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Material Culture in the Writing Classroom

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Introduction

I teach English and Creative Writing at Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School (CO-OP) in New Haven, Connecticut. CO-OP is an interdistrict magnet school in the heart of downtown New Haven, in close proximity to the historic Shubert Theatre, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Yale Center for British Art, the Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven is one of the largest, most diverse districts in Connecticut, and CO-OP draws its students from historic city neighborhoods such as the Hill, Newhallville, and Fair Haven, as well as surrounding suburbs, towns, and the coastline. Students interested in an immersive, arts-intensive curriculum come to CO-OP from a wide variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Some students have never played an instrument before, never danced on a stage, or written a play. Others come from families with intergenerational ties to international arts communities and to CO-OP. This unit is for teachers who enjoy writing and creating powerful classroom communities, and who are curious about where writing about cultural objects might take them personally and professionally.

This unit has a map with academic sources, as well as suggestions for classroom activities and sketches for how to construct meaningful writing. The premise is that by investigating and trying out the object-based methods of cultural anthropology, as well as descriptive strategies from art history, the unit can be therapeutic for teachers. The unit leaves space for teachers to create their own manuscripts, collages, displays, collaborations and performances. Creating alongside and in relationship to one's students builds the relationships students need in order to learn.

The wide range of life experiences and academic skills of intergenerational New Haven families and recent immigrants from Africa, Central and South America, and Asia allow for wide-ranging academic and student-centered creative projects. I use writing in my classes to create a positive and supportive community. Working with strategies, developed to understand our human material culture, offers a range of ways for us to get to know one another by sharing cultural and family stories through objects. Storytelling through objects is an excellent model for teaching students to write. In Creative Writing we curate showcases, a newspaper, and a literary magazine to collaborate with the other arts students in Visual Arts, Band, Dance, Choir, and Strings.

Students at CO-OP, like most high school students, are focused on their identity. They constantly look for ways to find themselves within larger geographic and social contexts. Providing them with tools to show and share their personal values gives them lifelong skills. Being able to clearly identify individual and collective values is what makes life meaningful.

Rationale

This unit includes research into how objects create and hold memory and how memories can inform storytelling. It investigates how reflective and creative writing can come from the scientific and imaginative study of objects. The unit builds research and study exercises, using familiar forms to honor the connections we have to one another. The unit is interdisciplinary in the sense that students and teachers are asked to use both scientific and literary methods to learn and to gather information. We will draw on art historian Jules Prown's method for describing an unknown object, artist Anni Albers's commitment to understanding the origins of materials we use, and insights about material identities from Alison Slater's collection "Memory as Dress."

The unit will start by studying our cultural relationship with printed yearbooks and journals as common material objects. We will do this by looking at copies of historical CO-OP yearbooks that we have in our classroom. We will talk about why we value yearbooks, what is special about them, and what role they play in our lives. Together we will identify the key structural elements of a yearbook/scrapbook, such as the different themes and sections. We will analyze, design, and identify material elements of the yearbook genre. After this discussion and study, we will do research into different scrapbooks by visiting the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale University Art Gallery to gather information about the history of these objects and how they were put together.

This unit will address the social and political markers of yearbooks. What is it about yearbooks that keep us connected with the past? Is this a positive experience? Why or why not? Why do we value them? What language does the yearbook speak? We will look both at past incarnations of the yearbook and more contemporary versions, such as "The History of the World in 100 Objects" podcast.¹

The unit is designed to build a supportive and innovative scholarly and creative, arts-influenced community. This community emerges through principles of hands-on learning and student-centered creativity. The goal is to construct an exhibition or performance designed for a specific classroom setting. We will initiate a tradition of sharing writing through studying material culture. By studying material culture, we will develop our relationships with each other and our creative work.

Objects and Creative Writing

Studying objects in our lives teaches us to write narrative stories which refine our lives. This ancient, precise measuring tool, descriptive writing, is a compass: describing our lives gives us a map. Through this map, we can study individual culture. When we add research to our descriptive writing, we can bring in art history,

aesthetics, and cultural values to provide detail and documentation. Research teaches us actionable skill sets. Each word and phrase we write is a valuable reflection. At the same time, stories shared with us teach us. Stories build understanding and compassion. Stories are sleights of hand, quietly piecing together our values.

The flip side of the mind's capacity for memory is that it can remind us of loss, tragedy, trauma. There is a fine line between creativity and love, between a day for planting, planning for the future, and a rainy one for growth, assessment, and the power of regret. Often trauma-based writing is the basis for assigned personal narratives as well as college essays. This reflects a tendency to tell stories or recount memories which point towards painful moments which memory assigns to us. Is this a well-intended assignment strategy? Most writing concerns the reconciliation of disparate experiences. Looking into relatable but unfamiliar stories and images, as can be found in a city or family archive, allows layers of experience to be recollected in a freshly conceived form. Memory is clearly intangible, therefore it is not measurable, but memories can be rebuilt from associations with writing. Visiting Nancy Rolfe's college years in Florida through photos arranged in her scrapbook brought me to reconsider my childhood relationship with clothing. I believe that the casual, visual arrangement of family-curated, organically collected objects, allows us to access information for writing outside institutional confines, which I identify as part of the charm and power of "The History of the World in 100 Objects" project.

Jules Prown writes "therefore, the way to understand the cause (some aspect of culture) is the careful and imaginative study of the effect (the object)."² In theory, if we could perceive all of the effects, we could understand all of the causes; an entire cultural universe is in the object waiting to be written down. How often are we aware of our imagination being freed up to curate enriching experiences in a creative and collaborative environment? Jules Prown's creative methods for investigating objects gives writing teachers practical guidelines for how to uncover what objects hold, how they reflect back to us a story. Teaching students to find the connections between the seen and unseen qualities of an object gives their writing power.

The Cabinet Project: Building Student-Centered Scrapbook Exhibitions

Creative writing, scrapbooking, and weaving them together give us a way to honor our lives, as well as a way to make sense of the spaces we live in. Scrapbooks are a hand-held exhibition of what could help make sense of loss, as well as celebration. This power is felt with the scrapbook, one designed for the studying of objects. Intentional description and storytelling preserve our stories, a process described on the Cabinet Project website.³ The Cabinet Project is an excellent example of how mixing research with storytelling becomes narrative writing. While recreating an electronic Cabinet resource for a local high school requires resources beyond the capacity of most schools, through writing activities, a powerful exhibition serving the same purpose is available to most.

Engaging students in curating an exhibition of personal objects that highlights the stories of student loves, successes, and failures uplifts the community. The practice of writing about objects creates relationships we can learn from between the present and the unknown past. Stories, tales and memories provide important information, not only about the past and its context, but also about people, places, and events linked to the object.

The Cabinet is a community collection model that includes a component where stories, tales, memories and

researched information are recorded and linked to objects. The contextual information is often unique and specific to a particular person or family, even when linked to a common object which may be seen in many different contexts. As such, the recording and sharing of the story in textual, visual, or aural form is crucial. The information may be collected as an event where team members talk to contributors and record their information before linking it to an exhibition of their objects.

This project points to how community building and descriptive writing about objects showcase our values. Teaching students to write focused, descriptive narratives grounds their writing. When writing is studied in community, it makes this writing visible to a wider audience. This unit is a hands-on study of how writing about objects, inspired by the model of a scrapbook, teaches students to appreciate their writing skills. The appreciation which comes from positive recognition of their experience encourages them to value themselves. Confidence in our writing gives students confidence in their academic skills. This confidence is what young people need to succeed and to enjoy their lives. Writing for an audience, for an exhibition, gives them this opportunity.

Examples of Material Culture Studies: Scrapbooks

One example of the power of material culture can be found in the recreation of families' photographic records in Soviet Central Asia. The touching up of photographs allowed families, dismantled during purges, deportations, or forced labor, to reunite on the page. "In these portraits the photorealist artists 'corrected' the originals, straightening crooked hair bows, adjusting collars and adding brooches to drab Soviet clothing or adding patterns to monotone dresses. You could have a portrait with your beloved but absent father who was a victim of the purges and whom you had never seen."⁴ Objects are relics, they mirror our visions. Imagining and recording memories unites us on the page. The chaos and impermanence of conflict clears a path towards resolution.

The Romanov family photo albums, archived at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, provide a counterexample. The albums capture, in casual snapshots, the mundane daily intimacies of Tsar Nicholas II and his family before they were murdered by Bolshevik forces in July 1918. These carefree snapshots taken by the Tsar and his wife, and by a family friend and confidant, with a Brownie Kodak camera, capture typical family activities. We see them hunting for mushrooms, knitting on a yacht, sledding, playing tennis, at picnics and dinner parties, as well as performing the duties of a ruling family, with no hint of what might come.

In contrast, the scrapbooks of artist Jane Wodening and her husband, filmmaker Stan Brakhage, record portraits of life in the mountain town of Rollinsville, Colorado from 1958 to 1967. In the carefully cut-and-pasted volume of cultural ephemera a canto to a simpler time is registered: typewritten love letters, postcards, photographs of their children reading and playing outdoors. Wodening gives a bottle to her baby sitting in a lawn chair in a turn-of-the-century wood cabin. The scrapbook lays out a story, told through a cut-up of words and printed images, encoded in the recognizable but also self-secret language of the New York School. We organize our lives in meaningful arrangements whenever we choose to pin up a picture.

Nancy Rolfe's scrapbook (1921-1933), part of the James Weldon Johnson archives at the Beinecke Library, is made up of ephemera corresponding to her time at the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College between 1921 and 1933. The scrapbook contains photographs, announcements, and correspondence, some related to

her siblings Daniel Thomas Rolfe and Carrie R. Rolfe. All this is seemingly ordinary, perhaps even unremarkable, and yet the details of Rolfe's experiences have immediate redemptive power in that they reveal a segregated reality—a world of intimacies and plans. Within these pages I saw another side of Black American Jim Crow South college life. Rolfe's scrapbook documents her classes and social life at the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College. Familiar references include Easter table-setting cards, birthday cards, and invitations to gatherings. But there are also references to events and locations, such as concerts and brunches, that were unfamiliar to me.

Since scrapbooks are constructed after the fact, they collect information in a different way than a single photograph or piece of memorabilia. The organization of the material in the scrapbooks generates a story different from the spoken or written story. Organization and orchestration are what bring stories to life. We admire a story, and we believe it, because of its emotionality, but perhaps the real impact lies in what a scrapbook can tell us. It is the suggestions and the layering of materials that make the characters meaningful.

Scrapbooks contain more than images and writing. Objects contained within a scrapbook make their own statements. Touching objects that are intentionally collected gives us a better understanding of the story we are reading. A scrapbook does what a regular book cannot do. It gives us an object to explore with our hands, a step into the tangible, beyond interpreting words. When building a class scrapbook, we build a world of personal values. Giving objects value by deliberating about them and choosing them for a scrapbook makes it so that scrapbooks build connections to the reader and writer through their materiality. Materiality is an antidote to social media. While building this scrapbook, we will simultaneously build relationships with things we experience through all our senses.

The goal of creating a scrapbook for this unit includes building an audience for it. Even though the scrapbook is not meant for families, the process should look towards the larger community as an audience. The point of reading scrapbooks is to build understanding and empathy, the basis for community. Nothing builds community like authenticity and effort. A scrapbook represents all of these values in a simple form which can be produced in the classroom without too many materials, and without spending too much money. The point of reading such books is to become part of the story they hold on to. These books are interactive; they are both personal and private, as they activate our memory and remind us of what we are made of, how we came to be. Scrapbooks create meaning and connection.

Scrapbooks can be thought of as a working rough draft. The scrapbook is a composition. The order of things in a scrapbook, the choice of what is accepted onto the pages of the scrapbook, and what is rejected from the pages of the scrapbook, can serve as an example of how we compose narrative fiction and nonfiction. With each photograph or with each piece of memorabilia, we are brought into conversation with the authors of the scrapbook in a way that is more hands-on than the way we interact with fiction or non-fictional texts. A scrapbook models the serendipity that is the basis of most writing, a basis which is often not spoken of. Just as the sequence of pages in a scrapbook are composed by a partial but invisible party, creative writing offers sequences that come together similarly. Writing is a collection of ordinary elements brought together to create something new and unpredictable.

Scrapbooks are also visual catalogues. Their power is dependent not so much on description and collection, but on intentional organization or editing. Teaching creative writing by introducing students to skills for how to read a scrapbook as a material object has the potential to lead to stronger writing. This is because strong writing comes from the better understanding of the details.

Presenting students with objects such as the Romanov Family albums and Nancy Rolfe's scrapbooks, which we

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can visit and study at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, is the basis for showing how a story can be seen as a collection of materials. Educators don't need to consult these specific objects, of course, but can seek out other resources at cultural heritage institutions in their communities. Handling objects is a universal experience. It is something we are taught from the beginning. How do we hold a glass, how do we hold a shovel? Holding books and scrapbooks, talking about them, and learning from them, will build strong academic relationships in the present. These relationships and findings about ourselves are new—this is how we continue to learn as artists and students, by meeting stories as objects.

Pedagogical Methods: Turning the Scrapbook into an Exhibition

Why are certain stories preserved and told?

What kind of resources are needed to preserve stories?

If you are going to preserve your memories of studying art at CO-OP, how would you go about it? Why are others forgotten?

What is your interest or responsibility in telling stories of your own?

In this unit we will design a scrapbook as an exhibition of personal objects to share with our families and with other students at school. There are many avenues for creating a new scrapbook which is physical, emotional, and tangible. As a class we can find the materials we need for our scrapbook. For example, what paper do we want to use? How can we create a table of contents so that we are inclusive? Important themes that tie us together appear as we work through our stories and poems. We can uncover the stories which need to be told as well as the stories we want to tell. These stories can be real or imagined. It will be important to allow our writing to exist between genres from truth to fairy tales and back; allowing ourselves to include other students in our scrapbook, deepens ties to the project.

After looking at the Romanov Family and Nancy Rolfe's scrapbooks, we will be able to identify what material aspects of the books interest us. This will lead to research into mapping out our own album. Based on scrapbook examples as well as scrapbooks that we have in our possession, we can imagine our own book. Research and notetaking clarify what we want to preserve.

"Therefore, the way to understand the cause (some aspect of culture) is the careful and imaginative study of the effect (the object). In theory, if we could perceive all of the effects we could understand all of the causes; an entire cultural universe is in the object waiting to be discovered."⁵

How often are we aware of our imagination being freed up to curate enriching experiences in a creative and collaborative environment? Jules Prown's academic, creative methods for investigating cultural objects lead to practical guidelines for teaching us how to uncover what objects are telling us. Teaching students to see the connections between the seen and unseen aspects of an object empowers them. By exploring objects, whether through writing or speaking, students learn to appreciate their lives. "[Prown's methods] led to a vision of objects as survivors from the past with a tale to tell."⁶

Glen Adamson writes, "All the more so if you agree with Prown, as I do, that everyday objects such as chairs

and teapots are as compelling to interpretation... as painting and sculpture. I have learned many lessons from [Prown], but ... this is the most important: have faith. Encourage people to look, and then let the art perform its magic.”⁷ The pedagogy of studying objects opens us up for creative writing, which is the highest level of sharing what we know. Bryan J. Wolfe, a student and friend of Prown, described the excellence of Prown’s teaching by recalling a visit he made to his farm in Vermont “hopping onto—actually, into—the front loader of a tractor that he drove. He then lifted us many feet above the ground, as if we were so many bales of hay, and proceeded to tour us for the next hour through his woodlot and fields. They looked especially magical from our vantage ten feet above the ground. Prown’s teaching philosophy resembles that tractor ride: lift them up, open their eyes, ask them to look. It was a classic performance: playful, sure and instructive. And it echoed with remarkable precision his practice in the classroom.”⁸

Using playful exploration gives students and teachers positive pathways to develop interest in their stories and to see them as important. With this passion and love, work is stronger, sustained, and deep. Helping students choose textual objects, photos and toys to include in the scrapbook will help build connections with scrapbook readers.

Based on a progressive instructional style that emerged from the community of artists at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, the textile artist Anni Albers taught an immersive weaving process. This teaching strategy involved ‘listening to the voice of the materials’, which is a step towards hands-on learning, one of the more successful methods for working with the diverse learning needs of students. Following in Albers’s footsteps, students will create something new from old, carefully curated materials. This activity figures into student interest in cutting down on carbon emissions. Repurposing materials is climate activism. Anni Albers viewed cultural objects in a new light, based on exploratory research she engaged in in Mexico. She wrote the following in her essay ‘On Jewelry’ in 1942:

You will be astonished, I think, to hear that the first stimulus to make jewelry from hardware came to us from the treasure of Monte Albán, the most precious jewels from ancient Mexico, found only a few years ago in a tomb near Oaxaca. These objects of gold and pearls, of jade, rock-crystal, and shells, made about 1000 years ago, are of such surprising beauty in unusual combinations of ...The art of Monte Albán had given us the freedom to see things detached from their use, as pure materials, worth being turned into precious objects. From the beginning we were quite conscious of our attempt not to discriminate between materials, not to attach to them the conventional values of preciousness or commonness. In breaking through the traditional valuation we felt this to be an attempt to rehabilitate materials. We felt that our experiments could help to point out the merely transient value we attach to things, though we believe them to be permanent. We tried to show that spiritual values are truly dominant. We thought that our work suggested that jewels no longer were the reserved privilege of the few, but property of everyone who cared to look about and was open to the beauty of the simple things around us. Though the so-called costume jewelry has gone in this direction, it is hard for them to trace back the simple elements that are them. We tried to emphasize just this side in our work. We wanted to lead the person looking at our jewels back through the process that brought it about. All things are at their beginning formed in this way of unprejudiced choosing. Sometimes, it becomes necessary again to go back to it to clear the way for new seeing.⁹

Annie Albers points out: “We have to work from where we are. But just as you can go everywhere from any

given point,”¹⁰ which I understand as good writing instruction. We can begin anywhere with our writing as another way to build confidence. We can learn to tell our stories through a combination of hands-on activities, like weaving, and Prown’s method of material cultural analysis, which is comprised of description: analysis of content; deduction: sensory, intellectual and emotional engagement; and speculation: theories and hypothesis, a program of research.

The study of an object sets up a strong hands-on path for learning to write stories, teaching us to trust our senses and our intellect at the same time. This process gives us a way to understand and collect knowledge. Reconciling description and memory teaches students to be precise with their narrative voice. This unit is designed to be as immersive as a group retreat. Students and teachers need to follow in the footsteps of not only Anni Albers, but also Booker T. Washington, who taught his students how to bake bricks, then build their school. Building a meaningful scrapbook exhibition asks students and teachers to slow down and to appreciate the rice.

Learning Activities: Building an Exhibition of Object Biographies through Writing Prompts Modeled after ‘The Cabinet’ and Scrapbooks

Critical thinking and writing exercises are steps toward building a student-centered exhibition of personal object biographies, modeled after the scrapbook. By studying the techniques and narrative structures from, for example, “Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects,” students will practice writing and organizing stories about self-selected objects from their lives. Using an online exhibition as the model, students will use the resources they have access to design their own exhibition. Trying out various writing templates, students will delve into their own history to write about and organize a display of handheld objects telling, the stories in their lives. This exhibit is a contemporary history, a snapshot of student values, loves, and beliefs. By collecting and exhibiting their object biographies, students will learn to appreciate their experiences, their biographies.

There are many options for exhibition-oriented, student-centered scrapbooks or other 3D display projects that come out of place-based learning. Using, for example, a granddaughter’s reflections on watching her grandmother spin wool, found on the website “Soviet Central Asia in 100.”¹¹ The Romanov, Brakhage, and Rolfe scrapbooks can also be used as examples for students.

Narrative and Descriptive Writing Using Memoir Techniques

1. Recall a time when you watched someone do something skillfully like prepare dinner, fix a car, get family groceries, write a letter or walk a dog. Consider what their fingers were doing. How were they moving?
2. Reflect on why the person you chose was doing what he/she/they were doing. What was the point of their activity?
3. For example, look at this piece of writing about a spindle from Kyrgyzstan from the Cabinet project, which shares biographies of objects from Soviet Central Asia.

One can endlessly watch a grandmother’s skillful hands effortlessly turning sheep’s wool into woolen yarn...The woolen yarn would be then used for making the majority of items

needed for supporting life. The spindle played an important role in the household economy, especially given the deficiency of consumer goods in the Soviet period. Dowry for daughters was made by hand with a spindle. Knitting clothes, making carpets, weaving straw mats, ropes for horse gear, parts of a yurt, ribbons for fixing the yurt, etc, all started with a spindle. Thus women supported the economic foundation of the family. Everything was made by hand, and the skills were passed on from generation to generation...Traditionally, a Kyrgyz spindle is formed of a dome shaped rock and a wooden stick.¹²

4. Examine the qualities of the writing:

First the writer describes a memory of motion of a spindle 'she can endlessly watch a grandmother's skillful hands.'

Then the writer identifies the specific items in their memory 'a spindle...turning sheep's wool into woolen yarn.'

Next the writer discusses what the yarn is used for 'making the majority of items needed for supporting life...given the deficiency of consumer goods.'

Here is a list of things made from hand spun yarn: a daughter's dowry, clothes, carpets, mats, ropes for horse gear, fixing the yurt.'

Finally the author discusses the origins of the spindle, giving us historical context, then sharing how she came upon the spindle.

5. Sentence starters:

' _____ was always part of ____, _____ life especially in _____

A _____ person with a _____ personality, my _____ was known as _____. The _____ in the photo belonged to _____. My _____ raised _____ children. She cooked _____. Her children would play _____ all day. At the end of the day, _____, my mother would _____. _____ spent many evenings _____. After _____ passed away _____

Experiment with these writing methods in class, using different objects written to create object biographies. Once student writing is completed and edited, collect this writing and the objects represented to help students curate, then organize and present an authentic exhibit of personal objects and writing.

Narrative and Descriptive Writing Based in Poetic Form

Short poem practicing the principles for identifying an object, based on art historian Jules Prown's method as a practice for community scrapbook writing and composition

1. Description: analysis of content
2. Deduction: sensory, intellectual and emotional engagement and
3. Speculation: theories + hypothesis, a program of research

Identifying an object based on Prown's steps of description, deduction and speculation sets up a basic path for direct learning, both through senses and your intellect, allowing for distinctions to be made between realms. In this case, reckoning with the consciousness of paper, ink, and photography without captions creates a malleable, fluid-like gaze, reflections of projections.

Describe the object as something which transcends your knowledge, as if it were magical, it held powers you felt within yourself or powers you want to have.

Ex: Inscribed, solid, ornate, language of Gods written by men, crafted, bejeweled by women, out of the door, reference and referential, distal, collegiate, sub, beneath

Deduce that the object is useful, very, very ordinary, and designed for tasks, like a fork is for eating cakes or a road is constructed for travelling up a mountain.

Ex: The work of many hands, the fruits of mostly inside voices, temperature gauge of deep cave, memory meter or a key to a paradoxical side of the fence

Speculate that your object is part of a larger story. Place your object into a vast theory, or hypothesis for what this object can accomplish. How can this object solve a human quest?

Ex: This is a message for how to unwind duality, to break down concepts, make them into poetry, a story that heals most hurts and gives balm to many doubts

Now, collect your descriptions, deductions and speculations into a poem/ short prose using

ALT Shift 5 or any method which works for your writing style

Ex Inscribed, solid, ornate, language of Gods written by men, crafted, bejeweled by women, out the door, reference and referential, distal, collegiate, sub, beneath

The work of many hands, the fruits of mostly inside voices, temperature gauge of deep cave, memory meter or a key to a paradoxical side of the fence

This is a message for how to unwind duality, to break down concepts, make them into poetry, a story that heals most hurts and gives balm to many doubts

In your preferred style of writing, combine the different elements into a piece of short prose based on Jules Prown's identification strategies.

Narrative and Descriptive Writing Using Your Senses in Anton Chekov's Short Story "Gooseberries"

"Nature seemed gentle and melancholy, Ivan Ivanich and Bourkin were filled with love for the fields and thought how grand and beautiful the country was."¹³ In this passage Chekov writes about his characters' relationship to the outdoors. Reflect on how nature seems to you. Write sentences to describe what the outdoors means to you in Chekov's style.

"It is a long time since I bathed," said Aliokhin shyly, as he soaped himself again, and the water round him became dark blue, like ink."¹⁴ Here Chekov writes about taking a restorative bath. Write about an ordinary daily activity that you found special and moving.

Practice using Chekov's precise style to appreciate your own relationships with your life.

Writing an Object Biography

1. Take time to choose an object that you can hold in your hand, that you are willing to spend time with, which you are curious about or that you enjoy.
2. Observe your object using your 5 senses.
3. Analyze your object.
4. Observe your object.
5. Collect data. It can also be helpful to draw your object to understand it. What is touchable? What is untouchable? What does it take to make this object? Could you make this object yourself?

Here is an example of writing about a chosen object in representative lines:

Family origin. Arrived by mail 'out of the blue'. Headed to Walgreens in East Haven to collect it on Halloween night. Heavy. Unexpected. Grandmother's never seen before China. Shipped by way of Vancouver, Washington. Probably stored in Washington, DC. Following the next to each other deaths of two of my brothers and before the last one died a year later, I received a box of porcelain. I was in a mental fog at the time. My Dad bought us a house. I had just signed up with New Haven Public Schools, a job I was 'not made for', Porcelain is white with 'warranted gold coin', Textured, embossed with a floral pattern, all in white. I could make a rubbing of it. The color of white is pretty, the color of the gold coin is also pretty, one might say 'feminine' or 'subtle' 'simple' 'cheerful' 'understandable. Made in the USA. Warranted Gold Coin. Rose Point.

Narrative Writing as a Mini Story: Examples of Mini Stories as Objects

Practice writing one-sentence fiction stories about your object by creating a slide with words and your image or object. See the example below.



Figure 1.

Readings

Brakhage, Stan. Jane Wodening and Stan Brakhage Scrapbook. 1958.
<https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16301942>.

Documentation, celebration of unconventional artist family life in Colorado. Beautifully arranged notes, letters, photos, and cards. Excellent format for exhibition study.

Edwards, "Photographs as Objects of Memory," *The Object Reader* (eds. Candlin, Guins)

Discussion of photographs as physical objects of social memory.

Dzongsar Khyentse. "Buddhist Visualization Practice Is Pure, Clear, and Vibrant." *Lion's Roar*, June 12, 2024.
<https://www.lionsroar.com/pure-clear-and-vibrant/>.

Recommended alternative ways of thinking about what we see from Tibetan Buddhism

Johnson, James Weldon, 1871-1938. from J. Rosamond Johnson. Box 42, folder 38. 1910-54, undated.
<https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/17397032>.

Excellent collection of Black historical cultural objects which merit immediate research.

"Kara-Kum Sweets (Central Asia)." n.d. Ox.ac.uk. Accessed March 9, 2025.
<https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/kara-kum-sweets-central-asia>.

Relatable template for students who love candy. Good example of descriptive writing to inspire excellent reflection and writing.

MacGregor, Neil. *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. (London: Penguin Books, 2013)

Brilliant, humorous, uplifting virtual template of objects from across time to share as an example for students to design their school exhibition of cultural objects.

Porter's note. Cabinet. (n.d.). <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/porters-note>

Wonderful hand-held object: Relatable welcome note exchange between a facilities worker and a new college student.

"Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica." n.d. The Art Institute of Chicago. Accessed March 24, 2025 <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/10157/project-a-black-planet-the-art-and-culture-of-panafrica?>

Virtual exhibition of objects from across Africa curated by the Art Institute of Chicago to share with students as an example and as inspiration for exhibition design.

Prown, J. D. (1982). *Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method*. Winterthur Portfolio, 17(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/496065>

Excellent resource for teachers and for scholars. Classic, organized method instructions for how to interpret, describe, analyze an object from a world class art historian/teacher.

"Recording Stories and Memories." n.d. Ox.ac.uk. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/recording-stories-and-memories>.

Instructions the cabinet virtual exhibition site on how to interview, research and to link objects to stories.

"Reimagination." n.d. Ox.ac.uk. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/reimagination>

Description of portraits of regular people, reconceived by artists to uplift and redeem family life following inconceivable suffering.

Rolfe, Nancy. "Scrapbook, 1921-1933." ArchiveGrid : Scrapbook, 1921-1933, researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/collection/data/1088210028. Accessed 17 Apr. 2025.

Inspiring, culturally relevant personal scrapbook of college years compiled by HBCU student Nancy Rolfe.

"Romanov Family Albums." 2018. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. December 14, 2018. <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/romanov-family-albums>

Example of the power of a family scrapbook with haunting photos taken by and of the last Imperial family in Russia prior to a catastrophic mass murder symbolizing the end of an era.

"The Prown Method." Richardhtran. October 7, 2015. <https://richardhtran.wordpress.com/2015/10/07/the-prown-method/>.

Helpful secondary source material explaining Prown's method for describing cultural objects.

Writing for the Humanities. "Formal Analysis Assignment." WFTHCCNY Commons. n.d. Accessed May 18, 2025.

Helpful additional instructions for teaching writing about formal analysis of objects.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Students will write the story of a personal or found object to practice examining complex information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Students will practice using Prown's Method to investigate and to write clear informational texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Students will research objects and learn techniques from art history to record material culture with writing.

Notes

¹ Neil MacGregor, "A History of the World in 100 Objects," podcast episode, *BBC Radio 4*, BBC, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrtd2/episodes/downloads>.

² Prown, Jules David. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method." *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/496065>.

³ Oxford University, "Cabinet," accessed August 15, 2025, <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/>.

⁴ "Reimagination," *Ox.ac.uk*, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/reimagination>.

⁵ Jaiyeola, Tara. "Art as Evidence: a method for looking | Art Speak with Tara Jaiyeola." Art Speak with Tara Jaiyeola. October 29, 2013. Accessed August 15, 2025. <https://artspeak515.wordpress.com/2013/10/29/art-as-evidence-a-method-for-looking-draft/>.

⁶ Ross Barrett, Sarah Burns, and Jennifer Jane Marshall, "Roundtable on Pedagogy: Jules Prown," in "Prown's Students Reflect on Prown," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2016), <https://journalpanorama.org/article/introduction-the-legacy-of-jules-prown/prowns-students-reflect-on-prown/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Albers, Anni. "On Jewelry." Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. 1942. Accessed August 15, 2025. <https://www.albersfoundation.org/alberses/teaching/anni-albers/on-jewelry>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Rahat Yasabalieva, "Grandmother's Spindle (Kyrgyzstan)," *Cabinet*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/grandmothers-spindle-kyrgyzstan>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anton Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Random House, 2000), 5.

¹⁴ Ibid, 7

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