of your partner? Was there anything that surprised you about your partner's perspective?

### **Assessment**

1. Assign individual students to write a personal narrative telling the story of a person in a photograph. Using visual evidence to support the details of the narrative, they will write from a first-person point of view, describing what the narrator thinks, feels, believes, and has experienced. Any images provided for this lesson would be appropriate for the writing activity.

### **Differentiation**

1. To adapt this lesson for younger students, simplify the written response. Scaffold students' interpretation of a photograph by providing writing prompts such as: My name is \_\_\_\_; I am \_\_\_\_ years old; When you took my picture, I felt \_\_\_\_; and Right now, I am thinking about \_\_\_\_\_. You could also ask students to draw a picture showing the photographer and write a caption telling why he or she was inspired to photograph the subject.
2. The photographs listed under Supplementary Images depict only the legs and feet or hands of the subject. Because they do not show a face, they are a bit more mysterious and would be an excellent challenge for more advanced students.

## Character Development Worksheet

For use with "Stepping inside a Photograph" lesson plan

### OBSERVATIONS ABOUT A PHOTOGRAPH

Setting of the photograph

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Person in the Photograph

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### INFERENCES ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER OR THE SUBJECT

What does this person  
perceive or feel?

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What does this person know  
or believe?

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What does this person care  
about?

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## Dialogue Template

For use with "Stepping inside a Photograph" lesson plan

**Photographer:** "I noticed . . ." (Think about what the photographer saw that inspired them to take this picture.)

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**Subject response:**

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**Photographer:** "I wonder . . ." (What do you imagine the photographer would like to ask the subject?)

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**Subject response:**

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**Photographer response:**

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**Subject:** "I'm, feeling . . ., because . . ." (How do you think the person in the picture was feeling in the moment that it was taken, and why?)

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**Photographer response:**

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