



## Nine Ways to Use Visual Art as a Prewriting Strategy

*Marlyn Press and Linda Epstein*

### **ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the use of art in developing students' prewriting ability. The activities, strategies, and objects used provide students with the background knowledge, motivation, vocabulary, structure, and fluency they need to compose and rehearse written pieces. The article describes research conducted on the effects of combining art with writing instruction. Finally, the article shows how various art activities and lessons help children develop strategies for improving their prewriting by providing a solid base of ideas and text structures at this initial stage.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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The authors have worked on a number of articles involving the use of art as a means of improving literacy instruction, especially as a means of developing writing skills.

Take a look into two very different classrooms. In both rooms, the lesson is on writing. In both rooms, the students have been taught the content and structure of the text they are to write. The teachers have taught and provided practice in the steps of the writing process. The age, ability level and background of the children are as equal as possible. In both rooms, the children are working on the beginning steps of their writing assignment.

In the first room, children are having difficulty getting started. They cannot get ideas and words on paper. They cannot decide on the order and structure of their paper. They require much help from the teacher. They talk with each other, but their discussions are fruitless. Little writing is actually going on and you can see that the children and teacher are becoming frustrated.

In the second room, the children are easily jotting down ideas and words that they plan to use in their writing. Many students have decided on the order in which ideas in their writing will take place. They are conferring with each other and the teacher, but their discussions are focused and everyone seems satisfied that they are getting where they want to go.

What is the difference in these two classes? In the second classroom, the teacher has used a variety of strategies and activities involving art that have provided the students with the words, ideas and structure for their writing. In the first class, the teacher has not used art to any great extent, and it is evident.



One possible way to increase fluency and interest in writing is by using artistic activities to help students at the prewriting step. Short, Kauffman and Kahn (2000) report that by “giving students a few minutes to quietly sketch or write about a book before gathering for group discussion...they have time to prepare for the discussion by thinking about personal connections” (p. 164). These drawings serve as a rehearsal for writing and help develop fluency ( Miller, 2000). This allows students to rehearse the words they want to use in their writing and remove the difficulties of spelling and vocabulary. Students determine the structure and order of the text they will write at this prewriting stage. Bartel (2005) describes a program where by integrating the fine and language arts, children connect their skills in drawing, play, singing, and dancing with pre-reading and pre-writing activities.

Children who have difficulty with written and/or oral language may find that artistic expression helps them organize their thoughts and rehearse their means of expressing them (Hoyt, 1992). Using the visual arts enables students to gain better eye-hand co-ordination, visual representation skills communicate ideas and expressing thoughts through symbols (Richardson, Sacks & Ayers, 2003). In real life, people move among symbol systems; only in schools do we restrict children to one symbol system (Short, Kaffman, and Kahn, 2000).

This article will look at the use of both student and artist created works of art as pre-writing activities. These activities provide students with the background knowledge, motivation, vocabulary, structure and fluency they need to compose and rehearse written pieces. The article will describe research conducted on the effects of combining art with writing. It will then show how nine specific art activities serve to help children improve their writing by providing a solid base of ideas and a text structure at the prewriting stage. Three aspects of art as a pre-writing strategy will be examined in this article. First, programs that utilize student created art will be described. Next, the article will describe programs that utilize other artist’s work as the stimulus for writing. Finally, the article will describe activities that were used in a classroom setting that combined art and writing through coordinated efforts of the art specialist, classroom teacher and reading teacher. All these programs provided students with improved literacy instruction and resulted in improved pieces of writing.

### **Visual Arts and Writing**

There are numerous connections between art and literacy in general; and visual art and writing specifically. The two systems are visually dependent (Alejandro, 1994). The combining of art and literacy uses multiple intelligences. Children who have difficulty with linguistic intelligence may have strong artistic abilities that can compensate for language weaknesses. The ability to read a work of art can help develop the ability to read and comprehend text (Rowell, 1983).

Art and writing develop in similar stages (Smout, 1990). Prewriting for kindergarten and early first-grade students is often a picture they draw before they write (Poindexter and Oliver, 1999). Much emergent writing is a combination of both drawing and writing. Drawing offers advantages to the novice writer in that art facilitates the exploration of ideas, reduces cognitive demands, and has structural advantages over



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writing (Caldwell and Moore, 1991). Caldwell and Moore (1991) looked at how both discussion and drawing could be used in preparation for writing and “concluded that drawing is a viable and effective form of rehearsal for narrative writing... and can be more successful than the traditional planning activity, discussion” (p. 107). With this prior research in mind, the article will now describe various programs and activities that have been implemented to use art as a prewriting activity.

#### *Activity 1—Sketch-To-Stretch*

One of the best known pre-writing activities is Sketch-to-Stretch (Seigel, 1984).

This strategy is introduced and modeled by the teacher several times before the students work either individually or as part of a group. After reading, pupils create a sketch based on their understanding of the text. They look for themes, patterns and/or relationships. Sketches serve as graphic organizers and provide rehearsal for discussions as to the accuracy and completeness of each sketch, and how sketches can be improved. Students add text to their sketches providing them with words to use in writing activities.

One of the best known pre-writing activities is Sketch-to-Stretch (Seigel, 1984). Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) describe it as “...a visually representing activity that moves students beyond literal comprehension to think more deeply about the characters theme, and other elements of the story structure and author’s craft in a story they are reading” (p. 34). This strategy is introduced and modeled by the teacher several times before the students work either individually or as part of a group. After reading, pupils create a sketch based on their understanding of the text. They look for themes, patterns and/or relationships. Sketches serve as graphic organizers and provide rehearsal for discussions as to the accuracy and completeness of each sketch, and how sketches can be improved. Students add text to their sketches providing them with words to use in writing activities. Naughton (1993/1994) described a similar activity called “creative mapping” in which the sketch served as a pictorial version of semantic mapping and used an image to organize and convey the meaning.

#### *Activity 2—Image-Making Within the Writing Process*

A second program based on child created art is “Image-Making Within the Writing Process” (Olshansky, 1995, 1997). “This...program integrates children’s visual imagery at every stage of the writing process from the earliest prewriting/idea formulating stage through rehearsal, drafting, revision and preparation for publication. By introducing a variety of simple art materials and methods young author/illustrators have access to visual and kinesthetic, as well as verbal modes of thinking.” (Olshansky, 1995, p. 44). Children are exposed to a series of art explorations using various techniques and materials. They create a portfolio of hand-painted, textured papers. Students examine their abstract-art papers and find images, which serve as inspirations for story ideas. During rehearsal, students cut out images from their textured papers and weave them into a story. Students move around the cut out images and orally describe what they are doing. Their language reflects the textures, designs and emotions within the images. Once students are satisfied with their stories, they paste down their images and



begin to write. The pictures serve as a reminder of the child's words and provide concrete tools for the thinking process.

Research on "Image Making Within the Writing Process" demonstrated how it enriched students' story-making and enhanced their finished pieces. The topics written about were more varied. Story plots were more developed. Stories had a well-developed structure, with beginning, middle and end. Students used more descriptive language. Finally, the stories written and illustrated by students demonstrated fuller expression of ideas and pictures than stories illustrated with colored markers alone (Olshansky, 1995).

### *Activity 3—Writing in the Artists' Workshop*

Ernst (1994), originally a middle school English teacher, became an art teacher due to staffing cuts, which eliminated her position. Her educational beliefs were based on a workshop approach "...where reading, writing and picture making work together to help students learn, think, express themselves and make meaning" (Ernst, 1994, p. 44). Drawing in one's sketchbook served as a meaning-making tool and provided students with ideas and images for later writing assignments. Words added to or incorporated into pictures demonstrated the processes of thinking, planning and discovering that students use and provided needed vocabulary. Combining the visual and written modes helped students develop fluency of expression. By writing about sketches, students were better able to select and plan art projects. Students' writing served as background notes to help them remember what they wanted to do and where they were on their projects. As the sketchbook was a source of ideas, it provided a way of planning ahead and remembering images.

Lessons began with information on artists, their work and artistic techniques. Often, stories were read and the connections between texts and illustrations were discussed. Throughout the year, students were encouraged to use notebooks to record processes and discoveries; and to sketch plans, emotions and interesting images. Initially, students wrote and sketched in response to teacher prompts; but as students developed ideas and fluency, they responded more on their own. Ernst made suggestions as to ways in which students could utilize the sketch journal. They can begin each day by drawing a "daily note" and writing about it to reflect on the previous day's learning. Doing this daily gives students a record of progress throughout the year (Ernst, 1998). Another suggestion was to draw a favorite place (Ernst, 1999). Including words and phrases in the sketch facilitates the planning and rehearsal stages for writing about the place and increases organization and fluency.

### *Activity 4—A Sketch is Worth a Thousand Worksheets*

Reluctant readers may have trouble visualizing what they read. Cox (1991) had high school students draw pictures at the end of each chapter they read and write three to five sentences describing their sketch. Students examined sketches, determined how well they described the material read, and discussed how well their writing described their sketch. At first, many had difficulty writing even a few sentences. They were encouraged to share their pictures and writing to determine which was the best and why. As the year progressed, students were asked to look for different elements, such as



specific words, sensory images, or literary techniques, in the text and to incorporate these elements in their sketches. Students reported the pictures helped remember material and served as a review. The sketches and chapter summary paragraphs made it easier to complete summaries at the end of the book. Writing improved in both fluency and quality.

#### *Activity 5—Integrating Visual Arts, Writing and Reading*

Alejandro (1994) used works by famous artists to prepare students for the Texas State testing program. She was concerned with the time and energy expended on traditional test-preparation activities. As both art and writing are visually dependent, she wanted students to “learn how to see, to interpret data from the world, the canvas, and the page...” (Alejandro, 1994, p 13). Instead of using traditional writing prompts, Alajandro utilized pictures, posters, and other reproductions of great works of art. Students were prompted with the idea that every picture tells a story, what does this one tell you? Beginning with single person portraits, pupils made up stories about the characters imagining what they and their lives were like. Students discussed their ideas and wrote stories about the characters.

Next students explored pictures showing several people engaged in various activities. After observing and discussing the emotions, characters and styles of many pictures, the students made up and wrote stories about individual pictures. In the spring, the children selected four pictures and used them in one story. The students were required to select pictures in different genres and subjects, and to include one picture they did not like. “The resulting narratives were rich and complex, and I am convinced that the element of tension created by the one ‘disturbing’ picture lifted these stories out of the trite, bland, and predictable” (Alajandro, 1994. p. 16). Despite not following the usual test-preparation program, 88% of the students achieved writing mastery, up from 38% the previous year.

#### *Activity 6—Photo Essays*

Photo essays are another means of incorporating visual arts and literacy. Sinatra et. al. (1990) combined photo essays and semantic maps to help culturally diverse middle school students build background knowledge and organize their thoughts prior to writing. This program helped incorporate verbal and visual thought processes. Semantic mapping helped students formulate ideas and the photo essay helped tell the story. Students were assigned a topic and organizational structure. After taking and developing photographs of their topic, students organized the photos according to the various semantic organizers, which served as story-boards for organization and rehearsal. The students revised and edited their work by moving around the photographs. Students used their completed story-boards to write essays. Compared to pre-test samples, the resulting essays indicated better use of mechanics and increased ideas and vocabulary.

#### *Activity 7—Picture Research*

Wildman (1990) used the photo essay to change a research paper into “picture research”. Students researched an historical event by looking through original documents



and other materials with pictures of that event, in this case, the flight of the Kitty Hawk. Pictures were selected and made into slides. Students “read” the information presented in the images and shared ideas with other students. Once “hooked” on the pictures, students began to read texts as well as pictures to learn more. Students determined what they wanted to present in their reports and developed a deeper familiarity with specific ideas and images. They needed to organize research, determine what to present, and develop a means for presenting information visually. Once the pictorial aspect of the project was selected and organized, students wrote the audio accompaniment. Poetry was used as the means for writing text as “poetry expresses an idea with fewer words than prose, yet poetic audio lines would give our presentation a style unlike most professionally made slide presentations.” (Wildman, 1990, p. 56). Students developed their poetry through prompted and non-prompted free writes. Poems were edited and revised as necessary and became part of a total presentation.

### Our Activities

With these programs and activities as the theoretical and practical basis for the use of the visual arts as pre-writing activities, the remainder of this article will describe the activities and projects used to improve the literacy skills of our students. Prior activities (Epstein and Rothman, 1995) have involved the use of both music and art at all stages of the learning process and combined literacy learning with content area instruction. In this study, the focus was solely on the use of art as a first step in the literacy process. The student population included children in second and sixth grades. Most were below grade level in ability. Several students were virtually non-readers. For about one-third of the students, English was not their dominant language. The use of the visual arts, therefore, reduced the conceptual load on these children and facilitated the learning of new vocabulary through multiple symbol systems.

#### *Activity 8—Activities Celebrating A. A. Milne*

The first project celebrated Winnie the Pooh by A. A. Milne. In art class, excerpts from *Winnie the Pooh* were read to the second grade students. Illustrations were used as prompts for students who could not read the text. A sad-looking Winnie the Pooh bear, created by the art specialist from a brown paper grocery bag, was exhibited to the class. The children talked about the story and discussed ways to decorate their bears, including how to create vests for the bears. These vests would open to reveal the stories the children were to write. During discussion of the book, the students drew sketches and the teacher listed on chart paper words the students suggested. This served as brainstorming for the art activity of creating and decorating individual bears, and provided the words to be used in later writing assignments. Students wrote their own stories describing how they would get honey from the honey tree. The students completed their stories and placed them under the vests of the paper bag bears.

Students’ use of adjectives and adverbs in writing improved. Because of their enthusiasm for the project students’ writing was longer and more imaginative. Many original ideas were generated. Students showed greater use of story grammar, and



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stories had a more defined structure. Creation of the bears and sketches of ideas and words facilitated students' fluency, structure and vocabulary.

### *Activity 9—Harlem Renaissance*

A second project involved sixth grade students. The classroom teacher introduced the class to the Harlem Renaissance as part of Black History Month. In art class, students were introduced to comic strip writing using story-boards and the comic strips “Herb and Jamaal” and “The Boondocks”. Chia-hui Lin (2005) reports that comics serve three purposes in reading classrooms. First, students are interested in them, second, they are economically viable and third, they usually have low readability levels. Students learned a successful comic strip has interplay between the characters or the characters and their environment. Students used pictures placed on the squares of the story board to develop a comic strip of their own, and discussed the type of situations they wanted for their characters. When satisfied, they pasted the pictures on the story boards. Next students researched poems by Langston Hughes and selected lines that would fit the emotion and situation of the first character of their comic strip. Then the students wrote their own dialogue for the second character/object based on the poetry comments of the first character. The writing was revised and edited to student satisfaction and the comic strips displayed for Black History Month.

After completing the comic strip project, a number of students asked if they could write poems with topics similar to those of Langston Hughes. With assistance from both the classroom teacher and the art specialist, these students wrote and illustrated their own Langston Hughes style poems. These poems and pictures were also displayed.

As demonstrated, the comic strip project led to great student enthusiasm as well as improved writing. Both the art and the poems served as models of style for students who could use imitation in an attempt to find their own voice. The use of graphics helped students visually understand the concept of dialogue and helped students organize and structure ideas. These were translated into the written symbol system with proper grammar and punctuation when they wrote dialogue in their own poems. In addition, the motivation created by the original project led to further practice and improved writing on the part of many of the students.

In summary, review of prior research on the use of art as a prewriting activity has demonstrated its usefulness in developing students' writing skills. The visual arts serve to motivate students, facilitate the development of ideas, provide rehearsal and help structure ideas for later written pieces. Our work with students adds to the information on the usefulness of the visual arts; and, hopefully, provides some additional concrete examples of the types of activities that can be employed to combine the visual arts and literacy.

There needs to be additional research into the effectiveness of the use of visual arts with literacy. This type of program is not only an activity that can be used on occasion to provide variety in instructional methods, but can also provide the basis for an on-going instructional program that integrates the arts in all aspects of the learning process. The more modalities and symbol systems we use in instruction, the more equality of educational opportunity we offer to our students. In addition, while most



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states have implemented standards for literacy, many are also setting standards for the fine and performing arts. By combining the two, education becomes more integrated and conceptually rich, and students learn and retain more. More hard data is needed to convince those in charge of funding of programs that the arts are not a frivolity or add-on to the curriculum. They are sound tools for educational improvement. Additional studies are needed to verify and extend the knowledge educators already have.

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