Artful Thinking: Beginning/Middle/End

The Artful Thinking approach encourages active looking and learning through the practice of short, simple thinking routines. These routines help students focus on specific aspects of an artwork and organize their observations and ideas. The repetition of thinking routines across subjects and disciplines supports students in developing not only the skills for inquiry, but also the habits of an inquiring mind.

Beginning/Middle/End is a structure for both critical and creative thinking. Students’ observations, descriptions, and inferences provide a solid foundation for imagining possibilities to fill in the missing parts of a narrative. Use this routine as a springboard for storytelling; to reinforce students’ sequencing skills; to support understanding of character, setting, and plot; as an exploration of genre; or to help young writers notice elements of craft, like composition, style, and choice of details.

Grade Level
Adaptable for all grades

Common Core Academic State Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCR.A.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCR.A.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCR.A.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCR.W.3

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

Suggested Art Images
Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the museum’s website:

- Breaking Home Ties, 1890, by Thomas Hovenden
- Carnival Evening, 1886, by Henri-Julien-Félix Rousseau
- In the Dog House, 1952, by Antonio Frasconi
- Portage, 2000, by William Kentridge
- Still Life with a Ham and a Roemer, around 1631–34, by Willem Claesz. Heda
- The Life Line, 1884, by Winslow Homer
- The Merry Jesters, 1906, by Henri-Julien-Félix Rousseau

The Merry Jesters, 1906
Henri-Julien-Félix Rousseau (French)
Oil on canvas
57 3/8 x 44 5/8 inches (145.7 x 113.3 cm)
Framed: 64 3/16 x 51 1/16 x 2 3/4 inches (163 x 129.7 x 7 cm)
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection 1950-134.176
Lesson Objectives
Students will be able to:

- Carefully notice and describe many details of a work of art.
- Connect observations about an artwork to story elements, like character, setting, and plot.
- Create a narrative by elaborating on their observations and ideas.

Materials Needed
- Screen for projecting Suggested Art Images
- Beginning/Middle/End or Before/After worksheets
- Color copies of selected images (optional)

Lesson Process
Beginning/Middle/End can be used with any of the artworks suggested in this lesson, or with other images you have available. Copies of Suggested Art Images that are not downloadable from the museum website are provided at the end of this lesson.

This routine works best with images that spark students’ imagination through mystery, curiosity, or dramatic tension. Students are invited to think divergently and flex their creativity, but only within the constraints of what makes narrative sense. For this to happen, the moment in time captured by an image needs to strike a balance between accessibility and nuance. Students must be able to interpret the image but also have plenty to wonder about what the artist has left out.

1. Introduce Beginning/Middle/End. Explain to students that they are going to use their imaginations and create a story from what they think and wonder about a work of art. Complete stories have a beginning, middle, and end, but a painting usually captures one moment in time, like a snapshot. Students will visualize the rest of a narrative based on what they see in a painting and what they think is going on in it.

2. Project the image of your selected artwork. Give students a short time to look quietly before asking them what they notice.

3. Guide students to describe what they see. Use another Artful Thinking routine, like Ten Times Two or the Elaboration Game, if you would like a structure for observing and describing.

4. Once students have described the selected artwork, invite them to share what they think is happening in the image. Who are the characters? What is the setting? What story do they think the artwork is telling? What might the genre of this story be? Keep encouraging students to support their ideas with evidence from the artwork.

5. Students of any age might benefit at this point from reviewing story elements. For younger students, the review may consist only of character, setting, and plot. For older students, it might also include conflict, point-of-view, and theme. This routine is easily adaptable to any level of understanding.

6. Now ask students to imagine the parts of the story the artist isn’t showing in the image. Where does this scene belong in a narrative—at the beginning, middle, or end? If it’s the beginning of a story, what might happen next? If it’s the middle of a story, what happened before, and how might the story end? If it’s the end of a story, what was the rest of the plot? Invite students to share their ideas.

7. Pass out copies of the Beginning/Middle/End worksheet. You can simplify the routine by using the Before/After worksheet instead. If you think students need even more scaffolding, complete a model of the worksheet together, having them tell the missing parts of the story while you draw or write.
8. If your students are using the Beginning/Middle/End worksheet, have them decide which part of the story the scene in the artwork represents, and cross out that box. They will write, draw, or use a combination of both to tell the rest of the story. If students are using the Before/After worksheet, they only need to decide whether to imagine what happened before the scene in the artwork or what might happen after.

9. As students work on their stories, remind them to ground the details of new scenes in their observations about the artwork. This is also an opportunity to make sense of mysterious details or unanswered questions. For example,

- In *Breaking Home Ties*, why do the characters look so sad? Why is the boy leaving home, and where is he going?
- In *Carnival Evening*, why are the characters dressed in costumes? Where are they coming from or going to? What is the spooky structure behind them in the trees?
- In *In the Dog House*, why is the dog sleeping in a bed while the man sleeps in a dog house? What are the dog and fire hydrant doing inside?
- In *Portage*, what are the silhouetted figures doing? Are they protesting, or marching in a parade, or fleeing danger? What objects are they carrying, and why? Try giving pairs or small groups of students different parts of this artwork, and compare their interpretations and stories.
- In *Still Life with a Ham and a Roemer*, who left the table in such disarray, and why?
- In *The Life Line*, who is the mysterious rescuer, and what happened to the woman he is rescuing? Do they make it to safety?
- In *The Merry Jesters*, what are these animals doing with human objects like a bottle? How did the objects get there in the first place?

10. Wrap up the routine by asking students to share their stories. What similarities and differences emerge? What details in the original image did students rely on to build their narratives? How did they make connections to the genre, theme, or point of view of the artwork? How does imagining the story around an image help us understand the image better?

**Extension**

Challenge students to tell their story in three dimensions by creating a diorama, or three-dimensional tableau, representing one of their imagined scenes.
**Worksheet: Beginning/Middle/End**

Take a few minutes to look closely at an image. Imagine the scene is part of a story.

- Decide if the scene is the beginning, middle, or end.
- Write, draw, or use a combination of writing and drawing to fill in the rest of the story.

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Worksheet: Before/After

Take a few minutes to look closely at an image. Imagine the scene is part of a story.

- What do you think happened before this scene? What do you think might happen after?
- Write, draw, or use a combination of writing and drawing to show what happened before or what will happen after.

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In the Dog House, from the series The World Upside Down, 1952, by Antonio Frasconi (Purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund, 1959-22-58) © Visual Artists and Galleries Assoc., Inc. (VAGA), New York
Portage (detail), 2000, by William Kentridge (Purchased with funds contributed by the Young Friends of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund, and the Print Revolving Fund, 2008-241-1)
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