Writing in Response to Art

Did you know the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art has been offering a creative writing program for Norman Public Schools sixth graders since 2008? Small groups from each middle school are selected by teachers to participate in one-day workshops with award-winning writer and former Oklahoma poet laureate Nathan Brown. At the museum, the students write poems and short stories in response to artworks in the permanent collection and special exhibitions. Generous support from the Harris Foundation helps make this opportunity possible every year.

Below you’ll find a selection of works created by past participants in the program. Believe it or not, each of these pieces was written in 30 minutes or less! After you’ve read the samples, give it a try yourself. There are some tips for getting started on the last page.

Noah A.
Alcott Middle School
2010-11

The valley
was a hand,
its pudgy fingers
forming a bowl
to contain the water,
which the sky
would
sip.

Inspired by Thomas Moran’s Lake Martha, in the Wasatch Range, 1895
Purchase, Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker Collection, 1996
A tight grip on the rein, hands guide the horses along. Pulling such a large creature at will in whatever direction. The horse moves with grace in each step, waiting for the next command.

Hands, Hands
Kennedi W.
Whittier Middle School
2010-11

Hands
reaching out
to touch the
course animals’
fur, leading them
down to death
Hands calming, lying,
deceiving the eyes
that watch intently,
clearly believing
every touch will
protect them
always, always

Inspired by Girolamo da Carpi
Priests leading a bull, a ram, and a boar to an altar, after the antique, c. 1549-53
Purchased with funds provided by the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Association, 2006
Wounds So Deep
Annabella P.
Whittier Middle School
2013-14

Two bronze bodies with only each other stay in one place, getting smothered by the sorrowful blue holes inside their mighty armor. With spherical wounds so deep, they can never be healed. But a hole in the bronze is slowly closing by the love of his partner, standing close by.

Inspired by Barbara Hepworth, Two Figures, 1968
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Max Weitzenhoffer, 1971
Cold
Olivia Robertson
Alcott Middle School
2012-13

A fox stumbles weakly over the barren landscape. She stops near a large mound of snow. She is too weak to get over it. She whines, surveying the impeccable whiteness that is her only home. She is looking for her kit. She has been looking for days and weeks. A wiser creature would have given up. There is always next year. She starts slightly when a cloud shifts, revealing a cold moon. That is the word to describe this place: cold. Cold ground, cold snow, cold moon, even the sky is cold. She starts walking again, trying to find a baby in this cold world that crushed all.

Inspired by Olive Rush, The White Sands (with Fox), c. 1925
Purchased with funds provided by the Jerome Westheimer, Sr., Family Foundation, Inc., 2006
I am wild. I am fierce! I have been free for my whole life, galloping the plains and living life to the fullest. I have always been kind and gentle to the creatures around me, but I felt something was different today. Everything was tense. For the first time in my life, I saw a human. It was a strange and intimidating creature. I didn’t know what to think. I wanted to figure them out. I went closer, closer, not close enough. Then I stopped mid stride. They saw me. A sly smile crossed his face. I turned to bolt. Before I knew it, I was tangled up in ropes. There were these strange forceful creatures in every direction. For the first time in my life, I was scared. No, scared is an understatement. I was petrified. I lived my whole life free, and I was not going to let them take that away from me. I decided then and there that I was not going down without a fight.

Inspired by Luis Jiménez, Mustang (Mesteño), 1997
Gift of Jerome M. and Wanda Otey Westheimer, 1998
Ready to write something of your own? Grab a pen or pencil and some paper, and look back through this guide. Choose one of the images on earlier pages, or browse the museum’s collection online for other inspiration. [https://www.ou.edu/fjjma/collections](https://www.ou.edu/fjjma/collections)

Once you’ve picked an artwork, take a few minutes to look at it carefully. Which objects, colors, and details catch your attention first? What seems to be happening in the scene? Do any emotions come to mind as you study the work? Jot down a few words that come to mind that describe what you’ve noticed.

Sometimes the hardest thing about writing is just getting started, so for this activity, jump right in! Whether you want to try a poem, a story, or just a description, don’t spend too long planning at this point. You might even set a timer for 15-20 minutes so that you have a time limit to put something on paper. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar right now either. You can go back and fix things later.

A few things you might consider:

- How would you describe the scene to somebody who doesn’t have the picture in front of them? Use specific details and vivid words to help them see what you see.

- What would it be like if you could hop into the scene like Mary Poppins? What would you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch? Make use of those five senses as you write.

- Write from a character’s point of view. People may be the most obvious choice, but you could also speak as an animal or even an object like a chair or an apple! Tell a story from that unique perspective.

- Remember, poems don’t have to rhyme, but they can if you want.

- When you’re done with your story or poem, think of a title that will catch a reader’s attention.

We hope you’ll visit the museum in person for even more inspiration. Happy writing!