
Visual Assessment: A Landscape Through an Artist's Eye

Activity Overview

Students will draw a natural area in two different views as they look at it aesthetically, artistically, and historically.

Objectives: Students will

- Practice observation skills
- Illustrate their observations with drawings
- Interpret and compare contrasting views
- Analyze and assess their feelings based on what they see.

Subjects Covered:

Language Arts and Art

Grades: K through 12

Activity Time: 1 hour

Season: Any

Materials: 2 pieces of plain white drawing paper, pencil, and clipboard per student. Colored pencils optional.

State Standards:

Language Arts:

Create writing (B.4.1, 8.1, 12.1),

Discuss (C.4.3, 8.3, 12.3)

Create media products (E.4.3, 8.3, 12.3)

Art:

Learn art vocabulary (A.4.2, A.8.2, A.12.2)

Use art as a way to think & communicate (A.4.6, A.8.6, A.12.6)

Use sketching to develop ideas (C.4.6, C.8.5)

Analyze nature & use art as visual resource (C.12.5)

Communicate ideas by producing visual forms (E.4.4, E.8.4.)

Use visual arts to express ideas that words cannot (E.4.5, E.8.5, E.12.5)

Background

There are two approaches to aesthetically assess a landscape—vista and close-up views. A vista approach is looking over a distance or a panoramic view. A close-up view is looking at a part nearest the viewer. Each approach influences a different set of feelings and perceptions along with contrasting artistic renderings.

Visit a natural area as a model for your school's restoration. Examine the close-up and vista views to determine what elements to include in your restoration. When planting a small space use the visual elements from a close-up view and for large spaces consider visual characteristics of the vista view. Incorporating these impressions into the school restoration project will provide a sense of a historical landscape with all its beauty at the proper scale.

Prairie Example

Vista View

A historical account:

"The (vista) view . . . beggars all description. An ocean of prairie surrounds the spectator whose vision is not limited to less than 30 or 40 miles. This great sea of verdure is interspersed with delightfully varying undulations like vast waves of the ocean. Here and there sinking in the hollows or cresting the swells appear spots of trees as if planted by hand for the purpose of ornamenting this naturally splendid scene."

From an 1837 journal describing the beauty of a prairie.

An artistic interpretation:

Expansive, open, flowing movement, energy, and sweeping forms describe a vista view of a prairie. The line of the prairie is low, flat or horizontal. Drifts of colors and forms create free-flowing patterns that weave in and out of the prairie. The movement is wave-like.

The ubiquitous grasses provide unity throughout the prairie. The grasses are the common linking elements through the entire scene. Colorful forbs accent the prairie scene. They add vividness and memory to the scene. "Drifts" of forbs gradually emerge and concentrate then blend into the background again. Environmental factors, such as soil type, microclimate, and individual plant characteristics create these drifts.

Close-up View

A writer's account:

" . . . Look closely among the grasses around your feet. Blossoms of orange and pink and white are scattered all through the tangle of grasses, blazes of color against the cool green. Stretching out your arms, you can almost touch a dozen different kinds of bright flowers. Some of them stand alone—a single flower or two, different from all those surrounding it. Oth-

Visual Assessment: A Prairie Through an Artist's Eye (cont.)

is not an orderly flower bed, but it is a rich one.”
From *Seasons of a Tallgrass Prairie* by Carol Lerner.

An artist's interpretation:

Contrasts, texture, color, variety, and depth describe a close-up view of a prairie. The line is vertical and erect; a horizontal line is loosely introduced through the various heights of the plants. Distinct layers as in a forest are evident. The variety of species and individuals result in contrasts of colors, shapes, and textures. Texture plays an important visual role—fine-textured grasses contrast with broad-leaved plants. Differences of leaf shapes further diversify the textural contrasts. The emphasis of the close-up view is on the individual stems rather than the mass.

Activity Description

Go out to the prairie and select a spot from which to view the entire prairie. Discuss the artistic characteristics of a vista view. Read a quote on how impressive the original prairie was when viewed as far as the eye could see. Imagine how it must have looked as you listen to the recounting.

Spread out and draw a vista view of the prairie. Draw for 20 minutes. Regroup and share your drawings and describe what you noticed. How did the vista approach make you feel?

Now select a spot to observe a close-up view of the prairie. Discuss the characteristics of a close-up view and read the quote about looking into a prairie. Draw a detailed view of your prairie for 20 minutes. Regroup and share your drawings and describe what you noticed. How did the close-up approach make you feel?

Extensions

- Repeat this exercise each season. Repetition allows students to observe change through time, to expand awareness, and to convey a sense of discovery and connection with the natural world.
- Visit a wetland or woodland to use as a model for your school's restoration. Examine the close-up and vista views to determine what elements to include in your restoration.
- Write an article for the local newspaper about the artistic splendor of the prairie.

Additional Resources

- Bouchard, D. (1995). *If you're not from the prairie...* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster
- Least Heat-Moon, W. (1991). *PrairieErth*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Lerner, C. (1980) *Seasons of the tallgrass prairie*. New York, NY: William Morrow and CO.
- Madson, J. (1995). *Where the sky began*. Ames Iowa: Iowa state University Press.

Assessments

- Summarize the class discussion. Write the summary in a news article format.
- Participate meaningfully in a class discussion.
- Compare and contrast the two views. Describe three design lessons you observed that you could incorporate into your school site restoration.