VISUAL NARRATIVE LESSON 3

Imagination and Visual Narrative

*Untitled*, Anaya Wynters, 2018

Grade Levels: 9–12

Duration: One 45-minute to one-hour classroom period
MESSAGE TO EDUCATORS

What tools can we offer students to create deeper, stronger, more complex and layered visual narratives?

In writing classes, students are sometimes on the receiving end of the dictum, “Show, don’t tell.” The intent is to remind them to use telling details and sense words to bring the reader along on an immersive journey.

With photography, the medium is more suited to “showing” than “telling.” However, there is still much to be gained from traditional story structures and imaginative narrative writing techniques. Reminding students of all the pieces that go into the puzzle of a good story can stimulate them to add dimension and detail to their photography, and to approach it with planning and intention.

This lesson plan includes photographs to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues to help you foster a brave space and lead confidently, as students create and present their visual narratives. The Getty Museum is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

ABOUT THIS EXPLORATION

The first part of this lesson is an opportunity to understand and establish students’ background knowledge of storytelling structures and techniques. The lesson begins by brainstorming and defining the elements of narrative fiction. Students discuss how the traditional elements of narrative fiction can be found in photography, using examples from the Getty collection.

Following discussions of the single photograph and the photo series, students explore imaginative narratives, and practice turning them into visual storyboards.

 Getty Visual Narrative Learning Objectives

- Analyze how imaginative narratives convey messages and tell stories
- Create the outline of an imaginative narrative
- Prep Time: 2–3 hours

Notes on Group Discussions Good classroom discussions can take different directions. It is important for students to make observations and construct their own knowledge in a way that connects to principles of photography or art history. It is equally important for students to go down new paths and support their ideas using their own powers of observation. We are committed to the idea that both directions, and many in between, are valid and worthwhile.

After each work of art, the lesson provides further context. We encourage you to use the context provided when and as needed to further classroom discussions. When possible, the context provided is in the artist’s own words. Even so, art histories carry bias and are rarely the complete story, so please use them with that knowledge in mind. There are times when a classroom discussion doesn’t need context because it is fueled by student responses, observations and interpretation of the works. These conversations, especially when ideas are well supported, are as much the goal as those that make use of more context.
ASSOCIATED STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest

MATERIALS

• Projector/Screen sharing abilities for remote classrooms
• Photo from the Unshuttered platform
• Photo from the Getty photography collection
• Graphic organizer: Imaginative Narrative Outline
• Graphic organizer: Storyboard
• A digital camera or smartphone

VOCABULARY

Climax The peak of a story; the main event in which the main character faces the problem or conflict.

Detail A word, phrase or sentence that is unique and memorable. Good details activate the senses, to help the reader see, hear, smell, touch or taste what’s being described. A detail can convey information about any element of a story, and ideally supports the theme as well.

Events The key things that happen in a story. Events should proceed logically from each other to provide a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Genre Categories of literature in both fiction and non-fiction, based on the type and purpose of writing. Examples in narrative fiction include poetry, prose and drama. Sub-genres include literary fiction; epics, fables and fairy tales; mystery, crime, horror, thriller and suspense; historical fiction; romance; Westerns; and science fiction and fantasy.

Narrative Fiction A sequence of connected, imaginary events; a story.

Pacing Classic story structure begins with an inciting event, followed by rising action, a crisis, a climax, and resolution.

Point of View Who tells the story; and how they convey the story events. Conventional points of view are first person (“I”) and third person or omniscient (“S/He” “They”).

Problem The conflict that is central to a story. Conflicts are typically internal (character vs. self) or external (character vs. outside forces).

Resolution The conclusion of a story’s plot; in which questions are answered and loose ends are tied up.

Sequence A sequence of photographs is intended to be viewed in a particular order. To build the story, the viewer begins with the first image and continues in the order prescribed by the artist.

Series In contrast to a sequence, a series denotes multiple images related by a theme or idea, which may be viewed in any order.
Setting The place and time of a narrative. Often used to set mood and introduce problems.

Subject/Characters The people in the story. The key character is the protagonist (or main character), who embodies, experiences and/or drives the central conflict of a story. A protagonist usually needs an antagonist, which is the person or thing the main character is contending with. Secondary characters support the events of a story.

Theme The central message of a story, as differentiated from the topic of a story. Stories usually have a topic and a theme. For example: In Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women, one might say the topic is “Four sisters growing up in a household in 19th-century Massachusetts,” and the theme is “Learning to balance familial duty with personal growth.”

Topic/Main Idea A summary of the major thought or point of a written passage. A text may have multiple major ideas; readers infer the main idea of the entire passage by looking for the most repeated or referenced ideas of the text.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Introduction

Just as books can be nonfiction or fiction, photographs can tell stories that are true and stories that are made up or fictionalized. By examining the stories in photographs that are retellings, staged, or imagined, and relating them to literary fiction, we can use those ideas to strengthen our understanding of visual narratives. The questions for inquiry at the center of this lesson include:

- What are the elements of narrative fiction?
- What is a “theme,” and how does it relate to a “topic”?
- How do the elements of narrative fiction relate to the principles of visual art and design found in photography?
- How can photography create/inform/deepen imaginary narratives?
- How can narrative structure inform photography?

Set the Stage

Untitled, Anaya Wynters, 2018
Begin by projecting the image shown above, created by Anaya Wynters, a photographer from the Unshuttered program. Provide the caption to situate the photograph in time and space. The discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph.

**Questions for discussion, with possible answers and points of discussion for reference**

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of this photograph? (Two people, one with multicolored [rainbow?] face paint.)
- What do you think is going on in this photograph? What story is it telling you?
- What aspects of the photograph are showing you that story? For example:
  - The photographer’s point of view or perspective? (Close-up, eye level with the person in the back.)
  - How are the subjects framed, or positioned? (The subjects are tightly framed, so that the focus is on their expressions.)
  - Telling details of the subjects or their surroundings? (It is difficult to tell exactly where the two subjects are, but there are spaces of blue sky beyond them that suggest they are outdoors.)
  - The scene’s foreground and background? (The person in the foreground is shot in profile, from slightly below, in a heroic pose; the person in the background is shot from eye level but she is gazing directly at the camera with a more enigmatic expression.)
  - Visual elements such as patterns, leading lines, scale, or lighting? (The faces of both subjects appear to be brightly lit by sunlight.)

Let’s expand the idea of storytelling to narrative as expressed in writing, rather than photography, and see whether photography can fit into the larger idea of narrative. Can photographs be narratives? What are some of the essential elements of a story/fictional narrative? Create a list of these elements and define terms as you go. Sample terms and definitions are found in the Vocabulary section.

**Once the list has been created, two questions can be posed**

1. Are the elements of a story also found in photographs?
2. How do the story elements relate to photographs generally, and this photo, specifically?

For example, how would you identify the subjects or characters of this photo? The point of view or the setting and details?

**DISCUSS: RE-IMAGINED STORIES FROM PHOTOGRAPHS**

With some shared understanding of how photographs can reflect the elements of narrative fiction, it is time to apply those ideas and questions to a photo series from the Getty collection. Share the following images. Allow time to individually read the paired narratives, or have students read them aloud for the class and show the captions, to situate the photographs in time and place.
Begin by taking a few quiet minutes to simply look at the Getty collection photograph series, then open up the conversation/discussion with some questions.

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about these images?

- How would you describe the subjects of the photographs? What are the subjects wearing? (The subject is actually the same in all four photographs; the artist is her own subject, wearing different clothing and makeup. The clothing and hairstyles echo the series and individual titles, which establish the photographs as portraits of the same woman in different eras of her life. However, because the subject doesn’t age, we recognize that these are not documentary photographs but stagings or retellings. In the first two photographs in Fernandez’ series, the subject is in profile or ¾ profile, while in the last two, she looks directly at the viewer, which may be a commentary on the era or on the subject’s increasing confidence with age.)
• How would you describe the settings? What details do you notice in each photograph? (Each photo has a different setting and carefully chosen details. In the first, she wears a period-appropriate longer dress and shawl. In the second, her clothing and makeup are more sophisticated, and the paired narrative tells us that she is trying to convey that she is from the US. The settings of both the third and fourth photos recall ideals of female-gendered domesticity.)

• What do you notice about the format, e.g., the composition, focus, lighting, framing? (All are portraits, but two are full-length and two are three-quarter views; two have flat backgrounds and are set inside, while two are set outside and use train tracks and laundry lines, respectively, to add strong senses of pattern and depth. The first three use the same technique, gelatin silver print, though the first one has a stronger sepia (reddish-brown) tone; the final photo is a chromogenic print. The evolving color treatment reminds the viewer of the series’ story arc through time.)

• What do you think the topic of the photographs is? (A possible answer is that the photographs are about an artist’s great-grandmother and her life in Mexico and the southwestern US.)

• What do you think the theme of the photographs is? (Possible themes of the series might include migration, family ties and gender roles.)

• What story do you think the photographer is telling? What elements of narrative fiction does the artist use to tell that story? Do the paired narratives deepen or distract from the visuals of the photographic series?

• What questions does the series pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT

The photographer staged six photographs, using herself as the subject, to reimagine the story of her great-grandmother, María Gonzales, who migrated from Mexico to Southern California as a single mother. Fernandez wrote, “Maria was already a legend in my family. She was somebody I was told about, and, being the oldest granddaughter, I was always all ears in family conversations. (I think I know more than the adults ever wanted me to know!) But because of this she was sort of in my head, somebody to be proud of, someone who had merit—and the reason we were here in “America.” Her hard work shaped the family work ethic and the desire to achieve both academically and within our chosen careers.”

The artist notes that there she could find only two existing photographs of María in her research, leading her in an artistic direction that might be said to mirror the genre of historical fiction in writing. She says, “I recognized I could not completely and accurately reconstruct the different time periods, I didn’t really even want to do this. I included anachronisms to let the audience know that this is a reconstruction or ‘reenactment.’ By including contemporary elements into the photos, I wanted to convey the idea that this migration story is historical but also still relevant and current.”

During the creative process, Fernandez realized how difficult things had been for her grandmother and others like her—“the racism, sexism, and elitism she endured, her desire to leave her country of origin and its religion behind, and branch out into the vast unknown (at least, unknown to her) of the Southwest.” Fernandez wrote further, “I was putting forward Maria’s migration story as that of an explorer... I recontextualized her story by positing migration as an exploration or expedition.”

View Christina Fernandez’s photographs in the collection
EXPLORE FURTHER

Exercise: Imaginative Narrative Outline

Now that the group has begun to explore the relationships between written fiction and visual narratives, students will have the opportunity to create their own imaginative narratives. As photographers and artists already, some students may be more comfortable with “showing” rather than “telling” their stories. Moving into “telling” their stories is a useful exercise, however, with the potential to lead to deeper storytelling through understanding of the traditional structures of imaginative narratives.

Share the Imaginative Narrative graphic organizer [See Resources section]. Have students choose to work individually or in a group. Each student should create their own outline. If time allows, following the breakout discussions, have students come back together as a group to workshop their outlines.

Practice: Imaginative Narrative Storyboard

If possible, assigning this practice as homework affords students time to work on the assignment. Having spent time with “telling” their stories, this culminating project turns back to visuals, with more emphasis on “showing.” Here, students use their story outlines to create storyboards.

A storyboard is a set of sequential visuals that tells a story. Storyboarding is a powerful tool for planning a visual narrative. Storyboards allow visual presentation of information, and, at the same time, reveal the arc of a story. Share the Storyboard template [See Resources section], and briefly define and describe the purpose of a storyboard. Be sure students understand that drawing ability is not necessary. Storyboard visuals can be anything from stick-figure drawings to detailed illustrations to photography to collage. Some students may find they need more frames than the six on a single page of the template, so you may wish to have many copies available, and encourage them to use as many (or as few) as they like. Showing a cross-section of storyboard examples from your own work, previous student work, graphic novels, or examples found online can help get across the wide range of possibilities, and focus students on what aspects are most useful.

Reflect

Initial constructive critique and reflection can take place in the group setting, and be followed by individual reflection. Ask students to introduce, show and describe their storyboards. Have them set up their stories with information from their imaginative narrative outlines, such as genre, setting, characters and conflict. This step will open the later discussion to how those elements are shown in the storyboards.

Having the viewers provide positive feedback is key to the exercise. However, critique can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgement about whether a group share-out is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a brave space.

Students may be ready to discuss and have their own questions for the artist. If prompting is needed, some possible questions might be

- What is the first thing you notice about the storyboard?
- What elements of imaginary narrative do you observe in the storyboard?
- What elements of the narrative would you like to learn more about?
• Are there any further opportunities to show more about the story?
• (If not announced by the artist) What do you think the theme of this story is?

**Questions for individual reflection**

• What did you discover about yourself and others in the course of the project? OR Did you discover anything about yourself or others in the course of this project? If so, what?
• What was challenging, and why?
• What detail are you most proud of, and why?
• Is there anything you would do differently?

**ASSESSMENT**

Observe the group discussion during Set the Stage and Discuss. Assess contributions to the group dialog. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?

Collect the Imaginative Narrative Outlines to check for understanding and completeness, and to assess students’ understanding of the elements of imaginative narratives.

Observe and evaluate student presentations of their Storyboards. Did the presentations make use of storytelling elements? Did they make effective use of the format and media available?

Collect Storyboards to check for how students moved from “telling” a story to “showing” a story. Are the events in the stories logical and well-paced? Do they use telling details?

In Reflect, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.

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**THANK YOU...**

...for your commitment to inspiring young people to create art and tell their stories.

Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group.

**RESOURCES**


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

Imaginative or Re-Imagined Narrative Outlines and Storyboard worksheets [See pages that follow]
## Imaginative or Re-imagined Narrative Outlines

Use this graphic organizer to outline your own imaginative narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telling Details</th>
<th>Author POV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climax</td>
<td>Resolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Storyboard

A storyboard is a set of sequential visuals that tells a story. Storyboarding is a powerful tool for planning a visual narrative. Storyboard visuals can be anything from stick-figure drawings to detailed illustrations to photography to collage. You can use multiple copies of this template to make as many frames as your story needs.