VISUAL NARRATIVE LESSON 5

Visuals and Narratives

Coming out, Anaya Wynters, 2018

Grade Levels: 9–12

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

The earlier lessons in this series are intended to help student artists enrich their processes by applying multiple perspectives to their work. The exercises in those lessons have called for rather specific outputs, in order to practice different skills (purely visual; text-based storytelling; and text-based nonfiction narratives). This lesson asks students to put all those skills into use in a final project.

The final project has looser guidance than the previous practice projects. Students can create single or multi-panel photographs and they are invited to tell imaginary or nonfiction stories with their work. What they are asked to do, as a first step, is to think through and plan their projects.

Whether their final projects directly reflect their plans is not critical. The creative process should allow for accidents and discoveries along the way. The critical skills to be gained here are in thinking, ideating, and organizing a project before executing it. The value of an artist’s intuition cannot be overstated, but the ability to plan out a project is valuable.

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

Rather than introducing new skills, this lesson re-emphasizes the twin ideas of topic and theme in visual narratives, and gives students a framework for planning a visual narrative, which rests on these ideas. The group analyzes photography together, looking for details and building up possible topics and themes.

The discussion framework becomes the basis for students’ project statements. The project statements, in turn, may become foundations for their final projects.

Getty Visual Narrative Learning Objective:

Create a visual narrative, using photography skills and literary or informational text.
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 viewing 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, we include 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 the prepared lesson.
ASSOCIATED STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

MATERIALS

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

VOCABULARY

Cause and Effect In writing, when an author explains something that has happened, and gives reasons for the event or circumstance.

Chronology, or Sequence of Events The key things that happen in a text. Events should proceed logically from each other to provide a clear beginning, middle, and end.

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

Compare and Contrast A technique that explores similarities and differences between two or more things.

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 nonfiction, 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.

Informational Text Nonfiction text written with a form that is not story-driven is called informational text. Examples include lists, directions, textbooks, and how-to books.

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

Narrative Nonfiction Text about true events written using the form of a story is called narrative nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction often uses a chronological structure.

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

Point of View The perspective of the author; and how they convey the story events.

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** 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. Every protagonist needs an antagonist, which is the person or thing the main character is contending with. Secondary characters support the events of a story.

**Text Features** In writing, added design elements that convey further information. Examples include photographs, captions, maps, timelines, charts, and infographics.

**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**
Great storytelling affects an audience beyond the impact of any given story’s characters, events or details, by tapping into larger questions or truths. A successful visual narrative should evoke one or more responses to two questions:

1. What is the story about? (topic?)
2. What is the story really about? (theme?)

The questions for inquiry at the center of this lesson include:

- How do artists use visual elements and storytelling events in a visual narrative?
- How do these elements work together to tell a story?
- What is the difference between topic/main idea and theme? How does an artist convey theme to an audience? How does an audience come to understand the theme of a work of art?

**Set the Stage**
Begin by projecting the image shown below, created by Anaya Wynters, a photographer from the Unshuttered teen program. Include the title and ask the students to look at the photo and title quietly. The discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph. As the
discussion starts, listen for responses that focus on the people, setting and details of the photograph, and how the artist uses photography skills. Help students connect those responses, as they build into their own understandings of the topic and theme of the photograph.

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of this photograph? (A close-up of a young person in profile, eyes obscured, possibly wearing headphones, gender identity not specified, with a rainbow or prism of light projected onto their face.)
- What is the photographer’s point of view or perspective? (The photograph is taken in close proximity to the subject.)
- What details tell us about the subject or subjects of the photograph? (While the main subject fills the frame, we see only their medium-length hair, profile and collar. The projected light highlights details of the subject.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (In the background, we see the arm of another young person, some partial drawings, and a case for some sort of electronic device. The subjects all seem to be sitting at a table with a coated metal mesh surface, often found in school settings.)
- Does the scene’s lighting tell aspects of the story? (The bright light suggests the photograph was taken outside. The source of the rainbow light on the subject’s face and collar is outside the frame and invisible to the viewer.)
- Are there noticeable visual elements such as patterns or leading lines?
- What is the effect of the title? (The title might suggest several things: acknowledging oneself as LTBTQ+, but also stepping outside from an institution of some sort.)
- What do you think is going on in this photograph? What story is it telling you? (The title, the seemingly young age of the subject, and the projected rainbow light point to a subject discovering or acknowledging their sexual identity. The presence of others and the setting hint that the subject could be coming out to peers.)
- Why do you think the artist obscured some details of the subject? (They possibly wanted to protect the identity of the subject; possibly the artist wished to generalize about the topic.)
• What other questions does the photograph pose for you?

• What do you think is the topic or main idea of the photograph, and why? Another way to state this question is: “What is this photograph about?” (A possible answer might be a young person at school with a pride flag projected onto their face; another answer might emerge from exploring the word “projection,” which could connect to the version of ourselves we project to the world, or to the ideas that other project onto us.)

• What do you think is the larger theme of the photograph, and why? (Another way to state this question is: “What is this photograph REALLY about?” Possible themes that emerge from this photograph might include sexual identity, peer relationships, and the idea of inside vs. outside.)

• Is this photograph a visual narrative? How so?

The group discussion should bring forth responses about what the photograph shows and how it works visually. You may need to scaffold students’ understanding of topic and theme. Use this photograph and the next one in this lesson as examples. Mastering the twin ideas of topic and theme, using these works, prepares students for the in-class exercise and the final project.

The photography discussions may also present a chance to connect the twin ideas of theme and topic to the purposes for photography explored in Lesson 1:

- Exploring desire
- Revealing what lies beyond sight
- Influencing choices
- Creating and complicating history and memories

**DISCUSS: VISUAL NARRATIVE**

Next, we turn to a photograph from the Getty collection and analyze it as a visual narrative. Project the images here. Share the title, to situate the photograph in time and place.

The J. Paul Getty Museum. © Graciela Iturbide

unshuttered.org
Begin by taking a few quiet minutes to simply look at the photograph. Again, the discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph. Once more, help students knit the details and artistic principles they observe into their own understandings of the topic and theme of the photograph.

**Suggested questions for discussion**

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How would you describe the subject of the photograph? (A man stands with his back to the camera, with his shirt rolled up to expose a large tattoo on his back.)
- What is the photographer’s point of view or perspective? (The photograph uses a traditional portrait format, but we see the subject’s back rather than his face; he remains anonymous to the viewer.)
- What details tell us about the subject or subjects of the photo? (The man wears a white t-shirt; his tattoo is a very detailed image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the revered patron saint of Mexico. The tattoo is almost a portrait within a portrait, with its own references to Mexican pride and national identity, Catholic faith, and faith generally.)
- What can we tell about the setting or surroundings of the subjects? (In the background, we see an arid and rather empty landscape; from the title we know it is Tijuana, Mexico, a city on the border of Mexico and the US.)
- What do you know about the chronology and location where the images were created? (The border at Tijuana was, in the 1990s, a known location for migrants without papers to cross into the United States. Some paid local residents to guide them across the border. Some guides were helpful, while others took advantage of undocumented migrants.)
- Composition: How is the photograph composed? (The lack of detail in the background allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions about the moment—is he about to guide migrants across the border or be guided, or just hanging out and showing off his body art?)
- How do you feel when you look at this picture? How do you think the photographer wanted you to feel looking at this picture?
- Is the photograph documentary or imaginative?
- What questions does the photograph pose for you?
- What do you think is the topic of the photograph, and why? Another way to state this question is: “What is this photograph about?” (A possible answer might be that the photograph is about a man with a tattoo of La Virgen de Guadalupe in a desert landscape.)
- What do you think is the larger theme of the photograph, and why? (Another way to state this question is: “What is this photograph REALLY about?” The themes of the photograph might include faith, immigration, cultural or national identity, and opportunity.)
- Is this photograph a visual narrative? How so?

**FURTHER CONTEXT**

From the Getty webpage for this photograph, some more information about La Virgen de Guadalupe: “Some speculate that Mexico’s indigenous Virgin of Guadalupe has roots in the Aztec mother goddess
Tonantzin. The characteristic wavy, pointed tendrils that surround her evoke rays of holy light. However, these are also thought to refer to something organic, namely the spiked agave plant, which Mexicans ferment into pulque, mezcal, and tequila—alcoholic beverages enjoyed on the Virgin of Guadalupe’s feast day.” The image of La Virgen is additionally meaningful in the context of La frontera because migrants sometimes pray to her for protection on the journey. Regarding the subject of the photograph, he was later identified by family as Roque Rojas, who was working as a border guide at the time. The artist says, “I think all photographers make documentary photography, but, afterwards, it all comes down to how each person interprets what they see, whether it has more or less poetry or imagination.”


EXPLORE FURTHER

Exercise: Project Statement

The in-class exercise in this lesson is the development of a project statement, which combines elements of an artist statement, an outline, and a project plan. The goal of the project statement is to prepare students to embark intentionally on their final projects to create single or multi-panel photographs. The most important elements of the project statement are:

- The project topic or main idea of the photography project, which should answer the question, “What is this project about?”
- The project theme should answer the question, “What is this project REALLY about?” In thinking about theme, you may wish to call back to the purposes for photography explored in Lesson 1:
  - Exploring desire
  - Revealing what lies beyond sight
  - Influencing choices
  - Creating and complicating history and memories

This exercise is also an opportunity to remind students of the toolsets they have developed in the previous four lessons in this unit:

- The principles of photography explored in Lesson 2
- The elements of narrative fiction explored in Lesson 3, in particular:
  - Author POV
  - Theme
  - Setting
  - Characters
  - Problem
  - Events
  - Resolution
  - Telling Details
- The elements of narrative nonfiction explored in Lesson 4, in particular:
  - Chronology
  - Cause and effect
  - Compare and contrast
  - Pacing
  - Text features
If students need more scaffolding to understand the interplay of topic and theme, revisit the questions for discussion under each of the photographic examples in this lesson. Other photographs from the Visual Narrative series can be analyzed in the same way.

Share the Project Statement handout [See Resources section]. Each student should create their own statement. It is not necessary to use the exact format of the graphic organizer, as long as the key elements are present. No drawing skills are necessary. Record ideas with photos, collage, simple drawings, or key words and phrases. If time allows following the exercise, bring the group back together to share and discuss project statements.

**Practice: Create a Visual Narrative**

With project statements complete, students embark on the final project, creating their own visual narratives. When creating visual narratives with photography, “storytelling” can refer to single photographs, series, or sequences. Students may choose to create a single frame, a series of related frames, or a set of sequential frames. The key is to both “tell” and “show” a story. A starting point can be any one of previous outputs: The project statement, the imaginative narrative storyboard, the mind map or the narrative nonfiction storyboard. Remind students of the tools at their disposal for setting their intention:

- Project statement
- Story outline
- Mind map
- Storyboard

If possible, assigning this practice as homework affords students time to work on the assignment.

**Reflect**

Sharing out final projects can be both exciting and intimidating. 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. At times, 1:1 share-outs may be more appropriate. The format can be the same:

**Ask each student to introduce their project**

- What is the title of your project, if any?
- What was the inspiration of your project?
- What tools did you use to plan your visual narrative?
- What tools did you use to execute your plan?

**Questions for a group share-out/critique (modify for 1:1)**

- What is the first thing you notice about the visual narrative?
- What do you think might be the main idea or topic of the project?
- How did the artist communicate the main idea of the story?
- What do you think are some possible themes of the project?
- What aspects of the story would you like to learn more about?
• Are there any further opportunities to add major ideas or telling details to the story? Is there anything that would enhance the theme?

Questions for individual reflection
• What did you discover about yourself and others, in the course of the project?
• 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 Project Statements to check for completeness, and to assess students’ understanding of the distinction between topic and theme.
• Observe and evaluate student presentations of their final projects. Did the projects use the skills built during the entire unit? Did they show evidence of planning?
• In Reflect, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.

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
1  To explore this topic further, one possible source is: https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/tijuana-border-fence/print/


Project Statement for Creating a Visual Narrative worksheet [See page that follows]
Project Statement for Creating a Visual Narrative

It is now time to develop a project statement, which combines elements of an artist statement, an outline, and a project plan. The project statement should help you prepare for creating your final project of either a single photograph or multi-panel photographs. The most important elements of the project statement are:

- The project topic or main idea of the photography project, which should answer the question, “What is this project about?”
- The project theme should answer the question, “What is this project really about?”

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