

Analyzing Photographs: From Theory to Practice

What can be learned from analyzing photographs?

Overview

Summary

Throughout this lesson, students will examine works of art and learn tools to analyze and discuss photography. Following a series of intensive in-class workshops—and, if possible, hands-on activities at a local museum—the participants will have the opportunity to apply what they have learned by using cameras to document daily life in their community. After the students' images are printed, students will supplement their photography by preparing artist's statements about their work. This lesson introduces a simple theoretical apparatus for viewing and analyzing works of art, which students will employ with several different works, including their own.

Note: This lesson is easily adaptable to enhance learning in virtually any theme, topic, or historical period that is expressed and/or documented in photography. By carefully selecting images appropriate to a particular subject, this lesson would be a great addition to units as diverse as the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil War, the Vietnam War, women's roles, and American presidents. In this lesson, each student will need either a digital or disposable camera, and should be able to develop prints. If your school's budget does not allow for this expense, you could try applying for grants or approaching local merchants for donations. A local merchant might be more inclined to donate if the students exhibit their work in the store, thereby increasing foot traffic for the business.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Look closely and critically at photographs
- Analyze images encountered in museums and daily life through a variety of strategies
- Write responses to the images based on their descriptive, reflective, and formal analytic abilities
- Apply what they have learned by taking photographs
- Write artist's statements to accompany their photographs

Teaching Approach

Comprehensive Arts Education

Teaching Methods

- Hands-On Learning
- Modeling
- Multimedia Instruction

Assessment Type

Determined by Teacher

Key Staff

Classroom teacher
Opportunities for collaboration with arts educators and social studies teachers exist

Key Skills

Developing Arts

Literacies: Analyzing and Evaluating - Critique, Understanding Genres

Making Art: Composing and Planning

Creative Thinking: Creativity and Innovation

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Preparation

Lesson Setup

Teacher Background

You will be leading students through written descriptions, reflections, and formal analyses as described in "Analyzing Photographs" on ARTSEDGE's Community PhotoWorks [site](#). Students will then take their own photographs, generate an artist's statement and analyze one another's work.

Prior Student Knowledge

How to use a digital or disposable camera

Physical Space

Classroom
Museum

Grouping

Large Group Instruction
Small Group Instruction
Individualized Instruction

Staging

Test internet connection

What You'll Need

Materials

Resources

Website

[Description Activity Worksheet](#)
[Photo Analysis Worksheet](#)
[Writing Your Artist's Statement](#)
[Assessment Rubric](#)

Required Technology

1 Computer per Classroom
Projector
Presentation Software

Required Plugins

 [Flash](#)

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Instruction

INTRODUCTION

Tell students that they will be learning how to analyze works of art. These strategies can be applied to any work of art, from any period in history. Inform students that they will ultimately use similar methods when writing about the images they will create. Use the ARTSEDGE How-To, "[Formal Visual Analysis: The Elements & Principles of Composition](#)", to learn the elements of design, and use it as a guide throughout the day

The first step in visual analysis is description. Descriptions should remain objective, discussing what can be seen without drawing conclusions. For instance, when looking at *Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam*, it would be appropriate to say, "The tall man in the middle is wearing a somber black suit," but inappropriate to say "the tall man in the middle is dressed as if going to a funeral." This sort of subjective comment should be reserved for the "reflection" section. A description can begin anywhere, but generally it is easiest to begin by discussing the subject matter. For example, a description of this photo might begin with the basic statement: "In this black and white image, three men stand in front of a tent." Once you have stated the subject matter, simply elaborate on what you can see: the man in the middle is the tallest, and is posed with his hands down at his sides, wearing a formal black suit with a bowtie and a tall stovepipe hat. The man to the left is wearing a worn dark suit and a bowler hat. The man to the right is dressed in a military uniform with bright buttons and epaulets. The tent is pitched on a grassy clearing with trees in the background. And so on.

ENGAGE

1. Model formal analysis methods by analyzing a photograph for the class using the process outlined below for Alexander Gardner's *Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam* (available on the [Getty Museum's site](#)). You may wish to analyze this 1862 battlefield portrait of Abraham Lincoln within a larger study of the Civil War or American presidents. You could also easily adapt the analysis process outlined below to suit a particular theme, era, or topic you are studying in class by choosing a corresponding image. For example, there are many photographs documenting the Civil War and the Great Depression, as well as photographs that would depict common literary themes (*i.e., innocence/experience, life/death, love/hate, etc.*).

2. After looking carefully at the image, begin your formal analysis. Decide as a class which elements are most strongly represented. In the Lincoln portrait, the very distinct *lines* and geometric *shapes* are immediately apparent. Upon closer inspection, it is clear that these lines and shapes function to frame and to *move* the viewer's eye towards the central subject, President Lincoln. For instance, note the way that all of the *lines* in the image draw us towards the figure of the president. The tent forms an inverted "V" shape directly behind Lincoln, while the vertical tent post and tree trunk in the background further elongate Lincoln's already tall figure, creating a clear *emphasis* in the composition. There are other strongly represented elements as well. Consider the stark *contrast* between the white of Lincoln's shirt and his black suit, which further draws our attention towards the president's face. There is also a sense of *balance*, with the figures standing to either side of the president in similar poses, like mirror images.

3. Discuss the tone or mood of the image with students as you see it, but stress that everyone will have a different answer. Appropriate comments for this type of analysis include the following: The tone of *Lincoln on Battlefield of Antietam* seems very bleak. The somber facial expressions of the men, coupled with the barren grass and sparse trees give an overall impression of death and dying. There is also a sense of loneliness about the figure of President Lincoln. Although standing next to two men, he seems totally isolated. He is unresponsive to the camera; rather than making eye contact, he stares distantly off into space, increasing the sense of isolation.

4. After you model description, formal analysis, and reflection with students, inform students that they will be analyzing another image in the same way in small groups.

BUILD

1. Lead students through additional visual analysis activities so they refine their skills and gain a deeper understanding of the process. You may wish to take students on a field trip to a museum so they can engage with actual works of art rather than digital or print reproductions. If you decide to take students to a museum, you could accomplish all activities below in one day. If the activities are conducted in class, note that completing the activities may take more than one 45-minute period.

If you intend to take the students to a museum, prepare for the excursion by browsing through the collection of a local museum ahead of time to find pieces that would work best for your class. Note that you can choose to work with sculpture, painting, or even cultural artifacts since not all museums have photography collections. If you choose to do this activity in the classroom, find images of artwork

Resources in Reach

Here are the resources you'll need for each activity, in order of instruction.

Build

[Description Activity Worksheet](#)
[Photo Analysis Worksheet](#)

Reflect

[Writing Your Artist's Statement](#)

Assess

[Assessment Rubric](#)

on the Internet that your students would find engaging and print transparencies of your selections.

2. Choose three objects from a local museum, or print images from the Internet. The same principles used in the activities from Day 1 should be applied here. Each object will engage one method of analysis and emphasize concentrated looking. When using non-photographic images, emphasize to students that the tools they are learning can be used to analyze any work of art from any time period. Students should record their written responses to the following methods of analysis in their journals or on the worksheets provided.

This activity should focus on an object that is rich in details and colors, which will give students the opportunity to write highly detailed descriptions. Paintings like James Ensor's '[Christ's Entry into Brussels](#)' or Henri Rousseau's '[A Centennial of Independence](#)' would work very well for this section because there is so much for students to observe and describe.

The students should divide their paper into quadrants, and label each quadrant with one part of speech: nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. Alternately, you may wish to pass out the [Description Activity](#) worksheet located within the Resource Carousel. Students should then be divided into four groups. Explain that each group will be responsible for brainstorming words for one part of speech. The noun group will come up with a long list of nouns that they see in the painting. The adverb group will come up with a list of adverbs that they see, and so on. Give the groups five minutes to come up with lists. When they are done, each of the groups should choose a spokesperson to read their list, and the other groups should copy the words down in the appropriate quadrant.

Their lists should look like this:

Nouns	Verbs
clowns	dance
masks	sing
dancers	celebrate
band	march
Adverbs	Adjectives
joyously	colorful
excitedly	loud
noisily	happy
vibrantly	fantastic

Next, using the words from the four different lists, students should compose sentences that use at least one of the words from each of the quadrants. Some examples based on the words above might be, "The colorful clowns dance and sing noisily," or "The fantastic band marches excitedly." This activity is an engaging way to help students create rich, descriptive sentences.

Reflection Activity

3. In this section, students will assess and respond to the work of art on a personal level, analyzing the effects that the work has on its audience. Works should be chosen that have a strong emotive characteristic, such as Man Ray's [Tears](#). As an activity for this image, it might be interesting to ask students to brainstorm why the woman in the image is crying. After students have shared their ideas, they can write a haiku to express their thoughts. For more on the haiku form, see the ARTSEDGE lesson, [You Too Can Haiku](#).

Formal Analysis Activity

4. For this activity, students will be sketching an image in their journals. Pick an image that would provide good opportunities to discuss formal analysis in detail, such as '[Memphis](#)' by William Eggleston (*available on the Getty Museum's site*). 'Memphis' would be a great image for this activity because of its strong formal characteristics, such as proportion and emphasis. Like this example, objects used in this activity should have strong lines and other formal characteristics.

5. Ask students to sketch the image, paying attention to the lines and other formal characteristics such as contrast and shape. When the students have completed the sketch, they should analyze the image in formal terms, and record their answers in their journals. As they move through the process of recreating the composition on paper, students will come to appreciate how the formal characteristics contribute to the overall composition. For instance, in this image, students will notice how the lines along the left side of the composition serve to distance the woman in the booth, as well as to guide our eyes towards her. Because we realize how long these lines are, we realize how far away she is, dwarfed in space. Proportionally, the woman is very small when compared to the space that surrounds her, but her position is emphasized by her situation underneath the vertical white stripe just to her right.

Discussion

6. Following this workshop, it will be important to prepare the students for going out and acting as photographers. To get the students to think about how to put the theory they have learned into practice, ask students to discuss which image was their favorite, and why it was such an effective photograph. It is also crucial that students understand the difference between a snapshot they might take at a family party, and a photograph that takes into consideration formal design elements. The ARTSEEDGE How-To, "The Language of Photography" is helpful in explaining this process. You may wish to project this How-To onto a screen or print handouts ahead of time.

APPLY

1. Tell students that they will be documenting daily life in their communities by taking photographs. Explain that large events such as parades can be great opportunities to take pictures. Images of everyday events can also be opportunities to take fantastic pictures. Point out to the students that they can make their images more exciting and dynamic by changing their position in relation to their subject. For instance, students should experiment with standing on top of a chair and looking down at an object from above as well as crouching down and looking up at an object from below. In addition, remind students that they can turn their cameras ninety degrees to frame their images like a portrait.

2. Inform students that they will examine a photograph and artist's statement from a seminal photographer in order to assist them in writing their own statements. Examine the image 'Migrant Mother' by Dorothea Lange (available on the Getty Museum's site). Before beginning, students should brainstorm questions they have about the photograph. A useful tool for beginning this dialogue is asking the students whether they would like to know about the picture or the photographer. These questions can be recorded on the blackboard, and will ideally form the basis for the artist's statements the students will write.

As a class, read Lange's comments about her photograph on the Web site of Berkeley University's Dorothea Lange Fellowship. You may wish to project this statement onto a screen or print handouts ahead of time. After reading the artist's statement aloud, the following can be used as discussion questions:

Are there questions you had about this image that were not answered in Lange's comments?

In her artist's statement, Dorothea Lange deliberately chooses to give us some information and exclude other information. For instance, why do you think Lange chooses to tell us that the migrant woman is 32 years old?

Did this information surprise you?

Lange describes her attraction to the "PEA-PICKERS CAMP" sign as "magnetic," a force she could not resist. Have you experienced a similar attraction to a subject?

Lange uses words such as "hungry" and "desperate" to describe her subject. How do these words affect the way we view this photograph?

REFLECT

1. Students should select one image from their work that they find most captivating. Once students have selected a photograph, they should write responses based on the three methods of analysis. As a prewriting activity, students can use the activities outlined in Day 2 as a way to brainstorm ideas for their own statements.

2. Distribute the 'Writing Your Artist's Statement' worksheet. Tell students that the artist's statement should be at least three paragraphs in length (*one paragraph can be committed to each analytic method*). Tell students to follow an organized structure and answer the questions in complete sentences. Remind them to be aware of transitions between sentences to unify important ideas. Students should also use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

3. Go over descriptive analysis with your students. Remind them that they should describe specific details in their image using complete sentences. Using the Dorothea Lange image as a model, inform students that you might begin, "In this image, a woman sits

with her face resting in her hand...". For the reflective section, the following is a list of possible questions that can be used to provoke responses:

- Why did you choose this image to represent your work?
- When you took this photograph, what first caught your eye?
- Where were you when you took this picture?
- What were you doing when you took this picture?
- What time of day was it?
- What were you thinking when you took this picture?
- What ideas or feelings were you trying to capture in this image?
- Do you think you were able to capture these ideas or feelings?
- What do you think about now when you look at this image?
- How would you like the viewer to respond when they look at this image?
- How did you expect this image to look? What, if anything, looks different than what you expected? What surprised you about this image?

The following is a list of questions that can prompt students to write responses based on formal analysis. It would be helpful to re-distribute the ARTSEDGE How-To, [Formal Visual Analysis: The Elements & Principles of Composition](#).

How did you use the principles of design in your work?
Which principles of design are most visible in your work?
How do these principles contribute to the meaning of your work?

4. Students should use the answers to these questions to construct their own artist's statements. Artist's statements are complex, and should go through a process of revising before they are fully completed. Peer review will also help students refine their ideas as well as get an outside opinion on their works of art.

ASSESS

1. Use the 'Assessment Rubric' to evaluate students' work.

2. As students share their written and artistic work, assess how much information the students absorbed during this process by leading a discussion. Good discussion questions include:

How is taking a carefully composed picture different than taking casual snapshots of family and friends?
How did you use formal analysis when you composed your shots? Which elements did you find most strongly represented in your image?
Was writing an artist's statement about your own work more or less difficult than writing about another artist's work? How did writing this statement affect how you viewed your photograph?
All artists go through a process of self-critique. Was there any part of this lesson that you found particularly difficult? How did you overcome these challenges?

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Standards

ARTSEdge Lessons connect to the National Standards for Arts Education, the Common Core Standards, and a range of other subject area standards.

Common Core/State Standards

Select state and grade(s) below, then click "Find" to display Common Core and state standards.

Select State Select Grade

The [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#) seeks to bring diverse state curricula into alignment through a set of common learning goals and assessments. In 2010, Standards were released for English language arts

[FIND >](#)

National Standards For Arts Education

Visual Art

Grade 5-8 Visual Arts Standard 2: Using knowledge of structures and functions

Grade 5-8 Visual Arts Standard 3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Grade 5-8 Visual Arts Standard 4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Grade 5-8 Visual Arts Standard 5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Grade 5-8 Visual Arts Standard 6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

National Standards in Other Subjects

Language Arts

Language Arts Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Language Arts Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions

Language Arts Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

Language Arts Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts

Language Arts Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

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CREDITS

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Works Cited

Print:

Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999.

Rosenblum, Naomi. *A World History of Photography*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1997.

Web:

Library of Congress: Prints & Photographs Online Catalog <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html>

and mathematics.

Common standards have not yet been released for science, social studies, and other subject areas, including the arts. In addition, some states have yet to, or have chosen not to, adopt the Common Core standards.

During this transitional period, ARTSEEDGE will present all relevant state and national standards as they apply to our lessons.

National Standards for Arts Education

For the full text of the content and achievement standards in Arts Education, visit our [Standards](#) section.
