



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

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

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## **Reflective Self Portraits: A Study of Oneself through Ekphrastic Poetry and Art**

Curriculum Unit 18.02.09, published September 2018

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### **Introduction and Rationale**

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Over the years I have noticed vast and egregious negative behavior changes in the students I teach. Experiences in counseling, along with other programs of study, led me to notating the shared patterns of negative behavior whenever they appeared. If I could find a common pattern it might lead to an underlying cause which would hopefully lead to a solution. As with all complex issues, I knew that there was no easy answer or easy fix. However, my students were struggling and I needed to help them, which was my motivation. After extensive reflection, looking for a place to begin, I suspected my observations were the results of trauma. Quickly, having administered the Trauma History Screen to my students, I learned that my suspicions were well-founded. The results were shocking, with 79% of my students affected by either a one-time or on-going traumatic event(s). This percentage cross-correlated with other districts in Los Angeles, Western North Carolina, and Philadelphia city and urban schools.<sup>1</sup>

Where I thought I would find barriers in trauma research, I did not. I thought I would have difficulty finding information because of the number of students I see struggling. How can students be so besieged and not receiving help? What I learned was that there has been a steady increase in the number of trauma-affected students and that this has been established as the root cause of the increasing negative behaviors. Trauma has long been understood to be a problem among students. What has changed is the number of students who experience trauma in their life and the lack of appropriate supports and the promotion of skills to help them positively cope. Systems in place to serve such students have not changed and are no longer adequate to meet the increased needs. Changing the system is not an easy task and often involves more politics than plain common sense. Research reveals the dire need for trauma-sensitive schools.<sup>2</sup> Currently schools and programs are set up to help “identified” students, but there are also the “unknown or unidentified” students affected by trauma. Additionally, due to the “causative relationship” of trauma-induced behaviors there are the students affected by these behaviors whom their peers subject to harassment in school.<sup>3</sup> This relatively recent revelation, coupled with increasing numbers, has been the rationale for changing the current ineffective system from “additional supports” to trauma-sensitive schools.<sup>4</sup>

While my current unit on Ekphrastic Poetry and Art will not help change the inadequate support systems in schools, I can create my own system of support using the expressive elements of the visual arts and poetry to

help students cope and manage. Research states that the best way to help students affected by trauma is to teach self-concept and self-reflection.<sup>5</sup> Teaching students self-concepts helps them know who they are, which aids in identity development that is often compromised when a relationship with a care-giver is compromised. Teaching students how to read and write poetry and make art related to their feelings is a positive step; and expression in two different modes will connect cognitive processing and promote identity development.

## School Demographics

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For the past seven years I have worked at Pittsburgh Liberty, a Spanish magnet school in Pittsburgh Public Schools. It is located in Shadyside, Pennsylvania on the east side of the city but has students from all the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. The current enrollment is four hundred students in grades Kindergarten through fifth grade. Students entering Pittsburgh Liberty in Kindergarten are expected to be proficient in Spanish by fifth grade. During my tenure at this school there have been three principals (42% turnover). There have been four to five teachers who retire or resign or leave each year in the past four years (a 15% turnover). There are three classrooms in each grade level from Kindergarten through fifth grade, totaling eighteen classrooms. There is more support staff this year than in previous years and our staff total is now forty-two, a 20% increase. 67% of our students are economically disadvantaged, 14% are diagnosed as special education, 0% ELL, 3% gifted, 74% black/African American, 12% white, 7% multi-racial, and 2% Asian and Hispanic. We have nineteen students currently on the retention list (5%). Our school has been recently labeled a “focus” school by the state of Pennsylvania due to the downward trends of multiple data points showing that we are currently failing in all areas.

## Whom the Unit Serves

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Fifth grade students who are participating in this unit at Pittsburgh Liberty have notably struggled with peer relations and pressures and the oftentimes awkward parts of maturation. This along with trauma-induced behaviors creates a challenging atmosphere where it is difficult to teach and to manage. Most students love to create and thrive in an environment where they have choices, open-ended assignments, and opportunities to express themselves. Because of this, the arts are an ideal environment to promote identity development through relationship-building activities that encourage self-concepts and self-reflection through creative expression. Self-portraits are the obvious choice for this unit. However, I can envision many other choices, as well. Though this unit is specifically designed for my fifth grade students, the structure of it will benefit all grade levels. Modifications would need to be made not only for developmental levels, but for your specific demographics. One would need to change the poems, the artwork, and alter the activities accordingly.

As with all my units, the biggest barrier is time. Students have art class twice every six day cycle for forty minutes. However, because I (mostly) have the same students every year, I know their prior knowledge in the arts, as well as their maturity through the various stages of development from ages five to ten. I am familiar with their individual social and emotional development, in addition to their fine motor control skills through artistic expression. I have relationships with all my students and know them and their families very well.

Other information relevant to this unit is: my school's mission and vision revolve around increasing writing proficiency for all students. To join in the efforts of my school, last year I implemented a narrative writing requirement connected to artworks completed in class for fourth graders. One of the many things I learned was that students are resistant to change. They do not like anything that takes them away from a "preferred" activity (creating art). It is important for me to recognize what students expect versus what is intended. However, this upcoming year the students and unit will benefit from prior writing experiences in the art classroom because there will be less resistance.

## Content Overview

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### Ekphrastic Poetry

Poetry began as a practical way to help people remember things. It was and still is used to help us remember the alphabet, the months of the year, the days of the week, etc. With the recurrence of a line pattern and/or a rhyme our brains are able to recall information more readily. These are known as "Ode or Rhyme Mnemonics."<sup>6</sup>

Ekphrastic poetry borrows a Greek term for poems that respond to art, sometimes in vivid detail. It is most often, especially recently, used for paintings, though it can also be used to describe objects and other art forms. Poems used to be memorized, but when they were very long and deemed valuable, they were often transcribed like Homer's *The Iliad*. In this he describes the shield of Achilles in almost one hundred fifty lines. Current ekphrasis does not go into long descriptions though, and descriptive poems are not as commonplace, either. Poets after Homer shortened them considerably. One example of this is the painting "Hunters in the Snow" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder described by William Carlos Williams (the poem has the same title). In this poem Williams is deliberately indifferent to the painting and describes it holistically, almost mechanically.

Interestingly, sometimes the description of an artwork is not completely accurate and involves objects that are not actually there. In the example of Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Poem," she describes a "thin church steeple" that is not actually there. Other poets have, during the creative writing process, imagined objects or embellished their writing when experiencing the aesthetic of the artwork. This happens in the poem by Joyce Carol Oates about Edward Hopper's painting "Nighthawks." In her poem she starts out descriptive, quickly goes to interpretive, and then quickly switches to a vibrant story about the people represented in the painting.

Another way poets respond to a work of art is *interpretative*. They use various ways to interpret an artwork. Sometimes poets imagine they are in it, other times they talk to the objects, or pretend they just approached it and are reacting to it. In "Musee des Beaux Arts," W. H. Auden interprets Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus* by mentioning the "old Masters" in a museum experience where they would be witnessing and participating in a painting illustrating the importance of everyday life with a very small pictorial devoted to Icarus' demise. Everyone in the painting is too busy with their daily chores to notice that he fell in the water. Auden expresses his distaste for the sequence of events by interpreting the image according to not only what he sees, but what the "old Masters" see, as well.

In the seminar, "Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers" taught by Paul H. Fry, I have learned that there is a distinction between men and women authors of ekphrastic poetry. Men

seem to respond indifferently towards the work of art and do not recognize its value, almost as if they are trying to “prove” their and their poem’s worth. Because pictures are allegedly free from the need to communicate meaningful content, poems should also be self-sufficient, according to the men. Conversely, women tend to immerse themselves in the work of art and are almost sympathetic towards it. This is relevant because not only does it determine the tone of the poem, it also leads to the significance of my seminar, which features women and other marginalized writers. In my previous examples there were white male poets, but they weren’t men of the establishment; they were considered marginal of unpopular political views during the time period in which they wrote and Auden was homosexual in the 1930’s.

### **Why Art and Poetry?**

Art and poetry naturally go together for many reasons. Many cultures, such as Japanese, have always included images alongside their poems (or poems alongside their images). Poetry and visual arts happen together just as water is to the earth. Though the earth and water exist separately, they thrive together.

During the Dadaist movement, which aimed to undermine authority, many artists created new ways to express themselves that involved doing the opposite of what was already being done. Because of this movement there was a convergence of the visual and literary arts. Artists created art and poems together where font, style, size, placement, and the shape of the letters were important to the poem. Interestingly, today’s memes are yesterday’s Dadaist graphics. We now see snippets of poems everywhere, especially in technology. What do students think of these? Do they inspire them? Or make them laugh? Would they write one for a class blog of memes? Though to some it may seem in poor taste or even a stretch, the Dadaist movement has shown us that great things can come from a merger of two things that seemingly do not go together.

When learning about art and a poem the process is the same. The medium is different. However, the medium is different for painting (paint and canvas, paper, wood) than for sculpture (plaster, metal, clay). The medium for poetry is words, paper, pen or pencil or ink (from a printer). Each has its own possibilities and limitations. As a visual artist I teach students about mediums such as watercolor, clay, ink, and pencil. English Language Art teachers teach students about words. Words are in everything and are everywhere, so they are “everyone’s” medium of sorts.

English Language Arts teachers have more required teaching material than they can possibly teach in one school year. Poetry is just one aspect. In addition to this, there has been a dramatic shift in the required skill set for people with the emergence of technology. 21<sup>st</sup> century advancements require strong written and creative skills for students to be competitive today. Successful forward-thinking companies such as Google are searching for those who are able to merge their technological skills with creativity. The minimum expectation is to have excellent writing skills to communicate these ideas. Because of this and because of the very natural way that poetry fits both neatly and constructively in tension with the visual arts, they should or could be embraced together.

## Goals

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My first goal is to teach students how to read and analyze an ekphrastic poem. First, I will teach them what a close reading is by demonstrating the process with them, then by practicing it with many different scaffolded techniques. This will build confidence and give me an opportunity connect the visual arts to poetry in my classes. Mark Rothko's painting "Untitled" with Bobbi Katz's poem "Lessons from a painting by Rothko" and Edward Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning" with John Stone's poem of the same title are the first and second pieces of artwork we will be looking at with the poems.

My next goal is to teach my fifth grade students how to analyze artwork. Because I have had my students for five years, they have had some exposure to this skill. When looking at a work (which could be their own, another student's, or an artist's they don't know, including famous work) I ask them to use the four stages of response commonly used in art criticism: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement.

My third goal is to teach students to write ekphrastic poetry by looking at selected famous artists' work and creating our own poems about it. Throughout the unit students will be completing their own artwork. They will also be creating ekphrastic poetry about that work and one ekphrastic poem about a classmate's work.

My last goal is to utilize therapeutic art skills to help lessen the impacts of trauma on affected students. I will do this by increasing their self-awareness in activities that give them opportunities to label and illustrate their feelings. This will allow them to connect their emotions to visuals and poems that will reinforce positive coping strategies. I will also have students utilize self-reflection over time to encourage the development of a positive self-concept that will aid in repairing compromised self-identities.

## Reading Poetry

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Though students have been reading poetry since Kindergarten in English Language Arts class, they have not done this with me in Visual Arts class. Additionally, I have found that students do not always retain information from previous years. Because of this, I need to access what they already know and/or remember. Any teaching I do in review will be the minimum of what is essential to establish the climate and expectations the unit entails. Another reason for students to recall prior knowledge is to get them thinking about what is to come.

To teach students how to do a close reading I will have them follow a checklist of skills with a goal in mind to find meaning or a deeper understanding of the poem. They will do an initial reading by themselves to establish their first impression and/or emotional response. I will have them to write down any feeling(s) about the poem by stanza. Second, we will read it aloud, saying and writing down any more thoughts in a different color (to differentiate thoughts). After this reading students will be asked to circle any words they don't know, underline words that stand out, put a star by a repeated phrase, word, or line, etc. Students will be guiding each other through seeking answers to these questions by asking a question to the class and having a student (not the teacher) answer it for them. They should not feel that there are wrong answers, only sometimes more constructive ones, and it is important to establish an open climate where students can write and express themselves freely. Letting the students guide one another through this process will empower them and, in

essence, give me credibility. Next, to deepen the learning I will give different students cards with a question on it to ask the class. For example, one card will say, Who is the speaker of the poem? Other cards are: What is the title? Can you paraphrase the poem? What is the theme? What is the setting? Did you make any connections to the poem? Are there any specific words that helped you with the meaning? Are there any repeated words or words that have multiple meanings? Is there any figurative language (specifically metaphor, simile, and personification)? What is the tone of the poem? What is the mood? Are there any rhyming words? What is the form of the poem? Are there any patterns in the words? When does the poem take place (past, present, future)? Though I will not ask student ALL these questions, these are ones I want them to be familiar with over time.

To introduce the unit students will read “Lessons from a Painting by Rothko” by Bobbi Katz. This URL (copied and pasted in your browser) will take you to this poem and one example of Mark Rothko’s work <http://ghpoetryplace.blogspot.com/2010/10/lessons-from-painting-by-rothko.html>

This poem is a “notional” ekphrastic poem, which means that there is not one specific art piece that it is about. The title of the poem tells the reader that the poem is ekphrastic by saying it’s from a painting and even gives the last name of the painter. I think the directness of this title is important for my students because I do not know if they have any prior knowledge of ekphrastic poetry and this is a fantastic way to make the connection for them right away. In the first line the author asks the reader a question, “How would you paint a poem?” which immediately engages the reader. This question, again, makes the connection between art and poetry. After this line I will ask a few of my students to answer this question orally and I will ask all students to answer it in on paper. This is important because I will be asking them to do this later as part of the unit and to compare their answers before and after a guided analysis. The poem goes on to do what artists do next and “prepare[s] the canvas.” This should be done “carefully.” This word sets a specific tone for the poem indicating that it is special and very important, like a package at Christmas. In the third line the poet begins to describe what Mark Rothko did with his series of “Untitled” paintings (I’ve included six different examples below). He painted rectangles. Sometimes it was two, in other cases three or more. The word “misty” refers to the blurry edges of the shapes. However, the word also appeals to the reader’s senses. It adds some mystery to the painting because when things are misty, they are often unclear. Misting is something that happens when the water in the air is quickly cooled causing it to change from invisible to visible. This may indicate a weather phenomenon related to a landscape. The last line in the first stanza refers to the way the rectangles are “stacked.” However, Katz does not say this directly of the rectangles, she says it is “secrets” that are stacked and that they are “waiting to be told.” This plays into the tone initiated in the previous line.

The second stanza begins with the second line of the first stanza. This indicates that there may be a pattern forming. The second line of this stanza also references something that may be outside “shallow pools”: not a pond or lake, but a “color.” Is Katz referring to the limited color palette? Or is she referencing simplified objects in a landscape? The third line of this poem is the same as the fourth line of the first stanza. So far lines two and four in the first stanza are the same as lines one and three in the second stanza. When my students discover this, I will ask them to highlight the lines in different colors to aid them in finding the pattern. The repetition of lines in the poem makes it seem like Rothko is preparing yet another canvas and stacking up more mysterious rectangles. It seems like the poet is paying a tribute to the vast number of “Untitled” paintings that Rothko made. I do have some prior knowledge of this artist, so I do not think I am objective about the presence of this idea in the poem and do not think that my students will pick up on this initially. The last line of the second stanza mentions “messages.” From whom or from where we do not know, but the place is “unknown,” keeping in line with the mysterious tone of the poem.

In the third stanza the first line is the same as the second line of the second stanza: “shallow pools of color.” The second line of the third stanza has new information for the reader. Indicating “thin layers of gauze” “floating” mysteriously over the canvas, Katz seems to be referring to something on the painting that I cannot see, though this line does vivify the imagery for the reader. The third line in the third stanza is the same as the fourth line in the second stanza. The fourth line in the third stanza is new and indicates a place of “soft shapes” which “expand above a glow.” Does this expansion point to more Rothko paintings? Or perhaps this refers to the “misty” shapes and the element of color in the painting being imagined. If this expansion is meant to lead us outside, the soft shapes could be trees moistened by dew that are expanding above the rising sun (which could be the glow).

In the fourth stanza the first line is the same as the second line in the third stanza. The second line is the same as the third line in the first stanza. The third line is the same as the fourth in the third stanza. And, beautifully, the last line is the same as the first. “How would you paint a poem?” The last line closes the poem in a circular way because it ends where it began. However, the reader went on a journey and knows more now than before, so we are not the same. For teaching purposes this is a great summary statement that brings the learners back to the original question with new acquired information. As I let students answer this question at the beginning of the activity, I will ask them to answer it again after an extensive guided analysis. I will encourage students to compare their ideas and reflect on their ideas.

This poem’s repeating pattern identifies the poem as a pantoum. In a pantoum there is an “abab” pattern that’s used to rhyme. It has changed over time and this it no longer does. This type of poetry, even though I do not derive much from the new punctuation in the last line, has the potential to shift meanings with that change.

I interpreted quite a bit as I looked at the poem above. I think the poet picked a pantoum to illustrate the mass production of Rothko’s “Untitled” paintings, as well as the alternation of his rectangles. Though my students will not pick up on this, I will enjoy giving them the tools to discover it when looking more closely at Rothko’s life and work. I also think the poet is hinting at the landscape quality in his work, as foreground, middle ground and background are roughly rectangular in landscape painting. I do not think that my students will understand this, but I will help them recall prior knowledge in their art lessons to guide them there. The simplicity of this poem and its direct connection with ekphrasis make it an appropriate choice for beginning on our poem journey.

### **Looking at Art**

The first step is description. “What do you see?” This may relate to elements of design, the size of the work, the type of work (painting, sculpture, etc.), the style in which it was created (realistic, abstract). The next step is to analyze the artwork. “How was the work created?” In the analysis students should be looking at the subject-matter, how the elements and principles of art are organized (overlapping, shade and tint of colors, type of texture, the way space is used, etc.), and which ones do they notice first. Students are given a list of descriptive words to use. I have this hanging in my art room, but the list can also be issued as a handout. The next step is to interpret. “Why is the work created?” “What does the work mean?” Students are asked to use the visual information that they gathered in description and analysis to interpret the(ir) work. Students should be able to reference their description and analysis to support their interpretation. Interpretation can be the hardest for students to make at the ten-eleven-year-old range because I ask them to come up with an individual interpretation. Doing this is like taking a “leap of faith” because they are making an educated guess. They are very aware of their peers and the idea of “not being accepted” or being laughed at is

demoralizing. It is important to have a climate of mutual respect in a classroom for students to feel comfortable as interpreters. The last step is judgement. Often, especially without prior training in the four art criticism techniques, students will want to rush to this step. I can't begin to count how many times I have been judged while working on a piece of art before I was finished. Even in their own artwork, children often overlook some of the sophisticated processes that creating art takes. Art that requires an armature, an undercoating, or any other prerequisite steps to achieve a desired effect is not close to being finished and should not be judged. Working in the public domain, especially while demonstrating a process, this is a prevalent mistake. When making a judgement, it is important to have finished artwork and to consider the description, analysis, and interpretation. Students should divide their judgment into two parts: the objective and the subjective. The objective should be based on the goal of the work (in actuality or in theory). For example, if the artist's intent (or what you think was their intent based on your acquired knowledge) was to create a realistic portrait, did they accomplish the goal? In the subjective judgement students should react personally to the artwork, putting their reaction in words.

Students will be looking at works of art by Vincent van Gogh, Edward Hopper, Jacob Lawrence, Alfred Stieglitz (of Georgia O'Keeffe), Pablo Picasso, Faith Ringgold, and Horace Pippin. Each artist created portraits in a unique way and all were or are marginalized in some way (with the exception of Edward Hopper).

## Untitled Mark Rothko paintings 1960's

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Because I am not sure which of Mark Rothko's paintings Bobbi Katz's poem is about I chose the one pictured on the page of the poem to discuss (URL above). Occasionally, I may refer to his style, because he has over 800 paintings and I am not exactly sure which "Untitled" image is which. With his collection <http://www.markrothko.org/paintings/> the style will be easy to reference, I hope. Mark Rothko's "Untitled" paintings were created in the 1960's. In this picture, which I believe was created in 1968, he uses three colors: yellow, red, and orange. Rothko used oil paint to create his large paintings (see above for a size reference). In this "Untitled" painting there are two rectangles. The yellow rectangle is above the red rectangle. There is an orange border around both of them. The rectangles do not have a sharp edge. The edges are fuzzy and there is no intention to make them straight rectangles. This painting is considered to be an instance of abstract expressionism--a movement that started as a way for artists to express themselves covertly about politics after World War II. Abstract expressionism seeks to come from the subconscious with a creative, natural, free quality to it. Many other famous artists came from this time, such as Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning, etc. Rothko created this and his other paintings by working quickly. He layered paint on thick which created a rough textural quality. His shapes, often rectangles, were large and simplified. His geometric rectangles were arranged vertically in this picture with bright, hot colors. The shapes are not overlapped. Because all three colors he used were hot colors, they almost equally stand out. Because yellow is a tint, it draws the eye first. Next, the eye travels to the red, as it's darker and contrasts with the yellow. The orange has the middle value and is the least noticeable. He softened the borders of his paintings and often let the canvas show through along his edges. Spatially he filled the canvas with the two shapes and there is little depth. The shapes are balanced. In this particular painting, the unclear transition from the yellow to the red rectangle makes it look like Rothko may have just mixed the two primary colors together to make the orange border color. This reflects the process of quick painting and abstract impressionistic qualities. I think the artist is trying to eliminate barriers between himself



and his painting which is why there is little depth. I also think Rothko is imposing simplicity on his ideas in part because of the art movement at the time (abstract expressionism), but also because he liked to make his own rules and not follow anyone else's. I base this on my knowledge of Mark Rothko, the artist. His mass production of large paintings that towered over his viewers makes a bold statement about their, or his importance. They will be seen. They will not be ignored. They will not be bound by rules or religion or parental influence or overbearing authority figures, which are all things that he struggled with in his life. He felt his voice was suppressed and the views and beliefs of others were forced upon him in punitive ways. This aspect of Rothko's life will resonate with my students who are affected by varying degrees of trauma and at the age level where challenging authority is a healthy part of development.

For the second poem in my unit, I will ask students to independently read a poem titled "Early Sunday Morning" by John Stone. I will use the close reading techniques used above under "Reading Poetry."

Copy and paste this URL in your browser to access the poem and the painting:  
<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/sunday.html>

This poem is about Edward Hopper's painting "Early Sunday Morning." I chose this painting because 82% of my students live in the Hill District, a neighborhood in the city of Pittsburgh. This area will have a couple of blocks of abandoned buildings, then a few with signs of life. There was a television show based on this area called "Hill Street Blues." Within the last few years there has been some revitalization in the area and many people are moving back. The Hill District is a great location due to its proximity to city events and access to public transportation. I think the visual imagery of Hopper's painting will resonate with my students and that they will have an emotional response. This will make the ekphrastic poem in turn accessible to them.

In the first line John Stone refers to another place. Not here, in Edward Hopper's painting, but somewhere else, in the next block. There, someone may be playing the beautiful breathy music that comes from a flute. If we listen quietly, we may capture a note or hear several that might remind us of another time. That music is not being played in this picture. The stores are closed and nothing is open. In the upstairs windows there are no faces or people or activity. In front of the buildings there are signs of life, though. The inanimate objects suggest that people do live here. But Stone switches his tone to say that "as if there could ever again/ be hair to cut/ fire to burn" to emphasize the emptiness. Then he goes far away to where the sun might be, "low" and in the "East." Though time is frozen here in this moment, on Sunday morning, it is not in reality because it always comes, "right on time." The sun brings with it from China to this quiet place the light that adds to the color of the building. This color will not determine the temperature of the day and make it hot. That would be unpleasant and that is not what is happening here. Stone switches to the artist, Edward Hopper, who finishes his painting on a day like this one that is perfectly still with anticipation and possibilities. The painting has the potential to be filled in whatever way the viewer imagines. It's like he painted the perfect background for whatever you want.

## **Early Sunday Morning by Edward Hopper 1930**

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Copy and paste this URL in your browser to access this painting:  
<https://www.edwardhopper.net/early-sunday-morning.jsp>

Edward Hopper is an American artist. His Early Sunday Morning painting is an oil on canvas that is roughly 35"x 60." Originally the title named the street that the buildings were on in New York, but he later changed the title to "Early Morning." That was somewhat unclear, but a critic called it "Early Sunday Morning," Hopper did not disagree and the title was changed again.

The repeated horizontal and vertical lines of the buildings and windows are repeated again in the long shadows in the foreground. The barber pole is the first thing one notices because of its contrast to the darker colors and its disruption of the repeated horizontals and verticals in the background. The bright building aglow in the sunlight is the next thing noticed, which draws your eye upward and over to the long diagonal cast shadow. The building is brownish-red and the trim is a muted green. These are complimentary colors. The shop windows each have a unique front.

Reading the poem with the painting makes it hard for me to separate the two for interpretation. I can see this painting being full of possibilities (just like poetry!) But, I can also see that one might have the opposite perspective, one of emptiness. The time period during the Great Depression supports that. What makes this painting so compelling, as with all of Hopper's work, is that it evokes everyday America. Anyone can look at it and find their own personal meaning based on their experiences, personality, and culture.

The third poem I plan to use for my unit on Reflective Self Portraits: A Study of Oneself through Ekphrastic Poetry and Art is "Looking Back" by Penelope Allen. I will ask students to independently read this poem and do a close read, utilizing the strategies they have previously learned. Afterwards, we will talk about it and walk through the steps to understanding poetry together.

Copy and post the URL in your browser to access the poem:

<https://allpoetry.com/contest/2640148-Vincent-van-Gogh--Self-Portrait--Art-Prompt>

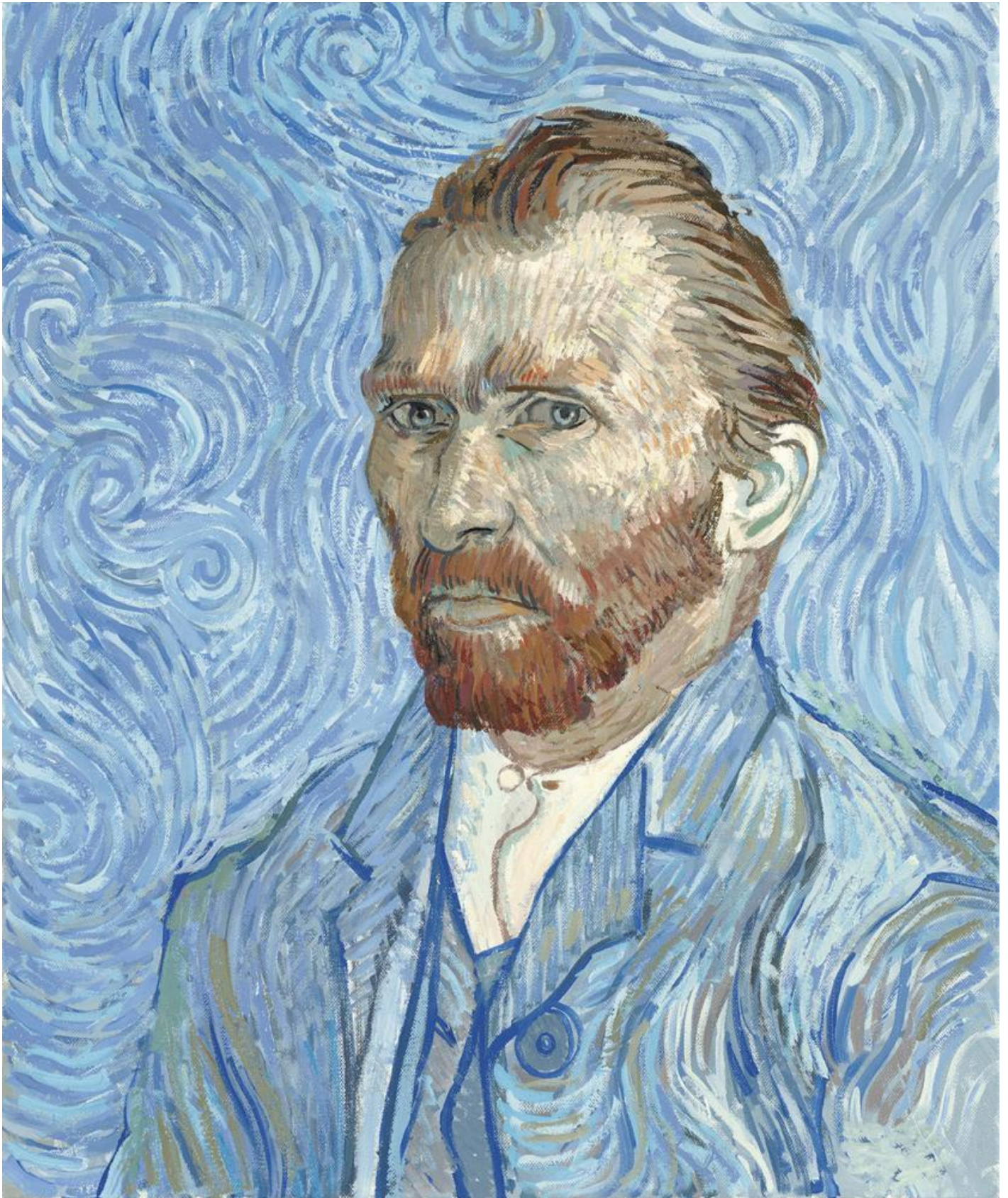


Image 1 - Self Portrait by Vincent van Gogh 1889

## Writing Ekphrastic Poetry

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When students get to this point of the unit, they will have a good foundation established from the previous two sections on Looking at Art and Reading Ekphrastic Poetry. References can be made at any time to previous poems or works of art. In learning to write Ekphrastic poetry children will describe, imagine, and incorporate their thoughts about the artwork. They will give a voice to the main figure and the other figure(s). They will be encouraged to let the objects speak. They will be encouraged to let the artist speak. I will ask the students to question the artist, and the figure(s), and themselves. I will ask them to summarize their interactions with the art and its visitors. Lastly, I will encourage children to use their imagination and to use their own method for interacting with the picture or object.

## Activities

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### Accessing prior knowledge

To do this, I will begin by having students fill out a “What in the World do I Know?” graphic organizer about poetry. At the bottom of the same paper they will write five words about walking to my class today (or something else eventful that’s on their mind). Transitions are difficult for students affected by trauma and quite a bit can happen during these unstructured times. I want to give students an opportunity to express themselves right away with the most current activity on their mind. On the back of the paper students will be asked to draw at least one part of their face and write the words on it or around it. The goal of this is to get students to think about what they know and to apply some of those skills to visual poetry. Also, it scaffolds learning by first tapping into prior knowledge, then second, making connections between those two things. If students have difficulty completing the visual poetry I will give them an example. I do not like to do this initially because oftentimes students will not come up with an original idea. This activity will allow me to access student’s prior knowledge and begin to lay the foundation of this unit by connecting it to the bigger goals.

### Creating and Using Visual Journals

Students will create a visual journal to document their reflective self-portraits, their drawings, their on-going learning and thoughts, as well as their poems (or words to be made into poems). Doing this will give students a place to document their ideas and to create a connection between students’ visual self and their verbal self. Students will be able to build on previous knowledge by accessing previous pages. I have observed that elementary level students like to do something then move onto the next project or learning goal. They don’t always connect one project to the next. I want students to learn to develop ideas and work over time to create a metacognitive connection that will deepen the impact of self-reflective learning practices.

To create the visual journals students will fold ten 9x12 sheets of paper in half and tie them together with a hole puncher and yarn. It is important to choose the size of the student’s paper based on the amount of time you have in a class period. I intentionally have students working small so they can accomplish daily goals. Students will create a title for their Visual Journal to be written on the front with their name. Creativity is encouraged. Students may include an image, if they want, but it is not required. The student’s name must be

visible and neatly written on the front to aid in quick distribution between art classes.

Students will use the first page of their journal to answer the question, “How would you paint a poem?” as described above when introducing Bobbi Katz’s poem, “Lessons from a Painting by Rothko.” This will be used for reflection at the end of the poem, artwork, and information about the artist to compare student’s thoughts before and after the detailed analyses to measure growth.

On the next page students will paste a copy of the first poem in their visual journal. They should be guided through a close reading using a checklist, so students can become familiar with the process. The teacher will demonstrate the process for using “questions cards” with questions to be asked and answered by students. Students will be expected to document answers and additional questions on the third page of their visual journal.

The fourth and fifth pages of their visual journals are for students to document art criticism techniques about Mark Rothko’s work and information about him as an artist. Students will use art criticism graphic organizer(s) to guide them through the activity. The graphic organizers should be glued into the journal so that students can easily reference and connect on-going and future learning.

After the close reading and a thorough analysis of Rothko’s work, the teacher should ask the students to share what they have learned, including any connections that they have made. Documentation is required by students in their visual journals. Then they will answer the question, “How do you paint a poem?” Students will be allowed to write, draw, paint, and illustrate to show their answer.

The next poem to be glued into the student’s journals is “Early Sunday Morning” by John Stone. There is a shift in the way this lesson is taught compared to the previous poem. Instead of reading the poetry separately from the art analysis, students will alternate between the first reading of the poem and looking at and describing the art, then doing a second reading of the poem, then following that with an art analysis. I want students to combine the two in a more integrated way to begin unifying the processes cognitively.

Students can read the poem independently while the teacher reads it aloud. Students will use a new close reading checklist to begin the process of finding a deeper meaning in the poem. After the first reading, students will look at and begin describing Edward Hopper’s painting. When the description is complete students will look at the poem again and move through the checklist by using the question cards to be asked and answered by students. When they have gathered enough information, students will analyze and interpret Hopper’s painting. Students will share their results in groups of two and then with the class. Students will be asked to think about where they live. Is it a place where there is a lot of noise? What colors are there? Students will compare and contrast where they live compared to Hopper’s painting (interpretation). Students will be encouraged to explore their feelings about where they live and portray it in their visual journal. Afterwards students will be asked to draw their neighborhoods and to write a free style poem about it using the skills they have learned. If students struggle, give them a choice of graphic organizers to help them make progress. They can also work with a partner (peer assistance).

For the third ekphrastic poem and visual artwork students will read and looking at Penelope Allen’s poem, “Looking Back” about Vincent van Gogh’s Self Portrait (pictured above). Students will do a close reading following the checklist and question cards activity. Students will use the four domains of art criticism, documenting each in their visual journals. Students will then share their information in groups and as a class.

At the end of this lesson students will look at more self-portraits and portraits by Vincent van Gogh and

additional ones by Jacob Lawrence, Alfred Stieglitz (of Georgia O’Keeffe), Pablo Picasso, Faith Ringgold, and Horace Pippin. Students will do a gallery walk where they look at each painting. After looking at each, they will pick one to look at while writing an ekphrastic poem. Before students begin writing they will need to describe, analyze, interpret, and judge the work. This will give them the information that they may need write the poem. Other resources students can use are: previous learning in their visual journal, graphic organizers, peer grouping, and other handouts (descriptive, sensory words, feelings, etc).

### **First Representational Reflective Self-Portrait and Poem**

Though one could argue that the task of creating art is a therapeutic one, not all agree with that sentiment. It is important to be cognizant of the fact that some students may not feel comfortable with this task. This is o.k. Students have various backgrounds and various entrance points. In addition, by moving into the more personal aspects of creation there will be some resistance from that, as well. I am hoping the previous activities will have built confidence and perhaps comfort in the process, therefore students can open their minds to self-reflection as it relates to their identity. In the next lesson students will be asked to draw a representational self-portrait of themselves demonstrating how they feel “right now.” This requires students to think about what they are feeling. Some will find this to be an easy task, others will struggle. Next, students will need to figure out how to draw a representational self-portrait that does not focus on realism, but on symbolism that is connected to their feelings. They will need to choose their materials and the elements and principles of design accordingly. Students need to write words either on their self-portrait or around it. The words will need to be made into a poem about their self-portrait. This can be integrated into the artwork if they choose. At the end of the activity, the entire class will get in a restorative circle. Students will be asked to share one word about how they felt at the beginning of the activity and one word about how they feel at the end of the activity. Whenever students are struggling or frustrated or you want to share, students can use the restorative circle practice technique to do this.

### **Second Representational Reflective Self-Portrait and Poem**

For this activity students will be asked to complete another representational self-portrait and poem. This will, like the first, be about how the students feel “right now” but at a different point in time. This activity needs to be repeated so that students feel comfortable with the process of self-expression reflecting their own lives. It teaches them to tune into their own feelings and use that energy to create. With each activity it is expected that students “dig deeper” and connect their feelings to the visual and the verbal more each time. It can be repeated as often as necessary. If students come to class and are agitated after riding the bus or some other negative experience, the familiarity of the therapeutic process of putting feelings to words and visuals will create a safe, relevant, and therapeutic way for students to express themselves.

### **“How Others View Me” Representational Self-Portrait and Poem**

To move away from what one thinks about themselves the next self-portrait and poem is for students to think about how others view them. It is important to give students time to think about this concept. Because it can be hard to do this visually, it would be better to begin with the words. First have students write down words describing what their peers, parents, teachers, and coaches think of them. With these cues students should be able to think of a visual and will be able to draw themselves. Again, representational self-portraits are expected. However, this will be difficult for students because they will want to be viewed by others as “whole” or good-looking. Because of this, there will be more efforts towards realism. The avoidance of realism in this unit is primarily so that students don’t get caught up in that aspect of visual creativity. The purpose of the self-portraits and poetry is to teach students to self-reflect about current, et al, states of being. This skill is

not understood by students who experience trauma. Teaching them to do it in a therapeutic, safe way will aid them in repairing harm to their self-identity. It is o.k. to let students determine their level of comfort with realism, but they should not be spending too much time on it.

### **“A Poem for a Friend”**

During this lesson students will pick one of their previously drawn self-portraits to share with the class. These will be displayed. Students will be randomly assigned to write a poem about one of them (this way every student gets a poem from another student). Students can use all of their resources to do this activity. If any struggle, they can use a graphic organizer to help them. If students feel comfortable they can share their poems with the person whom they wrote about or the class.

### **“Who I Will Become” Representational Self-Portrait and Poem**

Students will be asked to think about what or whom they want to be when they are grown. The age level they choose to represent here is up to them, but I would recommend it to be after high school. Students will begin this activity with words that they will construct into a poem. Afterward, students will draw a representational self-portrait showing what they think they will look like in the future, adding any additional information, if necessary. At this point I expect most students will be striving for realism with this self-portrait and that is permissible, as I stated earlier. But the purpose of representational self-portraits is to encourage students to focus more on their feelings and less on proper portraiture techniques.

### **“How I’ve Grown” Culminating Collage of all previous art and poems.**

For the culminating activity students will take apart their visual journals. They will create a collage of their previous created artworks and poems that they feel best represents themselves. Students can choose to combine them into one larger picture and poem or keep them separate. When students are finished their collages will be hung for display.

## **Resources for teachers**

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### **Pre-assessment**

“What in the World do I know?” is a handout to ask students what they already know before you begin. This will help activate their prior knowledge and set the tone for the new unit.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/45/91/e1/4591e1e94faa1e9139065ff5242422a3.png>

### **Reading Poetry**

“Close Reading Checklist” is a way for students to keep track of all of the steps involved in reading poetry.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/3e/6e/de/3e6ede8f92202cf022bcf3a029beca60.png>

“Analyzing a Poem” is a graphic organizer to help students document their findings as they read.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/2c/58/40/2c58402bac757efaa5bab08e521f66d8.png>

“How to Read Poetry” is a graphic organizer to help students with second and third readings (depending on

the age level). It is a middle step between the initial read and connecting to it to a deeper meaning. The URL to access it is: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/f3/50/22/f3502276517f6257e7fa01d1f483e7.png>

“Question Cards” for a close reading (needs to be copied on cardstock and cut apart). These are designed to help students ask students questions that get them to dig deeper in to a poem’s meaning. The ones in blue letters are summative. Some of these questions are on the previous handout, “How to Read Poetry.”

Page 1: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/9f/94/42/9f9442c81a5e45f8ef5c90cecc89283a.png>

Page 2: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/55/33/f4/5533f4c5303464bcf3fe5e7c919bd6a2.png>

Page 3: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/32/6a/3b/326a3b369c077744971b9264c6acec12.png>

<https://www.lauracandler.com/files/literacy/poetry/> is a poetry resource page for young children.

### **Looking at Art**

“Art Critique” has the four domains of art criticism on it for students to look at while analyzing art.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c6/5d/1e/c65d1e81bf2e10499e3f576f48cc117d.png>

This URL is a graphic organizer for students to write on when looking at art. It can be accessed here by copying and pasting it in your browser: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/0e/37/d4/0e37d4eebfc26389ef976563973e4d.png>

“Looking at Art” is a resource for younger children to use when analyzing artwork.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/f0/a5/fb/f0a5fb57962c54708b6038ec2df31f56.png>

### **Writing Ekphrastic Poetry**

“Writing an Ekphrastic Poem” graphic organizer is a basic form for getting started.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/8d/e7/c2/8de7c27a9d45d17f4de9e471494050de.png>

“Descriptive Sensory Words” will help students increase their vocabulary by giving them a list of words to use when trying to add meaning to their poems.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c8/57/23/c857233ba275c4de58da9c9ebda8d3c8.png>

“Feeling Words” will help students when looking for words to describe how they or someone else might feel.

Page 1: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/da/36/07/da36075bb4970bae979280d522c5a955.png>

Page 2: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/a5/a4/5c/a5a45c545c460a0d0095350a439b875b60e4.png>

“I am Poem” is a graphic organizer to write a poem about themselves. It gives students specific prompts to help them. This is useful for students who are struggling.

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/0f/da/6d/0fda6deb0e7eb4f5857b5528a0b09042.png>

### **More Links for Writing Ekphrastic Poetry**

You will need to copy and paste the URLs directly in your browser.



<http://descriptivewords.org/> lists descriptive words alphabetically by type.

<https://www.readinga-z.com/writing/poetry-writing-lessons/> lists poetry writing lessons with different forms.

[http://carliebence.weebly.com/uploads/2/5/2/7/25276845/la\\_freeverse\\_poemgraphicorganizer.pdf](http://carliebence.weebly.com/uploads/2/5/2/7/25276845/la_freeverse_poemgraphicorganizer.pdf) is a free verse poem graphic organizer that can help students organize their work.

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## Appendix

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### Standards

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the following standard when doing the close readings of the poems and when writing poetry as described above:

Standard - CC.1.2.5.F-Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in grade-level text, including interpretation of figurative language.

Eligible Content - E05.B-V.4.1.2 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. a. Interpret figurative language (simile, metaphor, and personification) in context. b. Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs. c. Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homographs) to better understand each of the words.

### Objectives

Students will explore the use of figurative language, especially similes, metaphors, personification, and alliteration. Students will:

- identify examples of similes and interpret their use.
- identify examples of metaphors and interpret their use.
- identify examples of personification and interpret their use.
- identify examples of alliteration and interpret their use.
- draw conclusions about how figurative language enhances text.

### Essential Questions

How do learners develop and refine their vocabulary?

What strategies and resources do I use to figure out unknown vocabulary?

What strategies and resources does the learner use to figure out unknown vocabulary?

Why learn new words?

- How does interaction with text provoke thinking and response?
- Why learn new words?
- How do strategic readers create meaning from informational and literary text?
- What strategies and resources do readers use to figure out unknown vocabulary?
- How do learners develop and refine their vocabulary?

## Notes

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1. McInerney, Cross referenced demographic numbers of trauma affected school age students.
2. Massachusetts, Schwartz, Dotson, Arseneault, and Kiebel all state the various reasons for trauma centered schools.
3. Massachusetts Advocates for Children, the interrelationship of trauma.
4. Dotson, services being provided are reactive and not enough.
5. Massachusetts Advocates for Children, self-concept and self-identity.
6. Congos, Mnemonics.

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