

Comparing Past and Present

Looking at works of art and cultural artifacts from the past can help students develop their chronological reasoning. Even the youngest learners can begin to understand change and continuity over time by comparing their personal experiences to images and objects representing the past. In this lesson, students observe, ask questions, and make personal connections to describe how life today compares to life in previous eras. They also practice reasoning to explain why cultural practices might change over time, and imagine how life might look in the future.

Grade Level

Grades PK–4

Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- Dimension 2: History – Change, Continuity, and Context

Suggested Art Images

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Museum’s website:

- [A May Morning in the Park \(The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand\)](#), 1879–80, by Thomas Eakins
- [Between Rounds](#), 1898–99, by Thomas Eakins
- [Boy’s Bathing Suit](#), 1901, United States
- [Lawn Tennis](#), 1887, by Eadweard Muybridge
- [“Lettera 33” Typewriter](#), designed 1965, by Ettore Sottsass
- [The Beach, Newport \(In the Sand\)](#), 1919, by George Bellows
- [The Newport Dune \(?\)](#), c. 1913–915, by Henri Louis Meurisse
- [“Trimline” Telephone](#), designed 1965, by Henry Dreyfuss Associates, in association with Bell Telephone Laboratories



The Beach, Newport (In the Sand), 1919
George Bellows (American)
Oil on panel
26 × 32 inches (66 × 81.3 cm)
Gift of C. K. Williams, II, 2009
2009-145-1

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Look closely and carefully to describe what they see.
- Analyze and understand artwork by connecting to personal experiences.
- Use visual evidence to compare life in the past to life today.

Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Whiteboard or chart paper for recording
- **Compare and Contrast worksheets** (optional)
- Print-outs of *A May Morning in the Park (The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand)*, *The Newport Dune (?)*, *Between Rounds*, and *Lawn Tennis*
- Drawing and writing materials

Lesson Process

1. Before beginning this lesson, prepare a large Compare and Contrast chart on your whiteboard or chart paper. Make copies of the worksheet for your students if they are independent writers. You may use either the *"Trimline" Telephone* or the *"Lettera 33" Typewriter* for the lesson introduction. Select whichever object you think will be most accessible and engaging for your students.
2. Tell students that today's lesson is about life today and life in the past. Make sure students understand what you mean by "the past." Project an image of the *"Trimline" Telephone* or the *"Lettera 33" Typewriter*, and ask what it is. Even if students can identify the object, spend some time observing and describing. Ask questions to guide their looking. What do they see? What does each part look like? What is it made of? How do they think each part of the object is used? How can they tell? Invite students to ask questions about anything that makes them curious.
3. Explain that the telephone or typewriter was made in 1965. You might draw a timeline on chart paper or your board to show how far 1965 is in the past. Ask students to describe what they use today that is like this object. How is a cell phone similar to this phone? How is a computer similar to a typewriter? How is it different? Encourage students to think not only about the superficial differences, but also about change and continuity in how we communicate and express ourselves.
4. Show students the large Compare and Contrast chart. Explain that you will look together at more images from the past and describe what you see. You will use the chart to show how life in the past was similar to life today in some ways and different in others.
5. Project the image of the *Boy's Bathing Suit*, but do not tell students what it is. Ask them to share their observations, questions, and connections. What do they see? What do they wonder about what they see? What does it remind them of, or make them think of?
6. After students have shared their observations, questions, and connections, ask them if they can guess who might have worn this article of clothing and where it may have been worn.
7. Show students *The Beach, Newport (In the Sand)*. Tell them that this image was painted about one hundred years ago. Ask them to describe the setting and characters in the painting. Where is this painting set? What are the characters doing, and how are they dressed?

8. If students have not guessed already, tell them what the *Boy's Bathing Suit* is. Ask if they can find anyone in *The Beach, Newport (In the Sand)* wearing something similar. How did people one hundred years ago dress differently to go swimming? What does this painting show from the past that reminds you of things we do today?
9. Ask students to begin describing differences and similarities they notice between the past and the present. If your students have not had the experience of going to the beach, that's okay. They might think about going to the swimming pool or playing outside in a sprinkler. Record their responses in the Compare and Contrast chart.
10. If your students are able to work independently in pairs or small groups, divide them up now. Give each group the images of sports or modes of transportation from the past, and pass out **Compare and Contrast worksheets**. Have students work together to analyze the images and identify similarities and differences between life in the past and today. Circulate and assist as needed.
11. Bring everyone back together for a reflection. Ask students to share what new information they learned about life in the past. What did they notice that is similar to life today? What did they notice that is different? Why might our modes of transportation, styles of clothing, and ways of communicating change over time? Encourage students to think about how change and progress in something like technology can affect how we travel, dress, and communicate.

Extension Activities and Assessment

1. For homework, assign students to interview an older member of their family or community about changes they experienced over the course of their lives. Ask students to find out what was different when the older person was their age. How do they explain changes over time? What parts of life have stayed the same, and why? Students can bring in a photograph or other artifact to illustrate the similarities or differences between the past and today.
2. Ask students to imagine changes that might take place over the course of their lives. How will they travel fifty years in the future? How will they communicate with each other? What will their clothing for work or play look like? Students can share their ideas through drawing, writing, or both.

Differentiation

- Bring in examples of old landline, cordless, and cell phones for younger students to use in hands-on exploration and dramatic play. Encourage them to find the differences and similarities among the phones as they play.
- Simplify the language of comparing for younger students: replace "Compare" and "Contrast" with "Same" and "Different."
- Use the images of modes of transportation from the past as a center activity. Pair the images with modern toy cars and airplanes, and ask students to describe similarities and differences.
- Older students might use images like *The Beach, Newport (In the Sand)*, *Between Rounds*, and *Lawn Tennis* to discuss the intersection between changes in social norms and changes in fashion. Ask them to consider why a female tennis player might have dressed so differently in the past, or why there are no women pictured in *Between Rounds*. Incorporate the question of social norms into their homework assignment as well.

Compare and Contrast

Take a few minutes to look closely at a work of art from a different time.

- What do you see that is similar to today?
- What do you see that is different?

 The Past

 Today

