

Ekphrasis Poem

By: Claire Hong

Education level: Elementary, junior high and/or high school

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: 30-60 minutes

Objective: Students can reflect on, question, and embody their preferred methods of self-expression and creation. This activity allows for students to get out excess energy, consider the role of friendship in art and poetry, collaborate with one another, and quietly write poems.

Prior knowledge and skills: None.

Required materials: Internet and projector screen (optional), blank pieces of paper (any size) for each table/small group, pencils, pens, color pencils or any art supplies for each table/small group, paper for writing their poems.

Literary model: Frank O'Hara's "Why I am Not a Painter"

Sequence of activities:

- 1) Read Frank O'Hara's poem "Why I Am Not a Painter" as a class:
<https://poets.org/poem/why-i-am-not-painter>. Depending on the grade level, you can read it once aloud and then ask for a student to read it. Alternatively, the whole class can read it in unison. **(5 minutes)**
- 2) Optional: Look at the painting *Sardines* by Michael Goldberg:
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/sardines-40531>.
- 3) As a class, notice moments where O'Hara compares the process of painting vs. writing a poem. How do oranges and sardines relate to expressing oneself? You can open a discussion about how students prefer to express themselves (writing, art, music, or something else?). Do they ever create anything with their friends or family? **(5 minutes)**
- 4) In small groups, students share one sheet of blank paper and take turns making messy marks with color pencils, pens, and/or pencils that express how they feel or what they're thinking about today. Let them know they can simply enjoy the feeling and visuals of making marks and creating something together. It doesn't have to be pretty or recognizable. They can repeat gestures and motions until they fill up the page. Students can come up with a name for their drawings. Note: students with visual impairment can focus on the sensation rather than the sight. **(5-10 minutes)**
- 5) Write an Ekphrasis Poem: **(15+ minutes, self-paced)**
Ekphrasis is Greek for "description." As a poetic term, it refers to the process of translating a piece of art into a poem. Look at your group's artwork and try to translate the images and expressions into your own poem using words. Allow yourself to play with

and splatter your words, layering meaning. Don't worry about making sense. Reflection questions to get started:

- What do the lines, images, and colors express to you?
- What feelings, ideas, and stories can you find in the drawing?
- What feelings and thoughts came up for you when you were drawing and when you look at the art? Silliness, laughter, frustration, anger, sadness, peace, chaos, or something else? How can you express this with words?

6) If time allows, groups can trade drawings and write multiple ekphrastic poems.