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**The Art of Writing**

**Writer:** Jill Taylor, NCMA Educator

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Related Big Picture Concepts:** Communication, Meaning, Reflection

**Subject Areas:** English Language Arts, Visual Arts

**Essential Question:** How do words and images tap into memories?

**Abstract:** Students will discuss the use of color, font, and words to evoke memories in Ed Ruscha’s *Scratches* *on the Film* and then reflect on their own memories of learning to write through composing a personal narrative, work of art, and label text.

**Duration:** 2–4 class periods

**Focus Works of Art:**

[](http://68.169.57.134./sites/default/files/RUSCHA,%20Scratches%20on%20the%20Film,%2097_2_0.jpg)

Ed Ruscha (American, born 1937)

***Scratches on the Film*, 1993**

Acrylic on canvas

36 1/16 x 72 in. (91.6 x 182.9 cm)  
[www.artnc.org/node/351](http://www.artnc.org/node/351)

**North Carolina Standards Correlations:**

Visual Arts: B.V.2.3, B.CX.1.3, I.V.1.2, I.V.1.4, I.V.2.2, P.V.1.2, P.CX.1.2, A.V.1.2, A.V.2.2

English Language Arts: 9–12.W.3, 9–12.W.4, 9–12.W.5, 9–12.W.10

**Student Learning Objectives:**

* Students will reflect on their personal writing experiences.
* Students will use language and the visual elements of design and color to communicate intended meaning.
* Students will monitor and assess individual comprehension.

**Activities:**

1. Show students Ed Ruscha’s painting, *Scratches on the Film* [additional background info below]. Ask students:

*What does this painting remind you of?*

*What do you think inspired the artist?*

*How do words, color, and font all communicate a meaning in this work of art? For example: Where do you usually see the words “The End”? How would you describe the visual appearance of the words? What font, or style of writing, has the artist used?*

*How does the style of writing influence how you interpret the words?*

*What colors does the artist use in the painting? How do these colors contribute to the subject and mood of the painting?*

1. Discuss the role of reflection and personal expression in writing and art. Tell students that this painting is one of a series inspired by the artist’s memories of watching movies as a child. Have students write a reflective essay about their own memories and feelings about writing, rather than the movies. Ask them to consider:

*What do you remember about learning how to write? What assignments or exercises did you do to practice writing? When and how did you learn to write cursive? How did you feel about writing? When would you write—just for school or for yourself, too? How do you feel now when you get a writing assignment? What makes writing easy or hard for you? What are the different ways you use writing?*

1. After students write their reflective essay, ask them to select one word or phrase that best describes their feelings and attitudes about writing. Have students write a brief explanation about their selection in their writing journals.
2. Ask students to create a work of art inspired by Ruscha’s *Scratches on the Film*. Tell them to use their selected word or phrase, select a style of writing (or font if using a computer program), and choose a color that corresponds to their word or phrase. Remind students to consider the discussion about Ruscha’s painting from the beginning of the lesson when planning the design of their art. Students may use their writing journals to plan their design.
3. Show students the wall label for Ruscha’s painting (below). Explain that a label usually provides some insight into a work of art. Ask them to write a brief paragraph for their own work using their writing journals as a reference. Display the student art and label in the classroom or an exhibition space within the school.

Wall label for Ruscha painting:

In *Scratches on the Film*, Ruscha exploits the canvas nap to convincingly create the surface texture of an old piece of film, scratched and faded to a sepia color. Floating on the simulated celluloid are the final words of a vintage movie, "The End," spelled out in gothic lettering. The oversized, old-fashioned typeface immerses viewers in the nostalgic romanticism of old movies, a mood done in by the apocalyptic implications of the inscribed message and the creeping realization that the artist's tone might well be mock-serious. By giving everyday phrases glorified treatment, Ruscha encourages a reconsideration of the complex relation between word and image, as well as between word and speaker.

**Assessments:**

* The reflective writing essay will demonstrate students’ ability to respond to personal experience.
* The work of art and label text will demonstrate students’ ability to communicate intended meaning visually and verbally.
* The writing journal will show students’ reflection over the course of the project and ability to monitor individual comprehension.

**Resources:**

Vocabulary:

label

Materials:

paper, paints, colored pencils, markers, pencils, or art materials of choice

Lesson Resources:

Ed Ruscha info sheet

**Ed Ruscha Information Sheet**

[](javascript:OpenLargeWindow('pictures/artifact/full/32.jpg'))

Ed Ruscha (American, born 1937)  
*Scratches on the Film*, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 72 in.

Purchased with funds from the North Carolina Museum of Art Foundation, Art Trust Fund, 1997 (97.2)

***What is this a painting of?***

Ed Ruscha recalls memories of watching movies in his youth by re-creating the appearance of scratches on movie film. *Are these words painted, written, or both? What is the effect of the words?* Notice the style, a gothic font, Ruscha uses for these words. *How does the aesthetic, or visual, appearance of the words affect the way that you read and react to them? What would the effect be if they were in a comic sans font?*

# *How does art communicate a message?*

What is the purpose of a portrait? Portraits can be true to life or depict the subjects as they wish to be seen by using expressions, body language, clothing, and props to affect the way we view a person. Try looking at this portrait without reading the title. What does this portrait tell you about this person? Why was the portrait made? What can we learn just from looking at this painting? Start with a simple description: A person sits on a chair. How is he dressed? What does he look like? He wears a large cloak with a chain across his neck, and his hair falls past his shoulders in gray curls. How is he posed? His right hand holds a metal staff, while he points outside the frame of the image by extending his left arm and index finger. He looks out of the picture in the same direction. His left leg sticks out from the cloak, and his foot turns out on the edge of a cushion. What other details can you find? A crown and another metal staff rest on a table next to the chair. Fabric of the same color and pattern covers the chair and table. The pattern is repeated on his cloak and the cushion at his feet. The person, chair, and table sit on top of a stepped platform covered by a carpet. A fabric backdrop with red and gold on either side hangs behind the person and partially covers a column on the right edge of image.

Look closely at the passage above. What inferences, or information that is interpreted from visual details, can you find in the description? What other inferences can you make? The round object on the table is identified as a crown. From here, the chair becomes a throne and the person royalty. The royal person’s small stature, soft and plump hands, and delicate features suggest he is a child. His cloak’s size in proportion to his body contributes to this inference (or jump to a conclusion). The left side of his cloak would hang off of his arm once unfolded.

***Where is this person from?***

Other components of the image, such as the props and patterns, tell the viewer the national identity of the royal person. The staff held by the ruler and the crown are topped with the same three-pronged flower shape that covers upholstery and appears in an alternating pattern on the chain worn by the person—the symbol is the fleur-de-lis, a symbol of France. The young king of France is depicted seated on his throne. Our observation skills and prior knowledge about the regalia of royalty help us understand the subject of the painting. Based on the information presented so far, what is the purpose of the portrait? What message does the portrait send?

***What message would a noble person in eighteenth-century France see?***

What was the context, or situation, behind the portrait’s creation? Born in 1710, Louis XV was an orphan at age two and succeeded his great-grandfather Louis XIV, the “Sun King.” Louis XIV reigned for seventy-two years; Louis XV became king at the age of five. Many courtiers spread rumors that Louis’s regent, Philippe, duc d’Orléans, had poisoned members of Louis’s family to get closer to the throne. To appease his critics, Orléans reversed many of Louis XIV’s more unpopular policies. At the same time, he commissioned a portrait of the new king by Hyacinthe Rigaud, the old king’s official court portraitist. Why do you think Orléans commissioned this portrait?

A French person would recognize the ceremonial clothing of the king. The chain is the “Order of the Holy Spirit.” The staff in his hand is the scepter of rule; at his side, Charles V’s “hand of justice” rests on the table. The “sword of Charlemagne” at his side completes the portrait of the king in his coronation regalia. The portrait was finished in 1717 but dated 1715—the year Louis XV became king. He had his coronation ceremony in 1722, seven years after becoming king. Why does this portrait depict him in clothing for a ceremony that had not taken place yet? How do you think an 18th-century French nobleperson would react to this painting?

***What other factors influence the way we interpret this painting?***

A museum wall label would tell today’s viewer some of the information given above. How can written text change the way you look at a work of art? Written texts can change the way we interpret the message of a painting that already includes substantial visual information. Writers may select which information fits their purpose best and leave out information that presents a different point of view. At the same time, people make connections to text based on their own knowledge and experience. How would a five-year-old interpret this painting? How would a politician interpret this painting? Compare their reactions to that of a professor of French history. What would be the similarities and differences in their interpretations of this painting’s messages?

Hyacinthe Rigaud (French, 1659–1743)  
*Louis XIV*, 1701  
Oil on canvas, 109 x 76 1/3 in.   
Louvre, Collection of Louis XIV

[http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/louis-xiv-1638-1715?selection=44902](http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/louis-xiv-1638-1715?selection=44902%20)

Rigaud painted this portrait of King Louis XIV when the king was 63 years old. *What similarities and differences can you find between this portrait and the portrait of Louis XV? What type of person does Louis XIV’s appear to be, based on his portrait? How would you describe his attitude and demeanor? What message is this portrait supposed to send?*