

RA



Storytelling

Royal
Academy
of Arts

attRAct resources
Produced by RA Learning

Summer 2021

Storytelling

Introduction

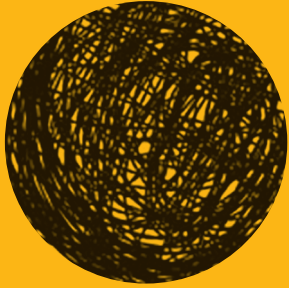
The history of words and art is long and intermingled. Mediaeval manuscripts were often 'illuminated' with elaborate, decorative illustrated borders. Dadaists and Surrealists in early twentieth century Europe overlaid photographs with **found text** or **cut-ups** as an aesthetic form of anti-capitalist protest. More recently, artists like Cy Twombly, Shahab Fotouhi, Fiona Banner RA, Roni Horn, Ray Yoshida, and many others have incorporated elements of myth, literature, and other text into their works of art.

Ekphrasis, or writing that explores a work of art, is over 2,000 years old, and poets like John Keates, Brenda Cárdenas, Cole Swensen, Anne Sexton, Angel Nafis, Douglas Kearney, and Iyawó have used the technique to write about everything from urns to graffiti. For this activity, we've pulled together six works of art from our collection to help you get started exploring art through writing.

Cover image

Visitors, queues and installation photography of the exhibition
Turner 1775–1851, 1974–1975. Silver gelatin print.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.

Activity



Choose one of the following selected works and respond to it with words. Instead of researching your chosen artwork by looking into the artists' biographies or the history and context of the art work, try to interpret the artwork yourself. Writing can be a useful way to access new approaches and avenues of creativity, based on feeling, instinct and observation so don't be afraid to act on your instincts and the impression that the artwork makes on you and your imagination.

Take some time to really **LOOK** at the artwork, in order to try to understand it better. You can be as fantastical, ridiculous, phenomenal, exaggerated and/or every day as you like. You can respond through words in any way that comes naturally to you—perhaps you would like to write a haiku or a poem, a mind map or an unconscious stream of writing, or perhaps you would like to write a longer piece—a story or even a mini-essay about how you interpret the artwork.

You can respond with one word or write an epic—it's up to you!

What you need

- a notebook or computer to write with
- a quiet space
- an open mind

Not sure how or where to start?

Trying to write about art can be intimidating at first. If you're stuck, why don't you try one of these starting points or 'ways in'.

Narrative What are your immediate reactions to the artwork? What do you think the artist was trying to convey? Are there any details which support the narrative? Or which provide clues to what's happening in the artwork?

Character Is there anyone in the artwork? What do they look like? Who do you think they are? Who is missing?

Colour How do the colours in the artwork affect your mood or provoke an emotion?

Perspective Will you write your piece in the first, second or third person? How can this point of view affect the way that your written piece is perceived?

Working as a group? Try a game of Pass On

Why don't you partner up with a friend or a group of friends and try the Pass On Game? This is a simple activity designed to encourage you to think about how visual images can be translated into words.

- Print out the artworks
- Place them face down on a table
- Have each participant pick up one of the printed images
- Keeping the artwork hidden, write a description of the picture in your own words
- Swap your descriptions
- Create your own painting from the description you've received
- Show your paintings to each other
- Compare the two images! Do they look similar? Think about how elements of the written description worked to convey the original imagery. What was successful and what didn't work as well?



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1 Jock MacFadyen RA, *K.M.B.*, 2007–2008.
Oil on canvas. 1230 mm x 1830 mm. © Royal Academy of Arts.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates.

2 L.S. Lowry RA, *Station Approach*, 1962.
Oil on board. 407 mm x 509 mm x 4 mm. © Royal Academy of Arts. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates Limited.

3 Augustus Egg RA, *The Night before Naseby*, 1859.
Oil on canvas. 1016 mm x 1270 mm x 25 mm.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: John Hammond.



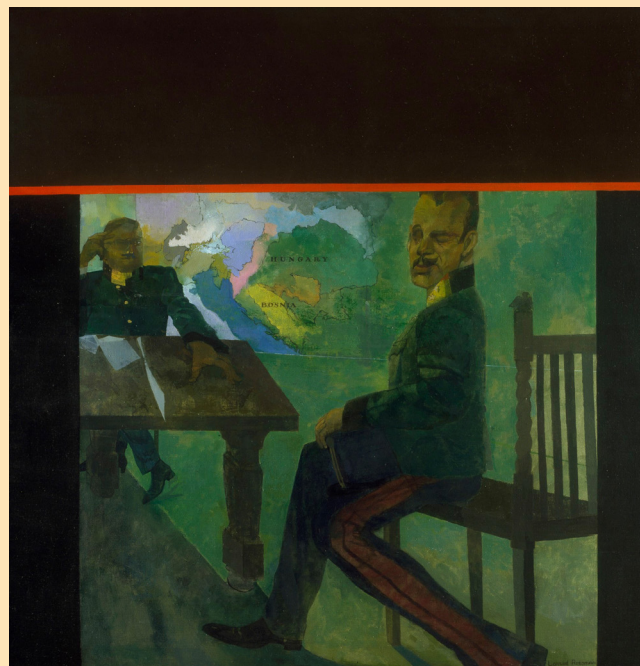
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4 Yinka Shonibare RA, *Cheeky Little Astronomer*, 2013.
Fibre glass life-sized mannequin, dutch wax printed cotton textile, leather, resin, chair, globe and telescope, 1230 mm x 470 mm x 900 mm. © Royal Academy of Arts.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Steve White.

5 Harriet Lassalle, *Disco Dancing No 3*, c.1982.
Oil on cottonduck. 1523 mm x 1530 mm x 20 mm.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.



6



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6 Leonard Rosoman RA, *The Promotion No. 1*, 1968.
Acrylic on canvas. 1220 mm x 1220 mm. © Royal Academy of Arts.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.
Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates Limited.

7 Gabriella Boyd, *Sunhead*, 2017.
Oil on canvas, 1600 mm x 1200 mm. © The Artist. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: Prudence Cuming Associates



8



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8 Henry George Hoyland, *Clowns' Dressing Room*, 1940.
Oil on board. 684 mm x 1018 mm.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.

9 Alfred Heyworth, *Millers Court*, c. 1976.
Oil on canvas. 610 mm x 913 mm x 15 mm
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.

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13



10 Charles West Cope RA, *The Night Alarm: the Advance!*, 1871.
Oil on canvas. 1502 mm x 996 mm x 25 mm.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: John Hammond.

11 Visitors, queues and installation photography of the exhibition *Turner 1775–1851*, 1974–1975. Silver gelatin print. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.

12 Sir William Orpen RA, *Le Chef de l'Hôtel Chatham, Paris*, c. 1921.
Oil on canvas. 1270 mm x 1025 mm x 25 mm.
© Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London. Photographer: John Hammond.

13 Charles W. Stewart, *Titus's Tenth Birthday*, 1974.
Pencil, black pen, wash and gouache. 221 mm x 147 mm.
© Royal Academy of Arts. © Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London.



‘Petrified’ by Lily

As she pulled the door shut the light filtered out, forcing the warm glow of the candle upon us and the dark shadows scuttling up the walls.

The drumming beat of hearts surrounded me, growing louder with every passing second. No one dared to move, no one would’ve been able to, weighed down by the air, heavy and thick, cold and unpleasant. It pales in comparison to what lies beyond the creaking timbers.

There came a sound from the far end of the hallway, it sent every hair standing upright, rigid from fear. An ear-splitting scrape, the kind that worms its way in, makes itself at home and is very content with your squirms of displeasure. It was continuous, unending and cacophonous, finding its way along, carving deep into the walls. Each second it grew closer it became louder and those around me clung tightly, forcing the weight upon my shoulders.

As it neared I took one last turning glance at the crowd that surrounded, their eyes gazed deep into mine pleading desperately. With a few quick movements I signalled that I would blow out the candle, I was hoping for one last factor that might tip the odds in our favour. No one moved, no one dared to make a sound. And so the decision was final.

I moved my lips to the quiet flame, the scraping noise nearing ever closer, echoing so vigorously it started to take a physical toll. Hands darted up to the ears, knees buckling under pressure, eyes squeezing tightly shut as if the newfound blindness could halt whatever creature prowled beyond. With one quick puff the light was out and darkness consumed us entirely. In the absence of the candlelight I was surrounded yet utterly alone, completely isolated from those around me despite their warmth that hung tightly to the air I breathed.

There was a harsh splintering crack from the wood in front, it sounded like a dog gnawing on leftover bones as it dragged past us at an excruciating rate. Once it had passed there were no sighs of relief, no softening of the muscles because no sooner than it had passed had a second equally disturbing sound broken out.

A dark rumbling from beyond the door, odious and guttural, building up in the belly of the beast until it cascaded outwards, annihilating any other sound dared to hang in the air. Then the scratching persisted, vicious claws dragged up and down. Why hadn't it moved on? What had made it stop? It followed the grain of the wood carving deeper and deeper, relentlessly chipping away. Any second now that door was going to give way, it was going to rip through and we were defenceless, huddled together hoping for a miracle.

And then it stopped, sudden, almost disappointing, it was as if we had entered a vacuum, void of all sound.

I gained no relief from the ceasing of its auditory battery. It only provoked the rise of poisonous questions, the burden to answer them burning in my mind. I will never know what caused such terror that night and hopefully I will never have the displeasure of satisfying that sick curiosity. It never came again. But the marks in the door are still ever present.



Poppy

They loved it. The 'thank yous' still ring in his ears and he can faintly hear the click of their high-heels and shrill cries as they clip-clop down the street.

"Yes Sir, the dish was Quite Superb- Delicious- Tangy- Sweet, but not too sickly- Sour, but not too tart- Quite Excellent, yes, thank you Sir, yes, goodbye now."

It's a funny time of day, when the sun fails the sky and the world is washed with grey.

He surveys the restaurant: the surfaces are clean, chairs tucked away, dishes half-washed- another stack to go. The sight of the stacked chairs disturbs him. A couple of hours ago warm bodies filled them, laughing, sharing stories and being.

It's a funny time of day, when the customers go home.

A void seems to open up in the middle of the stone floor; without the voices of others he's no longer the famous chef but a lonely man standing in the middle of a dark, stone room.

He doesn't know why they flood to his restaurant when at night it so easily resembles a prison cell.

He chokes back his wine. Another day, another batch of sales, success. Yes, success. Success he tells himself as the wine slips down his throat. Better get to those last few dishes.

He picks up a plate but drops it. The pale ceramic pieces glare at him. His hands shake. A smashed plate is no big deal-isn't it? No really, he's always believed in not crying over spilt milk. Yet, as this giant of a man sits at 7pm on a Thursday Night, picking up the pieces, he finds that tears are lolling down his face. Because the pieces are really everywhere, and one of his fingers is actually bleeding now and the room is so empty- when did it become so empty?

Because the silence bit him bad. Because he's nothing more or less than a lone man in a dark stone room.



‘Full Moon’ by Jane

Moon lit night bath sprinkled with fireflies
Oh! What a wonderful time to celebrate
Horses and foxes aced by the king of animal races
Double handed daggers are a lion's innate

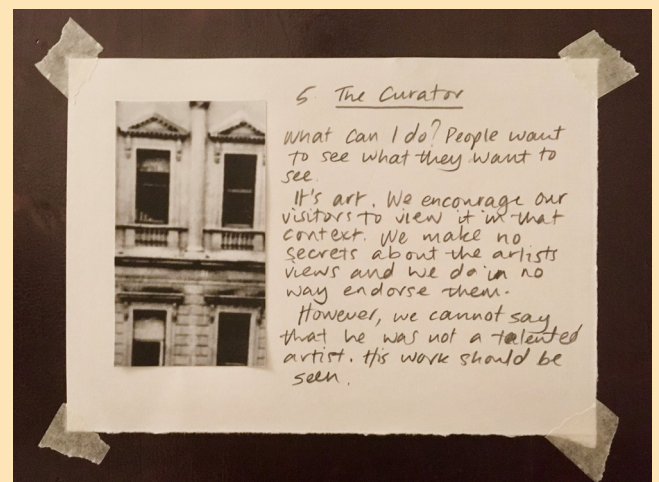
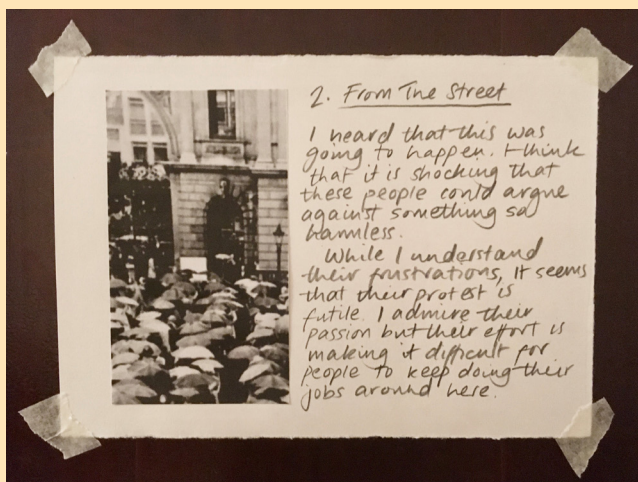
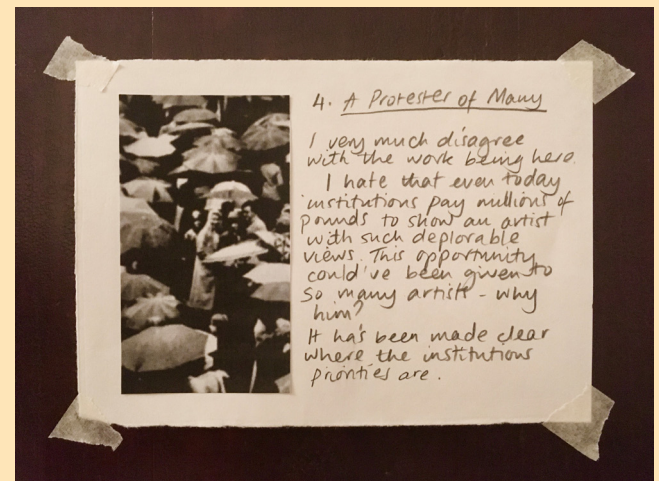
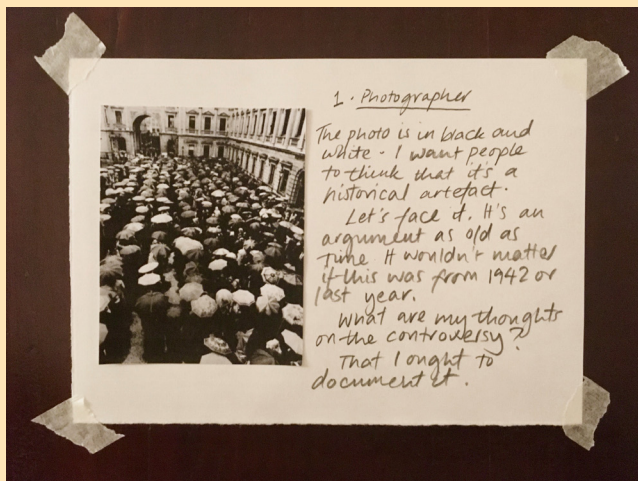
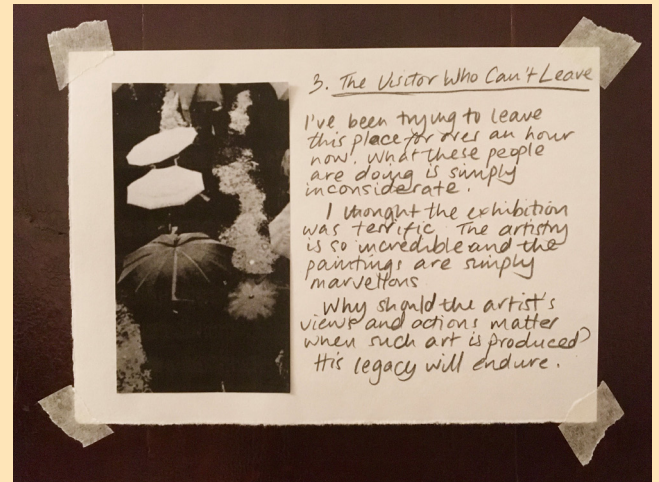
Raced to the front of the stage reflecting
Vaguely remembers the nostalgic gathering
Bright light echoes throughout the crowd
As if the party is now crying out loud

Hokusai-like mountains hover in the distance
Claw-like trees curl up to hug the frame
Stars wink at the moon for its entrance
Religion really is a dark game

The lucid sky dilute lingering body odours
Fire torches release a column of stinging colours
I feel like I'm in "It's a Small World" in Disneyland
But only to catch glimpses of chess pieces on Neverland



Aparna



Glossary

Ekphrasis is the use of detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device.

Wordscapes Fiona Banner's 'wordscapes' are landscape paintings comprising Banner's own descriptions of the frame-by-frame action in Hollywood war films

Illuminated Manuscripts are hand-written books produced between the 12th and 15th centuries and illuminated with gold, silver, and other expensive pigments. Monasteries were responsible for the earliest examples of illumination but as they became prized items, wealthy patrons wanted them for their personal libraries and so helped establish private workshops. After the advent of the mass production of printed text, illuminated manuscripts became less and less common.

First, second, and third person are ways of describing points of view.

The first person perspective is used to talk about ourselves, our feelings, and experiences; the pronouns we, us, our, and ourselves or I, me, my, mine and myself are used to tell first person narratives. Lots of stories are written from this perspective because it gives you quite a direct insight into a character's mind, choices, and motivations.

The second person perspective is used to talk to the person (or people) being addressed; the pronouns you, your, yours, yourself, yourselves are used to tell second person narratives. Stories using the second person are rarer than first or third person stories, but they do exist. The novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino is a very famous example of the second person and more recent examples include *Booked* by Kwame Alexander and much of the short story collection *Self-Help* by Lorrie Moore.

The third person is used to talk about the person (or people) being talked about; the pronouns he, him, his, himself, she, her, hers, herself, it, its, itself, they, them, their, theirs, and themselves/themself are used to tell third person narratives. Stories told from this perspective often involve a disembodied narrator who describes what the characters do and what happens to them.

Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry where there are three lines, which in total make up 17 syllables. Line one has five, line two has seven and line three has five.

found text is often referred to as the literary equivalent of a collage. Found poems are often composed by refashioning or reordering newspaper cuttings, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, books, and other poems and presenting them as new poems.

Cut-ups are closely related to found text. It refers to a written text that is made by cutting up a written text and rearranging it to create a new text. Dadaists and surrealists used this technique and it was very popular in the 1950s and 1960s amongst writers such as William Burroughs.