



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2018 Volume II: Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers

Reflections Upon Reflections: Ekphrasis as Self-Exploration in Middle School ELA

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Because moody middle school students are often unwilling to pay attention to topics that aren't personal, making learning personal is key. As an ELA teacher, I have an advantage here, and an opportunity. The arts have no meaning without our affective responses. We can help our students realize this, while also supporting literacy, school engagement, and emotional intelligence, by teaching ekphrastic poetry, which inherently values subjectivity.

Putting their subjective responses to literature and art front and center may be novel and interesting enough to engage even the most reluctant ELA students if they have the right tools. My seventh graders will first study the vocabulary of emotion, creating personal chapbook lexicons of emotion words. They will also study color's effect on emotion. Then, after closely reading several examples of ekphrastic poetry, we will embark on two field trips to the local museum of fine arts. Students will choose a work of art that they find evocative, and describe their moods before, during, and after encountering it. In their poetry, these descriptions will be conflated with their interpretations of the art itself. Ideally, the final poems will be naturally metaphorical, deeply personal, and surprisingly satisfying for my students.

(Developed for English, grade 7; recommended for English, grades 8-10, and Art, grades 7-10)

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