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## Using Art Criticism to Engage Students in Writing

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### Abstract:

*This article describes using art criticism, a process the authors define as “viewing, thinking, talking, and writing about art,” to engage students in writing. The authors provide theoretical support for art criticism in education, describe the process, and share ways it can be used to address Common Core writing and other content area standards. They also share a sample art criticism lesson taught to fourth graders and include a summary of student learning data documenting student engagement and learning aligned with targeted standards. The article ends with suggestions for using art criticism, finding and using accessible art criticism resources, and integrating art criticism writing with other content areas.*

“I know what it is. Art criticism is writin’ bad stuff about people’s art!” This response was from a fourth grader, but we have heard similar responses from many students and teachers over the years. While logical, especially considering the common meaning of “criticism,” it is a misconception. Barrett, an art criticism theorist who has devoted his career to translating the process into educational contexts, explains that art criticism is a generally positive endeavor. Critics write about art “because they love it and see it as a valuable phenomenon in the world... Critics do not always agree with the art that is made, but they enjoy thinking about it” (Barrett, 2000, p. 2).

Art criticism is the process of viewing, thinking, talking, and writing about art, and as teachers, we have found using the process to be a positive, effective way to engage students in meaningful conversations and writing. The process is even more applicable now, as it aligns with the focus of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) writing standards, specifically, the “emphasis on text (and other sources of information) as the basis for much of the writing” (Shanahan, 2015, p. 468). In criticism, artworks serve as the texts for exploration and analysis. Art criticism deals with images, and at times images that include traditional print/text, so it also supports teachers’ efforts to engage students in analysis of multimodal texts. “As the concept of text expands beyond the borders and boundaries of the printed book, so too must our definitions and conceptions of what it means to be a reader or literate being” (Serafini, 2012, p. 151).

In this article, we will provide theoretical support for art criticism in education, describe the art criticism process, and share ways it can be used to address elementary CCSS writing and other content area standards. We also share a sample art criticism lesson we taught to about 700 fourth graders in our state that includes some student writing samples and a summary of student learning data, and we end with some suggestions for using art criticism, finding and using accessible art criticism resources, and integrating art criticism writing with other content areas.

Thinking and talking about art, sharing and refining interpretations and opinions based on these discussions, and translating this textual analysis into coherent written arguments have many benefits. Barrett, a self-described “art critic in education,” asserts criticism teaches us to put art experiences into linguistic forms; it helps us learn to write in ways that interest, inform, and persuade readers; and ultimately, it prompts us to generate meanings that help us understand not just the art, but also ourselves and our world (2000). The late Elliot Eisner, another of art education’s prominent theorists, claimed that engagement in processes like art criticism teaches us that there can be multiple answers to questions and multiple appropriate solutions to problems, and that engagement in this sort of critical thinking and analysis leads toward “connoisseurship,” the art of informed appreciation (2002, p. 57). Efland reacts to the prior tendency to categorize the use of art in education as only related to the affective domain, and in his book, *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum* (2002), provides arguments that engaging in both artmaking and art criticism promote high levels of cognitive development that transfer not just academically, but in our lives.

The arts construct representations of the world, which may be about the world that is really there or about imagined worlds that are not present, but that might inspire human beings to create an alternative future for themselves... Therefore, the purpose for teaching the arts is to contribute to the understanding of the social and cultural landscape that each individual inhabits. The arts can contribute to this understanding, since the work of art mirrors this world through metaphorical elaboration. The ability to interpret this

world is learned through the interpretation of the arts, providing a foundation for intelligent, morally responsive actions. (p. 171)

Our experiences have confirmed the theorists' claims summarized above. As elementary teachers and teacher educators, we have effectively used art criticism with students from kindergarten through the doctoral level. As is true with all teaching, unexpected challenges may arise, and planning and gathering appropriate materials can be time consuming, but overall, we have employed the process for decades and have documented high levels of student learning and enthusiasm. Art criticism is not a writing curriculum, but it can be a positive addition to teachers' repertoires of writing activities that readily integrate with other curricular topics. And, as described later in this article, the process can be used to address multiple components of the Common Core standards.

### **Art Criticism**

Art criticism has been defined in a variety of ways, but Barrett shares some accepted generalizations about the process: it is written [or spoken] for an audience; the writer [or speaker] should aim to interest the reader [or listener]; critics are enthusiastic about art and the process; and it includes description and interpretation, and typically, informed judgments (2000). We define art criticism as viewing, thinking, talking, and writing about art. As Barrett has emphasized the use of criticism in education (as both author and teacher), his ideas inform our approach. Barrett suggests art criticism include the activities of description, interpretation, and judgment. Each of these activities is explained below.

#### **Description**

Description involves providing readers with information in and about the artwork. "*Describing* is a kind of verbal pointing a critic does so that features of a work of art will be noticed and appreciated" (Barrett, 2000, p. 63). Descriptive information could be about the subject matter: the people, things, activities, and places in a work of art. It could also include information about the general medium, e.g., sculpture or painting, or more specifically, the specific media/materials used by the artist, e.g., watercolor, cotton fiber, or wood. Finally, descriptive information might be about the artwork's form. Form is how the artist has composed, organized, or arranged the piece. These formal descriptions might include *elements of art*, how the artist used line, shape, color, or texture, or *design principles* like balance, rhythm, and contrast. Brief definitions of these elements and principles are included in Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b> <i>Art Elements and Design Principles</i>	
<b>Art Elements</b>	<b>Brief Definitions</b>
Line	the edges of a form
Shape	the contour of a form made when a line moves through space and meets itself
Value	the amount of light or dark in a color
space	interval of distance between you and the objects in your environment
color	visual sensation derived from pigment or light (has hue, value, intensity)
pattern	intervals of repeated lines, shapes, colors, or textures
texture	an artwork's surface quality
<b>Design Principles</b>	<b>Brief Definitions</b>
balance	visual equilibrium determined by weight, directional forces, and opposing tensions (symmetrical balance, asymmetrical balance, radial balance)
dominance	design principle of giving a focal point greater emphasis
rhythm	repetition of a line, shape, value, color, or other art element that suggests a moving force and direction
contrast	when the art elements in an artwork oppose or contradict each other
<b>Table 1 Art Elements and Design Principles</b>	

Good descriptions help readers understand and appreciate the artwork. They should be inclusive and attend to all parts of the artwork, and they should be accurate. That is not to say, however, they should be boring. Critics' descriptions "must capture their readers' attention and engage their readers' imaginations. Critics want to persuade their readers to see a work as they do" (Barrett, 2000, p. 85). So, a portrait of a girl looking over her shoulder becomes a girl, "looking impishly over her shoulder... the swirling brushstrokes... partly realized body and the billowing clouds out of which she seems to have sprung lend the work the quality of a dream, the momentary stoppage of a dynamic personality in motion" (*American Art Review*, 2013, p. 95).

Later in this article, we share suggested art criticism questions that could be used for discussion and/or writing prompts, but the simplest, and most effective description question we have used with students of all ages is, "What do you see (in this painting, sculpture, digital art piece...)?" This question alone has led to thorough responses, deep thinking, and excited exchanges between students and teachers.

### **Interpretation**

Barrett (2000) claims interpretation is the most complex and important component of art criticism. We agree. Interpreting involves assigning and explaining the meaning of an artwork. Interpretations are evidence-based persuasive arguments and so should be convincing and believable. Critics "might agree with one another's descriptions of the work but vary greatly in their interpretations and judgments of it...interpretations are not so much right or wrong as they are enlightening, insightful, useful" (Barrett, 2000, pp. 105,106).

Barrett shares a valuable set of "principles of interpretation." We do not typically present these to our students in list form, but instead, we weave them into our whole and small group conversations. This is a synthesis of those principles we feel most pertinent to teachers:

- Artworks have "aboutness." Art is always about something. Artworks are expressive objects made by people.
- There can be many different interpretations of an artwork, but some are better than others.
- Interpretations can be judged by:
  - Coherence – Does it make sense?
  - Correspondence – Does the interpretation fit the artwork?
  - Inclusiveness – Is everything in the artwork attended to?
- An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about.
- Interpretations should be about the artwork, not the artist.
- All art is in part about the world in which it emerged. In learning about the art, students are also learning about the context in which it was made.
- All art is in part about other art. Unavoidably, artists are informed and influenced by other art. Sometimes, art is specifically designed to reference other artworks.
- Interpretations are often based on a worldview and a theory of art. We all view art through our individual lenses informed by our assumptions and beliefs.
- Interpretation is a communal endeavor and self-corrective. For example, female artists often dismissed in the past have more recently received deserved recognition.
- Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own. (Barrett, 2000, pp. 113-120)

While interpretive discussions and writing are complex, they are also our favorite part of the art criticism process. Our own interpretations are often informed and even changed by those of our students. Attending to, honoring, and being open to multiple perspectives is one of our core teacher beliefs. The process of interpretation allows us to continue to grow as professionals in this area, model this openness for our students, and bring them into the process. A simple, yet highly effective interpretive question we use for discussion and as a writing prompt is, “What is this artwork about?”

### **Judgment**

We always include activities related to description and interpretation in our art criticism lessons, and we often include prompts for students to engage in judgment, but we typically place less emphasis on it. When we ask our students to judge and interpret, we are asking them to make decisions and to have reasons and evidence for why they made them. In doing so, students are crafting arguments to support their evaluations. This separates judgments from mere opinions.

When critics interpret works of art, they seek to determine what the works are about.

When critics judge works of art, they seek to determine how good the work is or isn't and why, and by what criteria. Judgments of art, like interpretations, are not so much right or wrong as they are convincing or unconvincing. (Barrett, 2000, p. 121)

Good judgments of artwork include evaluative statements, but these evaluations are based on reasons and criteria. We ask our students to tell us what they think is well done about an artwork (or what they think is not), but we also ask them to justify these appraisals. In a recent art criticism conversation about a Jackson Pollock painting, one of our students, after thoroughly engaging in, describing, and interpreting the work, claimed, “I just hate it.” When asked why, her response (demonstrating the criteria she used to judge the work) was, “because I just don't like art that isn't realistic.” Fair enough.

Even though most people's tendency is to first “judge” a work of art (“I like it.” Or, “I don't like it.”), we have found that conversations and writing related to evaluation are almost always richer when having first engaged in some description and interpretation of the work. Judgment questions we frequently use in our art criticism lessons are: “What do you think is good about this painting (or sculpture, collage, etc.)? Why? What do you think is not as good? Why?”

### **Art Criticism and the Common Core Writing Standards**

Writing gets more attention in the CCSS than in previous standards, and the types of writing required have different emphases (Shanahan, 2015). The art criticism model described above aligns with the CCSS in ways that provide teachers with a wide range of writing specific and interdisciplinary instructional opportunities. While previously used standards and accompanying state assessments have focused on more introspective, personal kinds of writing, the CCSS focus is more on examination of content, external texts, and ideas in ways that include direct and explicit critical analysis designed to produce writing that presents opinions and formal arguments supported by evidence. The Common Core emphasizes three specific types of writing--summarizing, analyzing, and synthesizing (Shanahan, 2015).

These types of writing (summary, analysis, and synthesis) are also inextricable elements of writing criticism. To write a critique, students/critics must identify and describe themes, prominent ideas, and important details and be able to share these with readers in succinct, but coherent, ways by crafting clear topic sentences, condensing key information, and combining repetitive or similar ideas (summarizing). They also need to interpret the text/artwork, assign

meaning, and support this assignment with reasons and evidence (analysis). Finally, students writing critiques of artwork present evaluative judgments that require them to interpret and reassemble information in ways that support their formal arguments (synthesis).

Increasingly, language arts teachers, art educators, and literacy theorists understand the importance of the “shift from the primacy of the printed word to the visual image and the multi-modal text” (Serafini, 2012, p. 153). Being able to receive, decode, analyze, and apply information from printed text, visual images, digital forms, and combinations of these are essential skills in our contemporary context. Analyzing visual art as “text” using an art criticism model presents teachers with unique opportunities to engage students in meeting CCSS language arts standards and provides additional opportunities to simultaneously integrate and address standards in other content areas. In the sample lesson described in the next section of this article, we addressed multiple fourth grade CCSS English Language Arts and National Core Arts Standards (<http://www.nationalartsstandards.org>) (see Table 2). This is a general list and includes both CCSS speaking and listening and writing standards. (In our lessons, the “speaking and listening” precedes the “writing.”). Dependent upon the specific learning targets and assessments selected by the teacher, the list could be reduced to those objectives that will be most directly evaluated in the specific learning segment. Our lesson example, and therefore the sample standards in the table, focused on fourth grade. Similar, but developmentally appropriate, CCSS standards for other grade levels also align with the use of art criticism. As expected, the standards increase in both complexity and quantity of reading/writing required of students. For example, “In opinion pieces, kindergarteners need to specify little more than an opinion about a topic or book, but by grade 5 they should also be able to include reasons for the opinion along with facts and details to support it” (Shanahan, 2015, p. 465).

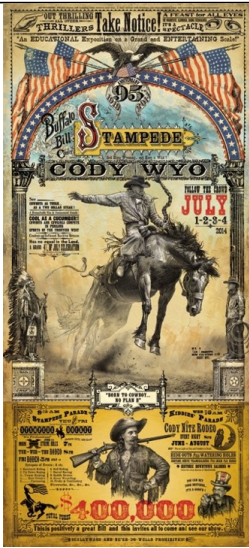


<p>Table 2  <i>Standards Addressed in Art Criticism Lessons – 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Examples from CCSS ELA and National Core Arts Standards</i></p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1</a>- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1.C</a> - Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1</a> - Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1</a> Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1.A</a> - Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which related ideas are grouped to support the writer's purpose.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1.B</a> - Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1.D</a> - Provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented.</p>
<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.4</a> - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p>
<p>VA:Re.7.2.4a - Analyze components in visual imagery that convey messages.</p>
<p>VA:Re8.1.4a - Interpret art by referring to contextual information and analyzing relevant subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media.</p>
<p>VA:Cn11.1.4a - Through observation, infer information about time, place, and culture in which a work of art was created.</p>
<p>Table 2 Standards Addressed in Art Criticism Lessons – 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Examples from CCSS ELA and National Core Arts Standards</p>

## Sample Art Criticism Lesson

This art criticism lesson was part of a Wyoming-themed unit that integrated state standards from Social Studies, CCSS English Language Arts, and Visual Art. The unit, *We Are Wyoming: A Study of Wyoming Counties, Landscapes, People, Artists, and Ways of Life*, included a series of interdisciplinary activities. We taught the two-day unit in 21 different counties to groups of fourth graders ranging from 14 to 65 students. Overall, we worked with about 700 students.

In this lesson, students viewed, discussed, analyzed, and wrote about art made by contemporary Wyoming artists. Activities included whole and small group discussions, analysis of visual artwork using an art criticism model, and individual art criticism writing activities. Six contemporary Wyoming artists allowed us to use their work for this lesson (see Figure 1 for thumbnail images). Bob Coronato provided us with his *Cody Stampede Rodeo* poster; Travis Ivey with a landscape painting that includes meadow, mountains, and a Union Pacific train called *Summer on the Main Line*; Joy Keown's *Buffalo Bull* is a watercolor painting of a large, foregrounded bison. Northern Arapaho tribal member Robert Martinez allowed us to use his vibrant painting of a Native American male, titled *Red and Blue*. (Left side of face is blue; right side is red). Do Palma provided an image of her quilt, *Sage Wars*, a fiber piece about the balance between the energy industry and wildlife; and finally, Adrienne Vetter contributed a digital piece commenting on manifest destiny, a hybrid between a modern camper and an old wagon called *Camperwagon #1: Horse Americana*.



Coronato - Rodeo Poster



Ivey – Summer on the Main Line



Keown – Buffalo Bull



Martinez – Red and Blue



Palma – Sage Wars



Vetter – Camperwagon #1: Horse Americana

Figure 1. Wyoming Artists' Work

The lesson started with a whole group discussion. We began by telling the students we would be doing some art criticism, asked them about their understanding of the process, and shared our brief definition that it is *viewing, thinking, talking, and writing about art*. We then briefly introduced the six artists/pieces by showing a poster sized reproduction of each on an easel. We typically asked a simple question about each piece to engage the students (e.g., “How would you describe this?”), and later shared artists’ names and artwork titles. We told students they would each be able to pick the artwork they were most interested in exploring for the small group discussion and writing portions of the lesson.

After this whole group activity, students selected and joined artwork specific groups and then discussed a series of art criticism questions/prompts specific to their selected piece (We had large mounted posters of each artwork for whole and small group use, and each student received a copy of the questions.). These questions followed a simple art criticism model (Barrett, 2000) that included description questions (e.g., “What do you see in this painting?”), interpretation questions (e.g., “What do you think this quilt is about?”), and judgment questions (e.g., “What makes this a good watercolor painting?”). Additionally, we included a question for each piece that asked students to share their knowledge about the historical significance and/or Wyoming connections included in the art pieces. After the small groups discussed the questions and shared ideas, each student responded to the questions individually, in writing, and in complete sentences. Upon completion, we then asked the students to write some more open-ended critique. Students either summarized and/or synthesized their responses to the questions; wrote a note/letter to the artist reacting to their pieces—at the conclusion of the project we sent this correspondence to each artist—or, in some cases, students wrote a poem in response to viewing, discussing, and writing about the artwork.

### ***Red and Blue: An Example***

We are using Robert Martinez’s vibrant painting, *Red and Blue*, as a sample in this lesson description. Questions for the other five artworks were similar but were adapted for the individual pieces and media. For this painting, we used the following questions and prompts for small group discussions and subsequent student writing. For the purposes of this article, we have included bracketed references to specific art criticism activities:

- Describe this painting. What do you see? [description]
- The painting is a portrait (painting, drawing, or photo of a person, usually head and shoulders). How is this portrait similar to others you have seen? How is it different? [description, interpretation, comparison, making inferences]
- What do you think this artwork is about? Why? Or, what messages do you think the artist is conveying in this piece? Why? [interpretation, providing reasons to support opinions/assertions]
- The portrait appears to be of a Native American male. What do you know about the history of Native Americans in Wyoming? [description]
- What words would you use to describe this portrait? [description]
- How does the painting make you feel? Why? [interpretation, making inferences, providing reasons to support opinions/assertions]
- What is good about this painting? Why? [judgment, providing reasons to support opinions/assertions]

Fourth graders wrote a wide range of responses. Students provided accurate descriptions of the painting, and most understood the term portrait and made personal connections (such as school pictures being portraits). Some students used art elements and design principles in their descriptions and included mention of warm and cool colors and symmetry in their writing. “It’s symmetrical, half of the man’s face is red and half blue.” “I see a portrait of a Native American man with a hat and a solemn face.” “It’s cool on one side and hot on the other.” “It’s similar to other portraits because it includes the head. It’s different because most portraits don’t have one side red and one side blue.”

A major theme identified in students’ interpretations was contrast. Students viewed this painting as an illustration of contrast between dichotomous terms like mad/sad; life/death; sad/angry; young/old; positive/negative; or good/bad. “I think it’s about the different moods people have, like mad and sad.” “I think it’s about the different sides of his personality. The red side represents furious, and the blue side calmness.” “The painting probably represents his past of war and future of peace” [fourth graders’ writing]. Other prominent themes were the students’ understanding of the unfair treatment of Native people in our state and the West and Native people’s resilience. Many shared these themes and included specific support for their assertions. “There was once a lot of native tribes, but because of the Indian wars, many tribes disappeared. The Indians were kicked off their lands.” “Their rights were taken away and they were treated badly by the government.” “They are peaceful people, but they will kill if their people are killed.” “They are tougher than normal humans” [fourth graders’ writing].

As with the other five art pieces, students were engaged at high levels when talking and writing about this piece. They appreciated the ambiguous nature of the painting and the opportunity to share their interpretations and supporting reasons. Words most often used to describe the painting were “unique,” “confusing,” “realistic,” “colorful,” “awesome,” “moods” “cool,” and “serious.” The students liked the use of color, the emotions invoked, and the openness of the painting to multiple perspectives.

### **Student Learning**

We had permission to copy all student work, and we systematically sampled to identify 40 samples to score against the lesson rubric. Students were evaluated on multiple language arts criteria, as well as on arts standards specific to observing, analyzing, making inferences, and interpreting the artwork (standards noted in Table 2). A three-level rubric was used to score students’ work using rubric levels “developing,” “proficient,” or “exemplary.” Overall, students scored an average of 2.28 (out of 3) across all targeted standards, confirming the appropriate level of challenge the activities provided. Seven sample students scored below proficiency on some criteria, but none received an overall score at the “one” or “developing” level.

### **Teacher Learning**

We have used art criticism in our classrooms over a long period of time as elementary teachers and in our current roles as teacher educators. This lesson confirmed earlier findings that it is a positive way to motivate students and involve them in high level thinking, discussion, negotiation, and writing. We kept field notes throughout the project to document student engagement and student and teacher comments. Our classroom teacher colleagues frequently noted how excited their students were about exploring the artwork and also about how readily students pursued the writing part of the activity. One teacher commented about a student, “It’s usually hard to get him to write a paragraph, but in this activity, he’s written more than a page!” Many other teachers shared similar observations about their students. Another teacher said,

“Now that I know how much they like talking and writing about art, I plan to make it an ongoing part of my curriculum.”

### **Art Criticism and Writing: Suggestions and Resources**

Our sample lesson included six art pieces connected to a unit theme, but using art criticism to teach writing and other language arts skills and concepts can be simple and can focus on a single image using a few prepared questions and prompts. In this closing section of the article we share: ground rules we use for art criticism discussions and writing; sample questions we use to engage students in describing, interpreting, and judging art; resources for implementing art criticism in classrooms; and ways art criticism and writing can readily integrate with other content area learning.

#### **Getting Started**

As in our sample lesson, we typically begin art criticism lessons with whole and/or small group discussions and then proceed to writing activities that are informed by these prior conversations. It is not necessary to begin with a discussion of “art criticism.” Teachers can simply explain, “Today we are going to view, talk, and write about a piece of artwork that connects to the topic we are studying in [science, social studies, math, etc.]” However, if art criticism is going to be an ongoing form of activity in the classroom, it is probably worth at least a brief discussion. Once students (and teachers, researchers, theorists...) understand the process/framework, many apply it in areas outside of visual art analysis. Eisner, for example, used criticism as a way to research and analyze the processes of schooling and education and called his approach, “educational criticism” (1991, p. 6). Elementary students might use the framework to guide and organize their research of a historical event, first describing what happened, then moving on to analyze the causes that led to the event and shape interpretations of the meaning and significance, and finally judging whether or not the event ultimately led to positive or negative outcomes.

Before beginning the actual discussion and writing activities, we have found sharing these “ground rules” helps students to understand our expectations and supports smooth lesson flow:

- Listen when the teacher or others are sharing directions and ideas.
- Be respectful of and open to others’ comments and interpretations (includes no laughing at or ridiculing others’ responses).
- Share one comment/thought at a time so multiple people can join the conversation.
- Be able to provide evidence or support for answers.
- Allow the discussion and others’ opinions to inform you and your writing, but all are entitled to their own interpretations and judgments.

Other tips for teachers we have learned include: Make sure everyone can see the art during discussions and for reference during writing time. Have a general plan for the discussion, and use prepared questions and prompts to guide discussions and writing. Reinforce students’ comments, praise/encourage insightful comments; redirect unhelpful ones. Use paraphrasing and summarizing. Paraphrasing allows students to hear and reinforce what others have said and additionally allows students thinking time as they formulate their own descriptive and interpretive comments. Summarizing keeps students engaged with major points discussed, and this also models the skill for students before they write their own critiques that include summary elements. And finally, we suggest insisting on reasons for students’ interpretations and judgments in both discussions and written critiques. In Table 3, we share some suggested art criticism questions and prompts teachers can use and adapt.

Table 3

*Art Criticism Questions and Prompts for Use or Adaptation*

<b>Description Questions/Prompts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you see?</li> <li>• Describe this artwork.</li> <li>• What did you notice first?</li> <li>• Have we missed anything?</li> <li>• Who is in this artwork?</li> <li>• What is in this artwork?</li> <li>• Where is this?</li> <li>• What can you say about the materials used?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What colors has the artist used?</li> <li>• What art elements have been used (line, shape, texture, value, pattern)</li> <li>• What design principles are used? (balance, dominance, rhythm, contrast)</li> </ul> <p>*Ask for reasons, justification, evidence as needed</p>
<b>Interpretation Questions/Prompts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's going on here?</li> <li>• What is this artwork about?</li> <li>• What are other possible meanings?</li> <li>• What might the people say if we could hear their thoughts aloud?</li> <li>• What is the artist's message?</li> <li>• What feelings does the artwork evoke?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What title would you give the artwork?</li> <li>• Why do you think the artist composed the work this way?</li> <li>• What did the artwork mean to people when it was created? What does it mean to us today?</li> </ul> <p>*Ask why? Ask for reasons, justification, evidence as needed</p>
<b>Judgment Questions/Prompts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's good about the artwork?</li> <li>• In what ways is this artwork good?</li> <li>• What would you change?</li> <li>• What's not as good about it?</li> <li>• What is your overall evaluation?</li> <li>• What are your reasons for your evaluation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would you like to have this artwork in your home? Why or why not?</li> <li>• Who do you think would like to have this artwork in his/her home? Why?</li> </ul> <p>*Ask for reasons and justification for appraisals</p>
<b>Other Possible Questions/Prompts</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes you think that?</li> <li>• What else would you like to say?</li> <li>• What do the others (that haven't responded) think about this?</li> <li>• How do you think this artwork was made?</li> <li>• What does this artwork remind you of?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is this artwork similar to other art you've seen?</li> <li>• What would you do with this artwork if you owned it?</li> <li>• How original is this artwork?</li> <li>• What words would you use to describe this artwork?</li> <li>• How does this work relate to other ideas or events?</li> </ul>
<p>Table 3 Art Criticism Questions and Prompts for Use or Adaptation</p>	

## Art Criticism Resources

Most art images can be used for criticism discussions and writing. We try to find and use diverse art and artists. Most students have seen Picassos and van Goghs; fewer have explored the works of Judy Chicago, Rufino Tamayo, Mark Bradford, or James Luna. Teachers can select images that are developmentally appropriate for their students and that connect to current topics of study. We have collected and used images from art postcards, calendars, and magazines. Smaller images are good for group work, and these can be scanned and projected for whole group viewing or can be shown on a document camera. If original artwork, as opposed to reproductions, is preferred, local artists, and high school and university students are often willing to lend pieces. Finally, the Internet is a gold mine for obtaining art criticism images. Most museums have images online, and museum education departments often include both images and lesson plans. Some of our favorite websites for images include:

- Museum of Modern Art: <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/teachers/index>
- Google Arts and Culture: <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute>
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art: <http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators>
- Art 21: <http://www.pbs.org/program/art21/>
- J. Paul Getty Museum: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/>
- The Denver Art Museum *Creativity Resource for Teachers*: <http://creativity.denverartmuseum.org/>

With the plethora of available images and access to projectors, obtaining and using images for art criticism is easier than ever. We suggest teachers begin by selecting an appropriate image, preparing a series of guiding questions and prompts, holding an opening discussion, and then allowing students to follow up the conversation with written responses to some of the questions and prompts. Students are typically eager to share their art criticism writing. For teachers wanting to explore the process in depth, we recommend Terry Barrett's book, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (2000), or Philip Yenawine's *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines* (2014).

## Integrating Art Criticism

Art criticism is a seamless way to integrate language arts with other curricular areas. In fact, most of our criticism activities are interdisciplinary. Our aims include *co-equal* integration; in other words, we seek quality learning for our students in all integrated disciplines. In our lesson sample, we addressed standards from both the visual arts and the CCSS English Language Arts, and so wanted our students to meet learning targets in both areas.

We have found contemporary artists' images to be particularly engaging. Using contemporary pieces for critique focuses students on speaking, listening, writing, and art analysis related standards, but depending upon the subject matter, they can also focus students' attention and thinking on issues in specific content areas and/or on social dilemmas and perspectives related to our current sociopolitical context. Some contemporary artists we have used and recommend include: William Wegman and Faith Ringgold (both also create children's picture books), Andy Goldsworthy, Deborah Butterfield, and James Turrell (science and nature connections), Keith Haring and Roy Lichtenstein (pop culture connections), and M.C. Escher, Frank Stella, and Alexander Calder (math and geometry connections).

In other units and lessons, we have used historical artwork to allow students to explore visual images connected to a variety of social studies and history topics. For example, Jacob Lawrence's work illustrates important moments and themes in African American and U.S.



history and the Harlem Renaissance. A unit we taught on American history included art criticism activities using Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Grant Wood's *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, and N.C. Wyeth's *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Finally, we have used many "narrative" artists in interdisciplinary art criticism lessons and units. Narrative art is art that tells a story, and so connections to language arts are inherent. Connections to other curricular areas vary according to subject matter. Some of our favorite narrative artists to use in criticism include Norman Rockwell, Grandma Moses, Rene Magritte, Kara Walker, Marc Chagall, Andrew Wyeth, Robert and Shaina Parke Harrison, Kerry James Marshall, Thomas Hart Benton, Carrie Mae Weems, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer. (The last two use traditional print/text in their work). Multiple images from each of these artists can be obtained with a Google image search.

### **Conclusion**

Art criticism has enriched our teaching, engaged our students, and supported our learning over many years. Like most of our colleagues, we are always looking for ways to motivate our students, involve them in critical thinking and analysis, and help them make connections between what we do and learn in school and their lives and contexts outside it. Criticism has helped us accomplish many of these aims. In our current educational context, the process is even more relevant. Art criticism activities align with CCSS English Language Arts and other content area standards. The process scaffolds students' and teachers' understanding and interpretation of multiple forms of "text," including multimodal and digital text forms. Resources are plentiful, and images can be selected that directly connect to and expand upon curricular and thematic areas of study in the classroom. For teachers unfamiliar with art criticism, or those that have not tried using the process, we suggest jumping right in and learning on the go, the way we have proceeded for more than 20 years! Find an appropriate image; display it for your students; ask them to talk and write about what they see and what they think it is about. Share. Adapt. Repeat.

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