

# Descriptive writing

WORK OF ART 1: *Collins St, 5p.m.*, John Brack, 1955

## Objectives

The focus of this project is to study, develop and practise descriptive writing with an emphasis on:

- building vocabulary
- using synonyms, nouns, adjectives and adverbs
- developing imagery including the literary devices of alliteration, simile, metaphor and onomatopoeia.

### CREATIVE OUTCOMES

Along with the 'Clones clock off' creative task suggested for assessment, the skills acquired through this project can be applied to the following creative outcomes:

- poetry—creating a rhyming couplet, *cinquain*, list poem, onomatopoeic and/or free verse poem
- writing an interview
- reportage—writing a feature article using real-life examples.

The activities are outlined in the 'Inspire me!' section at the end of the project.

## Teaching plans

- 1 Introduction to descriptive writing
- 2 Close reading and creative thinking
- 3 Building vocabulary
- 4 Elaboration
- 5 Alliteration and onomatopoeia
- 6 Painting and poetry links

## Artist and work of art

John Brack (1920–99) was one of Australia’s leading modern artists, and his iconic work, *Collins St, 5p.m.*, offers a social commentary on everyday life in the 1950s. In 2011 it was voted the National Gallery of Victoria’s most popular work of art.

*Collins St, 5p.m.* will challenge students to consider and reflect on the dramatic changes that have taken place in the social and cultural life of Melbourne, and indeed any large city since 1955. It is immensely popular with students, who gravitate towards its strong, graphic ‘cartoon’ style. The bold use of colour and shape make the atmosphere and meaning easily accessible, enabling students to experience immediate success in visual literacy.

Experience with students taking part in the National Gallery of Victoria’s workshop program has shown that the painting is also an inspiring resource for developing students’ descriptive writing skills, which are the focus of this project.

### The artist

John Brack lived most of his life in or near the city of Melbourne. He attended evening art classes at the National Gallery School from 1938 to 1940. He served in the army from 1940 to 1946 and, following his discharge, he returned to the National Gallery School full-time until 1949. Brack became a respected teacher and art reviewer in addition to his painting career. He was an avid reader of literature throughout his life and in the 1930s he considered becoming a poet. Writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean-Paul Sartre, WH Auden, Henry James and TS Eliot influenced his thinking and personal philosophies about art and life. When Brack was working on *Collins St, 5p.m.*, he has indicated that he was reflecting on part of TS Eliot’s epic poem ‘The waste land’:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of the winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

TS Eliot, ‘The waste land’

Brack was interested in describing modern life and society and the subjects he chose to depict were grounded in ordinary, daily life. His paintings, often sombre in tone, reveal insights into the human condition.

### The work of art

*Collins St, 5p.m.* was painted at a time when memories of the Depression and wartime austerity were still lingering. However, there were also causes for celebration. Melbourne saw the development of new suburbs as home building soared, the economy thrived in Australia and it was a period of full employment.

Brack has depicted the people in *Collins St, 5p.m.* monochromatically as a device to express their similarity. At this period in Melbourne, most of the population was Anglo-Celtic in origin. As preparation for the painting, Brack stood in a doorway in Collins St between 4.45pm and 5.15pm over many weeks, sketching streams of workers on their way home after

a day's work. He also referenced photographs of buildings in Collins St. The man wearing glasses on the left-hand side of the work was based on Brack's friend, John Stephens.

The artist's depiction of emotionally closed, robotic figures, seemingly unaware of each other and their surroundings, may be read as a loss of individuality and sense of alienation among the masses. Brack noted:

*As a matter of fact it used to strike me as most eerie, to be sketching within 3 feet of so many people, none of whom took the slightest notice.*

*John Brack on Brack, CAE art notes, 1956*

Brack's work, *The bar*, 1954, is a companion to *Collins St, 5p.m.*, and was considered radical for the time. It portrays the notorious '6 o'clock swill', another bleak aspect of Melbourne life in the 1950s. Patrons, under the watchful eyes of a stern barmaid, are depicted hurriedly finishing their drinks before early closing time. As a pair, the two paintings offer an insight into city life during this decade in Australia's history.

The companion painting *The bar*, 1954, can be accessed online. You can find a link to the site with your web resources.

## Historical context

In 1955 Melburnians felt optimistic and proud of their city in the lead-up to the 1956 Olympic Games. Buildings such as the Melbourne Olympic Pool and Olympic Park were constructed and the first skyscraper, ICI House, was approved. Modern architecture flowered and, ironically, the cast-iron verandahs of shop fronts and houses, now preserved as heritage features, were demolished.

The first television licences were issued before the Olympics were broadcast. People without television sets sometimes gathered in front of department store windows to watch what became known as 'the friendly Games'.

## Immigration

The White Australia Policy (1901–73) accounted for the lack of cultural diversity in Melbourne during the 1950s. Based on fears that there would be problems with assimilation and a threat of cheap labour, the policy restricted immigration of non-white people on racial grounds. Australia at this time was deeply linked to its colonial heritage and the aim of the policy was to uphold the British traditions and way of life. Citizens from mainland Europe and Britain, however, were encouraged to settle in Australia and this new wave of immigration transformed the country.

## Suggested linked texts

The following texts are excellent for study in Years 7 and 8. The topics and themes would link neatly with the Brack image and the focus of this project.

Year 7		
<i>The Giver</i>	Lois Lowry	Written in the speculative fiction genre, <i>The Giver</i> is the story of Jonas, whose future is determined by the elders of society, as is the case for all 12-year-olds. He is assigned the honoured position of 'Receiver', and as he learns more in this role, he begins to question the values and practices of his society. An absorbing story that raises interesting issues to do with socialisation, conformity, genetic engineering and relationships. Students might create a short piece comparing the image of 1950s city life, as depicted in <i>Collins St, 5 p.m.</i> , with the image of a future society, which is depicted in Lowry's novel.
<i>The Red Shoe</i>	Ursula Dubosarsky	Set in 1950s Sydney, <i>The Red Shoe</i> focuses on three sisters: Elizabeth, who is suffering from a nervous breakdown; Frances, whose friend contracts polio; and the slightly eccentric Matilda. We mostly get Matilda's perspective, but sometimes the omniscient narrator draws our attention to one of the other girls and the story follows her trajectory for a while—a strange, yet interesting narrative style. The novel raises interesting issues connected with 1950s Australian politics, such as the fear of communism, the post-traumatic stress suffered by returned WWII servicemen and -women, the development of nuclear weapons, and immunisation against polio. Students might design their own work of art to accompany a scene from the novel, perhaps working in groups to create a picture book for younger students. The issues raised by the text might provide stimulus for the interview and feature article tasks, which are 'Inspire me!' activities.
Year 8		
<i>Wolf on the Fold</i>	Judith Clarke	<i>Wolf on the Fold</i> is a collection of short stories. The six stories are all linked to various members of the Sinclair family tree, tracing the family through the decades from 1935 to 2002. The stories have both urban and rural Australian settings and they explore issues connected with family life and relationships. The motif of the threatening 'wolf' runs through all the stories, and Clarke's writing is rich in figurative language, which the students could emulate in their own stories. In the foreword, Clarke writes about looking at her aunt's collection of old photos as a child and being fascinated by 'these strangers in their unfamiliar landscapes, wondering who they were, where they lived, who were their friends and families, what were their lives ...'. Students might draw on characters from the Brack painting, or use a photograph as inspiration for their stories or interviews.
<i>Runner</i>	Robert Newton	<i>Runner</i> is set in 1919 in Richmond, Victoria. It is the story of Charlie, a teenager who gets a job as a runner for crime boss, Squizzy Taylor. The text is an interesting exploration of the struggles faced by the working class in post-WWI Melbourne and it raises issues to do with moral choices, family and friendship, and belonging to a community. Students might compare the messages of the Brack painting with the picture of Melbourne life in an earlier period, as portrayed in Newton's novel, thinking about the difficulties faced by ordinary people living in early- to mid-20th-century Australian cities.

# Teaching plans

## 1 Introduction to descriptive writing

### Objectives

- To introduce students to descriptive writing
- To encourage students to start looking closely at visual texts
- To help students develop an initial vocabulary for describing the painting

### What you need

Collect several digital images of objects seen from a close-up and a distant view, such as a single flower and a field of flowers. Alternatively, use the images provided online.

### Starter

This starter activity will introduce students to examples of the two main purposes for descriptive writing—to convey factual details (such as you might find in non-literary texts) and to create a literary description (which may or may not be figurative).

- a** Write the following descriptive sentences on the whiteboard:
- Spontaneous, scribbled lines on fields of fluorescent hot pink and acidic green are characteristic of his style of graffiti.
  - My brothers, all older and taller than me, are Tom, Bryan and Sam.
  - The stark, black silhouette of the skeleton peering out at me from the album cover hinted at the ghostly songs within.
  - The sun painted the sky with a wash of marigold, setting the clouds ablaze.
  - Tonight, the moon was crescent-shaped and tinged with more yellow than usual.
  - The ginger cat walked across the wooden fence to the bird house.
- b** Ask students to suggest which sentences are designed to convey factual descriptions, and which are more figurative.

### ACTIVITY 1.1 What is descriptive writing?

The next questions are designed to prompt students' thinking about both the contexts in which descriptive writing is used and the purpose and features of descriptive writing. They also provide an opportunity to gauge what students already know about descriptive writing and to introduce the focus of this project. Explain to students that the answers will be useful to refer to later in the project when they will be required to write their own descriptive pieces in response to a work of art, so they should record their ideas in their Student Book.

- a** What are some types of descriptive writing?
- b** For what purposes do you think writers use descriptive writing?
- c** What are some features of descriptive writing?
- d** Where have you found examples of descriptive writing?
- e** Have you ever written a piece of descriptive writing? If so, what was its purpose?

To ensure that students can identify the features of descriptive writing, guide the discussion toward these key points:

- a** There are two main types of descriptive writing—factual and fictitious. It is important to distinguish between the two, since they are created for distinctly separate purposes.
- b** The purpose of descriptive writing is to convey facts (in non-fiction) and details (in both fiction and non-fiction) in as complete a manner as possible. Being given from one person’s point of view, it will always be subjective. However, the writer’s aim in descriptive writing is to create a sense of objectivity—to the extent that the reader doesn’t encounter emotive language or value-laden statements that convey personal judgements or ideas.

Factual descriptive writing has many purposes—including the presentation of a detailed account of an event, the mapping out of a place, the identification of characteristics of a person or thing and the reporting of eyewitness testimony.

Fictitious descriptions are most often written for creative purposes. They may be given in a work of literature to help convey specific themes. This type of writing may be highly imaginative and not necessarily believable in its content. The writer may aim to transport the reader into the world of the text using lots of details that enable the reader to visualise the scene or action.

- c** The composer aims to reveal information in a logical order to ensure clarity. Consequently, the facts or details will often be presented chronologically.

Composers use adjectives and adverbs to make the nouns and verbs in the piece specific and precise.

Literary techniques present in descriptive writing include similes and metaphors, and sound devices such as alliteration and onomatopoeia, which create imagery.

Details that engage the senses may be present—including sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures.

- d** You may find descriptive writing in poetry, drama, novels, short stories or journals. In the factual realm, descriptions occur in non-fiction books specialising in a particular topic, in documentaries, news reports, travel blogs, product information and advertising.
- e** Answers will be individual.

#### WEB RESOURCE: DESCRIBING IMAGES

This optional activity helps students think about the language they use to describe. In it, students describe an image to another student who is unable to see the image. Monitor students’ verbal descriptions during the activity and make notes of any interesting or specific language used. Refer to this language during feedback.

### Looking closely: a focus on visual details

The next part of the lesson asks students to consider the benefits of looking closely.

Project the images of the close-up and distant views on the whiteboard. Designate one pair of images to separate groups of students and encourage them to discuss what they might appreciate or discover about one of the images.

Ensure that students understand that in the following activities we are dealing with the fictitious realm of descriptive writing to convey Brack’s perception of the state of things in the real world. They should recognise that his intention was to use the technique of



exaggeration to comment upon the real. His exaggerated caricature symbolises some important truths about the experiences of workers in the city.

## ACTIVITY 1.2 Look closely

- a Project the image of *Collins St, 5p.m.* on the whiteboard. Ask students to look intently at the image for 30 seconds without writing. Remove the image. Ask students to list from memory some specific nouns and verbs to identify the items and actions featured in the image. They should make this list using the table on page 3 of the Student Book. Allow about five minutes for this step.
- b Project the image on the board again for five minutes. This time, have the students focus on listing adjectives and adverbs to describe the nouns and verbs they listed. Instruct them to record the adjectives and adverbs in the table. Use these adjectives for the facial expressions to get them started—*gloomy, strained, intense, serious, glum, depressed, determined*.

Draw or project the table (available on the website) on the whiteboard. Ask students to share their adjectives and adverbs and add students' ideas to the table to create a class list. Discuss the various nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in the list with the class.

### Outcomes

Students have gained an understanding of the purpose, features and contexts of descriptive writing. By looking intently at a visual text, students come to appreciate that this process stimulates the production of adjectives and adverbs. Students have recorded their initial vocabulary for describing particular aspects of the painting.

## 2 Close reading and creative thinking

### Objectives

- To develop students' visual literacy and creative thinking skills through 'reading' and describing visual texts
- To encourage students to consider works of art in a broader historical and social context
- To facilitate students' consideration of the techniques the artist uses to communicate ideas

### What you need

A current image of a busy city that can be projected on the whiteboard. One is available online.

### Starter

The starter for this lesson is a word association game getting students looking closely at the painting.

Give each student a word from the following list, and ask them to consider how it relates to a particular aspect of the painting. Ask students to share their findings with a partner or the class. Remind students that there is no right or wrong answer.

strange	powerful	pleased	haunting
frightened	curious	dignified	important

puzzling	mysterious	tense	elegant
lonely	self-confident	funny	angry
sad	melancholy	swift	uniform
eager	symbolism	death	isolation
wooden	fashion		

## ACTIVITY 2.1 Impressions of *Collins St, 5p.m.*

Before engaging students in this activity, explore the following sentence from the ‘Artist and work of art’ section on page 2: ‘*Collins St, 5p.m.* offers a social commentary on everyday life in the 1950s.’ Discuss with students the meaning of the term ‘social commentary’ and similar terms such as ‘critique’, ‘criticism’ or ‘comment’.

Draw on information from the ‘Historical context’ section on this painting to expand students’ responses. Encourage students to record their own ideas and some of those suggested by their peers in the graphic organisers in the Student Book.

Display the Brack image on the whiteboard and encourage students to have it open in their Student Books (page viii). Lead a whole-class discussion around the following questions, or put students into pairs to discuss the questions before reporting back to the class. The bank of ideas generated can be used as inspiration for writing tasks later in the project so it is useful for students to record these in their workbook.

Stress that there is no wrong answer. Explain that viewers of works of art will form different interpretations, which are influenced by their particular personality, experience and culture.

### Class discussion

- a** What are your first impressions of the painting? What thoughts or words come immediately to mind? Be sure to include some adjectives and adverbs.

*Students may suggest things like: depressing, glum or uniform.*

- b** What does the painting make you think or wonder about?

*Suggestion: encourage students to come up with some questions that they wonder about in relation to the painting. E.g. Why are the people all wearing the same type of clothes?*

- c** We call the emotional atmosphere of the text ‘mood’. What mood might be conveyed? What do you see that makes you think so? What emotions might you associate with the mood?

- d** What clues do you see in the painting that tell you what actions might be happening in the scene?

*Some examples might be: workers flooding out of their offices at peak hour, eager to get home. Clues might be: people wearing work attire, crowds typical of peak-hour rush. Sense of misery clues might be: drab colours, depressed expressions on workers’ faces.*

- e** What clues are there that suggest the time of day and season the artist has depicted?

*For example: time: 5pm (from the title of the painting); season: winter (the people are wearing coats, the sky is cloudy and the weather seems gloomy).*



### WEB RESOURCE: BUILDING VOCABULARY

Download Worksheet 1.1 from the website. This crossword puzzle task consolidates students' understanding of new vocabulary and encourages them to apply the words in descriptive sentences related to the painting.

Encourage students to use the clues to find the appropriate words and to write them in the crossword. Suggest that they use a dictionary if required. After students have completed the puzzle, check answers as a class. You might like to project the crossword puzzle on the whiteboard, and have individual students come up to the board and write their answer.

## Then and now

### ACTIVITY 2.2 City life

- a** Project an image of a busy city today next to *Collins St, 5p.m.* (either your own or the one provided on the website). Ask the students to look at both images and discuss what aspects of city life remain the same and what aspects have changed. Draw a Venn diagram and record the students' responses in the diagram. Encourage students to record their answers in the Venn diagram provided in the Student Book.

If the students have trouble getting started, prompt them to consider aspects such as gender issues, fashion, architecture, transport and demographics. As a follow-up discussion, ask students to discuss in pairs what elements of city life were not in existence in the 1950s, and why. You could also ask them to think about what valuable aspects of city life in the 1950s may be lost to us now.

Then they can answer the following questions in the Student Book.

- b** In what ways does the painting remind you of something in your life?

*Answers will vary depending on the city and photograph for comparison. Encourage students to make observations regarding the built environment, people, work culture, etc.*

- c** What aspects of the picture do you find puzzling?

- d** What questions would you like to ask the artist if he was in the classroom?

Before addressing the next question, explain to students that both writers and artists use hyperbole (exaggeration), caricature and symbolism to convey meaning.

- e** How many aspects of the painting can you find that are 'unrealistic', in your opinion?

*Things that are unrealistic: the elongated and cartoon style of the faces of the workers; the monochromatic colours in the scene, the similarities among clothing styles, the direction of the people's fixed gazes.*

### Homework task: unrealistic images

Why might the artist John Brack have used exaggeration and 'unrealistic' looking images in his painting? Students write a short paragraph explaining what they think the artist is trying to communicate about people who lived in Melbourne (or in any busy city) in 1955.

**Suggested answers:** *Brack used exaggeration and unrealistic images to attract the attention of the viewer and to convey a particular meaning. The artist is communicating the idea that the office workers are self-absorbed and locked into an everyday routine from which they cannot escape.*

## Extension

This is an optional extension activity that can be used to delve further into the painting's historical and social context. It does not appear in the Student Book. The following questions focus on human psychology.

In an interview in *The Age* in 1991, Brack described his thoughts as he was painting *Collins St, 5p.m.* in 1955.

*'I was thinking ... I used to be a clerk in an insurance company 200 metres up the street, and it was a deadly, cowardly, too-secure life. Now I'm an artist, with the courage to take risks, and superior to these feeble people who cannot control their boring lives.'* He went on to explain: *'A few years later, I felt pretty ashamed of that painting. It was too one-dimensional. I realised those people were as worthy as me, and their lives as complex as mine ... I could use irony, but not superiority. I began to put many levels of meaning into each painting.'*

Interview with Janet Hawley, *The Age Good Weekend*, 24 August 1991

- a** Discuss with the students the meanings of 'irony' and 'superiority' by modelling sentences that highlight their meaning.
- b** Discuss why people may change their viewpoint over time. Ask students to suggest instances where public figures and/or family and friends have changed their ideas and opinions over time.
- c** Explain what might have caused them to change their opinion and whether or not it was a good thing.
- d** Discuss the possible repercussions when people are unable to modify their opinions.

### WEB RESOURCE: CONTEXT QUIZ

This activity (Worksheet 1.2) tests students' comprehension of the contextual information related to the painting *Collins St, 5p.m.* It is important that students have already been provided with the contextual information in previous lessons. If you feel that students might benefit from a revision exercise before the quiz, read the contextual notes aloud first and have students listen. Instructions and student worksheets are available online.

## Outcomes

At the end of this lesson, students have developed confidence in their visual analysis skills and in expressing their opinions. They will come to appreciate the value of learning from their peers' ideas and begin to view works of art as visual texts that can communicate historical, social and psychological ideas.