

Art Beyond Sight

Bringing Art & Culture to All

Tips for Crafting a Verbal Description of an Object or Artwork

LOOK CAREFULLY

Determine the key **visual** elements you would not want to leave out of a description. Try the Looking 3 Times exercise to see familiar artwork in a new way. Collaborate with others to learn how other people view the artwork; they might notice something you don't.

CREATE A SUMMARY

Develop 1-3 sentences (an “elevator pitch”) answering the basic question “What are we looking at?” You may want to begin your more detailed description with this **BRIEF** overview.

- “In front of us we have a large diptych, a painting made up of two canvases, by Andy Warhol called Double Elvis. The left canvas features two incomplete full-body portraits of Elvis Presley in black on a silver background, while the right canvas is simply silver with no image at all.”
- “We’ve reached a large landscape painting, oil paint on a canvas approximately the same size as a table for six, depicting an imaginary view of the Puget Sound as a storm approaches.”
- “We are looking at a long low wooden sculpture of a white Mercedes Benz, but this is no ordinary sculpture – it’s actually a coffin! Let me tell you a bit about what it looks like, and then we will talk about how it would be used.”

PLAN YOUR APPROACH

Decide on a system or framework on which to build your description. You are feeding people details one at a time; help them know how to arrange those details in their minds by sharing your system with them and sticking with it as much as possible. It may also help to frequently remind the audience of where you are along the route of your description, especially as you transition from one part of an artwork to another. Remember, each artwork may best be described in its own unique way, and two different systems or approaches may work equally well on the same object.

- “I’m going to talk about the blank panel first, then we will discuss the panel with the Elvis images on it.”
- “I’m going to start by describing the foreground, which only takes up about a fifth of the painting along the bottom, and then I will tell you about the background and sky.”
- “Let’s start our exploration of this car with the front bumper and work our way back.”

WRITE YOUR DESCRIPTION

Now use your system or outline to fill in the details. Remember, you cannot possibly include everything, so choose the most important elements, the ones that best communicate the artist’s message or make the object unique. You can always add more detail after you’ve given your initial description.

- The description should be long enough to include the important visual elements of the work (these may include composition, color, subject matter, style...) but not so long that you lose your audience. They are holding all these details and piecing them together in their minds as you go, so honor that use of mental energy by not being too longwinded. You might also take several passes at describing a single object – your summary, your solid overall description, then a more detailed one focusing on selected aspects of the piece. **EACH WORK WILL BE DIFFERENT**, as will each tour.
- Play the adjective game with yourself – brainstorm as many descriptive words or phrases as you can think of, independently or with a group, and use selected ones for the body of your description. As you’re brainstorming, don’t forget to think about descriptive words that engage **all** the senses.
- Challenge yourself to use objective language. Be aware of assumptions and mental leaps you are making based on what you see, and ask yourself what you are actually seeing, what the artist has done, to cause you to make those leaps. You want to describe what you see, not what you think! That’s how you enable the audience to make those leaps for themselves.
- You may also want to consider what makes this work different from other works. You don’t necessarily need to discuss other works in your description – that could be confusing – but thinking through that yourself could help you more accurately describe style or point of view.
- Consider how you will transition from your description into a broader conversation about context, background, meaning, and interpretation. It could be as simple as confirming that everyone feels comfortable that they have a good mental image of the work in their head, then moving on. Or you could begin to weave in interpretive details as you go back into the object for more

detailed or precise description. The more you practice this, the more naturally it will come to you. And great multi-layered descriptions can lead to amazing conversations about other aspects of the artwork.

GET FEEDBACK!

This is a really important phase. Before you find yourself in front of your visitors, run through your description with a partner or small group. Consider calling up a friend and describing the artwork over the phone. Did you hit all the key points? Do your analogies make sense? Are you making any assumptions about what your audience knows already? Did you remember to say **WHAT** you were describing?

DELIVER THE DESCRIPTION

Enjoy this part! Remember that what you are doing is very important for your audience, and it does not have to be tedious.

- Try not to read any script you may have written. If you've developed a solid outline for your description, the only script you need is that artwork that is in front of you.
- Check in periodically with your audience, and be prepared to answer questions or to go into more detail.
- After you've given them that initial mental image, you might ask them if they notice anything or have any questions.
- You might also use other techniques such as posing or invoking multisensory imagery to further enrich your audience's experience of the artwork.