

# Response

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Pam Childers' comment, "although we may be surrounded by visual images, so often we don't stop to look" points to the main reason I think her suggestions prove valuable: The activities make students look and have several benefits for the instructor.

- *It's a motivator:* Pam's suggestions to get students out of the familiar classroom usually stimulates interest and motivation. Too often students don't *see* anymore in a classroom that has grown generic and predictable (as a result, they don't *hear* anymore or *do* anymore either).
- *It connects learning to the world:* Students don't often connect what they study to their lives outside school walls. The *outside* world moves too fast for students to concentrate on a single image or idea. Moving to a place that challenges the eye, slows the response, and makes them assess their reaction not only produces good thinking and good writing, it is a lesson that transfers to other issues in and out of a class. Pam's methods here force connections by sharpening observation.
- *Materials are accessible:* What materials may be needed (for the still life activity) are readily available. The lattice itself, for example, can be replaced by a piece of grillwork, premade fencing, or a trellis, and the effect can also be achieved by restricting the view with cardboard boxes, curtains, scarves, shower curtains, or lace curtains.
- *Activities are adaptable to different places and different levels of students:* The second writing activity Pam mentions—choosing and writing about pieces of art you would save—can be conducted in any kind of setting that arrests the eye: a museum, a historical society, a historical district, a landmark home. The writing task can even be adapted to a botanical garden or a display of insects, butterflies, or birds. Directions can be as complex or simple as you want to make them.

- *Activities are adaptable to a variety of purposes:* As Pam points out, students responded enthusiastically (they were motivated to write), they reworked their pieces (revision), and they revised together (collaboration, peer editing).

## Thematic Variations

### *Parts of a Paper*

I once worked with studio art students who gave me a rich, concrete, visual vocabulary. Art students speak about what “color,” “tone,” “line,” or “shadow” mean in relation to the particular medium in which they work. They already understand that every work draws the eye to a focal point and that from every focal point the eye ranges across an artwork, usually in a fairly predictable order based on the arrangement of figures, light, shapes, or movements. The visual elements students already used in their artistic productions—focus, organization, tone, style, and color—seemed to correspond easily to similar abstract elements of writing a paper. Explaining style, audience, or even organization was less difficult once I began drawing the relationship between the concrete definitions familiar to artists and those same terms as they applied to written texts. As usual, it was a student who showed me the value of this visual vocabulary.

A few years ago I was particularly struck by one art student’s layering of detail in a paper, detail that went nowhere and had no main purpose showing me why I should read all of it. In a casual conversation with her studio art instructor, I discovered that she had a similar problem in her visual productions: her canvases gave details similar weight and provided no focal points, nowhere for the eye to rest. While this chaos could have been another artist’s intention, it was not this student’s, and she often complained that no one understood her work.

Keeping the art instructor’s diagnosis in mind, I began to use the student’s sketch book to talk about focal point, organization, and perspective in a verbal work. She began to *see* my point, and her papers gained new solidity and linearity as a result. (I often wish I had followed up by asking whether this instruction proved useful in solving her visual chaos, but I didn’t.)

What I have since realized is that students in our culture have already been introduced to the basics of art through animation, commercials, ads, and slick media productions. They know the value of a commercial that grabs attention with innovative use of color, visual detail, and a focal point that repeats in each frame. After a trip to the

museum, where students have closely observed artwork, they will develop a culturally rich visual vocabulary for talking about what they see. Teachers can capitalize on their prior knowledge by using that vocabulary to describe the “color,” “tone,” “focal point,” or “spatial organization” of their ideas. They easily get the picture.

### *Parts of a Paper (Another Version)*

Students develop their own visual vocabulary. They can do this, of course, before visiting a museum by looking at advertisements, music videos, book or CD covers, or commercials. As Pam’s chapter shows, it is advantageous to guide students through such an experience with questions, and similarly, a preexercise can arm them with a visual vocabulary. However, the activity is flexible enough to suit many time frames and objectives, and can wait until after the visit. Although every class list will most likely be quite similar, we know about the positive learning effects that result when students discover their own vocabularies, their own knowledge. Therefore, whether before or after the trip to the museum, students can take the visual vocabulary they have developed and apply it by naming corresponding parts of their paper.

I suggest that students work together on this. Each visual medium has similar techniques for persuading, demonstrating, or analyzing, so students do not have to have chosen similar pieces for their descriptive text. Each group can focus on an area of their choice. What you will get may resemble what usually turns up: beginning, middle, and end (where the eye travels); transitions (jump edits, color, space); use of key words or phrases (repetitious form, or the catch phrase for emphasis); the main point (focal point); point of view (camera angle, perspective). You don’t have to be an art expert; because of TV (especially music videos), movies, commercials, and endless audio and visual reviews of these media, the words students need are already part of their familiar lexicon. The result? Those who are more visual will be able to *see* a map for a written paper; those who are more verbal will understand why abstract ideas need to be supported with concrete details.

### *One More Step*

The writing students produce can further their understanding of both written and visual texts, with an end to improving their production and analysis of both. Student works can be bound together into a classroom text (made easier by desktop publishing, though that is not a necessary tool). Few people understand the art of the

book, even though it affects all of us who read. By producing a book of their own work, we teach them that the form and format in which information is contained controls the knowledge it holds. Students will have to make layout decisions: Poetry first, then short descriptions? Pictures or no pictures? What about the contents of the book: Does everyone get published? In what order? Alphabetical order of last names? Best to worst? And who judges? Discussions about such decisions inevitably lead to copyright issues and a consideration of plagiarism.

Teachable moments continue throughout this publishing experience. While students are engaged in the production of their own book, they can be looking at their textbooks and other books, ostensibly to get ideas. But the classroom conversations can revolve around issues of text and graphic production. The teacher can bring in some old textbooks and have students compare the number of pictures in newer books to that in similar but older texts: What does the obvious increase mean: Better production? Easier technology? Dependence on the quick learning opportunity offered by a visual? Students should also look at fonts and page layout, two important visual effects that most of us often fail to notice even though they play a vital role in our attitude toward the information thus contained.

In some classes, students will want to include their own drawings; in others that will create problems: Color? Size? Ratio of text to art? Other questions arise: What are the costs of color? How does that influence whether a publisher includes visual elements in a book or not? Who determines what is published? On what grounds? Merit only? In one composition class we got so involved in this conversation, I was afraid the quarter would pass us by without much student writing to show for it. Then they turned in their journals. As I had asked, each night they had responded to a prompt derived from the kinds of questions that were generated in class discussions. It became apparent that students had enjoyed writing their personal responses and that each student had the makings of a complete description of what a book could and couldn't be.

Their final project, therefore, was to make a book out of all their work that was pertinent to our central question: Visually and verbally, what makes a good book? Their own "books" were to exemplify their visual and verbal ideas with only one constraint: each had to have an opening "introduction," an argument for the work contained therein, that explained what I would see and why I would see it. Students included journal entries, essays, creative papers, drawings, copies of pages from books (new and old), various text styles and layout styles. The formats ranged from the handsewn

book to the three-ring binder. Nonetheless, one discovery seemed consistent: students pointed out that the book's format should depend upon the content. I regret not having any examples, because they demonstrate a deeper understanding of writing and the visual than the work of other classes I have previously taught, but these college students picked up their final projects because they wanted to keep them!

### *Dia-graphing*

Pam's use of the drawing-writing dialogue journal gave me another idea. Although I have always encouraged students to draw in their journals or to ignore the straight lines if they choose to, I'm usually the only one doing so as I comment on their work. I think that next time I'll devote at least one class to a collaborative project in which students cannot talk. Using the dialogue journal as their resource, students will have to create a layout for an infomercial. If this works the way I think it will, the ensuing discussion should provide experiential instruction on collaboration, brainstorming, and using the journal as a resource, and will demonstrate the kinds of boundaries one can break when combining the visual and verbal in a journal.

### *Now You See Me . . .*

Finally, Pam's writing exercise employing the still life with latticework seems a treasure trove of lessons in both visual and verbal perspective and interpretation: Each student's analysis of the still life depends on his or her position in the room. It also provides a jumping-off point for discussing multicultural writers (such as Sandra Cisneros, Toni Morrison, Nellie Wong, Amado Muro, Dave Martin Nez). As the texts of these writers show, each person's interpretation of life depends on the experiences they undergo and how those experiences are layered upon, placed next to, or separated by other experiences. This exercise shows that some people are very good at *bending* or extending their view, anticipating where a vine ends in the lattice, what the other side of the raccoon looks like, or how the snowshoe hidden under the cloth is shaped. What students quickly discover though, is that their ability to see a whole picture is limited to where they sit in the classroom (that is, in society).

Students can use their still life papers to create a larger vision in the classroom: each work can be copied and then *mapped* on a wall according to the student's physical relationship to the lattice. Ideally, the map would be formed around a pier or a column so those reading it

could verbally experience the visual point of view experienced by the students. This physical exemplification of the importance of point of view and experience could not only stimulate an introductory discussion on multicultural literature, but it could eventually be transformed into a concrete touchstone for some of the writing practices we already ask of our students.

A common assignment is to write a paper from two different perspectives or to analyze a play from the point of view of a minor character or characters (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is an excellent example). Yet once these creative exercises are over, students often don't carry over what they have learned about point of view to other work. Or, as we have discovered in our writing centers, students write from another perspective just to please the teacher. Too often we hear students saying, "Well, I have to say that because it's what my teacher wants to hear." They achieve no thoughtful integration of new information, nor do they attempt to support a personal perspective.

The resulting papers are poorly constructed, lack coherence, are short on evidence, and often contain surface errors that point to a lack of engagement in the assignment. But what if a precondition to writing was the knowledge that by dint of each writer's perspective—their place in front of the lattice—their point of view would be different from another's? For students, this exercise underscores the point of a multicultural unit or course—that different experiences produce different points of view—while encouraging students to explore the conditions that shape their own perspectives.

### *Now You See Me, Now You Don't*

I would suggest that, before beginning a multicultural unit, students experience an exercise like Pam's, in which they have to work their way through visual layers that depend upon a particular point of view, in which they have to wrestle with color, balance, space, shape, figure, and background. Then they can write a paper proposing a particular perspective: it can be a creative or a descriptive essay, but in some way (for example, visually, emotionally) it must recreate what it is they see. Next, assign a paper written from the point of view of someone else. These two could be pasted or stacked over the visual pieces to form a verbal latticework. In creating this *verbal* still life, students would have to discuss the papers, their point of view in terms of what they see, what they don't see, what is missing and why, what they need to look at more closely. The next step, of course, is for them to present their own perspective on a work of literature. The visual latticework could stop at this point—or continue.

## Postscript

All these exercises support “re-vision”: they supply models or visual cues that serve as guidelines for analysis. Mostly though, these activities help students extend a visual experience into a learning experience. New research in neuroscience suggests that the visual supports the verbal wiring of the brain, which would mean that visual experiences reinforce verbal/cognitive skills. These exercises, in which the visual and the spatial complement instruction, move students enthusiastically to verbal communication and seem to help them retain a verbal understanding and facility within various areas of our discipline. The potential application to other disciplines lies in manipulating the visual experience (see Chapter 6), the subject of the dialogue journals, or the objects behind the latticework. Just as the museum holds potential for our students, these activities hold potential for our pedagogy.