

# English Language Arts

## High School Self-Guide

At the National Portrait Gallery, we examine portraits as texts filled with visual clues that can lead us toward a richer understanding of the featured individual and his or her era. This guide will help you facilitate a rich gallery visit that supports English Language Arts standards of learning.

### READING PORTRAITURE

The prompts below will help you encourage your students to “read” a portrait before reading the museum label or other sources. They can also be used as a springboard for broader conversations about art, history, and biography.

1. Start by having your students identify the specific choices that artists make when they create portraits. We call these choices the Elements of Portrayal, which include clothing, pose, facial expression, setting, objects, hairstyle, color, medium, scale, and artistic style.
2. Building on the students’ observations and visual descriptions, discuss the sitter using some or all of the following questions:
  - What can we learn about the sitter and his or her era based on the elements of portrayal that we see in the portrait? What can we tell about the sitter’s accomplishments or personality?
  - How does the artist want us to remember or think about the sitter? What artistic choices support your answer to this question?
  - How is this portrait similar to or different from other portraits near it in the gallery? What might those similarities and/or differences reflect about the similarities and differences between the sitters and their eras?

### PORTRAITS AS WRITING PROMPTS

Portraits make terrific visual prompts for creative writing activities. They can spark ideas for stories and can inspire rich character sketches or monologues. When choosing portraits for use as visual prompts in discussion or writing activities, consider what concepts and/or content you want to emphasize. Some images may be more character-driven—a perfect opportunity for students to practice creating well-rounded characters. Others will encourage students to pay attention to the setting. Portraits that contain more than one sitter will help students create multiple characters and envision relationships among characters. No matter which portrait you choose, encourage students to bring their own interpretations to the image.

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Here is one suggested strategy for using portraits as a writing prompt during your National Portrait Gallery visit:

1. Before leading students to any portraits, engage them in a discussion of what makes a good story. As they come up with some of the concepts listed below, you can emphasize any or all of those you are currently studying. Possible concepts they will consider include:
  - Setting
  - Plot
  - Backstory
  - Characters
  - Theme
  - Point of view
  - Literary devices
2. Assign students a portrait or have them choose a portrait from which to create a story. (The portrait can be the same for all students or different for each student.) Ask questions to help students begin thinking about their story. Have them consider some or all of the following elements of the portrait:
  - Facial expression
  - Clothing
  - Pose
  - Direction of gaze
  - Setting
  - Objects
  - Colors
  - Relationships between sitters

Encourage students to use these elements to create a character, to imagine a setting (both in terms of physical location and in terms of time period), and/or to begin to develop a plot.

3. If time allows, have students share their story elements and ideas with their classmates. Are the students surprised by how many different kinds of stories were inspired by the same image? Were certain ideas and themes repeated?

## **OTHER WRITING PROMPT STRATEGIES (separate worksheets)**

- Six-Word Memoir
- Unveiling Stories
- Seven Ways to Look at a Portrait
- Short Essay Prompts