

Reacting To Art/Music: Ekphrasis Exercise

Grade Level: 6-7

Time Frame: 50-60 minutes

Objective: Students will begin to make associations with sound and image. They will see a picture or hear a song and write their first reaction, create a scene around the ideas the image/song evokes, and then come up with a poetic or figurative line to go with it. This is a way of getting students creating or finding inspiration in things like music, images, or other forms of art. Allow them to conjure up feelings or stories from ‘song’.

Prior Knowledge and Skill: None.

Materials: Speaker or any device you can play music from, computer or MP3 player with songs ready, photos for image portion

Sequence of Events:

Introduction to Activity/Warm Up (15-20 Minutes)

Begin by asking students about reactions. Discuss what it means to react to something, and how initial reactions can be changed and/or furthered as you gain more information. I usually do this by asking a long series of questions: “What is a reaction? What are ways to react to something? What is a first impression? Can reactions or first impressions be wrong? Things like this will set up the general idea and get them thinking about reacting and setting a scene.

Write three words on the board: Reaction, Scene, and Metaphor. This will be the formula for the whole lesson. Start with an example, some image or idea (do not start with a song--the music is meant to be a surprise, and the excitement generated by this will help drive the lesson further). The goal is to get the students to understand the intention of each word, so they may use them to write about each image or song you show them later in the lesson.

Take the time to do the following as a group activity. You will come up with three sentences/poetic lines associated with whatever image or idea you choose to start with:

Reaction: What was your first reaction when you heard this song/saw this image? What do you think of? What immediately comes to mind? Do you know about it? Have you seen it before? Write anything that comes to mind when you see/hear this.

Example (using Redbone by Childish Gambino): “I know this song! It is so relaxing. I can’t tell what types of instruments are being used, but I like the way it sounds. His voice sounds different than in other songs.”

Scene: Tell me what is going on in this song/image. Who is involved? What are they doing? Create a scene or a story behind what is going on. Write a narrative based on the mood or emotion the song/image gives you.

Example (using Redbone by Childish Gambino): "I imagine someone running, slowly. Like when you are in a dream and it's hard to run. I picture a forest of some kind. I picture someone running through it, unable to go as fast as they want. They are running from some kind of monster, that they cannot see. It's dark, nighttime. As the artist sings "They gone find you," I imagine the person looking behind them, and screaming."

Metaphor: (Metaphor being a general term used for poetic/figurative language) Come up with an image, a metaphor, or a line or poetry using figurative language based on the song/image. Metaphor in this case is an umbrella term. Just put these ideas from the previous two words into a piece of poetry. Do not think about it too much. Just find a way to take your reaction and make it something you would write a poem about.

Example (using Redbone by Childish Gambino): The trees lining the forest blow in the wake up the runner. He does not stop for them. He runs without his feet touching the ground, brown leaves stuck to his forehead and his shoes.

After the example group activity, share about three more images with them; have them write out all three using the images. Each should take about 2-3 minutes. Always remind them not to over think. After each image, have a few students share at least one of their three reactions/scenes/metaphors.

Song Reactions (20-25 Minutes)

Once the students have been warmed up with the images, begin introducing the concept of doing this same exercise with songs. For each song you play, have them come up with a line or paragraph associated with each idea (reaction, scene, metaphor). In order to force them to stay focused, or really pay attention, I found it helpful to only play about 45-60 seconds of each song. You can replay it a few times if they need, but do not play the entire song, so they have to think quickly and be creative on their feet. This is the main portion of the activity. Take your time. Do not have the students share right away. Give them a few minutes for each song, and then move onto the next. This will again, promote speed in their writing, and not leave any room for over thinking.

Sharing (5-10 Minutes)

After as many songs as you have time for, take some time to have the students share. Do not focus on what song they were writing about, unless they feel the need to share which. This will make the actual content of the writing more important, rather than the connection to the song. Take the time to have each student (or at least one student per table group if applicable) share at least one or two lines/paragraphs. Collect all work, and thank the class.

List of Songs I used (Clean Versions as needed):

1. Valentina by Carla Morrison
2. Redbone by Childish Gambino (Clean)
3. I'd Rather Go Blind by Etta James
4. Is This Love by Bob Marley
5. Signs by Drake (Clean)
6. Young Dumb & Broke by Khalid
7. Intro from Alt-J's 'An Awesome Wave'
8. Who Am I (What's My Name) by Snoop Dogg (Clean)
9. Melting by Kali Uchis
10. This Feeling by Alabama Shakes

These song choices were very carefully picked. The whole purpose is to keep them interested the whole time, by adding songs they will know, as well as providing an extreme amount of diversity in the type of music, in order to generate diverse descriptions or reactions.