

How to Build a Forest

Visual art lesson, grades 6-8

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Lesson overview

In this lesson, students will review the principles of design, observe a tree over time and represent it on a poster, view and reflect on the themes of the performance, discuss materials and their life cycles, and create an art installation response.

Learning objectives & “I can” statements

Learning objectives

Students will be able to

- use inquiry and questioning to develop a deeper understanding of the artwork the performance of *How to Build a Forest*.
- identify the main themes of the artwork.
- identify the materials used as well as the elements of art and principles of design present in the artwork.
- create a work of art that is a personal response to the themes of the performance.

“I can” statements

“I can improve my understanding of artwork by asking questions.”

“I can identify the main theme of ‘How to Build a Forest’.”

“I can name the materials used to create the forest.”

Common Core State Standards & North Carolina Essential Standards

NCES Visual Art 6-8

- 6.V.2** Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.
- 6.V.3** Create art using a variety of tools, media, and processes, safely and appropriately.
- 6.CX.2.2** Understand the connections between art and other disciplines.

- 7.V.1.3** Identify themes in art.
- 7.V.2.2** Use observation skills of the environment and personal experiences to create original imagery.
- 7.CX.1** Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

- 8.V.2** Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.
- 8.CX.1.3** Analyze the effect of geographic location and physical environment on the media and subject matter of art from NC and the United States.

Lesson-specific background

Students should have some familiarity with the elements of art and principles of design. Most school art resource books or textbooks have examples that can be used as a review guide. The teacher should also introduce the concept of installation and performance art. Christo, Nam June Paik, and Blue Man Group are all age-appropriate artists to examine as an introduction to installation and performance.

Vocabulary

Unity, rhythm, balance, harmony, proportion, emphasis

Materials

- Enough uniform materials (blocks, tubes, Legos, etc.) for the class to review the principles of design.
- One clipboard per student for the field trip.
- Recycled materials for the post-trip art response.

Lesson-specific student preparation

Students should know that this lesson will involve at-home activities. They can get their own poster-size paper or the teacher can provide paper for them to take home for their tree poster.

Before the performance

1. *Two weeks prior*: Introduce the trip, tell students the title of the performance, and give a brief overview. Make necessary preparations for taking a field trip (e.g., gather permission slips).
2. Have students begin to think about trees. Read *The Lorax*. Generate group lists about why trees are important and about some of the issues we face regarding trees.
3. Have each student befriend a tree. Students will identify a tree that is near their home, name the tree, and introduce it to their families. Students will write a history of the tree, describing the species and qualities of the tree, and what jobs it may do. How does the tree add to their lives and to the world? Create a poster about the tree, and make the poster beautiful. Include a bark rubbing, drawings, and the tree's specific size and location. Students should spend some time with the tree and watch how it changes over two weeks' time. In class, introduce some artists who have observed nature carefully through drawing (e.g., Da Vinci, Audubon, and Beatrix Potter).
4. *Two days prior*: Take one class to review the principles of design. Use wooden blocks, cardboard tubes, or any other uniform material. Have students work in teams to create temporary compositions demonstrating the principles of Unity, Rhythm, Balance, Harmony, Emphasis, and Proportion. Discuss as a class how these elements can be used in a performance, painting, and sculpture. Encourage students to begin to identify the principles of art in the environment around them as they move through their day.
5. *One day prior*: Have students bring in posters of their tree friend and share with the class. Do a gallery walk or exhibition/display of the posters. Have students place post-it notes with comments next to the posters. **Go over what to expect and what behavior is expected while on the field trip to the performance.** Review the background and nature of the performance but keep the main themes hidden. This could be a time to bring up the concept of "tree time", which is how long it takes for a tree to grow and develop. Compare and contrast "tree time" and "human time" by having each student

create a visual comparison with their family (themselves, parents, great grandparents) and a tree (sapling, mature, old growth).

During the performance

On the bus to the performance, have the students play “I-spy”, looking for materials that are human-made and that occur in the natural world. Bring clipboards and paper. When sitting in the audience, have students develop 5 to 7 specific questions about the performance (e.g., themes or materials; more detailed than, “What is going on?”).

After the performance

Small group reflections: Hold two rounds of small group discussion followed by report-backs to the whole group. First, have students share the questions they generated during the performance and select three to share with the class. Then, have the groups discuss what the theme of the piece was and share these themes with the class. Finally, have the students journal about what they would do differently if they were the artist. How would they communicate the theme through art?

Art response: Create a group installation using recycled materials, where each student creates a part. Students should generate possibilities for the installation (a tree? a forest?). Materials should be easy to gather, and all students, even faculty and staff, can contribute (e.g., newspaper, plastic bottles, plastic grocery bags, and cardboard). Encourage students to take the lead on deciding how to build their installation. This response should be very student-driven and student-generated. Once the class has decided upon the material, the teacher can demonstrate techniques for building, e.g., slot construction for cardboard, paper mache, or sewing plastic bags. When deciding on materials, talk with students about where the materials originated and what happens to them at the end of their lifespan. Note that the artists were very concerned with the origin and lifecycle of the materials used in *How to Build a Forest*. If there is not room for a large group installation, students could make individual miniature forests.

Assessment

Look for the principles of design in the students’ art responses. Have the students reflect on their field trip by writing a letter to a person in the future describing their experience at the performance, including reflections on themes and materials.