

## **How Vincent van Gogh Can Help You Teach to the Common Core Standards**

POSTED BY LYNNE MUNSON ON SEPTEMBER - 13 – 2012

[HTTP://BLOG.ARTSUSA.ORG/2012/09/13/HOW-VINCENT-VAN-GOGH-CAN-HELP-YOU-TEACH-TO-THE-COMMON-CORE-STANDARDS/](http://blog.artsusa.org/2012/09/13/how-vincent-van-gogh-can-help-you-teach-to-the-common-core-standards/)

Henri Matisse in Kindergarten? Leonardo da Vinci in fifth grade? These names don't often come to mind while thinking about instruction in English Language Arts (ELA). But they should.

In an age when literacy dominates public discourse on education, we must begin to think more broadly about what students read. Sure—the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) emphasize close reading of high-quality, rigorous informational and literary texts, but they also support the “reading” and scrutiny of other forms of high-quality text. Works of art can, indeed should, be “read” in a very similar way to a poem by Shakespeare or a speech by Winston Churchill.

The CCSS present an exciting opportunity for elementary school teachers (who teach all subjects), grades 6-12 ELA teachers, and arts teachers to utilize the arts to teach the literacy skills outlined by the new standards. This should be done in addition to (not instead of) teaching the arts for their own sake. David Coleman, a lead writer of the CCSS in ELA has argued:

*“There is no such thing as doing the nuts and bolts of reading in Kindergarten through 5th grade without coherently developing knowledge in science, and history, and the arts...it is the deep foundation in rich knowledge and vocabulary depth that allows you to access more complex text.”*

Because it is not always obvious how to use a painting, film, play, or dance to meet the speaking, listening, and writing standards, Common Core has illustrated this in our Common Core Curriculum Maps in ELA. Below are examples of how a teacher might design two arts-centered ELA activities using works by Louis Comfort Tiffany, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Seurat, and an unknown Chinese artist. These activities are written for second graders:



“Mulberry Tree” by Vincent van Gogh

### **Art, Speaking and Listening**

Artists often convey a sense of season in their depictions of flowers or trees. Ask students to study the Tiffany image, van Gogh's *Mulberry Tree*, and the work titled *Snow-Laden Plum Branches*. Note that these works were created on three different continents at around the same time period. Ask students to discuss similarities and differences in these artists' techniques for depicting the seasons. (SL.2.2)

### **Art, Informative Writing**

Select a work to study—for instance, you might choose the Georges Seurat for a clear depiction of a season. Ask the students to name the season that the artist has painted. Then have students write a two-or-three-sentence explanation identifying elements in the work that led them to their observation. (W.2.2)

The first activity engages students in close “reading” of three art pieces. Their settings and compositions convey a distinct message about a season. By engaging students in a discussion about their similarities and differences, students are practicing the skill outlined in the second speaking and listening standard (pg. 23) for second grade in the CCSS (SL.2.2):

“Recount or describe key ideas or details for a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.”



“Une Baignade, Asnieres” by Georges Seurat

In a similar fashion, the second activity enables students to practice the skill described in standard W.2.2 (pg. 19):

“Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section,” by considering a painting by Seurat.

Just imagine how wonderful it would be to hear a second grader liken a summer outing in the park to Seurat’s *Une Baignade, Asnieres*. While both activities address specific standards, they also build two other critically vital elements: students’ vocabulary and knowledge of important works of art. These assets contribute directly to students’ growth towards becoming skilled readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

These second grade activities are just two examples of the 179 arts activities included in Common Core’s ELA Maps that connect directly to the CCSS’ ELA standards. In fact, each of the 76 units that comprise our K-12 curriculum maps contain guidance for utilizing works of art, music, or film to teach to the new standards.

As students progress through the middle and high school grades, these arts activities demand increasingly complex analysis, thereby keeping pace with the standards while continuing to expand students’ knowledge of art history, and enriching their vocabulary. In an 8<sup>th</sup> grade unit titled “Urban Settings in America: It Happened in the City,” an arts activity engages students in the study of various depictions of New York City:

**Art, Speaking and Listening**



“Nighthawks” by Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* and Piet Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which both depict New York City, were painted in the same year. Notice the dramatic difference in these artists’ styles. The difference goes beyond realism versus abstraction. Discuss the painters’ color palettes, the distance at which they placed the viewer, and the type of space in the work. Dwell on the extent to which each artist was focused on the people versus the place. Were they depicting the same time of day? (SL.8.1, SL.8.2, SL.8.4, SL.8.5)

The activity addresses four of the six speaking and learning standards in eighth grade, by having students compare the works’ composition, style, and subject. One of the standards addressed, SL.8.2(pg.49), enables students to “analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g. social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.”

Common Core’s ELA Maps demonstrate that the CCSS are an ideal vehicle for providing students with ample opportunities to “read” art. Gearing up and tuning students’ skills of visual observation will help to develop them into insightful and analytical readers, dexterous writers, and adept speakers, while also turning them into avid art lovers.

LINKS TO ABOVE MENTIONED ARTPRINTS AND ART ACTIVITIES:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/15302> - Dogwood, Tiffany

[http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse\\_title.php?id=M.1976.09.P](http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.php?id=M.1976.09.P) - Mulberry Tree, VanGogh

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/seurat/baignade/seurat.baignade.jpg> - The Bathers, Seurat

<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectNumber=F1909.165> - Snow-Laden Plum Branches, unknown

[http://commoncore.org/maps/documents/Art\\_in\\_the\\_Maps.pdf](http://commoncore.org/maps/documents/Art_in_the_Maps.pdf) - Art in the Common Core Maps

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mondrian\\_Broadway\\_Boogie\\_Woogie.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mondrian_Broadway_Boogie_Woogie.jpg) - Broadway Boogie Woogie, Mondrian

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Modern/artwork/111628> - Nighthawks, Hopper