

# Visual Arts in the Elementary Classroom

*Visual art encompasses various mediums like painting and digital art, serving as a means of expression and cultural reflection. Integrating visual arts into education fosters creativity, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among students through techniques like teaching basic drawing skills and guiding students in observing visual art.*

## What is Visual Art?

Visual art refers to any form of art that is primarily visual in nature, encompassing a wide range of mediums, techniques, and styles. It includes various forms of creative expression that rely on visual elements and composition to convey ideas, emotions, or aesthetic experiences. Children naturally create and express in visual form as part of their development as learners.

Visual art includes traditional mediums like painting, drawing, sculpture, and printmaking, as well as newer forms such as digital art, photography, and multimedia installations. Beyond tangible artworks, visual art can also manifest in performance-based forms, such as street art, video art, and conceptual art.

Visual art plays a vital role in cultural expression and identity, reflecting the values, beliefs, and experiences of individuals and communities. It serves as a vehicle for storytelling, preserving historical narratives, and challenging societal norms. It can be a way for your students to share their stories and express their identity, too.

Visual art not only enriches our aesthetic experiences but also fosters critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. Including visual art in the classroom, allowing students to be both creators and consumers or observers can help them gain new perspectives, express themselves, and broaden their understanding of the world.



## Why Visual Arts in the Classroom?

- Foster flexible thinking.
- Influence the development of creativity and problem-solving skills.
- Enhance fine motor skills needed for writing.
- Boost confidence and acquire twenty-first century skills.
- Engage the imagination of all participants.
- Enhance executive functioning and decision-making skills.
- Encourage cultural awareness and empathy for differing human perspectives.
- Improve visual learning by learning to interpret, critique, and use visual information.

## Elements and Concepts of Visual Art

Developing a basic understanding, even an introductory understanding, of the principles and elements of visual art will help prepare you for more effective visual arts instruction in your classroom. Experience with composition, line, shape, texture, and form can help you design engaging activities and coach student thinking through the creative process. Knowing these elements and principles can help you provide constructive feedback and help students refine their skills while exploring art and the world around them. Consider these vocabulary words to embed within your arts instruction.

# ELEMENTS

- **LINE:** A point moving in space (a dot going for a walk).
- **VALUE:** The relative lightness or darkness of an object, which creates contrast.
- **TEXTURE:** The actual or implied look or feel of a surface.
- **SHAPE:** Created when a line defines an edge and makes an enclosed space.
- **FORM:** Encloses a three-dimensional area which has depth, length, and width.
- **SPACE:** The area extending in all directions inside or outside of a shape.
- **COLOR:** Light reflected from a surface; includes hue, value, and intensity.

# PRINCIPLES

- **BALANCE:** A means of maintaining visual equilibrium.
- **CONTRAST:** The visible differences in value, color, texture, and other elements that achieve emphasis, interest, and add meaning.
- **EMPHASIS:** The focal area in a work of art that attracts the viewer's attention.
- **UNITY/HARMONY:** The result of blending elements in a pleasing way.
- **MOVEMENT:** The component leading the viewer to sense action in a piece of artwork, or the path the viewer's eye follows throughout a work
- **PATTERN:** A decorative visual repetition.
- **PROPORTION:** The relationship of one part to another, and of the parts to the whole.
- **RHYTHM:** The combination of repeated elements.
- **REPETITION:** Regularly or consistently repeating an object or shape to suggest movement.
- **VARIETY:** Mixing elements and using juxtaposition and contrast to create interest in a work of art.

## How Do I Use Visual Arts in the Classroom?

### Teach Basic Drawing Skills

With only a pencil and paper, your students can participate in visual arts activities daily. Regularly practicing these skills builds visual discrimination and develops an understanding of spatial relationships and proportion. The blog below contains exercises you can share with students. They can be practiced daily to develop drawing technique, building from basic skills to more complex abilities. Embedded skills in these activities include rendering values, understanding pencil pressure in creating contrast, understanding properties of light, dark, and shadow, and identifying the effects of a light source.

[Click here to read "Teaching Basic Drawing Skills."](#)

### Use Sketchbooks With Students

Support students' use of sketchbooks or visual journals to document their learning in your classroom. Visual records can encourage and develop student creativity, individual expression, and self-reflection. They can synthesize thinking and probe new ideas. Plus, visual notetaking not only improves memory, it engages learning. Not designed to be formal or finished works of art, (although they can be), sketchbooks and visual journals emphasize and document thinking processes. The article below provides a sample of sketchbook strategies and examples from artists and teachers.

[Click here to read "Sketchbooks and Visual Journals in the Classroom."](#)

## Keep Your Own Sketchbook

Maintaining a sketchbook fosters creativity, reflection, and professional development among educators. By documenting thoughts, ideas, and inspirations, you can enhance your teaching practice and cultivate a deeper connection with your creative skills and your appreciation for the arts.

[Click here to read "The Power of Keeping a Sketchbook as a Teacher."](#)

## Guide Student Thinking as They Observe Visual Art

You can use arts-based questioning strategies to guide students through different elements within various works of art and develop their thinking skills. Benefits of regularly engaging in questioning strategies and helping students consume a work of art as the observer include refining observational prowess, deeper contemplation, developing collaboration and critical thinking abilities, and interpretation skills. The richest learning occurs when you use open-ended questions that allow children to keenly observe and discuss their findings. Read about more strategies for supporting student thinking while observing visual art in the blogs below.

[Click here to read "A Visual Thinking Guide: For Viewing Works of Art with Elementary Students."](#)

## Additional Resources

- [Arts Toolbox](#) - This ebook includes 16 dance activities and video links for the classroom.
- [Arts Playbook](#) - This ebook includes movement activities that support learning readiness and child development.
- [Visual Arts Lesson Plans](#) - Find lesson plans integrating music with literacy, science, math, and social studies
- [Visual Arts Blogs](#): find more music blogs on our website!



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