

Art, Books, and Creativity (ABC) Curriculum

Lesson 6: Abstraction

Grade Levels

3 to 5; 6 to 8; 9 to 12

Subjects

Visual Art; English/Language Arts

Lesson Overview

Students will explore abstraction to see how artists communicate ideas and emotions solely through their use of color, line, shape, pattern, and texture. Students will discover that the subject of some abstract art is the arrangement of color, line, shape, and other elements of art, rather than the description of people, ideas, things, or places. Students will create a flag book in this session.

Guiding Questions

- How do artists communicate with the elements of art?
- How do writers use the writing traits in creative writing?

Length of Lesson

Two or three 45-minute periods

Key Connections

Visual Arts

- Art is composed of the elements of art (color, line, shape, form, value, space, and texture).
- Artists use the elements of art to express ideas and emotions and to describe people and places.
- Abstract art can be based on an artist's interpretation of objects in the natural world but is not a visually realistic description of the objects.

Writing

- Written work is composed using the traits of writing (idea, voice, word choice, organization, sentence fluency, and conventions).

- Writers use the traits of writing to express ideas and emotions and to describe people and places.
- Creative writing can be based on interpretation of events but is not necessarily a realistic view.

Instructional Objectives

Visual Arts

Students will:

- Understand that the elements of art are the building blocks for creating works of art
- Recognize qualities of abstract art: simplified or distorted forms, exaggerated colors, distorted or flattened space
- Understand that abstract art can express ideas and emotions
- Create an abstract work of art that expresses an idea or emotion

Writing (Optional Activities)

Students will:

- Understand that the traits of writing are the building blocks for creating a literary piece
- Recognize qualities of creative writing, such as exaggeration, metaphors, diminution, etc.
- Understand that creative writing can elicit ideas and emotions
- Use metaphor and exaggeration in a creative writing piece

For the Teacher

Looking and Seeing

Some things to notice when looking at Alma Woodsey Thomas's [*Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses*](#):

- Thomas does not use overlapping in her painting; her approach emphasizes the flat surface and does not create a sense of depth.
- Thomas repeats shapes and colors to show movement. The repetition of the same-colored shapes in rows creates lines that seem to travel up or down.
- Have students look at [*Love's Young Dream*](#) and [*Staffelsee in Autumn*](#). Have them compare the two pictures: is one more abstract than the other? In what ways?

For additional artworks to include with this lesson, please view this [art gallery](#). To read about the artists and works included in the gallery, search the artist's name at [nmwa.org](#). To learn more about the featured artist, check out [Alma Woodsey Thomas's artist profile](#).

Vocabulary

- **Abstract art** is based on the real world, but the forms may be simplified, exaggerated, or contorted; the colors may be altered; and the space may be flattened or distorted.
- **Abstraction** is a style of art that emphasizes design and the elements of art. The subject of the artwork may be recognizable or may be an arrangement of shapes, colors, lines, and other elements of art.
- **Non-objective** or **non-representational** art is not based on the real world and does not contain recognizable objects. The subjects of non-representational art may be color, emotions, or the composition of the work itself. Often the term abstract is used for both abstract and non-representational art.
- **Elements of art** are color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture. Artists use these tools to create visual art: representational, abstract, and non-representational. (Review the [vocabulary list](#) for definitions of individual elements of art.)
- **Geometric shapes** are circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, etc. They have precise edges, as if made with a ruler, and can be described in mathematical terms.
- **Organic shapes** have an irregular outline, are often asymmetrical, and resemble forms found in nature (clouds, rocks, leaves, etc.).
- **Pattern** is created through any repeated element of art.
- **Rhythm** is the regular repetition of elements of art to create the look and feel of movement. It is often achieved through the careful placement of repeated shapes, lines, and colors.
- **Texture** is an element of art that refers to the feel of a thing or its surface quality. Texture can be implied or actual.

Instructional Plan: Observe, Create, and Reflect

Observe: Quick Write

Before beginning the lesson, show Alma Woodsey Thomas's [Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses](#) to students. Give students a few minutes to respond to the image. Use any of the following prompts:

- How do you think the artist made this artwork?
- This picture makes me think about/wonder....
- If this picture could talk, it would say....
- I would describe the mood of this picture as....

Introduction

Introduce your students to concepts of **abstract** and **non-representational** art. The concept of abstraction may be new to your students; rely on the knowledge they have gained about the elements of art in previous lessons to help teach the concept. Explain that abstract and non-representational art can communicate ideas and make us feel a certain way. Artists convey such

meaning through their use of color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture: **the elements of art**.

Artists make **abstractions** for many reasons: to capture the essence of what they see in nature; to create metaphors for ideas; to explore the expressive qualities of color, line, shape, texture, rhythm, etc.; and to use a language of pure form.

Observe: Look and Discuss

Ask students to look closely at Thomas's *Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses* and begin describing and interpreting what they see. [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) is a highly effective method for facilitating productive conversations about art with your students and introducing new vocabulary in a meaningful way. Following the conclusion of this initial exploration of the work, you may wish to revisit certain concepts in more depth using some of these questions:

- What do you see in the picture?
- How many different **colors** do you see? Which colors do you see the most? What do the colors make you think of?
- Choose one color and identify all its different **shades** (for example, green, light green, dark green, yellow green, blue green, etc.) Where do you see the darkest shade of the chosen color? Where do you see the lightest shade? In how many parts of the painting do you see the color?
- What **shapes** do you see? Where are the shapes repeated in the artwork?
- Do the shapes look flat, or do they look like they have depth and weight? Are they **geometric** or **organic**? What size are the shapes? What do they make you think of?
- What **lines** do you notice in the painting? How did the artist create the lines? In what direction do the lines seem to flow?
- What **patterns** do you see? How would you describe them? If a pattern you see could make a noise, what would it sound like?
- How would you describe the **texture** of the painting? Can you see individual brush strokes? Do you think the surface of the painting is completely smooth or are there areas that look like they might be rough? (The texture might be difficult to see in reproduction.)

Ask the students to interpret the painting. What ideas and emotions do they think the artist wanted to express? List these on the board. Make a list of other ideas and emotions an artist might want to express by brainstorming with the class. Tell students the title of the painting. Ask if the title changes their understanding of the painting. Why or why not?

Explain that the artist was inspired by the view of her garden from her kitchen window. Her painting is an interpretation of the view, but the subject matter (flowers in her garden) is not recognizable. Her painting is based on nature, but instead of showing a realistic view of her garden, the artist expressed her feelings about it with the elements of art.

Knowing about an artist's life or what the artist says about their work can add to students' understandings of an artwork. However, emphasize that students' interpretations based only on observation are equally valid (even if their conclusions differ from what the artist says about her work) as long as students can support their ideas with what they see in the works of art. Artists like Thomas want viewers to have their own interpretations, too.

Create: Flag Book

For the Teacher

In advance of this project, you may wish to view this ["how-to" video](#), which provides a step-by-step demonstration of how to create a flag book. You may find it helpful to show the video to your students in class instead of or in addition to providing them with the written directions. Once students have created the flag book, have them store their books in their folders. They will continue to work with them in [Lesson 8](#).

Supplies

- One sheet of 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper per student
- Two sheets of 8 1/2-by-5 1/2-inches paper (by cutting 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper in half) per student
- Six sheets of 2 7/8-by-5 1/2-inches paper (by cutting 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper in six equal rectangles per student)
- Glue sticks
- Student journals

Activity: Make the Spine

1. Begin by placing the 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper horizontally on the desk in front of you. (One of the paper's long sides will be closest to you.)
2. Fold the paper in half by bringing the two short sides together. Line the edges up as evenly as possible and press the fold firmly to crease. Open the paper back up to its original position.
3. Take the short edge of the paper near your left hand and fold it toward the center. With the edge lined up along the center crease, press this new fold down firmly. Repeat these actions with the short edge of the paper near your right hand.
4. Place your paper so that the two mountain folds point upward. Bring each of these mountain folds toward the center, one at a time, and press firmly to set the creases.
5. Your complete spine is essentially an accordion book, but the four inside pages are narrower than the two outside pages.

Activity: Attach the Covers

1. With your spine folded up completely, put glue on the top flap (one of the two wider pages) and attach one of your two 8 1/2-by-5 1/2-inche covers. The cover should line up with the folded edge of the top flap; the top flap will be visible on the inside of your cover.

2. Repeat these steps to attach the back cover.

Activity: Attach the Flags

1. Open your book so that the covers are near your right and left hands. The mountain folds of your spine will form an M if viewed from the side. Have your six paper flags nearby.
2. For the top row of flags, glue the first flag to the *left side* of the first mountain fold, lining it up with the top edge of your spine. Complete your first row of flags by gluing another flag on the *left side* of the second mountain fold, making sure it lines up behind the first flag.
3. The bottom row of flags mirrors the top row. Glue the first flag to the *left side* of the first mountain fold, lining it up with the bottom edge of the spine. Complete the bottom row by gluing another flag to the *left side* of the second mountain fold, making sure it lines up behind the first flag.
4. The middle row of flags occupies the space between the two completed rows. Glue the first flag to the *right side* of the first mountain fold; glue the final flag to the *right side* of the second mountain fold.
5. Your flags are correctly positioned if you open your book and the flags on the top and bottom rows point to the right and the flags in the middle row point to the left.

Reflect

Have students respond to one of the following prompts in their journals or use the prompts to generate a class discussion about abstraction.

- How does abstraction make you see differently?
- What new questions does abstract art inspire?
- I think Alma Thomas made abstract art because

Lesson Extensions

Visual Arts and Writing

- Have students write a piece that uses exaggeration or metaphor to express an idea or emotion.
- Ask them to use art vocabulary to describe Alma Thomas's painting to someone who hasn't seen it, and/or to write a poem, song, or short piece.
- Have students think of a place they love and create an abstract image of it using only the elements of art.

Physical Science

Components like wires, batteries, and bulbs serve as the building blocks of simple series and parallel circuits. Likewise, the elements of art serve as building blocks for an image or sculpture. As students construct the "flag book" have them compare the process of putting the flags in the

proper place with making sure the wires and bulbs in a circuit are connected correctly. Students can also discuss the relational causal pattern involved in both projects. How do two things work in relationship to each other to create cause and effect?