

READING ART AS INFORMATIONAL TEXT WITH COMMON CORE

The adoption of Common Core Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy has highlighted those skills required to understand and work with informational texts. The visual arts are viewed as alternative informational texts; and when also considered as primary source objects, works of art present unique opportunities to work with Common Core skills. This lesson will focus specifically on determining central ideas, supporting inferences and analyses with textual details, and comparing sources for specific events.



The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S. "Alabama," 1864
Édouard Manet, French
Oil on canvas
54 1/4 x 50 3/4 inches (137.8 x 128.9 cm)
Framed: 68 7/8 x 65 5/8 x 4 3/4 inches (174.9 x 166.7 x 12.1 cm)
John G. Johnson Collection, 1917
Cat. 1027

Grade Level

For grades 6–12

Common Core Academic Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.3](#)

Art Images Required

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

- [The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S. "Alabama,"](#) 1864, by Édouard Manet
Artstor search: PMA cat. 1027
- [The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834,](#) 1834–35, by Joseph Mallord William Turner
Artstor search: M1928-1-41

Lesson Process

Note to the Teacher: Before beginning the lesson, take a moment to review the Common Core standards indicated above. These are the questioning and examination skills you will want to teach and reinforce during the lesson. You may also want to review a definition of primary and secondary documents with students.)

1. Examine the painting *The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S "Alabama"* by Édouard Manet. Take a few minutes to look at it closely before discussing. (If viewing on the Museum website, be sure to click on the zoom feature. If using Artstor, employ zoom to bring the entire painting into closer examination.) Be sure to read the text about this painting provided on the Museum website. Pair students together to write a description of what is happening in this painting. Share the descriptions aloud, note details, and discuss as a class.
2. Have the class create a one sentence description of what is happening. Rephrase this statement as a central idea of the painting (Standard 6.2). What details support this statement of central idea?
3. What seems to be most important to the artist? What seems to be of lesser importance? Look closely (or zoom in) to see which ship is the Confederate C.S.S. *Alabama* and which is the Union U.S.S. *Kearsarge*. From the way he organized his painting, do you think Manet favors the North or the South? Cite details to support your opinions (Standard 6.1).
4. Which of your opinions seem to be obvious and which require additional corroboration? How could you corroborate those opinions? From here, conduct some additional research, looking specifically for evidence to either support or negate your opinions (hypotheses). Point out some good sources of primary documents, as well as high-quality secondary analysis (Standard 6.3). (NOTE: There are excellent letters from the captains of the two ships that can be found in the [Navy Department Library](#). You can also find excellent detail at the [Naval History & Heritage](#) site. This would be a good time to discuss the credibility of websites.)
5. What details did Manet exaggerate, alter, or omit in his representation (i.e. the British rescue ship)? What are the possible reasons for these changes? When noting details from the Navy Department letters, how can you reconcile two primary sources (letters and painting) that differ?
6. Examine the painting *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834* by Joseph Mallord William Turner. As before, pair students to write a description and then a central idea of this painting. What details of the painting reveal Turner's feelings toward or reaction to this event?
7. Research, as before, for other information sources about this event. Which sources are primary documents? Which are secondary documents? (NOTE: England's Parliament has an extensive website that includes [documents related to this fire](#).)
8. Discussion: How is Turner's painting similar to and different from the other historic accounts you have found? How do you examine works of art the same as or differently from other primary sources?

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Assessment

1. State a thesis regarding the theme of one (or both) of these paintings. As you write to support your statement, be sure to include details from the works and the reasons behind your interpretation of those details.
2. Dealing with primary sources is much like working with the Scientific Method. What is the Scientific Method, what are its steps, and how are these two methods similar? [Here is a simple review of the Scientific Method](#). Write about a work of art using the same format you would use for a general science lab write-up.

Enrichment

1. Find a painting that depicts a historic event. Research to find out how closely connected the artist was to the actual event. Was he/she a witness? A contemporary? Build upon your knowledge of this event with research into other primary and secondary sources.