



Choice-Based Art Edited by Nan Hathaway

Choice-Based Art classrooms are working studios where students learn through authentic art making. Control shifts from teacher to learner as students explore ideas and interests in art media of their choice. This concept supports multiple modes of learning to meet the diverse needs of our students. Learn more at teachingforartisticbehavior.org.

ARTIST STATEMENTS FOR ASSESSMENT AND STUDENT GROWTH

BY LINDA M. PAPANICOLAOU

If you could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint.”—Edward Hopper.

When the artist is of Hopper’s caliber, the work itself will convey the message, but for TAB-Choice pedagogy, artist statements are an important part of a school art exhibition.

FOR CHILDREN, THE ART EXPERIENCE is centered on *idea* and *making* rather than on product. Consequently, their drawings, paintings or sculptures are more the artifact of a process than the self-contained art object we expect from adult artists. To fully understand children’s art, some sort of interpretive gallery label is needed.

For Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) displays—based largely on a whole-class lesson plan—a paragraph by the teacher that explains the famous artwork that was studied, lesson objectives and relevant standards would suffice.

In TAB-Choice exhibitions, where each artwork represents an individual creative process, the best practice is to include artist statements by the children themselves. Collecting a few sentences from each participant in an inclusive exhibition is a huge job, but worth the authenticity of artist voice this brings.

In *Engaging Learners Through Artmaking*, Katherine Douglas and Diane Jaquith offer a few prompts that will serve any grade level:

1. *Tell me about your artwork.*
2. *What do you want people to notice?*
3. *Where did you find his idea?*
4. *How did you make this?*

MY OWN BASIC PROMPT, which I use often so students become familiar with it, is a simple yet open variant on these: *Tell something you’d like a viewer to know about your artwork (that they can’t just see for themselves by looking at it).*

For many of my middle-schoolers, particularly those with weaker language skills, thinking and writing about their art can be difficult at first, but “Present” is part of the Visual Art standards. In addition to exhibiting their work, my students write for assignments and for digital portfolios throughout the semester. Recorded when thoughts are fresh, their uploaded writing may be retrieved as needed for exhibition and has also become an important part of my assessment.

For assessment, however, I’ve found a need more than the “Tell something” prompt. It’s a good snapshot but

insufficient to show growth over time.

There are many online resources on writing about art, including a post by Tracy Hare at *theartofed.com*, which describes an extensive flow chart that scaffolds students into deeper thinking. But I’ve opted to keep things simple by relying on what students are already doing in their English classes.

ONE OF OUR EIGHTH-GRADE TEACHERS explains the types of informational texts they study in Common Core: Description, Compare-Contrast, Order-Sequence, Problem-Solution, and Cause-Effect. All are applicable to writing about art. Of these examples, “problem-solution” is my favorite because it’s fundamental to the art process:

- *What was your idea? How did it change or develop as you worked? Describe in order the sequence of decisions you made as the artwork progressed.*
- *What color scheme did you choose for this assignment? Describe how your choice affected your work.*
- *Describe a question, decision or problem that arose as you were working on this artwork. How did you deal with it? Fortify with specific details.*
- *Using specific examples in your sketchbook and portfolio, compare and contrast your work from the beginning of the semester to the art you create now. Explain how this shows your growth as an artist.*

THESE ARE NOT LIKE QUIZZES WITH RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS, nor is a five-paragraph essay required. My students take art to make art, not write about it. I believe that if the prompt is kept simple and relevant, students will respond with an authenticity that gives me a good understanding of their progress, as well as thoughtful label copy for exhibition.

Even more importantly, a well-crafted prompt makes writing part of the learning itself. Katherine Douglas likens artist statements to “speed bumps” that cause viewers to slow down and look more carefully. They’re also much-needed speed bumps for students.

Mature artists like Hopper can intuitively self-critique, but children don’t yet have this skill. Regularly writing short artist statements can be a closure routine that helps students reflect and realize what they’ve accomplished.

It’s the difference between just “making stuff” and an Art class that gives students a foundation for their future creative growth. ■

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