

DETAILS, DETAILS: HOW CHOICES REVEAL CHARACTER, SETTING, TONE, AND THEME

While biographers and historians are guided by actual events, artists and writers can select those details that suit their purposes, specifically to develop character, tone, conflict, and theme. This lesson guides students as they analyze and interpret details in a work of art in order to make inferences about narrative aspects.



The Ballet Class, c. 1880
Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, French
Oil on canvas
32 3/8 x 30 1/4 inches (82.2 x 76.8 cm)
Purchased with the W. P. Wiltach Fund, 1937
W1937-2-1

Curricular Areas

English – Language Arts

Grade Level

For grades 7–9, with modifications for elementary and high school

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.3](#)

PA Academic Standards for Art

- 9.3.A: Arts

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are available in the ARTstor

Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

- [At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance](#), 1890, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
ARTstor search: 1986-26-32
- [Pair of Doors \(Sugito\)](#), Edo Period (1615–1868), Japan
ARTstor search: Pair of Doors: Sugito
- [The Ballet Class](#), c. 1880, by Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas
ARTstor search: W1937-2-1

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Lesson Process

1. Review and discuss a story or novel that the class has recently read. Make a list on the board of specific details the writer included in the story.
2. Next, organize the list into categories, according to the purpose served by the detail:
 - To reveal character traits
 - To foreshadow events or conflicts
 - To present author's tone
 - To guide the reader toward theme (Note that some details may serve more than one purpose)
 - MODIFICATION: High school or higher-level students may want to compare the selection of details in fiction with those selected by a writer of non-fiction. Note similarities and differences of author's purpose in fiction and non-fiction.
3. Display the image *At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance* by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.
4. Have students work with a partner to examine the image and respond to the following questions:
 - How would you describe the setting?
 - Are these people having fun? Who is and who isn't?
 - How does the crowd seem to react to the dance?
5. Discuss the students' interpretations as a class, indicating for each response the details in the painting that caused the partners to respond as they did.
6. Using the same categories for the earlier discussion of details in fiction, list the details students found in the painting.
7. As a class, select one person from the painting, and list character/personality traits. Have students explain which details led them to their assumptions.
 - MODIFICATION, HIGH SCHOOL: Some characters in art and in fiction serve the purpose of setting an archetype. Which characters in the painting could be seen to represent certain "types" of personalities?
8. Display the image *Pair of Doors (Sugito)*.
9. With their partners, students will examine the painting to determine the approximate season of the year and the emotional reaction of the rider to the snowfall.
10. In a discussion of their assumptions, seek the details that the artist selected to show indicating time of year (setting) and reaction of the rider (character traits).
11. Examine more closely the response of students to the emotional reaction of the rider to the snowfall. Look for differences among students. How much of their response is based on details from the painting and how much from their own background and experiences?
12. From this, define and clarify the differences between "analysis" of any work of art (literature included) and "interpretation" of that work.
 - MODIFICATION, ELEMENTARY: If your friend disagrees with another classmate, do you tend to take the side of your friend? Why? If someone else were to ask you what the disagreement was about, could you be completely fair in your response? When you read a story, or examine a work of art, how much of your idea of what you have read is based on your own background or experiences? Explain that herein lies the difference between "interpreting" something (adding your own viewpoint) and "analyzing" something (without inserting your own viewpoint).

For more information, please contact Division of Education and Public Programs: School and Teacher Programs by phone at 215-684-7580, by fax at 215-236-4063, or by e-mail at educate@philamuseum.org.

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13. View the image *The Ballet Class* by Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas.
14. As a formative assessment, have students respond individually to the following questions:
 - What details give hints to the ages of the girls in the class?
 - What details tell you how advanced this class is?
 - What details indicate who the artist considers the “main characters” of this painting?
15. Discuss students’ conclusions.

Assessment

- **ELEMENTARY:** Select any two people from the three paintings you have examined. What do they have in common? How are they different? Compare and contrast your two people, focusing on such things as how they seem to react to what is happening around them and on their apparent “station in life” or social class. Write about what you have concluded in a narrative essay format, and tell which of these two people you would rather have as a good friend (and why).
- **SECONDARY:** Select one of these paintings and one short story you have recently read. In an informational essay format, describe how artists and writers select specific details to suit their purposes. Make sure you include specific examples from both the painting and the short story, and make sure you have connected those examples to a specific artist’s/writer’s purpose.

Enrichment

- **ELEMENTARY:** Select one person from one of the paintings and write an imaginary dialogue between that person and the artist.
- **SECONDARY:** Artists and writers often select characters and provide details that make them typical of certain “types” of people—or “archetypes.” This allows the artist/writer to make general comments about these types of people, and may be an important component of theme. Select people from the paintings or characters from fiction you have read who could be considered archetypes. Do you know anyone who is so typical of a type of person that he/she could be an archetype? Why is this type of thinking (which is so helpful in fiction and in art) so dangerous when considering other human beings?