

## Visual Arts Gallery Project

“That really bugged me. I know why Dr. King wrote what he did.”

- A student reacting to pictures from the 1960s civil rights movement prior to reading “A Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King Jr.

A visualization of a textual world provides students with the opportunity to experience and think about a text.

Using visual arts as a pre-reading strategy does the following:

- Provides opportunities for introverted students to visualize an imaginative text world
- Helps reluctant readers enter texts and respond
- Allows students to visualize the events that are reflected in the text being studied
- Addresses the needs of visual learners

Visual art, as in the case of drama, helps reluctant readers enter texts and respond to them. Teachers are able to open their notions of reading, as well as strategies for reading. Art and drama both reinforce the necessity of drawing on the reader’s prior experience to create meaning. Art also encourages students to explore and create new understanding and is a means through which to imagine and enter into text worlds (see Wilhelm, 1997). During the Clinton administration and the 1998 U.S. military strike against Iraq, Katie was working on an assignment for a class in graduate school and observed a peer’s (Jill’s) English class for two weeks. Jill was a veteran English teacher, who often taught the lower-level students who were tracked into the “support” classes. She was passionate about developing the students’ literacy skills so they could become “citizens of our community.” During this two-week period, Jill prepared the students to read Martin Luther King Jr.’s “A Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which was required reading in the ninth-grade English curriculum.



## Case Example: Visual Art in the Classroom

Jill enthusiastically introduced students to the history of the civil rights movement in America:

If we go through the experience, we know more about it and feel something about it. I remember the civil rights movement. I remember this, and this is personal for me because I lived through it. You [gesturing to her students] know something about it through books and, for some, your older relatives may have told you about it. This [Jill holds up her copy of "A Letter from Birmingham Jail"] is King's response to "man's inhumanity to man." Now, you can see that I have some pictures on the wall there and I'd like to invite you to look at my art gallery.

Jill's "art gallery" was composed of a collection of photos from books and magazines that she displayed on the classroom walls. As the students entered Jill's art gallery, they explored the historical background and impact of the civil rights movement. While perusing the pictures, one of the students hummed the famous civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome." Hearing the student, Jill promised to bring a recording of the song. One of the students, Walter, focused on a picture of protesters being sprayed by water hoses and asked, "Why were the water hoses such a big deal?"

"The water hoses were very painful," Jill responded. "The force of the water was so great, it could knock you down."

Jill's response seemed to satisfy Walter's curiosity, so Jill continued her civil rights mini-lesson.

"You do know," Jill shared thoughtfully, "that many non-blacks participated in the civil rights movement and lost their lives."

"Is this the bus boycott?" Marty asked, pointing to a picture.

"Yes," Jill responded. She paused. "You do know about Rosa Parks. She was the test case," she said. "When she was arrested, that started the bus boycott. As a matter of fact, the leaders of the movement were surprised that the blacks would organize so quickly. Most of the blacks didn't use buses. They organized car pools and taxis; many people walked ten to fifteen miles a day."

"Did King make any money from this?" Kim asked.

"No," Jill said. She paused as she thought about how to respond to that question. Just share the facts, she thought. "He did have a salary as a minister but if you're asking if he made a lot of money, well . . ."

Jill paused again. "The answer is no."

This discussion typified the progression of this pre-reading activity. While Jill directed the students through the art gallery, she allowed them to freely ask questions about the pictures and the civil rights movement.

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Katie asked Jill about her decision to engage her students in this pre-reading activity. “The art gallery is a tool for the students to visualize the events that Martin Luther King Jr. discusses in his letter,” Jill shared with Katie. “Many of them need to ‘see’ what they’ll read. It seems to help them understand the material more.”

After going through the art gallery, Jill had the students return to their seats and read the letter together. During the reading, Jill and the students frequently referred to the pictures and events discussed in the art-gallery tour. Among these concepts was the power of nonviolence and its consequent personal sacrifices. Two students expressed their amazement at the sacrifices that Dr. King had made during the movement. It seemed that the powerful images that Jill presented to her students affected their responses to King’s letter. The following day, Jill opened a classroom discussion about the work of the day before.



“What did you think of the pictures we saw yesterday?” Jill asked.

“They were nice.” Marcia responded.

Without skipping a beat, Jill pressed Marcia’s response for further reflection. “That doesn’t tell us anything. What impressed you?” She paused, giving the students time to reflect on the experience.

After a short period of time, a student raised his hand. “OK,” she said. “Fred?”

Fred paused as he formulated his thoughts. “Good.” He paused again. “They were informative.”

“OK.” Jill reflected back what Fred had said. “They were informative. What did you learn from the pictures?” she asked.

“It touched,” Fred paused again. “Well, I was touched by them. I learned that there were female KKK members.” Fred paused as he thought about the photos. “I didn’t realize that there were people watching as they lynched people.”

“They often watched and even laughed.” Jill shared, matter-of-factly.

“That really bugged me.” Fred reacted. “I know why King wrote what he did,” Fred said, as he related his emotional reaction to the events he saw portrayed in the photos. “It was awful but he stayed positive.” He paused as the impact of the events hit him. “I don’t know if I could do that.”

As the impact of Fred’s statement was felt by the other students, more students became involved in the discussion, sharing examples of what they had learned from the visual art gallery and reading of “A Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

“I didn’t know that there were nuns involved,” Abby said.

“Yes,” Jill followed up. “And there were many Jews and Catholics. Did you know that there were as many non-blacks as blacks involved?”

The din of student chatter broke out in the classroom, as half the students spontaneously turned to classmates, reacting to this information. As the discussion ensued, Jill directed the discussion to the role of individual conscience.

In addition, she asked the students to compare the discrimination of the 1990s to the 1960s. As they were about to conclude this discussion and pre-reading activity, a student posed one final question for Jill.

“Do you feel that President Clinton should be concerned about our country rather than what was happening in Iraq?”

Jill directed her response to parallel the text they were studying. “Isn’t there a similar pattern here? Hussein is a man who wants to stay in power and refuses to let go. He wants to stay in power at any cost. Well, isn’t this what Dr. King and many others are struggling against? I mean, this is how it all started. The civil rights movement started because those who were in power didn’t want to give it up, even though many people were suffering. Dr. King says it in his letter [quotes from the text]. ‘Someone refuses to give up power.’”

A hush fell over the class, as the students contemplated the correlation she had made between the events unfolding in their current history and those of the text they were studying. Through the use of the visual arts gallery, reflective classroom discussion, and the relation to current historical events, Jill had promoted the idea that an apparently simple text, such as King’s letter, held many historical, contemporary, and personal layers. During this two-day pre-reading activity, Jill had helped her students to uncover these layers, introducing possible themes and conflicts to prepare them for a more thorough reading of the text. Jill’s photo gallery is just one example of how the use of visual arts and discussion can trigger students’ abilities to imagine and envision a text.



### Guidelines for Creating a Visual Arts Gallery

Consider the following questions as you prepare your own visual arts lesson:

What connections do you want to elicit from your students?

What photos, artwork, or film media can help students develop a personal connection with the text?

What classroom discussion can be prompted through these visual arts?

## Exhibit 2.14 Visual Arts Pre-Reading Lesson Plan

<b>Pre-Reading Lesson</b>	<b>Visual Arts</b>
Objective	To create a bridge between the text and the visual medium
Materials	Pictures, paintings, movies related to the canonical text being studied
Time	One to two class periods
<b>Procedure</b>	
Step 1	Hang pictures and paintings in the form of an art gallery.
Step 2	Invite students to browse the art gallery.
Step 3	Through a large-group discussion, elicit students' experiences as they look at the visual arts provided. Bridge the gap between the visual arts and the related text.
IRA/NCTE Standards	<p>1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic, and contemporary works.</p> <p>3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).</p>

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