

Abstract Art and Poetic Response

Whether in language or in visual art, engaging with abstract forms of expression can be intimidating. This lesson connects abstract art and poetry through a low-risk creative process that makes both forms of expression more accessible to all learners.

Grade Level

Adaptable for all grades

Common Core Academic State Standards

1. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)
2. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3](#)
3. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Presenting: interpreting and sharing artistic work
- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning

Suggested Art Images

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

- [Circles in a Circle](#), 1923, by Vasily Kandinsky
- [Ex. 6, No Traveller's Borne \(Translation No. 13\)](#), 1965, by Jess (Jess Collins)
- [Night Sea](#), 1977, by Edna Andrade
- [Ocean Park No. 79](#), 1975, by Richard Diebenkorn
- [Point on Point](#), 1931–34, by Sophie Taeuber-Arp
- [Radius](#), 1992–93, by Helen Frankenthaler
- [Rift](#), December 2003, by Odili Donald Odita
- [Settlement Magenta](#), 1980, by Warren Rohrer
- [Untitled](#), 1999, by Charles Burwell
- [Untitled](#), 1955, by Mark Rothko



Ocean Park No. 79, 1975
Richard Diebenkorn (American)
Oil and charcoal on canvas
7 feet 9 inches × 6 feet 9 inches (236.2 × 205.7 cm) Framed:
7 feet 9 1/2 inches × 6 feet 9 3/4 inches × 2 3/4 inches (237.5 × 207.6 × 7 cm)
Purchased with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and with funds contributed by private donors, 1977-1978-1
© The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Use a wide variety of language in response to abstract artwork.
- Make effective word choices to communicate meaning and mood in poetry.
- Connect language and composition choices to observations about artwork.

Materials Needed

- Whiteboard or chart paper
- Screen for projecting [Suggested Art Images](#) or print-outs of selected artworks
- Slips of paper for generating words and phrases (about ten per student)
- Drawing and writing materials

Lesson Process

1. Begin by asking students to share what they know about poetry. What is a poem? What makes poetry different from other kinds of writing? Why might someone choose to write a poem rather than a story? What rules are there, if any, for writing poetry? Record student responses on chart paper or the whiteboard.
2. Tell students that in this lesson, they will be connecting poetry and art. They will be looking at abstract art and using language creatively to respond to what they see. Show students one of the [Suggested Art Images](#). Any of the images is appropriate for an introduction. Choose one that you think will engage your students, even if it is challenging at first.
3. Give students a minute to look quietly at the selected image. Ask them to describe what they see. If students seem stuck, suggest describing a color or a shape.
4. When students have shared many observations, help them define the term “abstract.” Guide them to talk about what they *do not* see in the image, or how it differs from other art they have seen. Abstract artists use shapes, colors, forms, and textures to express their ideas and emotions. They *do not* represent people, objects, or places realistically. What are some similarities between abstract art and poetry?
5. Ask students for examples of other ways they might respond to the artwork. For instance, what does the artwork look like or remind them of? How might they connect it to an action, sound, or state of being? Can they express an opinion or feeling about the artwork?
6. Allow time for students to take a second, closer look. Pass out three slips of paper to each student. Ask them to write down one word or a short phrase responding to any aspect of the artwork on each slip. Phrases should be no more than three words long. Encourage students to use many kinds of words, including conjunctions and interjections. Provide or ask for examples, if necessary.
7. Have students share with a partner. What kinds of words did they use in response to the artwork? Why?
8. Gather all the slips of paper into a pile. Ask a volunteer to pick three slips out at random and arrange the words or phrases to create a poem. Read the poem aloud. How do the words sound together? What meaning or mood do they express? How does the poem connect to the artwork? Try rearranging the words, adding a fourth slip at random, or trading for a different slip from the pile. What effect do these changes in language or composition have?
9. After this reflection, give an additional five to seven slips of paper to each student. Look at the artwork again. What new words or phrases come to mind? How might they contribute to the effective composition of a poem? Add all new slips to the class pile.

10. As students finish writing, they can begin looking at the words and phrases contributed by others and choose ones they like. Ask students to consider how they will compose a poem from these words. Encourage them to edit as they go, adding or swapping words and phrases to express their thoughts and feelings.
11. Once students have chosen the words and phrases for their poems, they can return to their seats. Alternatively, you might ask students to find an empty space on the floor where they can lay out the slips of paper. How do they want their poems to be read? Can they find creative ways to arrange the slips?
12. Finally, share poems by doing a “gallery walk” around the room, or asking students to read their work aloud. What do they notice? Are any words or phrases repeated? What kinds of emotions or ideas are expressed? How does the poetry reflect the artwork by which it was inspired?

Assessment

- Give each student five to ten new slips of paper, and repeat the word pile exercise with a new artwork. When students are composing their own poems, ask them to make at least one specific connection to the artwork. Ideas for connecting poetry to artwork might include:
 - Using color words
 - Expressing a mood or emotion
 - Describing an action
 - Arranging the poem in a way that reflects the composition of the artwork

Extension Activities

- Compare two artworks. Repeat the word pile exercise with two artworks that are very different in style or mood. Use different colored slips of paper or different writing utensils to distinguish between the words responding to each artwork. When students create their poems, ask them to reflect on the differences they notice. Were they more attracted to words or phrases about one artwork or the other? How does each artwork affect the mood or meaning of students’ poetry?
- Turn the activity around. Begin with a poem. As you read, ask students to visualize. If you could turn this poem into an artwork, what colors would you use? What kinds of shapes or forms would you use? Would you use straight lines and angles, or rounded and curvy lines? Would the composition be orderly or chaotic? What would the mood of the artwork be? Give students time to create an abstract image in response to the poem.
- Match a poem with a painting. Give students a selection of abstract artworks and an equal selection of poems. This advanced activity will work best if students are already familiar with the poetry selections. Ask students to pair a painting with a poem and justify their pairing. What is similar about the painting and the poem? Ask students to consider elements like form, rhythm, repetition, theme, and imagery.

Differentiation

- Adapt this lesson into a shared writing activity for early readers and writers. Have students share their responses verbally and add them to a class word bank with teacher guidance. This is a great opportunity to practice writing and reading color words, emotion words, and basic descriptive vocabulary. Create your word pile from the word bank, and ask volunteers to select words and phrases to create a class poem. Repeat the activity with a very different artwork, and ask students to compare the poems they create.
- Make this lesson accessible for English language learners by pairing them with more fluent English-language readers and writers. Encourage the use of words and phrases in the language in which students feel most comfortable expressing themselves. Partners can help each other read and understand unfamiliar words in the word pile.

