

Using Museums as an Educational Resource

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DIFFERENT TYPES OF MUSEUMS

Help students prepare for their trip by looking at the various types of museums. Do your students have a favorite, if so, how does it relate to their academic and personal interests? Here are some of the various kinds of museums and the interests they cover:

Art

History

Natural History

Science and Technology

Children's museums / hands-on museums

Zoos

Aquariums

Special Interests: (for example) Coca-Cola museum, Corvette museum, Rock and Roll museum, Doll museum

Cultural Museums: (for example) African-American, American Indian, Jewish, Asian
Museums you may not have considered:

Botanical Gardens & Arboretums

Nature Centers

Planetariums

Living History and Restored Areas (for example) Colonial Williamsburg (VA), Sturbridge Village (MA), Historic Jamestown (VA), Old Salem (NC)

Historic Homes and Properties (for example) The White House (DC), Farmington & Locust Grove (KY), Monticello (VA)

- Have your students explore their favorite museum by using the internet to put together a travel guide.
- Ask your students to assemble a list of all the museums in the Louisville area using newspapers, magazines, on-line resources, and even the phone book. Compare the lists. What are some of the reasons for differences among the lists? Were your students even aware of the number and variety of museum in the Louisville Metro and Southern Indiana area?

FINDING YOUR WAY IN A MUSEUM

FLOOR PLANS:

Most museums have floor plans available. The floor plans are a map to the museum and show you where things are located (important things like restrooms and elevators) and how the museum is arranged (chronologically, thematically, physical layout). By taking a few minutes to study the floor plans, you'll be able to find what you're looking for or how to determine the most efficient way to spend your time.

LABELS:

Labels are the way that many museums tell their stories. Museums use a combination of media (including computers, video, interactive displays, etc); however, labels are one of the primary methods. There are basically two types of labels:

Wall Panels – wall panels are large labels. They contain text but they'll often also contain pictures, graphics, maps or other visuals. Wall panels usually refer to large areas, entire galleries or groups of items and deal more with broad categories, themes or time periods. Wall panels are found on walls or large freestanding panels and can be from three feet to over six feet in height.

Object Labels – object labels tell you more about a particular object. What is it, who made it, how old is it, what does this mean—these are all questions that object labels attempt to answer. Object labels are smaller labels and are usually found in the case next to the object (or objects) it describes.

Maps – many museums use maps in a variety of settings. Maps can be found as wall panels, interactive electronic light boards, and as computer displays. Provide students the opportunity to discover “where” things come from with ties to transportation, economics, and the influences of physical geography (mountains, rivers, ecosystems, settlements and cities).

Interactive Displays – many museums are now using video and computer programs to create interactive displays designed to teach visitors about the collection and to encourage inquiries about the collection. Even with the sophistication of interactive displays and computer units in museum, the best way to use them is with some pre-planning and specific learning objectives. However, some students with certain learning styles may find using interactive displays and computers easier and more intuitive than negotiating wall panels and object labels.

PLANNING YOUR MUSEUM VISIT

What is the most important step in planning a trip to a museum?

Advance Planning: Taking the time to plan ahead is the single most important step in ensuring a successful and beneficial visit to any museum, historic property, or cultural event/program. Here are some time honored tips to help you (and your students) get the most out your museum experience.

- Plan the visit well in advance.
- Have one or two teachers visit the museum in advance of your visit (if possible).
- Request copies of all related resources materials in the form of teacher's guides, curriculum, gallery guides, work sheets, lesson plans, pre- and post-visit plans or other materials.
- Ask for a copy of a map or floor plan and familiarize yourself with the building before you go. Make sure you know where certain things are like restrooms, gift shop(s), and understand how the layout of the museum is organized and where your students will be spending most of their time while at the museum.
- Break your entire group into smaller teams and assign (in advance) a teacher or adult chaperone to each team. Make sure each chaperone knows the names of the students in their group and have each chaperone gather their group before departing to ensure that each student is accounted for before leaving the building.
- Ask about any regularly scheduled performances, demonstrations, or public programs that may be available, and relevant, during your group's visit.
- Spend time with students using reading, writing or researching projects related to the areas you plan to cover prior to your visit.
- Develop an educational plan for your visit. Don't try and do or see everything. Focus on the galleries or areas related to your curriculum, although you may want to try and leave a little extra time for browsing or trips to the gift shop.
- Younger students have limited attention spans. Try and avoid long tours that require a lot of walking. Consider breaking up your visit into 20 to 30 minute sections with short intervals for bathroom breaks or moving from one activity to another.
- **ASK QUESTIONS:** Creating ways to generate discussion about the museum and its collection is one of the best ways to create learning opportunities. Have your students make up a list of their own questions during their visit to discuss in class when they return.
- Organize the visit as a team, that way if the teacher who did all the preliminary arrangements is unable to go (due to illness or other conflicts) the other members of the "team" will be well briefed on arrangements, logistics, and educational expectations.

LEARNING FROM OBJECTS

LEARNING TO COLLECT AND CATEGORIZE

One of the most important things that museums do is collecting things. Some museums are responsible for the most important collections of items anywhere in the world. Museums collect things for a number of reasons, a few include:

To preserve and conserve
 To display and share with the public
 As an educational resource for schools and visitors
 For scholarly studies

What types of things do your students collect? Rocks, dolls, shells, coins, insects, toy cars, stamps are just a few of the more popular collections.

- Have each of your students put together a small collection or use part of a collection they already own.
- Ask them to categorize or classify them and make small labels for each item. Have them think about what each item is and what kind of information they might share with the other students in the class. Even very young students should be able to sort and organize their collection by size shape, color or texture.
- Get your students to create some type of display for their collection. How is it similar or different from the display they'll see at the Frazier or other museums?
- Taking care of the objects at a museum is a big job. What things might your students do to take care of their own collection?
- A *curator* is a very important person who works at a museum. Have your students do some research into what a curator is and what they do.
- Have your class create their own museum and invite other classes to visit.

LEARNING TO LOOK

Getting your students to look critically is part of the process of getting them to think critically. True learning really begins when students are asking their own questions instead of being lectured to or provided instructions. Part of this process of looking critically is allowing students to find their own object of fascination rather than being directed to a specific item.

The following sections provide ideas and activities that involve students and help to build careful observation skills.

USING OPENED ENDED QUESTIONS

One of the best ways to use museums as a learning resource is to have students discuss the objects and ideas presented in exhibits. Using open ended questions (questions that

require an answer other than “yes,” or “no”) can help facilitate those discussions. Some examples might include the following questions or observations:

How does this make you feel?
 What is this object and how was it used?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Museums are wonderful places to get students to think critically. How are objects similar and how are they different? How do objects change over time and why? Are some objects plain and other fancy, some long and some short; are some one color and other a different color—why? Use the opportunity museums present students to think deeply, independently, or in small groups to determine similarities and differences.

- Divide your class into small groups and assign them different categories, themes or time periods. Have one group compare objects from the medieval period to those of the Renaissance and then have them compare those objects to similar objects of today. Make comparisons of objects from one country to another or different centuries.

LEARNING TO CREATE MENTAL IMAGES

Students need to build skills to learn how to create and use mental imagery. Important questions to have your students consider might include:

- Ask your students to find an object that they have no idea or concept what it is or what it does. Now have them create an identity or use for that object. They should consider who created it, who owned it, and what is there about how it looks or how it is designed before deciding what it is or how was it used.
- Have your students select a painting or picture. Ask them to imagine themselves in that picture. What would they hear, see, or smell? Who would they meet and if they did meet someone—and what would they say? Can they determine what is going on in the picture and why?

LEARNING SELF-EXPRESSION USING WRITING, DRAMA, ART, AND POETRY

Each student learns differently and has a different set of skills, aptitudes and abilities. Museums can play an important role in allowing students the ability to use a range of approaches focused on learning to articulate and express themselves. Students who are better able to express their thoughts and feelings and articulate them effectively are going to have stronger skills and ensure their ability to remain life-long learners.

Writing and Literacy

Museums are excellent laboratories for learning and building skills. Writing offers an entirely new dimension by providing an opportunity to “look deeply”. When we “look deeply” we employ a range of visual, mental and creative abilities such as:

Observation	Analysis	Inference
Deduction	Abstraction	Using Metaphor and Similes
Projection	Logic	Sequence / Order

- Tell your students to select one object in a certain gallery without sharing what item they chose. Have them list 4 or 5 words that describe that object—but do not tell what it is. Ask the students share their lists with the other students and see if they can guess which object has been described. (You can challenge older or more proficient students by starting with one word and then moving up to two, three or four word combinations.)

You can use museum settings and displays to have students work on various styles of writing including:

- Informational and feature – students can gather information at the museum on a particular object or group of items then do a sketch or take a picture of the item and conduct additional research back at school.
- Personal Narrative – students can write about their visit and museum experience.
- Short Story – students can use objects in the museum to create a story by projecting themselves into a certain time period or personality. Have the student become the object itself and tell its story of how it was made, where, by whom, and what happened to it which led it to finding a home in a museum.
- Persuasive Letter—have students write letters to the principal, the mayor or other elected officials telling them about their museum experience and explaining why it is important to support such organizations. The letter could say why other students should visit the museum or why elected officials should support it financially.

Using Drama

The Frazier Museum employs a group of very talented actors as our historic interpreters. Our interpreters perform and conduct a series of demonstrations and dramatic first person narratives that “bring to life” notable personalities and events from history in 10 to 20 minute presentations. Students can use this same method to not only study people, dates, and places, but gain a richer understanding of who these people were and the times in which they lived.

- Have your students select a historic person or event. They can work individually or in small groups. They'll need to do some research using primary and secondary sources. In addition to writing their narrative, making period props or putting together bits of clothing as a costume is a good way to find out more about how people dressed and lived.

Art

- Have students select their favorite object in a museum or use ideas from other pictures, paintings or graphics to draw their own renditions. For younger students have them look for and identify objects or pictures according to size, color, theme, etc.

Poetry

Museums can be wonderful places to practice writing and vocabulary using poetry. Read poems about knights or other historic times periods. Ask your students to find a person, object or group of objects to write about. Use metered verse, free verse, or a particular style of poem (Haiku, Sonnet, Stanza, etc.) to practice. Introduce new vocabulary by providing students with a pool of words to use. Here are some common styles to try with your class:

Elegy – a poem of remembrance or lament about someone or something that has died

Free verse – a poem that is not tied to any patterns of rhyme or rhythm

Haiku – a Japanese style poem containing 3 lines and total of 17 syllables in a pattern of 5, 7, 5

Riddle – a question or statement, sometimes in the form of a rhyme, creating a puzzle to be solved

Cinquain – a poem with a standard and predictable syllable pattern (like a Haiku) that is comprised of 5 lines and a total of 22 syllables in the following pattern: 2, 4, 6, 8, 2.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Durbin, Gail, Susan Morris and Sue Wilkinson, *A Teacher's Guide to Learning from Objects*. English Heritage, 1990.

Voris, Helen H., Maija Sedzielarz and Carolyn P. Blackmon, *Teach the Mind, Touch the Spirit: A Guide to Focused Field Trips*. Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Education: Chicago, 1986.

Waterfall, Milde and Sarah Grusin, *Where's the ME in Museum: Going to Museums with Children*. Vandamere Press: Arlington, VA, 1988.

Talboys, Graeme K, *Using Museums as an Educational Resource: An Introductory Handbook for Students and Teachers*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd.: Burlington, VT, 1996.

Gartenhaus, Alan Reid, *Minds in Motion: Using Museums to Expand Creative Thinking*. Caddo Gap Press, 3rd ed., 1997.

Levstik, Linda and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary & Middle Schools*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: New Jersey, 2001.

Tucker, Amy, *Visual Literacy: Writing About Art*. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2001.

Walsh-Piper, Kathleen, *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing*. Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2003.

Lesson and teaching plans from the Smithsonian Institution can be found at:
<http://smithsonianeducation.org>

Going to a Museum? The Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia has assembled an excellent variety of lesson plans and resources entitled, *Resources for Educators*. You can find them at:
<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/it/projects/Museums/>

A project by the Museum Learning Initiative funded and established by the South West Museums Libraries and Archives Council of England. The MLI project is no longer active, but this web site still maintains numerous excellent resources and articles related to learning in museums.
<http://www.swmlac.org.uk/mli/learning.htm>

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) has a number of valuable resources available online for teachers.
http://www.vam.ac.uk/school_stdnts/schools_teach/index.html

The YouthLearn Initiative, developed by Education Development Center, Inc., has a number of resources dealing with inquiry-based learning that will help in preparing pre- and post-visit lessons for museums and other cultural organizations.
<http://www.youthlearn.org/learning/teaching/questions.asp>

The Royal Armouries in Leeds has a variety of excellent worksheets and teacher materials.
<http://www.royalarmouries.org/extsite/view.jsp?sectionId=106>