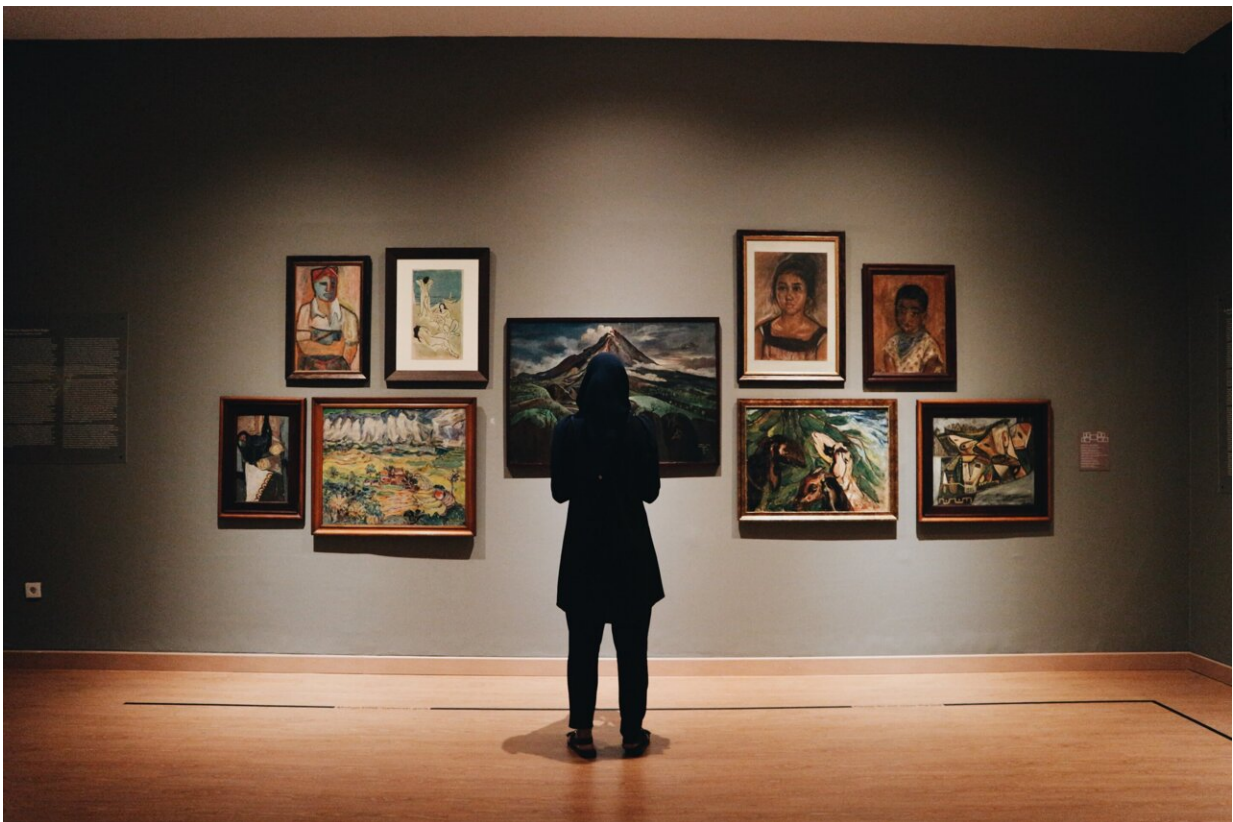


Researcher: I study the therapeutic qualities of writing about art. Here are three steps for trying it yourself

January 5 2024, by Patrick Wright



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What do we learn about ourselves when we write creatively about an artwork? I asked myself this question during my creative writing Ph.D.,

where my focus was on writing a collection of poems in response to modern and contemporary art.

While the early phase of my research involved sitting in galleries and museums, viewing [images](#) and objects in the flesh, during the pandemic I had to retreat home and recalibrate how I could access these visual prompts. I made use of books and postcard reproductions of artworks and also looked online, using resources such as Google Images and virtual gallery tours.

Lockdown had an impact on my mental health, and the poems I produced during this time went beyond straightforward descriptions of the artworks. They explored my thoughts and feelings—with the [artwork](#) aiding in uncovering parts of myself I was not aware of, or helping to warp or disguise personal content that would have left me feeling exposed if written about directly.

The idea of using images as a therapeutic tool has been a long-term interest of mine. When I ran creative writing workshops at the Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester Museum, I asked participants to select an image or object and write something in response, incorporating aspects of their own identity or sense of place.

During [lockdown](#), however, I was led to reflect not only on how art galleries and museums are often inaccessible (due to illness or disability, for example), but also how environments like this can feel intimidating or exclusionary for some people. And I reflected on how it's possible to nurture a love of art and creativity despite such feelings of marginalization.

Having also observed a shortfall in provision for [mental health](#) conditions, I wanted to develop techniques that would enable people who don't have prior knowledge of art history or a particular artist's intentions

to write about issues that affect them, through the prism of an artwork.

What might we see in a late Rothko, for instance? Or in J.M.W. Turner's final and often considered "unfinished" seascapes? Is there something in the obscurity or formlessness that chimes with something buried in our psyche? Perhaps trauma and depression require (at least at first) an image to serve as a metaphor between that which is unspeakable and more direct language?

Maybe [creative writing](#)—and particularly writing that makes use of artworks—can perform this function, and even work as a precursor or complement to psychotherapy. This is a process whereby things we can't name are brought to light and find expression. Often when this occurs, it's healing.

So, here are three steps I have found to be effective when using an artwork as a prompt to "write therapeutically."

1. Choose your artwork

The first decision to make is your choice of prompt. People often say a piece of art "resonates" or "speaks" to them. See if you can allow an image to find you in this way. It doesn't need to be an artwork in a museum or gallery—any image you feel a connection with is a good choice.

Then, ask yourself why it resonates with you. Does the image evoke something that you associate with? Is it a distorted portrait of yourself? Or is it a surface on which to project your own reality?

2. Embrace 'slow looking'

Next, I suggest trying the exercise of "slow looking," where your attention is deliberately focused on the image for an extended period of time (say, a few minutes). As you do so, analyze the image and try to notice as much as possible.

This may contrast with most of our more accustomed way of looking, where we glance at an image for a few seconds and make a snap judgment about it—often deciding that we like it or we don't. What do you see? Or what do you think you see?

It can be useful to test out a kind of "naive looking," making the most of your subjective and idiosyncratic perceptions (those we have conjured up ourselves but which others struggle to relate to). This kind of attention involves looking around the entire artwork, without assuming that some parts are more important than others. Instead, try to treat everything as though it's of equal significance (at least initially).

3. Try uninhibited writing

Follow your slow looking exercise with some uninhibited and uncensored writing. This can either be done while still looking, or you may choose to work from your memory. As you work, consider adopting a particular mode of writing in response to the image.

One option is to just describe what's there. Another is to imagine what you think you see, or what could be occurring out of your vision in the blind field beyond the frame. And another option: how about writing from the position of one of the figures in the picture? There are many alternatives—you could even try writing poems about the artwork.

Whatever your approach, have patience and experiment with different ways of seeing and writing—especially those that run counter to our fast-paced visual culture, and might provide fresh insights into ourselves and

the world.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Researcher: I study the therapeutic qualities of writing about art. Here are three steps for trying it yourself (2024, January 5) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-therapeutic-qualities-art.html>

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