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Mary Hall Surface & Nathalie Ryan

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FROM THE GUEST EDITORS



Developing Close Looking, Creativity, and Community Through Writing and Art

Mary Hall Surface and Nathalie Ryan

ABSTRACT

Writing Salon at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC, is a series of free creative writing workshops for adult audiences. The program uses art as an inspiration for writing and embraces writing as a powerful way to experience art. Highlighting the parallels between the writing and art-making processes, the program demonstrates that writing can be a tool for encouraging visitors to slow down, look closely, spark creativity, and find deep meaning within works of art. This article shares the pedagogical approach through case studies of two workshop topics.

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“The way of looking at a painting by imagining myself in it was completely new. I had always wondered how novelists, playwrights, and short story writers created plots—and suddenly, I found at the end of the session that I had a plot! I also found that I had ‘grown’ as a result of what the exercises helped me to see in the picture ... both the writing exercises and the painting enriched me.”

“I am not a writer but I love to play with words. English is not my native language ... I had a sense of confidence afterward. Maybe I can/should write ... ”

“This workshop gave me numerous moments to stop and question my conventional thinking.”

These quotes from participants leaving the Writing Salon program reflect the outcomes of time spent looking closely, in the company of others, embracing the creative challenges of intersecting art with writing. So how did the experience unfold?

Program overview

Writing Salon at the National Gallery of Art is designed to be a two-way mirror: we approach art as an inspiration for writing and we embrace writing as a powerful way to experience art. The workshops emphasize process over product – slowing down, making detailed observations, drawing on emotions, playing with words and ideas, sharing and reflecting. We highlight parallels between the writing and art-making processes, and frame the literary and historical contexts of the works of art. Our goal is to enable visitors to deepen their practice as writers – whatever that practice may be – while discovering real connections to works of art and the creative process.

Local writers lead the workshops, developing content and exercises in collaboration with museum educators. Offered on both weekdays and weekends, the programs are free but require advance registration to keep each group to thirty participants. During the course of the 2.5 hour sessions, instructors present and model a variety of writing prompts, from short warm-ups (5 minutes) to longer exercises (15-20 minutes). Participants reflect on the writing process throughout the workshop, joining in whole and small group conversations. In order to create a welcoming, unintimidating atmosphere for all skill levels, participants do not read their writing to one another. Instead, we suggest that they share with each other their creative processes and new insights. Comprised of both beginning and experienced writers, the audience is intergenerational, ages 18 and up, with about 35% of participants falling between ages 18 and 40. The program is designed for individuals interested in engaging with art through creative experiences and/or writers seeking opportunities to practice and expand their craft.

Each workshop investigates a theme – color, tone, rhythm, tension, ambiguity, subtext, symbolism, metaphor, character, perspective, identity, dialogue, point of view, setting, narrative, memoir/memory – both from the perspective of writers as well as visual artists. The writing exercises are not necessarily specific to a single work of art; participants may use many of the exercises with nearly any work. Using works of art as starting points for original writing, the prompts encourage open-ended, creative interpretations.

Pedagogical approach

Slowing down to discover complexity

To create a contrast to the fast-paced world, we invite participants to disconnect from their digital devices, spend more than the typical few seconds in front of a work of art, and go beyond the surface of the image to deeper places of meaning. By focusing on one or two works of art over the course of 2.5 hours, we allow for questions, puzzles, and authentic discoveries to emerge around the complex ideas that each object presents. As one participant recalled, “I’ll now remember that I can spend 2.5 hours in front of one painting and be short on time!”

Observations as the cornerstone of analysis

Each workshop begins with a substantial visual analysis. Participants are guided in silent meditation to encourage close looking, then capture their observations in a warm-up exercise, and finally share their first impressions with others. We encourage participants to linger in looking, suspend judgment, and avoid the instinct to interpret. We have found that the longer participants take to note the details of the work of art, the richer the interpretive possibilities that later unfold. As one participant discovered, “Stories abound all around us if we stop to ‘see’ them!”

Learning with, from, and through others

While the writing exercises are done in silence, the conversations that follow are typically very lively (Figure 1). Often, one of the most surprising and enjoyable aspects of the



Figure 1. Workshop participants exchanging ideas.

workshop for the participants is how much they learn from one another's perspectives. They come to realize the subjectivity of seeing. One noted, "It was wonderful to talk with people throughout the process because (1) writing is solitary and it's nice to hear where others are going. (2) There was no judgment, no criticism. (3) You were talking to all levels of writers, which gives fresh perspectives."

Information as a means, not an end

Throughout the workshop, the instructor shares relevant art historical content and literary connections as a means to broaden understanding of the topic being explored, not to narrow possible interpretations. Many adult visitors expect to have the work of art explained or interpreted for them by "experts," but these workshops take the opposite approach: we expect the participants to make meaning of the works of art and share their insights with the group. One participant reflected, "I loved the flight of fancy it set me on and enjoyed having my imagination exercised and stretched."

Looking outward leads inward

We have learned that close examination of a work of art can lead to inward reflection and awareness. Participants develop meaningful relationships with works of art and discover the museum as a place for creative inspiration and self-discovery. As one participant shared, "WOW! Eye opening. I felt like it was a great lesson on writing but also a great look at myself."

Case study: the power of place

Using Jasper Francis Cropsey's *Autumn – On the Hudson River* (Figure 2) as inspiration, this workshop invited participants to deepen their understanding of setting in both literature and visual art. Hoping to move beyond descriptive writing, we asked: How might character reveal the setting? How might setting reveal character? How might the setting function as a character and/or as a metaphor?



Figure 2. Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Autumn – On the Hudson River*, 1860, oil on canvas, 151.8 × 274.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Avalon Foundation, 1963.9.1.

The participants first looked at Cropsey's highly composed, detailed panorama. As a group, they shared their visual observations by saying "I see ... [specific details]" without interpretation. Participants then imaginatively "stepped into" the painting, noting the sounds, textures, smells, and tastes they might perceive. We followed with information about the painting's actual setting.

Inspired by how artists make rough drawings of the essentials of a composition, we then began ten minutes of sketching Cropsey's landscape with words (Figure 3). We prompted participants to capture details of the setting in two, three, and four-word phrases and to arrange those words on the paper in such a way that they reflected the composition of the painting. The instructions were to use active verbs in present tense to bring the setting to life.



Figure 3. Word sketch made while looking at Cropsey's *Autumn – On the Hudson River*.

Paired participants then reflected on the choices they made for their sketches, focusing on process, not product. What details did they choose to include? Where did they start? Were they focused more on land, sea, or sky? The full group pondered the parallels between the choices an artist makes and the choices a writer makes in conveying a setting. We asked how as writers we might reveal this autumn day on the Hudson River, not through omniscient narrative description, but through a character's direct experience of the place. This approach was inspired by 19th-century writers, such as Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Hudson River School painters, who probed the direct connection of humanity to nature.

Exercise one: *character-setting dynamic* (15 minutes)

- Imagine a character moving through this landscape, interacting with the place, not with other people.
- Give your character a place to start with a destination in mind.
- Capture the setting through the action of the character experiencing the place. Use verbs! "She balances on the sharp edge of the boulder, longing to break the glass of the still pool with her toe," rather than "Rough-edged boulders line the glassy pool."
- Encounter at least three aspects of the setting. Try not to get caught up in plot. Focus on the character-setting dynamic.
- Include specific and varied sensory details.
- Write in third person and in present tense.

We followed with a group discussion in which we delved deeper into how the state of a character can be revealed through *how* he or she experiences a place. Did he climb the boulder with boldness or trepidation? Did she run towards the bright sunbeams with delight or did she shield her eyes from the brightness because she was grouchy or grieving? Participants reread their writing from Exercise One and highlighted those moments when the connections between place and character were most dynamic and revealing. These reflections strengthened their approaches to the next exercise.

Exercise two: *emotional landscape* (15 minutes)

- Years later your character has returned to this place. You decide if the setting is the same or has changed.
- You decide the last time your character was here. Could be 30 years, could be yesterday.
- Your character is remembering the journey from your first story. How do they now encounter three specific elements that they encountered before? Try not to get caught up in plot. Focus on the character-setting dynamic.
- Write in third person and in past tense.

Reconvened, participants reflected on the impact of time on their character's experience of place. A participant shared one sentence of her exercise: "As she moved confidently down the now familiar path, following the light and water, she knew the town had changed in a way that could not be seen or heard, but could only be felt."

To conclude, we explored how setting can function as a kind of character or metaphor in writing, citing examples from literature. We invited the natural elements in the painting to speak.

Exercise three: *monologue from nature* (10 minutes)

- Pick one of the non-human/non-animal elements of the landscape.
- Give it a voice and an intention; it wants something.
- What does it see/ feel/ remember?
- Write in first person and present tense. The element is speaking now.
- Decide to whom the element is talking: another element in the painting, to the universe, to us?

After talking in pairs, participants shared with the full group the essence of what their partner's element wanted us to know or understand. We also reflected on Cropsey's desire to celebrate the distinctive beauty of the Hudson River Valley in the face of rapid societal change. We concluded with an invitation to return to the gallery and engage with other landscapes and cityscapes using these exercises.

Case study: the multilayered narrative

With Jan Steen's *The Dancing Couple* (Figure 4) as our entry point, we invited participants to try a variety of tools that writers and visual artists use to create multilayered narratives. Inspired by Steen's masterful visual storytelling, we asked: How might varying points of view, subplots, and symbolism enrich a story?

Our close looking began with collecting subject-action observations: "A woman balances a child on her lap." "A young man plays a violin." We challenged participants to look again to capture even more character-plot building blocks in their journals.



Figure 4. Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, 1663, oil on canvas, 102.5 × 142.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection, 1942.9.81.

We invited them to engage with Steen's vivid setting through a ten-minute sensory word sketch. We guided participants to imagine what they might hear, smell, taste, and touch within the painting and to capture those sensations in short word phrases, in present tense. They were asked to arrange the phrases on their papers so that the words reflected the composition of the painting.

Then we asked: What is happening? Participants shared their inferences and wonders about the plot and the central question of the painting. "Will she dance with him?" was the most popular response. Each then wrote the first sentence of how he/she would begin to tell the story captured in the painting.

Upon sharing their sentences with a partner, participants reflected on the choice they made: Where did I start in the story? Did I focus on an action or a character? Did I start with the setting? Do I tend to look at the big picture or zoom in on details? With new understandings about ourselves as writers, we began to imagine the multiple points of view from which the painting's story could be told.

Exercise one: *from where I stand* (15 minutes)

- Chose a character in the painting from whose point of view you will tell the story of the central couple.
- Include what happens leading up to this moment but not afterwards.
- Name your characters.
- Write in third person "close." Told within that person's scope of thought and senses. Examples: "Hans touched only the girl's finger tips as he drew her toward the music." "Hannah looked away from the city girl, summoning her courage to speak."
- Root your story in specifics of the painting.

After writing, we collected various points of view. Then using examples from literature, we discussed how subplots can reinforce and/or contrast the central plot in a story. After looking closely at the multiple couples in the painting, we explored their roles as subplots to the main story.

Exercise two: *listening in* (12 minutes)

- Choose one of the couples in the painting. Imagine they are talking to one another in this moment.
- One character wants one thing. The other character wants something else. Maybe the fiddler wants to speed up the tune while the flute player wants to slow down. What would each say to the other to try to get what they want?
- Write as dialogue. Try to make the two characters' "voices" distinctive or different from one another.
- Resolve the conflict of what they want. Or not.

The group discussed whether their characters surprised them by what they had to say, and identified the challenges and opportunities of communicating story through dialogue alone.

We then introduced the rich symbolism in the painting: how a bubble-blowing child represents the transience of youth and the violin's vibrating strings suggest forbidden

passion. We shared that other symbols evoke proverbs of Steen's time. The empty barrel in the foreground depicts the saying: "A full barrel doesn't resound." But an empty barrel, like the actions of foolish people, echoes hollowly when you pound on it.

We wondered: If Steen, our master storyteller, has given us the beginning of the story with his wide view of this lively world, told us the middle (the part of the story where there is a problem) by featuring the mismatched couple, could he be offering us the end of the story through the symbols?

Exercise three: *what happens next?* (15 minutes)

- Tell the story of what will happen next from an omniscient point of view – you see and know all.
- You decide what "next" means: the next moment, day, year, or decade.
- Write in past tense.
- Have one or more symbols play into your story.

Noting how families in seventeenth century Holland gathered in their homes around paintings to ponder their meaning, we gathered in small groups to share what each participant imagines "next" to be for the story ([Figure 5](#)). We concluded with asking: If you could ask the artist one questions about this multilayered narrative, what would it be?

While we focus on process during the workshop, we encourage participants to share writing that grows from the prompts. We received a short story written by a participant inspired by Exercise Three which included this "next:" "Bella yanked her hand away from Willem's. She stamped her elegantly shod foot. 'I will not live with this boor!' The music stopped. The crowd quieted. Willem continued dancing for a few more beats until he stopped at last, a puzzled expression on his face. Indeed, it could be said – and was being said by everyone at the tavern – that Willem was not the sharpest tack in the box."



Figure 5. Workshop participants sharing their reflections on the writing process.

Final thoughts

Since the Writing Salon began three years ago, participants have found that the diversity of individual perspectives is one of the qualities they most value. While we have a core of regulars, new participants comprise about 40% of each workshop, ensuring a fresh dynamic. Participants bond quite quickly and share eagerly during their small group discussions. They express real enthusiasm for the opportunity to do something so out of the ordinary, to see through one another's eyes, and to imagine new possibilities. Each workshop produces its own community, with discussions that often ponder how the practices they have learned can enrich their lives beyond the museum experience. One participant's parting thoughts were, "I'll remember most the teaching and exercises about writing what I see and what I feel – and the ways in which the exercises expand my awareness of the world."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

About the authors

Nathalie Ryan, as a Senior Educator and Manager in the Department of Gallery and Studio Learning at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, has coordinated in-gallery and studio programs for families, teens, and adults since 2002. She also facilitates educator professional development workshops for Harvard Project Zero.

Mary Hall Surface is an award-winning playwright and theater director specializing in performances for intergenerational audiences and multidisciplinary collaborations. Since 2007, the National Gallery of Art has commissioned her to create four theater productions inspired by visual art. She is a teaching artist for the John F. Kennedy Center, Harvard Project Zero, and the National Gallery of Art, where she was the instructor for the Writing Salon's first two seasons and continues to teach in the program.