

## What's "Write" About Art?

Art Criticism is a field of study within the arts that is based in various philosophy of how we can gain insight and meaning from art works and arts experiences. The process leads the students through a Bloom's taxonomy method from lower level to high level of critical thinking. Students are eager to decipher and express the meaning of artworks.



**artist credit:** Melba Cooper

**Big Idea:** Artworks can be "read" like a book. Students become intensely engaged when they can Look, Talk, Think, and Write about Art. The following information includes a general format for understanding art and an example of a lesson. The Feldman method of criticism is used as our model.



**pictured here:** Second graders in Ms. Spivey's class are taking an inventory of the images in Palmer Heyden's "When John Henry was a Baby." Sprawled before the painting, the write their interpretations of the painting. The AI lesson was a part of their study of American Legends.

### The Inquiry Process

- I. Look at the artwork. Determine the aesthetic quality of the work. It is the standard by which the work can be judge. **Imitationalism:** A literal presentation that reminds of what we see in the real world. (Think Audubon.) **Emotionalism:** A vivid communication of moods, feelings through exaggeration and expressive color. (Think Van Gogh.) **Formal:** an abstract design emphasizing organization of the elements of art. (Think Pollock). Many works will have a combination of some or all of these qualities.

II. Investigate by going through these steps. (Feldman Model)

1. **Describe** what is in the work by taking an inventory of everything. **Analyze** how the artist organized the design to create a mood. Notice how the design is organized with the elements and principles. (see "Visual Art Design Notes" at the end of this doc.)

2. **Interpret** the meaning of the work. This is the most important part of the critique. Encourage the students to back up their

interpretation with the information they have found in their investigative process.

3. **Judge the significance of the work and its success to communicate.**

Put the work back into the context of the aesthetic quality as the standard by which it can be judged. Realistic? Emotional? Design for the eye?

**example:**

**Art Critique: George Washington Crossing the Delaware**

How do artists Emanuel Leutze dramatize this historical event in Washington Crossing the Delaware?

**Materials and Set Up:** We arranged to bring the students into the library. The painting was available on student computers as well as on the Smart Board. Students worked in groups of two. Paper, pencils and a discussion guide were distributed.

**Prior Knowledge:** Students had studied the Revolutionary War battles. We believed that this classically heroic painting would bring alive the drama of the important Battle of Trenton.



*"It is doubtful whether so small a number of men in so short a space of time had greater results upon the history of the world."*

Washington Crossing the Delaware  
Emanuel Leutze, 1855

**Background:**

On the day before Christmas in 1776, the Hessian commander, Colonel Rall, heard a rumor that Washington would try to cross the Delaware River and attack the British and Hessian troops. He laughed at the idea: "If Washington and the Americans dare cross, I will personally chase them back in my stocking feet."

He knew the winter was severe and the Americans were suffering from lack of clothing medical supplies and food. The river was frozen, it was bitter cold. Believing that crossing the Delaware was unthinkable, if not impossible, he lightened the guards on duty for Christmas Day convinced that the rebellion would soon be over. The Hessians were crack troops from Germany that were fighting on the side of the British. Losing was unthinkable.

On Christmas Day, the American army, having crossed the river after a night of battling the river, the cold, the ice, and their own fatigue, won the Battle of Trenton. Colonel Rall was dead. He had made a fatal mistake..underestimated the character of General Washington and the power of the idea of freedom in the hearts of his men.

The American artist, Emanuel Leutze, while living in Germany in 1851, painted Washington Crossing the Delaware 75 years after the event.

**Discussion Questions:**

Aesthetic Quality: imitational, emotional, formal? What is a heroic painting? Do you think that this is the way the scene would have actually looked? Why or why not?

1. Describe: What do you first notice in the painting? What makes the river look dangerous? Describe Washington's dress? What are the men doing? List some of the details you see?
2. Analyze: What is the mood of the painting and the men? How does the artist use lighting and color to create a mood? How many triangles can you find? Why would the artist repeat this shape? How does the artist show the boat is rocking?
3. Interpret: How much history can you read into this painting? Contrast the attitude of Washington with that of the men? What does Washington's position show about him? What is going on with the men? How does the artist create a sense of drama?
4. Judgment: How has your reaction to the painting changed because you know more about it? Do you think this painting is successful? Why?
5. What would your artwork of Washington Crossing the Delaware look like?
6. Are there other interpretation of this famous event? research

**Other activities:**

- team presentation of analysis
- act out the scene in the artwork
- write a poetic response
- create a dance
- sketch the artwork, or create original work that is inspired by it.

## **Visual Art Design Notes**

Artists use design elements and principles to make an effective and coherent design. The following is a basic list of these art concepts that can be vocabulary reference points for writing about as well as making artworks. (*Creating Meaning Through Literature and the Arts*, Claudia E. Cornett, third ed.)

### **Art Elements**

**1. Line:** a moving point that gives direction, rhythm and movement.

- Types: vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved, long, short, dotted
- Contour: A continuous line that concentrates on the outer edges of the object.
- Lines that vary from thick to thin, light to dark create a "beat" in the drawing.

**2. Shape:** Two dimensions of height and width are arranged either geometrically (e.g. circles, triangles), organically (e.g. natural shapes) or symbolically (e.g. letters)

**3. Color:**

- Hue = color names (e.g. primary, secondary, tertiary, color harmonies (cool, warm)).
- Value = lightness to darkness (tints and shades) of color.
- Saturation = vibrancy vs dullness of color.

**4. Space:** (2D) the area objects take up (positive space) and the surrounding space (negative space). Depth illusions are created by perspective and overlapping.

**5. Texture:** the way a surface looks and feels (rough, smooth, silky, bumpy)

**6. Form:** 3D shapes (e.g. sphere, pyramid, cube)

### **Art Concepts and Design Principles**

- Composition: the arrangement of masses and spaces
- Foreground, middle and background: the areas in a piece of art that appear closest to the viewer, next closest, and farthest away.
- Balance: how the weight of objects is distributed either symmetrically or asymmetrically.
- Emphasis: areas that are stressed and attracted the eye.
- Variety: no two elements used are the same: e.g. a geometric and organic shape.
- Repetition: elements used more than once to create a pattern or texture.
- Contrast: opposition or difference of elements (e.g. light colors next to dark colors).
- Rhythm and motion: a sense that there are paths leading the eye through the work.
- Unity: a sense that the elements and principles are working together. Feels complete.
- Light: An illusion created with lighter colors.

### **Tips for good design:**

- Keep the guidelines simple and flexible. Often drawing a border first helps the student to get started and “frames” the drawing.
- Encourage students to have the drawing touch the border in a least three places.
- Have the students hold up their drawings/designs a distance from them and see what they need to be unified and complete.
- Look at the work from a viewer’s standpoint, as if it’s hanging in a gallery. Find the point of emphasis (focal point), be sure there is enough contrast from light to dark, give attention to the background as well as the main foreground. All of the space is important.

**Design problems:**

- Make a contour line drawing of the object you are viewing. Change the thinness and thickness, lightness and darkness of the line by controlling the amount of pressure on your pencil as you draw.
- Make a drawing that uses contrasting colors (warm and cool). Use cool for the background and warm for the foreground.
- Make a design that uses only geometric shapes.
- Make a design that repeats the rectangle at least three times.
- Make a design that contrast organic and geometric shapes.
- Make a design that is symmetrical, same on both sides of a center line. (think butterfly.)



Each of these drawings has a sense of unity and completeness using the



compositional concepts of the elements and principles.



Can you identify ways the students used the art elements to make an effective design?