

# Disability and the Arts: Descriptive Writing Activities

This activity sheet includes poetry and prose exercises as well as information designed to help students understand and experiment with writing designed to describe visual art to individuals who are blind or partially sighted.

## First Activity: Poetry Through the Senses

These poetry activities are designed to help writers of all ages increase their use of sensory descriptions to make their writing more immediate and vivid. Introduce the activity by talking about the five senses. We all experience our senses differently. Some people are extra sensitive to or aware of one or more senses and others may not be able to use one sense or may find it difficult or even painful to focus on a particular sensory experience. In these activities we ask writers to focus on a particular sensory awareness that is available to them and that they are comfortable using or willing to explore.

Using one of the poetry ideas below, have each person work independently to create a poem that could be used to portray or recreate an object using information from different senses. Depending on time available, students may read their poems aloud or create a classroom display of their work (bulletin board or class poetry book). Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a whole class to create their poems.

**Object Poems:** Take a few minutes to choose an object and brainstorm words and phrases that describe it without using visual descriptions. Then write a poem about this object, using some of the most compelling language from your brainstorming session. For example, a birch tree may be white or gold or gray in color but describe how it sounds in the wind, what the bark and leaves feel like when you touch them. Try creating separate stanzas that describe the object through each of the senses (touch, hearing, vision, smell or taste).

Try doing this as group writing activity. Each team member works alone on the first draft of one stanza and then everyone works together to edit the poem.

**Experiencing Colors:** Write a poem that describes colors without using visual descriptions. As you work with each color, think about your response to the color, how it makes you feel — what memories it brings up.

Write the template below on the board or copy it on worksheets and have students complete each line to create a poem and capture the memories or feelings that belong with the color. Encourage students to think about how they can describe each color using feelings, memories, taste, sound, touch and smell rather than visual images. Instructors may offer students additional suggestions

or requirements regarding the use of rhyming words or specific vocabulary words.

Colors

Red like a . . .

Blue like a . . .

Green like a . . .

Black like a . . .

Orange like a . . .

White like a . . .

Brown like a . . .

Purple like a . . .

**Sound Poem:** Write a poem that explains different sounds. Encourage students to creatively utilize sight, smell, touch and taste descriptions to describe each sound. Use the guidelines as described for the Vision Poem.

### Sounds

An alarm clock ringing like a...

A baby crying like a...

Frogs croaking like a...

Leaves rustling in the wind like a...

A cat meowing like a...

A motorcycle roaring like a...

Ducks quacking like a...

**Colors and Sound Poems, Step 2:** Take one of these poems and try moving from describing the sound as being “like” or “as” something to describing a sound as being something else, without the use of similes (such as like or as). The object can be named in the title of the poem but not explicitly named in the body of the poem.

## Second Activity: Using Prose for a Purpose

This activity is designed to introduce students to written and audio descriptions of art, film and performances; and to give them an opportunity to experience and be able to understand the difference between written and/or audio description of someone’s work and writing or verbalizing their own personal interpretation of or response to a visual work of art.

### **What is an Audio Description?**

What if you could not see a person’s artwork, a stage set, a movie or other art form that requires sight? You might still be interested in knowing about a painting or having the visual images in a film or play or other artwork explained so that you can understand what is going on or understand what the artists or performers are doing visually. Written and audio descriptions are meant to provide information about what is visually happening in television programs, films and theater to people who are blind or have vision impairments. Similarly, audio or text descriptions of paintings, prints and other visual arts are used to describe the art to someone who cannot see it.

Written and audio description is intended to describe what the author does to create a particular work of art (e.g. painting, print, film or performance). In contrast, a personal or professional critique or review of a work of art is intended

to share someone else's ideas about or responses to particular productions or works of art. Describing the meaning you find in someone's art is as important as describing the artwork itself, but it is a very different skill and serves a different purpose.

Examples of visual arts and text and audio descriptions from VSA Vermont are included with this lesson. Review one or two of these and be ready to discuss them with the class. If time allows, you could also watch a portion of a movie or television show that uses audio description and then ask people to describe how this is different from what we do when we describe a film or speak about how a painting or dance made us feel.

### **Writing Personal or Professional Responses to and Assessments of Art**

Generally, the text and audio descriptions we see or hear at a museum or art exhibit have been done by people who are trained to carefully describe visual or multimedia art to someone who cannot see. Audio description is very different from using words to describe our responses to a work of art or analyzing it for historical, cultural, or personal meaning.

We may analyze or interpret art, giving our own response to or knowledge and understanding of a painting, drawing, film, dance, sculpture or other visual or multimedia creation to explain it to others. This is a subjective or personal response to someone else's creation, though it can be grounded in expert knowledge of the artist and/or the art form. Some artists choose to interpret or explain their own visual or multimedia art in words; others choose not to do this, wanting the art to be experienced for what it is rather than explained through words.

### **Activity: Exploring Two Different Forms of Descriptive Writing**

Getting Ready: Review the artwork and audio descriptions provided with this Include! lesson and obtain a sample of an audio description of a television program or movie. Samples may be available on the Internet, through a local video store or through educational specialists in your district who work with students with disabilities. In addition, you may also contact local community organizations working with individuals who are blind or have low vision. Explore the written and audio descriptions of the Engage exhibit posted on this website, or use one of the resources available through [the Audio Description Project's website](#). Reserve the use of AV equipment as needed.

Review samples of audio description from VSA Arts, from television, or from an online source. Examples from VSA Vermont are included with this lesson.

A Writing Experiment: Try writing about the feeling you get from viewing a certain piece of visual art, either your own work or someone else's. Then try using words

to describe only what the artist has done visually to create the art. After doing these writing activities, come together to discuss what each writing experience was like. Which one was easier for you? What did you learn from each activity?