

Portrait Interpretation PROCEDURE

This Portrait Interpretation, which is basically a portrait-based version of a Picture Interpretation, is a challenging and engaging writing project that allows students to become active readers of a visual text. The project leads students to make close observations, evaluate (and then reevaluate) their collected evidence, and engage in creative interpretation. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage nimble thinking in an analytical framework.

Portrait Interpretation: Observation Worksheet

Name: _____ Photo: _____

"A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or a fact is transformed into a photograph, it is no longer a fact but an opinion. ...All photographs are accurate. None of them tell the truth." -- Richard Avedon, Foreword, *In the American West*

Here's a worksheet that will guide you through the observation and prime you for the writing process.

A) Look closely at the portrait, uninterrupted, for at least two minutes.

B) List 12 details that seem striking about this portrait.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____
- 7) _____
- 8) _____
- 9) _____
- 10) _____
- 11) _____
- 12) _____

C) Reread your list of details and eliminate one obvious (and therefore not very interesting) detail from the list.

Eliminated detail: _____

D) Reread your list and eliminate the detail that seems the most awkward or unconvincing.

Eliminated detail: _____

E) Reread your details and then decide on a unifying impression that is created by these details: happy, sad, serene, chaotic, loving, tense, etc.

Impression: _____

Details: from previous list that create the impression

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____
- 7) _____

F) Reread your details and refine the impression, ie: happy--- proud; sad --- ashamed.

_____:

G) Observe the portrait again and then add 1-2 new details that you didn't notice the first time around.

New detail: _____

New detail: _____

Portrait Interpretation: Writing Assignment

Now that you've completed your worksheet, you're ready to write.

Your assignment is to write a compelling description of the photograph that creates an impression

The paragraph should be about 6- 8 sentences with at least 6 concrete details.

- The first sentence presents your paragraph's dominant impression.
- The last sentence of your paragraph reminds your reader of your impression, leaving her something to think about.

Student Writing Sample One

The Child

The damaged look in the child's eyes is utterly heart wrenching. The little Native American girl gazes desolately at the camera as her photograph is taken. Her straw-like hair hangs around her small, delicate face. Her ethnicity weaves twine through her cultural braids that frame either side of her cheeks. Sadness turns the corners of her pouting mouth down and furrows her brow in confusion. Her tiny, undeveloped nose is winced, as if she is ready to unleash a mass of tears. The child is dirty, pitiful-looking, and unfortunate like an animal left out in a storm with no shelter. Abandoned, she stares with a sorrowful look imprinted on her young, distressed face.

Student Writing Sample Two

The Peacemaker

The peacemaker sits on the floor just behind the spinning wheel. His palm is outstretched as if he were holding a flower; his glasses perched on his nose like a bird waiting to take flight. The soft light filters in through the window behind him stretching dark pools of shadows across the room. His old face, soft like the cushions piled behind him, is wrinkled with wisdom. His thoughts take substance as he spins the spinning wheel. The string run through the spokes, a single thought being woven into the grand cloth of life. The simple room, a representation of how life should be: all thoughts look like they should be born here.

Student Writing Sample Three

The Woman

Her eyes stare wistfully towards nothingness. They are uninterested, if not angry. Her eyes, her eyes. They stay fixed on the void, gazing into oblivion. Her eyes tell nothing of her. She uses them only to seem vacant, nearly ethereal. She's been stripped of everything that makes her a woman, save the liberal opening of the neck of her shirt. Her lips, soft, pouting, tell a different story. An enigma, her clandestine smile reveals itself only when you cover the rest of her. She has disallowed emotion, but microemotions seep through the aegis that is her lips. They are wordless, but they say enough to fill the void.

Adapted by Peg Walsh and Debra Gniewek, Council Rock School District from Katherine Dunbar 2008

<http://www.aimsmd.org/upload/PM-9-Berman-CriticalThinking.pdf>