

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

IMAGING WORDS

Grades: K-12

SUMMARY: Georgia O'Keeffe wrote thousands of letters throughout her lifetime. In this lesson students will read some of O'Keeffe's writing and consider how words can translate into visual images and vice versa. *This lesson is meant to be flexible. Please adapt for the level of your students and your individual curriculum.*

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will...

- Read and analyze a descriptive letter written by Georgia O'Keeffe
- Become acquainted with the genre of descriptive writing and identify the differences between "telling" and "showing"
- Write a short descriptive writing piece that illustrates a memorable scene or experience



Letter from Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, with enclosed photographs, July 6, 1944
© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

INSTRUCTION:

Engage: Georgia O'Keeffe wanted her paintings to communicate what she saw and felt. Think about your visit to the Museum. *Which paintings made you feel happy, sad, excited, lonely, peaceful, scared etc...? What about those paintings made you feel that way?* Think about the color, the shapes, the lines. A painting with very few shapes, cool colors and smooth lines might make you feel calm while a painting with vivid, bright colors, many interlocking shapes and a cramped composition might make you feel anxious or trapped. (If you need a reminder- look at the images provided with this lesson)

Build Knowledge:

1. Georgia O'Keeffe not only wanted her paintings to communicate what she saw and felt, but also her letters. O'Keeffe wrote hundreds, maybe even thousands of letters throughout her lifetime. She wrote many different kinds of letters for many different reasons to many different people- letters about her paintings and business, love letters, funny letters, sad letters, angry letters, and philosophical letters. Often, she would describe the world around her so that friends far away could see what she saw and feel what she felt.
2. Read an excerpt of one of Georgia O'Keeffe's letters (following this lesson). As the letter is being read aloud, quickly sketch what you see and feel in the words. When the reading is finished, share your drawings in small groups or as a class. *What did you choose to draw? Why? Did anyone draw the same thing? How did you communicate the feeling of the scene?*
3. Hand out a copy of the letter. Highlight or underline the sentences or phrases that are the most descriptive, and help you to see what O'Keeffe was seeing. Share these sentences or phrases with your group. *What makes these sentences or phrases descriptive?*
4. There are two different ways to describe a scene. One is to "tell" the reader what happened- "I went on a walk in the mountains yesterday." Another is to "show" the reader what happened. *How could you "show" the reader what a walk in the mountains is like?* Paint a scene with words. Use sensory details. *What does it sound like? Taste like? Smell like? What colors do you see?* Consider using comparative language like similes and metaphors to help the reader understand what you felt as you walked through the mountains.
5. Try writing a description as a class. Make each sentence more descriptive than the last.

Apply:

Compose a descriptive letter

1. Visualize a place. Sometimes it helps to close your eyes! Maybe this place is a place you love to go or maybe it's a scary place or a sad place. Once you have this image in mind, describe how it felt to be in your place. *What did you hear? What did you feel? Did you eat anything? What did it taste like? What did it smell like?* Describe the people you interacted with. *Were they loud or silent? Funny or mean or somewhere in between?*
2. *How could you turn this writing into a letter?* Discuss the formal elements of a letter. Begin with a salutation and a short introduction telling the recipient why you're writing the letter. Include your descriptive writing as the body of the letter and conclude with a paragraph that wraps everything up. Wish the recipient well and sign your name.
3. When your letter is finished, switch letters with a classmate. Read your classmate's letter and create a drawing or painting of the scene. Think about how it might feel to be in this place. *What is around you? Is it night or day? Rainy, sunny, cold or warm? What colors, lines and shapes can you use to communicate this feeling?*
4. Return the letter to your classmate and share the painting you made. *How does the drawing compare to your classmate's experience? What is similar? What is different? Why do you think this is?*

Reflect:

How did it feel to write your letter? Did it feel different from texting or calling or emailing? How? Why?

ASSESS:

Assess your students on the completion of the following tasks:

- Use of effective descriptive language in the letter
- Format and composition of the letter
- Use of color, design and shape to communicate an experience as described by a classmate
- Ability to collaborate with their peers

The following letter was written by Georgia O'Keeffe when she was teaching art at the West Texas State Normal College in Canyon, Texas. The letter is written to O'Keeffe's good friend Anita Pollitzer who she met when they were both students at the Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City.

[Canyon, Texas, 11 September 1916]

Tonight I walked into the sunset - to mail some letters- the whole sky- and there is so much of it out here- was just blazing - and grey blue clouds were rioting all through the hotness of it - and the ugly little buildings and windmills looked great against it.

But some way or other I didn't seem to like the redness much so after I mailed the letters I walked home - and kept on walking-

The Eastern sky was all grey blue- bunches of clouds - different kinds of clouds - sticking around everywhere and the whole thing - lit up - first in one place - then in another with flashes of lightning - sometimes just sheet lightning- and sometimes sheet lightning with a sharp bright zigzag flashing across it - .

I walked out past the last house - past the last locust tree - and sat on the fence for a long time - looking - just looking at the lightning - you see there was nothing but sky and flat prairie land - land that seems more like the ocean than anything else I know - There was a wonderful moon -

Well I just sat there and had a great time all by myself - Not even many night noises - just the wind -

I wondered what you are doing -

It is absurd the way I love this country - Then when I came back - it was funny - roads just shoot across blocks anywhere - all the houses looked alike - and I almost got lost - I had to laugh at myself - I couldn't tell which house was home -

I am loving the plains more than ever it seems- and the SKY - Anita you have never seen SKY - it is wonderful -

Cowart, Jack and Juan Hamilton. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*. Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1987. p.