

BRAINSTORMING TO CONNECT THINKING SKILLS WITH ABSTRACT ART

THIS LESSON, ALTHOUGH ALIGNED WITH CAREER, ART, AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STANDARDS, CAN BE EASILY ADAPTED FOR ANY CORE SUBJECT

There is no greater way to forge connections across disciplines than the use of critical and creative thinking skills. Sophisticated thinking creates satisfied, successful, lifelong learners. Of the many skills demanded from today's professionals, creative thinking is the most frequently mentioned, and brainstorming is key to the development of creative thinking. Abstract art, which is open to many interpretations, challenges viewers to think in new ways and can provide a rich starting point for creative brainstorming.



The City, 1919
Fernand Léger, French
Oil on canvas
7 feet 7 inches x 9 feet 9 1/2 inches (231.1 x 298.4 cm)
A. E. Gallatin Collection, 1952
1952-61-58
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

Grade Level

For grades 7–9, with adaptations for elementary and high school

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-8.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.2](#)

PA Academic Standards for Art

- 9.3.B: Arts & Humanities – Criteria for Critical Response to Art

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

- [The City](#), 1919, by Fernand Léger
ARTstor search: 1952-61-58
- [Night Sea](#), 1977, by Edna Andrade
ARTstor search: Not available
- [Hydrangeas Spring Song](#), 1976, by Alma Thomas
ARTstor search: 2002-20-1
- [Red and Orange Streak](#), 1919, by Georgia O'Keeffe
ARTstor search: Not available

For more information, please contact Division of Education and Public Programs: School and Teacher Programs by phone at 215-684-7580, by fax at 215-236-4063, or by e-mail at educate@philamuseum.org.

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Lesson Process

THE FIRST FOUR STEPS OF THIS EXERCISE COMPRISE AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BRAINSTORMING PROCESS. IF YOUR STUDENTS ARE ALREADY COMFORTABLE WITH BRAINSTORMING, YOU CAN BEGIN WITH STEP 5.

1. Break the class into groups of four or five students. Give each group a large piece of paper to record their work. Describe for them the following situation: You are driving down the highway and you notice a single shoe lying by the side of the road. What are four possible explanations for the shoe to be here? Ask each group to list their ideas on their paper. (Possible example: it fell off the foot of someone hanging his/her feet out of the car window.)
2. Once the class has finished this initial challenge, instruct them to continue the brainstorming process until they come up with sixteen more possible explanations (for a total of twenty).
3. Begin a class discussion to compare responses. Choose one group to read their first five explanations. Follow by asking the class which other groups wrote a similar explanation. Notice that many groups will have shared ideas. Next, pick a group to share their last three explanations, asking which other groups have similar responses. Notice that very few of these final explanations will be repeated. Ask students why they think this variation has occurred.
4. **EXPLANATION:** The brainstorming process allows us to tap into our creative thoughts. Notice how the items from the beginning of the lists typically include the obvious responses. It is only when we are forced to continue after those obvious responses that we arrive at the more creative ones. Also note that each group typically writes quickly for a minute (the obvious responses), then experiences a period of frustration (while the brain “resets”), after which there is a slow but steady stream of more creative responses. The bottom line: thinking creatively often requires that we experience that period of frustration. Otherwise, the brainstorming process will only present the most obvious (and usually most uninteresting) responses.
5. Replace each group’s writing paper and give each group a copy of the painting *The City*—unless you choose to display the image to the class. (NOTE: The images listed above can be used in any order, or you may assign different images to different groups. *The City*, however, provides a more “approachable” first piece.)
6. Ask each group to consider what the artist may have been attempting to communicate. Students should consider such questions as: What ideas might the artist have been exploring? What did the artists want to convey to the viewer? They are to list five responses.
7. Discuss these responses as a class. Select several and try to discuss the art using the response selected. What do these responses tell us about ways we can approach abstract art?
8. Display or give the groups copies of *Red and Orange Streak*. Follow the same process as with *The City*. Discuss. Are there any responses which seem to apply to both paintings? If ideas are sparse, ask whether any of their responses involves color choice, composition, or the arrangement of lines and shapes. This may lead to additional ideas.

Assessment

1. From their brainstorming, each student should write a brief essay attempting to interpret a work of abstract art. You might want to start with one of the remaining pieces—*Hydrangeas Spring Song* or *Night Sea*.

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2. Present a work of abstract art to the class, using techniques from the brainstorming session to discuss various interpretations.

Enrichment

1. Provide additional information on these works to refine and add depth to the discussions. (NOTE: This information can be found on the Museum website. When you click on one of the titles, look for the "Teacher Resources" tab in the upper right corner of that page)
2. Additional works can be added, either in class or as homework. (NOTE: *Hydrangeas Spring Song* or *Night Sea* may be assigned as homework.) You may also give students the task of making their own selections.