
Learning Application: Three Class Exercises for Writing with Artifacts

I. Working through an Idea

What makes you curious?

As you study geometry (and other content-based ideas), what do you wonder about?

Can you summarize your interest in one word? Ordinary words like “angle,” “symmetry,” “curve,” “related,” “parallel” (in a geometry class) can represent extraordinary ideas.

Your word:

Look for evidence around you. Where in your daily environment do you see examples of this word?

Look for evidence in art. Where in books, music, or movies do you see examples of this word?

Look for clues. How many different ways do people use this word? (Try Googling the word and see where your search leads.)

Fact-find. Where can you look to find information about your word? List three ideas you can find on the Internet, and be sure to note the website where you found them.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Illustrate. What places on the Internet might you find a few pictures to illustrate your word?

- 1.
- 2.

Design. Make a slide to present your word in a class slideshow. Include at least one image (illustration), a definition, an example of where we find the word in life (or in art). Tell your partner (audience) something they might not know about how the word relates to a concept in your course.

II. Collaborative Artifact Exchange

(Adapted from Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, 4th ed., 2012, Box 20.)

To investigate the story behind an object from another person's point of view, choose partners and act as both interviewer and informant. Select an interesting artifact that the partner is wearing or carrying (keychain, piece of jewelry, clothing item) or have the partner select. These background strategies echo the entire research process:

1. Observation Notes Take quiet time to inspect, describe, measure, draw, and take notes on the artifact your informant has given you. Pay attention to its form and speculate about its function. Where do you think it comes from? What is it used for?

2. Personal Notes What does it remind you of? What do you already know about things similar to it? How does it connect to your own experiences? What are your hunches about the artifact? In other words, what assumptions do you have about it? (For example, you may be taking notes on someone's ring and find yourself speculating about how much it costs and whether the owner is wealthy). It is important here to identify your assumptions and not mask them.

And then, with your partner/research participant.

3. Interview the research participant Ask questions and take notes on the story behind the artifact. What people are involved in it? Why is it important to him or her? How does the owner use it? Value it? What's its cultural background? After recording your partner's responses, read your observational notes to each other to verify or clarify the information.

After the interview, begin to analyze and write up research on the "other's" chosen artifact.

4. Theorize Think of a metaphor that describes the object. How does the artifact reflect something you know about the participant? Could you find background material about the artifact? Where would you go on the Internet? In your partner's community? Where would you look? How does the artifact relate to a larger history or culture?

5. Write In several paragraphs about the observations, the interview, and your theories, create a written account of the artifact and its relationship to your informant. Give a draft to your partner for his or her response.

6. Exchange Write a response to your interviewer's written account, detailing what was interesting and surprising. At this point, the participant can point out what the interviewer didn't notice, say, or ask that might be important to a further understanding of the artifact. You will want to exchange your responses again, the interviewer explaining what she learned from the first exchange.

7. Reflect Write about what you learned about yourself as an interviewer. What are your strengths? Your weaknesses? What assumptions or preconceptions did you find that you had which interfered with your interviewing skills? How might you change this?

III. Write a Review of Writing that Highlights an Artifact

It's fun and instructive to read others' writing about artifacts, and the writing can vary as much as the topic. But always it's about how the reader/narrator (you) engaged with what and how it "speaks" to you. For this assignment, find an essay (or a website, film, or book excerpt) that talks about an artifact and its history. Read the essay, notice the written and imaged portions, ask some questions, and take some notes. As you read, you'll want to "read as a writer"; that is, notice how the writer creates an image with description, information, and history. You might ask such questions as:

1. Does it blur boundaries, or sit squarely inside a style or genre (website, article/essay, collection, script). Why did the author choose this style to present the artifact this way?
2. What kinds of information gathering does the presentation show, and how does the writer mask it to create a smooth read? How many sources did the author need to consult? What kinds of sources? What surprises you about the way the author organizes the presentation?
3. Does it offer you any new opportunities as a reader? How does it mix words, sounds, and images? Or does it offer a full description in words alone?
4. What knowledge do you already need to have to be a reader of this presentation?
5. What's the story it tells? How does that story expand itself to a larger theme about a culture?
6. How (and what) does the writer use as a "toolkit" (focus, voice, point of view, narrative arc, rhythm and pacing, metaphor, simile, analogy)?
7. Where, and in what form, was this presentation first published? Why do you suppose the writer chose that publication method?
8. For whom is this written? Does the writer identify the audience?
9. What sentences/images really grab you? Write out a few.
10. What would you revise about how this presentation highlights an artifact and its history?
11. What made you choose this presentation to review?

Write a one- or two-page review of the essay, not necessarily a sales pitch, but perhaps a pitch for your abilities to recommend (or not) this presentation to other writers. Be funny or cynical or intellectual, snobbish or self-effacing, pushy or demure. Just review it so we know a lot about this presentation, its writer, the artifact it's meant to highlight, and its effect on your expert readership.