

The Art of Discussion: Prompting Discussions with the Work of Norman Rockwell

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It is no surprise that visual texts can be as profound, concise, and subtle as written ones; our mental processes are driven by images and feelings as much as by words. What's more, visual texts offer a shortcut for those who struggle to read or who lack the motivation to do so. When a struggling student can engage in academic discussions without having to decode a written text first, their motivation and attention are reinforced. A challenge with visual texts, however, is that they often are widely varied, and students may lack a coherent pattern of response. Focusing on the work of a single artist can reduce anxiety and re-teaching. This is why, whether teaching English as a second or foreign language at the university level, I turn to the paintings of Norman Rockwell as a reliable prompt for class discussion and writing. As a plus, these illustrations invite frank and compelling conversations that those of us interested in sharing and discussing American values sometimes find hard to stage.

Rockwell's cover illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post*, offered in scenarios that are often humorous and easily digestible, can prompt natural discussions about some of the key characteristics—historical, legal, and cultural—that give American life its allure and complexity. The paintings demand interpretation, unfolding stories in a single glance; the stories are typically about

experiences common to all nations: growing up, coming of age, or challenges of life. (And, since many of Rockwell's paintings were made in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, they provide a platform for discussions about changes that have occurred since that time.)

When using the artwork with beginners, you can start with a descriptive present-progressive prompt, moving on to simple past, present perfect, or simple future tenses. Move the discussion along by providing visual cues, pointing out the basic narrative elements and then asking for proof or details. As the narrative unfolds, an opportunity is presented for the viewer to respond, using their own personal experience.

For example, show your class *Boy with Baby Carriage*—depicting a boy wearing a black hat, jacket, and tie pushing a baby carriage past other boys of the same age who are wearing baseball uniforms—and ask, “How does the boy with the black hat feel?” You can continue with questions like, “Why is the boy angry/unhappy? Where is he going? What are the other boys saying? Do you think this picture is funny? What makes it funny?” (Or, “Why isn't it funny?”) Try to elicit complex responses, but to lower the affective filter, focus on the emotions of the moment of capture, asking about each character's emotions, their reactions to others, and what they might be

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thinking or saying. The narrative elements in a Rockwell painting are straightforward, but close viewing is also rewarded. In *The Shiner*, for example, you can point out not just the central figure’s dishevelment, but also the puzzled faces in the background as the adults try to figure out how to deal with a schoolyard brawler who just happens to be—gasp—a girl!

Many of Rockwell’s works capture moments that elicit responses at varying levels of linguistic sophistication. For intermediate and advanced learners, introduce academic vocabulary. View *The Shiner* and ask, “How does this painting express gender roles? Have they changed since it was painted? If so, how?” (You might also ask students to comment on the gender roles they see expressed in the painting with how a similar scene might be depicted and received in their own culture.) We can see that at the time of this painting—1953—the idea of a girl fighting at school (and winning) was so strange as to be humorous. For more-advanced students, have a debate about the perfect title for the painting and ask for detailed justification. With practice, the interpretive regimen becomes second nature to your students, and you may find that they will take charge of discussions.

Rockwell loved to paint children and teens, and these images provide an entry point into comparative discussions about education, parenting, and coming-of-age rituals. For intermediate and advanced students, show *Double Trouble for Willie Gillis* and ask, “When do you think people in the United States start dating? Is it okay for Americans to date more than one person at the same time? How about in your country? What happens when someone dates more than one person at the same time?”

Rockwell’s paintings of children being punished lead to questions such as, “Is it okay for parents to hit their children? Is it legal for parents to punish their children by hitting them? Is it okay for a teacher to hit a child? What are some other ways to discipline a child? Are these effective? If you have a child, would you ever hit them? Why or why not?” As with all the prompts, these can lead to written responses after discussions.

To mix things up, ask intermediate and advanced students to create and perform skits based on a Rockwell prompt. Role plays offer a low-stress opportunity for public speech, pronunciation coaching, and confidence building. For a role play, ask students to write a short dramatic scene, based on a painting, and perform it for the class. Illustrations like *Double Trouble for Willie Gillis* can spark improvised dialogues or formally rehearsed scenes. Start things off by asking, “What are the girls holding? What are they so angry about? What’s going to happen now?” You can write speech balloons as the students respond. Then release responsibility as the creative impulse takes over. Ask students to write a scene that comes to a climax. Often, students quickly create, rehearse, and perform role plays with ease and pleasure. Front-loading useful vocabulary terms will coax the writers along. Ask, for example, “What are some expressions used to indicate the status of a romantic relationship?”

Visual prompts help students practice advanced forms in natural conversation. For example, viewing *The Runaway*, ask, “What advice would you give if you met someone who was running away from home?” But for all levels, Rockwell’s works provide a starting point for extended discussions of gender roles, culture, and history. Have students

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focus on the expressions of characters, on their actions, and on their clothing. Eliciting descriptions and observations of details, and adding explanation as needed, can lead to further, more-sophisticated discussions about American culture and society, as well as changes that have occurred since the paintings were made. This approach also offers students a chance to make comparisons to their own culture. Students can weigh in with information about their own roles and upbringing, and their present reactions to a changing world.

As cultural ambassadors, teachers can depend on Rockwell to provoke discussions of history and current events. Take the series of paintings inspired by former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1941 speech, *Four Freedoms*. These iconic works are touchstones of the American id, and they lend themselves to parody, both serious and humorous. They have been revisited by contemporary artists to present an ironic portrait of latter-day America. For example, Rockwell’s most familiar painting, *Freedom from Want*, depicting a Thanksgiving cornucopia, has been updated by replacing the elderly grandparents with an interracial, single-sex couple. Comparing the originals to their corresponding parodies offers a rich vein for advanced discussions of history, culture, and the place of minorities in the United States (and elsewhere). Or you can have beginning students point out differences and similarities in the paired paintings—great for teaching adjectives and history all at once!

Another fruitful avenue for higher-level conversation is to ask, “How is a painting different from other works of art, like music or literature?” Point out how music appeals through sounds and rhythms, and literature can draw a reader through an emotional wringer; painting, however, is constrained to

colors, shapes, and lines, and relates a gestalt. It is not linear and cannot be absorbed in a single glance. A whole lot more is on offer all at once, both emotionally and cognitively. Images, which strike our brains all at once, may perhaps be more emotionally affecting than words, and our responses are thereby stronger and more memorable.

Let students notice how Rockwell telegraphs a story and relations in a single glance in the painting *Coming Home* (which has also been titled *The Homecoming* and *Homecoming G.I.*). In this work, a young World War II veteran has just arrived home. Though his face is not visible, we can guess how he’s feeling by the ecstatic reactions of the circle of characters around him. Compare art and literature: in a single glance, we are given information that would have required paragraphs of exposition explaining family relations, expressed in paint by a single color: bright red hair. Beginners can be asked to note the circle of excitement around the soldier, all eyes on him. More-advanced students can discover complex layers of meanings by answering questions such as, “How does the painting show heroism?” Point out the implied democratic patriotism of humble ordinary joy, in contrast to the usual command to worship the military that is common to other places and times. The small figure is not glorious or shiny in itself, but glorified by how others react to it, reactions that bind the whole painting together in a circle.

Ask intermediate and advanced students, “Is this painting pleasing to look at? Why or why not?” This calls for a complex discussion of artistic intent and composition. True, that might require a mini-lecture on composition, framing, and line of sight. Point out how Rockwell avoids symmetry and repetition, and how the human figure is presented in manifold

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sizes and shapes, and in clusters that overlap. Ask, “Why do such complex outlines please us more than simple ones?” Advanced students can compare Rockwell’s work to the Old Masters. I suggest posting Johannes Vermeer’s *The Little Street* alongside Rockwell’s *Sunday Morning*.

You can also ask intermediate and advanced students the perennial question, “Is this art?” Rockwell is often called an “illustrator” rather than a “serious artist.” Ask students to agree or disagree. Because Rockwell worked on deadline, churning out picture after picture for a weekly American magazine, he was generally ignored by the art world—or criticized for his talent for realism and for his idealization of small-town values and an America that had been left behind. Pointing this out can lead to discussions about history, art, and cultural change. Have students note that Rockwell and many representational artists have long been dismissed by the art establishment; then ask students, “Was it right for critics to ignore these works?”

A viewing of Rockwell’s *The Connoisseur* demonstrates that Rockwell was aware of such criticism and was not above making a sarcastic visual comment about the art that critics celebrated instead; in this painting, Rockwell imitates Jackson Pollock’s work as if to say, “Yes, I can paint that way, too.” Ask intermediate learners to create an internal monologue for the “connoisseur” as he stands before the masterpiece, or have beginners write a speech balloon.

I am not here to argue the merits of Rockwell’s work one way or the other, but to suggest that his paintings are an effective teaching tool. Discussions take just a few moments to arrange, but rich, natural, and prolonged conversations follow, and they

can lead to writing assignments, skits, and research presentations. Rockwell’s work may seem, at first glance, rather ethnocentric and limited in scope, but its narrative drive, its humor, and its obvious love of the common person provide a compelling resource for teachers who value animated classroom conversations. The popularity of Rockwell’s work has endured.

Where can you find good images of these Rockwell paintings? Though much is not in public domain for downloading, his art is widely available for free online viewing, at Google Arts & Culture or the Norman Rockwell Museum website (nrm.org—you will need the title of a work to search this site effectively). A few works are available for free and legal downloading on Wikimedia Commons, in the original magazine cover form. For the most famous images, you can use a Google Images search, using the drop-down tools menu to list usage rights and selecting those under Creative Commons licensing.

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