

Using the Lincoln Memorial to help students form an argument

I have always found that visual art is more accessible to some students than we might think and it has become a good teaching tool for me. I used this lesson early in the school year to help students understand how to use evidence to build an argument and the results were positive.

Materials: photograph(s) or projection of the Lincoln Memorial statue
easel paper and markers
willing students armed with pen and paper

Procedure narrative: I projected the Lincoln Memorial statue on the screen and asked students to write for five minutes describing what they saw. When students write about art, this is the method I typically use: I ask them to start with “plot” – write about what you see “going on” in the piece – setting, characters, relationships, actions, etc. Describe each of these as much as you can – for the Lincoln Memorial, that means describing Lincoln himself – his face, his expression, his body, his clothes, his position, etc. and the chair – its size and shape, color and material. (The next step is to write about the elements and principles of art – line, shape, color, tone, texture, movement, balance, etc. but with this monument and this early in the year, I don’t really push that).

After writing, students shared what they saw and several did this by presenting an opinion (like – he looks a god, he looks like a good guy, he looks like a leader, or he looks royal). During the thrust of the discussion, I noticed that students were having a difficult time backing up their opinion because they could not identify support. We took a step back and regrouped. The class seemed split between royal depiction and humble. We did all agree that the statue really had three parts we could use to form an opinion about the way Lincoln was being portrayed: the chair, his body/body language and his clothes.

I hung three pieces of easel paper on the wall, each labeled with one of the following: the chair, his body/body language and his clothes. One student volunteered to man each piece of paper, ready to write. Together, we looked at the statue again and described only what we saw. **The chair is:** big, seat is large and deep, there is some sort of footrest, two armrests, both are tall and rectangular, it is made of marble. **Lincoln’s clothes:** he’s wearing a suit with bow tie, vest and jacket, he’s wearing closed-toe shoes, he is not wearing a hat, the jacket is open, the tie is loosened, etc.

After we finished each paper, students wrote one proof paragraph stating their opinion about the depiction (either he’s humble or he’s royal) using evidence from each of the three aspects of the statue. They had to choose the best evidence then explain that evidence in terms of their argument.

Results: Students reported that they understood (some for the first time) that they needed to take actual examples of what they saw to help them develop an argument. They also realized that word choice helps to make the argument (students used different words to convey the size of the chair, for example. Those arguing royal depiction tended to call the chair large or towering, while the humble ones called it roomy). They all wrote strong first draft proof paragraphs filled with specific evidence and analysis.