

TELLING

An Object's Story

Overview

During a museum visit, students select objects to study and describe, then write stories based on their observations of and reactions to the objects.

Objectives

Students will

- closely observe cultural objects and list concrete details about them
- select important details to include in a descriptive paragraph
- distinguish between objective and subjective language
- write a descriptive text using only objective details
- write a story using both objective and subjective language

Subjects/Skills

- archaeology, anthropology, history, language arts, art
- observation, description, evaluation, comparison, interpretation, composition, drawing

Age Level

Grades 6–10

Materials

- paper and pens or pencils
- clipboards

Time Required

Allow 1–2 hours to prepare for this activity and 1–3 hours at the museum. Optionally, the final step of the activity can be done during a class period.

Background

Whether objects that they recover are whole or fragmentary, an archaeolo-

gist must analyze the characteristics of each artifact—such as shape, size, fabric, decoration, and mode of construction—and then try to determine its function. This latter quality is sometimes hard to assess, and archaeologists take care not to assign a function based on modern perceptions about what people need and the tools they make.

In addition, a researcher may have subjective or emotional reactions to an artifact because of its attributes, symbolism, or the statements it makes about a past population. In writing about their finds, archaeologists emphasize the objective details, although they sometimes weave their subjective responses into the story as well.

In an activity that combines the observation of objects with a writing exercise, teachers make use of the rich array of cultural materials available at local museums. Adapted from a lesson plan in which paintings are the focus of attention, the activity as presented here can be tailored further, based on current classroom topics or the age and abilities of students. For example, the lesson can complement an archaeology unit by demonstrating one of the tasks that archaeologists perform; or it can be used to highlight artifacts from a particular culture or time period.

Older students may be able to work with limited supervision in different areas of the museum, while younger students should be kept together in a single gallery. In selecting their artifacts for study, students should avoid objects that have few distinctive attributes, such as a plain pot sherd; and avoid reading interpretive labels, focusing instead on the qualities of the artifact.

Vocabulary

artifact — any object made, modified, or used by humans

attribute — a characteristic or prop-

erty of an object, such as weight, size, or color

culture — a set of learned beliefs, values, and behaviors—the way of life—shared by members of a society

historic — a term referring to past eras or cultures in which or about which written records were made

prehistoric — a term referring to past eras or cultures in which or about which written records were not made

Preparation

1. Select a local museum to use for this activity, then visit it to become familiar with the exhibits. Note the locations of objects that students can study during the exercise.

2. Contact the museum education or program staff to make a reservation (if necessary) and to ask whether there is a quiet area—perhaps a corner of a gallery—where you can conduct part of the lesson without being disturbed.

3. If necessary, model the activity in class before the field trip so students will know what to expect. Bring a selection of “thingamajigs”—objects that are not readily identifiable—to class and guide students through the steps 2–5 of the lesson plan.

4. Gather writing materials.

Procedure

1. *Students select an object to study.*

Lead students on a brief tour of the museum, pointing out several objects that you find appropriate for the activity. Tell them to note the locations of artifacts that interest them and explain that each person will write about a different object. Then instruct each person to choose an item for the assignment.

2. *Students make a list of the details, or attributes, of their object.*

Allow students a few minutes to observe their artifact, then instruct them



When students study and write about objects that may be unusual or unfamiliar, they learn to appreciate the significance of artifacts, and the people who made them.



to make a list of as many details as possible that describe its appearance. The list should include physical attributes rather than subjective observations, assumptions, or emotions that the artifact evokes. For example, a student might write, "pointed stone object with nicks along the edges of both sides," but avoid such language as "small, perfect arrowhead used for hunting."

3. Students write descriptions of their objects.

Gather students in the quiet area identified during preparations. Allow them several minutes to write a description of their object based on the list that they compiled. Explain that the description should enable someone else to find the artifact in the museum. Tell students not to include all of the attributes that they listed, but rather to select the most important or distinctive traits; and remind them again to avoid making subjective remarks or assumptions. For now, the point is to focus on the physical details of the object.

4. Volunteers read their descriptions aloud.

Select a few volunteers to share their descriptions. After each one, ask listeners to state whatever details they remember. If two students wrote about similar artifacts, discuss similarities and differences in the two descriptions. Discuss any subjective language or assumptions that may have slipped into the descriptions, explaining that the focus at this stage is to give "just the facts." Ask students how subjective language can portray more than the facts.

5. Students create drawings based on each other's descriptions.

Divide students into teams, ensuring that students who worked on similar artifacts are not paired. Instruct team members to exchange artifact descriptions and to draw an illustration of the other's object.

6. Students attempt to find their partner's object.

Give students 10 minutes to try to find the object described by their partner. They may use the descriptions and drawings, and they should work in teams, although partners should not give each other hints as they search.

7. Students evaluate the written descriptions.

When the search time has elapsed, reconvene students in the quiet area and ask how many located their partner's object. Invite several teams to share their descriptions and drawings with the rest of the class, using these examples to discuss aspects of the descriptions in general that were useful in helping to draw an artifact and find it in the museum, as well as ways in which descriptions could have been improved. If time permits, take students to an artifact that no one has studied, preferably one with many attributes, and collectively create a descriptive list of its details, asking students to draw on the experiences that they have just had.

8. Students write stories about their objects.

To help students combine the visible aspects of cultural items with the feelings and ideas that they inspire, ask students to write a story about their artifact. Explain that they may use their descriptions or return to the object; and, unlike their descriptions, the stories do

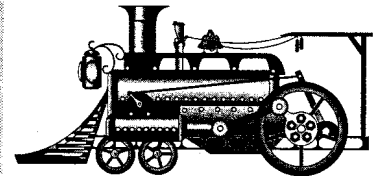
not have to stick to the facts. The inclusion of emotions, assumptions, and subjective language is quite acceptable.

9. Students share their stories.

(This step can be done at the museum or in the classroom.)

Ask students to read their stories aloud to their classmates.

The concept and portions of the text for this activity have been adapted from "Telling a Painting's Story," in Collecting Their Thoughts: Using Museums as Resources for Student Writing, pp. 13-17, produced by the Smithsonian Institution Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The activity was adapted by KC Smith, Museum of Florida History, Tallahassee, FL.



The Education Station invites examples of lesson plans and activity ideas, comments about useful resources, and articles about unique approaches to teaching archaeology. Please accompany material with illustrations and black and white photos. Do not send color slides or negatives.

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