

Narrative Art

How do artists tell stories with art?

How do writers tell effective stories?

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will explore narrative art to see how stories are expressed visually and to learn how artists provide clues (setting, symbols, etc.) that help us understand the stories. Students will learn that by looking carefully and analyzing what they see in a work of art, they can “read” a painting and find meaning in narrative art. Students will discover that people tell stories about themselves and their cultures through the visual arts. They will create their own narrative art in an accordion book form.

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two or three 45-minute periods

KEY IDEAS THAT CONNECT VISUAL ARTS AND WRITING

Visual Arts

- Art is a visual means of conveying information.
- Artists use symbols and details to help tell a story.
- An artist’s vocabulary includes setting, subject, symbol, point of view, and perspective.
- Narrative art can describe myths, historical or current events, fantasy, or personal stories.
- Narrative art does not have to present conclusions; it is open to interpretation.

Writing

- Writing is a way to convey information.
- Writers use literary elements, such as symbols, similes, metaphors, and details to help tell a story.
- A narrative text includes story elements such as setting, problems, characters, events, and solutions.
- Narrative genres include myths, fiction, historical or current events, fantasy, poetry, and personal stories.
- Writing does not have to include conclusions; it is open to interpretation.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Students will:

Visual Arts

- Identify aspects of narrative art and use art terms to describe them
- Interpret a narrative work of art through observation and discussion
- Create art that tells a story

Writing (optional activities)

- Write about narrative artwork using art vocabulary
 - Identify perspective and point of view in student writing and the writing of others
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FOR THE TEACHER**Looking and Seeing**

Some things to notice and think about when looking at Jennie Augusta Brownscombe's [Love's Young Dream](#):

- Color: Low intensity browns and oranges suggest season and time of day.
- Pose: What is the importance of the young woman standing on the edge of the porch? What direction is each character looking?
- Symbols: What might the flowers symbolize? What about the kitten?
- Who is coming up the road?
- What is each person doing and how does it relate to the story?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Read about [Jennie Augusta Brownscombe](#) on the ABC website.

SUPPLIES

- Student journals
- 12" x 18" drawing paper (cut into 4" x 18" strips), one strip per student
- 4½" x 5" mat board, poster board, or cover stock for book covers, two sheets per student
- Pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers
- Glue sticks

VOCABULARY

Narrative refers to a work of art that tells a story.

Setting is the time and place where a subject is located or a story happens.

Subject is who or what the artwork is about. It can be a story, an idea, a person, an emotion, or a feeling.

Symbol is an object or thing that has meaning more than the thing itself. A dog might represent fidelity in addition to being a pet; it is a visual sign for an idea or concept.

Foreground is the part of the picture that seems closest to the viewer.

Background is the part of the picture that seems farthest from the viewer.

Middle ground is the part of the picture midway between the foreground and background.

Elements of art are color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture. Artists use these tools to create all visual art—representational, abstract, and non-representational. (See Vocabulary list for definitions of individual elements of art.)

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN: OBSERVE, CREATE, AND REFLECT**Observe: Quick Write**

Before beginning the lesson, show Jennie August Brownscombe's [Love's Young Dream](#) to students. Give them a few minutes to respond to the image. Use any of the following prompts:

- What is happening in this picture?
- Imagine that each character has a thought bubble floating above his or her head. What are they thinking?
- If I could walk into this picture, I would _____.



Introduction

Tell students that **narrative** art is artwork that tells a story (*narrative* means story or tale). The stories in narrative art can come from history, mythology, literature, religion, or current events; they can represent an idea, such as freedom; or they can be a personal story from the artist's life. Ask students if they have seen any examples of narrative art (religious art, neighborhood murals, war memorials, etc.). Have they ever told stories just with images? Narrative art is meant to teach, inspire, inform, and even to preserve memories and culture. It can be a way to understand the experiences of people from other places and times. Artists today often use narrative art to express their ideas about politics and society.

Observe: Look and Discuss

Ask students to look closely at Brownscombe's *Love's Young Dream* and begin describing and interpreting what they see. Visual Thinking Strategies (vtshome.org) is a highly effective method for facilitating productive conversations about art with your students and introducing new vocabulary in a meaningful way. Following the conclusion of this initial exploration of the work, you may wish to revisit certain concepts in more depth using some of the questions below.

- What is happening in this picture?
- How many people do you see? How many animals? What are they doing?
- Is there a main character? How can you tell?
- What are the relationships among the characters?
- Where is the story taking place? Describe the **setting** and the time period.
- What does the clothing tell you about the time and place?
- What facial expressions do the characters have? Where is each person looking? How does this help you understand what is happening? What do you think each character is thinking?
- What is happening in the **background**? How does it relate to the **foreground**?
- Are there any objects? Are they **symbols**? What do they stand for?

Ask students what they think the **subject** is—what is the story about? Have them talk about the setting, people, and action taking place and how these aspects help tell the story.

Look again and ask students to think about the moment of the story the artist chose to show.

- What might have happened just before this scene?
- What do you think is about to happen?
- Do you think the artist shows the most exciting part of this story? Why or why not?
- What would you have shown?
- How could the title, *Love's Young Dream*, be interpreted by each character in the painting (what is each character's personal voice)?

Create: Accordion Book Narrative

1. Accordion Book

Download instructions for the [Accordion Book](#) and lead students through the process of creating the book form. **Note: For this activity, you will make a four-page book, completing only the first four steps shown in the instructions.**



2. Tell a Story Visually

Ask students to choose an important event or moment from their own lives as the basis for their story. It could be an actual event or one that they hope will happen in the future. The story should have four parts: a beginning, middle, climax, and conclusion. It can be a problem that needs to be solved or a description of a daily activity. Have student think about:

- What is the story? What has happened/will happen?
- Who is the main character? Who are the other characters?
- What are the characters thinking and doing?
- What is the setting? What is in the background?
- How will facial expressions, clothing, and symbols help tell the story?
- What is the action of the story? What happens first? Then what? How does the story end?

Have students make a quick pencil sketch of the first part of the story in the first square of their accordion book. Then have them sketch the second, third, and fourth parts of the story in the following squares. The sketch should show just the basic shapes and outlines of the characters and the setting. Students should spend only a few minutes per sketch. Next have students use crayons, markers, or colored pencils to add details such as symbols, background, and objects around the characters. Have them fill in some areas of the drawing with color.

Reflect

When students have finished, have them exchange books with a partner and interpret each other's narratives. Discuss as a class what was hardest and easiest about telling a story without words. Have students respond to one of the following prompts in their journals:

- Telling a story without using words is like _____.
- If I could do this project again, I would _____.
- When I read my partner's book, I noticed _____.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Visual Arts and Writing

- Have students write the story of their narrative artwork in their journals or on the back of their accordion books.
- Ask students to write in their journals, explaining how they used setting, characters, and symbols to tell their story through art.
- Suggest that students make another accordion book, using very small paper, and illustrate it with very small images.

Science, History, Performing Arts, and Mathematics

Visual artists and writers present narratives in artworks and literature using symbols, setting, themes, and characters. Similarly, scientists, musicians, historians, and mathematicians tell stories in their own disciplines by drawing on their own tools, techniques, and specialized vocabularies. For example:

- Archeologists on a dig uncover and tell the story of a dinosaur's life and death by piecing together clues like bones and fossils. →

- Geologists narrate the formative story of the earth by reading the ages of rock formations.
- Historians search a variety of documents, artifacts, and resources to glean stories about a period's people and events.
- Composers write music that may use certain musical themes or particular instruments to communicate a story, such as *Peter and the Wolf* by Sergei Prokofiev.
- Mathematicians can tell a story using symbols, setting, or characters, whether it is a complex algorithm or a traditional word problem.

Have students create their own narratives related to these subject areas so that they recognize the parallels in process, tools, and vocabularies between creating stories in the visual and language arts and other disciplines.